



ARTWORK THE CONVERSION OF SAUL
 Workshop of Pieter van Aelst, after a cartoon
 by Raphael and his workshop
DATE 1517-1519
MATERIAL Wool, silk, and gilded silver
DIMENSIONS 464 x 533 cm
INVENTORY n. 43872
LOCATION Vatican City, Vatican Museums

The tapestry, the first panel in the Pauline cycle, depicts the episode of the Conversion of Saul as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles (9:1-17). The Holy Scriptures recount how Saint Paul, a young Jew from Tarsus originally named Saul and a zealous persecutor of the early Christians, was suddenly struck blind by a dazzling light while traveling along the road to Damascus, where he intended to arrest the followers of Christ. Overwhelmed, he fell from his horse. At that moment he heard the divine words: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Moved by this revelation, he converted, choosing to become a disciple of Christ and to spread His Word.

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This exquisitely crafted panel, enriched with golden and silver threads, captures the decisive moment when Saul, cast to the ground, listens to the voice of Jesus, who appears amid the clouds, framed by a radiant halo of golden light. The agitation, astonishment, and confusion of the surrounding figures heighten the dramatic intensity of the scene. A perfect formal balance unites the composition: the vigorous motion of the secondary figures contrasts with Saul's near immobility, as he is absorbed in his secret dialogue with Christ, in a suspension of time and space.

In the foreground lies Saul's sword, which would later become the saint's principal iconographic attribute. It serves as a symbolic bridge between his former life as a Roman soldier and persecutor of Christians and his new mission as the "Apostle of the Gentiles," devoted preacher of God's word, whose path of holiness would ultimately lead to martyrdom.

In conceiving the scene, Raphael drew inspiration from an illumination of the *Life of Paul* in the *Bible of Urbino*, produced in Florence between 1476 and 1478 for Federico da Montefeltro, as well as from Leonardo da Vinci's celebrated, though now lost, mural of the *Battle of Anghiari* (1505), particularly in the group of horsemen on the right. Above all, however, the master from Urbino reintroduced certain compositional solutions that he himself had employed only a few years earlier in the frescoes of the papal apartments of Julius II in the Vatican Palace. Several surviving drawings, preserved today in major graphic collections, document his process of invention and the way he assembled and adapted figures for new creations.

The richly gilded border at the base, designed as a faux monochrome frieze, is a unifying ornamental element that characterizes the entire set of tapestries conceived by Raphael for Leo X. In this instance, it recounts episodes from the life of Saint Paul prior to his conversion. Arranged paratactically, the scenes unfold in a horizontal sequence reminiscent of an ancient bas-relief, offering a continuous visual narrative of striking decorative effect.

