

# This Raphael is for real



In the pinks: The National's Madonna. Photo: National Gallery, London

For the next three months, Raphael's Madonna of the Pinks, acquired in March by the National Gallery for £22m, can be seen in our new exhibition Raphael: From Urbino to Rome, alongside 37 other paintings by the young artist. This provides an unequalled opportunity to examine the claims by Professor James Beck, reported in yesterday's Times, that this painting is not by Raphael.

When a painting is as expensive as Madonna of the Pinks, it is to be expected that the gallery's decision to acquire it should be properly scrutinised. But the questions asked of the picture need to be the right ones. One person's opinion, however vociferously expressed, isn't sufficient reason to doubt a picture's authenticity.

The story of the rediscovery of the painting is well known. Dr Nicholas Penny, then working at the National Gallery and the author of a major monograph on Raphael, noticed the picture on a visit to Alnwick in 1991. It had long been regarded as the best surviving copy of a lost composition by Raphael; no art historian believed it was by Raphael himself. But Penny thought it worth borrowing for examination in the gallery's scientific department.

By the early 1990s, the National Gallery had recognised that a connoisseur's judgment needs to be backed up by science. Only by examining the way Raphael's painting was made could we abandon the idea that the picture was a copy. Penny found that a remarkable free drawing, very like many of Raphael's works on paper, lay under the paint. This underdrawing can be seen only in infrared - a 20th-century technology.

It became clear that Raphael had changed his mind several times as he executed the painting. In particular, he rethought the neckline of the Madonna's dress. No copyist from the 19th century (as Beck would have us believe) or earlier could have guessed that this first design would ever be made visible, and no copyist would have dreamed of including variations on what was already a well-published image, especially if they wished to pass it off as the lost original.

This sort of research is necessarily cumulative. It's very unlikely that a single piece of evidence can prove that an artist painted a picture. That is why we needed to examine the picture again before we bought it. A scientific examination of the pigments demonstrated that it must have been painted in Italy in the early 16th century. We found, for example, mineral azurite and lead tin yellow, which had entirely fallen out of use by the 19th century - colours certainly unknown to any forger. We also noticed elements such as powdered metallic bismuth, a material that Raphael used in other pictures and characteristic of central Italian painting of the early 16th century; it is almost never encountered elsewhere.

The scientific material has been published on our website. And now, thanks to the exhibition, we have a unique chance for the public to compare Raphael's Madonna of the Pinks to his other paintings and drawings. I am confident that this very beautiful, small picture will stand up to the test.

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