

‘You can almost hear the sound of Raphael’s charcoal on the paper’

Rachel Campbell-Johnston sees Raphael’s cartoons up close, thanks to a thrilling V&A digital project



Christ's Charge to Peter

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON. COURTESY ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST / HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II 2020; GABRIEL SCARPA FOR FACTUM FOUNDATION

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Raphael’s life was short. He died on his 37th birthday in 1520, yet his output was prodigious, his legacy immortal. Last year thousands of enthusiasts were looking forward to marking the 550th anniversary of his death with a visit to the National Gallery in London, which was all set to stage one of the first big exhibitions to examine his brief (it lasted barely two decades) but amazingly versatile career in full breadth.

Plans had to be cancelled because of Covid and the show has been rescheduled to 2022, but you haven’t missed your chance to honour, albeit belatedly, the anniversary of this High Renaissance master, thanks to a new digital project by the V&A.

The museum is putting ever more energy into digital projects. “They are proving very successful,” says its director, Tristram Hunt. Its Friday Late sessions, aimed at young audiences, are proving very popular online, or you can log on and enrol in the V&A Academy, which offers lessons in everything from dressmaking to queer history. Fees contribute only a fraction of the museum’s running costs but, Hunts explains, this digital programme opens up a museum in lockdown not just to national audiences but, at a time when the return of foreign tourists remains unlikely, to the world.

The V&A’s Raphael project, launched online today, shows how much can be achieved. It offers the public a landmark (and free) opportunity to examine the museum’s series of Raphael Cartoons – full-size drawings made as a preliminary design for tapestries – in a vivid new light. It will be “a feast for the eyes and a joy for Raphael lovers”, says Ana Debenedetti, the lead curator of the project and of paintings at the V&A.

The Raphael Cartoons are the only full-scale tapestry designs by the Italian painter in existence. The seven enormous illustrations (each measures about 5m x 3.5m) depict scenes from the lives of St Peter and St Paul.



Painted in tempera upon paper, they were created to serve as a template for weavers to follow.

They were commissioned by Pope Leo X shortly after his election in 1513. He wanted to make his own contributions to the Sistine Chapel where they complemented the adornments of Botticelli and Perugino and rivalled Michelangelo's ceiling, although Raphael possibly never saw them installed. Sixteen tapestries were completed and the dozen that survive may be seen in the Vatican Museums. The seven surviving cartoons in the V&A's Raphael Court, which hang in a gallery almost the same size as the Sistine Chapel, unfurl the vision of a master in all its lavish complexity.

Little wonder that this collection is so widely considered to be among the very finest Renaissance treasures to be found in this country. Blurring the boundaries between painting and weaving, they are not just working drawings. Raphael, it would seem, considered them to be artworks in their own right.

From the moment these cartoons fetched up (after various convoluted adventures) in Britain in the early 17th century they have played an informative role in our national culture. James Thornhill, the painter of the Old Royal Naval College's Painted Hall in Greenwich, was inspired by them; Reynolds (despite his reverence for Michelangelo) discussed them in his teaching; Constable and Turner studied and drew from them.

In our era, as ever more artists turn to the medium of tapestry (Peter Blake, Grayson Perry, Gavin Turk and Chris Ofili prominent among them), Raphael's drawings continue to play a powerfully inspirational role.

Yet after such a long history of scholarship, what can there possibly be left to say about the Raphael Cartoons?

This was the question that Debenedetti and her team were asking themselves when, with the help of the Factum Foundation, they embarked on a high-resolution recording project.

The answer may lie in the flood of feeling evoked by a close study of these images. That might sound a bit fey, but maybe not when you remember that Raphael, so gracious and affable in his own nature, is famed as a painter of emotion. He imbued his images with a profound sense of feeling, capturing the warmth of a mother's embrace, conjuring up not just the character but the sensitivities of the sitters.

The V&A's Raphael project, by leading us layer by layer through the process of making, sets us down imaginatively alongside a creator in his studio, Debenedetti suggests. "He had a talented team," she says, "but he seems to have played a far more hands-on role than was previously thought. Every element was harmonised by the master."

The digital study begins with the blank surface of the paper. The drawings are so huge that Raphael needed more than 200 sheets of paper pieced together to make each cartoon. A 3D scan gives you a sense of the texture. This is not a dead substrate, Debenedetti says. "It looks like an elephant skin; feels almost like a living animal."

Next, x-ray reflectography exposes each painting's underdrawing and, with it, the superb craftsmanship of the composition.

"You can see how he drew a fish before deciding it was too large," Hunt says. "He rubbed it out and redrafted. You are there absolutely with his hand."



The third and final layer looks at the painted surface. When you can finally return to the Raphael gallery in person you will find a refurbishment involving acoustic paneling, benches and state-of-the-art lighting – not to mention images of the finished tapestries from the Vatican – that will promote a richer visitor experience. Yet when it comes to work of this massive scale, it takes a digital exploration to reveal the fine detail. Call up a picture and click on the marked points of interest to find out what is happening, to meet different characters, discover explanations of symbols or (often abstruse) biblical stories.

Then zoom in closer and closer until you can see each mark: every feather stroke of the cranes that wait greedily for the apostles to haul in their miraculous draught of fishes; every carved adornment of the temple pillars that lend dramatic perspectival structure to the scene in which a lame man is healed.

The protective glass that flattens and subdues the images in the gallery has been removed. "People will be amazed by the freshness and vibrancy of the colour," Debenedetti says. "It's quite startling. Bright pinks next to acidic greens. Yellow bouncing about. It makes the figures seem almost to be in movement."

The world of Raphael comes alive. It's an emotional moment. Use your imagination and you might almost believe you are so close to the master that you can almost hear the sound of his charcoal as it sweeps across paper. "It raised every hair non the back of my neck," Hunt says.

The Story of the Raphael Cartoons is at vam.ac.uk from today
