

## PHILOSOPHY OF ART

# RAPHAEL'S "THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS": A HYPOTHESIS ON THE IDENTITY AND SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE FIGURE IN WHITE CLOAK: THE TRUE MUSE OF RAPHAEL

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*Abstract:* Raphael's fresco "The School of Athens" is rich with figures of prominent philosophers who are identified by their certain characteristic details. The identity of a figure in Raphael's "The School of Athens" Plato group traditionally attributed to Francesco Rovere, is currently being questioned. Present article brings forward a new hypothesis on this matter: the aforementioned figure is seen as a collective figure that symbolizes the unity of a man and a woman, in this case, Raphael and his muse. Besides, this figure also encodes the year when the fresco was painted. As a key to the code, the blackboard containing the Platonic perfect number 10 immediately at the figure's feet is important, as well as the positions of some of the figures in the first row on the left part of the painting. The article also makes some revelations about Raphael's real muse, who, according to the author, was the courtesan Imperia. Evidence of this is the fact that Imperia is portrayed in many of Raphael's works.

*Keywords:* Raphael, "The School of Athens", Francesco Maria della Rovere, Imperia, Raphael's muse, Margherita Luti, "Four Sibyls".

## Introduction

The main subject of Raphael's "The School of Athens", as the title shows, is philosophy. Philosophical schools are creations of Greek genius. The most famous are the following 6 schools of ancient Greek philosophical thought: the Platonist, the Aristotelian, the Stoic, the Epicurean, the Skeptic, and the Pythagorean schools. Despite the impressive number of original thinkers of many philosophical schools in the history of human culture, two philosophers are incompara-

ble in the extent of their recognition in educated circles of both distant history and the modern world. These are the great thinker Plato and his brilliant student Aristotle. The former is the founder of the school of objective idealism, the latter is the founder of theoretical philosophy. Although Aristotle spent about 20 years at Plato's Academy, they lived and worked as if in parallel worlds. Plato considered the earthly world to be an imperfect, distorted reflection of the ideal world, the perfect world of eternal and unchanging ideas. Aristotle is the embodiment of

common sense and of the limitless power of human thought. He believed, that existence is inherent, first of all, in the objects of the earthly world, and the eternity of the world lies, according to the interpretation of the great Stagirite, in the infinity of the chain of mutual transformations of material bodies. Two great Teachers of human race were opposing each other also in the central point of philosophical teachings. Plato's concept of truth is not much convincing. According to the founder of idealist philosophy, true thoughts are the memories of the human soul about the state of affairs in the ideal world where human souls lived happily before landing to the earthly world. In Aristotle's concept the true thought is an adequate reflection of reality. He taught that the truth about the essence of the phenomena of the material world can be revealed only to those who are completely immersed in their study, become related and merged with them.

In the light of the foregoing, it can be considered quite natural that Raphael gave the central place in his famous fresco "The School of Athens" to the two thinkers with world recognition – Plato and Aristotle. With the finger of his right hand pointing vertically upwards, Plato inspiring directs the interlocutor's thought upwards, to the heavenly heights of the ideal stay; Aristotle's reciprocal gesture – the balanced horizontal position of the right hand with the palm down – symbolizes the orientation of his interests towards the earth, the center of the universe of Aristotelian cosmology. For complete unambiguity, Plato's left hand is invested with his work *Timaeus*, while with Aristotle, his work *Nicomachean Ethics* serves the same purpose of identification.

Researchers of the Raphael fresco believe that the elderly man, enthusiastically explaining

something to his two interlocutors, is the image of Socrates, Plato's teacher. This interpretation is supported by the fact that this character, depicted in profile, is noticeable by his snub nose, a feature uncharacteristic for the Greek ethnos. But the snub nose of Socrates was a well-known facial feature of the outstanding thinker. Another argument concerns the character of Socrates, who was in constant search of an interlocutor. And on the fresco in question, Socrates is immortalized in the process of his favorite pastime – a discussion (undoubtedly moral and philosophical) with a group of interlocutors.

Quite recognizable is also another character of "The School of Athens" – a middle-aged, casually dressed thinker lying comfortably on the steps of the temple stairs. Since artists in all ages strive to express the typical in the singular, it is natural to assume that the dismissive attitude of this thinker to the conventions of public behavior is a characteristic position for him. Therefore, the interpreters of the fresco of Raphael unanimously identify this thinker as Diogenes, the founder of the Cynic philosophy.

Besides the above-mentioned, some other characters can be identified, such as Epicurus on the left side, Heraclitus in the middle, and Pythagoras between them, in the so-called group of Pythagoras. Some of these characters were already mentioned by Vasari in his "Life of Raphael", others were identified later by different scholars. Interestingly, Plato is identified with Leonardo da Vinci, while Heraclitus is associated with Michelangelo. However, some characters and relationships are still disputable, and the issues in dispute are not only the details of "The School of Athens", but also sometimes by extension the personality and intimate world of Raphael himself.



Figure 1. Fragment of "The School of Athens", Group of Pythagoras

Raphael's "The School of Athens" is one of his best known works. It is significant not only due to the young artist's comprehensive ideas, due to their magnificence, the harmonious and orderly interpretation of what is to be transmitted to the viewer but also due to his tremendous influence on further generations, attesting to Raphael's presence, in fine arts, as that of an established, perfect figure of that time already. This piece of work has long been the subject of numerous discussions and has been studied by both the present and past time scholars; it has enriched the undeniable value system of art for quite a long time, just like many of Leonardo's and Michelangelo's masterpieces; and seems, it succeeded in being thoroughly introduced to humanity's competent mental set. However, in contrast to the great geni of his time, whose works, as a rule, were viewed and are still being viewed in the light of both mystery and uniqueness, the works by Raphael, including "The School of Athens", are largely deprived of any such approaches, in quest of mystery. While representing one of the pillars of the Renaissance and miraculously causing to awaken from the centuries long drowsiness of the Middle Ages, Raphael, obviously, deep down, had determined the marvellous and unusual mentality of that "miracle"; both his life and his art are wrapped in a no less fabulous mist, characteristic of others. Being a great figure in the time of the Renaissance means renewing each time one's own vision of the truth rather than the aesthetic means of expression merely; it also means presenting at its best the profound, sophisticated, sudden, and often mysterious peripeteia of one's soul in confrontation with the truth. Below, an attempt is being made to show that "The School of Athens" is, first of all, the outcome of just that very dialogue with internal impulses; and secondly, by illustrating the statements with factual examples, it is necessary to make most viable the idea that it must not be viewed in the light of common assessment criteria characteristic of aestheticism and fine arts but instead be viewed as the most powerful means that incorporates the artist's innermost peripeteia of his soul; and that the evaluation of the painting from this viewpoint may and, most probably, will cast light upon certain details of Raphael's life which so far have not been disclosed.

## The Hypotheses

111 Detail from the School of Athens: Francesco Maria della Rovere (?). Stanza della Segnatura.



Figure 2. The Picture from "The Complete Work of Raphael" (Becherucci, 1969, p. 96)

"The School of Athens" depicts a fragment which is extremely noteworthy in form while opinions on its content still vary. The arguments are stirred up around the figure with a white cloak over his shoulders standing out from the group, portrayed in the front row, on the left side of the fresco. The figure is widely believed to belong to the Duke of Urbino, Francesco Maria della Rovere (Cocke & Vecchi, 1966), whom Raphael had known since the years in Urbino, the former being on a short visit in Rome at that time. This hypothesis that has reached us through Giorgio Vasari, apparently gives way to serious doubts among scientific circles. Nevertheless, the sources referring to it either avoid commenting on the identity of the person, or accompany it by an additional question mark (Becherucci, 1969), or merely write "According to Vasari" (Lübke, 1878, p. 271), applying such wording as if to disclaim responsibility. In fact, such "approach", revolving around the figure in question, has well-



grounded reasons. The thing is that there exist two more paintings depicting Francesco Maria della Rovere wherein the man portrayed substantially differs from the Francesco portrayed in "The School of Athens". One of these paintings is believed to belong to Raphael, too, while the other one, painted chronologically at a later period, is attributed to Titian. Both paintings are displayed in Uffizi, Florence. However, one must be a man of a somewhat wild imagination to seek resemblance between the assumed Frances-



Figure 3. Raphael: Portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere, Uffizi Gallery

According to Wilhelm Stein (1923), a German scholar, this figure "den Familienzug raffaelischer Bildnisse trägt" [has got features predominantly peculiar to Raphael] rather than bears any resemblance to Francesco Maria's famous portrait (p. 129).

"He has been thought to be the portrait of some prince, which may or may not be the case, but what is certainly true is that he has the formal function of supplying the necessary vertical in the tangle of curves" (Wölfflin, 1952, p. 96).

From the above mentioned, it becomes evident that Wölfflin is also of the opinion that this figure has nothing to do with Francesco Rovere, and is a matter of merely technical importance. However, on the other hand, the aforementioned white cloaked young man from "The School of Athens", sitting in the front row, is so eye-catching, his slender figure and peculiar features making him stand out from the surrounding monotony so that hardly could it be said to have

co Rovere of "The School of Athens" and between, particularly, the one portrayed by Titian. Besides, Francesco Maria della Rovere became famous not much later than the painting was created (during the Bologna wars) as a result of cardinal Alidosi's violent murder, this sometimes being the reason for identifying him with Cesare Borgia's bloody personality – something that seems absolutely incompatible with appealing and kind expression of the white cloaked young man from "The School of Athens".



Figure 2. Titian: Portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere

been depicted in order to iron out some minor, composition related wrinkles. With this regard we have our own, seemingly well-grounded viewpoint. According to our hypothesis, instead of the assumed Francesco Rovere portrayed in the fresco, this figure had been depicted by Raphael in order to impart some peculiar, symbolic meaning to it; it could possibly be a woman or as we think, neither a man nor a woman but rather something in between-something common to and combining both, let's say between Raphael himself and a woman in close relation with Raphael (the hypothesis that this figure may be representing a woman, namely Greek mathematician Hypatia, has been circulating in the Internet for quite some time). A symbolic "proof" of our hypothesis as of an alternative reference, can be found in the right side of the fresco, in Euclid's group, where on the board, inserted in a circle, there are two, equal-sided triangles one on top of the other but upside down, the so called

“Solomon’s Seal” which often comes to symbolize the male and female indivisible unity (according to other interpretations it also represents the unity of fire and water; and as is well known, Raphael’s astrological element is the fire). Besides, depicting the two mutually loving, heterogeneous creatures in one single, imaginary unity is an old tradition. As an example, we can even take Plato’s ten-member, primary creatures symbolizing the true, ideal love (in this respect Plato’s figure 10 symbolizes the ideal love) where the four legs, four hands, and the two faces are united harmoniously in one single body (Plato, 2008). Or the same can be referred to Dante’s “Divine Comedy” where in the part related to Francesca and Paolo’s tragic love story an analogous phrase is being exclaimed twice, “It [love] still will not leave me”, “He who will never be separated from me.” At the same time, when delving deeper into the logical course of reasoning, a question arises and that is, who is embodied then in the controversial figure of “The School of Athens”?

To be able to give a satisfactory answer, in the first place one needs to present another very important observation which scholars surprisingly have failed to notice so far. In fact the “young man” from “The School of Athens” with his intent look directed towards us is the eleventh in the front row from left. In addition, there are two other looks directed towards us from the left side of the fresco – in this case those of children – occupying the first and fifth seats respectively. On resuming these numbers we arrive at 1511 which is the year when “The School of Athens” was completed. We suspect that the above mentioned fact is a special code aforethought by Raphael which at the same time seems to emphasize ever more the importance of the figure in question; because if it indeed reveals the year when the painting was created, then it is only natural that the key solution given to the painting could not have been completely deprived of meaning.

Raphael is well known for his thirst for love and his voluptuous nature. Obviously, a great many women must have played a role in his life and naturally enough there must have been one among them who had influenced greatly the painter’s life and creation. We do not believe that Margherita Luti, Raphael’s so far alleged mistress, could have been claimed to justifiably as-

sume the role of “this mysterious woman” for Raphael because if we reckon that the intimate relationship between Raphael and the former goes back to the time when the artist had been working in Stanza della Segnatura, then it is less likely that the fact had remained unnoticed for so long among the painter’s circles and had only reached us at “third hand” through Vasari, taking into account the fact that the woman’s humble origin merely could have never become a ponderous reason for the painter to thoroughly conceal their close relationship. The same reasoning applies to Raphael’s sonnets that have reached us today, part of which can be found in a handwritten form on the pages of preparatory sketches of a fresco under the title “Disputa”. Thus, they could not have been addressed to the aforementioned Margherita Luti. Moreover, a “closer” study of the period when Stanza della Segnatura frescoes had been created causes us to think that the woman who was destined to have a significant influence on Raphael’s life and who left traces in the painter’s soul in his further life, must have been Imperia – the courtesan who was famous in Rome for her unparalleled beauty; and so Raphael had to conceal this for obvious reasons.

There is very little reliable information about Imperia. Imperia, “real name Lucrezia de Cognati” was born circa 1485; Imperia was in the greatest demand in Rome and her clients were the famous and influential people of the time. Her lover and patron during the recent years had been Agostino Chigi – the banker of incredible might who had built the magnificent villa in the Trastevere area for his mistress and who was Imperia’s only daughter’s – Lucrezia’s likely father. The circumstances of Imperia’s premature death remain rather vague. The most widely spread opinion is that she had committed suicide in the summer of 1511. According to Matteo Bandello’s narrative, the reason for the suicide had been the unrequited love for some nobleman Angello Bufallo which however cannot be treated as a valid reason and is most probably the result of idealization characteristic of the novel. In this context, when examining the circumstances of Imperia’s death and assuming that Imperia had indeed committed suicide and that there had been well-grounded reasons, then her intricate relationship with Agostino Chigi himself can be more noteworthy. The thing is that despite the

particularly intimate relationship with Imperia, in the spring of 1511 Agostino Chigi, on his way from Venice to Rome, brought with him his future wife Francesca Ordeachi; this was rather unexpected under the circumstances and could have indeed been the reason for the courtesan's sufferings. On the other hand, Chigi's continuous accusations and jealous scenes towards his lover may have driven the courtesan to despair if we assume that the latter went on seeing her former clients.

The reason for speculations about the likely intimacy between Raphael and Imperia lies in the hypothesis that in a number of images Raphael had created, he embodied Imperia herself. In fact, Raphael had a lot of occasions to meet Imperia. Agostino Chigi had been patron of many artists of his time, including Raphael. The painter would frequent the Trastevere villa – presently Farnesina – where he would create a number of his illustrations ordered by this wealthy client and now considered masterpieces. More often it is the popular literature rather than that shows that Raphael's fascination for Imperia had been reflected in a number of images created by the painter during this period; however, there are

quite many academic references as well. According to them Imperia is allegedly identified with Sappho – the female poet of antiquity from "The Parnassus" fresco in Stanza della Segnatura (King, 2003); with the Phrygian sibyl from the "Four Sibyls" fresco in the Santa Maria della Pace church (Servadio, 2005); with Galatea from villa Farnesina (Servadio, 2005); as well as with the character of a kneeling woman in the painting "Transfiguration" (Benediktov, 2006, p. 135). This list seems to have tendency to increase, and even Fomarina is included in it (King, 2003). Some of the aforementioned characters have obviously common features in terms of appearance and style: the position of the trunk, the turn of the head, the style of the hair, and the features as a whole. It is also obvious that in a way all this speaks of the peculiarity of the painter's style and should we follow the same logic, one can also find other similar analogies in Raphael's works. At the same time, considering the aforesaid, we would like to bring several arguments which prove that if not all of the characters specified, then at least some, as a matter of fact, imply Imperia.



Figure 5. Raphael: Fragment from  
"The Parnassus"

a) In "The Parnassus" fresco in Stanza della Segnatura, Sappho has the Hellenic lyre in her hands. Even though it has been proved that in Sappho's times this instrument had not been in use, it is nevertheless essential for our study

that Imperia too could play this instrument, and wrote sonnets like the Greek poet Sappho – something that once again stresses the similarity between the two characters: Sappho and Imperia. It is also possible that it is from

Imperia herself that Raphael had inherited the desire to write sonnets.

- b) Chronologically, the next to come is the frescoes of the Farnesina villa that had been created after Imperia's decease. In this regard Raphael's famous lines about "Galatea" addressed to Castiglione where he mentions that for lack of beautiful women he had to follow his own "imaginary" ideas on what beauty is

in order to get a complete image, are of particular interest, and can be interpreted in two ways: either Raphael indeed intended to say that in this way he recreated Imperia in his mind as Imperia was no longer alive at the time or, on the contrary, by using the distracting expression – "imaginary ideas" – he intended to conceal his one-time feelings towards the deceased woman.

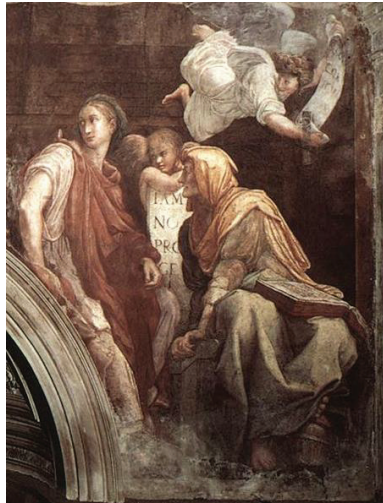


Figure 3. Raphael: Fragment from "The Four Sibyls"

- c) Furthermore, Imperia is supposedly identified with the image of phrygian sibyl portrayed in the "Four Sibyls" fresco over the Agostino Chigi chapel, in the Santa Maria della Pace church in Rome where next to the fortune-teller there is the Latin inscription by Virgil "IAM NOVA PROGENIES" (now a new race descends). As if deliberately this sentence reveals only those letters that are sufficient to communicate to us the "confession" "EGO AMO IMPERIA" (I love Imperia). If this turns out to be true, then probably this circumstance had caused Chigi to change his previous intention and to be buried posthumously not in the chapel of Santa Maria della Pace church but in that of Santa Maria del

Popolo where later his brother's, Sigismondo Chigi's body will be buried too and with whom Agostino had been on hostile terms during his lifetime.

- d) And finally, the aforementioned leads us to Raphael's painting, the "Transfiguration", considered to be his last masterpiece where the woman with her look turned towards the left is pointing in the opposite direction to a young man in the crowd (allegorically might be Raphael himself) suffering from epileptic fits, in a state of severe agony. A painting which later on will accompany the dead body of the painter in the funeral procession as per his will and will find refuge in the Pantheon for some time.



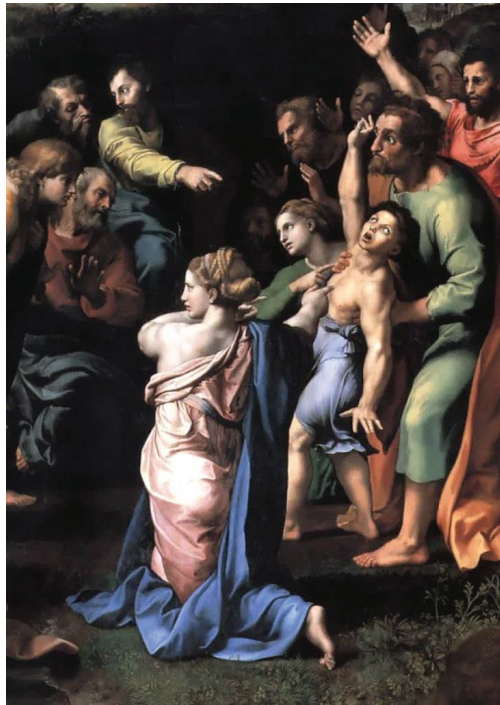


Figure 7. Raphael: Fragment from "The Transfiguration"

And now, going back again to "The School of Athens" where as we believe Raphael most probably used Imperia's or his and Imperia's common image for the 1511 code, we would like to bring some more reasons to support our viewpoint and make it more comprehensive. If we take a close look at the frame depicted in the Pythagoras group in the left side of "The School of Athens", the first thing that catches the eye is the already above specified absolute numeral ten which is possibly the reflection of harmonious platonic love incorporating the two sexes in one single entity. This frame is in the hands of the tenth person from left sitting in the first row which once again comes to prove Raphael's covertly manner of numbering his characters and of making the best use of this circumstance to bring his ideas into life. What is no less important is that this board also depicts the respective strings of the antique lyre – as we know – the instrument symbolizing Imperia and which is not at all a coincidence but rather well thought of, and is placed at the feet of the ambiguous character with the white cloak over his shoulders.

## Conclusion

Summarizing all the aforementioned, one can arrive at the following conclusions:

1. The figure portrayed in "The School of Athens" in the front row from left, with a white cloak over his shoulders, possibly belongs to a collective figure symbolizing Raphael and Imperia's unity, and not to Francesco Rovere as had once been believed. The above specified figure is ingeniously codified in intent looks towards the viewer from the first, fifth, and eleventh positions from left, which is interpreted as 1511 – symbolizing the year when the painting was completed.
2. In fact, Raphael's mysterious mistress is thus Agostino Chigi's former mistress – the courtesan Imperia, and not a certain Margherita Luti, of whom no mention had been made among Raphael's circle. This explains Raphael's love for sonnets; likewise it is she who was the source of inspiration for his sonnets that have reached us today.



Figure 8. Chapel of Agostino Chigi in the Church Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome

3. The relationship between Raphael and Agostino Chigi had not been cloudless at all. Most probably, Chigi had objective suspicions with regard to the real relationship between his former mistress and Raphael. A circumstance that may have played a role in causing Imperia to commit suicide (or maybe in the motives to be killed). Raphael had been trying to consistently conceal his close relationship with Imperia, however at the same time wishing to eternalize the possible memories of her in his further works. Raphael's reference to another woman who is in no way involved in all this, and namely to Margherita Luti, is an attempt by Raphael to dispel the existing suspicions.
4. The circumstances, under which Raphael and Agostino Chigi had died, remain rather vague. The unexpected death of the "two inseparable friends" that struck both of them within a four day difference seems surprising. Nobody knows why Agostino Chigi had rejected the idea of burying his dead body in the Santa Maria della Pace church, in his chapel (under the "Four Sibyls" fresco) as had been previously envisaged but instead had preferred another chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo church.

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