

A detail from Raphael's fresco 'The Fall of Man' in the Vatican Museums. The scene depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam is shown in the upper left, leaning forward and pointing towards the forbidden fruit. Eve is in the lower right, looking up at him. In the background, a landscape with trees and a distant city is visible. The text 'Raphael in Rome' and 'Style, technique, conservation' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Raphael in Rome

Style, technique, conservation

EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI

Introduction

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The main topic of this volume is the extraordinary change undergone by Raphael during the years 1511 to 1514, the years of the Stanza di Eliodoro, since this book mostly revolves around the restoration which has been carried out recently, directed by Arnold Nesselrath and carried out by Paolo Violini. What happened in these years? Any history of art textbook, even the briefest, will say that certain events took place: Raphael first decorated the Stanza della Segnatura – his work there lasted between three and four years – and then he starts on the Audience Hall, which today we all know as the Stanza di Eliodoro. Any history of art textbook will tell you that Raphael, at the time aged nearly thirty-one, had the chance to see some works in Rome: for example, the Sistine Chapel ceiling, completed and opened by Pope Julius II della Rovere on 31 October 1512. We know that important artists from the Veneto, from the culture of colour, came to Rome and even spent some time in his workshop: Lorenzo Lotto for example, documented as being working in Vatican at Raphael's time, or Sebastiano del Piombo. But is this enough to explain what happened in the Stanza di Eliodoro? This is the point on which we shall come together today with our colleagues who will certainly have something important to say on this subject: how it came about such a transformation so profound and important that brings Raphael to his peak, his zenith, to what Vasari has identified as his moment of supreme perfection? There we have it: the Heliodorus Raphael is supreme perfection. We look at these frescoes (someone like me has been able to observe them almost in their makings going up onto the scaffolding day by day, as they have been gradually revealed by restoration: these are extraordinary experiences only granted to people in our profession).

For example, in the Stanza di Eliodoro, where there is the episode of the *Liberation of St Peter*, you look at that sky, that night, which is not a night but a journey to the end of night because we understand that the night is declining towards dawn: already in the background we start to glimpse some glimmer of dawn (fig. 137). And you look at that moon (fig. 136), the moon of the *Liberation of St Peter*; when was a moon like that ever seen in Italian painting? A sky like that? This is really the first nocturne in the history of Italian art. Do you have the moon of the *Liberation of St Peter* in mind? This sky heavy with the sirocco, this moon just veiled by a scrap of cloud in the Roman Campagna – because Raphael imagines that the liberation of St Peter happens not in Jerusalem as is written in the Acts of the Apostles, but on the edge of Rome. Of course, any number of the greatest Italian painters have portrayed meteorological events and the sky, from the misty thread of cloud caught in the crenellations of a distant castle which Gentile da Fabriano painted in the *Flight into Egypt* for the *predella* of the altarpiece with the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi; or Giovanni Bellini's skies, for example the sky standing above the *Baptism of*

Christ of Santa Corona in Vicenza; or Lorenzo Lotto's skies. Think of the black sky – as we read in the Gospel, “And darkness fell over all the earth” – which Lorenzo Lotto painted in *Crucifixion* of San Giusto at Fermo. And yet this moon by Raphael in the *Liberation of St Peter* is something never seen before. And also never seen before in the history of Italian painting is the psychological intensity in the facial expressions, and at the same time the warmth of the skin, almost the breathing of the characters portrayed by Raphael. That portrait of Julius II's chairmen, kneeling at the feet of the Pope (figs. 102-106): they are officials, probably Germanic – blond hair, pale skin, blue eyes, proud of their sumptuous uniforms, their glorious weapons – but I do not believe that anyone, not even Dürer – and that's saying a lot – has been able to give such intensity to a male portrait.

Or, still in the Stanza di Eliodoro, the unforgettable episode of the *Meeting between Attila and Pope Leo the Great* (fig. 150): as has often been said and is surely true, it is likely that Giovan Francesco Penni did much of the work on that fresco, even if the conception and drawings were provided by Raphael. But I think there is no doubt that the landscape in the background (figs. 152-155) can be by nobody but Raphael. You would need to see it close up, as I have done, to see what the landscape is, with a ghostly, greyish-violet Coliseum in the background and the profile of the arches on the Roman plain and Monte Mario ablaze, and these fires seem like napalm bombs in the background: there has never been anyone but Raphael who could paint that landscape, those colours, that total mimesis of the truly visible. We really have the impression that the violet ashes rising from Giorgione's funeral have reached the Stanza di Eliodoro; and yet this is not enough, because in my opinion this is the point: art historians are very deterministic (and we are right to be so). We know that the work of art is something exquisitely relative and is linked to a virtually infinite network of circumstances and relationships. But for goodness' sake, this is always true, and it's easy to say “He did this because he saw that, he was influenced by this other man”. And yet it is this minutely detailed and recorded network that creates the exquisite relativity of the work of art. In any artwork there are, so to speak, all works of art. And yet, in the case of the Raphael of the Stanza di Eliodoro all this is still not enough because I think that the processes by which genius is accelerated, in painting as in all the arts, are something essentially unknown, unpredictable, like thunderbolts.

How are we to think of the painter who created the murals of the Upper Basilica at Assisi as the same man who then painted the frescoes of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua? A painter who first seems to be Domenico Veneziano, now seems to be Piero della Francesca, and yet only a few years divide the Assisi murals from the Paduan frescoes; always supposing – as I do – that the same painter made both. Think of Dante Alighieri, try picking up *La Vita Nova* or *Il Convivio*, and then open the *Inferno*, read the canto of Paolo and Francesca. How do we pass from those learned, doctrinal, refined, aristocratic texts to the canto of Paolo and Francesca, to this line: “*La bocca mi baciò tutto tremante*” (‘His mouth kissed me trembling all over’). It seems like a ditty from Sanremo and yet, as De Robertis used to write, modern erotic poetry starts with this line, and then come Petrarch, Leopardi,

Baudelaire, and whoever else you care to name. Of course, enough texts have been written on the development of Dante Alighieri to fill not one but ten libraries, and yet all this is still not enough to explain the canto of Paolo and Francesca. We should pay greater attention to this phenomenon, which in the end is mysterious, the process of accelerating genius: how little it may take, or perhaps nothing at all, to achieve results that could be explained by an infinity of relationships and influences. This happens in the years 1511-1514 in Rome in the Audience Hall of the apartments of Pope Julius II della Rovere. In his contribution Paolo Violini explains how this restoration has been undertaken: for me it has been unforgettably exciting to stand on the scaffolding and see this incredibly delicate painting emerge, this succession of prodigious layerings which recreate out of nothing the warmth of life, the heat of things. This is the miracle of Raphael, who was, I think you will all be convinced of this, the greatest of all time, the “painter of painters” in other words, the one who has inspired all the others: first there is Raphael, and then come Poussin, Pietro da Cortona, Ingres, David, all the way to Picasso, yes even Picasso. Any painter who has looked at the visible world with the eyes of astonishment and excitement, any painter who has had a luminous, serene vision of man and of women, whoever has done this has in some way been inspired by Raphael, has been his clone, a variant of him. And we can understand this here, better than in any other room of the Stanze painted by Raffaello, right here in the Stanza di Eliodoro which, I repeat, is the focus of most of the researches that follows.