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Raphael portrait testifies to MAM's global reputation by **Bobby Tanzilo**



Milwaukee Art Museum is just one of three U.S. museums showing this Raphael masterwork.

When Leonardo DaVinci's gorgeous "Lady with an Ermine" landed in Milwaukee as part of an exhibition of treasures from Poland, all the city stood up and took notice. Luckily, when Santiago Calatrava's Quadracci Pavilion with the Burke Brise Soleil went up, the international art world took notice of Milwaukee, too.

According to Milwaukee Art Museum Director of Exhibitions Laurie Winters, that reputation is creating new and previously unheard-of opportunities for MAM. The latest fruit of that phenomenon is the appearance here of influential Italian Renaissance painter Raphael Sanzio's "The Woman with the Veil," created in 1516.

The painting, on loan from Florence's Pitti Palace will be the subject of a single-work show in the museum's Koss Gallery from March 27 through June 6. Milwaukee is one of only three U.S. cities showing the work. It's a real coup.

And to prove it, the elegant Italian dinner event that will kick off the show, Friday, March 26, at 5:30 p.m., will host a range of visiting dignitaries, including -- among others -- Pitti Palace Director Alessandro Cecchi, David Alan Brown, the curator of Italian painting at Washington's National Gallery of Art, Consul General of Italy Alessandro Motta and Alain Elkann, president of the Foundation for Italian Art & Culture and a well-known Italian novelist and television personality. Elkann's sons are key players in Fiat (their mother was the daughter of legendary Fiat head Gianni Agnelli.)

"I'm hoping that we'll be working with many different European countries and many different museums," says Winters. "We have a number of projects that are in process that will be happening in the next two to three years. All good things for the Milwaukee Art Museum -- we're really becoming an international player."

So, how did Milwaukee land this prestigious painting?

"I think it takes other museums that trust in you, and also a reputation for excellence," says Winters. "I've had any number of meetings with European directors and they know our building. They may have never been to Milwaukee before, but they know Calatrava. (And) nobody wants to lend a great work of art to (a place where) it might not be treated appropriately or without the security measures that it would need. We'll have a security guard standing right next to the painting throughout the entire run of the exhibition.

"We had an important Italian official, (Ambassador) Daniel Bodini, working on our behalf from the Foundation for Italian Art and Culture in New York. He had helped one or two other museums in the past, put together other exhibitions, notably the Frick Museum in New York with the Parmigianino, which they brought in about a year ago. He had also helped with another painting that has gone to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He very quickly became known as someone who was influential. "

The Raphael painting was at the top of Winters' wish list, and, she says, "I have a very long wish list." With the help of Ambassador Bodini, a connection was made with the Pitti.

"We approached (Bodini) and told him we were interested in doing this and he made a few phone calls and paved the way for us, which was great," she recalls. "We were thinking about doing a single-piece, for lack of a better word, masterpiece exhibition for about four or five years. (Milwaukee Art Museum director) Dan Keegan came here and liked the idea."

Winters says bringing paintings like Raphael's "The Woman with the Veil" to Milwaukee is important because it provides access to masterworks to those of us living away from the large art institutions

"For me, it's important because if you go to New York, there are a number of fantastic and important museums and it's easy to see great works from many different cultures and from Western Europe," she says.

"In Milwaukee, it's often harder for people. We're in the Midwest, and if you don't have a lot of money it's harder to travel to places like Rome or Florence. For me, it's sort of an obligation to bring the great works to Milwaukee. This is the first in what I hope will be a series of exhibitions that with a single great work."

There are a couple reasons why Winters and the Milwaukee Art Museum requested the Raphael painting specifically.

"Partly because we thought of it as an adjunct to the Leonardo that had been here ("The Lady with the Ermine")," says Winters. "That wasn't a single work (show), but I do see it as kind of a companion to that because Raphael and Leonardo were certainly great friends. Raphael looked to Leonardo for influence -- he was about 30 years younger than Leonardo, and so he was certainly influenced by the great "Mona Lisa" and by Leonardo's other paintings. as well. Leonardo and Raphael were really inventing a new type of portraiture. That's an important thing to remember.

"In Florence in the late 15th century, I'd say in the late 1470s-1480s, portraiture was just coming into its own as a kind of artistic form. The portraits, particularly of women, were always in profile, reflecting the influence of Roman and Greek coins. ... They were also done for two occasions ... for commemoration of a marriage or they were done in memorial after the person had died. After a very short period of about 20 years, Leonardo and Raphael really came to the function of portraiture. It becomes about preserving or presenting identity and character. Raphael goes so far as to paint, in theory, the love of his life."

But there was also a consideration beyond the artistic ones, Winter says, too.

"We wanted a great name that people could recognize. Sometimes there are great paintings, but if you don't have the power of a great artistic name like Leonardo, Raphael or Michelangelo, sometimes people miss that point, and because we wanted this to be the launch of the series of masterpieces, we wanted it to have name power, as well."

Milwaukee Art Museum hopes that this exhibit, like the building that houses it, will help build on MAM's name power, too.

"We have an incredible guest list coming to the opening night," says Winters. "They are big names and I think part of it is that people who haven't been here before want to come and see the new building.

"It's a great occasion for us to negotiate the next great loan."

Web address: <http://onmilwaukee.com/articles/mamraphael.html>