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Sublime Beauty: Raphael's Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn

Through April 10 at the Legion of Honor

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco are pleased to present *Sublime Beauty: Raphael's "Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn."* This focused exhibition features one of Raphael's most beguiling and enigmatic paintings. The masterpiece, presented in the United States for the first time, will be lent by the Galleria Borghese in Rome, where it was first recorded in the collection in 1682.

"Raphael's 'Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn' is a stunning masterpiece of the Italian High Renaissance. When it arrives in San Francisco for the first time, we will greet it with new scholarship as well as a celebration fitting for the blond beauty and her mysterious unicorn," Esther Bell, curator in charge of European paintings at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, said just before the exhibit's opening on January 9. Bell is the organizing curator of the exhibition and the editor of the accompanying catalogue.

"Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn" (ca. 1505-1506) features an unidentified blond-haired sitter and epitomizes the beauty of Raphael's female portraits. The exhibition will explore the possible identity of this subject, as well as the painting's distinct iconography, including the unicorn she holds in her lap. Scholars believe that the painting was commissioned to celebrate a wedding, and the unicorn, a conventional symbol of chastity, may offer clues to her familial lineage.

The exhibition further highlights the stylistic relationships between this masterpiece and Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa." Leonardo's canonical work, painted in Florence in the early years of the 16th century, had a great impact on the younger Raphael, who also prac-



Raphael (1483–1520), *Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn*, ca. 1505–1506. Oil on canvas, transferred from panel, 26 5/8 x 20 15/16 in. (67.7 x 53.2 cm). Galleria Borghese, Rome, inv 371

ticed in the city during this period. Raphael's sophisticated adaptation of Leonardo's innovations in portrait compositions resulted in "Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn," a painting that hints at the "Mona Lisa" with its half-length format, its sitter with hands folded in her lap, and its setting before a distant landscape. Visitors will be able to explore Raphael's painting in detail and get a glimpse into its intriguing history.

"Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn" is coming to the Legion of Honor after being on view at the Cincinnati Art Museum, where Dr. Bell was previously a curator of

European paintings, drawings and sculpture.

About the Artist:

Painter, draftsman and architect Raphael (1483–1520) was one of the most famous artists working in Italy during the period from 1500 to 1520, often identified as the High Renaissance. His paintings are noteworthy for their great beauty and harmony, epitomizing the Renaissance virtues of balance and ideal form. His later production exhibits an interest in expressing movement and emotion through narratives. He is best known for religious subjects, portraits, and historical scenes.