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Layout and design in the exhibition

Brescia. The Renaissance in Northern Italy

Moretto – Savoldo – Moroni. Raphael – Titian – Lotto

Joanna Kilian – curator

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While the difference between the theatre and the museum is an obvious one, it does not mean that theatrical thinking has no place in exhibition work. Viewers can be led along in a way that seems natural to them by creating a space conducive to that. Walls can be pulled in or pushed back, obstacles (to be circumvented) can be placed and light can be used with varying intensity. It is certainly possible to create a desired mood by shaping the environment around us and it may even be possible to transcend into the dimension of the *sacrum*. Works of art in a museum collection are a bit like mounted butterflies – beautiful but lifeless. They exist outside of the context they had been created for, originally envisioned not for museum halls but for palaces, churches, domestic chapels and rural estates, or possibly reserved for the eyes of husbands and wives in private bedroom alcoves. Modern exhibition design should not attempt to take us back in time but it should, through allusion and metaphor, reflect the early context in which the works were to function.

In our initial talks on the concept for the exhibition's design, inspiration arose out of the logic of beautiful but simple forms based on the Renaissance's notions of harmony and geometric proportions. After all, the aesthetic principles of the Italian Renaissance still possess tremendous value to the modern architect, set designer or even art historian. We decided to base the exhibition's concept—its main design premise—on the fundamental artistic canons of the 15th and 16th centuries. Firstly, we incorporated the rule of the golden ration (Latin *sectio aureo*), during the Renaissance also known as divine proportion. At the heart of this poetic term is an ancient rule for the division of a line into two, done in such a way so that the ratio of the length of the longer section to the shorter section is equal to the ratio of the full line to the longer section. The observance of motifs and rules typical of the Renaissance—the golden ratio, gentle arcades, columns, decorative bossage on building facades reminiscent of cut precious stones—allowed us to preserve uniformity and artistic discipline within the whole. Yet, we were driven by a sense of restraint and by an ambition to create a new, thoroughly modern interpretation of Quatro- and Cinquecento art.

Thus, we offer visitors allusions to forms rather than the forms themselves. A colonnade begins but never ends, arcades appear as sketches on a wall in chalk,

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decorative bossage crumbles and disappears, the solid marble of a column is supplanted by clear imitation crystal...

From the beginning, our vision for the exhibition necessitated a precise path to be followed by viewers. Opening the show is a real gem – a painting by Raphael, an artist active in central Italy and one of the three paragons of the Italian Renaissance. Like Leonardo and Michelangelo, Raphael was already in his lifetime heralded as a genius and anointed with the title of “divine painter”. His harmonious output was widely accepted as a benchmark of painting perfection and served as a point of reference for subsequent generations of Italian artists. The exhibition lets us compare the work of Northern Italian painters with Raphael's splendid *Christ Blessing*.

The presentation culminates in a room devoted to paintings from Brescia. Situated half-way between Venice and Milan, the city developed its unique artistic identity through a creative adaptation of impulses coming from both of those cultural powerhouses, already boasting its own school of outstanding painters by the 15th century.

The following two rooms are devoted to portraiture. Masters from Brescia and Bergamo were among the most insightful portraitists in all of European painting. They captured the sitter's physical appearance with staggering technical mastery and sophisticated elegance yet also with sombre restraint that called for a minimum of attributes and great attention to the facial expression. Accordingly, in designing the exhibition, we resolved to dispense with as much of the unnecessary as possible.

Alongside the portraits, visitors will find geometric structures composed of repeating modules which contain example of the material and spiritual heritage of Northern Italy: medals, old books, furniture, maiolica, bronzes, glassware and some exquisite pieces of armour. These were objects of luxury and pleasure, symbols of the high social standing of their owners. Also on display are ancient sculptures and inscriptions, which, having been unearthed in early archaeological digs, became a means for Northern Italian cities of the Renaissance to assert their historical identity.

Among our goals was to maintain visual and conceptual discipline. The exhibition's design continuity hinges on the use of similar yet unique architectural motifs in all of the rooms. Yet, there is still room for the element of surprise, for the notion of *concetto* so greatly valued in the Renaissance and beyond, which accounted for the individuality of each great work of art.

Bidding visitors farewell is Dosso Dossi's *Jupiter Painting Butterflies, Mercury and Virtue* – one of the most fascinating and enigmatic works in the history of painting. This truly original and unprecedented portrayal of the ancient god as a painter of butterflies, a subject entirely “meaningless” in the tradition of sublime history painting, constitutes a defence of the artist's profession and of the artistic freedom which painters enjoyed to the same extent as poets...