



## Leaving this Earthly Plane

***The Owl***

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Dear Inquiring Traveler,

Michelangelo once commented that one painted knee alone was worth the exorbitant price that Raphael was asking for his depiction of the Prophet Isaiah in Sant'Agostino church in Rome. But Michelangelo was not always so kind to his rival.

Read on to learn more about artists' lives and rivalries at the time of the Italian Renaissance.

Regards,

*Catherine Lapp*

Editor, *The Owl*



*Raphael's Isaiah holds a scroll with his prophecy of the birth of Christ.*



*The Ducal Palace of Urbino is listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site. Built for Duke Federico da Montefeltro in the 15th century, it now houses municipal archives and offices.*

## **A Grand Master and the Unsung Influence of his Origins (part 1)**

by Duncan Campbell

Urbino gets you before you arrive. Seen from its countryside approach (through the central Italian region of Le Marche), its fairytale twin towers suggest you're leaving this earthly plane for a land of enchantment. You'll fall even further into its clutches once there, amidst its warren of steep alleys, its mélange of stone piazzas, and its singular emblem, the *palazzo ducale*.

But it's not just the physical dimension that enchants, there's also a temporal aspect to it. It's one of those places where you can imagine yourself walking the streets in its heyday—during the time of the town's most famous *padrone*, Duke Federico da Montefeltro, whose 15th-century court became everything that noble Europe aspired to.

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Urbino might not have been a fixture on a Grand Tour itinerary of the 17th and 18th centuries, but thanks to Duke Federico's sensibilities, his choice of company, and his architectural acumen, his court's sway reached into the salons and museums of all the tour's leading destinations, the Uffizi, the Vatican, and the Louvre among them. If it wasn't the art itself, it might have been the style of the room, or perhaps the decorum of its patrons that ultimately found its root in Urbino.

### **Student of Opportunity**

Of all these far-ranging influences, perhaps best-known is one of the most famous of the High Renaissance's grand masters—Raphael. Born Raffaello Santi in Urbino in 1483, the youngster was brought up in an environment of privilege and opportunity, thanks to his father's position as painter-poet in the duke's illustrious court. It was the ideal preparation

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for his future life—his ability to move comfortably in high circles gave him unparalleled opportunity to pursue his craft, unhindered by life's more banal challenges.

Raphael's artistic schooling in the Montefeltro court started under the caring eye of his father and painter Timoteo Viti, after which the 16-year-old left for Perugia to study under

Perugino. Already a master at the age of 17, Raphael's work from this time is almost indiscernible from his teacher's. His ability to assimilate from the styles around him characterized his development as a painter, prompting some less-than-complimentary remarks from one of his most distinguished peers, Michelangelo.

### *The Book of the Courtier*

One of the most important books of the 16th century was *The Book of the Courtier*, the definitive work of the day on what it took to be the perfect court attendant. Based on a series of fictional conversations by courtiers of the Duke of Urbino that takes place in 1507, the book expanded the ideal gentleman's concept of chivalry to include a requisite education in the classics. This notion of the need for a classical education provided a major impetus for the young English gentry to undertake their Grand Tours in the 17th and 18th centuries.

First published in 1528, *The Book of the Courtier* was translated into Spanish, French, German, and English, and by 1616 a total of 108 editions had been published. It has been continuously in print ever since.

The author of this influential work was Baldassare Castiglione, attaché to the Duke of Urbino in the early 16th century. Born into the powerful Gonzaga family of Mantua, Castiglione spent several years in the Urbino court before pursuing a diplomatic career under a variety of dukes and popes. Castiglione himself became a close friend of Raphael, who frequently consulted him on his work. The artist's famous portrait of his friend now hangs in the Louvre.



*Renaissance luminary  
Baldassare Castiglione, as  
painted by his friend  
Raphael.*

### **Master of *Sprezzatura***

The natural progression of Raphael's style and the continuing emergence of his prodigious talent eventually established him, along with Leonardo, as one of the foremost exponents of "*sprezzatura*", an ethereal (and uniquely Italian) concept that translates as something like "effortless grace". The first attempt to capture its essence appears in Baldassare Castiglione's famous 16th-century *The Book of the Courtier*, which was based on his time in the court of Urbino. Castiglione describes it thus: "It is an art which does not seem to be an art. One must avoid affectation and practice in all things a certain *sprezzatura*, disdain or carelessness, so as to conceal art, and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it ... obvious effort is the antithesis of grace."

Whether or not it was a benefit of Raphael's time in the court of Urbino is perhaps irrelevant—his work dripped with *sprezzatura*, perhaps none more than his famous *La Fornarina*. The portrait exudes sensuality, tenderness, and eroticism, captured so expertly by his seemingly effortless brushstrokes. Similarly, his *Sistine Madonna* has been called one of the supreme examples of western paintings, rivaling the *Mona Lisa* in its popularity, and eliciting voluminous analysis on the transfixed and disturbing expressions of the Mother and Child.

“... a great fondness for women ...”

The enigma surrounding *La Fornarina* goes beyond the voluptuous subject's tempting smile—popular opinion holds that she is Margherita Luti, baker's daughter and Raphael's long-time mistress, but it's not conclusive.



Was this Fornarina (or “baker's daughter”) Raphael's lover?

Regardless of her identity, however, it's neither surprising nor incongruous for there to be a hint of scandal regarding Raphael and a woman. According to his 16th-century biographer, Giorgio Vasari: “He was a very amorous man with a great fondness for women, whom he was always anxious to serve.” It even affected his work, forcing his close friend Agostino Chigi to install the painter's mistress in his house in order to minimize the delaying effects of his amorous wanderings on the decoration he was commissioned to paint.

Raphael was seemingly talked into an engagement in 1514 to Maria Bibbiena, his friend Cardinal Medici Bibbiena's niece, but she was to die in 1520 without ever tying the knot. The artist's dragging feet seem to indicate a certain lack of enthusiasm for the match, and he presumably kept up his other liaisons during this time. Indeed, such was the fire of his passion that it eventually led to his demise—word has it that the fever that killed him resulted from a night of sexual excess.

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## ***The Owl* Turns One! Our New Photo Contest.**

*The Owl* celebrates its first birthday! We journeyed to a number of fabulous countries together during the last 12 months, from Italy to France, Great Britain, Greece, Turkey, and even China. We traveled in the riveting company of Lord Byron, Claude Monet and Antonio Canaletto, to mention just a few.

Join in the celebration! Select a photo of a birthday party or of a festivity of any kind that you participated in in Europe, add a short commentary to let us know where it was taken, and e-mail it in jpeg format to:  
[theowl@agorapublishinggroup.com](mailto:theowl@agorapublishinggroup.com).

Should you win the contest, we'll publish your photo in *The Owl*, offer you a free subscription to our travel magazine, *International Living*, for two years, and send a complimentary copy of our anthology of the masterpieces of ancient literature, *The Essential Classics*.

Photos are accepted until the end of August. The winner will be selected in September.

### **Terms and conditions**

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- The winner of the contest grants *The Owl* the non-exclusive right to publish his/her picture in the context of "*The Owl* Turns One" Photo Contest.
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