



# ‘THE BIG THREE’

A trail exploring some exceptional works by Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael in the National Gallery's collection

The National Gallery is the only collection in the UK where paintings by Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael can be seen in one place, the Gallery owning 11 works by Raphael alone. The enormous reputation of these artists was already established during their lifetimes, their work being much sought after. Their stature grew further in the sixteenth century, after the Italian painter and architect Giorgio Vasari wrote their biographies. Favouring artists who worked in Florence, Vasari placed them at the pinnacle of his approach to evaluating art in his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. He also coined the term ‘*renascita*’ (or ‘Renaissance’), a concept that has come to encapsulate the ‘rebirth’ of interest in Classical art and learning. The reputations of Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael have stood the test of time. They remain the big three names of Renaissance art and their works are among the most loved in the collection.

# ‘THE BIG THREE’



Leonardo, the eldest of the three, was born in 1452 at the Tuscan hill-town of Vinci. We can view his works in Rooms 51 and 57.

# The Leonardo Cartoon

Leonardo da Vinci, about 1499–1500



This cartoon (from the Italian ‘cartone’, meaning a large sheet of paper) is a full-size preparatory drawing for a painting. Such drawings were usually rubbed with chalk or charcoal on the reverse and traced over with a stylus. Alternatively, pin holes were pricked through the drawing and charcoal dust ‘pounced’ through to transfer the design to a panel. No pin holes or scoring are visible on this cartoon so we assume that a corresponding painting was not completed. Leonardo – now considered the epitome of the idealised ‘Renaissance man’, interested in a wide range of investigation, from biology to weaponry – completed relatively few of his works of art. This cartoon, though only a preparatory drawing, was kept in its own right, evidence of how deeply Leonardo’s work was prized. A cartoon of a similar subject by Leonardo drew huge crowds when it was publicly displayed in Florence in 1501.



## The Virgin of the Rocks

Leonardo da Vinci, about 1491–1508

In this painting, newly cleaned and framed, we see some of the same figures again. Christ similarly lifts his hand in a gesture of blessing towards his little cousin, Saint John the Baptist, but this time the Virgin is accompanied by an angel. The angel's pale, ethereal face and delicately curled hair are so fine that they could only be by the expert hand of Leonardo. The hand of the angel on Christ's back shows that this painting too is not completed. It was most probably intended to replace an earlier panel of the same subject that had been commissioned from Leonardo in 1483. The fact that the confraternity in Milan were willing to wait several years for a replacement painting by him indicates Leonardo's important status. Through the gap in the mysterious rocky landscape we see a view into the background, painted in blue because the eyes perceive cool colours as being further away.

In Room 8 we can see that Michelangelo uses this same technique, known as aerial perspective, to create a sense of distance.



## The Entombment

Michelangelo, about 1500–1

Michelangelo Buonarroti was also a man with diverse interests. A painter, poet and architect, his primary fascination lay with sculpture and depicting the figure. Both Leonardo and Michelangelo studied anatomy and considered drawing to be a fundamental part of preparing for a painting. The sense of the importance of '*disegno*' (drawing) is visible in this work. The symmetrically balanced, twisting figures have clear, linear outlines, almost like a sculptural frieze. Paintings on panel by Michelangelo are rare. Our two paintings, this and '*The Manchester Madonna*', are both unfinished but were also considered

worthy of preserving, being by such a prized artist. The areas that would have been occupied by the Virgin (bottom right) and the tomb (in the background) have been left blank. Perhaps Michelangelo was offered a more lucrative and interesting opportunity? Shortly after painting *The Entombment*, Michelangelo left for Florence to sculpt his famous *David*.

Raphael was considered a far more obliging and reliable artist than either Michelangelo or Leonardo, and created a successful career in his own style, as we can see in Room 8.



## The Ansidei Madonna

Raphael, 1505

Raphael, the youngest of the three painters, and a whole generation later than Leonardo, was born in Urbino in 1483. In his early life he worked mainly in Perugia, where he was influenced by the style of the older artist Perugino, famous for painting sweet angelic faces. This altarpiece was painted for the chapel of the Ansidei family in the Church of San Fiorenzo, Perugia, a year after Raphael had been to Florence, studying the new styles of Leonardo, Michelangelo and others. In the weighty figures we see that Raphael had examined the monumental figures of Michelangelo. We also sense Raphael's admiration of Leonardo's mastery of expressing emotional states through gestures and expression, in the way that Raphael gently tilting their heads.



## The Madonna of the Pinks

Raphael, about 1506–7



This small, beautiful painting was purchased in 2004, the latest addition to a rich collection of works by Raphael in the Gallery. It was probably made shortly before Raphael left Florence for Rome. The theme and much of the composition are borrowed from Leonardo's *'Benois Madonna'* which he had seen in Florence. This devotional scene of a mother delicately offering her child some carnations (or pinks) has a strong element of human tenderness which brings the subject matter closer to the viewer. The Madonna and Child was a theme Raphael returned to many times. For years this painting was thought to be a copy of a lost original painting by Raphael. Infra-red photography, which allows a close look at the under-drawing below the paint surface, revealed that the painting is actually an 'autograph' work entirely by the hand of Raphael.

## Portrait of Pope Julius II

Raphael, 1511



In 1508 Raphael was summoned to Rome by this man, Pope Julius II, an important patron of the arts. During this same year, Michelangelo had begun to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling at Pope Julius's request, and Raphael was later hired to decorate his private apartments, the Stanze, in the Vatican. Raphael's painting is one of the great images of Renaissance portraiture. Instead of portraying the Pope from the front or in profile, as would be expected for a great ruler, we view the formidable Julius from an angle, glimpsing a more intimate representation of an elderly leader in a quiet moment of contemplation. His throne is adorned with two acorns as symbols of his family name, della Rovere, which is Italian for 'of oak'. Giorgio Vasari said of the portrait: 'It was so wonderfully lifelike and true that it inspired fear as if it were alive.'

If you would like to find out more about the National Gallery's collection of Italian Renaissance paintings, many publications about the period are available from Gallery bookshops or from the online Shop at [www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk).

Please note that a painting may occasionally be removed from display. If so, you can view a reproduction of it on Artstart screens around the Gallery. Artstart also provides current locations of paintings.