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Raphael's 'S. John the Baptist Preaching'

Allan Braham and Martin Wyld

Introduction

Allan Braham

Raphael's painting of *S. John the Baptist Preaching* (No.6480, Plate 2, p.18) is the only section that is known to have survived of the predella panel of the National Gallery's *Madonna and Child with the Baptist and S. Nicholas of Bari* ('*The Ansidei Madonna*') (No.1171, Fig.1). The altarpiece was painted by the young Raphael for the Ansidei family chapel in the church of S. Fiorenzo in Perugia (Figs.2 and 3), and bears what clearly appears to be the date 1505 on the hem of the Madonna's robe near her left hand [1]. The predella of the altarpiece was originally decorated with three scenes, the *Marriage of the Virgin* in the centre, with the *Preaching of the Baptist* to the left and a *Miracle of S. Nicholas of Bari* to the right.

The altarpiece apparently remained intact until the middle years of the eighteenth century, when the interior of the church was restored. Its shallow side chapels, two to each side of the nave, were then equipped with elaborate *settecento* frames rising the full height of the rear walls. In the Ansidei chapel (Fig.3), the second on the right from the main entrance, an opening was left in the centre of the frame, equivalent in size to the main panel of Raphael's altarpiece, which was eventually equipped with a copy of the painting, attributed to Nicola Monti. The modest architecture of the chapel was probably not otherwise greatly altered at this time and the main features of its entrance arch are closely echoed in Raphael's painting (Figs.1 and 3).

The main panel of the altarpiece and the surviving section of the predella were apparently acquired in 1764 through Gavin Hamilton by Lord Robert Spencer, a younger son of the 3rd Duke of Marlborough, then in Italy on the Grand Tour [2]. The altarpiece had presumably been dismembered before this time, as the new frames in S. Fiorenzo (Fig.3) seem earlier than the 1760s in date, but the sale of the painting and the alteration of the chapel are likely to have been related events. Even so, Raphael's original may have been installed in the new altar before it was replaced by the copy which the purchaser of the original was asked to provide [3].

An early print of the predella painting in reverse (Fig.4) by Antonio Capellan, who engraved several of the plates for Hamilton's *Schola Italica Picturae* (1771), gives an indication of the appearance of the painting after its acquisition by Lord Robert Spencer, who is recorded as the owner in the inscription [4]. After his return to England the main panel of the altarpiece was given to his brother, the 4th Duke of Marlborough, and it remained at Blenheim until bought by the National Gallery in 1885. The predella was eventually sold in 1799 and later acquired for the Lansdowne collection [5].

Since 1976 it had been on loan to the National Gallery, exhibited in the vicinity of '*The Ansidei Madonna*', but much darkened and discoloured in comparison with the main panel, which had been cleaned in 1956 (see below). Following tests which confirmed the autograph quality of the predella and its satisfactory state of preservation, the painting was acquired through private treaty sale in 1983, thus permanently reuniting the two surviving parts of the altarpiece [6].

During cleaning the predella was freed from the gesso and paint added at the top of the panel, and the borders at its edges, black with traces of decoration in red, were found to be probably not original (see below). In tone and colouring the painting emerged as scarcely less brilliant than the main panel of the altarpiece, though it appears softer in handling and in its range of colours, partly no doubt because of the scale of the painting and its more complex theme, and perhaps also indicating a later completion date, at a time when the style of the painter was at a stage of rapid development.

The predella is not in other ways inconsistent, after cleaning, with the main panel of the altar. Both are brightly illuminated from the upper right, from the direction of the window above the main door of S. Fiorenzo (Fig.2) which lights the nave of the church and its chapels. The landscapes in the two paintings are akin and the figure of S. John, bearing a long crystal cross, is related to the two paintings.

In the context of the predella panel, however, where the composition, as one of three continuous scenes, is weighted to the right, S. John appears as an almost visionary figure, his cloak marking the edge of the painting and billowing at his back with an almost medieval weightlessness. Infra-red photographs (Fig.9) show here and in other parts of the composition careful underdrawing on the gesso.

The listeners are weightier than the figure of the saint, with an element of portraiture in the facial and physical differentiation of the crowd, and a suggestion even of caricature to the left, where the impact of the sermon has not yet fully penetrated. The crowd is co-ordinated by the figure in the foreground seen from the back, who witnesses the whole scene, mediating between the spectator and the crowd of listeners. The genius of Raphael in the creation of narrative, underlined by the use of portraiture and the manipulation of colour, can now more easily be appreciated, as can the enrichment of his technique through early contact with the new sophistication of Florentine art.

Notes and references

1. GOULD, C., *National Gallery Catalogues: The Sixteenth-Century Italian Schools* (London 1975), pp.216–18; and DUSSLER, L., *Raphael: A Critical Catalogue* (London 1971), pp.13–14, with further references.
2. SCHARF, G., *Catalogue Raisonné [...] of the Pictures in Blenheim Palace* (1862), p.40. ROWSE, A.L., *The Later Churchills* (Harmondsworth 1971), p.120ff. describes the tour of Lord Robert, who seems to have been in Italy in 1767, rather than 1764, when his age was only seventeen.
3. SCHARF, *op. cit.*
4. Copy in the National Gallery library (Brockendon Collection). Inscribed 'Raphael S.U. pinsit', 'Ant. Capellan Sculpisit', 'Nobilissimo viro Roberto Spencer/ Insignis hujus Tabulae Possessori/C. Morison L.D.' Morison may well be the Scottish antiquarian who, for example, guided Boswell in Rome in 1765. See *Boswell on the Grand Tour* (1955), p.63ff.
5. Lord Robert Spencer sale, Christie's, 31 May 1799, lot 86. *Loan Exhibition of the Lansdowne Collection*, Agnew's (1954–55), p.29, no.48.
6. The predella panel measures 29.2cm (11½ in.) by 53.8cm (21⅜ in.) across the top, and 52.8cm (20¾ in.) across the base. The painted area is 26.2cm (10¼ in.) in height. The altarpiece is 152.6cm (61½ in.) in width [painted area, 148.6cm (58½ in.)]. Since the predella is more than one-third the width of the painted area of the altarpiece, it is probable that the central predella scene ('The Marriage of the Virgin') was narrower than those to the left and right, and perhaps had some relationship to the shape of the base of the throne.



Figure 1 (Right) Raphael, *Madonna and Child with the Baptist and S. Nicholas of Bari* ('The Ansidei Madonna') (No.1171).

Figure 4 (Below) Antonio Capellan, engraving in reverse of S. John the Baptist Preaching.





Figure 2 Perugia, the church of S. Fiorenzo.



Figure 3 Perugia, S. Fiorenzo, the Ansidei chapel.

The treatment of the picture

Martin Wyld

The altarpiece of which *S. John the Baptist Preaching* is a predella (*Madonna and Child with the Baptist and S. Nicholas of Bari* ('*The Ansidei Madonna*'), No.1171 [1], Fig.1) was described by Passavant [2], who had seen it in 1831, as being in excellent condition, and by Waagen four years later as having turned very dark in the landscape and canopy. Both descriptions were accurate. Of the nine paintings by Raphael now in the National Gallery Collection, only the *Madonna and Child*, No.2069 (commonly known as '*The Madonna of the Tower*' or '*The Mackintosh Madonna*') is poorly preserved; the remainder, which vary in size from 17.1 cm square (*An Allegory*, No.213) to 2.8 m × 1.65 m (*Altarpiece: The Crucified Christ, with the Virgin Mary, Saints and Angels*, No.3943) are all in good condition, some of them exceptionally so.

The '*Ansidei Madonna*' (purchased by the National Gallery in 1885) was cleaned in 1956 and found to be in excellent condition. Some minor panel repairs and blister-laying were necessary, but no paint had been lost except for a few small flakes along old splits in the panel.

S. John the Baptist Preaching, the only surviving part of the predella (the other two scenes were so badly damaged that they were discarded when the main panel left Italy [1]) was, on acquisition, so obscured by dirt and varnish that it was felt to be essential that it be cleaned before the purchase was announced and the picture put on public display. Fig.5 shows the state of the picture on acquisition. The bottom edge of the paint was clearly original, ending in a slight ridge of gesso on which, under the paint, were minute traces of red bole and gold (see Plate 3a, p.18). The unpainted wooden border, originally covered by the frame, survived at the bottom except where a knot in the rather poor quality poplar plank had fallen out. The equivalent border at the top edge had been filled to the level of the original paint surface and re-touched, thus adding c.1.5 cm to the height of the picture. The panel (Fig.6) had split from the left edge and had been repaired with butterfly keys, but had otherwise survived well considering the wildness of the grain and the large number of knots.

X-radiographs (Fig.7) showed the original edge of the paint at the top, and a few small damages at the left and right edges, but otherwise revealed no damage more significant than the two lacunae in the stout figure in the left-hand group. The cleaning of the picture was initially quite straightforward. After the removal of the surface dirt, a thick layer of discoloured varnish which covered the whole picture and the addition at the top edge were cleaned away without difficulty. The putty over the unpainted border at the top was insecurely attached, and the re-touching over it, which consisted of synthetic ultramarine, viridian and earth pigments (Plate 3b, p.18) was easily soluble. It was at this stage of the cleaning that certain similarities with the cleaning of the '*Ansidei Madonna*' in 1956 became apparent. Firstly, the remains of an orange/brown varnish layer were engrained in the texture of the sky, and some slight staining of the paint seemed to have resulted. A similar

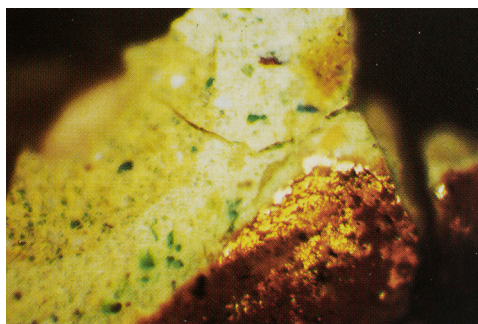


Plate 1 Raphael, *S. John the Baptist Preaching* (No.6480), during cleaning.



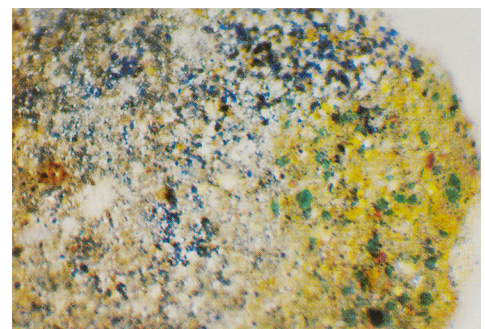
Plate 2 Raphael, *S. John the Baptist Preaching* (No.6480), after cleaning and restoration.

Plate 3 Raphael, *S. John the Baptist Preaching* (No.6480), photomicrographs of the top surface of samples from the edge of the picture. Full caption on facing page.



a

85x



b

85x

layer had been found on the throne, arch and particularly the floor of the altarpiece itself. Secondly, the reason for the extraordinarily dull appearance of the predella became clear. A brownish black layer had been painted over all the landscape from the horizon to the bottom of the picture, and over the trees on the left, but not those in the centre or right of the sky. The same layer had been painted, seemingly almost at random, over many of the figures. Plate 1 (p.18) shows the whole picture during cleaning. The brown layer can be seen most clearly in the foreground between the stout standing figure and the figure to his right; it also covers the stout figure's green cloak, the shadowed part of the green drapery of the seated figure in the right foreground, the red and green sash of the figure with the red hat facing away from the Baptist, and other smaller areas of drapery, including the green peaked hat of the central profiled spectator.

Much of the landscape of the '*Ansidei Madonna*' had been covered with a similar layer which was partially soluble and which, as with the predella, was removed mechanically. It is not unusual to find that landscape and foliage, glazed originally with 'copper resinate', have been overpainted to imitate a discoloured 'copper resinate' layer [3]. It is surprising to find that such a layer has been applied over other colours as well, for instance over the red lake glaze on the hat of the figure on horseback and over the red part of the sash of the central figure with the red hat. Plate 1 (p.18) shows clearly the two distinct layers of varnish over the left part of the sky, and also the staining of the sky near the horizon which resembled the staining of the architecture in the main altarpiece. The filling and repaint over the unpainted border at the top can be seen during their removal.

The hat of the mounted figure in the left background presented a minor problem during cleaning. It was, before cleaning, a rather curious shape, with an eccentrically placed point like a leaning church spire. Both the main part of the hat and the point were covered with the brown repaint, though a red lake colour could be seen underneath. In the X-radiograph (Fig.7) the hills on the

horizon can be seen to be painted round the main part of the hat, whereas the pointed crown has the paint of the hills beneath it. Cross-section examination of a very small sample from the edge of the hat brim showed an original red lake layer, slightly overlapping the pale blue paint of the hills. Examination under the low-powered stereoscopic microscope showed that the pointed part of the hat consisted of a brown resinous layer lying in the hollows of the brushstrokes of the hills; it was similar to, but older than, the overpaint on the landscape.

The late-eighteenth-century engraving (Fig.4) shows with reasonable accuracy the details of the landscape and the folds of drapery uncovered during the recent cleaning. The engraving seems to pre-date the overpainting of the landscape and drapery, which obscured much of the picture. The engraver has added slightly to the top edge of the composition, perhaps to give more room above the Baptist's head, and very slightly to the bottom edge. The addition to the picture itself at the top edge (Plate 1 and 3b, p.18; Fig.5) contained synthetic ultramarine (introduced as a pigment in 1828) and viridian (transparent chromium oxide, first made in the mid-nineteenth-century). The same two pigments were used in the overpaint on the landscape and drapery, with the addition of carbon black and earth pigments.

The foliage of the trees in the centre and right of the picture, the only parts of the landscape not to have been overpainted, consists mainly of a 'copper resinate' layer, now discoloured, directly on top of the sky. There is also discoloured 'copper resinate' in the darkest parts of the green drapery and in some of the foreground. The darks in the drapery have a bright green underpaint, unlike the foliage, and this helps them retain some of their original colour, whereas the foliage has for the most part discoloured to brown right through its thickness. The hillocks which form the foreground and middle distance landscape change in colour from yellow through green to light brown. The materials and technique vary in different areas. Some parts are painted deliberately brown or yellowish brown using different shades of ochres in combination with lead white; the brighter yellow and green opaque areas, for example behind the Baptist's legs and cloak, are combinations of lead-tin yellow and verdigris. Some of the parts which were intended to be greenest were given a final glaze of 'copper resinate' which has become brown, so they have come to resemble the intentionally brown and yellow-brown parts.

The black borders at the two sides of the panel, and the traces of red decoration on them (Fig.9) are old, but probably not original. The incised lines which indicate the edge of the composition at each side can be seen on the X-radiograph (Fig.7) and closely correspond to the black border. In the top right corner, 'copper resinate' foliage covered by the black border has remained bright green, giving some indication of the original colour of the trees.

Because of the good state of preservation, there was quite little scope for paint sampling, with the exception of the small sections taken to identify the pigments of the overpaint, and a few selected very small samples to investigate the technique [4]. The wood of the panel was identified microscopically from a transverse thin section

Plate 3 Raphael, *S. John the Baptist Preaching* (No.6480).

(a) Photomicrograph of the top surface of a sample of original green paint from the bottom edge of the picture showing the bole and gilding of the original frame (now lost) continuing under the paint layer.

(b) Photomicrograph of the top surface of a sample of the 'browned green' re-touching on the puttied strip along the top edge of the picture. The blue pigment particles are artificial ultramarine, the green are viridian, both of nineteenth-century invention.



Figure 5 Raphael, *S. John the Baptist Preaching* (No.6480), on acquisition.

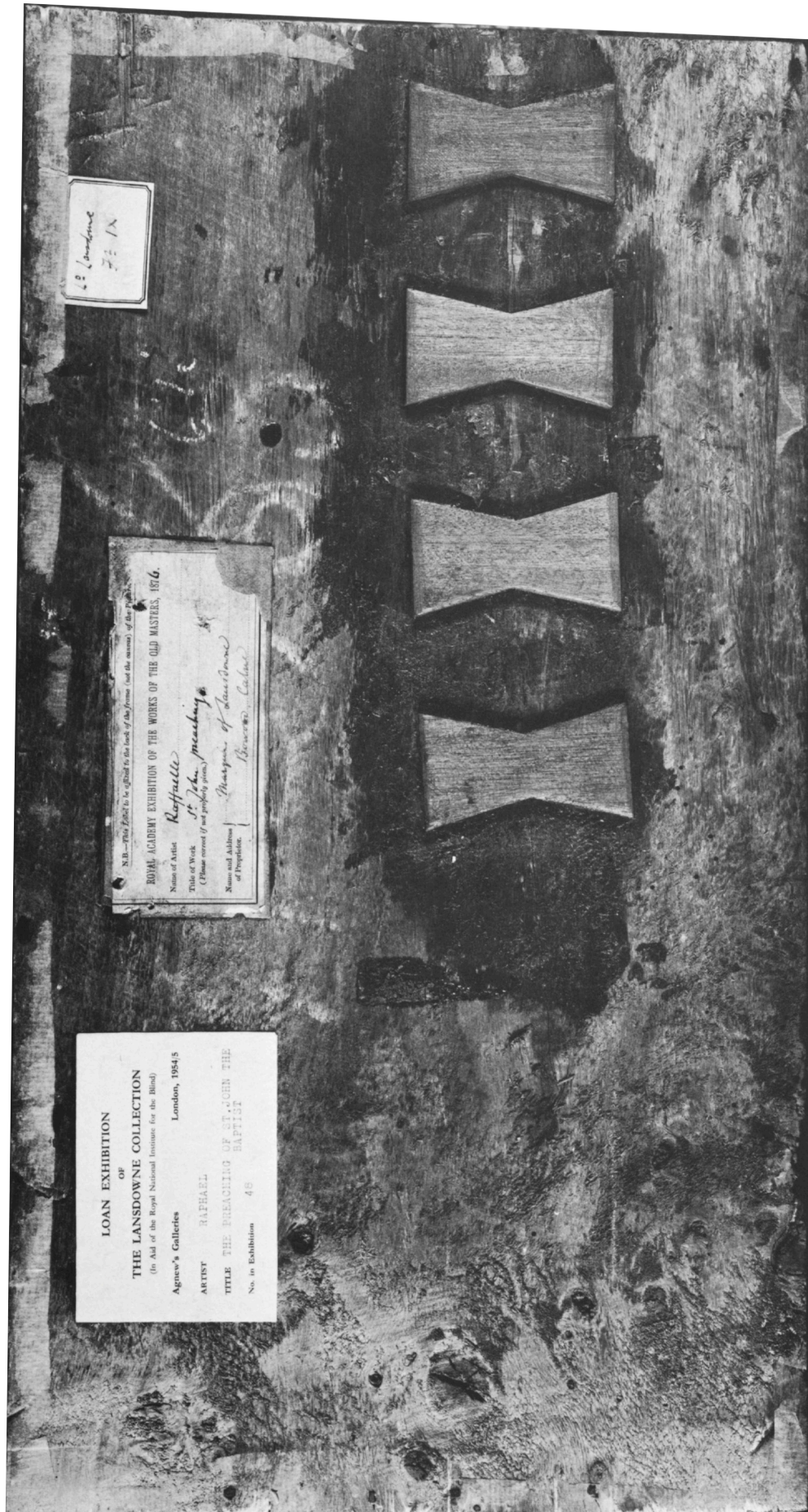


Figure 6 Raphael, *S. John the Baptist Preaching* (No. 6480), the back of the panel.



Figure 7 X-radiograph of the whole, taken on acquisition.



Figure 8 (Above) Raphael, *S. John the Baptist Preaching* (No.6480), after cleaning and restoration.



Figure 9 (Left) Infra-red detail of the Baptist, after cleaning and before restoration. The traces of red decoration on the black border (probably not original) can be seen.

as poplar (*Populus* sp.). The medium was identified as egg tempera, except for a sample of the original green glaze which was walnut oil with a trace of pine resin.

The treatment of the picture was comparatively simple, once the pigments in the brown overpaint had been identified. The butterfly keys (Fig.6) were removed from the back of the panel, and the split re-glued. The overpaint was removed mechanically under low magnification. The filling at the top edge was removed without difficulty, and the original gesso ended in a ridge with, as at the bottom edge, minute traces of red bole and gold leaf under the paint. Clearly these ridges had immediately adjoined the original gilded frame, and this proved that the engraver had added to the composition (Fig.4) at top and bottom before a 'restorer' had extended the picture.

Notes and references

1. See GOULD, C., *National Gallery Catalogues: The Sixteenth-Century Italian Schools* (London 1975).
2. PASSAVANT, M., *Tour of a German Artist in England* (London 1836).
3. WYLD, M., ROY, A. and SMITH, A., 'Gerard David's "The Virgin and Child with Saints and a Donor"', *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, 3 (1978), pp.51-65.
4. A brief description of the materials and technique of the painting will be published in the *Proceedings of the Princeton Raphael Symposium, 1983*, in a contribution by Joyce Plesters, 'Technical Examination of Some Paintings by Raphael in the National Gallery, London'.