

Raphael: cartoons and tapestries

By DR MARK EVANS FSA

SENIOR CURATOR OF PAINTINGS, VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM



MARK EVANS

studied at the Universities of London (BA 1975) and East Anglia (PhD 1983). He has held posts at the University of St Andrews, the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside and the National Museum of Wales, and has been Senior Curator of Paintings at the V&A since 2000. He was most recently editor of the Roxburghe Club volume *The Lumley Inventory and Pedigree, Art Collecting in the Elizabethan Age* (2010), co-curator of the exhibition *Raphael: Cartoons and Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* and co-editor of the book of that title (2010). He is currently working on a book and exhibition about the oil sketches of John Constable.

The exhibition *Raphael: Cartoons and Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* is a momentous event, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum between 8th September and 17th October to mark the state visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom. Organised by the V&A and the Vatican Museums, this show displays four of the Sistine Chapel tapestries, for the first time since they were woven almost 500 years ago, alongside their preparatory designs, the celebrated Raphael Cartoons. Also included are seven of the artist's preliminary sketches, lent by the Royal Collection Trust and the Musée du Louvre, and other related works.

The Raphael Cartoons, commissioned in 1515 by Pope Leo X, are among the great treasures of the High Renaissance. Painted by Raphael and his assistants, they are full-scale designs for tapestries made to cover the lower walls of the Sistine Chapel. This renowned sacred space is the principal chapel in the Vatican. The Sistine tapestries, woven from the Cartoons, depict the Acts of St Peter, the first Pope, and St Paul, the greatest preacher of the early Church. The tapestries belong

to the Vatican Museums, and the Cartoons are the property of HM Queen Elizabeth II, but have been on loan from the royal collection to the V&A since 1865.

Raphael Santi of Urbino (1483-1520) ranks beside Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarrotti as the three towering artistic personalities of the Italian High Renaissance. Raphael was summoned to Rome in 1508 by Pope Julius II to decorate the new apartments in the Vatican. He assembled a team of talented assistants and, in a remarkably short period, undertook a series of spectacular commissions. By the time of his death, aged only 37, Raphael was one of the most admired painters in Europe, and the creator of an internationally recognised style. He had established an enduring myth of an urbane genius, with superabundant inventiveness and skill.

Leo X (1475-1521) was the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the ruler of Florence. He was Pope between 1513 and 1521 and his generous patronage of the arts marked the apex of the High Renaissance. The Sistine Chapel was rebuilt in 1477-83 by Sixtus IV, who employed leading Florentine painters to decorate its walls with frescoes. His nephew, Julius II,



The Brussels tapestry of *Christ's Charge to Peter*, after Raphael, Vatican Museums © Vatican Museums

commissioned Michelangelo to decorate the ceiling with subjects from the Old Testament Book of Genesis in 1508-12. Following his election, Leo X made the Sistine Chapel even more magnificent by adding a suite of sumptuous tapestries of wool, silk and metal thread. It is likely that sixteen were envisaged, but only ten were actually made. Their full-scale Cartoons were designed by Raphael, and painted by him and his assistants around 1515 in gouache on supports of many sheets of paper, pasted together. They were then transported to the workshop of Pieter van Aelst in Brussels, the main centre of tapestry production in Europe. The Cartoons were cut vertically into sections for the weavers to copy, and around 1516-21 the compositions were woven into tapestries. Seven of these were displayed for the first time at the Sistine Chapel on 26th December 1519. Following the Sack of Rome in 1527, several were carried off as booty, but all had been returned by 1554. The most celebrated tapestries in the papal collection, they were reserved for display on major feasts of the church. In 1932 they were transferred to their current location in the Vatican Picture Gallery.

The Raphael Cartoons remained in use as tapestry designs in Brussels workshops throughout the 16th century, and sets were subsequently acquired by Francis I of France, Henry VIII, and Philip II of Spain. The Cartoons came to England in 1623, when the Prince of Wales (later Charles I) bought them for use in the royal tapestry manufactory at Mortlake. The first set of the Acts woven at Mortlake was made for Charles I, and a series of other sets were produced before the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1641, which may be seen today in collections as far afield as Dresden and Bratislava. The Cartoons survived the dispersal of the collections of Charles I during the Protectorate, and on the Restoration were returned to the Crown. In the 1690s, William III ordered the Cartoons to be reassembled for display at Hampton Court Palace, in a special gallery designed by Sir Christopher Wren.

The classicising curriculum formulated by the French Academy in the late 17th century attached great importance to history painting, and Raphael was a central figure in this tradition. In 1711-19 Nicolas Dorigny published a set of engravings after the Cartoons, and was rewarded by George I with a knighthood – a previously unheard of honour for a printmaker. Their clear, dramatic narrative gave the Cartoons a seemingly infinite capacity to address a succession of audiences. For two centuries they were among the most famous paintings in the world, and endlessly copied in a variety of media. Despite their innate fragility and centuries of robust use, they survived in a surprisingly good state of preservation. In 1865 Queen Victoria gave her consent that the Cartoons should be lent to the recently founded South

Kensington Museum, now the V&A.

Since their return to display from wartime storage in 1950, modern scholarship has transformed our understanding of the Cartoons. This great cycle of High Renaissance paintings was the subject of two decades of research by the late John Shearman. His fundamental monograph, *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel*, published in 1972, remains the standard work on the subject. In 1965-6, the Cartoons had been cleaned, and in 1980-99 the Sistine Chapel frescoes were also restored. Following the Raphael quincentennial year of 1983 a programme of conservation of the Sistine tapestries began, which is now almost complete. In 1992 the Cartoons were the subject of detailed technical examination, x-radiography and infra-red reflectography, whose results were published in 1996 and 1998. Two of the Sistine tapestries and a group of related works played a central role in the groundbreaking exhibition *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence* at the Metropolitan Museum, New York in 2002. At the National Gallery in 2004-5 the exhibition *Raphael: from Urbino to Rome* surveyed the painter's career up to the death of Leo X in 1513. The present exhibition, proposed to the V&A by the Vatican Museums to mark the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, provides an unique opportunity to study side-by-side two great and intimately related cycles of Raphael's later years: the Sistine Chapel tapestries and the Raphael Cartoons.

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Detail of Raphael's cartoon of *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, The Royal Collection ©2010 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

