

ART APPRECIATION GROUP VISIT TO ROYAL ACADEMY 12 February 2025: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael.

The sky was mundane in its greyness again. But happily, that did not flatten the mood as we set off for Kings Lynn Station where a group of seven of us was ready to travel down to London to see the exhibition that combined three artists – Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael. I almost wrote *starred* three artists as these Renaissance men are up there at the top of the art world.

One of the joys of going down to London with the Art Appreciation Group is the time we have to chat during the journeys. Meeting interesting people on the train is also a treat. The woman sitting next to us on the train turned out to be a Cambridge don whose job was to interpret Buddhist texts. She was also very clear as to the original meaning of the word 'woke' which we had been musing about. You never know where you are going to find enlightenment!

Our lunch time slot at the Academy didn't leave time for a leisurely lunch and somehow the group got split into two. Our threesome dived into a Prêt a Manger whilst the quartet found an excellent Italian restaurant on Piccadilly.

The Royal Academy is a very handsome building - somewhat altered since I was last there but the lovely staircase rising from the entrance hall has been left alone.



Art critic Jonathan Jones writing in the Guardian complained that this important exhibition had been put at the back of the building into only two rooms. We walked in to the main room painted a deep, deep green/blue giving a somewhat dark impression.

So, what had we come to see?

From the Golden Age of Lorenzo de Medici's Florence emerged two geniuses – Michelangelo and Leonardo. Their paths crossed in 1504 when Machiavelli commissioned them to paint histories of Florentine battles in the Great Council Hall. Leonardo had also come to help decide where to position Michelangelo's statue of David.

The meeting however did not go well – the two insulted each other and there was a standoff.

At the same time the young Raphael was in Florence; he had come to observe the works of these two great Florentine rivals.

This exhibition was an opportunity to display all three artists alive and working in the same place from 1504 - 07.

Jonathan James was clearly disappointed - he wrote that it was an "academic show" and that "there was too much Raphael".

Another critic Laura Cumming however called the show "small but potent".

I partly agree with Jones in that for me the show as a whole didn't spring to life. I was hugely impressed by some of the works but I didn't get a sense of the rivalry between Michelangelo and Leonardo.

Of course, I acknowledge that this is probably a failing on my part!

The works lingering in my mind as I write this are the Taddei tondo by Michelangelo and Leonardo's Virgin and Child with St Anne and the Infant St. John the Baptist.

Unfinished the tondo* may be but I felt a sense of marvel at the skill Michelangelo had to create these living shapes out of marble. John Constable declared it “one of the most beautiful works of art in existence”.

In the second room all on its own was Leonardo’s cartoon of the holy group. He never made it into a painting as often cartoons were. Laura Cumming was of the opinion that the piece is “too grand and complete in itself” to develop it further.

It is a huge work comprising eight pieces of paper glued side by side to make a whole.

There was utter quiet in the small area as if all of us gazing on this work were lost in thought. As I stood there what captivated me most was the expression on the women’s faces. What was St Anne saying to Mary and what was she musing on as she listened? Leonardo has captured a living moment bringing into the room the breath of life from when his pencil touched the paper.

One other drawing that caught my attention was Raphael’s depiction of Michelangelo’s David. Drawn from behind the sculpture, it is in ink over traces of black chalk and was completed between 1505-7. He adapted the sculpture for his own purposes producing a graceful image that appears as if it was achieved without effort. However, this was Raphael’s great skill - to make it look easy when it was not so.

Did I come away understanding that moment in history when the three titans of the art world coincided in Florence? I’m not sure about that, but the works I have described in this exhibition pulled me into a direct relationship with the act of creation and that is a gift worth having.

* Tondo – this is a Renaissance term for a circular work of art, either a painting or sculpture.

Report by Margi Blunden.

Photos by Jill Davis



More below



Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John the Baptist ('The Taddei Tondo')
c. 1504–05

Marble

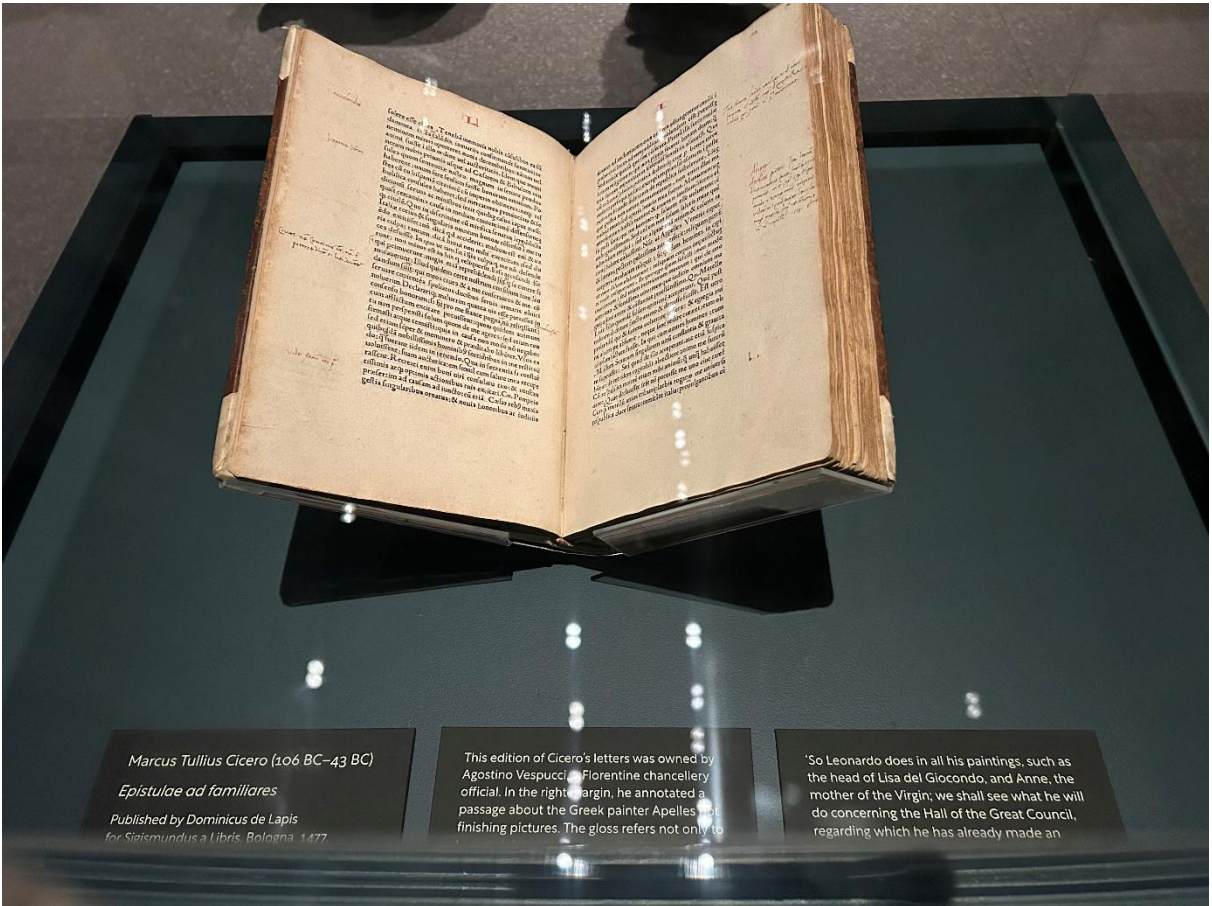
The infant St John the Baptist presents the Christ Child with a goldfinch, a symbol of his Passion. The Child, resting on the Virgin's lap, turns away from the bird in fear, while at the same time turning back to accept his destiny. Michelangelo never completed the relief, which shows different degrees of finish: from the highly polished body of Christ to much less resolved areas such as the head of St John, and the goldfinch, which is only barely suggested.

Royal Academy of Arts, London
Bequeathed by Sir George Besumont 1830



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Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC–43 BC)
Epistulae ad familiares
Published by Dominicus de Lapis
for Sigismundus a Libris, Bologna, 1477

This edition of Cicero's letters was owned by Agostino Vespucci, Florentine chancery official. In the right margin, he annotated a passage about the Greek painter Apelles not finishing pictures. The gloss refers not only to

'So Leonardo does in all his paintings, such as the head of Lisa del Giocondo, and Anne, the mother of the Virgin; we shall see what he will do concerning the Hall of the Great Council, regarding which he has already made an