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**Few visitors today realize that the Sistine Chapel
decoration is incomplete without the Raphael tapestries
depicting stories from the book of Acts.**

Figure 1: Raphael (1483-1520), THE HEALING OF THE LAME MAN (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 5.4 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images, London / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Spreading the Gospel “To the Ends of the Earth”

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The High Renaissance painter Raphael Sanzio was chosen by Giovanni de' Medici, newly elected as Pope Leo X (1513-1521), to design tapestries for the walls of his private chapel, the Sistine.¹ The ten tapestries, woven in Brussels from cartoons made by Raphael, were to hang beneath the frescoes commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere (1471-1484) in the early 1480s. Five of these cartoons are illustrated here and depict scenes from the Acts of the Apostles.

Very few visitors today realize that the Sistine Chapel decoration is incomplete without the tapestries. The iconographic importance of the tapestries to the Sistine Chapel program rivaled in fame and beauty during the sixteenth century Michelangelo's ceiling (1508-1512), which was commissioned by Pope Julius II (1503-1513). The narrative scenes of the original tapestry program were tailored to continue the iconography of the *Capella papalis*. The proper titles for the Sistine are *Capella palatina* and *Capella magna* (or *maior*) in the Vatican. Together with the Basilica of St. Peter's, the chapel was the primary location for the liturgical feasts of the pope and his court. St. Peter's was the premier church of Christendom, and the chapel represented Christ's vicar on earth, the pope. The manifestation of the *Maiestas Papalis* occurred not only in the magnificence of these structures and the money spent on the gold and silver threads used to weave the tapestries but also in the narratives painted on the walls under Sixtus, the ceiling under Julius, and the tapestries under Leo.

The theme of papal authority continues through the placement of the life of Peter tapestries beneath the scenes from the life of Christ frescoes on the north wall. The narratives of Paul's life woven into tapestries are located beneath the painted life of Moses on the opposite wall. Sharon Fermor explains the selection of these tapestry narratives: "Peter and Paul are portrayed as the twin founders of the Christian church, with special missions to convert the Jews and Gentiles respectively. They are also presented as the joint sources of the Pope's own authority and the tapestries were certainly intended to have a personal and political dimension for Leo in his role as Pope."² Each tapestry series parallels the 1480s frescoes: Peter and Christ, Paul and Moses. The tapestries were not permanently on display but were put up on special occasions.

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Figure 2

Raphael (1483-1520), *THE DEATH OF ANANIAS* (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 5.3 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images / The Royal Collection, on loan from HM The Queen. Used by permission.

As one faces the altar, the Peter scenes are placed below the Christ frescoes and begin on the right side of the altar and move clockwise onto the side wall in the following order: *Miraculous Draught of Fishes* (Luke 5:3-10), *Christ's Charge to Peter* (Matthew 16:18-19; John 21:15-17), *Healing of the Lame Man* (Acts 3:1-10), and *Death of Ananias* (Acts 5:1-6). The scene on the left side of the altar is the *Stoning of Stephen* (Acts 7:54-60). Continuing on the sidewall, in a counter-clockwise direction are the Paul scenes, hung below the Moses frescoes. The Paul compositions are: *Conversion of Saul* (Acts 9:1-9), *Conversion of the Proconsul and the Blinding of Elymas* (Acts 13:6-12), *Sacrifice at Lystra* (Acts 14:8-18), *Paul in Prison* (Acts 16:23-26), and *Paul Preaching at Athens* (Acts 17:15-34).³ Altogether the tapestries would cover approximately twelve hundred square feet.

I will briefly discuss the cartoons produced by Raphael and his assistants that depict two Peter scenes and three Paul scenes from the book of Acts. The cartoons, each approximately 11' x 18', were painted in a glue-based watercolor over charcoal drawings by Raphael. Often the drawings are visible through the applied color. His pupils probably did the painting. Raphael set the average height of a standing figure in the foreground of the

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Figure 3

Raphael (1483-1520), *THE CONVERSION OF THE PROCONSUL* (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 4.4 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images, London / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

painting at 8'. He utilized architecture that is cut off by the frame to keep it in proportion with the large figures. The cartoons and tapestries were far more expensive than frescoes and oil paintings. The total cost was 16,000 ducats, which is more than five times the amount paid to Michelangelo for painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling.⁴

The Healing of the Lame Man (Figure 1) depicts the first miracle performed by the apostles after Christ's death. The biblical narrative describes the man as both a lame and a beggar, which factors into the story when Peter says, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Acts 3:6). Biblical scholar Loveday Alexander explains, "Peter's lack of silver and gold (perhaps due to the community's policy on property [cf. Acts 2:44]) highlights both the unexpected character of the miracle (the beggar is looking for money not healing) and the apostles' own dependence: only 'in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth' can healing take place."⁵

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Figure 4

Raphael (1483-1520), *THE SACRIFICE AT LYSTRA* (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 5.6 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images, London / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The crowd has gathered at the Beautiful Gate, the *Porta speciosa*, between the second and third of the peripheral courts around the temple of Jerusalem. Peter stands in the center with John looking towards the lame man. Peter is healing the man through a blessing gesture. In the cartoon Peter raises his left hand, but the tapestry will be woven in reverse. This act is symbolic of Peter's spiritual healing and the conversion of the Jews.⁶

The Death of Ananias (Figure 2) is presented in a very straightforward manner. Peter and the other apostles have persuaded wealthy individuals to sell off land and property and distribute the proceeds to the poor. One of them, Ananias, kept back some money, and Peter rebukes him. Ananias falls down dead in the front right foreground of the composition before the entire crowd. The shock is seen in the faces of a group of men delivering sacks on the right. Two figures, a man and a woman, on the left also react in horror to the sudden death before them but the alms distribution by the other apostles on the far left continues without anyone seeing what has happened.

While the main event occurs in the center of the composition, two later stories are referred to on the left and right sides of the cartoon. The depiction of the distribution of alms is not only a way to call attention to the apostles'

actions as good examples, but also refers to the distribution of the common goods of the Church, for which purpose the office of deacon was instituted. Stephen was one of those deacons appointed after the death of Ananias.⁷ *The Stoning of Stephen* is the next tapestry in the series. The right side shows Sapphira, the wife of Ananias, counting her coins as she, too, keeps back some of the wealth. She will be struck dead within three hours because of her greed and deceit.

Peter pronounces divine judgment on these members of the Christian community for their disobedience. His action has also been interpreted as punishment because of the embezzlement of church funds. This is somewhat ironic as Pope Leo X himself was accused of diverting funds for the payment of the tapestries.⁸ Sources for Raphael's composition are not from other artistic depictions of the death of Ananias, but instead are from classical sculptures such as the *Oratio Augusti* from the *Arch of Constantine* and the *Dying Gaul*. Michelangelo's *Death of Haman* from the Sistine ceiling may also be a source for the pose of the woman with upraised hands looking back at the dying Ananias.⁹

The Conversion of the Proconsul (Figure 3) is a centralized, characteristically High Renaissance composition. The proconsul, the governor of a senatorial province, sits enthroned in the center of the painting. The throne is inset before an architectural niche. His attention is on the man to his left, the magician Elymas, who has just now been struck blind by Paul. Paul is on the left of the painting in green gown and rose-colored mantle with his right hand extended towards Elymas. Elymas staggers forward with eyes closed and hands and arms extended to feel his way as he walks towards Paul.

The proconsul Sergius Paulus had called Paul and Barnabas because he wanted to hear the word of God.¹⁰ Elymas opposed what they had to say. Loveday Alexander notes that, "Educated Romans had a particular interest in divination, and it was not uncommon for a wealthy senator such as Sergius Paulus to keep a soothsayer as part of his household."¹¹ Paul sees this magician as evil. Luke describes their encounter:

Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him [Elymas] and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And, now listen—the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand.

Acts 13:10-11

Witnessing Paul's act of punishing this evil man caused the proconsul to convert and become a follower of the Lord. Raphael recorded this conversion in an inscription on the throne (as translated by John Shearman), "Through

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Figure 5

Raphael (1483-1520), *PAUL PREACHING AT ATHENS* (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 4.4 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images / The Royal Collection, on loan from HM The Queen. Used by permission.

the preaching of Saul, Sergius Paulus, Proconsul of Asia, embraces the Christian Faith."¹²

The Sacrifice of Lystra (Figure 4) illustrates the biblical text of Acts 14:11-18 in precise detail. Lystra was a small town in southern Asia Minor whose residents spoke Lycaonian. Paul has just commanded a man whose feet have been crippled from his birth to "Stand upright on your feet." This healing occurred after Paul "looking at [the man] intently saw that he had faith to be healed" (Acts 14:9). Upon seeing the man rise up and walk, the frenzied crowd on the right, along with the priest of Zeus who brought oxen to the gates, want to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. The crowd refers to the two missionaries as Hermes and Zeus, respectively (because Paul/Hermes was the chief speaker).

Paul responds to them by offering his first sermon that tries to explain the gospel to pagans:

“Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.”

Acts 14:15-17

Raphael depicts the moment when Paul attempts to stop the crowd but fails, and they make the sacrifices. Later, some Jews come from Antioch and Iconium and convince the crowd that Paul and Barnabas are not related to their pagan gods. They stone Paul, drag him out of the city, and leave him for dead.

While the Jews are not accepting of Paul’s gospel in Lystra, Paul has a very different experience in Athens. Some scholars have suggested the message is received differently by country dwellers (Lystra) than city residents (Athens).¹³ *Paul Preaching in Athens* (Figure 5) is the most widely copied of the Raphael cartoons in the history of art. Paul had become deeply concerned about the presence of idols as he walked around the city of Athens. Paul wears the same vestments as in other scenes and stands on a stepped platform in front of the Areopagus as he raises his hands in gesture. He addresses the crowd, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god’” (Acts 17:22b-23a). The statue of Mars can be seen to the right of the composition. Paul goes on to speak of God as creator and as the one who raised “the man whom he appointed,” Jesus, from the dead. The mention of the Resurrection causes some in the crowd to scoff, but others believe.

This is often considered Paul’s most dramatic speech and defines him as a preacher. The tapestry was, from an iconographic perspective, appropriately placed below Cosimo Rosselli’s fresco from the Moses cycle depicting the *Adoration of the Golden Calf*. Pope Leo X had just issued a doctrine of preaching reform in the tenth session of the Lateran Council on December 15, 1515.¹⁴ In this document, the Pope gave Paul the title Prince of Preachers. The tapestries were truly a legacy of Pope Leo X, but unfortunately when he died in 1521 the papacy was bankrupt and the tapestries had to be sold to help pay for the gathering of the cardinals to elect his successor.¹⁵

The Raphael tapestries are rich visual depictions of stories about Peter and Paul. Eight out of ten of them refer to events recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. As the most thorough set of paintings from Acts, they allow us to visualize the major events in the spreading of the gospel “unto the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47).

NOTES

1 This article is developed from research for Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *The Acts of the Apostles Through the Centuries*, Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, forthcoming).

2 Sharon Fermor, *The Raphael Tapestry Cartoons: Narrative, Decoration, Design* (London, UK: Scala, 1996), 10.

3 The cartoons are lost for the *Conversion of Saul*, *Paul in Prison*, and *Stoning of Stephen*.

4 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, seventh edition, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 528.

5 Loveday Alexander, "The Acts of the Apostles," in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1033.

6 Mark Evans and Clare Browne, eds., *Raphael: Cartoons and Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London, UK: V & A Publishing, 2010), 83.

7 John K. G. Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London, UK: Phaidon, 1972), 57.

8 Evans and Browne, *Raphael*, 89.

9 Ibid.

10 Alexander, "The Acts of the Apostles," 1044. A man named Sergius Paulus held office in Rome under Claudius at about the right time to be Luke's proconsul.

11 Alexander, "The Acts of the Apostles," 1044.

12 Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons*, 58.

13 Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries in the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 199-200.

14 Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons*, 71.

15 Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 530.



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