

In Memory of Grifonetto Baglioni

The night between July 14-15, 1500 marked a **terrible bloodshed** in the family feud to take power in Perugia: Grifonetto Baglioni with the aid of two accomplices killed Guido, Astorre, Simonetto and Gismondo Baglioni. Only a few days later Grifonetto was killed, in turn, by soldiers sent by his cousin Gian Paolo who, having escaped the massacre, became the new Lord of Perugia.

Raphael's painting, also known as the *Baglioni Altarpiece*, was commissioned by Atalanta, Grifonetto's mother, who, after having denounced her son for his betrayal, ceded to his dying request for pardon. She then ordered the altarpiece portraying the *Deposition of Christ* to be painted in his memory. Raphael immortalised **Grifonetto** as the young man gripping the burial shroud that holds Christ up, **the only mortal in the scene** to echo the turn of Jesus' head toward heaven, or the place of Divine Will.

The work became so famous that it made Grifonetto into a mythic figure who was remembered by Oscar Wilde in his *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "[...] jewelled cap and acanthus like curls Grifonetto Baglioni who slew Astorre with his bride, and Simonetto with his page, and whose comeliness was such that, as he lay dying in the yellow piazza of Perugia, those who had hated him could but weep, and Atalanta, who had cursed him, blessed him."

Fig. 1 Raphael,
Deposition of Christ (Baglioni Altarpiece), 1507.
Oil on wood, 184x176 cm. Rome, Galleria Borghese.

In 1608 the altarpiece was stolen from the *Baglioni Chapel* in the *Church of San Francesco al Prato* in Perugia. The theft was commissioned by Pope Paul V who made a gift of the painting to his nephew Scipione Borghese.

Two copies were immediately ordered to replace the stolen work: the one commissioned from Cavalier d'Arpino substitutes Raphael's original in Perugia. The second copy by Giovanni Lanfranco has been lost. The painting's general layout recalls reliefs from a Roman sarcophagus of the 3rd century, showing the Carrying of Meleager (fig. below, Rome, Musei Capitolini).



The Drama's Enactment

The *Deposition* panel was Raphael's most difficult undertaking during the years he lived in Florence, a period commonly ascribed to 1504-1508. It was **originally part of a larger altarpiece** which was completed with an extruding framed work (today in the National Gallery of Umbria in Perugia) on the top and a predella (now in the Vatican Picture Gallery in Rome) below. Raphael was dealing with a complex theme that required **the organisation of several figures** who all show different attitudes, movements and inner tensions.

Painted at the end of his Florentine period, the artist shows how he has assimilated the lessons of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo; he must have been looking at their recent designs for the *Battle of Anghiari* and the *Battle of Cascina* because he reaches similar results of drama and heroism in this altarpiece.

Raphael represents the dramatic action through **the dynamic poses and divergence of the bodies**. What had been pathos in Michelangelo is, however, attenuated here in a kind of intense but interiorised grief, in **a painful and mute resignation**. It all culminates in the group of Pious Women on the right. In Mary's pain we see the portrayal of Atalanta's grief for her son. A number of references to Michelangelo can be found here: in the greater solidity of the bodies, in the articulation of movement but also in the falling arm of Christ that recalls the *Vatican Pietà* housed in *Saint Peter's Basilica*. Most especially we see a reference to Buonarroti in the woman in the lower far right who repeats the twisting pose of the Virgin from the *Tondo Doni*.





Read and Recognise

1 Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F).

T F

- ☐ ☐ 1. Raphael's facility with painting was useful for the small *Baglioni Altarpiece*.
- ☐ ☐ 2. The painting shows the influence of Florentine masters like Mantegna and Bellini.
- ☐ ☐ 3. The number of figures, their expressions and dynamism made the work challenging to execute.
- ☐ ☐ 4. This deposition is similar to one that Michelangelo painted for the Vatican.

2 Who was Grifonetto Baglioni and what is his relationship with Raphael's *Deposition*? Read the text for clues and complete the text.

1. The struggle for power over the city of _____, led to terrible _____ among the members of the _____ family. Grifonetto, helped by some _____, killed four members of the family. His mother _____ spoke against her son's _____. Soon afterwards his assassination by soldiers was ordered by his _____ Gian Paolo.
2. While Grifonetto was dying his mother accepted his request for _____. Later she ordered an _____ showing the _____ scene to be created in Grifonetto's _____. In the painting he appears as the man holding up _____ on the burial _____.

Vocabulary

3 Match each verb in English to its Italian equivalent.

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|------------------|-------------------|
| ____ 1. Denounce | a. Afferrare |
| ____ 2. Cede | b. Condannare |
| ____ 3. Grip | c. Trucidare |
| ____ 4. Slay | d. Inveire contro |
| ____ 5. Curse | e. Concedere |

4 Match each adjective with its noun and write your Italian translation of the term.

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|--------------------------|----------------|-------|
| ____ 1. Burial | a. resignation | _____ |
| ____ 2. Jewelled | b. work | _____ |
| ____ 3. Acanthuslike | c. cap | _____ |
| ____ 4. Extruding framed | d. curls | _____ |
| ____ 5. Mute | e. shroud | _____ |