



Rafael's Compressed Colors

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Uncompressed Thinking
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In my previous essay about artist-made versus photo-made portraits, I tried to describe the difference between a photograph and a painted portrait as a difference in time. A photo captures one moment, one thin slice of Now. A painted portrait, especially a great one, carries many moments compressed into one face. The painter sees the sitter again and again, in slightly different states, and slowly blends these states into one surface. Later, the observer stands in front of the portrait and, with his own time and attention, begins to unpack this compressed time. While contemplating my visit to the Metropolitan to see Rafael's great exposition, a parallel thought came to me almost naturally: if portrait painting can compress time, perhaps oil painting can compress color.

When we discuss different artists, we often talk about differences in their palettes — the dominant sets of colors repeatedly present in their art. This is useful, of course. Some painters seem to live in darker worlds, some in warmer worlds, some in a sharper contrast of light and shadow, some in a more transparent softness. We can recognize them partly by the colors they repeatedly choose and by the atmosphere these colors create.

But this line of comparison, useful as it is, seems to miss something very subtle and, in my eyes, crucially important.

It speaks about the palette, but not enough about what happens inside the color.

Let me try to explain my vision of painting, specifically in oils. When I imagine a painter, in this case Rafael creating his future masterpiece, the *Sistine Madonna*, I do not see him simply applying color to a surface. I see him painting and overpainting the elements of the painting a mind-boggling number of times. Each stroke adds a thin layer of one of the colors from his palette over many layers of paint left by the previous strokes. Each new stroke adds an imperceptibly nuanced change — imperceptible to most of us, but not to him.

A face is not just "flesh color." A robe is not just blue or red. A shadow is not just darkness. What we finally see as one calm surface is, in reality, the result of many small decisions placed one over another. A slight warming here. A softening there. A little more depth in the fold. A little less sharpness in the

edge. A small correction that we may not be able to identify, but without which the whole image would not breathe in the same way.

And he would not stop until he saw that one more stroke of the brush would not add beauty, but would override the beauty already accumulated over time. This stopping point is fascinating to me. The artist must feel that another touch may begin to destroy the art he already has in his mind and in his eyes. So the final painting is not only the result of adding. It is also the result of knowing when not to add anymore.

In parallel to my “compressed time” of portrait painting, I would refer to this as “compressed colors.”

The painting is flat when we look at it from the usual distance. It hangs on a wall. It has height and width. But in my imagination, it also has a very small, almost invisible depth. I try to zoom inside the paint, whether it is on canvas, panel, or wall, and visualize the surface of the painting as a three-dimensional structure. My eyes pierce into it from the surface downward, and I imagine the paint changing along this vertical line, almost atom by atom, as if I am traveling inside the painting itself.

What a marvelous trip this would be — not across the image, but into it.

Layer after layer. Stroke after stroke. Slightly different tones. Almost invisible transitions. Earlier decisions hidden under later decisions. A surface that looks quiet only because all the internal movement has already been compressed into it.

Of course, I cannot really see this in full. I do not have the eye of a restorer or the knowledge of a specialist. But I can imagine it, and perhaps this imagination is not completely meaningless. When we stand in front of a great oil painting, we often feel that the color has depth, even if we cannot explain why. It is not only the pigment itself. It is the accumulated judgment of the artist, compressed into visible color.

Returning from this imagined movement inside the paint back to the surface, and standing in front of multiple Rafael paintings, another thought crossed my mind. This time it was not about colors, but about his known completed works.

Curiously, almost automatically, when we mention Rafael, the first painting that comes to mind is his Madonna, especially the *Sistine Madonna*. This is natural. The image is famous, deeply loved, reproduced endlessly, and the two angels at the bottom have almost become their own independent cultural object. Even people who do not know much about Rafael often recognize them.

But then you see his other works, each carrying his artistic genius baked into it. And a simple question appears.

Are they inferior to the Madonna, or just different?

Are we dealing with some kind of “crowd effect,” where one image became so famous that it now stands in front of all the others almost automatically? Or is there something truly magical in the Madonna that justifies this special place?

I do not ask this to challenge the *Sistine Madonna*. I ask it because looking at Rafael’s works together makes this question unavoidable. Fame helps us see, but it can also cover. A painting can become so

famous that we stop looking at it freshly. Another work can be less famous and therefore quietly wait for us to discover it without the noise of public admiration.

So I did some research on Rafael's major oil and oil-related paintings and arranged about twenty from the top of the list by their "popularity" and presence in the eyes of the world. I understand that such a list cannot be exact. It is not a scientific measurement. It is a blend of public recognition and professional appreciation, with professional opinion dominating the final rating.

My goal was not to produce a final judgment on Rafael. That would be absurd. My goal was more modest: to bracket Rafael's paintings, then put the two "bracketing" works side by side, and then compare and think.

Here is the list...

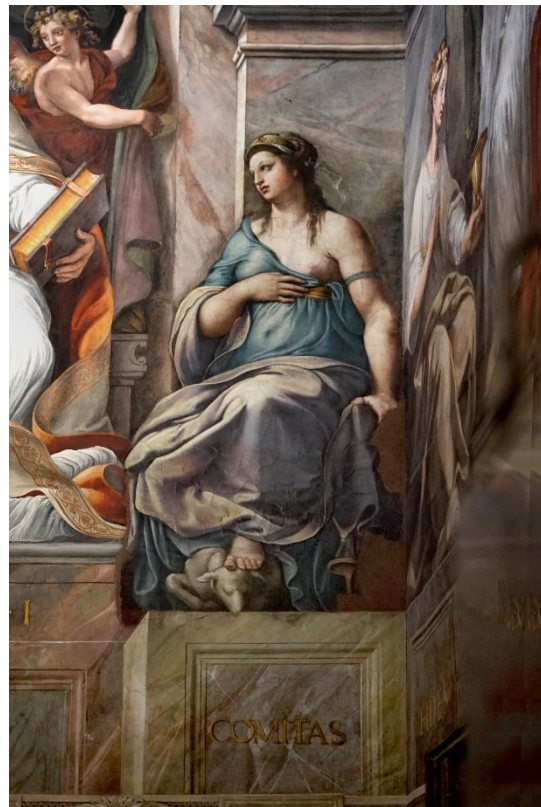
Rating	Title	Year	Type, Location, Comment
1	Sistine Madonna	1512/13	Oil on canvas; Dresden. Most beloved, with the famous cherubs.
2	The Transfiguration	1516-1520	Tempera grassa on wood; Vatican. Final major work, professional canon peak.
3	Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione	1514/15	Oil on canvas; Louvre. Supreme Renaissance portrait of intellect and restraint.
4	Madonna of the Goldfinch	1506	Panel painting; Uffizi. Tender Florentine Madonna with Passion symbolism.
5	Madonna in the Meadow	1505/06	Oil on wood; Vienna. Perfect triangular harmony and calm landscape.
6	The Alba Madonna	c. 1510	Originally panel, transferred to canvas; Washington. Monumental circular Madonna.
7	La Belle Jardiniere	1507/08	Oil on wood; Louvre. Peak Florentine Madonna composition.
8	Portrait of Pope Julius II	1511	Oil on poplar; London. Revolutionary psychological papal portrait.
9	The Entombment / Pala Baglioni	1507	Oil on panel; Borghese. Dramatic, ambitious breakthrough altarpiece.
10	The Marriage of the Virgin	1504	Oil on panel; Brera. Early masterpiece of architecture and order.
11	Saint Cecilia Altarpiece	c. 1514-1517	Panel transferred to canvas; Bologna. Music, silence, and spiritual hearing.
12	Madonna of Foligno	1511/12	Large altarpiece; Vatican. Important Roman sacred composition.
13	Madonna della Seggiola	c. 1512	Oil on wood; Pitti. Intimate, circular, warmly human Madonna.
14	Saint Catherine of Alexandria	c. 1507	Oil on wood; London. Graceful devotional figure, Leonardesque influence.

Rating	Title	Year	Type, Location, Comment
15	La Velata / Woman with a Veil	c. 1512-1515	Oil on canvas; Pitti. Great female portrait, soft and monumental.
16	La Fornarina	1518-1519	Oil on wood; Rome. Famous, sensual, mysterious late portrait.
17	Madonna del Granduca	c. 1506-1507	Oil on panel; Pitti. Quiet, dark-background Madonna of deep tenderness.
18	Madonna del Baldacchino	1507-1508	Unfinished/altered altarpiece; Pitti. Historically important, less public-famous.
19	Canigiani Holy Family	1507/08	Oil on wood; Munich. Rich Florentine Holy Family grouping.
20	Bindo Altoviti	c. 1515	Oil on panel; Washington. Magnetic portrait, striking but more specialist.
21	Comitas and Iustitia fragments	c. 1519-1520	Oil-on-wall fragments; Vatican. Rare late fragments, low public recognition.

And here are the two “bracketing” paintings.



Sistine Madonna



Comitas and Iustitia fragments

Looking at them this way, side by side, makes the contrast strangely clear.

On one side is the *Sistine Madonna*, the public Rafael, the famous Rafael, the Rafael immediately recognized even by those who do not spend their lives in art museums. On the other side is one of the *Comitas* and *Iustitia* fragments, much less known, more hidden, almost specialist in its presence. One is a great complete image that seems to carry a whole world. The other is a fragment, a surviving piece, a quieter statement.

At first, one may expect the difference in rank to explain the difference in beauty. Number one should be obviously “greater.” The fragment should feel secondary. The famous painting should dominate.

But this is not exactly what happens.

The *Sistine Madonna* is certainly extraordinary. Its beauty is not only in the figures, but in the whole strange calm of the image. The Madonna, the child, the curtain, the clouds, the angels — everything seems to be placed with that Rafael balance where softness does not weaken the image, and harmony does not make it empty. There is tenderness, but there is also seriousness. The child is beautiful, but not simply sweet. The Madonna is gentle, but not decorative. The painting has that rare quality where the whole image feels inevitable.

But then the fragment also carries something unmistakably Rafael. It is different in scale, different in function, different in public destiny. Yet it has beauty. It has the same sense of controlled form, the same softness without weakness, the same quiet authority of the line and color. It does not compete with the *Sistine Madonna* as a complete world, but it does not disappear next to it either.

This is what interested me most.

A slightly different palette, but the same beauty.

Or maybe not exactly the same beauty, but the same source of beauty. The same hand. The same eye. The same ability to make color, form, and human presence come together without forcing them.

The *Sistine Madonna* is full and famous. The fragment is smaller and less known. But if I look at them side by side, I do not feel that one belongs to Rafael and the other only to history. Both carry Rafael. One loudly, because the world has learned to hear it. The other quietly, because we have to come closer.

This also brings me back to the idea of compressed colors. In the Madonna, the compression is vast and open. In the fragment, it is more concentrated. But in both cases, I imagine the same artistic process: layer over layer, correction over correction, color over color, until the visible surface becomes calm enough to look as if it was always meant to be this way.

Perhaps this is the most interesting result of placing the works side by side. The ranking remains useful. It helps organize the view. It shows how the world remembers Rafael. But the eye does not have to fully obey the ranking. Once the paintings are next to each other, the less famous work can suddenly become much more alive, and the famous work can become less like an icon and more like a painting again.

So what can I say?

To my under-educated eye: a different palette, but the same beauty.

And perhaps this is the whole point of the exercise. I started with the thought that a painted portrait compresses time. Then, thinking about Rafael, I arrived at the thought that oil painting compresses colors. And then, looking across his works, I felt that Rafael's beauty itself may also be compressed differently in different paintings — widely in one, quietly in another, publicly in one, almost secretly in another.

The painting asks us to look not only at the image, but into the image — almost vertically, as if our eyes could travel down through the thin layers of paint where color slowly acquires depth.

And maybe, if we stand long enough, we begin to see not only the colors Rafael used, but the time, patience, judgment, restraint, and almost invisible decisions compressed inside them.