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Shakespeare is no less classical than Homer;  
Likewise Raphael stands next to Phidias.  
The pure aesthetic form of the classical  
does not include any time determination;  
classical work is part of time,  
the form of the classical is outside time.

Zimmermann 1865, p. 95.



# Introduction



## Introduction to the historical-hermeneutical reading of Raphael's *School of Athens*

*Different ways of reading and understanding the School of Athens*

There are two ways of looking at and interpreting the *School of Athens*, which was painted by Raphael between 1508 and 1511 (see Gould, 1991).

The first, aesthetic point of view consists of analyzing the structure of forms, the complexities of their relationships, the canons on which they are based and the beautiful play of colors in all their tonalities and extraordinary harmony. Similarly, we can study Raphael in connection to music. Several writers have compared Raphael's paintings with Mozart's music, and rightly so. For instance, Stendhal thought that both Raphael and Mozart had perfect control over artistic means (Stendhal, 1970, p. 281) (although he would regard the figures of the *Disputa* as superior to those of the *School of Athens*, Stendhal, 1972, p. 355); C.E.R. Alberti judged both to be masters of harmony and appropriateness of tones in art (Alberti, 1856, p. 5 and 20). Rochlitz even compared the *School of Athens* to the finale of the second act of the *Don Giovanni*

(Rochlitz, 1800, p. 641). The parallel between Raphael and Mozart does indeed seem sound, as does the analogy between Michelangelo's painting and Beethoven's music. Clearly many parallels can be (and have been) established or merely proposed between painters and composers, but we would still remain in a purely aesthetic dimension, which is not the focus of this work.

The second way of looking at the *School of Athens* is the historical-hermeneutic one. It aims at understanding and interpreting the message expressed by those forms, i.e. to interpret accurately the figures of the philosophers and their meaning. (See also additional considerations in my book on Botticelli: Reale, 2001<sup>1</sup>, pp. 175-179).

The first type of inquiry is more common and has often been carried out by experts of great technical skills and with excellent results. The second type, on the other hand, has often led to unsystematic and partial results because the authors have lacked the analytical skills and the knowledge of the cultural and philosophical background that are clearly necessary in such cases.

This fresco, as well as all the others in the Vatican rooms, has its background in the rediscovery and rethinking of ancient thought, which is owed to the great contributions of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), and to the high level of culture that the Vatican has achieved at that time (see Shearman, 1972 and 1993; Fallani, 1984; Frommel, 1984). In particular, a general Platonic-Neoplatonic vision underlies the frescoes in the *Stanza della Segnatura*; this vision is in perfect harmony with rationally interpreted Christian thought, while making

essential use of the categories of Platonic metaphysics (see Redig de Campos, 1938 and 1965; Hoogewerff, 1950; Bierman, 1957; Gutman, 1958; von Einem, 1971; Gombrich, 1972; Rowland, 1997 and Verdon, 1997; Joost-Gaugier, 2002).

The *School of Athens* has its specific background in *the general rebirth of Greek thought, re-experienced and re-analyzed systematically*, enriched by the acquisition of new knowledge and resulting in the creation of the characteristic cultural atmosphere. This is exactly what various historians of art have not taken into account or have not fully appreciated when they have approached the *School of Athens*. The continuously appearing new publications, even though they provide interesting observations, are also mostly deficient from the historically-hermeneutical point of view, which we are interested in (see, for example, Bell, 1995; Rash-Fabbri, 1997; Hall, 1997; Most, 1999). For these reasons we want to address this issue and deal with it in an analytical and systematic way.

### *The beginning, development and completion of this work*

Besides the *School of Athens*, I have also worked on the *Disputa* (Reale, 1998<sup>2</sup>) and the *Parnaso* (Reale, 1999). Most recently, I have studied Botticelli's *Primavera*, following the approach adopted here (Reale, 2001<sup>1</sup>).

I have dealt with the *School of Athens* several times. For the first time, it was while I was preparing the cover of a five-volume Italian edition of my *History of Ancient Philosophy* (1975-1980, Milano: Vita e Pensiero; English transl. 1985, New York: N.Y. University Press, SUNY series); the cover of each volume reproduces a part of the fresco related to the theme of the volume. This made me aware that in his composition of the fresco, representing ancient Greek thought from its beginning to its end, Raphael was following an exact Platonic scheme, with a precise logical and chronological order. Later, in 1993, I published an essay in the journal *Kos*. This version has been further elaborated and became the basis of the present volume.

Simultaneously, I also studied the *cartoon* of the *School of Athens* in the Picture Gallery of the Ambrosiana Library in Milan and I also presented it on television. The *cartoon* is of extraordinary beauty (see Feltrami, 1920; Oberhuber-Vitali, 1972). It corresponds almost perfectly to the fresco, and shows Raphael's creative capacity in a unique way. It reveals Raphael as a genuine *natura naturans*, i.e. as an exceptional creative power. Nietzsche, who used this expression, wrote: "Because you do not know what such a *natura naturans* like Raphael is, it does not make you hot to hear that such a person was and will never be again" (1988, I, p. 310, l. 20-22).

To introduce this masterpiece, which is widely considered a symbol of an entire epoch, I present a summary of my interpretation. This summary will be followed by

the presentation and analysis of the various individuals and groups depicted in the fresco.

*The medallion representing Philosophy above the School of Athens*

Let us begin with a short explanation of the medallion representing Philosophy, which constitutes a sort of overture to the fresco.

First of all, we may say that it corresponds to the great overtures to great operas. These overtures, when compared with the operas, turn out to be rather thin things. The face of the woman who represents philosophy, though it is pleasant, is not particularly striking and the symbols of philosophy are somewhat generic. However, we do well to remember Gombrich's astute judgment expressed in his *The Use of Images* regarding the illustration of the *New Calendar*, which was published during the French Revolution:

The first thing that strikes one as one delves into these questions of visual etymology is the tenacity and longevity of these symbols. The artist, for instance, who had to draw Philosophy for the *New Calendar* did not invent the image. He took it from the most famous representation of Philosophy, Raphael's fresco on the ceiling of the *Stanza della Segnatura*, where she is also placed on a throne with the mysterious image of many-breasted Nature and holding the books of moral Philosophy. You might

say that this artist happened to be uninventive. But clearly this is not the point. For those who tried to be original always failed in their purpose” (Gombrich, 1999, p. 170).

What Gombrich says about the artist of the *New Calendar* holds also for Raphael.

It is quite a different matter when it comes to the originality of the fresco itself, which we have already labeled as a landmark in culture. Edgar Morin in his *Penser l'Europe* has clearly expressed this concept:

Christianity triumphant in the empire closed the school of Athens and imposed for centuries the sovereign dominion of theology over and above any kind of thought. This dominion ended with Renaissance. The school of Athens was dead and could not be opened again, but the Renaissance culture opened itself to Greek freedom. Moreover, in 1510 Raphael illustrates and exalts in a great fresco the dispute of the *School of Athens* equal to the *Disputa del Sacramento*, which can be found on the opposite wall in the Vatican Stanza della Segnatura. The re-appropriation of Greek inheritance, which is a specific merit of the Renaissance, becomes permanent. Since then, European thought, poetry and art remain anchored to this source (Morin, 1988, p. 67).

In this sense Raphael's *School of Athens* is a great symbol of immense value. Let us then move on to the fresco.

*The building and the background of the scene*

The group of Greek thinkers is located inside a grandiose basilica. As is well known, Raphael has not been inspired by any existing basilica. Some experts think that Bramante might have given some hints and structural indications to Raphael. However, it may even be Raphael's own creation, given his knowledge of architecture, which is displayed in his other works (see Ermers, 1909; Marchini, 1968, II, pp. 431-491; Frommel, 1983; Ray, 1990). Oberhuber (Oberhuber-Vitali, 1972, p. 30) notes:

It is impossible to discuss here all the arguments for the assumption that Raphael was the inventor of the architecture of the building; we may just point out to the complete unity between the architectural and the figurative parts and the wholly pictorial conception of the building. It is not even clear what kind of building it is since on one side it gradually raises like a temple and on the other side it is open to all directions like the four-sided arch of Janus in Rome. The dimensions of Raphael's building are larger than those of the arch but smaller than those of a forum-like temple, which it might at first resemble: the space between the columns is five meters wide and the circular vault is seven and a half meters high; arms are about ten meters long (without the projecting parts) and the dome is between seven and eight meters across. There are also other details, such as the architrave of the dome's supporting pillars, where Raphael did not follow the exact per-

spective but had a free hand; this can be seen also in the figure composition. Moreover, the markedly plastic structure of the architecture and the emphatic outlining of the basreliefs are typical of later Raphael's buildings; these elements differ from Bramante's more abstract works, which are conceived more in a spatial than plastic manner. Even the proportions differ: the space of the *School* follows the classical canon (almost always adopted in Raphael's buildings), as we can see in the 1:8 ratio for the pillars, while Bramante usually prefers less orthodox ratios" (see also Ermers, 1909; Hülsen, 1911; Oberhuber, 1983; Liebermann, 1997; Valtieri, 1971 and 1972; Most, 1999, pp. 75 ff.).

The building is opened by a gigantic semicircular arch, which passes into an impressive sequel of arches, creating a perspective scene of extraordinary beauty. The last arch, which constitutes the perspective centre of the entire composition, embraces Plato and Aristotle, the two central figures of Greek thought, who from the viewpoint of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* or "history of influences" are the central figures of the whole Western thought, not only until Renaissance but also in later periods. Here we find the idealization and the poetic transfiguration, which was called by Bellori "Gymnasium of Athens or Philosophy" (1695; English transl. in: Hall, 1997, pp. 48-56).

Before we identify the characters, we should provide an interpretation of the front stairs and explain why they are so prominent a feature of the picture.

*A representation of the Platonic idea of levels of knowledge with philosophy at the top*

The question has often been raised of the meaning of the grandiose staircase with the four steps at the centre of the scene and of the position of the characters at different levels, culminating in Plato, who points his finger to the sky, indicating thereby the first and supreme principle, the Good, which can be reached only through philosophy.

In the past, it has been thought that Raphael had introduced a complex allusion to the seven liberal arts (Springer, 1883; Schlosser, 1896; Gutman, 1958; Einem, 1971; Gombrich, 1972; Most, 1999, pp. 41 ff.), which had been introduced by the work of Marziano Capella, *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury* (Capella, 1969). As a matter of fact, while on the vaults of the Stanza della Segnatura Raphael does refer to the liberal arts, in the *School of Athens* he aims at an entirely different goal, which completely overthrows the established pictorial tradition connected with this theme. Raphael's inspiration most likely comes from Plato's *Republic*, as Winner (Winner, 1993, p. 268) has pointed out:

In the oldest allegories of the seven liberal arts, the *Artes* themselves are painted alone or together with their representatives. The *School of Athens*, however, shows only philosophers who in the gradual process of training devote themselves exclusively to the mathematical arts. The presence of children

and adolescents in front shows clearly that what is at stake is the inculcation of the mathematical disciplines. What they are learning is precisely described in the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*. This is clearly the source that inspired Raphael's choice of the topic of the fresco. In his commentary of the seventh book, Marsilio Ficino describes the way in which Plato gradually directs the soul towards the highest Good and towards the Sun, i.e. towards God himself and the ideas. According to Plato, the future guardians of the ideal state must receive an education in philosophy. The educational curriculum of the young philosopher consists of five mathematical disciplines that enable him to find the way to the world of ideas, which is beyond the world of appearances. Arithmetic and geometry, which deal with pure numbers and measures, form the basis of such education. Therefore, it is clear that the staircase in the *School of Athens* cannot be a merely decorative element of the scene. The staircase symbolizes the "steps" of the mathematical education, which is the necessary preparation for philosophy.

According to Plato, the mathematical sciences were "arithmetic", "geometry", "stereometry" (study of the geometric solids) and "astronomy". Even "music" was linked to the mathematical sciences. The Pythagoreans on the left hand side represent arithmetic and music (musical harmony is based on numbers); on the right hand side there is a group of geometers and astronomers. Winner (1993, p. 274) identifies the geometers

specialized in stereometry with Ptolemy, who holds in his hand the globe of the Earth. Since the globe is a geometric solid *par excellence*, Winner writes: “Ptolemy is thus picked out as the representative of the Platonic discipline of stereometry.”

From the hermeneutic point of view this identification does not hold for two reasons. First, it would skew the status of Ptolemy, making him a geometer instead of an astronomer. Second, the symbolic steps of the *School of Athens* are not five but four. Evidently, Raphael treats stereometry as part of geometry. Plato himself talks about stereometry, which, although commonly neglected, was deeply studied in the Academy. Here, where the first complete studies of the five regular geometric solids have been accomplished, stereometry has been included in the frame of geometry. The four steps leading to philosophy therefore represent “music”, “arithmetic”, “geometry” and “astronomy”, embodied in the characters of the lower part of the fresco.

Plato’s *Republic* says more than what Winner thinks (see Winner, 1986 and 1993): Plato not only says *that* to be able to practice philosophy one needs to cultivate these sciences, but also explains *why* it is necessary.

As is well known, Plato considered music an essential educational instrument and gave it not only conceptual but also moral importance: harmony fills the soul with a sense of proportion and helps to attune the body to the mind in the right measure. Let us read the most significant passage:

Then the man who makes the finest mixture of gymnastics with music and brings them to his soul in the most proper measure is the one of whom we would most correctly say that he is the most perfectly musical and well harmonized, far more so than the man who tunes the strings to one another (*Resp.* III 412a, transl. A. Bloom).

However, music as such is not a science, except insofar as it depends on the science of numbers (*Resp.* VII 522a-b). In any case, in *Republic* VII (530e-531c), Plato recognizes that the science of the harmony of musical sounds implies knowledge of intelligible relationships:

As the eyes are fixed on astronomy, so the ears are fixed to harmonic movement, and these two kinds of knowledge are in a way akin, as the Pythagoreans say and we, Glaucon, agree (*Resp.* VII 530d, transl. A. Bloom).

Regarding the science of numbers, arithmetic, Plato specifies that “It has a strong tendency to draw the soul towards being” (*Resp.* VII 523a). Moreover, highlighting the opposition that holds between the “one” and the “many”, it prepares the soul for the knowledge of the first and supreme principles, and therefore pushes the human being to transcend the world of becoming (*Resp.* VII 523). Plato writes:

Then it would be fitting, Glaucon, to set this study down in law and to persuade those who are

going to participate in the greatest things in the city to go to calculation and to take it up, not after the fashion of private men, but to stay with it until they come to the contemplation of nature of numbers with intellection itself, not practicing it for the sake of buying or selling like merchants or tradesmen, but for war and for ease of turning the soul itself around from becoming to truth and being (*Resp.* VII 525b-c, transl. A. Bloom).

About geometry Plato writes:

That it is for the sake of knowing what is always, and not at all for what is at any time coming into being and passing away. [...]. Then, you noble man, it [geometry] would draw the soul towards truth and be productive of philosophic understanding in directing upward what we now improperly direct downward (*Resp.* VII 527b, transl. A. Bloom).

About astronomy, the philosopher says:

[...] as the fourth study let us set down astronomy [...]. In my opinion it is plain to everyone that astronomy *compels the soul to see what is above and leads it there away from the things here* (*Resp.* VII 528e-529a, transl. A. Bloom; highlighted by G.R.).

According to late ancient sources it was written over the door of the Academy: “Let no man enter here who is ignorant of geometry”. And even if this motto were an

invention of the imagination of the time, it nevertheless conveys a truth by summarizing the program, which was outlined in the *Republic* (see Reale, 1998<sup>1</sup>, pp. 167-183). Unless we bear in mind the philosophical program of Plato's *Republic*, we shall not adequately understand the great message expressed by Raphael in the *School of Athens*.

*The great pictorial representation of the history of Greek thought from a Platonic point of view*

The central problem for the historical-hermeneutic interpretation of the *School of Athens* is the following: given that it is an idealized historical representation of ancient philosophy from the Platonic point of view, we need to identify the philosophers represented here and discover the reason for their presence. But how many characters are clearly identifiable? And how many can be identified by conjecture or pure guesswork? Understandably, scholars have different, even opposed views.

The opinion expressed by Wölfflin (1986, p. 88, reprinted in: Wölfflin, 1997, p. 58) is wholly misleading when he says that “historical learning is not essential for the understanding of these frescoes, which deal with familiar subjects, and it is quite wrong to attempt interpretations of the *School of Athens* as an esoteric treatise in historical and philosophical ideas”. On the contrary, works like those in the *Stanza della Segnatura* cannot be understood in full without historical knowledge, as they

are ideal interpretations of history presented by the most sublime artistic means. Even the view of Most, although it is much more moderate and precise, does not hold. Most writes:

With the exception of Diogenes (whose well-known antisocial attitude explains the absence of a group around him), it is not by chance that every character that is clearly identifiable by name is a “focal point” of the group of anonymous figures surrounding him. Each of them is a star and the other figures are there to highlight the main character and its dominance. This is their only function and the reason why they have received no identity and why they will not receive any. In other words, most of these anonymous figures look with admiration to those very philosophers that the painting invites us to admire. They are indeed our counterparts: by reacting appropriately *within* the painting they suggest how we should react *to* the painting.

If they had had specifiable names they could not have properly played this role of empty ciphers that take on the identity of the spectator. In a certain sense, they should not be given a name but ought to be called with second person pronoun: “You, the spectator” (Most, 1999, p. 25).

This position is not convincing. First of all, we should note that there are three, not just one, single characters. Moreover, some of the secondary characters of the groups are identifiable from ancient sources, while the identity of others can be an object of conjectures. All

the characters to the left of Plato (besides the group of five disciples next to him) represent important philosophers before Plato, namely the Presocratics, the Sophists, Socrates and the Socratics. It was the author's intention to place them here in accordance with chosen artistic as well as conceptual and historical canons. This will be shown below.

In a niche on the top left there is the statue of Apollo. On the right hand side, in addition to Aristotle and his six direct disciples, we find selective representation of the philosophy and science of the Hellenistic and Imperial periods. In particular, there are two isolated philosophers, Diogenes the Cynic and Plotinus (for reasons that will be made clear), and a composite and articulated group of geometers with the figures of Zoroaster and Ptolemy next to them; on the top right there are three figures of late Cynics, who were considered the recluses of the ancient world. In a niche on the top right there is a representation of a statue of Athena, symmetric to that of Apollo on the left.

It should already be clear that what is represented here is the history of the ancient thought from its origins to its end, interpreted from the Platonic perspective, which understands philosophy as an ascent from the mathematical sciences to the heights of metaphysics. In the first part, there are the Orphics and the great Presocratic philosophers inspired by Orphism; the Sophists are *de facto* included, but *de jure* expelled (with great dramatic effect) by a gesture of a Socratic philosopher; Socrates is depicted along with his close friends

(and not with the founders of the minor Socratic schools). In the second part, Epicurus and the Sceptics are excluded not only *de jure* but also *de facto*, because their philosophy does not help us with the ascent through the sciences to the knowledge of being.

*The representation of the first group of figures on the bottom left*

This often misunderstood group of figures represents the ceremony of an Orphic ritual (see below, pp. 52 and 75). Some scholars have come close to the right solution but without drawing appropriate conclusion. Orpheus, whose name the Orphic movement borrows, was a mythical Thracian poet (already famous in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). The documents that have come down to us as “Orphic” are forgeries, dated mainly to the Hellenistic-Imperial period. But the core of Orphic thought was constantly important for the ancient thought.

Particularly, the Italian Renaissance knew the *Orphic Hymns*, which had been translated and made famous by Marsilio Ficino. He even used to sing these hymns in order to receive positive energy from the stars. Raphael must have known of the importance of Orphism, which was not only an essential reference point for understanding Greek philosophy but also a theme that Renaissance thinkers had brought to the fore.

*The Presocratic philosophers influenced by Orphism*

The next impressive group of nine characters at the bottom left (see below, p. 54/55) is closely connected with the previous group. Indeed, the three dominant figures, Pythagoras, Empedocles and Heraclitus, have tight links with Orphism.

Pythagoras, besides being the great thinker, who gave scientific form to mathematical enquiries, was the first philosopher to accept the Orphic doctrine of the reincarnation of the soul. He interpreted mathematics itself as a form of spiritual purification. In one of his two poems, entitled *Purifications*, Empedocles even devoted himself to the Orphic doctrine (see below, p. 91). Similarly, Heraclitus expressed some thoughts that were strongly inspired by Orphism (see below, p. 99).

Three of the young people depicted in this group have not only decorative but also programmatic role (see Winner, 1968, 1993): they represent the various ages that, according to Plato, correspond to the various stages of learning arithmetic. On the other hand, the handsome figure of the white-dressed young man, to whom importance is clearly given, symbolizes the youth endowed with virtue and beauty, the ideal disciple of the philosophers (see below, p. 93).

The old man writing behind Pythagoras shoulders represents one of the leading figures of the Pythagorean school, probably Philolaus, who was the first of his school to publish written works.

The Arab figure has been identified by some scholars with Avicenna. But this interpretation is certainly mistaken, since Avicenna was not a Pythagorean but an Aristotelian philosopher. This character can be easily explained as symbolically connected with the invention, or rather, given that the invention took place in India, with the systematization and the spread of “Arabic” numerals: the Greeks (and the Romans) used to indicate numbers with letters of the alphabet, which made their use rather clumsy; Arabic numerals offered, on the other hand, great advantages, while remaining numbers in the Pythagorean sense.

The last philosopher in the group is Heraclitus, depicted sitting somewhat apart and busy writing. He does not appear in the cartoon, but is a late addition to the fresco, and he appears with features of Michelangelo, for reasons to be mentioned (see below pp. 95ff.).

### *The three characters on the top left*

The three top left characters represent the “sellers of doctrines” (see below, pp. 56 and 101-103). Let us consider the central character, which is depicted as a high-spirited and vigorous man who holds books and a scroll under his arm. He treats them as goods for sale, which contrasts to an almost sacred respect to books, displayed by the other characters. To confirm this interpretation, let us consider the disdain of one of the Socratics, whose extended arm indicates that he would like to expel these

characters from the assembly of the philosophers as unworthy of it. This character, which strongly expresses the critical Socratic position against the Sophists, is probably Apollodorus. More on him later (see below, pp. 101 and 105).

It is not hard to identify the central character as Protagoras, the most celebrated and best paid of the Sophists (see below, p. 101f.). The figure who is trying to oppose the injunction of the Socratic philosopher could be Gorgias, well known for his eloquence and his ability to persuade (see below, p. 102).

The character appearing partially behind Protagoras' flapping cloak could be identified as Prodicus of Ceos (whom Socrates ironically called his teacher) or Hippias of Elis (see below, p. 102).

*The group of characters at the centre of the left hand side of the fresco*

Apart from the two whose faces are only half visible, the eight figures in this group – reproduced on pages 58/59 – can be identified with certainty. Socrates' face, portrayed in profile, corresponds exactly to one of the busts that have survived from antiquity. The two young men next to him are the beautiful Alcibiades, identifiable after the armor, and Xenophon, author of famous works on Socrates. As already indicated, the person who angrily would like to expel the Sophists can only be Apollodorus. Plato describes his impassionate character in the

*Symposium* and *Phaedo* (see below, pp. 105f.). The figure to the right of Alcibiades, which is shorter than the others, is very likely Aristodemus. The *Symposium* depicts him as a small man (p. 107). The figure behind Socrates should be identified with Crito, his great friend and contemporary (see p. 109).

*The group of Platonists and the statue of Apollo*

The figure of Plato—in the guise of Leonardo da Vinci (see p. 49)—can be easily identified as it holds in his hand the *Timaeus* and dominates over the other five characters on his right hand side (on the left for the observer—see below, p. 60). The two central figures in the group may represent the first two successors of Plato as scholarchs of the Academy, namely Speusippus (Plato's own nephew) and Xenocrates. The figure on the extreme left, with an expression of deep thought and with high spirituality may be a symbol of an ideal disciple as well as it may represent Philip of Opus; alternatively, it may be a portrait of Dion of Syracuse.

Particularly noteworthy is the meaning of Plato's right hand with his finger pointing upwards and indicating transcendence (see p. 62). The raised hand with a finger pointing at the sky has become an emblematic pictorial symbol. We find it in Leonardo's *John the Baptist*, in the figure of Mercury in Botticelli's *Primavera* (see Reale, 2001<sup>1</sup>, p. 245), in Raphael's *Disputa* (see Reale, 1998<sup>2</sup>, p. 65) in the figure of the first Christian







