

RAPHAEL'S STANZA DELLA SEGNATURA

Meaning and Invention

Known as the “prince of painters,” Raphael was the preeminent painter of Renaissance Rome. His classical style marks some of the most enduring masterpieces of Italian Renaissance art. Of these, the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican Palace has often been considered the most aesthetically perfect. Executed between 1508 and 1511 for the notoriously temperamental, but adventurous patron of the arts, Pope Julius II, it was the commission that thrust Raphael, then a very young painter, forward into international prominence. This ingenious work features a painted ceiling, a pavement of inlaid marble, and four large frescoed walls orchestrated with a rich cast of famous historical figures who exemplify the various disciplines of learning – theology, philosophy, poetry and music, and the law. Joost-Gaugier’s study, the first modern monograph on the Stanza della Segnatura as a whole, is the first to examine the elements of this famous monument as a philosophically integrated unit. The volume focuses on unravelling the meaning of the frescoes and accompanying decoration in light of the intellectual world of High Renaissance Rome.

Christiane L. Joost-Gaugier is a distinguished art historian and scholar of Renaissance art. She holds a B.A. degree from Radcliffe College, and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard University. A former Fulbright scholar and a recipient of grants from the Delmas Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, among others, Professor Joost-Gaugier has written extensively on Italian art. Her work, published in international journals, books, and conference proceedings, has studied the art and architecture of Venice, Florence, Lombardy, Tuscany, and Rome as well as humanism and classical subjects.

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Frontispiece. General View of the Private Library of Julius II, the Stanza della Segnatura

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Tu vero in alto.

Raffaele Maffei, *Oration on the Death of Tommaso Inghirami*
(BAV. Vat. Lat. 7928, fol. 68r)

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Preface

When I first studied the Stanza della Segnatura, we were taught, and I reverently learned, that Raphael's importance for the history of art lay in his esthetic temper. The iconography – that is, the content – of these works was not so important as the vibrant lucidities of their paint. When, later, I began to teach the Stanza della Segnatura to my own students, I discovered we did not really know what its paintings were about.

Meanwhile I had begun to study the tradition of famous heroes in Italian art. Through this experience I began to realize that, because it represents famous heroes, the Stanza della Segnatura belongs exactly to this tradition, which derived from the ancient Greek and Roman practice of using famous heroes to adorn princely palaces and civic buildings. Such heroes were arranged, by earlier Renaissance painters, separated from each other and in rows. Often these figures were identified by inscriptions. During his youth, Raphael had assisted his teacher Perugino in painting a series of famous heroes in Perugia. The difference between Perugino's static heroes, created in 1500, and Raphael's active heroes created eight years later for the Stanza della Segnatura, is vast. Raphael shows the noble figures of the past engaged in activity and conversation, so that by their appearances and postures, as well as by their personalities and the interconnective tissue they form with their neighbors, they reveal their identities without the necessity of inscriptions.

As I contemplated the difference that a few years could make, I began to realize that the reason for the difference was not only that Raphael's artistic aspirations changed when he first laid eyes on the rich archaeology of Rome; it was that the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura had an intellectual content that is deeply connected to the contemporary scholarly world of Roman humanism, a world previously unknown to Raphael. Thus did my project take form.

Preface

The present volume is the product of the many years I have pondered one or another of the problems that linked scholarship and the arts in this important commission. My interest was not restricted by the definitions of one discipline or another but rather was dedicated to seeking the links that connect the thought of the Renaissance not only with its ancient and medieval sources but also with its contemporary visualization in this extraordinary commission. I hope that my readers will understand that I do not purport to provide, in these pages, a complete picture of the deeply interconnected tissue of humanism and the arts. My purpose will be served more than adequately if these pages question the completeness of our present knowledge and inspire new viewers to enlarge their studies so as to continue research in this field so rich for the history of thought. Thus this book represents only the tip of the iceberg.

That tip would have remained invisible had I not been inspired, years ago, by those who taught me when I was a student at Harvard. It was they who first introduced me to the thrill of research. Among these were especially Millard Meiss, who allowed me as a mere undergraduate to take two seminars with him, and Federico Zeri, who taught me to read paintings for the originality of their ideas and for the fermenting effect they have on future painters. From these professors in particular I was inspired – at a time when women could, as my entering class at Radcliffe was told by then President Wilbur Jordan, hope to go to secretarial school – to trust my intuitions and abilities. Although he was not in a strict sense my professor, Giuseppe Billanovich was also one of my most inspiring teachers. I remember being treated as a real scholar sitting at the table in his home in Padua, actively discussing issues with his family and colleagues at a time when I was trying to imagine the meaning of humanism.

When working with the past, one also learns to admire those who are long dead. My years of working on the problems and issues that have led to this volume have inspired me with the deepest gratitude to many more who will not read these words. Among them are not only Raphael and Tommaso Inghirami but also Pindar, Hesiod, Dante, Cicero, Pliny the Elder, Pythagoras, Sappho, Pico della Mirandola, and many others whose words and volumes have provided me with the thrill of inspiration and the devotion to understand.

I am most grateful to those who allowed me the first opportunities to publish, in however tentative a way, the beginnings of what is presented here in a more formal structure. François Souchal and the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* were especially supportive. Gratitude is also extended to Józef Grabski and *Artibus et Historiae*, and to Michael J.B. Allen and the *Renaissance Quarterly*.

My research would not have been possible without the generous hospitality accorded to me by the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, the Library of Congress, the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the Kunsthistorisches Institut, the Folger Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Biblioteca Guarnacci. These institutions and others too numerous to list provided me with invaluable services as well as with

Preface

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My indebtedness to colleagues and friends is deep. John O'Malley was the first reader of this text in 1992, when it was but a rough draft and a gleam in my eye. His positive reaction regarding the role of Inghirami in the Stanza della Segnatura inspired me to dig deeper. Luba Freedman and Norberto Gramaccini were especially helpful and supportive early on. Among those who have helped with constructive comments, citations, ideas, photographs, support, and/or encouragement at one time or another in the progress of this project are Warren Smith, Carolyn Valone, Herbert Kessler, John Bussanich, Guido Cornini, Francesco Buranelli, David Alan Brown, R. R. R. Smith, Fleming Johansen, Dominique Surh, Bruno Gallo, Margaret Franklin, Kristina Perea, Françoise de la Moureyre, Christoph Frommel, James Beck, James Housefield, Evangelos Coutsiyas, O. J. Rothrock, George Hersey, Jerry Phillips, and David Craven. Special gratitude is extended to Ingrid Rowland, who shared my enthusiasm for this subject and for this book, which might have been ours but for her other obligations. Without the wisdom, constancy, and elegance of mind of Beatrice Rehl, its editor at Cambridge University Press, this book's road would have been far less smooth.

A special word of thanks is due to the ever helpful librarians at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, Jeannette Canty, Rachel Barham, and Jennifer Spiker, who were always able, with cheer, to find the unfindable. To Larry Meyer, whose patience transformed this manuscript into a book, I am also very much indebted.

Last but not least, this book would not have been possible without the years of patience bestowed on me by my daughters Nathalie and Leonarda, to whom it is most affectionately dedicated.

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