Why the 'Madonna of the Pinks' was worth £22m

In the run-up to the London show, Raphael's masterpiece toured the nation. National Gallery director Charles Saumarez Smith describes the extraordinary effect it had.

One of my great pleasures over the last few months has been travelling to see Raphael's Madonna of the Pinks in its temporary locations as it tours round the country.

This was one of the conditions of the very substantial (£11.5 million) grant given by the Heritage Lottery Fund - that the painting should be seen and admired not just by the 4.5 million visitors who come to the National Gallery every year, but that it should be an acquisition on behalf of the nation as a whole.

Its first stop was in Manchester, where it was displayed in one of the newly refurbished, upstairs rooms in Charles Barry's fine Greek Revival City Art Gallery. A newspaper had sent a reporter whose job it was to go round asking visitors what they thought of the purchase, in the evident expectation that they would say that it had been a waste of money.

On the contrary, every single person who was asked said how beautiful they thought the picture was, and how pleased they were to be able to see it in Manchester. I found it unexpectedly moving to see young schoolgirls contemplating pictures of the Madonna and child, which had been assembled not just from the National Gallery's collection, but from Manchester's as well.

This, after all, was the original impulse which lay behind the foundation of so many 19th-century art galleries: that the experience of great works of art would in some way humanise the harsh lives of the denizens of industrial cities.

Two months later, the Madonna of the Pinks went to Cardiff, where it was displayed in a room of its own, off the main-floor galleries of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, one of the best, and least well-known, great collections of fine art in the British Isles.

I had always associated Cardiff's Museum with its fine 18th-century holdings - its works by Richard Wilson and Thomas Jones, the great Pompeo Batoni portrait of Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn - as well as the wonderful collection of Impressionists which were given by the two spinster Davies sisters who bought so wisely in Paris in the early part of the 20th century.

I had not realised what fine Renaissance pictures they have, including an amazing, highly expressionist Virgin and Child, painted by Amico Aspertini only a decade or so after the Raphael, but occupying a totally different emotional universe.

What was clear from seeing the Madonna of the Pinks in different places was the way in which works of art talk to one another according to the environments and circumstances in which they are hung, enabling visitors to see and experience paintings differently according to where and how they are seen.

There were some people who were unhappy that the Madonna of the Pinks had to be hawked about the country as a celebrity artefact. I am not one of them. Now, after five months on tour, the Madonna of the Pinks returns to London to be installed in the great Raphael exhibition which opens in the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing on Wednesday. Again, the context will be different.

The purposes of the exhibition are fundamentally scholarly: to understand and interpret the development of Raphael's pictorial style by assembling as many as possible of his early works, including some by those who influenced him (we are moving the Leonardo cartoon downstairs) and many drawings which have been lent by the British Museum and the Ashmolean.

It will be possible to trace from picture to picture and drawing to drawing the ways in which Raphael absorbed and reinterpreted the influences of other artists of the time, including Giovanni Santi, his father, Perugino, to whom he is traditionally thought to have been apprenticed, Pinturicchio, with whom he worked in Siena, and, most importantly, Leonardo, whose works encouraged him to create a much looser and more three-dimensional style.

The Madonna of the Pinks will take its place among a whole sequence of other Madonnas, all painted in the first decade of the 15th century and all exploring the nature of the human relationship between Madonna and child.

When the Madonna of the Pinks was in Cardiff, I was told that there were three immediate responses to the painting: that it was very small, very shiny and very expensive. All three are true.

It is small, as a way of encouraging close and intense contemplation of the details of the narrative. It is shiny, because it is painted on a piece of highly polished cherry wood, which is unusual, but not unique, for a work by Raphael.

And it is indisputably expensive, having cost the National Gallery £22 million. But I hope that those who come to see the Madonna of the Pinks in the Raphael exhibition will enjoy the opportunity of seeing the picture in the context of other works by Raphael and will share the views of those in Manchester who thought that its purchase was public money well spent.

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