

What makes the Colonna Altarpiece a Great Painting?

By Vincent Luo

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Abstract

In his painting the Colonna Altarpiece, Raphael took various approaches, like realism, linear perspective, balance and symmetry and merged them together to create this dynamic piece. Patient examination reveals some of the most unique aspects of this piece. Is the blue in the heavenly scene above the same as the blue of the earthly scene below? Can a painting have symmetry when the colors are different on the two sides? Aside from his use of perspective, how does Raphael use light and shade to make the figures appear three dimensional? What effect is achieved when the Christ Child coincides with the vanishing point of the perspectival construction? What is the significance of the fact that baby Jesus is holding a loop-like gathering of cloth in the center of the main panel? Asking basic questions such as these makes it possible to appreciate many of the fascinating features of this painting. The various features all appear to play different roles, yet they come together to create a powerful picture.

Keywords: Raphael; *Colonna Altarpiece*; realism; linear perspective; balance; symmetry.



Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints
(Photo credit: The Metropolitan Museum)

Raphael painted *The Colonna Altarpiece* for a Franciscan convent in Perugia circa 1504. Since this altarpiece was created for the nuns of a local convent, Raphael worked painstakingly to meet their demands. Every detail of this painting was depicted with the utmost attention, including the direction of the light source, which was drawn to match the light coming into the church from its right window. In addition, it is also important to note that many features of *The Colonna Altarpiece*, such as the lunette, were based on the works of other artists, such as Perugino. Raphael likely imitated the composition of the lunette in Perugino's *Polyptych for the church of San Pietro in Perugia*, where Jesus sat in the center and was flanked by angels on both sides.

Soon after its completion, *The Colonna Altarpiece* inspired the artworks of many local artists, including Francesco da Citta di Castello's *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine with Saint Agnostion* and Sinibaldo Ibi's *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints* (1509). Although *The Colonna Altarpiece* was widely celebrated during the Renaissance, it eventually

started to languish in the 18th century. Art critics like Roger Fry went as far as to say that “no one would buy it and no one wanted to look at it.” Later on, however, this painting was purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, whose son bequeathed it to the Metropolitan Museum in the 1920s.

Today, many historians claim that the importance of *The Colonna Altarpiece* cannot be compromised. It is significant because it represents an important period in Raphael's life and is currently recognized as one of the many masterpieces of the Renaissance. This painting is an essential artifact within the Metropolitan Museum and is Raphael's only altarpiece in the United States (Bayer, 2016).

What makes *The Colonna Altarpiece* so great is its complexity and nuance. The painting is characterized by an unusual combination of tranquility and liveliness. This combination creates a sense of harmony, if harmony is understood as the interweaving of different elements into an aesthetically balanced whole. In the resulting work, minor changes to any elements of the painting will disturb its congruence. For example, if one were to change the color of the characters' robes, the two sides of this painting would no longer be balanced. The main panel of Raphael's painting features seven figures, five standing in their distinct postures, as well as a woman and child sitting on a slightly elevated throne. The initial impression is one of great symmetry-- in the main panel, a male and a female on either side of an enthroned figure, and in the lunette above, a standing figure flanked by angels on either side. The basic symmetry of the figural arrangement is carried through by the floral patterns and ornaments of the throne. On closer examination, however, the painting is full of elements that escape symmetry. Identifying the symmetrical and asymmetrical aspects of the painting is one part of a larger slow observational process. Aside from enabling the audience to notice aspects of symmetry, this observational process will ultimately unveil to the audience many impressive features that may be overlooked at a glance. It is through this analytical process that we are able to pay close attention to its realism, structural balance, color modulation, linear and atmospheric perspective, all of which contribute toward the painting's excellence.



(Sketch of Baby Jesus. Photo Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



My own sketch of Raphael's work. This has helped me gain a better understanding of how he laid out his painting at its earlier stages.

Realism is achieved when artists depict objects as accurately as possible in the form they appear. For the sake of precision, Raphael focused on his preparatory drawings before painting his panels. While painting, he concentrated on different applications of the brush stroke, and in that process created color contrast. In the publication accompanying an exhibition of the Colonna Altarpiece, Linda Wolk Simon points out that a preparatory work, *The Head of a Child*, is a study made from life for the baby Jesus in the painting. This drawing of an actual baby forms the basis for the figure of the baby Jesus in the painting. Wolk-Simon also observes that in preparing the figure of the Madonna, Raphael had an assistant pose for him while he made multiple sketches. These studies from life helped him preserve the observations that he made in the life drawings and become familiar with the shape of the figures that he planned to draw onto his main panel. After sketching these figures, his next step was to lay out the landscape and any additional elements that he wanted to incorporate into it, such as the building with a tower at the corner (Wolk Simon, 2006). Then he could apply paint to the panels. While applying paint, Raphael modeled the draperies of the figures to create contour and volume, causing light and shadow to appear on different sides (Bayer, 2006). One example of Raphael's enhancement of the painting's volume can be shown in his depiction of Saint Cecilia's mantle, which shows a marked difference in tone between its golden front side, the spot where the light is shining, and the dark color of its lower left side. Moreover, vibrant color contrast is also notable on Madonna's mantle, which is not only drawn with a particularly delicate brushstroke, but also displays a wide contrast between the light source and the shadow of the robe. To indicate the presence of the light source, Raphael included a higher concentration of yellow dots in certain areas, such as her knees (Bayer, 2013). This separates it from areas without light, where the dots are submerged in the deep blue of her robe. The yellow dots allow the viewer to see the contour and shape of her legs, which otherwise would be difficult to make out given the darkness of her robe. The dots are effective in the modeling of the shape of her legs because of their natural tendency to catch light, which in turn increases the painting's three dimensional effect by making the lighter areas protrude from the rest of her dress. It is undoubtedly a unique element that makes Madonna's robe different from the draperies of the other figures. In the end, Raphael's initial planning,

the color contrast of his figures, as well as his varying use of the paint brush, are approaches that made his painting more realistic.



(This image shows how the yellow dots that Raphael painted on Madonna's dress can enhance the level of realism. Photo Credit: The Metropolitan Museum)

Other than realism, Raphael also carried out a variety of steps to achieve structural balance. Raphael's painting is emphatically symmetrical in its elaborate throne and in the disposition of two older male saints and two younger female saints to either side of it. Raphael drew diagonal lines from the corner of the painting to locate its center, which is where he drew Christ's hand (Bayer, 2013). But the symmetry is also explored in more subtle ways. Inspired by painters such as Fra Bartolomeo, the landscape in this altarpiece offers gentle rather than absolute symmetry: while not identical, the two hills at the back of the painting resemble one another, jutting into the water in the middle (Muntz, 2016). The additional layer of symmetry allows this artwork to achieve a sense of harmony and stability. Despite the blurriness of some of its features, the symmetrical landscape helps the figures stand out further in the foreground, which draws our attention immediately to their distinct appearances and gestures. Beyond managing forms and proportions, Raphael achieves a symmetry of attitudes: one male figure looks out, the other male is in (near) profile, and the same goes for the two female saints, though here profile and outward gaze are switched; even the angels above display this contrast. Thus, a symmetry of contrasts threads through the painting (Nagel, 2020). This painting shows that subtle symmetry is actually stronger than overt symmetry.



Umbrian landscape studies. Photo Credit: The Metropolitan Museum



Fra Bartolomeo. Sketch of landscape. Photo credit: The Metropolitan Museum

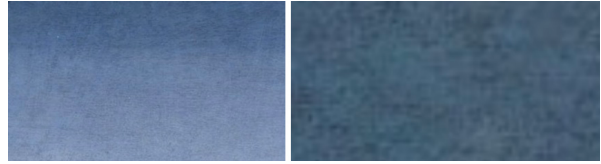


Raphael's symmetrical landscape in the background. Photo Credit: The Metropolitan Museum

Likewise, Raphael's choice of color is also a notable aspect of this painting. Raphael used a technique called equalization, essentially the symmetry of color, to make the figures in his painting balanced in tone (Nagel, 2020). The mantles of Paul and Peter are different in color, yet this obvious difference is compensated by their similarity in tone. Though red is darker and more vibrant than yellow, Raphael made St. Paul's red mantle slightly closer to the light source in order to lighten its tone and thus match St. Peter's yellow mantle through equalization. By bringing their mantles into a proximate tonal range, this equalization technique gives the audience the impression that both Saints are equal in status with one another, and indeed

as the two principal Apostles they were. Raphael draws the audience's attention towards Madonna, whose red tunic reflects light more sharply than St. Paul's. Perhaps it is made out of a shinier, more reflective fabric. In respecting these differences in the reflective properties of different fabrics, Raphael is a realist. Yet, he uses these devices in order to shine a spotlight on the Virgin, the core of the painting, the miraculous vehicle through whom the divine was made flesh. This effect is also enhanced by contrasting the tone of her tunic with her dark mantle. Because Madonna is the central figure of this painting, it appears as if Raphael has established a symbolic hierarchy based on the color of their robes. (Nagel, 2020).

Additionally, Raphael used similar colors to connect related characters. For instance, he used red and purple to paint Christ and Madonna's clothes to match God's robe in the lunette- a red thread that encapsulates the theology of the incarnation: the divine becomes flesh through the body of a virgin (Nagel, 2020). All the figures are wearing a combination of purple, red, yellow, and green, which implies that they are connected to one another. Since God in the lunette is dressed in a similar fashion to the Saints, it is likely that Raphael is trying to demonstrate God's connection to humans (Nagel, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to take into account that God has been angry with humans several times, as indicated by the Old Testament: Adam and Eve's Expulsion from heaven, The Great Flood, The plague of Egypt. To take it one step further, it is likely that Raphael's depiction of similar colored robes suggests people's desire for reconciliation. Because people see God as the almighty being, it makes sense why they want to be on his good side. Aside from the color of their robes, there is also a modulation of light in the background; Raphael added a lighter hue to the blue-sky layer by layer as he worked his way down the central panel. By contrast, Raphael painted the sky of heaven with one unmodulated blue to highlight its purity, whereas the sky at the bottom is painted with more depth and feels more spacious, which gives it an earthly atmosphere. This establishes the difference between the sphere of the living and the sphere of the immortals in heaven (Nagel, 2020), which in effect makes this painting particularly interesting to examine in depth.



Left: The blue of the sky in the central panel. Right: The blue of heaven in the lunette. Photo Credit: The Metropolitan Museum

On top of that, Raphael effectively uses technical elements such as linear perspective to address details of a larger story. In the painting, it is notable that the perspectival lines of the throne extend diagonally into the center of the painting, giving the impression that they converge at Jesus's left hand. This directs our attention to baby Jesus's unique posture, where his right hand seems to be in a blessing posture, while his left characterizes his childlike innocence (Wolk-Simon, 2006). Like all the techniques mentioned above, this serves to depict the duality of baby Jesus's character as both a human and a living God. In addition, it is also important to note that both Jesus and God the Father in the lunette above are holding circular objects. Jesus's left hand seems to be holding a loop, which parallels God the Father holding a sphere above. Since a circle, having no beginning nor end, suggests the concept of infinity, we can then infer that Raphael is trying to highlight their immortality. Even though scrutinizing technical aspects like linear perspective might seem minor to our understanding of the painting, it can sometimes reveal contextual information that is crucial to the implications behind the altarpiece.

The discussion of Raphael's Colonna Altarpiece is highly logical as it comes in a sequence. This essay began by explaining the steps that he took to create this painting, followed by a discussion of various features that made this painting remarkable. It included a discussion of features that enhance realism, different ways of achieving structural harmony, incorporation of linear perspectives, as well as approaches that provide contextual elements about Christianity. However, the Colonna Altarpiece as a whole does not have a sequence in which it is being looked at. All the features are where they are supposed to be and they all serve unique purposes. Nevertheless, none of these features, such as the equalization of Paul and Peter's robes, the variation in the different shades of the sky, or the Christ Child holding a loop would make sense on their own. Raphael deliberately made St. Paul's red robe the same tone as St. Peter's

yellow robe to indicate their equality in status, which is impossible to notice without observing carefully both of the Saints; Likewise, it would be difficult to understand the implication behind the changing shades of the blue sky if merely the central panel is being looked at; it would also be puzzling to assess why the Christ child is holding a loop without taking God the Father into consideration. Given these examples, it is reasonable to conclude that many features of the painting work together with one another to form a powerful picture. Along with Raphael's brilliant technique, the cohesion of these subtle elements is what makes the Colonna Altarpiece brilliant as a whole.

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Christ holding a loop in front of Madonna's womb. Photo Credit: The Metropolitan Museum

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