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## Raphael's 'Lady with a Unicorn' opens at SF's Legion of Honor in January.

December 17, 2015

8:15 PM MST

In his "[Lives of the Artists](#)," Renaissance writer [Vasari](#) declared that Heaven had bestowed upon [Raphael](#) the "infinite riches of her treasure.. of modesty, grace and talent." His work personified the Renaissance ideals of clarity, order and balance.



*courtesy Legion of Honor/FAMSF*

Viewers will have a chance to decide for themselves when "Lady with a Unicorn," a one-painting exhibit opens at the [Legion of Honor](#) in January 2016. The work comes to us via the [Cincinnati Art Museum](#) and marks the very first time [Raphael's](#) "Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn" has visited the United States, itself a reason for celebration.

Painted in 1506, the work is on loan from the [Galleria Borghese](#) in Rome which acquired the painting in 1682. The demure looking, blue-eyed blond, wearing a moss green dress with crimson velvet sleeves, sits in a loggia flanked by Tuscan columns with an Italian landscape in the background, merging into a deep luminous sky. A gold pendant with a red jewel with a pearl dangling from the end of the ornament is around her neck. In terms of format, the position of the sitter's hands, and the distant landscape in the background, the exhibit will highlight the stylistic similarities between this portrait by Raphael and the Mona Lisa. But unlike the Mona Lisa, this lady does not invite us in with a mysterious slight smile. Indeed, she looks rather disapprovingly at the viewer, pursing her mouth with a disdainful gesture.

In her lap, she holds a small, greenish unicorn which gives the painting its

name. In both classical and medieval symbolism, the unicorn symbolized purity and was an animal that could only be held by a virgin. The lady's identity is ambiguous, although some scholars believe that she might be Giulia Farnese.

Born in Urbino in 1483, Raphael's talent was recognized early and he earned the title of master when he was just 17. In his early 20's he moved to Florence, where he was exposed to Leonardo, whom he admired as a mentor and father figure. His relationship with Michelangelo, just eight years his senior, was far more stormy and competitive relationship. (Leonardo died in 1519, one year before Raphael, but Michelangelo lived until 1564). Raphael learned from both men, but while he made use of their exploration of human anatomy, he added a gentle sweet sentimentality to his religious paintings.

He was invited to Rome in 1508 by **Donato Bramante**, the architect of St. Peter's and was soon introduced to **Pope Julius II**. The Pope commissioned Raphael to paint a series of frescoes in the papal apartments. These would consume Raphael for the best part of a decade, with those of the Stanza della Segnatura, which include his vast "School of Athens," the most outstanding. In 1514, following Bramante's death, the pope named him architect of St. Peter's. Even more than Michelangelo, at work at the time on the Sistine Chapel, Raphael was the pope's painter.

There are numerous ambiguities surrounding the painting. Until the 1930's the work was attributed to **Perugino** and it's not at all clear who the lady was – a real person or a mythological creation. Interestingly enough, it was discovered in the early 20th century that someone had painted over the portrait, recasting the sitter as St. Catherine complete with her martyr's wheel. Later restoration work and cleaning revealed the original portrait. X-rays of the piece showed that a dog had been painted before the unicorn, leading some scholars to suggest that Raphael had left the painting unfinished, with both the dog and the unicorn added later by some unknown artist. If the painting was "touched up" by another artist, the dazzling colors and the demure, icy blonde are products of the Master's hand, a rare treasure to visit San Francisco, since Raphael's most famous works, his large religious frescoes in the Vatican, cannot travel

Opens January 9, 2016. **Opening day celebrations** include an afternoon program featuring a scholarly lecture, Italian opera, art-making activities

for all ages, and more.

Hours: Tuesday - Sunday. 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Admission prices and information [here](#)

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- **'Sunrise' and 'Time Tunnel' at the Chinese Culture Foundation**
- **How 'Looking East' inspired western artists**
- **'Roman Silver Treasure from Berthouville' opens at the Legion of Honor**