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## An Amateur Art Historian May Have Found a Rare Raphael Print in a Rural Virginia Church

The Baroque print hung unnoticed in a hallway in the small church for decades. But is it the real thing?

**Henri Neuendorf**, March 6, 2018



Raphael's *Madonna di San Sisto* (1513–14). Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

A local art enthusiast may have identified a rare print by Renaissance master Raphael hanging in a small, rural church outside of Richmond, Virginia. The

artwork, which could be a significant and valuable copy of a famous painting by the Italian artist, apparently went unnoticed by church staff for decades.

In November 2015, Italian expat Federico Colagrande, a Renaissance art fan, attended a funeral at Gilboa Church, a quaint brick building in Louisa County that dates back to 1849. After mourners left, Colagrande and his girlfriend Annette Bronson stayed behind to explore the church, a pastime the couple called “extreme churching” in a report by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

Wandering through the place of worship, Colagrande recognized what appeared to be a print of Raphael’s *Madonna di San Sisto* (*The Sistine Madonna*), a 16th-century painting of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus, commissioned by Pope Julius II in 1512 as an altarpiece for the church of San Sisto in Piacenza, Italy. The artwork is famous for the iconic pair of cherubs the artist included at the bottom of the work. “My eyes were captured by this print,” Colagrande told the newspaper.

In 1754, the original painting was sold to Augustus III, Elector of Saxony, who brought it to Dresden where it was copied by the German master printer Friedrich Müller—the handful of so-called “Müller Madonnas” that remain today are incredibly rare and valuable. The Metropolitan Museum in New York has one in their collection, so does the MFA in Boston, and the British Museum in London. Colagrande thinks he may have stumbled on another edition in Gilboa Church.

Since that day, he’s made it his mission to investigate the provenance of the piece and has spent several years researching the artwork’s origin, compiling a convincing list of evidence supporting the attribution. He even traveled to Piacenza, Italy, and met with church leaders at San Sisto, where the original painting by Raphael once adorned the altar.

Upon closer inspection, the amateur art historian discovered the coat of arms for the King of Saxony, and a dedication in Latin and Italian, as well as the name of Müller. The print also bears a stamp from notable 18th- and 19th-century art dealers Goupil’s, including the gallery’s address on Fifth Avenue in New York.

Despite the documentary evidence, the exact provenance—and a definitive attribution—remains unclear. Nobody at the Gilboa Church seems to know anything about the print or how it ended up in rural Virginia. “It’s always been in the hallway” Joe Leslie, one of the church elders, told the *Times-Dispatch*. “We were all used to it [and] had never thought about it.” That all changed after Federico Colagrande’s visit.