

**RENAISSANCE ROME:  
RAPHAEL'S SCHOOL OF  
ATHENS**



# RENAISSANCE ROME: RAPHAEL'S SCHOOL OF ATHENS

## Description

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind the School of Athens by Raphael, the techniques used by the artist to paint the masterpiece and how he used different images and people to convey his messages through the fresco.

## Subjects

Art  
Art History  
World History  
European History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Vatican
- Vatican Museums
- Pantheon

## Essential Questions

- Who was Raphael? Why was he commissioned to paint the *School of Athens*?
- What techniques did Raphael use to paint the School of Athens? Why do so many of the philosophers in the work look like Raphael's Renaissance contemporaries?
- What message does the School of Athens try to convey to its viewers?
- Was Raphael successful in articulating his message to the public? How did the community receive the fresco?

## Academic Summary

On Good Friday, 06 Apr 1520, at the age of only 37, Raphael Sanzio da Urbino (commonly known simply as Raphael) died of an acute illness that had plagued him for over two weeks. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, attended his funeral in 1520 when he was buried in a marble sarcophagus in the Pantheon, an honor that few important figures have received since. Although still a young man at the time of his death, Raphael produced quite an impressive volume of artistic work over the course of his lifetime. Some of the most famous paintings of the High Renaissance are attributed to him and can be found in museums all over Europe. Considered one of the greatest artists of his age, Raphael's artistic legacy went on for years, decades and even centuries after his death. During the first half of the sixteenth century, under the papal reigns of Julius II and Leo X, Raphael, Michelangelo and Bramante literally remade Rome and the Vatican.

One of Raphael's most famous works is the *School of Athens*, a massive fresco (6 meters x 8 meters) commissioned by Julius II and decorating the wall of what is today called the Stanze di Raffaello (Raphael Rooms) in the waiting rooms of the papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace. Painted between 1509 and 1511, the *School of Athens* is a look back at the philosophers of Ancient Greece, or at least what Raphael wants us to imagine as Ancient Greece. Although the "school" never existed, academic disciplines are mixed in with philosophy so that grammar, science, music and beauty are all represented, as are wisdom and religion. Many modern engineers believe that the fresco's buildings, showing off classical Greek mathematical lines and geometry, would never have been able to withstand the immense weight of the stone ceilings. The figures in the work represent some of the greatest philosophers in the Hellenistic world such as Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, but their faces are distinctly reminiscent of Raphael and his contemporaries. Like many Renaissance artists, the master was "inspired" to paint his contemporaries (not just his friends and mentors, but even his "enemies" like Michelangelo) as subjects in the painting. Thus, Leonardo da Vinci (Raphael's mentor) became Plato, Giuliano da Sangallo (Florentine artist and close friend of Raphael) became Aristotle, and Michelangelo (who was convinced that Raphael had copied some of his style) became Heraclitus of Ephesus: the best form of flattery, perhaps? Raphael's masterpiece, however, was never intended to be a true representation of Ancient Athens, but rather a look into the "window" of classical thought and philosophy. The main figures, Plato and Aristotle, appear to be engaged in a deep discussion as they walk out of the painting, across the Apostolic Palace and into another one of Raphael's masterpieces, *The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament*, a fresco that was painted to represent the Church and its relationship to Heaven. It is as though Raphael used the *School of Athens* and its placement on the east wall of the room to explain to the public how classical philosophy and wisdom led to the development of Christian thought and philosophy.

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind the *School of Athens* by Raphael, the techniques used by the artist to paint the masterpiece and how he used different images and people to convey his messages through the fresco.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain who Raphael was and why he was commissioned to paint the *School of Athens*.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain who Pope Julius II was and how he used the patronage of the arts to convey a message of power and prestige.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the artistic techniques, symbols and iconography used by Raphael in the *School of Athens*.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How can artists use their works to convey a message? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Raphael's School of Athens
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on Raphael and the School of Athens, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework before class.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Raphael and the School of Athens (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Exit Ticket / Assessment – Short Essay: Explain in detail the message Raphael tried to convey through the images of the School of Athens, why he painted many of his contemporaries into the fresco and whether or not the artist was successful in conveying his message.

## Extension

### On tour: Pantheon

While on tour, you will visit Pantheon. Inside is Raphael's tomb. He died at a young age (37), and yet his funeral was grand and heavily attended. Raphael wanted to be buried in the Pantheon. According to tradition, he was born and died on Good Friday.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/bio/r/raphael/biograph.html](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/bio/r/raphael/biograph.html)  
Raffaello Sanzio (Raphael) Biography on the Web Gallery of Art website
- [www.newbanner.com/AboutPic/SOA.html](http://www.newbanner.com/AboutPic/SOA.html)  
“The School of Athens” (website)
- [www.artcyclopedia.com/feature-2002-09.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/feature-2002-09.html)  
“Philosopher as Hero: Raphael’s School of Athens” – article by Joseph Phelan at Artcyclopedia
- [100swallows.wordpress.com/2008/03/04/michelangelo-and-raphael/](http://100swallows.wordpress.com/2008/03/04/michelangelo-and-raphael/)  
Michelangelo and Raphael (website)
- [machias.edu/faculty/necastro/sunrise/raphael-athens.ppt](http://machias.edu/faculty/necastro/sunrise/raphael-athens.ppt)  
Raphael’s School of Athens – PowerPoint
- [www.italian-renaissance-art.com/Raphael.html](http://www.italian-renaissance-art.com/Raphael.html)  
Raphael: High Renaissance painter and Architect (website)
- [www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/SchoolAthens.htm](http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/SchoolAthens.htm)  
“The School of Athens: Who’s Who?” (website)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOrG6jfBzEU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOrG6jfBzEU)  
Raphael’s Fresco of the School of Athens (video) from the Masterpieces of Western Art series at Columbia University. Outstanding academic video – highly recommended for both students and teachers.

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raphael](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raphael)  
“Raphael” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_School\\_of\\_Athens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_School_of_Athens)  
“The School of Athens (Raphael)” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius\\_II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_II)  
“Pope Julius II” – Wikipedia article
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/country\\_profile](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/country_profile)  
On the Road: Italy (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/rome](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/rome)  
On the Road: Rome – from Passports Educational Travel
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/the\\_vatican](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/the_vatican)  
On the Road: Vatican City – from Passports Educational Travel

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus)  
Renaissance Florence – Botticelli: Birth of Venus
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo)  
Renaissance Florence – Brunelleschi: Dome of the Florence Duomo

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello)  
Renaissance Florence – Donatello
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art)  
Renaissance Florence – Giotto
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince)  
Renaissance Florence – Machiavelli: The Prince
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family)  
Renaissance Florence – Medici Family
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david)  
Renaissance Florence – Michelangelo: The David
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio)  
Renaissance Florence -- Verrocchio
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview)  
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa)  
Renaissance Europe – Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper)  
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment)  
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Last Judgment
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling)  
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta)  
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: The Pieta
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens)  
Renaissance Rome – Raphael: School of Athens

## Key Terms

- Raphael
- Reformation
- Renaissance
- Perspective
- Philosophy
- Pope Julius II
- School of Athens
- Vatican Palace

