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THE SISTINE MADONNA.

By ISABEL MACDONALD.

Recently, during a rather desultory conversation with an artist on some of the old works of art, we casually made the remark that "a present of a picture of the Sistine Madonna had been made to the nurses." Immediately she replied in a very arresting way, "But what a wonderful gift to make to nurses." Her impressive way of saying it set us thinking about what is regarded by most people as the world's masterpiece in the art of painting and is held by many to find its equal, in the whole world of art, only in Angelo's "Pieta" in Rome. Of the life of that prince of painters, the creator of this sublime picture the Sistine Madonna, practically nothing is known with any certainty except a very few details. He appears, this Raphael, to have been a strangely harmonious character. There, in Roman life, between the fiery willed Angelo and the brilliant, versatile da Vinci, he came and went, like some ray from the sun itself, about the ancient city. There is little wonder that the man is overshadowed by his work, but has he not spread the garment of his personality over the world in the beauty he has left behind him, the beauty of art at its very highest? His greatest pictures are, of course, the Sistine Madonna and the Transfiguration; the first he painted when he was thirty, and the latter was not completed when he died. The Sistine Madonna was painted originally for the Sistine Chapel, and there

it remained until it was removed to Dresden in the eighteenth century.

In this Madonna all the elaboration which had crept into the painters' work of that time, when they portrayed the Mother of God, is completely dropped. Here is grandeur true enough—the grandeur of a sublime

simplicity. The mother stands as the great type of womanhood with wondrous, unfathomable eyes gazing out upon the universe. Equally impressive are the eyes of the child, so that one has the feeling that Raphael must have painted the faces round these eyes to make them the main motif in the whole composition. It may have been so, for neither as regards colour nor anything else have artists been able to discover his methods of working. Surrounding the figures of the mother and child the clouds appear as almost entirely composed of tiny angel faces, although, in a reproduction, these are invisible. The Holy Child appears as though he had just dropped into the arms of the mother from this garland, this arch of little children. Perhaps Raphael may have intended to convey the conception that here is no ordinary child but—the Cosmic Child. The Madonna is placed right in the



MADONNA DI SAN SISTO. (RAPHAEL.)

Royal Gallery, Dresden.

middle of the picture, a position avoided as a rule by artists for the principal figure. But Raphael was a great master of balance and harmony in painting. Painted by another, this figure might appear to be falling or it might have stood like a target for the eye. But every detail of the grouping of the figures, particularly

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