

Don't miss Cincinnati Art Museum's 'Sublime Beauty'



Carol Motsinger, cmotsinger@enquirer.com 2:11 p.m. EDT September 24, 2015



(Photo: Provided)

There's just something about her.

And that something is not just the tiny unicorn she's cradling.

The striking beauty featured in Raphael's "Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn" is a captivating force.

"It's a sense of mystery about it," said Anne Buening, Cincinnati Art Museum's coordinating curator for "Sublime Beauty," the upcoming exhibit featuring Raphael's work.

Who is this blonde woman? Why is she holding a unicorn?



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The new show, opening Saturday, Oct. 3, will explore these questions of inspirations, influences, as well as its storied and long history of the work painted around 1505.

This will be the first time the masterpiece will be shown in the United States. It will be on loan from the Galleria Borghese in Rome, where it was first recorded in the collection in 1682. The portrait will be on display through Jan. 6 before heading to San Francisco.

The exhibit announcement captured the imagination of national publications earlier this year. The New York Times and the The Huffington Post both wrote-up the show, with The Huffington Post calling that one-horned horse "inarguable the world's most adorable baby unicorn."

So how did Cincinnati become the first U.S. host of the world's most adorable baby unicorn? Esther Bell, now curator in charge of European paintings at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, is the organizing curator of the exhibition and the editor of the accompanying catalogue.

Starting about two years ago, Bell arranged the single painting loan with Italy. The organization offered the Eden Park institution a Raphael. "We were like a little kid in a candy store," said Buening.

Although it's truly a single-painting show, "Sublime Beauty" will explore connections to a couple other works.

One of those other works: A heavy overpainting. In the early 1930s, art historian Roberto Longhi removed the overpainting to reveal the unicorn (Like The Huffington Post writer, news reports at the time were also super excited about the unicorn, Buening said). Later restoration work on the painting also revealed that she originally held a dog.

"Sublime Beauty" will also explore the stylistic connection between this work and Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," which had a great impact on the young Raphael.

da Vinci produced his revolutionary portrait at around the same time at his lady with the unicorn. The wall text will explore the similarities and the space will also include an engraving from Luigi Calamatta (1801–1869) after the Mona Lisa.

Still, Buening emphasizes the depth and richness of the star of the show, the portrait itself.

Look closely: You can almost see the individual brush strokes. The shine in the metal of the jewelry almost vibrates, for instance.

"There is so much happening," Buening said.

Related CAM programming

2-3 p.m. Oct. 10: Join Anne Buening for an in-depth look at "Sublime Beauty." This expanded gallery talk will provide comprehensive information and insight. Free. Reservations required.

MUSE, 2-3:30 p.m. Oct. 11. Renaissance Madrigals (Raphael, Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn). Part-gallery talk and part-classical music concert, this program explores the intersection of the visual arts and music throughout history. Each month, students from the University of Cincinnati examine a different era through the lens of the Art Museum's permanent collection. Every Muse program features a gallery talk presented by a College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (DAAP) student, as well as live concerts by students from the College-Conservatory of Music (CCM). Free. Reservations not required.

ASL Tours for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired, 11 a.m.-noon Oct. 17 "Sublime Beauty." A certified American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter joins an art museum docent each month for a free tour of one of our special exhibitions. Free. Reservations required.

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