

Raphael – Genius of the Renaissance in Rome. A Study Day

Born in 1483, the painter Raphael lived a short but highly successful life, dying in Rome in 1520. Despite the brevity of his career his reputation as a major artist, influencing the way other artists worked and how they evaluated their own success, has lived on for a further five centuries. Contemporaries viewed him as a “Prince among artists”, a man who helped to raise the status of the painter from being ‘just’ a craftsman to being one fit to mix with the very highest – even Dukes, Princes and Popes. Although the nature of art has changed radically in the past century, Raphael’s work is still influencing artists today.

Part One - From Urbino to Florence

In this study day we examine Raphael’s career, starting with his origins in the city of Urbino. Brought up in this small but sophisticated city he learned the courtly manners which would allow him to mix easily with the elite and proved himself to be a prodigiously talented painter while still a teenager. He worked for wealthy patrons in Urbino and in neighbouring towns, producing altarpieces, portraits and small luxury paintings for discerning collectors.

Part Two – From Florence to Rome

In 1504, at the age of twenty-one, Raphael moved to Florence, the centre of so many of the most innovative developments in Italian Renaissance art. Here, artists strove to create realistic images of the human body, using their knowledge of anatomy to make their figures believable and exciting. Raphael rapidly assimilated the Florentine style, bringing characterful insights to his portraits and dramatic vigour to his altarpieces.

Four years later he was summoned to Rome, by Pope Julius II, to work on the decoration of the Pope’s personal apartments. Here he would transform ideas about narrative in painting, creating frescoes filled with dramatic tension and energy. He became the most sought-after painter in the city, working for the rich and powerful, developing new styles of interior decoration and bringing new naturalism to portrait painting.

Part Three - Rome and Beyond

Fiercely ambitious, Raphael dominated the artistic world of Rome at a time of exuberant expenditure on art, architecture and design - his beautiful works reflecting the opulence of the Church and its ruling court, despite the zeal of the Reformation beginning to take hold elsewhere. His sudden death in April 1520 death shocked the city, but his assistants and pupils preserved his legacy by producing prints of his works, allowing them to be seen by people across Europe. That legacy would reverberate down the centuries, making his work a benchmark for later artists, even down to painters, photographers and digital artists of our own day.