**Color and Chiaroscuro:**

**Their Influence in Raphael’s *School Of Athens***

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The use of color and chiaroscuro in Raphael’s *School of Athens* (1510-1512) has created critical controversy throughout the centuries.[[1]](#footnote-1) Raphael’s naturalist approach to his use of light and his subtle use of color, while initially lauded, became increasingly criticized over the years by critics who believed that dramatic uses of light and color helped define great paintings, until eventually Raphael’s masterpiece was ignored altogether in regards to those elements.[[2]](#footnote-2) Fortunately, though, over the past century interest in Raphael’s use of color and chiaroscuro in *School of Athens* has allowed for a renewed appreciation of the Renaissance master’s successes. Raphael’s use of those elements in *School of Athens*, while being criticized for not being dramatic like contemporary Baroque painters, succeeds in providing masterful depth and clarity to the fresco while providing a suitable lighting for the subject, the painted conglomeration of scientists, poets, and philosophers.

When one glances at the fresco for the first time, he or she may be surprised that such a debate on Raphael’s use of chiaroscuro and color has existed. While the many philosophers and scientists in *School of Athens* wear many different colors of tunics and robes, the fresco seems to be more focused on the physical postures of people and the architecture of the impressive building they are scattered throughout. Raphael subdues the effect of his use of various colors by “the toning down of color saturation and the limiting of color values to create a greater sense of unity in the distribution of colors across the surface of the picture.”[[3]](#footnote-3) His depictions of shadows in the painting are also moderated, “consisting of subtle gradations between white and dark.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The use of color provides that the juxtaposition of the flesh tones of the figures in the painting next to the colors of their clothing does not result in making the figures appear disjointed,[[5]](#footnote-5) and the use of chiaroscuro provides a natural-looking light to the fresco, but they were ultimately criticized in comparison to the later Baroque painters.

Roger De Piles (1635-1709), feeling that “the massing of light and shadow [was] the most important part of chiaroscuro,” naturally believed that the dramatic use of shadow and raking light common in the Baroque period was superior to Raphael’s moderated, naturalist approach. He criticized *School of Athens*, feeling that “Raphael had not understood the essential principle of massing until after he had finished *School of Athens* . . . [and] also that Raphael’s color was not eye-catching.”[[6]](#footnote-6) While De Piles felt Raphael succeeded in all other facets of the painting, he thought Raphael’s “coloring was inferior to those of some twenty-two Venetian and northern artists,” and was nowhere near the prowess of Rubens.[[7]](#footnote-7) After De Piles’ critical example, Raphael’s use of chiaroscuro and coloring was increasingly discredited over the years.[[8]](#footnote-8) Apparently, Raphael’s God-given artistic “Renaissancian genius” did not extend to the colors of paints he used.

Recently, though, a greater appreciation has been extended to Raphael’s use of color and chiaroscuro. The use of warm colored tones—red, yellow, orange, pink—in the clothes of the figures in the painting allows for the figures to appear closer to the viewer of the fresco.[[9]](#footnote-9) Likewise, the colder colors of green, blue, purple make the figures seem farther away. This provides much of the depth in *School of Athens,* making the fresco easier to spatially understand. The colors of the tunics also provide personality to the figures, such as the “Cardinal” dressed in gold, whose “intense colors emphasize his spirituality.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In a similar way, Raphael’s use of chiaroscuro, though subtle, is instrumental in visually understanding the fresco.

In a naturalistic way, Raphael used cast shadow to minimize the distinction of the figure—ground values where shadow served the compositional focus. The feet of Plato and Aristotle are in shadow, as is the pavement flanking them on both sides; this creates a unity of tone that visibly welds their feet to the ground, whereas the upper body detaches itself from the light ground behind and becomes a focus for the eye.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In addition, the shadows around the figures add depth and the gradual darkening in the extreme right and left of the painting directs the central focus towards the center of the painting where Plato and Aristotle stand. And Raphael’s use of natural lighting—lighting that the viewer is apt to experience in real life—seems to fit best for a fresco depicting philosophers, scientists, and poets[[12]](#footnote-12) who gained their fame by observing and contemplating that same natural world.

While Raphael’s use of color and chiaroscuro in his masterpiece fell out of favor when in comparison to the drama of the Baroque painters, his successes in such elements can still be greatly admired today. His use of moderation in colors ultimately seems not to be a failing, as De Piles suggested, but instead a conscious effort to depict a natural, clear representation of the founding members of Western science and philosophy. And his use of chiaroscuro, while not as dramatic or as expressive as Rubens or Rembrandt, performs the important and effective role of providing depth and focus. Perhaps Raphael knew what he was doing when he painted his *School of Athens*. He was, after all, a “genius.”

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1. 1. Roger Jones, *Raphael* (Milan: Amilcare Pizzi s.p.a., 1983), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2. Janis Bell, “Color and Chiaroscuro,” in *Raphael’s School of Athens*, ed. Marcia Hall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3. Ibid., 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5. Bell, “Color and Chiaroscuro,” 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6. Ibid., 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9. Frederico Zeri and Elena Mazour, *Raphael: School of Athens* (Bologna, Italy: Poligrafici Calderara S.p.A, 1999), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10. Ibid., 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11. Bell, “Color and Chiaroscuro,” 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12. Camesasca Ettore, ed., *All the Frescos of Raphael* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)