

The most beautiful picture in the world is the Sistine Madonna in the Royal Gallery at Dresden, Saxony. It was painted by Raphael as an altar-piece for a church in Piacenza, Italy. In a far corner of the great Palace of Art it is now placed, probably to remain until the colors shall fade. It is the only picture in the room. The figures are of life size. When that room is entered all voices are hushed, and all merriment silenced. The place is as holy as a church.

In the centre of the canvas is the Virgin Mother with a young, almost girlish face of surpassing loveliness. In her eyes affection and wonder are blended, and the features and the figure are the most spiritual and beautiful in the world's art.

I have wondered where Raphael found that face. It is not voluptuous like the Italian, nor heavy like the German, nor light like the French, nor cold like the women of more northern nations. It is the ideal woman's face for all nations and ages, and yet it is typical of none.

In the Mother's arms is the Divine Child, with those strange, far-away-looking eyes that casual visitors so little understand—eyes that even in babyhood seem reading the future, and beginning to see the greatness of the world's sorrow. Kneeling on one side, below them, is St. Sixtus, the nearest perfect of all pictures of strong and venerable age that was ever painted; on the other side Santa Barbara, only less beautiful than the Virgin, is kneeling, with eyes turned from the glory too bright for mortals to look upon. At the bottom of the canvas are the two cherub faces which for centuries have been ideals of innocence and loveliness. The background is of fleecy clouds, and peering out of the clouds are angel faces.

It has been said that Raphael never painted anything exactly as it was, but always idealized whatever he touched. If he found those faces anywhere among the throngs in Italian streets, he lifted them out of their surroundings and glorified them, so that all nations recognize in that matchless Madonna their ideal of the Mother of our Lord, and in that child their ideal of the Divine Child. The vision of angels breaking the barriers of physical limitations, and entering human spheres, is a suggestion that the spiritual and physical are never far apart, and that perhaps if we had clearer vision, angel faces might be often seen, and if we had more acute hearing, angel songs might be often heard. This greatest of all paintings conveys immortal lessons in a pictorial and impressive form.

The central figure at the Advent and in the childhood of Christ was His mother. In the painting, too, the mother is not less prominent than her Child. The Roman Church has carried its adoration of the Virgin too far, but Protestants have treated her with positive neglect. Raphael has made her the most beautiful woman ever dreamed of by art. Perhaps he was right. Who knows ?

The Sistine Madonna, which hung for centuries on the wall behind the high altar of San Sisto at Piacenza in Northern Italy. It was suggested by Grimme that this noble painting, most celebrated of all of Raphael's Madonnas and the first to be painted on canvas, the picture assumed a commemorative role.

The loveliest of Raphael's Virgins, is an idealised figure, walks toward us from beyond the stars (heaven), holding up her Child for us, on a canopy of clouds suffused with light, and these two figures look directly at the viewer.

The composition of the piece is harmonious, and centralized in the two main figures. Mother and Child look upon us with eyes of unusual size, depth, and luminosity, of calm and perfect understanding. It might be added that Mary's pose as she walks across the clouds is identical with that imagined by Michelangelo, probably as one of the alternates for the accepted design of the Tomb of Julius II in 1505 and certainly for the definitive version in 1513.

Very naturally this allegory of the proper entry into Paradise is universally revered as

an image of ideal motherhood. In its broad rising and descending curves, its subtle balance of masses, its rich tonalities of gold and green, gray and blue, its air of peace and fulfillment, the Sistine Madonna is one of Raphael's supreme creations.