



Art City

Art and architecture critic Mary Louise Schumacher explores Milwaukee's creative endeavors

Raphael's masterpiece on view at MAM

By [Mary Louise Schumacher](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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She may be coming alone, but centuries of mystery have accompanied Raphael's "La Donna Velata" to Milwaukee. It may be the tiniest exhibit the Milwaukee Art Museum has ever staged — featuring exactly one painting — but this solo turn of a Renaissance masterpiece is one of the most auspicious events to occur at the museum in recent memory.

The portrait "La Velata," as she is sometimes called for short, was once considered the most famous painting in the world. As of Saturday, she will be ensconced in one of the more intimate galleries of the museum's older wing.

A security guard will stand beside her at all times and only a limited number of people will be allowed into the gallery at one time.

So, who is this demure but quietly erotic beauty anyway? These centuries on, there is still rumor and intrigue associated with her.

Veiled in white, with her large, almond-shaped eyes looking directly at her onlookers, "La Velata" has variously been identified as the bride of a patron, the artist's fiancée and the final lover of the artist, who, if you believe the 16th-century biographer Giorgio Vasari, died when he was 37 after a night of excessive sex.

Many believe she is the same winsome woman who took a previous tour through the United States about five years ago, Raphael's "La Fornarina," which traveled to the Frick Collection in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

The faultless skin of the two beauties, the cheeks flush with pink, the curves at the sides of the mouths and the large eyes bear an almost undeniable resemblance.

"La Fornarina," though, is nude, wearing little more than a turban and suggestively offers her left breast. She wears an armband bearing the name of the artist, in the way someone would get a tattoo paying homage to a lover today. There's no ambiguity. The painting, which hangs in the Barberini Gallery in Rome, is an image of passion and possession.

In recent years, "La Fornarina" has been increasingly identified by art historians as Raphael's mistress, a baker's daughter named Margherita Luti, and now there is growing belief that "La Velata" may be this same woman.

A small pearl hair clip appears in both portraits, which further supports the identification with Margherita, whose name means pearl in Italian.



"Clearly this woman was his great love," said Laurie Winters, director of exhibitions at the Milwaukee Art Museum and an expert of earlier European art. "Now we can connect these two women and make a pretty strong case that it is the same woman."

By the time Raphael was 30, he was already a legendary artist. He was a sophisticated man, a poet and an intellectual. In certain ways, he was far more suited to society than his artistic elders, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. He was the one chosen for the ultimate job, as painter to the papal court. He painted several rooms in the Vatican's apartments at about the time Michelangelo was at work on the Sistine Chapel.

He became engaged to the niece of a powerful cardinal. But he never married her, though many years passed.

Perhaps this was because he met and fell in love with Margherita, from Siena. He didn't marry her either. She may have been considered beneath his station in life, and it might have been politically tricky to get out of his engagement. Tellingly, he left the majority of his estate to her at his death.



"La Velata," from about 1516, is thought to be Raphael's response to da Vinci's statement of ideal beauty: the Mona Lisa."

Raphael would have seen what is today the world's most famous painting when it was first completed, in Florence, and some years later in Rome. He would have been about 21 the first time. After that, his paintings of Madonnas became clearly influenced by da Vinci. There are striking similarities in the posing of the hands and the body, as well as the use of landscape as backdrop, for instance.

But it was after the second encounter, and some of his own successes, that Raphael seemed to take on da Vinci in a competition of sorts.

"What better way to do this than to take the woman he thought was incredibly beautiful, his love, and use her as a concept of ideal beauty?" said Winters, who believes Margherita is most likely the favored model whom Vasari referenced in his biography of Raphael.

"La Velata" was not a commission. Raphael, who was best known for his altarpieces and Madonnas, religious paintings of immense sweetness, painted this work for himself, it would seem.

In it, his sitter is framed by smooth silk, a veil typical of a marriage portrait. The edge is exposed briefly, next to her neck, creating an alcove of silk, skin and shadowy space in the painting.

She places her hand to her bosom, to her heart. Translucent silk gathers beneath her index finger, showing the slight pressure she's applying. Wisps of barely discernible, blood-red paint around the finger draw our eye to this spot, this precise place of enclosure or entry. That same red is picked up in the tip of her lip.

Her gown's opulent sleeve erupts like plumage. Silks and brocades swell open and sink into mounds and rivulets of volume and space. This sensuous undulation of fabrics, at least in abstract terms, may convey the complex psychology of this woman who looks back at us.

The arm, believe it or not, was a highly charged space in portraits of the time, a place for family emblems, for instance. It is also where Raphael would, a few years later, place a band bearing his name around the arm of "La Fornarina."

The exhibit of "La Velata" — unlike the exhibit of another damsel, da Vinci's poised "Lady with an Ermine," the centerpiece of the 2002 "Leonardo and the Splendor of Poland" show at MAM — is designed for a very focused experience. To see the depth in one great work takes time, Winters said.

It took more than a year of negotiations to secure the loan of "La Velata" from the Palatine Gallery at the Pitti Palace in Florence. Milwaukee will be its final stop. It also traveled to the Portland (Ore.) Art Museum, which organized the tour with the Foundation for Italian Art & Culture, and the Nevada Museum of Art.

The special exhibit of Raphael's "La Donna Velata" opens Saturday at MAM and will remain on view through June 6.

