



Renaissance masters

Mitch Brook wanders the halls of the National Gallery of Australia, encountering the masterful artworks of five centuries ago at the gallery's *Renaissance* exhibition.

There's a palpable sense of awe on their faces. The crowd touring the gallery for the first time remark in wonder, and there are a few gasps of disbelief – these works, they're shown here? In Australia? The term 'renaissance' means birth or revival, and that's exactly what affected the arts and sciences during this important historical era. The Renaissance marks the transition of western culture from medieval to modern, with the revival of the value and exploration of classical art, literature, science and learning. Raphael, Botticelli, Titian and Bellini ... Master artists of their era, the period in history that redefined western culture and even day-to-day life.

For *Renaissance: 15th and 16th Century Italian Paintings from the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo* at Canberra's National Gallery of Australia (NGA) the gallery has negotiated with the Accademia Carrara to feature these works for a limited season. This is the first time these masterpieces have left Europe, and works by many of these artists have never been displayed in Australia. The Accademia is undergoing renovation and NGA

director, Dr Ron Radford, worked hard for several years to negotiate the display, held while the Accademia is closed.

"We're delighted to present this unprecedented exhibition of works on panel and canvas by some of the most celebrated artists of the Italian Renaissance right here in Canberra," Radford said at the launch of the exhibition. He gives the speech with a manic grin – it's clear he's enjoying himself.

Walking the galleries of the exhibition, it's easy to see how masterful these artists were. Although many of these pieces were completed almost seven centuries ago, the clarity and definition of the designs seem not to have faded. Some of the art has undergone restoration work, but their original splendour is still evident.

One of the most excellent things about this exhibition is that an understanding of fine art and the Renaissance is not necessary to appreciate the works. Panels of text accompany the art giving information, and visitors can investigate further with guidebooks and a catalogue, which are available from the gallery.

Above: Sandro Botticelli's 'The Story of Virginia the Roman' (1500).

Right: Giovanni Bellini's 'Madonna and Child' (1488).

Right inset: Raphael's 'Saint Sebastian' (1501-1502).

Next page: Maestro dei Cartellini's 'Saint Peter' (1458).



An element of many of these works that will amaze newcomers to Renaissance art is the golden embellishments – not simply on the frames of the works, but used within the paintings. The most celebrated of the works displayed is by Raphael. It depicts Saint Sebastian and was created between 1501 and 1502. Gold has been used to highlight the saint's halo and to embellish his clothing with fine detail.

The *Renaissance* exhibition has been designed so the works trace history through the years, so the changing styles, subjects and treatments are subtle but evident. Much of the art is religious in nature or subject – the Church was the commissioning entity for many works in the Renaissance era – but many also take household scenes, parables and individuals as their subjects.

When you look at these artworks, you're not just looking at paint, gold and pigment on canvas or panel. The works channel history – they're a part of one of the most significant cultural movements in the history of mankind.

The Renaissance exhibition runs through to April 9, 2012. See next page for more information or visit www.nga.gov.au.