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Raphael's School of Athens: The Big Picture

If any of you happened to be at my presentation last year, you might remember that the research that led to that talk began with a phone call from one of our art historians at Augustana. Well, a year later, there I was in my office again, dutifully contemplating Velleius Paterculus, and, guess who calls again.....That's right. This time she has in mind to use a print of Raphael's *School of Athens* from our collection -- here that is -- (**Slide 2, Augustana Print**) in a fancy new version of our First-Year Reader -- and here that is -- that will combine art with texts and, since the *School of Athens* will be used in conjunction with Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, which I wrote the introduction for, wouldn't I like to write a little something about the painting for the Reader? Not at all confident in my knowledge of Renaissance art, but having learned that "No" was not a possible answer in this situation, I skipped the argument and simply said "Errrr...Sure".

I mentioned just a moment ago that I happened to have written the introduction in our First-Year Reader for what is often called Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, an excerpt from the beginning of book 7 of the *Republic*. In preparing to write that introduction I reread the *Republic*, so that work was fairly fresh in my mind as I was researching Raphael's *School of Athens*. Once I got my sea legs, so to speak, with Raphael and the *School of Athens*, the argument that I'm going to lay out for you today became fairly obvious to me. In short, I believe I have stumbled upon the biggest of the "big picture" ways to interpret Raphael's fresco, and my argument is quite simple: the artist's composition perfectly reflects the paradigm of education set forth in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*.

Raphael's *School of Athens*

Intense and purposeful engagement. That is the message Raphael's *School of Athens* most obviously conveys. Taking the hint from the title of Raphael's masterpiece, one quickly perceives that students are engaging with their teachers and teachers with their students, and both, we surmise, thanks to Raphael's masterful depiction of motion and expression, are *actively and seriously* engaged with their studies. But who are these people, and with what are they so passionately engaged?

I will address both of those questions in due course, but let us begin by considering what, exactly, it is that we are looking at, and the context, both historical and artistic, of Raphael's *School of Athens*. Augustana's image of the *School of Athens* is as much a product of eighteenth-century Rome as it is of Raphael's sixteenth-century Rome. What you are looking at is a print¹ made from an eighteenth-century engraving by Giovanni Volpato,² who based his engraving on a drawing of Raphael's fresco by Giuseppe Cades, a well known eighteenth-century Italian painter.³ Despite the involvement of these other artists, prominent in their own rights, the large Latin inscriptions in the left- and right-hand corners of the print, *Raphael Santius Pinx[it]* ("Raphael Santi painted [this]") and *In Aedibus Vaticanis* ("In the Vatican Palace"), make it clear that the print was intended to provide a representation of Raphael's famous work in the Vatican, not to masquerade as an original work of art by Cades and Volpato. Prints such as these were common souvenirs

¹ The inscription in Italian in the lower left-hand corner which reads *Roma, presso La Calcografia Camerale* ("Rome, at the *Calcographia Camerale*"), indicates that the printing of our image was carried out by the *Calcographia Camerale*, a very old and important printing press located in Rome.

² Valpato is known for his engravings of many of the works of the great masters. He apparently made this engraving for Pope Pius VI (1775–1799), perhaps as part of a project intended to document Raphael's work at the Vatican in the days long before photography. The inscription beneath the engraving, in its full Latin, is as follows:

*Pio Sexto Pont[ifici] Max[imo]
Artium Bonarum Restitutori ac Vindici d[ono] d[edit] d[edicavit]*

"He gave and dedicated [this] as a gift to Pius the Sixth, Pope,
Restorer and Defender of the Good Arts."

The smaller Latin inscription in the lower right-hand corner, *Joannes Volpato sculpsit et vendit Roma* ("Giovanni Volpato engraved and sold [this] from Rome"), is a sort of primitive copyright notice that was not part of the original engraving.

³ The inscription at the bottom left of the image, *Joseph Cades delineavit*, also in Latin, reads "Giuseppe Cades drew [this]." Cades lived from 1750–1799.

for eighteenth-century tourists, and it is likely that our piece started its journey to Augustana in just such a context.⁴

No print or engraving (or photograph), however, can truly do justice to Raphael's fresco, which measures over twenty-five feet in width and over twelve feet in height (the figures in the foreground of the fresco are actually life-size). Also, Raphael's *School of Athens* was not meant to be viewed in isolation. The *School of Athens* is one of thirteen frescoes that Pope Julius II commissioned Raphael to paint as the decoration for just one room in the Vatican palace.⁵ These thirteen frescoes, four of which decorate the walls and nine of which adorn the vaulted ceiling, work together to create a comprehensive image of the intellectual and spiritual life of the high Renaissance. The four images which decorate the walls reflect the four categories of knowledge according to which Renaissance libraries were commonly organized, and it is now agreed that the room originally housed the personal library of Pope Julius II.⁶ The *School of Athens*, representing Philosophy, is counterpoised on the wall opposite it by a work titled *La Disputa*,⁷ its symmetrical twin, which represents Theology; on the smaller walls, the canvass of each of which is interrupted by a window, the *School of Athens* is flanked on the left by a work titled *Parnassus*, which represents Poetry and Literature, and on the right by a work titled *Jurisprudence*, which represents Law. The much smaller round and rectangular frescoes that decorate the vaulted ceiling of the room reflect the four categories of knowledge that are celebrated on the walls, and serve to unify the room compositionally.

⁴ The famous German art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, writing at the end of the 19th century, notes that "Volpato made a series of seven engravings of the [frescoes in the room which contains Raphael's *School of Athens*], which for generations were the souvenirs brought home by visitors to Rome, and even now these plates are not to be despised;" Wölfflin goes on to assert regarding such prints that "the powerful spatial impression of the frescoes is reproduced better, even in a superficial engraving, than in any photograph" (from an excerpt from Wölfflin's *Die klassische Kunst*, 1899, translated by L. Murray and P. Murray as *Classic Art*, London, 1948, in M. Hall, ed., *Raphael's School of Athens*, Cambridge, 1997, 62). Times, of course, have changed, and the reader is strongly encouraged to seek out a full-color photograph of Raphael's *School of Athens* such as that in H. Chapman, T. Henry, and C. Plazzota, *Raphael: From Urbino to Rome* (London, National Gallery, 2004), 52, available in the Thomas Tredway Library.

⁵ For a full description of the room, commonly known as the *Stanza della Segnatura* ("Room of the [Papal] Signature"), its artistic program and the circumstances of its decoration by Raphael, see Hall (as in note 4), 3–21.

⁶ Hall (as in note 4), 6–7. The name *Stanza della Segnatura* derives from the use of the room in later times for ceremonial signings of papal documents. J. Shearman, "The Vatican *Stanze*: Functions and Decoration," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 57 (1972), has conclusively demonstrated that the room was originally the private library of Pope Julius II.

⁷ For images of *La Disputa* and the other frescoes mentioned here, see H. Chapman et al. (as in note 4), 50 and 52–54.

Now, to return to the questions with which we began: Who are all of these people in the *School of Athens*, and with what are they so engaged? As for the first question, the artist allows us to identify only two of the individuals with certainty—and even so it is not by means of names.⁸ Dominating the fresco from its center, though they stand in the background, are Plato and Aristotle; both are identified by the books they hold: an elder Plato, on the left, holds his dialogue titled *Timaeus*, while his student Aristotle, on the right, holds a work titled *Ethics* (almost certainly his treatise commonly called the *Nicomachean Ethics*). These clues would have easily allowed any educated contemporary of Raphael to understand the general context of the fresco: philosophers and students in lively discussion. But who are the other individuals Raphael depicted? The clues provided for Plato and Aristotle suggest that, on the one hand, the artist wanted his audience to attempt to identify the figures in the fresco, and, indeed, scholars from Raphael's time on have voraciously taken that bait.⁹ On the other hand, the clues are vague enough that, despite the best efforts of so many scholars, there is general agreement on the identification of only a few of the other characters.¹⁰

Attempts to identify the various figures represented in the fresco do and do not miss the artist's point, and this assertion leads us to the second question we posed: With what are these characters so passionately engaged? A simple answer can be given in one word: learning. But, I propose, the sort of learning depicted here is of a specific variety, and that variety of learning in fact explains both the design of the

⁸ I say “the artist allows us...” rather than “Raphael allows us” for a reason. There is much debate among art historians as to what role the painter had in designing—rather than merely painting—his composition. Painters at this time were considered craftsmen more than artists, and were provided with a correspondingly “appropriate” education—Raphael, though Italian, did not even know Latin, and he certainly did not know Greek (the number of western Europeans who knew Greek at this time could probably be counted on one or two hands). Clearly, then, Raphael must have been aided in determining both the content and the design of the composition (this is true for the other frescoes in the room as well). For a brief discussion of this issue see Hall (as in note 4), 3–5; for a lengthier discussion of the issue and some theories as to who in the papal court might have been involved, see I. Rowland's “The Intellectual Background of the *School of Athens*: Tracking Divine Wisdom in the Rome of Julius II,” in Hall (as in note 4 and above), 131–170. Ultimately, we see the result of a perfect combination of talents: the knowledge and imagination to compose the work, and the skill and vision to bring the composition to life.

⁹ Hall (as in note 4), 32, sees the real beginning of the frenzied quest to decode Raphael's *School of Athens* in the publication of J.D. Passavant's *Raphael of Urbino and His Father Giovanni Santi* in 1839, which she identifies as “the first scholarly monograph on Raphael.”

¹⁰ Most agree on the following identifications: Socrates, the balding figure to the left of Plato, involved in conversation with a small group beneath the statue of Apollo; the Cynic Diogenes, the figure sprawling on the stairs with his beggar bowl; Pythagoras, in the foreground on the left, the figure writing in a book and

composition as a whole, and also its purpose: my argument is that the artist's design was inspired by Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*.

Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*, as students of *Liberal Arts through the AGES* know, begins with an elaborate tale that is titled in this work *Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"* (*Republic*, 514a–521b). The "Allegory of the Cave," which I describe in my introduction to the piece as "a painting in words," depicts education as a journey from the shadows of the Cave into the light of the Sun, with the caveat that those who have glimpsed the Sun must return to the Cave to assist those still trapped therein. Socrates goes on, then, in the remainder of Book 7, to describe the sort of education that might effect such a journey from the Shadows to the Light. Students should begin, Socrates tells us, with the study of simple mathematics (522c–526c). The next step is the study of plane (two dimensional) geometry (526c–527d), and the third—at least initially—is the study of astronomy (527d–528a). But at this point Socrates suggests that he has made a misstep—the study of solid (three dimensional) geometry should come before that of astronomy. So, solid geometry (528b–e) becomes the third step, and astronomy (528b–531b) the fourth. The sort of study of astronomy that Socrates has in mind, however, is not the sort that focuses on the heavenly bodies, "the way astronomy is done at the moment" (530c),¹¹ but rather the sort that attempts to ascertain, in accordance with the Pythagorean school (530d), the mysteries of "astronomical motion" and the harmony of the spheres, with a close attunement of the sciences of harmonics and astronomy (e.g., 530d: "These may well be in some sense sister sciences"). But, all of this is "merely the prelude" (531d). The final stage of a student's education will be in the dialectical method (531d–541b). This is a complex notion with a simple origin. Dialectics—simply—means "conversation," but in the Platonic sense it is conversation, or inquiry, "which systematically and universally attempts, for each thing just by itself, to grasp what that thing is" (533b). All of Plato's works, inasmuch as they are dialogues directed to that purpose, are examples of the dialectical method.¹²

looking at the tablet held out before him by a student; Euclid or Archimedes, in the foreground on the right, the figure kneeling and demonstrating a principle of plane geometry with his compass.

¹¹ All the translations I use here are from Plato, *The Republic*, edited by G. Ferrari and translated by T. Griffith (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹² "dialogue" and "dialectics" derive from the same root in Greek, which essentially means "to talk [something] through." Aristotle developed a more formal version of the dialectical process, but his purpose remained the same as Plato's.

Let us return now to Raphael's *School of Athens*. One will notice that the design of the composition adheres rather closely to the paradigm of education described in Book 7 of the *Republic*. In the foreground, at the lowest level of the composition, we find students studying, on the right, plane geometry, the first stage in Plato's paradigm.¹³ Next to them and standing, at the far right, are figures who have always been associated, because of the globes they hold, with astronomy—an interesting nod to Socrates own (seeming) misstep in placing the study of astronomy before solid geometry; the artist grasps Plato's point: the study of “simple” astronomy, which involves basic knowledge of the heavenly bodies, may precede the study of solid geometry and higher astronomy. The next step in Plato's paradigm of education finds itself, again, quite perfectly depicted in the *School of Athens*. On the lower level still, but on the left, we find Pythagoras, whose school Plato mentions by name at this point in his paradigm. He is writing in a book and looking at a tablet held before him by one of his pupils; this tablet has written upon it in Greek, in schematic form, harmonic ratios “believed to be the key to the harmony of the universe.”¹⁴ Having completed this “prelude,” a student progresses up the stairs to the final stage of his education: dialectics. As the student makes his way up the stairs an anonymous figure points him towards Plato and Aristotle,¹⁵ the masters who will introduce him to two different understandings of dialectics: one, the theoretical approach advocated by Plato, seeks knowledge of things that cannot be perceived by the senses—hence Plato points up toward things beyond the visible world; the other, the more practical approach advocated by Aristotle, deals more with the things of this world—hence Aristotle's downward gesture to the world in front of him. The figures on the highest level with Plato and Aristotle, we may therefore conclude, are engaged in dialectics.

¹³ We need not be bothered by the absence of simple mathematics. On the contrary, its absence demonstrates the artist's intimate knowledge of Plato, for when Socrates himself reflects on the subjects he stipulated as prior to dialectics, he describes them (533b) as “studies in geometry and the disciplines which go with geometry.”

¹⁴ Hall (as in note 4), 33. My understanding of music and harmonics is insufficient to explain this any further. For those who are interested in exploring this topic, I refer you to Hall's (as in note 4) discussion of scholarship on this issue (33–34), and also to her ample bibliography on the topic.

¹⁵ The Cynic Diogenes sprawling on the stairs, whom the young student must pass, may be an allusion to the dangers of dialectics—or the “damage done in the name of dialectic”—on which Plato reflects at 537e–539d. What he fears is that students might mistake sophistic argumentation for dialectic, and, ultimately,

The *School of Athens* shows its debt to Book 7 of Plato's *Republic* in another way which, again, quite precisely reflects its source of inspiration. The semi-circular architectural setting for the *School of Athens*, called in Italian a *grottesco* (“cave-like opening”), a common architectural frame for many Renaissance works,¹⁶ takes on added significance in the *School of Athens*. Here, its cave-like frame reminds us of the “Allegory of the Cave” that opens Book 7 of the *Republic*, and so also of the ascent from shadow to light which is Plato's allegory of education. Though not apparent in our black and white print, the path through the two vaults behind Plato and Aristotle leads to a view of blue sky and clouds—a stunningly brilliant blue in Raphael's fresco that contrasts remarkably with the shadows of the coffered ceilings of the vaults. Clearly, we have here the mouth of the Cave which leads to the light of the Sun. That Plato and Aristotle seem to be walking into the Cave reflects the injunction at the end of the “Allegory” that philosophers must not be allowed to spend their lives gazing at the Sun, but must return to those imprisoned in the Cave. That the Sun itself is not visible—only its light—reflects the overall message of Plato's philosophy: we must strive to see what is real, even though we can never actually do so while we live in the material world.

I will conclude by defending the claim I made earlier, that scholars who have obsessively sought to identify all of the philosophers in the *School of Athens* do and do not miss the artist's point. Raphael's *School of Athens* is a fine example of mimetic art; that is, art that is meant to engender in its viewers what it depicts. The *School of Athens* depicts philosophers in intense and serious discussion for the sake of learning. By not naming any of the philosophers in the composition, the artist compels those studying his work to do exactly what those in the fresco are doing: to discuss and debate what, exactly, something is—in other words, to engage in dialectics. So, while it is impossible to identify with certainty all of the philosophers in the *School of Athens*, the artist wanted us to try. The *School of Athens* is like Plato's dialogues: it does not answer all of the questions it poses, but it compels us to think, and that is its point.

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lapse into moral relativism “and be reduced to thinking that the beautiful is no more beautiful or fine than it is ugly or shameful” (538e).

¹⁶ All of the frescoes on the walls of the *Stanza della Segnatura* are situated in *grotteschi*, as are those in the adjacent *Stanza di Elidoro*; for images of all of these, see H. Chapman et al. (as in note 4), 50, 52–54, and 286–287.