

Raphael's *Coronation of the Virgin*,
aka *Pala degli Oddi* or *The Oddi Altarpiece*

Estimated Cost: 35.000 Euro

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Restoration Report: *Coronation of the Virgin*, also referred to a *Pala degli Oddi*, was painted for the altar of the Oddi family chapel located in the church of San Francesco al Prato in Perugia, Italy, between 1503 and 1504. The work was performed for the heirs of Guido degli Oddi. It is the first known commission of the Italian renaissance master, Raphael, in Perugia.

The action of the painting occurs in two related scenes: Heaven and Earth.

- In Heaven, Mary is crowned Queen of Heaven by Jesus while angel choirs and musicians herald her arrival in heaven and coronation
- On Earth, the Apostles gather around the empty tomb of Mary realizing that she is assumed body and soul into heaven. Thomas holds onto the belt that has fallen from Mary, thus connecting heaven and earth.

The work remained as the altarpiece in the Oddi chapel from the early 1500s until 1797. In 1797, in accordance with the Treaty of Tolentino and due to the Napoleonic requisitions, the painting was relocated to Paris, France. When the altarpiece arrived in Paris in 1797, it underwent a radical restoration. The support of the painting was changed from wood to canvas through a very invasive restoration process. This process, called *transporto*, is now completely avoided.

Interestingly, another work by Raphael, the *Madonna di Foligno* (c. 1511-1512), underwent restoration in later years using a successful technique and thus served as a model to properly restore the *Coronation of the Virgin*. The *Coronation of the Virgin* was returned to Italy in 1815. At the behest of Pope Pius VII, both of these Raphael paintings became part of the new layout of the Vatican Pinacoteca in 1817. In 1957 the restoration laboratory of the Vatican Museums, under the guidance of the past Director, Deoclecio Redig de Campos, undertook the restoration of the *Coronation of the Virgin* using the more successful technique.

In 2011 the Vatican Museum's restoration laboratories completed an additional successful restoration of the *Madonna di Foligno*. Because the two Raphael works shared historical events, in 2019 the current director of the Museums was prompted to undertake a new and similar restoration of the *Coronation of the Virgin*. This restoration was completed in 2020 to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Raphael's death. The two Madonna works are now displayed in the Vatican Museum's Pinacoteca along with other works of Raphael. More on History of This Restoration:

The conservation status of the Oddi Altarpiece, *Coronation of the Virgin*, started when it arrived in Paris at the end of the eighteenth century and continued at intervals up until the recent 21st Century restoration. Photo 1 below shows the work before the current 2019-2020 restoration efforts. Following is a report of the restoration findings and recommendations and actions that will be summarized in Photo 15 at the end of the report.

Photo 1 - Pre-2019 Restoration



Even the *Madonna di Foligno*, in fact, after undergoing “transporto” or a transferring of color in France, was subject to a restoration in the Vatican in 1958. The results by the Vatican restorers caused many to marvel at the rediscovery of the original colors. The alteration of the materials used in the French intervention prevented the vibrancy of color in the painting. However, even the products used in the restoration of the fifties within the last century greatly altered the pigments. When a new cleaning took place in 2011, it was a surprise to see the recovery of the original color – cold, bright, and lively – typical painting qualities of Raphael.

In July 2019, the restoration of the *Coronation of the Virgin* was begun. In addition to the alteration of the paints and touch-ups, which date back to the last restoration, the *Coronation of the Virgin* also presented a problem localized in the mantel of the Virgin and in the guise of Saint Peter. (Photos 2 & 3)



Photo 2



Photo 3

The blue of these draperies appeared gray and uniform, completely losing the chiaroscuro and chromatic intensity. Moreover, the folds of the robes dissolved and the volume of their garments completely disappeared because of complete tonal and chiaroscuro flattening. This problem concerned only the blue pigment of lapis lazuli as it was not in the previous intervention of the Madonna of Foligno. Thus, at the very first stage of the restoration, restorers believed that the blue color lost its great intensity due to the previous cleaning.

This inconvenience greatly interfered the balance and the possibility of a complete and coherent reading of the painting, which appeared well preserved on almost its entire surface, but showed this serious deficiency affecting two vital parts of the composition. In the report of the previous restoration of 1957, restorers acknowledged this issue but failed to find an answer:

The blue and green paneling with time must surely have undergone oxidation and partially lost the primitive plastic power; however, this problem has not, of course, been remedied," Luigi Brandi, Restoration Report, LRP 1957.

Despite this, a close observation of the painting aided by the use of a grazing light, showed a body of pictorial film. Later confirmed by the image of the IR reflectography, the shapes and volumes of the drapery appeared more delineated than what was visible with the naked eye.

Before addressing the specific and difficult problem of the blue color of lapis lazuli, restorers began cleaning the blue of the sky. The removal of oxidized paint recovered the lighter colors of Raphael, which brings out the illustrious colored heads of the cherubs. They now look as if they were on a blue enameled base of a Della Robbia terracotta. (Photo 4)

Photo 4



Even the first essays on the drapery of the lateral musical angels highlighted the original chiaroscuro, delicate and very elegant, which had remained hidden by the thick layer of altered paints. (Photos 5 & 6)



Photo 5

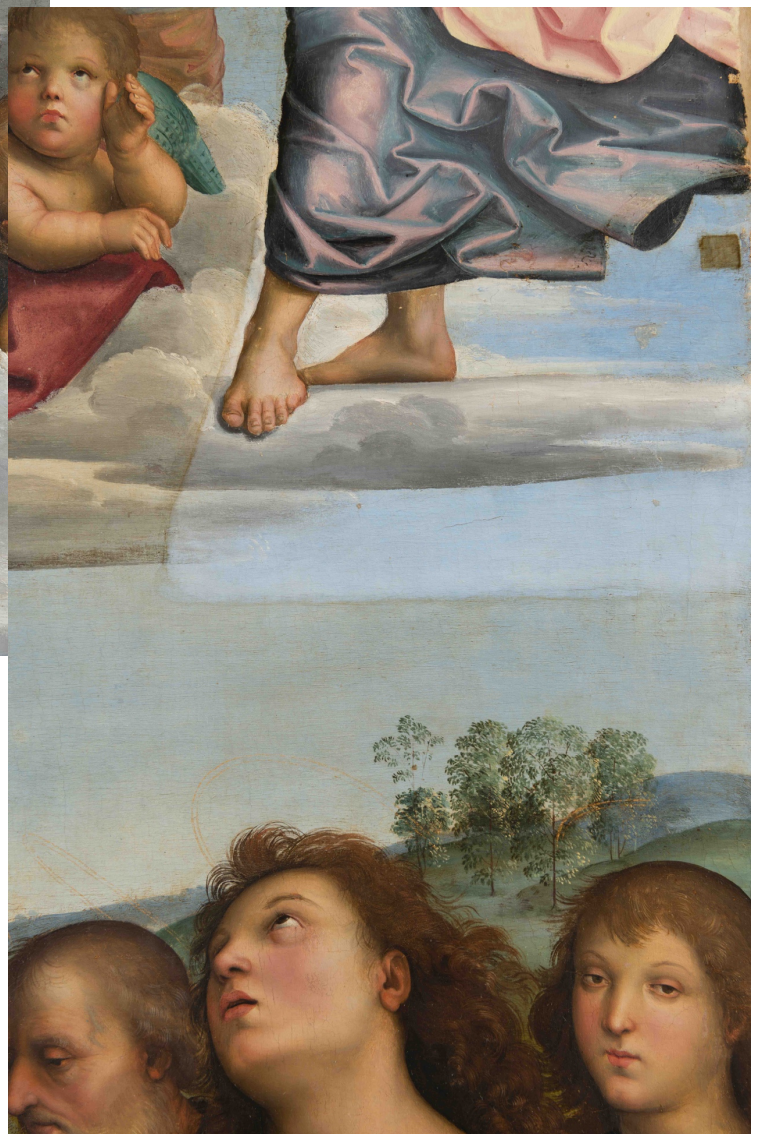


Photo 6

Continuing to clean the sky above the Madonna, a few drops of solvent reached the edge of the blue drapery that covers the Virgin's head, which revealed in some places, a truly unpredictable dark blue tone. This situation suddenly uncovered a completely unexpected yet new possibility. Restorers are now able to find a way to clean the blue pigment coating more thoroughly and in a differentiated way with the concrete possibility of being able to recover all the details that seemed lost forever. By finding the right combination of solvent, along with varying the times and methods of contact on the surface it became possible to obtain a satisfactory and unexpected initial result when cleaning a part of the drapery that covers the head of the virgin. (Photo 7)

Photo 7



A very similar restoration result is visually evident in Saint Peter's garment. (Photo 8)

Photo 8



Linked to an overlap of many layers of oxidized paints, the alteration of the blue pigment is even older than the pigments dating back to the last restoration. Never completely removed, but always added on top of one another, restorers obtained an initial improvement in the color rendering of the original pictorial structure. Over time, the color inevitably canceled itself out to become a gray, dull, and flat layer.

As the cleaning continued on the rest of the painting, a second problem with the blue color emerged. The good result obtained from the differentiated cleaning, which allowed the full recovery of the chiaroscuro and the chromatic intensity of the lapis lazuli, vanished at the time of the complete drying of the color. About a day later, a general bleaching appeared. (Photo 9)

Photo 9

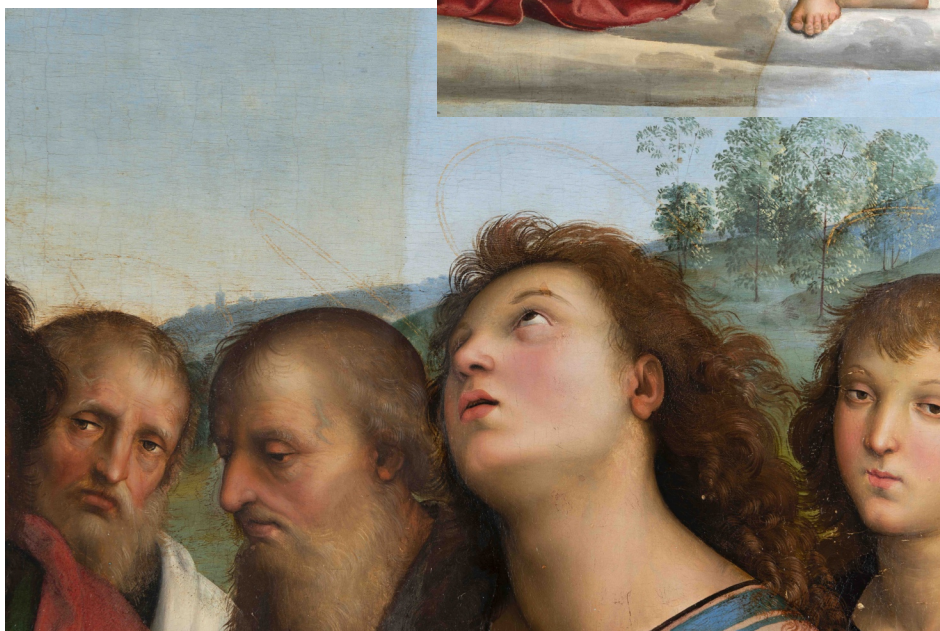


Very difficult to control, the cleaning of the painting continued and may other details of the original chromatism came to light. (Photos 10 & 11)

Photo 10



Photo 11



The removal of the paints layered on the blue made the original Raphael model almost magically reappear. (Photo 12) In the meantime, the Vatican Museums Scientific Research Cabinet studied the blue pigment in its surface morphology at a microscopic level and discovered that lapis lazuli, a very large particle size that ensures the best chromatic intensity, created a very strong light surface diffraction effect. This was the basis of the visual bleaching.

Photo 12



While the blue cleaning continued, the research cabinet completed many tests with different layered paints in order to stabilize the surface after cleaning to find the correct chromatic intensity of the blue backgrounds. (Photo 13)

Photo 13



The color saturation created a continuity of superficial refraction with the rest of the painting. Obtained with a mixture of bright and opaque paints, the result is a 4:1 ratio. (Photo 14)

Photo 14



Similar to the work done on the *Madonna di Foligno*, the old renovations had the right intentions. The outline, defined with a dotted line in the 1957 restoration, is a testimony to a significant moment in history of the Vatican Restoration Laboratory.

At the end of the pictorial reintegration, restorers retouched a multitude of small gaps and abrasions, due to the traumatic events previously suffered by the painting. They proceeded with a new spray painting at the end of the interventions. (Photo 15)

Photo 15 - *Coronation of the Virgin* - Restored 2020



Before relocating the painting to the Pinacoteca, the three works by Raphael – *Madonna di Foligno*, *Transfiguration*, and *Coronation of the Virgin* – were equipped with new frames made with nineteenth century profiles. They are comparable to most of the large frames on display and part of a complete rearrangement of Room VIII to honor Raphael and celebrate the 500th anniversary of his death.