88 **Raphael** (1483–1520)

Portrait of Pope Julius II, 1511

Oil on poplar, 108.7 × 81 cm
The National Gallery, London (NG 27)

Inscribed in the bottom left corner: *118*

In 1511, Pope Julius II della Rovere asked the twenty-eight-year-old Raphael to take his likeness. Although frail from a recent life-threatening illness, the sixty-eight-year-old pope was still renowned for his powerful, often terrifying, personality. He died less than two years later, in February 1513, bequeathing the portrait, possibly as a votive offering, to the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome,[1] where it was displayed on the altar for eight days over the Feast of the Birth of the Virgin. The people of Rome flocked to see it and Vasari later reported that it was 'so lifelike and true that it struck fear into those who saw it, as if it were the living man'.[2]

Raphael's image of the most powerful man in Christendom was radically different from previous ruler portraits. Instead of the traditional frontal view used not only for monarchs but also, tellingly, for images of Christ,[3] Raphael chose to depict the pope seated at an angle and turned away from the viewer, using in reverse the composition of Justus of Ghent's portrait of his uncle, *Pope Sixtus IV*, which he would have seen in Urbino.[4] Seen in three-quarter length, the pope is dressed not in full ceremonial garb but wearing the more informal *mozzetta* (the red velvet shoulder-length cape) and *camauro* (the red velvet hat), both of which are trimmed with white ermine. The gold acorns adorning the backrest of the armchair are symbols of the Della Rovere family (*rovere* in Italian means oak). In an extraordinary passage of painting, they reflect the light from a window outside the picture,[5] their polished brilliance skilfully framing the head of the pontiff.

Indeed, every surface and texture in the painting is exquisitely rendered, from the pope's crisp white, starched smock to his freshly combed beard, its texture subtly distinguished from the softer white ermine lining the hat and cape, a few unkempt strands peeping through the button-holes of the cape. Pope Julius grew a beard in the autumn of 1510 as a sign of his mourning for the loss of the city of Bologna to the French, which in turn brought about his ill heath.[6] He did not shave it off until March 1512. It is thought that this bearded likeness was taken in the summer of 1511, based also on its similarity to Raphael's frescoed portrait of the pope in the *Stanza della Segnatura*.[7]

The pope's well-worn face and downcast gaze betray the strain of his role as leader of Christendom. In his right hand he holds a white cloth, or *mappa*, which was sometimes held by emperors in representations from classical antiquity as a sign of status.[8] The pope, after all, had taken the name Julius in emulation of the great General of the Roman republic. The prominent stones of his three rings correspond with the colours of the three theological virtues – white for faith, green for hope and red for charity.[9] His left hand, also adorned with rings, grips the armrest of the chair with a resoluteness that belies his aged and hunched body.

Pope Julius presided over one of the most troubled periods in the history of the Church. His own extravagant spending, particularly in the arts, attracted widespread criticism and contributed greatly to the perception that the popes were more concerned with the material world than the spiritual. Ecclesiastical abuses and corruption were widespread, and on the eve of the Reformation the mood was one of impending gloom. Erasmus, who was in Rome in 1509, wrote a shocking satire entitled 'Julius Excluded from Paradise' and Luther, who visited the papal city in 1511, famously said, 'I would not have missed seeing Rome for a thousand florins for then I might have been accused of being unjust to the pope'.[10]

Raphael's portrait shows a man too preoccupied to perform for the artist for whom he is sitting. The result is an exceptionally human portrayal of a pontiff. The painting was so influential that it became the prototype for papal portraiture for the next two centuries. This was the first painting by Raphael to enter the National Gallery's collection and was the subject of a dramatic re-discovery in 1970 when it was confirmed after technical examination, that the portrait, which had been demoted to a copy, was after all the prime version.[11] MME

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Vasari (1966–87), IV, p. 174; Gould 1970; Gould 1975, pp. 208–10, no. 27; Zucker 1977; Partridge and Starn 1980; Henry 2001; Dunkerton and Roy 2004; London 2004, no. 99, pp. 272–5

NOTES

1 London 2004, p. 272. See also for the full provenance history of the painting.
2 Vasari (1966–87), IV, p. 174.
3 Langmuir 1994, p. 147.
4 Campbell 1990, p. 61.
5 See further Henry 2001.
6 Zucker 1977.
7 London 2004, p. 272.
8 Partridge and Starn, 1980, p. 55.
9 Partridge and Starn, 1980, p. 61.
10 Chadwick 1990, p. 19.
11 Gould 1970. For the most recent work on this see Dunkerton and Roy 2004.