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SCHOOL OF ATHENS embodies Raphael's profound vision:
the pursuit of knowledge requires a conversation
among friends that unites the disciplines across
centuries and human cultures.

Raphael (1486-1520), SCHOOL OF ATHENS (1509-1512). Fresco, 19' x 27'. Stanza della Segnatura, Stanze di Raffaello, Vatican Palace, Vatican State. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Pursuing Knowledge

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

In school hallways and classrooms around the world today, reproductions of Raphael's *School of Athens* are displayed to encourage the pursuit of knowledge. This famous Italian Renaissance painting represents philosophy, one of the four main branches of knowledge, by depicting the most well-known intellectuals of the ancient world gathered around the central figures of Plato and Aristotle.

Pope Julius II della Rovere summoned the young architect and painter Raphael, who was known as the great assimilator, to decorate the Pope's private apartments. The *School of Athens* fresco is in a room that served as a library in the sixteenth century (it does not have a fireplace as is usually found in salons and bedrooms of that period). Called the *Stanza della Segnatura* (Room of the Signature) because for a period it was where papal documents were signed, it now is part of the Vatican Museum.¹

The paintings in the room were designed to be a teaching tool about the nature of human knowledge. On the vaulted ceiling, four *tondi* (round paintings) personify the central disciplines of Theology, Poetry, Philosophy, and Jurisprudence, in correspondence with the rectangular frescoes on the walls below. The fresco that exemplifies theology, the *Disputà* (Disputation), probably was the first to be painted. Here Raphael uses a typical Renaissance composition with three clear horizontal divisions. The upper area is an illusionistic vault that includes God the Father. The middle area depicts Christ, who is enthroned with the Virgin and St. John by his side, and seated prophets and martyrs arranged on a group of clouds. The lower area represents the Church, with the Eucharist present on an altar. Around the altar, the Church Fathers discuss the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In *Parnassus*, the fresco on the adjacent wall that depicts poetry and probably was painted next, we see a great trans-historical gathering of poets, nine from antiquity and nine from contemporary times, on the hill made famous by Apollo whose music enraptured the Muses. The fourth fresco, corresponding to jurisprudence, is painted around a window. Above the window the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Temperance, and Fortitude are depicted; on either side of the window are images of Pope Gregory IX (c. 1145-1241) and Justinian I (483-565), Emperor of Byzantium, delivering decrees. Raphael positioned *School of Athens* directly across the room from *Disputà* so that

the two groups, Church theologians and ancient philosophers, might engage one another in intellectual discussion.

The balanced, symmetrical composition in *School of Athens* has become known as the ideal of formal and spatial harmony. Plato and Aristotle are framed by an arch that extends into a coffered barrel vault—a perfectly perspected Roman Doric structure. *Grisaille* statues of Apollo and Minerva, the ancient gods of the arts and wisdom, appear to the left and right of the immense architecture.

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Looking closer at the central figures (p. 48), we see Plato (427-347 BC) is holding a copy of his *Timaeus*, which describes the origin and nature of the universe, and pointing upward to indicate that his insights come from the realm of un-changing Ideas.² His student Aristotle (384-322 BC) holds in his left hand the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he presents human nature as the basis for morality; his other hand, in contrast to Plato's, is lowered toward the earth to symbolize learning from experience. The isolated figure reclining on the steps in the foreground may be the cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (412-323 BC) or Socrates (c. 469-399 BC).³

Center Detail. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY.
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In the group of figures on the right side of the composition (p. 49), the second-century Greek astronomer Ptolemy holds a celestial globe. Just in front of him the geometer Euclid (fourth century BC) bends over to draw a circle with a compass for his pupils. The face of Euclid is a portrait of the High Renaissance architect Bramante (1444-1514), who was engaged by Pope Julius II to design the Basilica of St. Peter. Raphael painted his self-portrait in the personage in the black beret on the far right in the lowest level; the twenty-five-year-old artist looks out at his audience.

Raphael made numerous preparatory drawings for *School of Athens* to work out the spatial relationships among the figures and develop the individuality of their gestures. His goal was to create an activated and lively intellectual debate. Yet, despite all of his advance preparation, Raphael appears to have made a last-minute addition to the plan. His large cartoon for the lower band of figures that would allow him to transfer their gestures

proportionally to the wall does not contain the foreground individual dressed in purple and gold. This lonely individual, who is making notes on a sheet of paper while leaning on a block of marble, resembles Raphael's older contemporary Michelangelo (1475-1574), who had been working on the neighboring Sistine Chapel ceiling from 1508 to 1511. Raphael probably saw the Sistine Chapel when it was opened to the rest of Rome in August 1511. One theory is that he returned to his own work and paid tribute to Michelangelo by placing him in the *School of Athens*.⁴ It was clear to everyone who saw the Sistine ceiling that Michelangelo had a new style with a massive power unlike anything in the High Renaissance.

Behind the apparent complexity of Raphael's intellectual program for the frescos in the Pope's library is this simple, but profound insight: the pursuit of knowledge requires a conversation among friends that unites the disciplines across centuries and human cultures. The *School of Athens*, which most clearly embodies this vision, has much to teach students in our own schools today.

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NOTES

1 A virtual tour of this famous room and Raphael's frescos is available online at the Web site of the Vatican Museum (http://mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/SDR/SDR_03_SalaSegn.html).

2 In identifying the figures in *School of Athens* I follow Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 524. The identification of figures in this work is difficult because Raphael did not leave any personal notes on his program. For an alternative identification of several figures see Daniel Orth Bell, "New Identifications in Raphael's 'School of Athens,'" *The Art Bulletin* 77:4 (December 1, 1995).

3 This figure is a source for numerous reclining figures. For its use by Pontormo (1484-1556) in the *Visitation*, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting*, volume 1 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 87, n. 70.

4 Hartt and Wilkins, 525.