



The School of Athens, the Philosophical Artwork that Conveys All Human Knowledge

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Abstract: The School of Athens, the fresco by Raphael, is an artwork in which the whole world has seen for five centuries, not only the aesthetic, emotional and spiritual aspect of art, but also the philosophical and intellectual one. In this fresco Raphael painted the human mind. This work is a holistic variation of cultural anthropology and cultural cognitive science. It is a university in which all human knowledge is summoned. Raphael combined paganism and humanism within the Vatican premises. Making this fresco a significant work, reflecting and conveying the core cultural values and universal ideals, offering an excellent opportunity for any viewer to engage in a multicultural cognitive act and process. This paper presents how this multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary work serves as an ideal example for today's works and philosophy to connect all creative and philosophical disciplines into one, inspiring today's thought and the new works of creative arts to contain the human knowledge of the ages, uniting the past and future, as a meeting point of history, reason, discovery and human aspirations. It will present how this complex artwork includes knowledge, philosophy, art, morals, customs, etc, acquired by any member of society to understand human cultural cognition.

Keywords: Athens, Raphael, Plato, Aristotle, Cultural Cognition.

Introduction

While Michelangelo was painting the dome of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican, a few feet away, another artist was painting a fresco that would go down in history as one of the world's masterpieces. This artist was Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (1483-1520), who today is known, after Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, as the third figure of the most important artistic trinity of the Golden Renaissance, even of the entire history of art.

Raffaello, whom we know today as Raphael, is the author of The School of Athens fresco (1509-1511), in which the whole world saw for five centuries, not only the aesthetic, emotional and spiritual aspect of art, but also the intellectual aspect. In this fresco, Raphael painted the human mind. This work is a university in which all human knowledge is summed up. This work is a holistic variation of cultural anthropology and cultural cognitive science, engaging any viewer in a multicultural cognitive act and process.

The School of Athens is considered one of the best examples, and even the pinnacle of the classical Renaissance style. It depicts a pleasant scene of people dressed in ancient clothes and engaged in various forms of intellectual activity: conversations, readings, explanations and listening. All the figures are composed within a luxurious Roman architectural structure, through which the eye is drawn to the blue sky seen in the background.

The identities of the 58 figures in the painting have intrigued scholars and researchers for a long time. Many of the figures are known and easily recognizable, but some others still remain a mystery.

In the room where the fresco is located, Pope Julius II, in 1508, ordered the young master from Urbino to paint the walls of his personal rooms in the Vatican Palace. The School of Athens is found

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on one of the four painted walls of the Stanza della Segnatura (Signature Room), designated to be the Pope's personal library.

This paper presents how this multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary work serves as an ideal example for today's works and philosophy to connect all creative and philosophical disciplines into one, inspiring new thought and new works of creative arts to contain the human knowledge of the ages, uniting the past and future, as a meeting point of history, reason, discovery and human aspirations. It will present how this complex artwork includes knowledge, philosophy, art, morals, customs, etc, acquired by any member of society to understand human cultural cognition.

The School of Athens

At that time, libraries were divided by categories; in this case, the room is divided into four categories: Theology, Philosophy, Poetry and Law. All four categories are marked on the ceiling of the room. Philosophy has a female figure engraved with the motto *causarum cognitio*, (knowledge of causes). Theology, with the motto *divinarum notitia* (knowledge of divine things). The other two are Poetry and Law. The two dominant frescoes of the room facing each other are Theology and Philosophy illustrated with The School of Athens fresco, as two confrontations between the worlds of intellect and religion. Together, they expressed the world that Pope Julius II wished to promote: a glorious synthesis of the totality of learning within the seat of papal power. Pagan antiquity welcomed into the bosom of the Church. (Bosman, 2014, p. 67).

The fresco technique is one of the most difficult techniques in painting. Unlike canvases or wood paintings, which can be created for years and years, the fresco must be created in a day. The process is very difficult and requires a great preparation of materials and speed in casting the colors. To paint this fresco, Raphael first drew each figure on paper, then joining the pieces, he placed them on the wall, piercing the drawing lines with nails, and then sprinkled black powder to leave a trace of the figures on the wall. The biggest difficulty was with the paint. The helpers plastered the wall and the master painted quickly before it dried, so that the wall would absorb the paint and become resistant to time. Imagining this difficult technique, we can understand the genius and skill of Raphael who created such a work.

Raphael chose the subject of his fresco from Greece of the V century BC, from the speech of Pericles where it was said "Athens, is the school of Greece." Therefore, the two central figures of the fresco are the two colossi of world knowledge and philosophy: Plato and Aristotle. These two figures are the center of the fresco from which all the diagonal lines and reference points for linear perspective originate.

At the center of the picture are Plato (pointing up to his ideals in heaven) and Aristotle (gesturing down to the real world here on earth (Haas, 2012, p.8)). Plato, on the left, holds his *Timaeus* while Aristotle, on the right, holds his *Ethics*. Plato, depicted with the portrait of Leonardo da Vinci, is dressed in pink and purple, colors that symbolize fire and air, while Aristotle is dressed in blue and brown, the colors of water and earth. Both of these figures symbolize the four physical elements of the universe but also the two basic worldviews of philosophy. Plato has the index finger of his right hand pointing towards the sky, while Aristotle has his palm pointing towards the earth. One the sky and the other the earth, this was also the dividing line between the philosophers of the two enlightened minds.

Placing these two figures at the center and next to one another, was a philosophical, existential and cultural cognitive symbolism engaging the viewer to participate and make a stance in the conflicting presence of these two philosophers who represented two opposing views and beliefs in almost every discipline of thought.

Plato believed that concepts had a universal form, an ideal form. Aristotle believed that universal forms were not necessarily associated with each object or concept, and that each instance of an object or concept had to be analyzed on its own. For Plato knowledge was a virtue while Aristotle believed it had to be earned. Plato stood out in the world as "the great apostle of morality." He believed that God's voice left an echo in the human heart, but for Aristotle, God was indifferent to virtue. He was an opinion and not a moral. For him morality had no eternal basis, no divine nature, and no reward in the next world. Aristotle's philosophy emphasized reason and ignored conscience and heart (Cocker, 2018, p.886). Thus, the idealist and the pragmatist, painted in the center of this fresco, with the right hand of one and the left of the other integrated into the architectural arch that stands above them like an aura of glory.

Raphael adds to this peaceful conflict other important figures, such as Socrates, Zeno of Citium, Epicurus, Boethius, Pythagoras, Alexander the Great, Pericles, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Euclid, Archimedes, Zoroaster, Ptolemy, Protogonus, and dozens of philosophers and outstanding ancient

Greek and Roman figures who form the center of this fresco, but organized in three horizontal and two vertical groups, belonging to either the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle. For five centuries, scholars and historians have always agreed on their identities and symbolism, which now are considered as public domain.

In the background there are several arches and stairs that illustrate perspective, an important discovery and element of that time, which form a Greek cross, illustration of the harmony between pagan philosophy and Christian theology. In the background there are also two sculptures, that of Apollo, on the left, the god of light, bows and music, holding a lyre in his hand, while the other sculpture is Athena, the goddess of knowledge.

Raphael was a great admirer of two art colossi who were his contemporaries, Leonardo and Michelangelo. Thus, both of them are painted in this fresco. Leonardo in the portrait of Plato, and Michelangelo in the figure of Heraclitus, the foreground figure of the fresco, leaning thoughtfully with his elbow on a block of marble, solitary and introvert, as Michelangelo really was, and so was Heraclitus. Raphael is said to have repeatedly dropped by to check on Michelangelo as he worked on the Sistine Chapel dome fresco in the next hall, a few meters away. The figure of Heraclitus, i.e. Michelangelo, was added last, after the fresco was finished. Just as Plato and Aristotle stood for opposing ideologies and beliefs, Leonardo and Michelangelo were two opposing figures of the Renaissance in personal aspects, and sworn enemies and fierce competitors in art and society. This harmonious conflict represented in the fresco is an open invitation for cognitive processing and cultural apprehension.

In the lower right corner, the bent figure, with a red cape and flowing hair, is found the friend and cousin of Raphael, Donato Bramante, the Pope's architect, who is sketching a geometric shape with a compass in his hand, which is actually the floor plan of St. Peter's Basilica where this fresco is located, created by the hand of the master Bramante, whom Raphael compares to Euclid, the outstanding Greek mathematician, the father of geometry. But behind Euclid, Raphael left his signature, painting himself through a self-portrait hidden behind the column, wearing a black hat, half-profile and looking towards the viewer, as a message for future ages that art is an integral part of the universal school. He has painted himself hidden, somehow enigmatic, just like his own short life of thirty-seven years, which in history has remained only as a shadow, a sfumato, without living the kind of greatness that is manifested in his works. (Forcellino, 2015, p.7).

Behind Euclid are Zoroaster, the Iranian philosopher and spiritualist, holding a celestial globe, and Ptolemy, the astrologer, with a terrestrial globe. In the figure of Zoroaster, Raphael painted Jacopo Sadoleto, the pope's secretary. The celestial and terrestrial globes were important elements for the Renaissance, due to the extraordinary discoveries and expansion of the world at the time of Pope Julius II. The Cape of Good Hope was discovered in 1487, the West Indies and America in 1492, India in 1498 and Brazil in 1500. Balboa would discover the Pacific in 1513 and Magellan would complete his circumnavigation of the globe in 1521. The geographical horizon had greatly expanded during the papacy of Julius II and Christian preachers were being sent to India, Africa and the New World. Thus, these ancient scholars unfolded by the hand of Raphael were suited to the Christian interests of Pope Julius (Joost-Gaugier, 1998, p.760).

In the lower left corner of the fresco, Pythagoras is seen seated, writing, covered with a white robe, with flowing hair. He is engrossed in writing in his book with the young disciple holding a slate diagramming musical intervals and the mystic formula $1+2+3+4=10$ (Haas, 2012, p.9). He is also surrounded by thinkers of antiquity, among them, as distinguished by the white turban and the dark skin, is also Averroes, the Arab philosopher, known as Ibn Rushd.

Pythagoras is known as the great mathematician and astronomer but Raphael pays homage to his Great Theory of Beauty. The Ancient Greeks formulated The General Theory of Beauty according to which beauty consists in the proportions of the parts; in the proportions and the proper arrangement of the parts, or, even more precisely, in the size, quality and number of the parts and their interrelations. The Great Theory was developed by the Pythagoreans. The Pythagorean School defined beauty in terms of perfect structure, and structure was defined in terms of the proportions of the parts (Kostov, 2013, p.3). This Pythagorean definition is expressed explicitly in the fresco, incorporating also moral beauty and combining aesthetics and ethics.

In the center of the fresco, under the two main figures of Plato and Aristotle, stands out the Greek philosopher Diogenes, known as Diogenes the Cynic, as he was one of the founders of Cynic philosophy. Posed on the steps of the stage, covered in a blue cloak, appearing as a beggar, Raphael has depicted him as he was known, a philosopher who chose a simple lifestyle, eating and sleeping where he pleased, but homeless, in order to criticize social values and institutions which he considered corrupt.

Raphael is not timid to include the Arab philosophers at the heart of Christianity, and he has even shown himself to be very brave with Epicurus, who is on the left with a blue cloak and a laurel wreath on

his head, a philosopher very contradictory to the Christian faith, since he promoted pleasure as good, death as the annihilator of body and soul, and promoted the idea that the gods neither reward nor punish mankind. The school of the Epicureans, but also the Stoics, brought a philosophy which ridiculed the doctrines of resurrection and judgment. Their philosophy directed attention only to the welfare of the individual in this world; it was simply a philosophy on life and not like Plato's, which was "a preparation for death." The followers of Epicurus believed that "Pleasure is the chief good, the end of life is self-pleasure; therefore do not fear the gods any more, and above all do not fear death. Others took refuge in the Stoics, saying "fata nos ducunt – the fates guide us! Live according to reason." (Cocker, 2018, p.887). This is another timeless conflicting atmosphere on religion, wisely and harmoniously presented as a stage play, requiring once again the cognitive participation of the viewer.

But, however liberal The School of Athens fresco may seem, considering the period and the location, as well as how conflicting with the creed of Christianity, if analyzed in the historical context and considering some unexplained but implied elements of the work, it is understood that it was neither a manifestation of rebellion nor a threat for the Christian faith and the papacy. The whole scene of the ancient scholars, and the brightest minds of mankind, takes place in the lower half of the fresco. The upper half is covered only with architectural space, which culminates with three small windows which, like in Leonardo's Last Supper, not only serve to create the notion of space for a room without windows, but also serve as symbolism of the holy trinity, thus transmitting the message that the greatest knowledge of humanity, however magnificent it may be, remains earthly, and always under the presence of the divine. This method brought about an intertwining of religion with emotion and cognitive process. The intertwining of religion and emotion was deeply rooted in the Christian anthropology that commended the power of human emotion. In this fresco the language about religion, conveyed through imagery, religious experience and emotion is intertwined, creating a new approach how religion was conceptualized (Corrigan, 2017, pp.3-5). By adding elements of paganism Raphael raises this cognitive and emotional approach to a new level.

In order to understand this setting the viewer had to be personally part of the atmosphere, engaging all his faculties and perceptive abilities and senses. Raphael's work impacts the visual perception, i.e. the capacity to identify, classify, and interpret visual stimuli in light of prior knowledge, describing the cognitive skills that integrate visual information into higher cognitive functions and processes (Ferah-Ozcan and Yildiz, 2022, p.2).

It is worth noticing that Raphael combined paganism and humanism within the Vatican with the full blessing of Pope Julius II, at a time when the papacy itself had been more open to ancient lore and pagan mythology for centuries. The penetration of Humanism into the practices of Christianity had been evolving slowly and gently for centuries. It was Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) a well-known Dominican and theologian of his time, who believed that man had rebelled against God but that his fall was partial. According to him, the will of man was corrupted while the intellect was not affected. Therefore people could rely on human wisdom by mixing the teachings of the Bible with the teachings of ancient non-Christian philosophers.

Thanks to him, Aristotle was accepted to be taught in the universities, and the geniuses of the Renaissance created works where Christianity clearly mixes with paganism and humanism, as seen in the works of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Even Dante Alighieri followed the path of Aquinas in his work *The Divine Comedy*, where in *Inferno*, the guide is the Roman poet Virgil, who was to Dante what Aristotle was to Aquinas, and as the greatest sinners of hell Dante named Lucifer who betrayed God, Judas who betrayed Christ, as well as Brutus and Cassius who betrayed Caesar (Schaeffer, 2022, p.56). Therefore, the mixture of paganism and Christianity had become a fashion over the centuries and an artistic tool for the art of the Renaissance, which, like *The School of Athens*, could also be interpreted as a cult work for man, the power of human thought and the tradition of pagan gods in history of humanity. The coexistence between this cult and Christianity was so organically intertwined and difficult to distinguish that it allowed pagan gods within the premises of church worship.

Even St. Augustine, one of the church fathers, seems to accept their union when he wrote that "Plato made me know the true God, while Jesus Christ showed me the way to Him." (Augustine, 2015, p.184). This union would be copied in the future by Enlightenment, philosophical groups, and revolutionaries who would tone down the divine nature of Christian places of worship and promote more human nature and attributes. For example, eighteenth-century church architecture features churches decorated with angels and cherubim as if they were out-of-this-world drawing rooms, colorfully decorated to entice the masses and create choir resonance. Pushed by art, church music also went through a metamorphosis, including the music of Bach, Handel, Heide, Beethoven and Mozart in church services (Green, 2000, p.230).

Certainly, it also expanded into literature and politics. Niccolo Machiavelli's famous work *The Prince*, published a few years after the completion of *The School of Athens* fresco, promoted pragmatism

rather than morality, humanism rather than faith. Complicated in political nature, Machiavelli's advice is far from canonical biblical principles. They are typically humanist and pragmatist. For example, Machiavelli advises the prince, in this case Lorenzo de' Medici, that he should not be merciful but mean, not gentle but rude, not fair but manipulative: If he is wise, the prince need not fear the reputation of being bad... We have not seen great things done, except by those who have considered themselves evil... For this reason it is wiser to have a reputation for being mean because it brings you a rebuke without hatred... (Machiavelli, 1998, Ch. XVI-XIX).

Whenever we see or discuss such works of art, to understand them better we need to be well informed and well read. Art as mere aesthetics is amateurism and naivety. A work of art either has the heart or the mind, or both. Raphael's portraits, Saint Mary and other paintings are full of heart and feeling as they radiate a sensuous and almost divine delicacy and beauty, but in this case, with the fresco The School of Athens, with this university work, the viewer must put his mind to work, interact, use his faculties and cognitive thinking, and call for knowledge as aid, because it is a true reflection of the events, achievements and developments of time.

A viewer may naively ask why there are so many names of philosophers in this fresco. And the answer comes from history. On May 29, 1453, the Ottomans entered the golden city of Constantinople, today's Istanbul, thus signaling the end of Byzantine Christian culture. This forced all the scholars, who were much desired by the royal courts, to flee to western countries, finding refuge in the many universities that had sprung up in Europe during the past two centuries. Two of the destinations where the scholars arrived were Florence and Rome. This emigration was highly significant, as it brought many classical thinkers back to the attention of Western culture. Furthermore, due to Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, texts such as the Bible, ancient works only available to a few could now be widely read. By 1500, over half a million printed books were circulating in Europe, spreading new intellectual ideas across the continent (Kissik, 1993, p.151). Thus, mythology and ancient lore became a thing of fashion and an inspiration for the academic and intellectual ranks. Hence, under this spirit, Renaissance artists manifested that ancient lore and knowledge through their works.

The artists of the Renaissance were not simply painters or sculptors, they were engineers, researchers, historians, poets, etc., and among other things Raphael was also an architect and an archaeologist, thus, The School of Athens fresco consists in a large part of architectural forms. In his time, Raphael was well-known and important figure. Raphael's interest in architecture provides much of the grandeur in The School of Athens. By 1514 he was named the papal architect, a position suggesting he had a substantial knowledge of practical mathematics (Haas, 2012, p.6).

As the architect of St. Peter's he held an important position with many other architects under his command. As a painter he had a world-wide known name and a staff of assistants for his paintings. And as an archaeologist he was the leader of excavations and tried to systematize the measurements and restorations of ancient Rome. He accurately measured the architectural remains of Rome's old buildings. He wanted to reveal the foundations of ancient Rome in all its grandeur; therefore, although the figures in his fresco are Athenian, the architecture of the work reflects his work as an archaeologist and architect, painting it as Roman. Because of the great passion he had for archaeology, Raphael exhausted himself and his death came because of the fever that he caught during the excavations (Kissik, 1993, p.21). Due, to his architectural knowledge and talent, The School of Athens conveys an immersive experience and storytelling that makes the user lose the separation between real and virtual world (Bonacini, 2021, p.37) requiring the cognitive participation of the viewer to perceive the scene and understand the artwork.

"Raphael! As we merely whisper this magical name," writes a 19th-century author, "our whole being seems enchanted. Wonder, delight, and awe seize our souls, throwing us into a whirlwind of strong emotions." However, today he still remains unknown. An artist of intelligence, sensuality and the divine. It was not only Giorgio Vasari, the well-known biographer, who thought that Raphael's art was divine, there was no master of the Florentine school in the early 16th century who did not acknowledge his superiority (Crowe and Cavalcaselle, 2022, p.2). His masterful talent and genius is surely demonstrated in The School of Athens, where all the human senses, including that of space, of the notion of past, present and future, perspective and cognitive abilities, are required.

It is not known exactly when Raphael started painting, but it is known that he started very early. Perhaps he painted from the moment he could hold a brush in his hand. His father was a highly respected painter of the school of plastic perspective, so Raphael learned easily to depict the human form and to practice geometry and perspective in his works. The School of Athens is an intelligent fresco, but the artistic delicacy of Raphael's brush is more noticeable in the portraits and other compositions which radiate a reflection of beauty unprecedented in the history of art, making Raphael known as one of the "most known and most loved" of the Golden Renaissance (Berenson, 2005, p.94). Even Pope Leo X,

successor of Pope Julius II, emphasized the mastery of the artist. In the middle of the 16th century Raphael was thought to be the ideal painter, the universal artist in his talent, meeting all the absolute standards and obeying all the rules that govern art (Blunt, 1962, p.76). Today he is considered one of the absolute masters in history.

There is one point in The School of Athens that might trouble today's viewer, however it serves evoking another element on the cultural cognitive process, i.e. the fresco contains no women. Among the greatest minds of human knowledge and intelligence, Raphael did not include Hypatia, or Aspasia, or the wise woman Diotima of Mantinea who was Socrates' teacher. In extenuation though, Raphael paints the great Greek woman poet Sappho, prominently positioned and labeled, on the adjacent wall fresco Parnassus celebrating the arts and music (Haas, 2012, p.11). This urges the reflective senses and social cognitive participation.

Conclusion

The School of Athens summoned all the knowledge of the past, influencing the knowledge of the eras to come. As the viewer stands before it, in what is now known as the Raphael's Hall, one kneels with reverence before art and knowledge, and engages in the cultural cognitive process analyzing that ancient expression, attributed sometimes to Socrates and sometimes to Plato, ipse se nihil scire id unum sciat, I know that I know nothing.

Is this not the genesis of all knowledge, and the essence of art itself? Is this not the most inviting exercise for cognitive thinking, and cultural cognitive involvement and participation? This multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary work serves as an ideal example for today's works and philosophy to connect all creative and philosophical disciplines into one. It inspires how new works of creative art can contain the human knowledge of the ages, uniting the past and future, as a meeting point of history, reason, discovery and human aspirations. It is a complex artwork that includes knowledge, philosophy, art, morals, customs, faculties of the mind, perception abilities, and more, (Moore, 2022, p.194) acquired by any member of society to understand human cultural cognition.

The work creates a semiotic activity that at its core there is a self-exceeding mechanism, which triggers a moving-backward-and-forward relation between the sign and the interpreter. The concept of "representation" is used to define this relationship (Cerella and Bradley, 2023, pp.6-8). It stimulates the cognitive, didactic, reflective, and affective domains, fusing knowledge, thinking skills, and the centrality of emotions, values, beliefs, and moral issues into a cohesive experience. The human world is constantly being reopened and formed through the creation of new meaning.

The use of the symmetrical style mirrors the laws of nature and mathematics. The incorporation of historic figures, architectural elements, specific symbols, as well as seemingly insignificant objects, referring to philosophical concepts, invites humanity to understand and interact with the world.

This work is a holistic variation of cultural anthropology and cultural cognitive science. It is a university in which all human knowledge is summoned. Through this fresco, intellectuals, philosophers, as well as ordinary individuals, seek to use and intertwine the results from the cognitive science of culture to determine or construct debates over many philosophical questions and beliefs, considering it as a transformative example into modernity.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: B.K. and A.I., Data curation: B.K. and A.I., Formal Analysis: B.K. and A.I., Investigation: A.I., Resources: B.K. and A.I., Software: B.K. and A.I., Supervision: B.K. and A.I., Validation: B.K. and A.I., Visualization: B.K. and A.I., Writing original draft: B.K. and A.I., Writing review & editing: B.K. and A.I. We confirm that all authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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