Andrea del Sarto

The Renaissance Workshop in Action

Andrea del Sarto (Italian, 1486–1530) ran the most successful and productive workshop in Florence in the 1510s and 1520s. Moving beyond the graceful harmony and elegance of elders and peers such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Fra Bartolommeo, he brought unprecedented naturalism and immediacy to his art through the rough and rustic use of red chalk. This exhibition looks behind the scenes and examines the artist's entire creative process. The latest technology allows us to see beneath the surface of his paintings in order to appreciate the workshop activity involved. The exhibition also demonstrates studio tricks such as the reuse of drawings and motifs, while highlighting Andrea's constant dazzling inventiveness.

All works in the exhibition are by Andrea del Sarto.

This exhibition has been co-organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Frick Collection, New York, in association with the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence. We acknowledge the generous support provided by an anonymous donation in memory of Melvin R. Seiden and by the Italian Cultural Institute.

The J. Paul Getty Museum

Rendering Reality

In this room we focus on Andrea's much-lauded naturalism and how his powerful drawn studies enabled him to transform everyday people into saints and Madonnas, and smirking children into angels. With the example of *The Madonna of the Steps*, we see his constant return to life drawing on paper—even after he had started painting—to ensure truth to nature.

Hidden Secrets

In this gallery we focus on the process—and the hidden secrets—behind two superlative examples of Andrea's work: the unfinished *The Sacrifice of Isaac* and the iconic Medici *Holy Family*. Although we know that Andrea ran a large and efficient studio, we are only just beginning to understand some of the methods employed within it.

The Medici *Holy Family*

One of the last works that Andrea del Sarto painted, this oil features an arresting mix of majesty, detailed observation, and tenderness that mark the culmination of a series of Holy Family scenes. It is this subject matter for which Andrea is still most famous today. The multiple diagonals of the two pairs of heads are encircled at the bottom by a frieze of hands, while the mobility of the children is in stark contrast to the solidity of the adults. Christ occupies the focal point of the composition, and indeed his turning head is at the very center of the panel. Color is muted and relies on a complementary range of shining reds, grays, and browns.

Even to the naked eye, it is clear that Andrea made adjustments to the composition of the Medici *Holy Family* as he painted; some of the pigments have become transparent over time, and changes in Christ's left leg and the Madonna's right hand are now clearly visible.

Yet the biggest "secret" of the painting is that the entire figure of the Madonna has been camouflaged from two previously made cartoons. The Virgin's drapery came from a cartoon used both for a *Holy Family* in Saint Petersburg (left) and the Barberini *Holy Family* (right), while her head and hair came from a cartoon previously used for Saint Margaret in the *Pisa Saint Agnes* altarpiece (see infrared reflectogram at far right).

Head of Saint Elizabeth modified from drawing (detail, study)

Infrared reflectogram of the Medici *Holy Family*
The image reveals the underdrawing executed by Sarto in black chalk or charcoal that he modified during the painting process.

The cartoon was a full-scale down treatment of the subject on paper that Andrea used to transfer the design to the panel. The final stage in the design process but one (and a unique survey from the Roman century, meaning "large sheet of paper"). The back of the cartoon was covered with black chalk and then placed on the wood panel, the lines of the composition were then gone over with a sharp object, transferring the black chalk on the back like a carbon paper. Andrea then painted over the lines so we now barely notice. The paper cartoon does not survive.

Footland underdrawing

Drapery added to Christ

Clothing fringe detail not painted

Adjustments to profile of Virgin Mary (Madonna) and Christ Child's left leg. Seen in earlier painting of Saint Margaret (below) and revised and inverted.

Adjustments to Christ's leg

Monochromes "wash" (a very thin translucent paint) used for initial shadows

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Photo: www.arthermitage.org

The Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist, about 1527. Oil on panel, 129 x 100 cm (50 3/4 x 39 3/8 in.). St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum.

Photo: www.wikiart.org

Barberini *Holy Family*, about 1527. Oil on panel, 138 x 104 cm (54 3/8 x 41 in.). Palazzo Barberini, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica

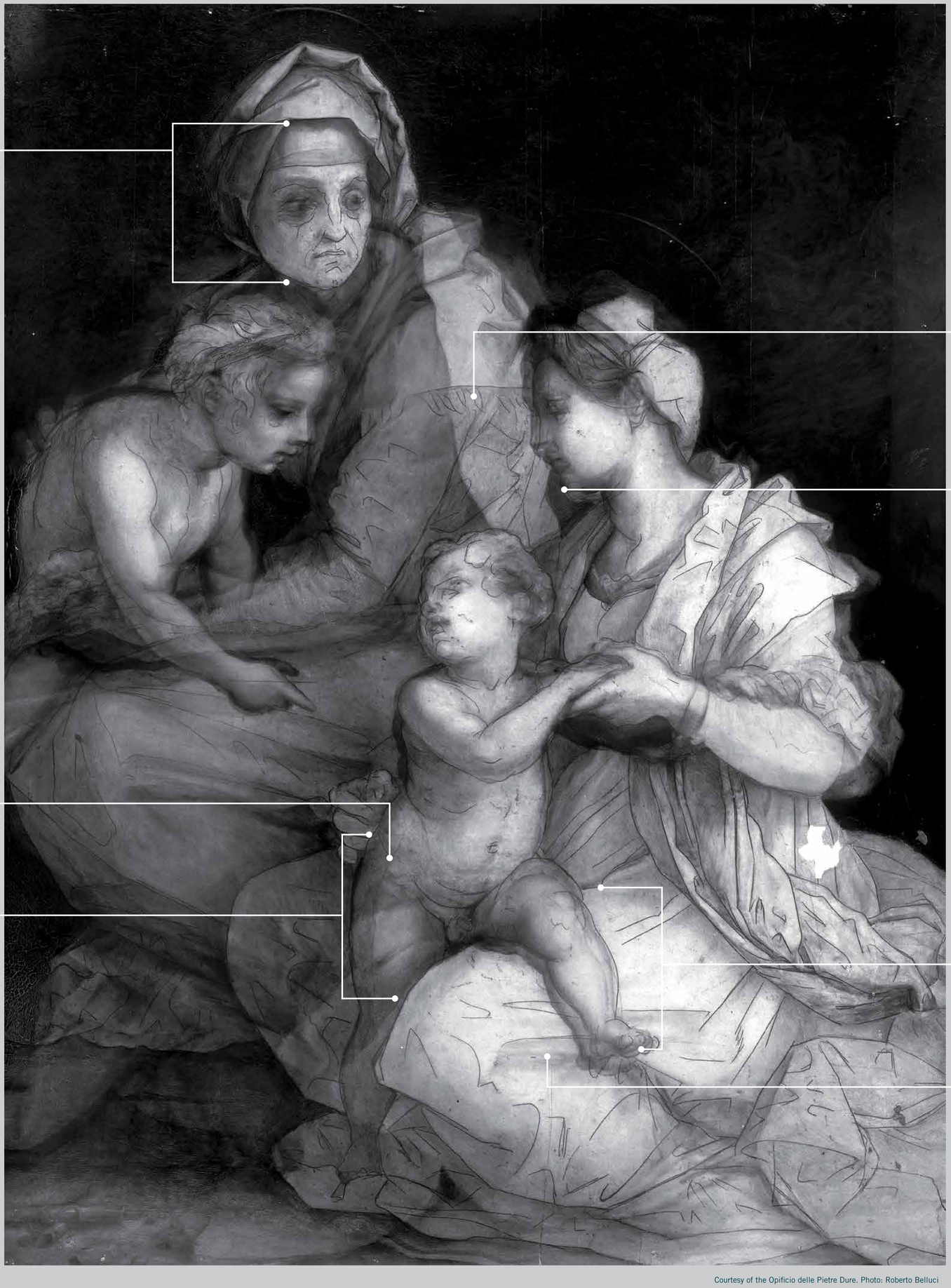
Head of Saint Elizabeth modified from drawing (shown nearby)

Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Infrared reflectogram of the Medici *Holy Family*

This image reveals the underdrawing beneath the layers of paint. It shows the lines transferred from the cartoon.

The cartoon was a full-scale drawn treatment of the subject on multiple joined sheets of paper, normally fully resolved and the final stage in the design process (our word cartoon derives from the Italian *cartone*, meaning "large sheet of paper"). The back of the cartoon was blackened and pressed against the primed wood panel; the lines of the composition were then gone over with a sharp object, transferring the black chalk on the back like a carbon copy to the surface. These lines are now clearly visible. The paper cartoon does not survive.



Clothing fringe detail not painted

Adjustments to profile of Virgin Mary

Transfer lines show that the cartoon from an earlier painting of Saint Margaret (below) was reused and modified.

Saint Margaret, from the Saint Agnes altarpiece, 1527–28. Oil on panel, 145 x 62 cm (57 1/8 x 24 3/8 in.). Pisa, Cathedral

Photo: Scala Archives/RCS

Freehand underdrawing

Drapery added to Christ

Photo: Scala Archives/RCS

Adjustments to Christ's leg

Monochrome "wash" (a very thin transparent paint) used for initial shadows

Courtesy of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure. Photo: Roberto Belluci

The *Sacrifice of Isaac*

With one of the most dynamic compositions of the Florentine Renaissance, Andrea treated a moment from the biblical text of Genesis (22:1–14) in which God orders Abraham to sacrifice his beloved only son, Isaac, as a test of faith. As the father raises his blade and pins down his son, holding his hands behind his back, an angel swoops in to tell him that his son is spared through Abraham's demonstrated faith; the act is unnecessary.

The scene showcases Andrea's famed ability to convey subtle psychological detail through expression and pose. Abraham looks up at the angel in dumbfounded disbelief and relief, while his son, unaware that he is saved, looks out at the viewer with calm resignation, still waiting for the blow.

This painting is unfinished and reveals Andrea's working process clearly to the naked eye. Some areas at right—for example, the donkey—are totally unpainted, leaving visible the imprimitura (a priming layer) and cartoon transfer lines. Other parts are roughly colored in, awaiting further layers. Andrea built up thin veils of paint to gradually render the scene, using increasing opacity to solidify the forms while retaining subtlety. Changes in the position of the angel are visible in particular.

We do not know why Andrea left the Cleveland painting unfinished, but he used his cartoon to make two more—very similar—paintings of the same subject: a finished small quarter-size one in the Prado (left) and a full-size finished and signed panel in Dresden (right).

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MADRID VERSION

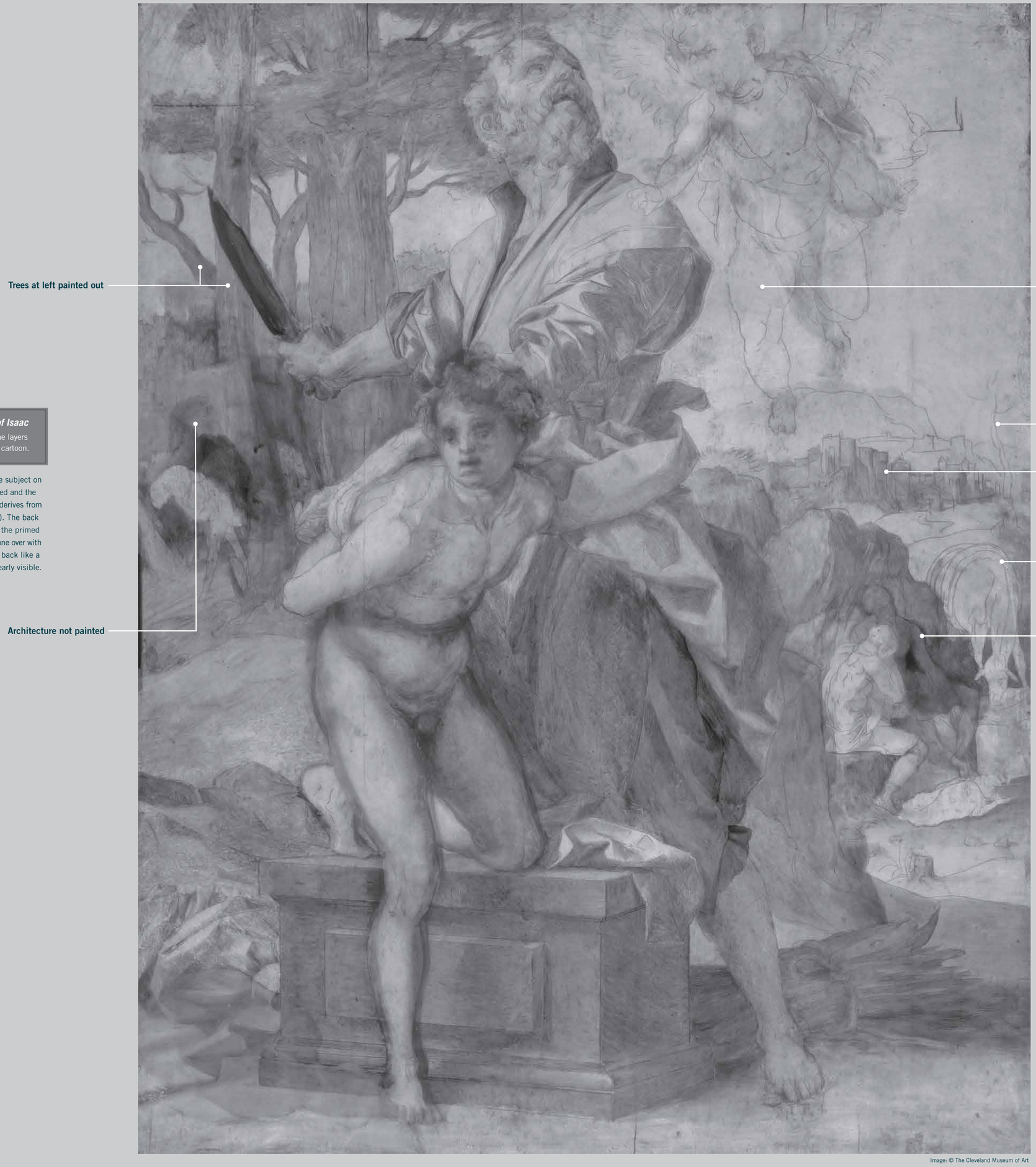
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The Sacrifice of Isaac, about 1528. Oil on panel, 98 x 69 cm (38 5/8 x 27 1/8 in.). Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

DRESDEN VERSION

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The Sacrifice of Isaac, about 1528. Oil on panel, 213 x 159 cm (83 7/8 x 62 5/8 in.). Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden



Infrared reflectogram of *The Sacrifice of Isaac*

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Image: © The Cleveland Museum of Art

Portraits

Although best known for his religious works, Andrea del Sarto was one of the most accomplished portrait artists of the Florentine Renaissance, influencing a generation of successors and many painters through the centuries. The combination of bold compositions and verisimilitude conveyed his sitters as dynamic, living, breathing beings. The success of his portraits is rooted in carefully observed drawn studies; his additional use of such studies for figures in altarpieces blurred the distinction between the genres of portraiture and religious subjects.

Planning on Paper

About 180 drawings by Andrea del Sarto survive, but very few of them are studies of complete compositions, and almost all of those are displayed here. They vary from sketchy ideas thrown down on the sheet to more complete designs, and they show that Andrea made drawings on paper at every stage of the process in planning his numerous panel paintings and frescoes. They also reveal a fertile mind constantly generating compositions to be further developed or rejected. The spark of creation for all of his works started with sketches on paper.

Humanity

Andrea del Sarto's careful observation of life resulted in astonishingly naturalistic portraits and religious works that effectively conveyed his deep piety. These two paintings display different subjects, moods, and methods of working, yet with the same intensely focused sense of real life. On the one hand, the *Portrait of a Young Man* was painted (unusually for Andrea) on canvas and captures the sitter in a dynamic, spontaneous pose, carefully formulated on the two drawn sheets shown alongside. The *Saint John the Baptist*, instead, uses the same powerful observation of life to generate a realistic, yet iconic, rendition of a young saint as a spiritual meditation. X-rays show that it was painted with little preparation over a blacked-out depiction of an apostle.

This material was published in 2015 to coincide with the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *Andrea del Sarto: The Renaissance Workshop in Action*, June 23–September 13, 2015, at the Getty Center.

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