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MASTERPIECE

Taking Shape Before Our Eyes

With its energetic lines, full figures and thrilling sense of tactility, Raphael's cartoon for his fresco 'School of Athens' is a breathtaking artwork in its own right.



'School of Athens' (1510), by Raphael PHOTO: VENERANDA BIBLIOTECA AMBROSIANA, MONDADORI PORTFOLIO

By *Cammy Brothers*

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The fame of Raphael's "School of Athens," painted between 1508 and 1510 for the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican, makes it almost impossible to actually see. One must endure the lines, the crush of humanity in the room itself and rushing by to get to the Sistine Chapel. Beyond this, like any work of art known through countless reproductions, it is difficult to approach with fresh eyes. What an extraordinary satisfaction, then, in the galleries of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, to see it in peace, albeit in another form. Since March, Raphael's preliminary drawing, or cartoon, measuring over 25 feet across, has been on display in a newly designed room after a four-year restoration. Unlike the other large-scale surviving cartoons by Raphael at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, it can be seen up close, at eye level and behind nonreflective glass. We see Raphael's masterwork in the midst of its creation.

A cartoon—from the Italian *cartone*—is the last preparatory stage of a fresco painting. The image is drawn on paper at full scale, pricked along important contours, and laid on the wall. Loose powder is dusted across the surface, passing through the perforations to provide outlines to guide the artist. Cartoons were often destroyed in the transfer process or discarded afterward. The Ambrosiana's is pricked, but both its enormous scale and its survival indicate that it was never transferred to the wall. Indeed, this is the largest such work to survive since the 16th century, a minor miracle.

We live in a highly saturated visual universe, but here is a reminder that images must be made: sheets of paper pasted together, drawn on and then pricked for transfer. The gallery has a bench positioned for an overview of the drawing. But the real pleasure is in putting your nose close to the glass and seeing the energy of Raphael's lines, the broad strokes and delicate outlines, from the fine facial features to hair and drapery.

Up close, you can also see the surface of the paper—its joints, cuts, wrinkles and repairs. You can follow the prick marks, and observe that only a fraction of the lines were pricked. Since its purpose was ultimately to provide a guideline for the fresco, one might expect the artist to have limited himself to making a contour drawing. Instead, Raphael evokes the full volumes of figures, with crosshatching and smudged black chalk. Like other artists of the day, Raphael employed a team of assistants. But it is impossible to imagine anyone else making this cartoon; his hand is evident in every inch.

The "School of Athens" is the best known work in a cycle painted for Popes Julius II and Leo X between 1508 and Raphael's death in 1520. On the four walls of the Stanza della Segnatura, the artist created an image of the harmony Pope Julius II and the humanists of his court wanted to forge between ancient learning and sacred knowledge, between the classics and the Bible. In essence, Raphael and his patron gave visual form to the central problem of Renaissance culture.

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in conversation, Euclid demonstrating a mathematical exercise to a group of students, and an array of other classical thinkers from Diogenes to Ptolemy.

The cartoon displays many of the things Raphael did brilliantly—groups of people in dialogue; varied figural types, young and old, delicate and robust; and figures elegantly distributed in space. He was also a great inventor of fictive architecture, as we see in the finished painting. That, however, was the subject of a separate cartoon, now lost.

Not everything about the display is conducive to quiet contemplation. Music wafts in from the video in the antechamber. While the cartoon itself is lighted beautifully, the surrounding room is maddeningly dark. Drawings require low lighting, though this seems motivated more by the desire to imitate a dark church or a theater. But Raphael brings the drama himself; he needs no artificial enhancement.

Drawings are never easy to present to the public, but the video orients visitors who know the fresco. Even more useful are the didactic materials in the room itself. They include videos showing that none of this happened by magic—we see workmen bringing the enormous glass into the building by crane through a hole cut in the wall, and the process of cleaning and stabilizing the cartoon, then mounting it on a new piece of cloth.

The cartoon entered the Ambrosiana's permanent collection in 1626 as a gift of Cardinal Borromeo, only to be taken to Paris following Napoleon's conquest of Milan in 1796, and returned again to Milan by order of the 1815 Treaty of Vienna. It was placed in safe custody during the world wars. After a temporary display that protected it during the museum's own period of restoration, it finally has the home it deserves.

—*Ms. Brothers is an associate professor at Northeastern University and the author of "Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture" (Yale).*

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