

Giorgio Vasari, "Life of Raphael"

EXCERPT FROM LIVES OF THE ARTISTS, 2ND ED., 1568

RAPHAEL OF URBINO, PAINTER AND ARCHITECT (1483-1520)

The liberality with which Heaven now and again unites in one person the inexhaustible riches of its treasures and all those graces and rare gifts which are usually shared among many over a long period is seen in Raphael Sanzio of Urbino, who was as excellent as gracious, and endowed with a natural modesty and goodness sometimes seen in those who possess to an unusual degree a humane and gentle nature adorned with affability and good-fellowship, and he always showed himself sweet and pleasant with persons of every degree and in all circumstances. Thus Nature created Michelangelo Buonarroti to excel and conquer in art, but Raphael to excel in art and in manners also. Most artists have hitherto displayed something of folly and savagery, which, in addition to rendering them eccentric and fantastical, has also displayed itself in the darkness of vice and not in the splendour of those virtues which render men immortal. In Raphael, on the other hand, the rarest gifts were combined with such grace, diligence, beauty, modesty and good character that they would have sufficed to cover the ugliest vice and the worst blemishes. We may indeed say that those who possess such gifts as Raphael are not mere men, but rather mortal gods, and that those who by their works leave an honoured name among us on the roll of fame may hope to receive a fitting reward in heaven for their labours and their merits.

Raphael was born at Urbino, a most important city of Italy, in 1483, on Good Friday at three in the morning, of Giovanni de' Santi, a painter of no great merit, but of good intelligence and well able to show his son the right way, a favour which bad fortune had not granted to himself in his youth. Giovanni, knowing how important it was for the child, whom he called Raphael as a good augury, being his only son, to have his mother's milk and not that of a nurse, wished her to suckle it, so that the child might see the ways of his equals in his tender years rather than the rough manners of clowns and people of low condition. When the boy was grown, Giovanni began to teach him painting, finding him much inclined to that art and of great intelligence. Thus Raphael, before many years and while still a child, greatly assisted his father in the numerous works which he did in the state of Urbino. At last this good and loving father perceived that his son could learn little more from him, and determined to put him with Pietro Perugino, who, as I have already said, occupied the first place among the painters of the time. Accordingly Giovanni went to Perugia, and not finding Pietro there he waited for him, occupying the time in doing some things in S. Francesco. When Pietro returned from Rome,¹ Giovanni being courteous and well bred, made his acquaintance, and at a fitting opportunity told him what he wished in the most tactful manner. Pietro, who was also courteous and a friend of young men of promise, agreed to take Raphael. Accordingly Giovanni returned joyfully to Urbino, and took the boy with him to Perugia, his mother, who loved him tenderly, weeping bitterly at the separation.² When Pietro had seen Raphael's method of drawing and his fine manners and behaviour, he formed an opinion of him that was amply justified by time. It is well known that while Raphael was studying Pietro's style he imitated him so exactly in everything that his portraits cannot be distinguished from those of his master, nor indeed can other things, as we see in some figures done in oils on a panel in S. Francesco at Perugia for Madonna Maddalena degli Oddi.³ It represents an Assumption, Jesus Christ crowning the Virgin in heaven, while the twelve Apostles about the tomb are contemplating the celestial glory. The predella contains three scenes: the Annunciation, the Magi adoring Christ, and the presentation in the Temple. This work is most carefully finished, and anyone not skilled in style would take it to be the hand of Pietro, though there is no doubt that it is by Raphael. After this Pietro returned on some business to Florence, and Raphael left Perugia, going with some friends to Città di Castello. Here he did a panel in S. Agostino in that style, and a Crucifixion in S. Domenico, which, if not signed with Raphael's name, would be taken by everyone to be a work of Perugino. In S. Francesco in the same city he also did a Marriage of the Virgin,⁴ which shows that Raphael was progressing in skill, refining upon the style of Pietro and surpassing it. This work contains a temple drawn in perspective, so charmingly that it is a wonder to see how he confronted the difficulties of this task. Raphael had thus acquired a great reputation in this style when the library of the Duomo at Siena was allotted by Pope Pius II. to Pinturicchio.⁵ As he was a friend of Raphael, and knew him to be an admirable draughtsman, he brought him to Siena, where Raphael drew some of the cartoons for that work. He did not finish it because his love for art drew him to Florence⁶, for he heard great things from some painters of Siena of a cartoon done by Leonardo da Vinci in this Pope's Hall at Florence of a fine group of horses, to be put in the hall of the palace, and also of some nudes of even greater excellence done by Michelangelo in competition with Leonardo. This excited so strong a desire in Raphael that he put aside his work and all thought of his personal advantage, for excellence in art always attracted him.

Arrived in Florence, he was no less delighted with the city than with the works of art there, which he

thought divine, and he determined to live there for some time. Having struck up a friendship with Ridolfo Ghirlandajo, Aristotele S. Gallo, and other young painters, he was well received, especially by Taddeo Taddei, who was always inviting him to his house and table, being one who loved the society of men of ability. Raphael, who was courtesy itself, in order not to be surpassed in kindness, did two pictures for him in a transitional style between the early manner of Pietro and of the other which he learned afterwards, and which was much better, as I shall relate. These pictures are still in the house of the heirs of Taddeo.⁷ Raphael was also very friendly with Lorenzo Nasi, and as Lorenzo had newly taken a wife, he painted them a picture of a babe between the knees of the Virgin, to whom a little St. John is offering a bird, to the delight of both. Their attitude displays childish simplicity and affection, while the picture is well coloured and carefully finished, so that they appear to be actual living flesh.⁸ The Madonna possesses an air full of grace and divinity, the plain, the landscape and all the rest of the work being of great beauty. This picture was greatly valued by Lorenzo Nasi in memory of his close friend and for its excellent workmanship. But it was severely damaged on 17 November, 1548, when the house of Lorenzo was crushed, together with the beautiful houses of the heirs of Marco del Nero and many others, by a landslide from Monte S. Giorgio. However, the pieces were found among the débris, and were carefully put together by Battista, Lorenzo's son, who was very fond of the arts. After these works Raphael was forced to leave Florence and go to Urbino, because, owing to the death of his father and mother, all his things were in disorder. While staying there he did two small but very beautiful Madonnas in his second manner for Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, then captain of the Florentines.⁹ These are now the property of the illustrious Guidobaldo, Duke of Urbino. For the same captain he did a small picture of Christ praying in the Garden, the three Apostles sleeping in the distance. This painting is as delicately finished as a miniature. After remaining for a long time in the possession of Francesco Maria, Duke of Urbino, it was given by his illustrious consort, Leonora, to Don Paolo Giustiniano and Don Pietro Quirini, Venetians, hermits of the Camaldoli. They placed it in a principal chamber of the hermitage, as a thing of rare virtue, a work of Raphael, and the gift of so great a lady, and there it is held in the esteem which it merits.

After settling his affairs, Raphael returned to Perugia, where he painted for the Ansidei Chapel, in the church of the Servites, a picture of Our Lady, St. John the Baptist and St. Nicholas.¹⁰ In the Lady Chapel of S. Severo, in the same city, a small Camaldolite monastery, he painted in fresco a Christ in Glory, God the Father surrounded by angels, with six saints seated, three on either side, St. Benedict, St. Romuald, St. Laurence, St. Jerome, St. Maur and St. Placidus.¹¹ To this fine fresco he put his name in large letters, easily seen. The nuns of S. Antonio da Padova, in the same city, employed him to paint a Madonna with a clothed Christ, as they desired, with St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Cecilia and St. Catherine, the heads of the two holy virgins being the sweetest and purest imaginable, with their varied attire, a rare thing in those days. Above this he painted a fine God the Father in a lunette, and three scenes of small figures in the predella of Christ praying in the Garden, bearing the cross, the soldiers driving Him being very vigorous, and dead in the lap of His Mother.¹² This is a marvellous work, greatly valued by the nuns and much admired by all artists. It is well known that after his stay in Florence Raphael greatly altered and improved his style, through having seen the works of the foremost masters, and he never reverted to his former manner, which looks like the work of a different and inferior hand.

Before Raphael left Perugia, Madonna Atalanta Baglioni begged him to do a panel for her chapel in the church of S. Francesco. But not being able to do so then, he promised that he would not fail her when he returned from Florence, where he had affairs. At Florence he devoted infinite pains to the study of his art, and did the cartoon for this chapel, intending to carry it out as soon as he had the opportunity, as he did. Agnolo Doni was then in Florence, and though sparing in other things, spent willingly upon paintings and sculpture, of which he was very fond, though he saved as much as he could. He had portraits of himself and his wife done,¹³ which may be seen in the house of his son Gio. Battista, built by Agnolo, a fine structure and most convenient in the Corso de' Tintori, near the corner of the Alberti in Florence. For Domenico Canigiani Raphael did a Madonna with the Child Jesus playing with a St. John held to him by St. Elizabeth, who is regarding St. Joseph, leaning with both hands on a staff and bending his head towards Elizabeth, as if marvelling and praising the greatness of God that so old a woman should have a little child.¹⁴ All of them seem to be marvelling at the attitude of the children as they play, one reverencing the other, the colouring of the heads, hands and feet being faultless, and the work of a master. This noble picture is now the property of the heirs of Domenico Canigiani, who value it as a work of Raphael deserves.

This excellent artist studied the old paintings of Masaccio at Florence, and the works of Leonardo and Michelangelo which he saw induced him to study hard, and brought about an extraordinary improvement in his art and style. While at Florence Raphael became very friendly with Fra Bartolommeo of S. Marco, whose colouring pleased him greatly, and this he tried to imitate. On his part he taught the good father the methods of perspective, which he had previously neglected. In the midst of this intimacy Raphael was recalled to Perugia, where he began by finishing the work for Atalanta Baglioni, for which he had prepared the cartoon at Florence, as I have said. This divine picture represents Christ carried to burial, so finely done that it seems freshly executed.¹⁵ In composing this work Raphael imagined the grief of loving relations in carrying to burial the body of their dearest, the one on