

# How does the Italian High Renaissance Artist Raphael Sanzio Connect the Past, Present and Future of the Art Community?

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## ABSTRACT

The artist Raphael Sanzio is one of the most renowned artists in the history of art, praised of his ideal of perfection, beauty, and harmony that prompted the Italian High Renaissance to its very peak. Conventionally, investigation on Raphael's influence as a master would center around his major art creations during the High Renaissance. This essay would also explore Raphael's main achievements in the artistic sphere (including education, techniques, compositions, and aesthetic theories) and his social life during the High Renaissance as his present but would at the same time discuss the connection of his present to the past and future of the art community. In terms of the past during the Early Renaissance, this essay would elaborate on how past events of commercialization of economy triggers the dignified status of artists, compared to the status of craftsmen during the Middle Ages. Moreover, in terms of the future, this essay would depict Raphael's influence and contribution to artistic movements surrounding *the Accademia* and the modernists during the Early Modern period.

## **Part I: Raphael Sanzio and the Past of the Art Community during the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance**

It was the commercialized Italian society during the Early Renaissance that encouraged the public to admire and even worship artists, acting as a prerequisite for the high prestige of Raphael as an artist. Possessing impressive virtuosity as an artist did not guarantee a leading position in social classes. The ingenious Medieval craftsmen remained menial in social status. They remained anonymous and subordinate, in comparison to the fame of the High Renaissance artists, such as Raphael. The social event, bankers in control of trade and commerce during Early Renaissance, in search of patronizations, heightened the significance of artists in civic lives.

As the money economy dominated the markets in Renaissance, the needs to manage the circulation of currencies led to the emergence of the wealthy bankers. These banker families aimed to obtain aristocrats titles yet were publicly recognized as only young upstarts. This is because they possessed neither fame of ancestors nor heroism in battles, which were traditional honors that defined noblemen. These families were urgently aspiring a solid justification for their high social class. To make the matters even worse, these banker families, deeply entangled in lending, debt, and interests, were resentfully regarded as "be in debt to God" by the Christian religion dominating the public opinion. These families suffered from public imputation and were constantly attacked by their opponents in terms of extravagance. Therefore, patronages for religious art turned out to be the best proof of their devoted contribution to the Catholic Churches and the local community.<sup>1</sup> This publicizing practice proves to be successful: when the dome of

<sup>1</sup> Roover, R. de. (2011, February 3). The Medici Bank Organization and Management\*: The Journal of Economic History. Cambridge Core. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-economic-history/article/medici-bank-organization-and-management/C479683DE651459ABC23506617FA365E>

the Florence Cathedral under the Medici patronage was perfectly constructed, the Florentine citizens celebrated the Medici family as the new ruler of their states. The citizens were proud of the fame and flair these masterpieces had brought to the glory of their states. The practice of art patronage therefore turns into an effective propaganda of the banking families, demonstrating their generous benefaction to their own states and achieving support and popularity among their subjects. These families utilize artworks as a deft political footwork to maintain leadership and influence in their local states. Therefore, the bankers strived to search for the most virtuosic masters so that the most sophisticated, spectacular artworks could be displayed to please their subjects.

The bankers' pursuit after talented artists resulted in a boost in financial and social power of the painters. As the banking industry was blooming at that time, there were numerous banking families in need of art propaganda. However, the number of art geniuses were strictly limited. As the demands rose over the supplies, wealthy families were forced to compete among one another for better resources, attracting the genius artists by offering extremely high wages and welfares. More significantly than mere financial strengths, the role of the artists shifts from a diligent, obscure craftsman during the Middle Ages to legendary geniuses who are missioned to glorify the local states. They were transformed into honorable celebrities welcomed and adored by various community, as their masterpieces boasted the power and the influence of the local states. It is this heroic mission correlated to the artists which boosts their rise in social classes, supporting Raphael in his successful social network.

## Part II: Raphael Sanzio and the Present of the Art Community during the High Renaissance

At Raphael's time of high Renaissance, the high demand after artists in the society began to prompt art education among the youths. Prevailing studios led by artists of fame during the Italian Renaissance develops into systematic art educational institutions that accepted young apprentices, who aspired to become leading artists of high pay and elaborate social networks in the future. For example, Michelangelo<sup>2</sup> and Leonardo da Vinci<sup>3</sup>, the two predecessors of Raphael, were cultivated in the studios Ghirlandaio and Verrocchio respectively. Similarly, Raphael learned the skill of frescoes in Perugino's studio as an apprentice.<sup>4</sup> His use of gentle, swift brushstrokes, lucid, harmonious colors, and precise draughtsmanship was inherited from Perugino. Even after Raphael had developed his personal styles fully later in his career, the trace of serenity and sweetness of his master Perugino still dominates the overall tone of his painting. Therefore, the simple imitation Raphael endured in his apprenticeship assimilated into his personal style, casting a persistent, profound influence on his works ever since his youth. The apprenticeship settled the major tone of harmony as the representative quality of Raphael's paintings, which has largely attributed to the popularity of Raphael's masterpieces till now. Raphael was inspired by his master and had progressed to attain a successful artistic career. Raphael's engagement in apprenticeships served as a steady foundation of his artistic career as an "art genius", which was the vital precondition of future development in the art community.

Despite his high achievements in artistic techniques and compositions, his most influential idea would be his aesthetic values, which for the first time derives from the goal of capturing nature to improving upon nature during Renaissance. One of his inspiring contributions is the artistic concept of sheer beauty. When Raphael had completed *Galatea in the Triumph*, he was asked which model the protagonist was based on. Raphael replied that it was not a

<sup>2</sup> Paul Barolsky, P. (2012). MICHELANGELO, GHIRLANDAIO, AND THE ARTIFICE OF BIOGRAPHY Vol 31, no 2. Source: Notes in the History of Art. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/sou/2012/31/2>

<sup>3</sup> Bodkin, T. (1952). Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1952 - JSTOR. The Furrow. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27655991>

<sup>4</sup> RUSSELL, F. R. A. N. C. I. S. (1986). Perugino and the early experience of Raphael - JSTOR. Studies in the History of Art. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42618002>

loyal depiction of any real person, but instead was a face of “sheer beauty” that he had in his mind. Thus, Raphael had modified the human portrait according to the classical beauties suggested by the classical Antiquities. Instead of conforming to his predecessors’ approach of faithfully imitating nature, Raphael idealized nature according to his own knowledge and imagination. Raphael transcended from being a subject to nature to a revolutionary creator who refined nature with his independent mind. Therefore, Raphael’s work gave a peek into a world brighter than the reality we all live in, infused with harmony, love, and beauty. His unprecedented achievement in artistic idealization as a rebellion against the nature was an oddity in Renaissance, as this was the first time that idealization of beauty was created since the Dark Ages. This is a huge leap in artistic concepts, opening a new era in which artists seized much dominance as “creators”. Therefore, Raphael conception of “sheer beauty” as one of his significant contributions guaranteed his leadership in the history of art.

His huge accomplishment in arts identifies him as a respectable Renaissance “superhuman genius” artist, popularizing him in social life. Throughout his personal life, Raphael was a leader in the socio-economic field, regarding to his considerable wealth and prosperous engagements. His wealth derived from his patrons who ordered art pieces from his studio. As a publicly recognized master in his era, he accumulated so much wealth in numerous similar commissions from his patrons that he was able to purchase Palazzo Caprini, a private palace in Rome, as his own accommodation. As private palaces and villas were often owned and accommodated by influential local ruler families in Renaissance Italy, they were not only a proof of Raphael’s wealth but also an implication of his dignified, significant civic role. Raphael’s supreme social status demonstrated by his private property echoes with his engagement with Maria Bibbiana, Cardinal Medici’s niece. This engagement revealed the intimate, friendly relationship between Raphael and the religious patriarch from the ruling Medici family, proving his success in handling interpersonal social networks and entering the aristocratic social circle. Furthermore, his marital relationship to Maria implies his future identity as the groom of the Chamber of the Medici Pope. This privileged title that suggests his tight family ties with the powerful leader of the Papal states, the exclusive sovereign of the Renaissance Italy and all Christians in the Western Europe. Therefore, Raphael was proved to be an outstanding leader in his civic life. His success in socialization apparently attributed to his unprecedented talent in his artistic career, which earned him wealth and fame in the first place.

### **Part III: Raphael Sanzio and the Future of the Art Community in Relation to *the Academia* and Early Modernism**

Even after his death, Raphael’s deep influence in terms of the aesthetics has prevailed for several centuries. His creation of leading artworks and artistic concepts influences not only his generation of Renaissance artists but also numerous descendants. Raphael’s leadership in aesthetic values stirred artistic movements among his descendants. Whether recognizing themselves as supporters or opponents of Raphael’s classical beauty, these descendants attached significance to the idealized beauty proposed by Raphael by either accepting or rejecting this concept.

The artistic event launched by Raphael’s followers in Britain and France was the academic art, which pursues the classical ideals of the Greek, Roman, and Renaissance arts. Among them, Sir Joshua Reynolds believed that Raphael’s and other past masters’ works served as perfect models and should be carefully studied and imitated by art students in academics<sup>5</sup>. Thus, these followers regarded Raphael as an ultimate authority in art that no other individual may exceed or challenge against, asserting that there was no more left for them to achieve rather than the revival of Raphael’s idealism. However, some artists were tired of the invariable imitation of classical beauty by the mainstream

<sup>5</sup> RICHARDSON, E. P. (n.d.). A 'fancy picture' by sir Joshua Reynolds. Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41504119>

artists, and deliberately combat against the idealism of beauty. For example, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood<sup>6</sup> literally named their goal as to return to the era before Raphael “when the only teacher for artists is nature” in the Medieval times. Yet, though disagreeing with Raphael’s invention of idealism, their phrasing of “further back than Raphael” stressed on the dramatic conversion that Raphael’s “sheer beauty” has brought to the art creation after him and further signified Raphael’s position as a key milestone in the development of art. To sum up, whether the descendants agree or disagree upon the artistic principles proposed by Raphael, they both launched events and campaigns in response to Raphael’s conceptions. This proves the huge impacts of these concepts on future artists and reiterates Raphael’s pro-longing leadership in the development of aesthetic views centuries later.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Italian artist Raphael Sanzio succeeded in both his socio-economic lives and artistic accomplishments at his present time during the Italian Renaissance. His huge success can be traced back into the past events of commercialization and attention to art patronage that attached dignity to art creation during the past of Early Renaissance. Furthermore, his influence extended into the future of the art community, regarding to the Academia arts and the modernist art movements. Therefore, the limitation of viewing Raphael’s works under his present context during the High Renaissance is the detachment from the historical developments of the arts and society. On one hand, the past paves way to the present, inspiring us to ponder over the societal factors that bred the artist. On the other hand, the future derives from the present. In other words, it would be harder to understand the motivation and goal of modern art movements without tracing its origins and developments from decades or even centuries back. Consequently, the terms of past, present, and future composes an integral unit, which is internally closely connected and should not be viewed separately. A perspective extending over a wide time span would help construct an overall perception of the artist’s role and significance in the history of art.

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<sup>6</sup> CRUISE, C. O. L. I. N. (2010). 'sick-sad dreams': Burne-Jones and pre-raphaelite medievalism. *The Yearbook of English Studies*. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41059784>