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CATHEDRAL'S FAMED PAINTING RECEIVES LOVING CARE At the Skilled Hands of John B Matthew

By Eleanor Doyle, printed in the July 23, 1970 issue of the *Catholic Herald*



Photo by John E Boll 2012

The Cathedral's Sistine Madonna Painting

How many people realize one of the most unique works of art in the world has been hanging on the wall of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament for 80 some years? It is one of only two such copies of Rafael's famous *Sistine Madonna*, and according to John B Matthew, whose task it has been in recent months to restore the painting, it is a real "treasure", one that too few people know about.

"To my knowledge," Matthew explains, and since he is an expert his words carry importance, "this copy and its twin, hanging at Stanford University, marks the only time in the history of the art world that permission was granted to allow copies to be made in the same size as the original."

In this case it is an 8 by 10 foot reproduction, and again, according to Matthew, "an excellent work, done by Verbino, a fine painter, with the permission of the Emperor of Austria who owned the original when the Cathedral's copy was commissioned in the late 1800s."

This came about when Mrs E.B. Crocker, who was traveling to Austria to purchase stained glass windows for Bishop Patrick Manogue's Cathedral, was accompanied by her friend, Mrs Leland Stanford. The latter begged permission of the Emperor to have two copies made, one for the cathedral and one for the university, and he assigned the task to Verbino.

The 80 square foot painting, which has hung ever since on the front north wall of the Cathedral, has suffered, like all works in oil, from candle smoke, structural leaks and fly specks. "The latter," Matthew interestingly explains, "is probably the single most destructive element to strike a work of art. Infinitesimal though they are, the acid penetrates right through to the canvas and when they are multiplied, they can really take a devastating toll. To fill them in with carefully matched paint is a time consuming process."

Matthew, who retired as art department chairman at City College and still a member of the board of the California Museum Association of Crocker Art Gallery, hoped to devote his late years to painting. But he is possessed with a rare talent for restoration work and now finds little time for painting as he is kept in constant demand to handle the latter commissions.

When he first started the arduous task of cleaning the portrait, 80 square feet is quite an undertaking. As the decades of grime began to disappear, he was amazed to find a series of angel faces delicately worked into the background of the huge art work. Chances are, in the dimly lighted Cathedral, few visitors were ever aware they were there.

Once his cleaning process ended, he had to hand work linseed oil back into the pigments and as these began to take hold, the original color came alive once again. Then next he had to touch up areas damaged by water stains with a skillfully applied brush, re-matching pigments, which calls for both extensive knowledge and a delicate touch.

Now he is in the process of covering the entire portrait with thin coats of lacquer, which in his words, "will conserve this work of art for at least 50 years." John Matthew likes to think of him-



Catholic Herald Photo

John B Matthew Restores the Sistine Madonna Painting For the Cathedral in 1970

self as a “conservator rather than a restorer”. But both terms equally connote years and years of more enjoyment in the eyes of the beholder.

How valuable is the Cathedral’s copy? Matthew estimates that since it is an excellent copy, done by a very fine painter, with proper promotion to the art world, it very likely could bring \$200,000 in the present bullish art market!

The Sistine Madonna, also known as the Madonna de San Sista, was painted by Rafael in Piacenza, Northern Italy, in the year 1515 for the Church of St Sixtus. This was five years before Rafael’s death when he was at the height of his genius. Later it passed into the hands of the Austrian Emperor and today, the original hangs in Dresden, East Germany.

The famed German art scholar, Wilhelm Lubke, once said that the “Sistine Madonna is and will continue to be the apex of all religious art.”

Matthew, who soon will commence restoration work on other art works for the cathedral, including a copy of Ruben's *The Descent from the Cross*, believes every art student should make a pilgrimage to the Cathedral to view first-hand the Rafael treasure which soon will hang there again.

CATHEDRAL RESTORER WINS ROME ART HONORS

Catholic Herald, February 18, 1971

John B Matthew, noted local artist currently engaged in restoring the art work for the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, has been awarded an honorary membership and silver medal from the Tommasco Campanella International Academy of Arts and Sciences in Rome.

The membership with the Academy offers Matthew the "right to participate in all cultural and artistic activities" which includes "the personal and collective exhibitions in Il Colosseo Art Gallery" plus the opportunity to participate in the annual exhibitions. His certificate of membership acknowledges his "artistic and cultural activities."

Matthew just now is completing restoration work on the 14 Stations of the Cross which will be rehung in the renovated Cathedral and which were badly damaged from the ravages of time. Last summer, the former head of the art department at Sacramento City College, who recently retired as a director of the E.B. Crocker Art Gallery, completed restoration work on the actual size reproduction of Rafael's Sistine Madonna which was a gift from Mrs Leland Stanford when the Cathedral was constructed.

He also is working on three oil paintings, all reproductions of the originals, which will be rehung in the edifice. These are The Archangel Michael Crushing Satan, a gift of David Lubin copied from the original in the Church of the Capuchins in Rome; and two brought from Virginia City by Bishop Patrick Manogue, Sacramento's founding leader. They are The Holy Family and The Death of a Martyr Bishop.

Matthew, whose art works and active involvement in the art world have earned him listings in *Who's Who in America* and *Who's Who in the West*, is a graduate of the University of California and the Art Institute of Chicago.

A lifelong member of the Methodist Church, his late father, W.S. Matthew, who was a dean and acting president of the University of Southern California, was a Methodist minister.

The Cathedral commissions are Matthew's third restoration stint for Catholic Church art. Some years ago he restored the 14 Stations for St Ignatius Church in San Francisco and restored the murals and Stations of the Cross in the historic Church of St Anne in Colombia State Park in the Mother Lode area.