

Life & Times Exhibition

Raphael: The Drawings

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford,
1 June–3 September 2017

DRAWING MASTER

A week after the opening of this highly-acclaimed exhibition at the Ashmolean, Professor Stephen Farthing RA gave a lecture entitled 'Raphael and the nine secrets of drawing' based, rather teasingly, on an unfinished book that he began 25 years ago when he was Ruskin Master of Drawing at Oxford. John Ruskin had personally endowed this position when he established the Ruskin School of Art within the Ashmolean in 1871. Ruskin was a great supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites. It is a nice irony that Raphael, who produced some of the supreme achievements of the High Renaissance, and who was the lightning rod for the Pre-Raphaelites' rejection of cool classical perfection, is recast here as profoundly human, warm, and tender, vulnerable, and experimental. Looking at some of these drawings is almost like looking over his shoulder as he begins to work.

David. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Raphael was born in the Umbrian city of Urbino in 1483, orphaned at the age of 11, and died at 37. He grew up in the sophisticated court of Duke Guidobaldo da Montefaltro, described by WB Yeats as '*... that grammar school of courtesies, where wit and beauty learned their trade, upon Urbino's windy hill*'. He worked in Florence, where he was deeply affected by Leonardo and Michelangelo, and finally in Rome where he contributed frescoes, paintings, and tapestries to many parts of the Vatican and the Sistine chapel.

There are about 120 drawings in this beautiful exhibition, many from the Ashmolean's own collection, others from the Albertina in Vienna, with whom the show is co-curated, the Uffizi, the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Queen's collection. One or two are from Oxford colleges. The commentary, as well as providing historical and artistic context, concentrates on the range of techniques that Raphael brought to drawing. Detailed descriptions of the methods used to create these works accompany almost all of them. The tools and materials use by Raphael are on display: the coloured chalks and paper; ink, made from oak gall, ferrous sulphate, and gum arabic, which gradually changes from black to brown over time; a quill; and a double-pointed compass. Raphael also worked in metalpoint, using metal rods of different thickness, composed of alloys of gold, silver, copper, and lead, which deposit microscopic particles on the paper, and whose colours on oxidation vary with the proportions of metals in the alloy.

Raphael drew many mother and child studies, and the drawing of the Madonna with the child reaching out to touch a pomegranate, chubby toes and fingers



Two Apostles. ©Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

curled in delight, is exquisite. He liked to draw the muscular male body. His study of Michelangelo's David, (left), drawn from behind, is particularly beautiful, and Hercules overpowering the Nemean Lion is terrific. He was also a fine portraitist, and there are a number of studies of the heads of apostles of great power and beauty. This really is an exhibition not to be missed.

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