



Christian Classicism and Raphael's *School of Athens*

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All Roads Lead to Rome

The classical culture and civilization of antiquity constituted one of the primary driving forces of the Italian Renaissance, as humanists of the period strived for the ideals and principles which classical civilization valued. Seeking to reconcile and connect the classical learning and philosophy of Greece and Rome with Christian thought, the humanist movement promoted Christian classicism and stressed the importance of understanding the wisdom of old in light of Christ's revealed truth. For them, the learning of antiquity should ultimately direct one towards God by helping him or her to grow in knowledge and the pursuit of truth. This harmonization of classical Greek thought with Christian thought manifests itself throughout the art of the Renaissance, as the artist, like the humanist, promoted classical ideals in light of Christianity. Accordingly, the art of the Renaissance reflects Christian classicism and physically expresses the intellectual ideas underlying the Renaissance movement. Raphael's *School of Athens* stands as an embodiment of this idea, as it very clearly emphasizes Greek learning but subtly directs the viewer towards ultimately understanding the work in light of Christian wisdom.

Before exploring and analyzing their manifestation in Raphael's *School of Athens*, it is important to understand humanism and some of the intellectual sources and ideas behind the Renaissance movement. Although classicism was not the only factor in the Renaissance movement, it played an essential role in the transformation which the movement brought about, as the Renaissance consisted greatly in a shared set of ideological principles and philosophic concerns which were embodied by artists and humanists.<sup>1</sup> In the words of the important scholar of the Italian Renaissance Jacob Burckhardt, the humanists were those individuals who "acted as mediators between their own age and a venerated antiquity, and made the latter a chief element

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<sup>1</sup> Baron, Hans. *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*. Princeton University Press, 1993. Pg. 4

in the culture of the former.”<sup>2</sup> Fundamental to the idea of humanism is thus an emphasis on classical learning and the desire to connect antiquity to present culture. Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, were among the first and most important of such figures, and Petrarch in particular is considered the father of humanism. Through these early humanists and later figures like them, “A belief in the identity of the human spirit under all previous manifestations, and in its uninterrupted continuity, was generated.”<sup>3</sup> Connecting themselves to antiquity under this idea of antiquity, “men found that in classical as well as biblical antiquity existed an ideal of human life, both moral and intellectual, by which they might profit in the present.”<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, striving to achieve this ideal, the humanists “looked to that remote past as a guide to their own conduct in the present.”<sup>5</sup> Whereas the Middle Ages largely viewed the Greek and Latin classics as “antagonistic to the principles of Christian Ethics,” the Renaissance rather viewed them as instrumentally good in enhancing the morality of man.<sup>6</sup> Tying together classical learning and Christian thought was thus a primary focus of the humanist movement, and humanism can thus be seen as Christian classicism which is ultimately directed at understanding antiquity in light of Christianity. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the time of Raphael, classicism was especially prominent, as “The time had come for the emergence of a brand of classicism characterized by a single-minded, even militant dedication to antiquity such as had been unknown to earlier centuries.”<sup>7</sup> (Baron 4). The desire for a “restored Roman imperial culture” expressed itself linguistically in the poetry and literature of the time, architecturally through monuments by architects such as

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<sup>2</sup> Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Translated by S. G. C. Middlemore, Penguin Books, 2004. Pg. 135

<sup>3</sup> Symonds, John Addington, and Alfred Pearson. *A Short History of the Renaissance in Italy*. Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966. Pg. 6

<sup>4</sup> Symonds, *A Short History of the Renaissance in Italy*. Pg. 6

<sup>5</sup> Rowland, Ingrid D. *The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth-Century Rome*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pg. 11

<sup>6</sup> Symonds, *A Short History of the Renaissance in Italy*. Pg. 121

<sup>7</sup> Baron, Hans. *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*. Princeton University Press, 1993. Pg. 4

Bramante, and artistically through men such as Michelangelo and Raphael.<sup>8</sup> As Symonds eloquently says, “It has been granted only to two nations, the Greeks and the Italians, and to the latter only at the time of the Renaissance, to invest every place and variety of intellectual energy with the form of art.”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, just as the Greeks expressed their intellectual ideas through their beautiful classical art, so too did the Italians during the Renaissance, which further reflects the connection between the two cultures. There is thus a strong connection between humanism and art in the Renaissance, as art becomes a visual manifestation of the philosophic ideas underlying the movement and the artist a creative force expressing the values of his time.

Reflecting the very complex and powerful ways in which an artist is able to communicate philosophic ideas, Raphael’s *School of Athens* stands as an embodiment of Christian Classicism. Painted by Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, or Raphael as he is commonly known, the *School of Athens* is a Renaissance fresco within the Stanza of the Segnatura, one of the Raphael rooms in the Vatican Palace. Commissioned by Pope Julius II to decorate his library and completed between 1509 and 1511, the fresco portrays the classical philosophers and thinkers of the pre-Christian world, actively engaging in discussion and other activities of learning.<sup>10</sup> The importance and influence of the *School of Athens* in art is monumental, and the work stands as one of the masterpieces of the entire Italian Renaissance.

Raphael’s commission by Pope Julius II to complete some frescoes was part of the Julius’ program of *Renovatio Urbis*, a complete renewal of the greatness and grandeur of Rome as the center of Christian and papal power.<sup>11</sup> During the reign of Pope Julius, the Stanza della Segnatura functioned as his personal library in the Vatican Palace, and Raphael was accordingly

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<sup>8</sup> Stinger, Charles L. *The Renaissance in Rome*. Indiana University Press, 1998. Pg. 289

<sup>9</sup> Symonds, *A Short History of the Renaissance in Italy*. Pg. 197

<sup>10</sup> Talvacchia, Bette. *Raphael*. London: Phaidon, 2007. Pg. 90

<sup>11</sup> Talvacchia, *Raphael*. Pg. 80

asked to decorate the room in light of this function.<sup>12</sup> In Renaissance libraries, the books were categorized into sections of law, theology, poetry, and philosophy, and it is such a division which informs Raphael's fresco decoration of the room.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the original intended viewers of the room and its frescoes, due to its being a private library, would have been very intellectual and highly educated men who were familiar with the great learning referenced throughout the space and its art.

Because the *School of Athens* was planned in conjunction with other works of art in the room under the direction of Julius, it is necessary to consider the physical setting of the painting and how different aspects of the entire Stanza della Segnatura inform or enhance the meaning of the fresco. The entire Stanza of the Segnatura focuses on the idea of wisdom and the frescoes on each of the walls are meant to reflect different aspects of wisdom. On the ceiling of the room there are four medallions reflecting knowledge that are connected to an octagonal oculus in which angels are seen in the sky.<sup>14</sup> Although God is not directly shown as in other oculi such as that in the Chigi Chapel, the oculus reveals a heavenly sky with celestial beings and thus can be said to open up towards Him. At the top and center of the room, the oculus thus demonstrates how all else is centered around and directed towards Him and His wisdom. Accordingly, being centered around the oculus and the opening to God, the surrounding artwork representing the branches of knowledge signifies their participation in the more complete wisdom of God. The placement of the *School of Athens* beneath this oculus is also thus important for understanding the work fully. Moreover, the painting was intended to stand in confrontation with the *Disputa*,

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<sup>12</sup> Hersey, George L. *High Renaissance Art in St. Peters and the Vatican: An Interpretative Guide*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Pg. 130

<sup>13</sup> Hersey, *High Renaissance Art in St. Peters and the Vatican: An Interpretative Guide*. Pg. 130

<sup>14</sup> Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art; Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1980. Pg. 514

which, standing opposite the work, portrays a group of Christian theologians also engaged in discussion.<sup>15</sup> The contextual positioning of the *School of Athens* is thus very important to the work and informs many aspects of its meaning.



Ceiling of the Stanza Della Segnatura



Raphael's *Disputa*

Furthermore, in analyzing the *School of Athens*, it is important to consider the relationship between patron and artist and how ultimately the painting is a manifestation of both

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<sup>15</sup> Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art; Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*. Pg. 515

Julius' intellectual idea for the painting and the way in which Raphael expresses the idea visually. For, "Although the figural theme of the Stanza della Segnatura, in its general outline, could be enunciated by Julius II, it was the artist's task to articulate it within the frame of a discourse through an imagery that was no less logical than the conceptual discourse of philosophy."<sup>16</sup> There is thus a parallel between the philosophic discourse between the subject matter and the imagery used to portray the subjects. Accordingly, although Raphael himself was not a learned or cultured man, in painting the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura it was necessary for him to become closely acquainted with both the theological culture and secular Humanistic culture.<sup>17</sup> Hence, Raphael himself "had to become a man of culture, capable of understanding the subtleties to which he had to give form."<sup>18</sup> According to Becherucci, Raphael did, however, have available to him the "figural culture" which he experienced in Florence as a pupil of Leonardo da Vinci and which allowed him to "endow with real historicity the abstract enunciations of intellectual speculation."<sup>19</sup> Influenced by this artistic culture, Raphael could clearly express intellectual ideas through art and thus "proved capable of brilliantly translating the pontiff's conception of Christian power and papal grandeur into art that was totally new in its approach and advanced in its style."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Becherucci, Luisa. "Raphael and Painting." *The Complete Work of Raphael*. New York: Harrison House, 1969. Pg. 91

<sup>17</sup> Becherucci, "Raphael and Painting." *The Complete Work of Raphael*. Pg. 91

<sup>18</sup> Becherucci, "Raphael and Painting." *The Complete Work of Raphael*. Pg. 91

<sup>19</sup> Becherucci, "Raphael and Painting." *The Complete Work of Raphael*. Pg. 91

<sup>20</sup> Talvacchia, *Raphael*. Pg. 86



Shown in the *School of Athens* is a cycle of famous philosophers and other intellectual figures from antiquity, viewed in perspective engaging in discussion, learning, and thought. Almost all of them important Greek thinkers, the men are “removed from their own epochs and arranged as colleagues in a timeless academy.”<sup>21</sup> In the center of the scene are Plato and Aristotle holding books, their respective primary works, the *Timaeus* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Traditionally, Plato and Aristotle are considered to be the two foundational philosophers of all Western thought, and Raphael represents that idea visually very clearly here. The interaction between these two philosophers forms the focal point of the work of art, as all else is centered around them and “From this double fountainhead, metaphysics and natural philosophy, flow the philosophic streams that mingle in this hall.”<sup>22</sup> Carefully interpreting their interaction is thus fundamentally important to understanding the larger meaning of the work. Whereas

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<sup>21</sup> Hersey, *High Renaissance Art in St. Peters and the Vatican: An Interpretative Guide*. Pg. 130

<sup>22</sup> Hersey, *High Renaissance Art in St. Peters and the Vatican: An Interpretative Guide*. Pg. 132

Aristotle is motioning down towards the earth, Plato is pointing up towards the sky. Aristotle was very concerned with the natural world and his philosophy was based greatly on empirical science.<sup>23</sup> Gesturing horizontally, he thus “describes the earth and the wide dominion of moral teaching.”<sup>24</sup> Plato, on the other hand, was very focused on looking up towards the heavens, as a fundamental principle of his philosophy was the theory of the forms, or ideas of physical things which give meaning to the world.<sup>25</sup> The philosopher, according to Plato, ascends intellectually from knowledge of worldly things to the knowledge of the forms, an idea clearly reflected by his pointing upwards. Plato’s motioning upward, moreover, bears even greater meaning with the understanding of the placement of the oculus and its relationship to the *School of Athens*, for it can be said that Plato is actually pointing up towards Heaven and God. According to some traditional Christian philosophy and Neoplatonic belief, it was thought that Plato was in line with much of the truth and wisdom of Christianity and thus an important and hugely beneficial philosophic figure for Christianity. The important humanist Lorenzo, for example, said that “without Plato it would be hard to be a good Christian or a good citizen.”<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, although he was missing the complete Christian understanding achieved through Christ, Plato was nevertheless ultimately aiming at God, and his philosophy, therefore, is conducive towards Christian truth and wisdom, an idea which is reflected in the fresco. However, the symbolic difference between the philosophers does not necessitate that Plato and Aristotle are expressly disagreeing with one another. While Aristotle is emphasizing the wisdom of the world, Plato is rather directing him to look up and understand that this wisdom ultimately participates in and is directed towards God and what is above.

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<sup>23</sup> Elliott, Sara. *Italian Renaissance Painting*. London: Phaidon Press, 1998. Pg. 96

<sup>24</sup> Hersey, *High Renaissance Art in St. Peters and the Vatican: An Interpretative Guide*. Pg. 130

<sup>25</sup> Elliott, *Italian Renaissance Painting*. Pg. 96

<sup>26</sup> Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Pg. 146

Because “the philosophers of the classical tradition and the Apostles and prophets partake of the same eternal wisdom,” the discussion of the philosophers can ultimately be understood as directed towards God.<sup>27</sup> Hence, led by Plato and Aristotle, “the champions of *Prisca theologia*, whose insights into the nature of God allowed Christianity its quick contest,” all of these great thinkers of antiquity are assembled “to discuss the nature of God and humanity.”<sup>28</sup> The notion that these philosophers are progressing towards Christianity and its truth is further expressed by Becherucci, who says that, “The solemn progress of the two supreme philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, through the whole personified dialectic of ancient philosophy ideally had to finish at the foot of the altar on which the small Host is elevated in its bare essentiality.”<sup>29</sup> It must be recalled that the *School of Athens* was intended to be understood in light of the *Disputa* and Raphael’s entire project of the Stanza della Segnatura. Accordingly, Raphael, “recreating poetically the whole significance of Rome, ancient and Christian, as it appeared to him in its own structures, knew how to give a powerful organic character to his theme, an entire synthesis of the course of centuries, including that in which he was living.”<sup>30</sup> Hence, the *School of Athens* and the classical philosophy which it embodies do not stand isolated but must be understood in reference to Christianity and its significance to Rome, which Raphael synthesizes in the work.

Very fittingly, the setting for the discussion of the philosophers is a large, magnificent classicized architectural structure dominated by three arches and filled with beautiful coffered vaults, bronze and marble friezes, giant statues of gods, and ornate designs which decorate the arch in the front of the scene. Raphael’s architectural creation is one of the most stunning aspects of the work, and provides a highly classical setting for the classical characters which it

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<sup>27</sup> Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome*. Pg. 201

<sup>28</sup> Rowland, *The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth-Century Rome*. Pg. 166

<sup>29</sup> Becherucci, Luisa. “Raphael and Painting.” *The Complete Work of Raphael*. New York: Harrison House, 1969. Pg. 99

<sup>30</sup> Becherucci, “Raphael and Painting.” *The Complete Work of Raphael*. Pg. 99

contains. The coffered vaults of the structure seem to be derived from the Basilica of Maxentius, which at this time was identified as the Temple of Peace, the ancient Roman structure housing the library of the emperor Vespasian.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, it makes sense that Raphael would model the architecture in the library of the pope after such a structure.<sup>32</sup> Demonstrating symbolically a connection between classical antiquity and Christianity and their synthesis in this work of art and the room as a whole, the structure, which closely resembles the architectural of the classical triumphal arch, “serves as an architectural image of the “triumph” of human reasoning, mirroring the triumphal theme of Christ as Logos in the facing *Disputà*.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in its “extended symbolism,” the structure stands as a “Temple of Philosophy,” “which is united in truth to the spiritual temple of the Roman Church shown on the opposite wall.”<sup>34</sup> Again, the *School of Athens* must be understood in relation to the *Disputà*, revealing that the architectural settings of the two works are symbolically connected, joining the two scenes together under one unified truth in which both the philosophers and theologians participate.

Furthermore, the central open space of the setting invites the viewer, who is in the library a seeker of knowledge, into the scene of learning.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, there is an implied continuity between the space of the viewer and the space of the painting “imaginatively linking the Golden Age of classical civilization to the time of Julius II.”<sup>36</sup> In the Golden Age of antiquity, Apollo and Minerva were the gods associated with wisdom, and Raphael accordingly places giant statues of these two deities in niches on either side of the monumental structure.<sup>37</sup> A further interesting aspect of the structure is how it appears to be open to the sky and clouds, mirroring the oculus on

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<sup>31</sup> Talvacchia, *Raphael*. Pg. 90

<sup>32</sup> Talvacchia, *Raphael*. Pg. 90

<sup>33</sup> Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome*. Pg. 201

<sup>34</sup> Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome*. Pg. 201

<sup>35</sup> Talvacchia, *Raphael*. Pg. 90

<sup>36</sup> Talvacchia, *Raphael*. Pg. 90

<sup>37</sup> Talvacchia, *Raphael*. Pg. 86

the ceiling of the Stanza della Segnatura. These two features thus seem to be connected, with the open architectural structure reinforcing visually the idea of how philosophy and the search after ultimately knowledge opens and moves upward towards God. Becherucci espouses a similar view when she says that Raphael's ideal basilica is not bounded by a cupola but rather by "the immense exedra that became the vault of heaven itself, open to infinity."<sup>38</sup> The expression of such infinity further allows the viewer to participate in the timelessness of the learning of antiquity, for in such a room, "the real person, the viewer, could linger, his gaze contemplating that immense history that was continuing in him."<sup>39</sup>

Renaissance Humanism focused greatly on returning to and reconciling ancient Greek thought with Christianity and its revealed truth. Raphael expresses this focus very clearly in the *School of Athens*, as he illustrates a powerful connection between the philosophers and thinkers of ancient Greece and the Christian wisdom of God. As Marini says, "The great achievement of Raphael was his consummate fusion of Renaissance Humanism with the genuine spirit of classical culture."<sup>40</sup> Given that the commissioning of the painting was part of Pope Julius II's program of *Renovatio Urbis* to renew the city of Rome as a Christian capital reflecting the splendor and grandeur of antiquity, such a fusion makes sense. Through the *School of Athens* Raphael expresses genuine classicism but also the larger connection that classical learning has to Christianity. If God is the source and end of all wisdom, then the knowledge of the philosophers participates in Christian wisdom and moves towards God, even if it falls short of grasping the complete truth achieved only through the revelation of Christ. The fresco thus reflects not only the human search after wisdom and natural truth, but how this search itself, philosophy, is

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<sup>38</sup> Becherucci, "Raphael and Painting." *The Complete Work of Raphael*. Pg. 99

<sup>39</sup> Becherucci, "Raphael and Painting." *The Complete Work of Raphael*. Pg. 99

<sup>40</sup> Marini, "The Vatican Frescoes: a microcosm of the history of art." *The Vatican and Its Treasures: A Pictorial History and Guide*. Pg. 128

ultimately directed towards and fulfilled through God and His eternal and divine wisdom. Furthermore, because it engages the viewer so heavily with its iconography and spatial expression, the painting invites the viewer himself to pursue philosophy and participate in such learning. While the meaning and mysteries of the *School of Athens* are debated still today, the work stands indubitably as a masterpiece of Italian Renaissance art and a profound expression of the grandeur of antiquity.

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