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**Raphael's image, based on a popular apocryphal story,
commends Mary's chastity as a model for young women
about to be betrothed and married.**

Mary's Worthy Suitor

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The chastity of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is frequently represented by a white lily or, in an Annunciation painting, a vase sitting on the table with light passing through it without breaking the vessel. An enclosed garden also represents her perpetual virginity in Catholic art.

The young Mary is most often featured in representations of the Lukan accounts of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), Visitation (1:39-57), and Nativity (2:15-19). But she also appears in images like this one, Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, based on an apocryphal story about her betrothal to Joseph.

Raphael's painting was probably commissioned by the Albizzini family for the church dedicated to the Virgin's wedding ring in Città di Castello. The artist, only twenty-one years old at the time, had recently become an independent master and left the workshop of his teacher, Perugino (1446-1523). Raphael must have been quite proud of this work, which shows off his mastery of one-point linear perspective, because he signed and dated it.

The subject matter is a narrative found in the *Golden Legend*, an anthology of stories compiled by Jacobus da Voragine around 1260. This immensely popular book (remarkably, over one thousand copies of it have survived!) gave readers more "human" details about the lives of biblical characters and later Christian saints.

In this story, the Virgin Mary is at the temple awaiting her suitors. Each man selects a rod and presents it to the high priest. The suitor with the rod that miraculously blooms will be Mary's betrothed. In Raphael's composition, an older Joseph holds a flowering rod in one hand and with his other hand is about to place a ring on Mary's finger. Other temple virgins stand to the left of Mary, while unsuccessful suitors stand to Joseph's side. (One young suitor breaks his rod with his knee in frustration!)

The lines, or orthogonals, of the piazza converge on the doorway of the temple, which looks much like an Italian baptistery. The building's shape was often used by contemporary Renaissance architects, drawing their inspiration from Roman temples. It also recalls the Dome of the Rock, which had been built in Jerusalem in the seventh century on the site of the Temple of Solomon. This is an appropriate backdrop to the marriage of the Virgin.

Scenes like this served to commend Mary's chastity as a model for young women about to be betrothed and married.