

The Transfiguration
Raphael Sanzio
1516-1520
Oil on Wood
Vatican Museum



The painting of *The Transfiguration* was Raphael's last great masterpiece. In fact, he died before this painting was finished leaving others to complete the work. He loved this piece so much that he asked for it to be brought to the foot of his bed so he could gaze on it before he passed away. He died on Good Friday, April 6, 1520 at the age of 37 and is buried in the Pantheon in Rome.

History of the Painting

This painting was commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de Medici for a church in Narbonne, France. However, the Cardinal decided to place it in the church of St. Peter in Montorio in Rome instead. This painting was so popular that a mosaic copy was made for St. Peter's Basilica in 1774.

In 1797, Napoleon's troops marched into Rome and seized many great paintings of art including *The Transfiguration*. The stolen paintings were brought to Paris and installed in the Louvre Museum.

After the fall of Napoleon in 1815, envoys to Pope Pius VII were able to negotiate the return of the Raphael paintings back to Rome. This painting was then placed in the Vatican Museums.

The Gospel Story

Raphael's depiction of the Transfiguration is actually two separate events one following the other. The upper portion of the painting depicts the Transfiguration of Christ aglow in heavenly light. Christ is shown in His glory. The glory that was proper to God at the time now shows a communion of glory between the Father and the Son, thus showing that His glory is also attributed to His Son. His hands are raised to heaven and also foreshadow His hands raised and nailed on the cross. Along with Christ, are Moses on the left representing the law and Elijah on the right representing the prophets. It is through the law and prophets of ancient Israel that a message comes forth about a Messiah who suffers and dies. St. Luke states the conversation between the three of them is about Jesus' exodus out of Jerusalem; His death and resurrection. (Luk 9:31)

Peter, James and John are shown at the feet of Christ lying on the ground overcome with sleep. Luke states that after, "becoming fully awake, they saw His glory." (9:32)

The two figures kneeling on the left are commonly identified as St. Justus and St. Pastor. Their feast day is August 6, the same day we celebrate the Transfiguration on the Church calendar. The church in Narbonne, France where the painting was to be hung over the altar was named after these two saints, hence they were placed in the painting as if they were viewing the whole Transfiguration scene.

The scene down below Christ, tells us what followed the Transfiguration after Jesus and the disciples came down off the mountain. In the foreground we see nine of the disciples on the left side while a boy on the right is presented by his parents for healing. In the Gospel story the boy's father explains to Jesus his plea for the healing of his son from an evil spirit, but His disciples could not cast out the demon.

The scene Raphael portrays in his painting shows the nine disciples in a bit of chaos trying to figure out what to do with the boy. We see Matthew (or as some historians claim, Andrew) in the front with a book open. Perhaps to show he is looking through the Old Testament for an answer to this problem. He also has his hand out to the viewer as if he is beckoning us into the scene for help, or perhaps telling us to wait for something as he gazes at the woman. The woman in the front stands apart from anyone else in the bottom scene. She is portrayed boldly in front looking distinctly at something which the painter does not directly show. Yet, she appears to be staring at nothing in particular but also pleading for someone to help this child. However, if you bring Jesus off the mountain, directly down in front, suddenly you can image that she is looking at Jesus and is pleading for healing for the boy. The woman represents the Church interceding for the boy. Therefore, the two people who stand out the most in this painting are Christ and His Bride the Church.

The Meaning of Colors, Light and Shadows

The colors chosen for clothing in paintings often have meaning associated with them. For example, The parents of the boy are both wearing green. Green is a symbol of hope; hope that their boy will be healed. The son is wearing blue, a symbol of humanity. However, the possession strips him of his humanity, thus he is shown being stripped of his clothes.

The woman is wearing the colors blue and rose to illustrate that the Church is both divine and human. The woman is kneeling on green plants, thus showing the fertile ground that the Church rests on.

Raphael plays with light and darkness in this painting to illustrate heaven and hell. Christ basked in light shows the glory of heaven. The scene below with the possessed boy is in shadows, imaging the darkness of hell. There is even a man in the shadows above the woman's head. He is hard to see at first, but he emerges from darkness as he looks at the scene before him. Another man in the shadows is Judas Iscariot. He is on the far left in blue.

Meditation

This painting is a reflection of our spiritual lives. The top part depicting our Lord in glory stirs our desire to follow him and to obtain heaven at the end of our lives. It is the times in our prayer life that we are most elevated by contemplating His beauty and continence. Yet, we also fall into times of darkness where there seems to be chaos and confusion as we, too, are wondering what has gone wrong. Our Lord reminds us to have faith and to pray. Notice the flow of hands on the left side of the painting. The lowest figure, Matthew perhaps, is reaching out to us, with his outstretched arm, the flow continues with the disciple above him who points to another who is fixed on Christ. From there our eyes are drawn back down to the boy. It is a whole circular scene which portrays excitement and action.

