

Sistine Madonna turns 500

Jo Caird reports on the legacy of Raphael's masterpiece, which is being celebrated in Germany, and highlights some exhibitions of note around Europe this season

It's not often that a major exhibition is dedicated to just one painting, but then it's not every day that a work of the artistic calibre, historical interest and contemporary relevance of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* celebrates a 500th birthday. One of only a handful of Raphaels found outside Italy, the extraordinary altarpiece is a high point of the wonderful Old Masters collection at the Staatliche Kunstmuseum Dresden (SKD).

Andreas Henning, curator of Italian paintings, has observed the effect the work has on visitors – both art history experts and those who've come seeking a glimpse of the most famous angel babies in the world – and is thrilled to be able to give the painting the attention it deserves with *The Sistine Madonna: Raphael's iconic painting turns 500*.

In early 1754, an almost unknown altarpiece was removed from the Church of San Sisto in the small northern Italian city of Piacenza, carried over the Alps and presented at the court of August III, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. Such a journey would normally be postponed until the arrival of spring, but negotiations for the purchase of the *Sistine Madonna* had been so fraught with difficulty that when the sale finally went through, even the driving rain and bitter cold of the Alps in winter couldn't stop August III's agent from dispatching his precious cargo.

Buying a piece of history

August III was so desperate to add the painting to his collection in Dresden, Henning explains, because at the time Raphael was "by far the most important painter". The King bought hundreds of works every year, but "what was missing was a painting by Raphael, the unique painting by Raphael." Used to paying somewhere in the region of 800-1,000 scudi Romani (the currency of the Papal States) for large works, August III handed over 25,000 scudi Romani for the *Sistine Madonna*, an enormous amount of money for a painting during that period.

By the beginning of the 19th century, says Henning, the work was "the most famous

painting by Raphael in Europe", but when the *Sistine Madonna* was first exhibited in Dresden in 1754, another Italian artist, Antonio di Correggio, was the flavour of the day in Germany. While everyone was aware of Raphael's masterworks such as the Vatican 'Stanze' in Rome, the *Sistine Madonna* had languished out of the public eye in Piacenza for more than 200 years. Unlike Rome, Milan and Venice, Piacenza was not a Grand Tour destination, so no one except the Benedictine monks of San Sisto, for whom the work was commissioned in 1512, ever saw the painting. It was also barely written about: Giorgio Vasari, the

great chronicler of the lives of Italian artists in the 16th century, wrote only one line about the painting, calling it "a truly rare and extraordinary work".

The SKD exhibition explores the painting's beginnings – with various other paintings and drawings by Raphael displayed to give a sense of the uniqueness of the *Sistine Madonna* – but it also considers the work's rise to fame after its transfer to Dresden. As increasing numbers of visitors were struck by the altarpiece, essays and poetry were written about it and reproductions were produced. Henning puts the painting's popularity down to Raphael's "very simple but very powerful composition" and the "heavenly vision" he produced for the figure of the Madonna.

The pair of winged cherubs at the base of the *Sistine Madonna* are an interesting story in themselves. Appearing first in paintings before being reproduced as prints and on porcelain, they had a life of their own from as early as the end of the 18th century. Now, of course, their little faces can be found on kitsch stationary and homeware the world over. "A lot of our visitors", says Henning, "are surprised to see they're small and only two of the angels in the painting".

The Sistine Madonna: Raphael's iconic painting turns 500 contains over 250 works of art and historical artefacts. Henning was very keen that the show have an international feel, so there are numerous examples of the work's reception in different cultures and markets, from England to Russia. Given the painting's significance worldwide today, it is extraordinary to consider the absolute obscurity of those early years as a humble altarpiece in Piacenza. Happy birthday *Sistine Madonna*. ■

***The Sistine Madonna: Raphael's iconic painting turns 500* is running at the Staatliche Kunstmuseum in Dresden, Germany until August 26.**
www.skd.museum



Above: The German painter Kurt Schwitters used the image in one of his famous collages

Right: Despite reaching the ripe old age of 500, the painting has lost none of its beauty



Further exhibitions:

There are plenty of worthwhile exhibitions taking place throughout the European art scene, including an Edward Hopper retrospective in Madrid and Yoko Ono at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm



EDWARD HOPPER

The Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is the primary holder of works by Edward Hopper outside of the US. This European retrospective of the American realist painter presents a wide-ranging overview of Hopper's mature career, but also explores his formative years. Looking in particular at the influence of early 20th century works of art on his oeuvre, the show includes complementary pieces by artists such as Edgar Degas and Walter Sickert. Previous European exhibitions, notably the massive 2004 travelling show, have proved Hopper to be among the most popular of American artists in Europe.

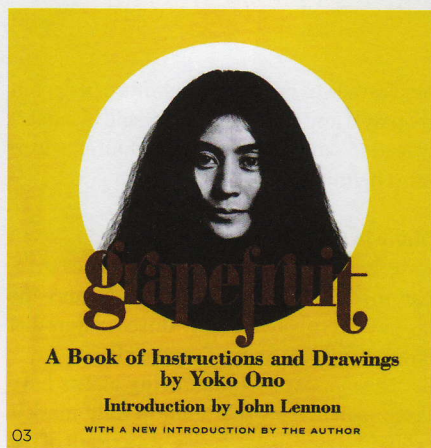
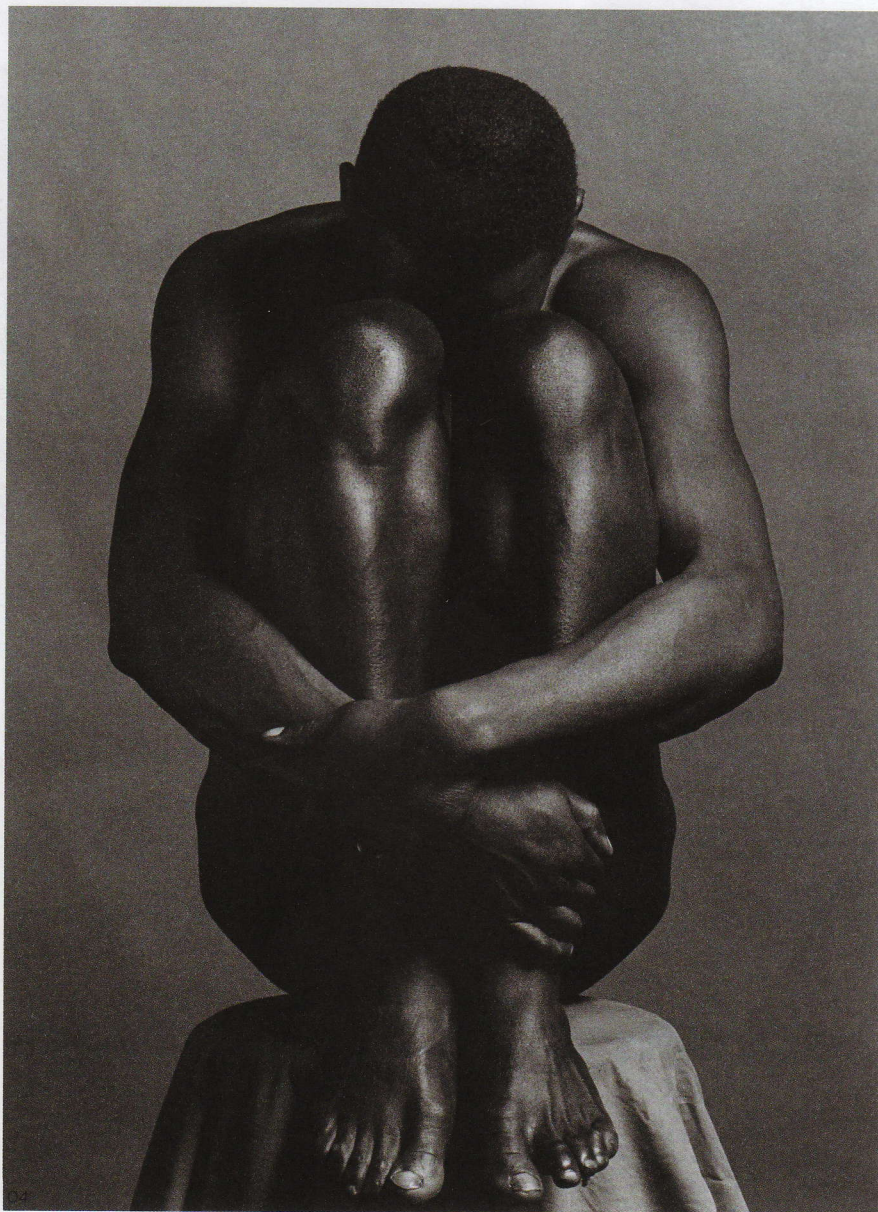
Edward Hopper is running at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain until September 16.

www.museothyssen.org

01 Edward Hopper.
Room in New York,
1932

02 Edward Hopper.
Conference in
Night, 1949





YOKO ONO

In 1964, Yoko Ono published *Grapefruit*, a book of poetic instructions for acts of imagination to take place in the mind of the reader. An early example of conceptual art, the book has been reprinted on a number of occasions and remains influential today. This exhibition celebrates the work of one of the most iconic female artists alive today, presenting a selection of Ono's 'instruction pieces' from *Grapefruit*, as well as some important early works and experimental films by the artist.

Yoko Ono is running at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden until September 9. www.modernamuseet.se

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

Robert Mapplethorpe's sexually explicit photographs of acts of sadomasochism and homoeroticism were a source of controversy both during the American artist's lifetime and since his death in 1989. But though the importance of this part of his oeuvre shouldn't be underestimated, Mapplethorpe's other works, including celebrity portraits and still lifes, make him one of the key figures of 20th century photography. This exhibition of works on loan from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation in New York gives a taste of the photographer's practice with a selection of pieces representing the different stages of his career.

Robert Mapplethorpe is running at the Ludwig Museum, Budapest, Hungary from 25 May to 30 September. www.ludwigmuseum.hu

03 *Grapefruit*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1970, originally published in 1964 © Yoko Ono

04 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ajitto*, 1981