

DESCRIVEDENDO

DESCRIVEDENDO THE MASTERPAINTINGS OF BRERA

The Marriage of the Virgin by Raphael

Pinacoteca di Brera, Room 24

Formal Description

The somewhat complex painting that we are about to describe is Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*. The altarpiece, an oil painting on wood dated 1504, is painted in a realistic style. The picture is rectangular in shape, taller than it is wide, and is round at the top. It is 118 centimetres wide and 170 centimetres high.

The scene it depicts is the marriage of Mary and Joseph as described in the *Apocryphal Gospels* and the *Golden Legend*, a book containing stories of the lives of the saints. These sources tell us that the High Priest of Jerusalem, inspired by God, asked several suitors for Mary's hand to come to the Temple with a withered branch. Joseph was chosen from among their number because his branch alone burst miraculously into flower when it was placed on the altar.

The picture shows the moment when Mary and Joseph exchange wedding rings in the presence of the High Priest, five young girls and five suitors. The scene is set outdoors in daytime. The figures in the foreground take up the whole of the lower part of the painting. They are shown as full figures, standing, and we see them from a frontal viewpoint set slightly above ground level.

Behind them, in the centre of a broad square, a domed temple sits at the top of a short flight of steps. In the background, a distant hilly landscape

lies beneath a clear sky occupying the upper part of the painting on either side of the temple.

To make it easier to understand the painting, we should now try to imagine it split into 9 equal sections obtained by crossing three columns with three lines, like a noughts and crosses grid. We can number the sections using a telephone keypad layout from left to right: 1, 2, 3 above; 4, 5, 6 in the middle; and 7, 8, 9 below.

We can start our examination of the painting with the section closest to us.

In the centre of the group of figures in the foreground we see the High Priest with his body in section 8 and his head in section 5. He separates the part of the painting with female figures in sections 4 and 7 from the part with male figures in sections 6 and 9.

The priest, his head leaning to one side, joins the hands of the betrothed couple standing beside him, holding their wrists as he helps Joseph to place the ring on Mary's finger. All three gaze at the ring, their expressions, like those of the other figures, serene and measured.

Raphael has taken great care in depicting the details of their clothing. The High Priest wears an ornate cap on his short, grey-brown hair, and his long beard is split into two pointed tails. He is attired in a long purple tunic with an embroidered hem and with a gilded and decorated belt dropping vertically in the shape of a cross at the front. He also wears a long, dark green mantle with embroidery at the hem and a red bib, while orange shoes peep out from beneath his robes.

Mary, to the priest's right, turns towards the centre of the scene. Her light brown hair, partly caught up behind her neck, is covered by a very light, transparent veil falling to her shoulders and tied at the breast. She has a thin gold halo around her head. She wears a simple red gown, the collar edged in black, while a blue mantle falls softly away from her left shoulder. Her grey shoes peep out from beneath her gown.

Joseph, to the priest's left, also turns towards the middle of the scene. The oldest of the suitors in attendance, he has a beard and short, light brown hair, and he too, like Mary, has a thin gold halo around his head. A deep

yellow mantle falls softly away from his left shoulder to reveal a bright green tunic, with the thin white line of his shirt collar visible at the neck. He is the only figure who is barefoot. In his left hand he holds the flowering branch that confirms his role as the chosen suitor.

The scene in the lower foreground is completed by a number of secondary figures. Beside Mary we see a full-figure depiction of one of the five girls, holding a white linen handkerchief in her hands which are crossed over her belly, as she gazes at Mary.

In section 4 we see the heads and busts of the other four girls with gowns of various colours and with their hair dressed in a variety of different styles. In sections 6 and 9 we see the five suitors. One of them stands beside Joseph and is shown bending forward in an attempt to snap his branch by placing it over his right knee and vigorously pulling the two ends towards him. The other four suitors are behind Joseph, in section 6, each one holding his withered branch.

In the middle ground, behind this large group of figures, we see the square in which the marriage is being celebrated. The square is paved with ochre-coloured panels separated by light stone strips that increase the perspective effect as they converge on the temple set atop the short flight of steps running all the way around it.

Various figures are dotted about the large square in a balanced composition: two central groups are set before the steps and another two groups stand further back on either side of the temple while a single person in section 4 and two in section 6 stand at the top of the steps.

The centrally planned temple is light ochre in colour. It dominates the square, chiefly occupying sections 2 and 5. It is sixteen-sided and so at first sight it may seem almost circular. The ground floor is surrounded by an arched portico carried on thin columns; a door in the centre is perfectly mirrored by another door at the back of the building, allowing us to see right through the building and catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it.

The top floor has a series of rectangular windows and is topped by a smooth, dark green dome. The dome, in its turn, is crowned by a lantern reaching right up to the top of the painting. The natural landscape on either

side of the temple consists of low hills in nuanced shades of green and blue. A clear sky dominates the upper part of the painting which ends, as we have seen, in a semicircular arch.

Sunlight illuminates the entire scene with its warmth, coming from a source outside the picture at 2 o'clock and casting only short and fairly insignificant shadows. The luminous colours alternate in a perfect balance between cold and warm tones. And finally, we should note the signature RAPHAEEL URBINAS, Raphael of Urbino, and the date of the work, MDIIII (1504), in Roman numerals just below it, on the central arch of the portico surrounding the temple.



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Art Historical Description

When Raphael painted this picture, he was about 20 years old and had already left his home town of Urbino, where he had picked up his first notions of art in his father's workshop, to visit Perugia, Rome, Siena and Florence.

Before returning to Florence to study the work of Leonardo and Michelangelo in greater depth, he completed a number of paintings in Città di Castello, the Umbrian town from which this altarpiece comes. It was commissioned from him by the Albizzini family for the Chapel of St. Joseph in the church of San Francesco.

Raphael was probably asked to produce a picture similar to the one that Pietro Vannucci, known as Perugino, was painting for the chapel in Perugia cathedral erected to house the Holy Ring that was believed to have been placed on the Virgin's finger at her marriage. Raphael certainly emulated Perugino's subject matter and overall composition, with the most important figures in the foreground and a broad square opening out behind them and dominated by a temple in the background. But while the space in Perugino's altarpiece is two-dimensional, Raphael's great innovation lay in creating a space spreading out from the temple's vertical axis to embrace the entire square and extend as far as the curve of the horizon. He got the basic idea for this astonishing innovation both from the theories formulated by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise entitled *De Re Aedificatoria* in which he extolls the circle as the perfect form of the elements in nature and describes the ideal church as white, centrally planned and built on a vast square but raised off the ground, and from those formulated by Piero della Francesca and Bramante who describe beauty as an order of geometrical and musical ratios capable of reawakening in the observer the harmonious sense of the Universe. The temple, set in full light and distanced by the gradually shrinking paving slabs with their precise perspective lines, is the source of this circular space. The figures in the foreground, who are not in a straight line

but are arranged in a semicircle fanning out over the paving slabs, also help to reflect the circular rhythm dominating the whole composition. The figures are extremely controlled in their gazes and in their very basic gestures and poses in order to ensure that everything converges and focuses on the priest's ritual gesture and that nothing distracts the observer's eye from the symbolic significance of the temple in the centre of the picture.

In varying his figures' features, costumes and poses, Raphael succeeds in conveying a feeling of immense simplicity and naturalness, to which the small figures in the distance linking the foreground to the temple and the landscape also contribute. The overall feeling of harmony is also expressed through a rich and skilfully measured palette.

The altarpiece graced the altar in the Chapel of St. Joseph until 1798, when Giuseppe Lechi, commanding a detachment of the Napoleonic army, took it with him to Brescia. He claimed that it was freely offered to him by the local people, but later reconstructions suggest that the troops forced the people to hand over the painting. After passing through several hands, it was finally bought by Giuseppe Bossi, the Secretary of the Reale Accademia di Brera, in 1806 for the picture gallery that was still in its infancy at the time.

Biography

Raphael, the son of painter Giovanni Santi, was born in Urbino in 1483. Orphaned while still only a child, he worked at the court of the Montefeltro. Vasari lists him among Perugino's pupils, but full light has yet to be shed on the relationship between the two. What we do know is that he was familiar with Perugino's work when the latter was painting in Perugia and Città di Castello in the early years of the 16th century.

Raphael came to full artistic maturity in Florence in late 1504, but for his unquestioned public acclamation he had to wait until he moved to Rome in 1508, where he began to work at the courts of Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X. Within a few years he was earning such important commissions as

painting the frescoes in the Vatican Stanze, producing the cartoons for the tapestries in the Sistine Chapel and decorating the Vatican Logge and the Loggia of Psyche in Sienese banker Agostino Chigi's Villa Farnesina. In later years he also intensified his study of the city's classical monuments thanks to a commission from Leo X to produce a map of ancient Rome. He died in Rome on 6 April 1520.