

# It wasn't the sex: bloodletting fatal for Raphael, study claims

18 July 2020, by Ella Ide



Renaissance artist Raphael died aged only 37

A feverish Raphael suffering from "a coronavirus-like disease" died after failing to tell his doctors he had been secretly visiting lovers on freezing cold nights, leading them to wrongly prescribe bloodletting, a new study claims.

Popular myth has the Renaissance painter succumb to syphilis in 1520 after wooing one too many ladies, though experts widely agree that he died of an infection.

Laid low by a raging fever, the prolific painter, designer and architect, was tended to by "the best doctors in Rome, sent to him by the pope" who feared losing the invaluable artist, medical historian Michele Augusto Riva told AFP.

But according to Italian painter Giorgio Vasari and his 1550 masterpiece on the lives of painters, Raphael failed to tell the physicians of his "frequent night outings in the cold" to visit lovers.

"It was much, much colder in March in that period, and it's very likely he caught pneumonia," Riva said.

The doctors diagnosed a fever caused by an "excess of humours", or blood, and let his blood—either through incisions or leeches—which fatally weakened him.

The artist, a child prodigy and part of a trinity of Renaissance greats along with Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, died aged only 37.

Raphael was sent off with high honours at a grand funeral at the Vatican, and his remains rest in Rome's Pantheon. A red rose graces his grave all the year round.

## 'His own mistake'

"In that period, doctors were aware of the dangers of bloodletting in the treatment of infectious diseases, but were acting on misinformation," said Riva, who co-authored the study with three fellow researchers from the University of Milano Bicocca.



A red rose graces his grave all year round

"A medical mistake, and his own mistake in not faithfully recounting his history, contributed to Raphael's death," he said.

The researchers had been preparing the short study, which was published this week in the *Internal and Emergency Medicine journal*, before COVID-19 gripped northern Italy in late February.

As practising doctors, they then had to put it on hold when they found themselves on the frontline of the crisis, caring for medical staff who had caught the virus in intensive care units.

"From what we know, Raphael died of a pulmonary illness very similar to the coronavirus we've seen now," he said.

Contemporary accounts of his death reveal the painter's disease "lasted 15 days; Raphael was composed enough to put his affairs in order, confess his sins, and receive the last rites," the study says.

It said it was an acute disease, characterised by high and continuous fever.

"A recent sexually transmitted infection—such as gonorrhoea and syphilis—could not explain the incubation period.

"An acute manifestation of viral hepatitis could not be considered without jaundice and other signs of liver failure. No epidemics of typhus or plague were reported in the city of Rome at that time," it added.

Despite his [premature death](#), Raphael produced a vast oeuvre of seminal work, much of it at the Vatican, whose museums include several rooms filled with his frescoes.

Completed by Raphael's students after his death, they remain some of the Vatican's most popular rooms.

**More information:** Michele Augusto Riva et al. The death of Raphael: a reflection on bloodletting in the Renaissance, *Internal and Emergency Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s11739-020-02435-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11739-020-02435-8)

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