**Raphael**

Italian in full RAFFAELLO SANZIO (b. April 6, 1483, Urbino, Duchy of Urbino [Italy]--d. April 6, 1520, Rome, Papal States [Italy]), master painter and architect of the Italian High Renaissance. Raphael is best known for his Madonnas and for his large figure compositions in the Vatican in Rome. His work is admired for its clarity of form and ease of composition and for its visual achievement of the Neoplatonic ideal of human grandeur.

While we may term other works paintings, those of Raphael are living things; the flesh palpitates, the breath comes and goes, every organ lives, life pulsates everywhere.

After the complexities of Leonardo and Michelangelo, it is a relief to find Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio, 1483-1520), a genius no less than they, but one whose daily ways were those of other men. He was born in the small town of Urbino, an artistic centre, and received his earliest training from his father. Later, his father sent him to Pietro Perugino (active 1478-1523) who, like Verrocchio and Ghirlandaio, was an artist of considerable gifts. But while Leonardo and Michelangelo quickly outgrew their teachers and show no later trace of influence, Raphael had a precocious talent right from the beginning and was an innate absorber of influences. Whatever he saw, he took possession of, always growing by what was taught to him. An early Raphael can look like a Perugino. In fact, Perugino's Crucifixion with the Virgin, St John, St Jerome, and St Mary Magdalene was thought to be by Raphael until evidence proved it was given to the church of San Gimigniano in 1497, when Raphael was only 14. It is undoubtedly a Perugino, calmly emotional, and pious rather than passionate. A fascinating context for this scene of quiet faith is the notorious unbelief on the part of the artist, who was described by Vasari as an atheist. He painted what would be acceptable, not what he felt to be true, and this may account for the lack of real emotive impact.

**Early Raphael**

There are still echoes of the gentle Perugino in an early Raphael like the diminutive St George and the Dragon, painted when he was in his early twenties; the little praying princess is very Peruginesque. But there is a fire in the knight and his intelligent horse, and a nasty vigour in the convincing dragon that would always be beyond Perugino's skill. Even the horse's tail is electric, and the saint's mantle flies wide as he speeds to the kill.

Raphael spent his first sojourn in Florence (1504-08) to sublime purpose. At that time Leonardo and Michelangelo were both working there, and as a result Raphael adopted new working methods and techniques--particularly influenced by Leonardo--and his paintings took on a more vigorous graphic energy. We may think we see a hint of what he took from Leonardo in a work like the Small Cowper Madonna, with its softness of contour and perfection of balance. Both faces, the Virgin's almost smiling, almost praying, wholly wrapped up in her Child, and that of the Child, wholly at ease with His Mother, dreamily looking out at us with abstracted sweetness, have that inwardness we see in Leonardo, but made firm and unproblematic. Behind the seated figures we see a tranquil rural landscape with a church perched on a hill.

**Raphael's later work**

Raphael returned to the subject of the Madonna and Child several times, each time in an intimate, gentle composition. The Alba Madonna, on the other hand, has a Michelangelic heroism about it; tender as always in Raphael, but also heavy; masses wonderfully composed in tondo form; a crescendo of emotion that finds its fulfilment in the watchful face of Mary. The world stretches away on either side, centered on this trinity of figures, and the movement sweeps graciously onwards until it reaches the furthest fold of Mary's cloaked elbow. Then it floods back, with her bodily inclination towards the left, and the meaning is perfectly contained: love is never stationary, it is given and returned.

Raphael's life was short, but while he lived he was one of those geniuses who continually evolve and develop. He had an extraordinary capacity (like, though greater than, Picasso's) to respond to every movement in the art world, and to subsume it within his own work.

Since Vasari described the picture commissioned by Bindo Altoviti as ``his portrait when young'', historians have liked to think that this radiant youth was Raphael himself. He was indeed said to be unusually handsome, pensive, and fair, which is exactly what this portrait shows to us. But it is now agreed that it is Bindo when young, and since he was at this time a mere 22 (and Raphael 33, with only five years left to him), this is not an ``imagined'' youth but the real boy who takes up so self-conscious a stance before the painter.

Raphael is one of the most acute of all portraitists, effortlessly cleaving through the external defences of his sitter, yet courteously colluding with whatever image the ego would seek to have portrayed. This duality, looking beneath the surface and yet remaining wholly respectful of the surface, gives an additional layer of meaning to all his portraits. We see, and we know things that we do not see; we are helped to encounter rather than to evaluate.

Bindo Altoviti was beautiful, successful (as a banker), and rich: rather like Raphael himself. There may have been some feeling of fellowship in the work, as the noble countenance is sensitively fleshed out for us. Half the face is in shadow, as if to allow the sitter his mystery, his maturing, his private destiny. The lips are full and sensual, balanced by the deep-set eyes with their confrontational stare, almost defiant. The ruffled shirt is half-covered by the young man's locks, calculatedly casual, at odds in their dandyish profusion with the plain beret and the rich but simple doublet. He holds a darkened hand dramatically to his breast, maybe to show off the ring, maybe to indicate psychic ease.

But Raphael has not given him the real world for his setting. Bindo Aldoviti stands in a nowhere place of luminous green, outside the scope of time in his eternal youth, fearless because he is protected by art from human incertainties.

There is an aptness in the areas of darkness in which the great doublet sleeve loses itself. For all his debonaire poise, this is a young man threatened. For the viewer who knows how short Raphael's own life was to be, the thought that this might be a self-portrait is seductively plausible. There is a sense in which every portrait is one of the self, since we never escape our own life enough to see with divine vision what is objectively there: this shows us both men, painter and banker, ``when young''.

Raphael is out of favour today; his work seems too perfect, too faultless for our slipshod age. Yet these great icons of human beauty can never fail to stir us: his Vatican murals can stand fearlessly beside the Sistine ceiling. The School of Athens, for example, monumentally immortalizing the great philosophers, is unrivalled in its classic grace. Raphael's huge influence on successive artists is all the more impressive considering his short life.