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Cathleen Hoeniger
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CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF RESTORING RAPHAEL'S PAINTINGS

Raphael of Urbino, the chosen artist of Popes Julius II and Leo X, was remembered by early biographers as possessing touches of divinity. His appearance was described as angelic, his nature as courteous and gentle, and his artistic gifts were thought to be inspired by God (Fig. 1). When Raphael died suddenly in early April 1520, writers expressed the fear that painting herself might expire, her grief was so deep. Giorgio Vasari, in the most famous account of the artist's death, sought to reassure readers by expressing his faith that Raphael's soul had risen to heaven:

> Then [Raphael], having confessed and shown true penitence, finished the course of his life at the age of thirty-seven on Good Friday, the same day on which he had been born. It is to be believed that just as his virtue has graced the earth, so does his soul adorn the heavens. [After laying Raphael's body] in the room where he had worked, they placed the *Transfiguration*, which he had done for the Cardinal de' Medici, at his head. All those present were overwhelmed by sorrow when they saw [the artist's] dead body, and the living [painting]. . . . Painting [herself] might well have died [alongside] this noble artist; since when [Raphael] closed his eyes, she was left virtually blind.[1]

In this story, Vasari emphasizes how those who came to pay their respects were aggrieved when they saw the dramatic *Transfiguration* towering over the artist's spent frame (Plate 1). Vasari's description of the painting as "living" seems to imply that the tragic loss of such a talented individual would be mitigated by the survival of his vibrantly communicative works.

Although the understanding of Raphael's life and work in the centuries to follow was conditioned by a sequence of written accounts, Raphael's legacy, as Vasari knew, lay in his surviving works. By now, many of Raphael's paintings have outlived him by close to five hundred years. They have perpetuated the artist's fame by carrying in their pictorial compositions and painted brushwork the evidence of Raphael's exceptional ability. The paintings have acted as a lens through which the artist has been interpreted. It is to this afterlife of Raphael – the afterlife enabled by the survival of his paintings – that the title of my book refers.

Many generations of viewers have tried to fathom how Raphael realized such memorable images. So strong was the response that the images were described as otherworldly. Yet in reality, the paintings were subject to decay. Despite the vast literature on Raphael, however, little emphasis has been placed on the history of his paintings as material objects. This has left a space in the scholarship that my book attempts to fill by exploring how the reception of Raphael can be investigated through the physical history of his painted works. In the decades and centuries after his death, Raphael's paintings experienced journeys: they were moved, damaged, restored, and many were displayed in different locations for new audiences. My emphasis is on certain particularly interesting periods during those voyages.

Though marvelled at as timeless, Raphael's panels and frescoes shared with all other Renaissance paintings the limitations of the materials with which they were made. The supports of the large altarpieces and the smaller devotional Madonnas were constructed from poplar wood planks with the assistance of carpenters, and the front surface of the wood, in each case, was prepared to receive Raphael's painting by coating it with a smooth and reflective white ground made from gesso and glue size.[2] Raphael's frescoes were executed on stone or brick walls, which had been covered with layers of slaked lime plaster. The final, very fine plaster coating provided a smooth surface for the artist's composition. In the case of an altarpiece with a wood-panel support, Raphael realised the religious vision in the paint layers, by applying onto the gesso colours made from earth and mineral pigments that had been mixed with the medium of egg tempera or drying oil. When he worked on the wall, most notably for the frescoed rooms in the Vatican Palace, Raphael required the assistance of a workshop because of the scale of the commissions

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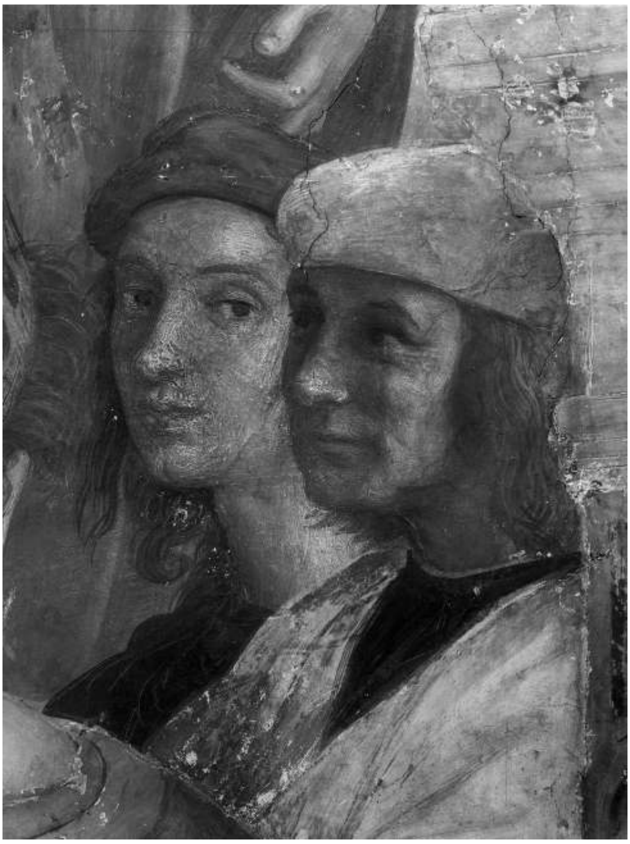

1. Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail, portraits of Raphael and Sodoma, 1955, before cleaning. Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican. (Photo Vatican Museums)

and the complexity of the painting method. Large areas of the Vatican murals were painted in true fresco by working while the top plaster rendering was still wet and painting with finely ground earth colours suspended in water. Once the plaster had dried, more intensely coloured passages could be added to enhance the images. Many of the brighter pigments, for example, the mineral azurite, required a dry environment and an adhesive medium such as glue to fix their colour onto the plaster. Several of the richer pigments either could not be finely enough ground for use with water or reacted chemically with water and changed colour.

In other words, even though Raphael's images had a lasting effect on myriad viewers, they were not only unique and unrepeatable but also somewhat ephemeral creative acts. At the most reductive level, the paintings were made up of applications of organic and inorganic colour mixtures to impermanent and potentially unstable foundations of wood and gesso or stone and lime plaster. In the centuries following his death, Raphael's reputation remained at a constant high and even increased in the estimation of wealthy collectors and academic writers. Yet the paintings on which so much of his fame truly rested could not fare as well as Raphael's untouchable reputation, subject as they were to circumstances that came with the passage of time. Many experienced pronounced deterioration, and some were lost altogether amidst the trauma of natural disasters and the events of political upheavals.

The paintings by Raphael that form the subject of this book underwent different kinds of physical changes that resulted in their being considered in need of restoration. More than one example will be discussed in which a painting was severely damaged in a natural disaster. An important case involves Raphael's earliest documented altarpiece, the *Coronation of St. Nicholas of Tolentino*, which was painted on wood (Fig. 2). The altarpiece was ruined when an earthquake struck the town of Città di Castello in 1789 and destroyed a large part of the church where the painting was housed. The altarpiece seems to have fallen down from the altar and been damaged further by falling rubble. An analogous example, which has been analysed by conservators, is the high altarpiece from Santa Croce in Florence, painted by Ugolino da Siena in the early fourteenth century.[3] The surviving panels exhibit large paint losses, which seem to have occurred when Ugolino's polyptych fell down from its altar table. Aside from destruction caused by natural disasters, this study will also include paintings by Raphael that were purposefully damaged by human hands. One example involves the room of the Vatican that held the pope's library, the Stanza della Segnatura (Plate 2). The frescoes were fired at with guns and run through with swords during the Sack of Rome in 1527.

A rich amount of evidence will be presented to show that several of Raphael's works suffered from serious structural problems. Most often the culprit was the environment of the building in which the painting was housed. Natural aging was also a principal factor in deterioration. An interesting case features the prominent Roman Baroque artist Carlo Maratta, who was commissioned to repair the loggia frescoed by Raphael and his workshop at the Villa Farnesina (Plate 3). It quickly became evident that paint was flaking off the vault because the plaster had lost its adhesion, and a structural intervention was urgently required.

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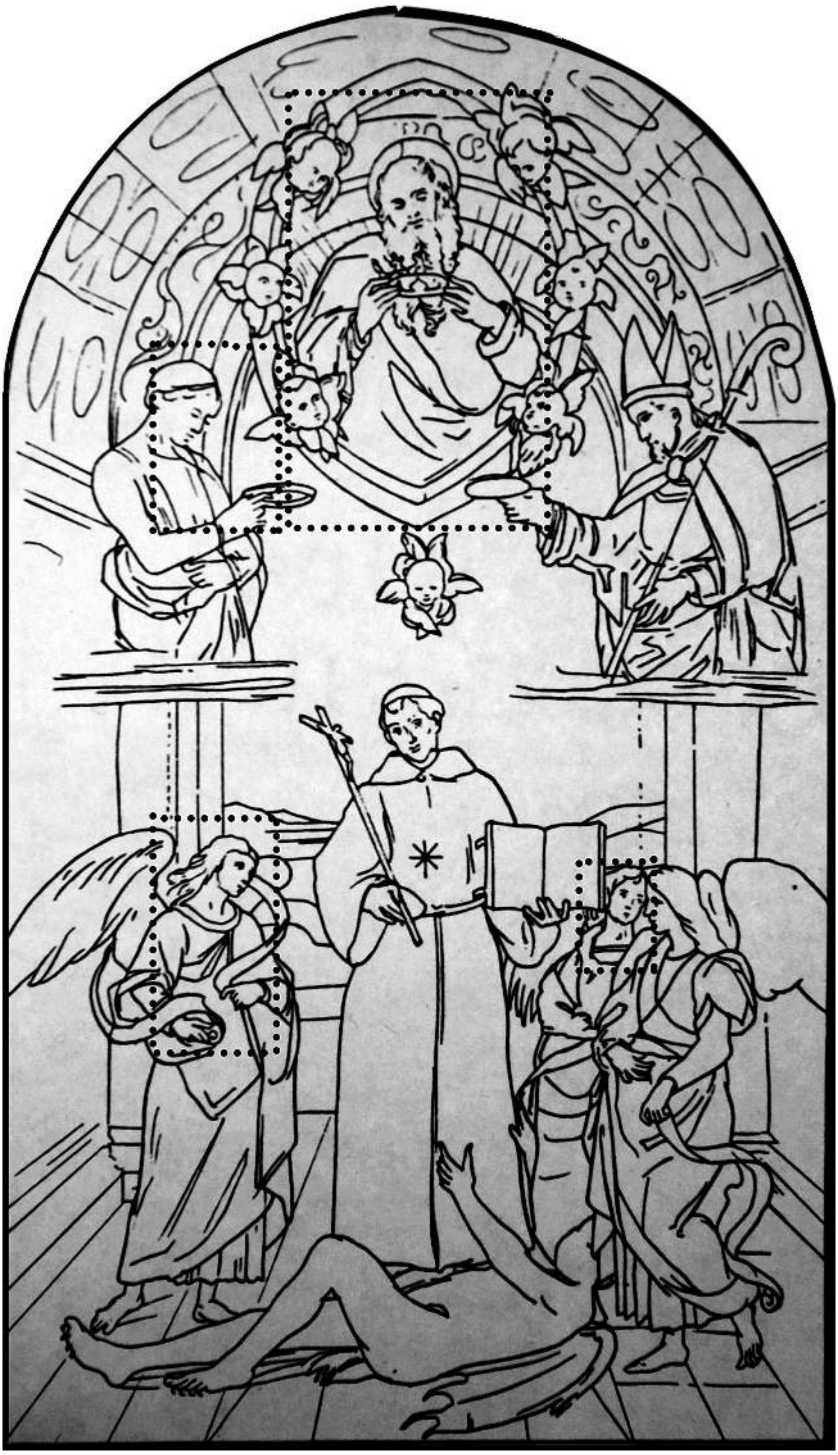

2. Raphael and Evangelista da Pian di Meleto, *Coronation of St. Nicholas of Tolentino*, reconstruction based on Fischel, 1912, with location of surviving fragments. (P.A. Hodgetts, Kingston)

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Although many of Raphael's paintings deteriorated in situ, sometimes the movement of a work from its original location, and its journey over land and by sea, exacerbated the situation. A key example was the *Madonna di Foligno*, which was discovered to be already in terrible condition when it was removed from its convent chapel in 1797 (Plate 4). French experts working under Napoléon packed up the altarpiece for shipment to Paris. On arrival, the curator at the Louvre openly admitted that the traumatic journey could only have contributed further to the precarious state of the painting.

Changes of an artistic nature were wrought to the surface of Raphael's paintings for a number of reasons. In the extreme case of the *Canigiani Holy Family*, the composition was altered to please a patron in the eighteenth century (Fig. 3). There are many documents in which critics lament the incompetence of restorers, who have changed the look of works by Raphael through excessive and tasteless repainting. In addition, the appearance of his works was affected by tried-and-true preservation methods. Protective varnish coatings deteriorated over time, and glue films, employed for centuries to remedy the problem of flaking paint, became greyish and caught particles of dirt on the surface of the painting. Those attentive to the paintings remarked on the discolouration caused by the aging of varnish films. Occasionally, viewers also mentioned, with dampened enthusiasm, that an image had been disfigured by the accumulation of dirt.

Because Raphael's paintings suffered from different forms of deterioration, the scope of the treatments varied widely. The history of each painting was also affected by the preservation methods of each era, and those techniques developed in remarkable ways over the course of five centuries. When the records of restoration to Raphael's paintings are surveyed, predictably one finds that many relate to the routine cleaning and revarnishing of the surface. Yet there are also accounts of structural interventions to stabilize the supports and paint layers. Among these are dramatic descriptions of the transfer of paint layers from their original wood supports to new canvas backings. With the advent of photography in the late nineteenth century, restoration campaigns began to be visually documented. In one example that is presented in Chapter 10, early photographs show how a damaged fragment was repainted to make it appear complete for sale on the art market.

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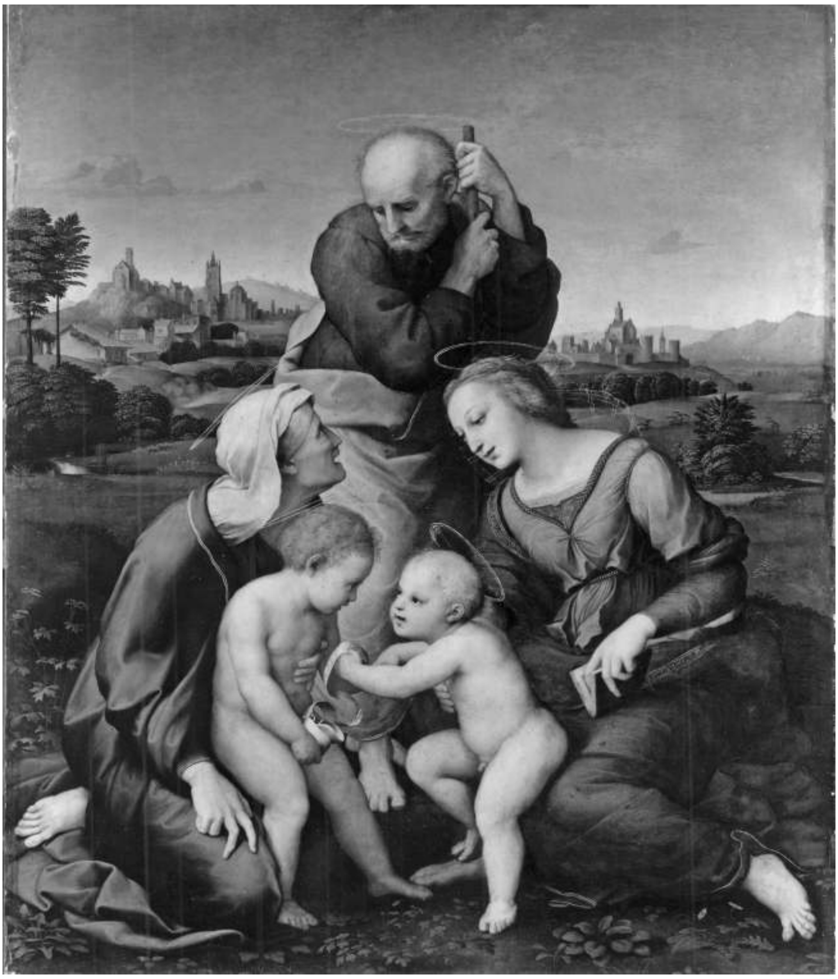

3. Raphael, *Canigiani Holy Family*, before cleaning of 1982, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. (© Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich)

Every time a restorer was commissioned to treat a painting by Raphael, the painting was delivered in a damaged, dirty, darkened, or repainted state. Whether under the instruction of a patron or in consultation with a curatorial committee, a treatment was chosen. The circumstances affecting the decision would have included the condition of the painting, the approaches of the day, the value of the image, and how it was to be displayed. Those restorers trusted to work on paintings by Raphael understood well the theory and practice of their generation, and they either adopted current methods or reacted against them to perform "improved" treatments. Therefore, as a prelude to the subsequent chapters, which explore periods in the history of Raphael's paintings, at least a glimpse is given here of the practice of restoration in Europe since the Renaissance.

A Selective Survey of Painting Restoration in Europe, 1500–1985

In the following pages, several of the principal developments in painting restoration will be considered, and Raphael's works will be featured.[4] In such a cursory account, the reasons restoration methods changed over the centuries cannot be fully explained. Sometimes shifts occurred when restorers became critical of their own traditional theory and practice, and at other junctures, changes were motivated by external forces. Curators and art historians who worked in close proximity to restorers in museum settings influenced restoration decisions, as the later chapters of this book will show.

Renovation

Frequently in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance it was the restorer's task to renovate and thereby modify paintings. In Italy, a considerable number of panel and wall paintings were noticeably altered through repainting or reframing, sometimes to increase the religious efficacy of an image and at other moments because of changing taste. One early Italian example is Lippo Memmi's *Maestà* of 1317 in the Palazzo Comunale of San Gimignano, in which two separate stages of renovation activity can be detected. In the late fourteenth century, the wall painting was extended at each end to house four additional saints. A repainting in the mid-Quattrocento was carried out in a fashionable Florentine style, perhaps at the request of the commune to perpetuate the civic importance of the mural.[5] However, conclusions about the underlying motivations must remain tentative. Because very little archival documentation of restoration work from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries survives, interpretations follow only from the material evidence of the renovations, together with some knowledge of the contextual history of the images.

From the fifteenth century, some documentary records do exist, including account books from Florentine workshops, which reveal that renovations were practiced by artists as prominent as Fra Filippo Lippi,

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Alesso Baldovinetti, and Lorenzo di Credi.[6] In most cases, the renovations were requested to adapt paintings in churches to new circumstances of patronage, situation, or taste. The workshop journal kept by Neri di Bicci in 1453–75 records his modification of earlier panel paintings for affluent Florentines and describes his treatments as "refreshing" (*rinfrescare*), "renewing" (*renovare*), "reframing in the classical style" (*all'antica*), and "restoring" (*rachonciare*; *acconciatura*).[7] One widespread procedure involved inserting a venerated image inside a painted or sculpted framework, apparently to enhance its religious power but also as a means of attracting alms.[8] The Catholic Church encouraged adaptations of this kind long after the general tendency had been to move away from overt renovation.

Another type of renovation work, which continued to be practiced during the seventeenth century, was akin to redecorating and motivated by taste. Members of Europe's religious and political elite did not hesitate to modify or even obliterate works of art. An example of frescoes being destroyed directly involves Raphael. Giorgio Vasari records how Pope Julius II ordered that the frescoes by Piero della Francesca and other Quattrocento artists in the papal apartments of the Vatican Palace be removed to make way for cycles by Raphael. Vasari says that the painted plaster walls of the Stanze were broken off by workmen and fell to the ground so that they might be plastered afresh to prepare for Raphael's compositions.[9]

In a secular context, wealthy patrons ordered their court artists to repaint and reframe older images so that they might harmonize with new decorative schemes. There are documents concerning the French royal picture collection at Versailles, which record more than four hundred alterations in a twelve-year period during the late seventeenth century.[10] The size of a picture could be reduced or enlarged for the sake of interior design. One example of a painting transformed under the influence of Baroque taste is Andrea del Sarto's *Holy Family* (Louvre, Paris). Originally the panel took the shape of a tondo, but the paint layers were transferred to canvas and the whole enlarged to form an oval before 1784.[11]

Nevertheless, at the same time that "tasteful" transformations were desired at court, in other circles there was a growing concern by the late seventeenth century that artworks be preserved in as close to their original state as possible. The coexistence of such diverse approaches to

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restoration will be explored in Chapter 3, when Carlo Maratta’s work on Raphael’s fresco cycles is discussed.

Renovations to Paintings by Raphael

Three treatments of works by Raphael will be introduced at this juncture to exemplify the period when “renovations” were carried out to meet the requests of patrons. These renovations illustrate an artisan and private practice of restoration that was not constrained by the kind of principles that would be established beginning in the late seventeenth century. The first case features one of the earliest recorded repairs of a painting by Raphael. Vasari, who sometimes discussed the condition of works of art, related in the second edition of the *Lives of the Artists* (1568) how a natural disaster caused serious damage to the *Madonna del Cardellino*. The panel painting literally was broken into pieces when the suburban house of Raphael’s Florentine friend Lorenzo Nasi collapsed because of a landslide from Monte San Giorgio in 1547. Pieces of the painting were found among the ruins, and Lorenzo’s son, Giovanbattista, whom Vasari describes as an art lover, put the fragments back together “as best he could.”[12] X-ray studies provide evidence that the panel was indeed joined together along several break lines (Fig. 4).[13] Although Vasari does not say so, one can presume that the patron sought the help of a Florentine artist in the reconstruction of his family’s Madonna. In this instance, the structural work of reassembling the support probably was subcontracted to a carpenter, who would have regularly carried out the construction of wood panels and their frames for the painter in question.

It was the normal practice until the eighteenth century for painting restoration to be carried out by artists as one of their many activities. It was thought that as well-trained painters they understood how to carry out repairs. Yet though their lengthy apprenticeship would have ensured a thorough knowledge of the making of panel paintings and frescoes, the only principles that seem to have governed restoration during this era were those articulated by the patron and intuited by the artist. The price the patron was willing to pay would have determined the quality of the artist who performed the treatment and the value of the materials used.