

# Raphael

The National Gallery is fortunate to possess this country's finest collection of paintings by Raphael, the youngest of the three artists whose styles epitomize the High Renaissance. What Leonardo achieved by sheer intellect and Michelangelo through passionate intuition, Raphael acquired by persistent study and assimilation. Through the works in this room we can trace the process by which he transformed the fifteenth-century style of his earliest teachers into something new and of enduring influence. For later generations, Raphael's art came to represent an ideal of perfection, the very definition of easy grace and harmonious balance.

Raphael must have studied first with his father, a painter at the court in Urbino. After his father's death, Raphael entered the workshop of Perugino, whose graceful, open landscapes and gentle figures were widely admired. An adept student from the outset, Raphael mastered his teacher's delicate, ornamental style. Late in 1504 Raphael moved to Florence, where he responded quickly to the innovations of Florentine painters, especially those of Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo's works must have seemed stunningly new. Softly shadowed forms recreated the appearance of reality to an extent never before achieved. Figures were convincingly integrated into their settings and related naturally to each other. In the words of Vasari, a sixteenth-century artist and biographer, Raphael "stood confounded in astonishment and admiration: the manner of Leonardo pleased him more than any other he had ever seen. . . ."

Raphael's artistic evolution continued when he moved to Rome in 1508. There he was influenced not only by the idealized, classical art of the city's ancient past but also by the more energetic and physical style of Michelangelo, whose works he also had studied in Florence.



## Perugino

Umbrian, about 1448–1524

### *The Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saint John, Saint Jerome, and Saint Mary Magdalene*, about 1485

Once considered to be an early work by Raphael, this altarpiece is recognized today as one of Perugino's most successful. Its cool, silvery atmosphere and poetic mood are typical of what a contemporary described as Perugino's "aria angelica et molto dolce" (angelic and sweet air). The work's quiet piety differs from the more intense emotion found in many Crucifixion scenes. Elevating Christ's body high over the landscape seems to raise him literally above human suffering. The saints who witness the event appear more grave than grief-torn.

Some of the figures apparently were painted from the same model in Perugino's large and busy workshop. Compare, for example, John the Evangelist, at the foot of the cross, with Mary Magdalene in the right-hand wing. Except for a slight variation in their hands, their poses are identical. Even their expressions are the same.

When this altarpiece was completed, the artist was reaching the height of his popularity and receiving prestigious commissions. Later, however, Perugino found his style to be outmoded and his work criticized for its over-reliance on stock figures and formulaic compositions.

Oil on panel transferred to canvas, framed, 1.340 x 1.651 m (52 3/4 x 65 in.).

Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.27a-c



## Piero di Cosimo

Florentine, 1462–1521

### *The Visitation with Saint Nicholas and Saint Anthony Abbot*, about 1490

This subject is unusual as the central focus of an altarpiece. Normally the meeting of the cousins Mary and Elizabeth, the first pregnant with Jesus and the second bearing John the Baptist, was reserved for the small narrative scenes that decorate the base of altarpieces. Its prominence here must have been at the request of the Capponi family, who commissioned this work for the altar of a family chapel in Florence.

On the right is Anthony Abbot, venerated as a healing saint. Opposite him sits Nicholas of Bari. The three gold balls at his feet refer to the legend that Nicholas rescued three young girls from prostitution by providing them with dowries, a tale that accounts for his association with children's welfare (and his evolution as Santa Claus). Small scenes in the background expand upon this emphasis on childhood through episodes from the infancy of Christ: a tiny Annunciation appears on a church facade in the right distance, a scene of the Nativity is to the left, and the Massacre of Innocents takes place in the middle right. It has been suggested that these subjects were selected to celebrate the recent birth of two male Capponi children and, more generally, to offer a prayer for protection of the family line.

Oil on panel, 1.842 x 1.886 m (72 1/2 x 74 1/4 in.).

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.361



## Raphael

Umbrian, 1483–1520

### *The Small Cowper Madonna*, about 1505

Raphael was in Florence from late 1504 until 1508. Seventeen images of the Virgin and Child from those few years survive today, two of them in this room. Probably many of these works were made for the art market—images of the Madonna and Child were often given as wedding presents—rather than to fulfill a specific commission.

*The Small Cowper Madonna* mirrors in style and sentiment what Raphael had seen, and helped produce, in Perugino's workshop. Compare it with Perugino's own *Madonna and Child*, also in this room. The two Virgins share a graceful turn of the head and wistful expression. Compositionally, however, the two works differ significantly. Stock figures from Perugino's workshop repertoire fill his composition. Their gestures are particular, but unrelated and unexplained. In Raphael's painting, by contrast, both figures look out to the viewer, a unifying device he would have seen in terracotta reliefs by Luca Della Robbia. The figures' interlocked gestures reveal another and more important source of inspiration: Leonardo.

Oil on panel, .595 x .440 m (23 3/8 x 17 3/8 in.).

Widener Collection 1942.9.57



**Raphael**

*Saint George and the Dragon*, about 1506

This panel—one of the best-known images of Saint George—was meant to be seen at close range. Its highly detailed and precise setting is reminiscent of the Netherlandish paintings then popular with Italian patrons. It appears, in fact, that Raphael may have copied some landscape motifs from Hans Memling's *Saint Veronica* (Gallery 39).

Other elements of Raphael's painting were inspired by Leonardo's cartoon for the fresco of *The Battle of Anghiari*, a work that Vasari said first drew the younger artist to Florence. The rearing horse and the rider's fluttering cape can be traced through Raphael's own drawings of Leonardo's influential design. Raphael used the diagonal thrust of the saint's lance to organize and energize the entire composition with a tightly knit, dynamic naturalism.

George was patron saint of England and of the English Order of the Garter. The ribbon tied around his calf reads *honi*, opening of the order's slogan *Honi soit qui mal y pense* (disgraced be he who thinks evil of it). It was once thought that the duke of Urbino had commissioned Raphael to paint this as a gift for King Henry VII of England after the duke was inducted into the English knightly order. It now seems more likely that it was intended for the king's envoy instead. In either case, the commission signals Raphael's growing prestige.

Oil on panel, .285 x .215 m (11 1/8 x 8 3/8 in.).  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.26



**Raphael**

*The Niccolini-Cowper Madonna*, 1508

This may be the last work Raphael painted in Florence before he left for Rome. It is more complex than the *Small Cowper Madonna*, both named after former owners, made only a few years before. The child, at once imposing and playful, grabs at his mother's bodice as if wanting to nurse. The two figures are now more closely related than in the earlier *Small Cowper Madonna*, both by the geometry of their poses and the intimacy of their actions. Their physical and psychological connection, so effortless and natural, is perhaps the most important lesson Raphael derived from Leonardo. (*The Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John*, attributed to Fernando Yáñez de la Almedina [also in this room], gives some sense of the appearance of Leonardo's own work. That painting was once believed to have been painted by Leonardo himself, since it closely follows the artist's pyramidal figure groups and modeling of form with smoky shadows.)

In Raphael's *Niccolini-Cowper Madonna*, large figures nearly fill the frame to concentrate attention fully on mother and child. Although presented in a moment of tender, maternal exchange, their increased size gives the pair a new monumentality. This and the infant's energetic outline suggest that young Raphael had been studying the works of Michelangelo as well.

Oil on panel, .807 x .575 m (31 3/4 x 22 5/8 in.).  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.25



**Raphael**

*The Alba Madonna*, about 1510

*The Alba Madonna* stands out as the most important painting in the United States from Raphael's time in Rome. There he continued to respond creatively to new artistic stimuli, combining old and new influences with his own inventive imagination. The round format of this painting, for example, was popular in Florence, yet this picture looks very different from his more intimate Florentine madonnas. Its grandeur suggests greater seriousness. The Virgin's pose resembles a work of classical sculpture. Also, she no longer wears contemporary dress but the robes of ancient Rome, and the landscape has become an idealized view of the Roman *campagna*.

Addition of a third figure, the infant John the Baptist, creates a broad and stable group that is fully integrated into the setting yet dominates the space effortlessly. No longer part of an iconlike devotional schema, these full-length figures appear to be a natural part of the environment. The focus of their gestures and glances is centered on a slender reed cross that actually defines the work's meaning. Church doctrine holds that from birth Christ had an "understanding" of his fate. Here he accepts the cross of his future sacrifice, an action understood as well by his mother and cousin.

Oil on panel transferred to canvas, diameter .945 m (37 1/4 in.).



**Raphael**

*Bindo Altoviti*, about 1515

This arresting image—a young man at once frank and coy—was once thought to be a self-portrait of the artist. What is known of Raphael's appearance, however, suggests otherwise. The portrait is now generally accepted to be that of Bindo Altoviti, a wealthy banker and friend, whom Vasari says Raphael painted in Rome.

The striking silhouette and hard colors differ significantly from the softer and more natural look of Raphael's other paintings in this room. Bindo turns in a dramatic, almost theatrical, way to look at the viewer, his robe slipping from his shoulder. Such "mannerist" qualities have prompted some scholars to attribute the portrait to Raphael's younger assistant Giulio Romano, yet this portrait lacks the hard enamel finish of Romano's style. More importantly, it conforms with Raphael's continued stylistic evolution in Rome. He experimented with similar jarring colors and abrupt turns in the frescoes that he painted for the Vatican in 1515.

It is also true that many artists have used a somewhat different style for portraits than for other, especially religious, subjects. In portraits, they place greater emphasis on likeness, that is, on a neutrally accurate recreation of the sitter's appearance. It is not surprising, then, that Raphael's portrait would have a less-idealized look than his other works in this room.

Oil on panel, .597 x .438 m (23 1/2 x 17 1/4 in.).  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.33