

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-64932-3 - Group Identity in the Renaissance World  
Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski  
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## GROUP IDENTITY IN THE RENAISSANCE WORLD

This book argues that the Renaissance, an era long associated with the historical development of individualism, in fact witnessed the emergence of radically new concepts of group identity. From the end of the fifteenth century, rapidly accelerating globalization intensified cross-cultural encounters, destabilized older categories of large- and small-group identity, and contributed to the rise of new hybrid group concepts. Drawing on insights from psychoanalysis, linguistics, and Simmelian social network theory, this book advances a theory of “group subjectivity” – perceptions, fantasies, and patterns of belief that guide the behaviors of individuals in groups and of groups themselves. Considering not only Europe but also South Asia, Africa, the Sugar Islands of the Atlantic, the Caribbean world, and Brazil, Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski reconsiders the Renaissance in global context, presenting micro-histories of group identity formation, and persuasively argues that we think of that transformational era as a “re-networking” of the world and its peoples, rather than a “rebirth.”

Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski is Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin and an Affiliate of UT's Program in Comparative Literature as well as the South Asia Institute. A specialist in the history of subjectivity and group-identity formation, she is the author of *Old Masters, New Subjects: Early Modern and Poststructuralist Theories of Will*, as well as numerous essays on medieval and Renaissance authors and on the history and practice of literary theory.

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HANNAH CHAPELLE WOJCIEHOWSKI

University of Texas, Austin



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## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107649323](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107649323)

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First published 2011

First paperback edition 2014

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Wojciehowski, Hannah Chapelle, 1957–

Group Identity in the Renaissance World / Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-00360-6

1. Group identity – Europe – History. 2. Group identity – History.

3. Renaissance. I. Title.

HM753.W65 2011

305.09'031–dc22 2010044853

ISBN 978-1-107-00360-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-64932-3 Paperback

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*To my parents*  
*Betty Joan Cotter Wojciehowski*  
*and*  
*James Philip Wojciehowski*



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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	<i>page</i> ix
List of Illustrations	xv
Dreaming the Group: A Freudian Foreword	xix
<b>Introduction: The Group and the Individual: Recollecting Burckhardt’s Renaissance</b>	<b>I</b>
1 Laocoön: The Group as a Work of Art	36
2 Of Cannibals and Caraïbas: The New World and Large-Group Transformations	76
3 Utopia: The Prenascent Group	129
4 The Buddha’s Tooth Relic: The Group Mystery	178
5 Hamlet’s Machine: The Inorganic Group	226
6 The Animal Hospitals of Gujarat: The Collective Unbound	271
Post-Freudian Conclusions for the Future History of Groups	313
Bibliography	319
Index	345

*Color plates follow page xxxiv.*

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978-1-107-64932-3 - Group Identity in the Renaissance World  
Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this book was an arduous journey and a great adventure. Many people guided me along the way, and without their help the project would not have been completed. The ideas for this book emerged during a trip to India in December of 1999. Supported by a research award from the University of Texas (UT), I visited the Historical Archives of Goa, where I was aided by Director S. K. Mhamai, and by associates M. L. Dicholkar and Arvind Yalagi. I also had the opportunity to work at the Xavier Centre of Historical Research in Porvorim, where I benefited immensely from the insight of Charles Borges, S. J., then Director of the Centre, as well as Lilia Maria d'Souza, the Centre's Librarian. Conversations with Michael N. Pearson, P. P. Shirodkar, and Pedro Moura Carvalho sent me off in new directions, as I began to understand the Renaissance in more global terms.

In the summers of 2000 and 2001, I received a K. Garth Huston and Fletcher Jones Foundation Fellowship and an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship from the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California. There I was able to continue my research for this project with the guidance of Robert Ritchie, W. M. Keck Foundation Director of Research at the Huntington; and of Susi Krasnoo, Christopher Adde, and especially Jill Cogan of Reader Services. The opportunity to converse with groups of scholars at the Huntington was an unforgettable experience and a great boost to my own understanding of creative social collectives.

In the spring of 2002, I had the good fortune to work at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (VFH), thanks to a Rockefeller Resident Fellowship at the Institute for the Study of Violence, Survival, and Culture. I owe my lasting gratitude to James Garrison, then chair of the English Department at UT; Robert Vaughan, President of the VFH; Roberta Culbertson, Director of the Institute; and Ann Spencer, Program Associate. I would also like to thank Claudia Ferman, Susan Pennybacker, Victoria Sanford,

and Leonard Smith, my fellow fellows that spring, and Jean Maria Arrigo. Many others inspired me that season, especially Vamik Volkan, Director of the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction at the University of Virginia School of Medicine. Volkan's studies of ethnic conflict and large-group behaviors had a powerful influence on the shape of this book.

I would like to thank my own institution, the University of Texas, and especially Elizabeth Cullingford, Chair of the Department of English at UT, for her continued support of this project, particularly in its final stages. A University Research Institute Faculty Research Award in the fall of 2008 made it possible for me to complete the manuscript on which I had worked for many years.

The one thing that most of us never have enough of is time. Hence, I am enormously grateful to all those who made time to read the manuscript or various chapters, sometimes in multiple drafts, and to provide suggestions for improvement. I owe my deepest thanks and appreciation to three mentors – Albert Ascoli, Sidney Monas, and Leah Marcus – who went over the manuscript carefully and helped to bring it to its final form. Eric Chapelle, Betty Wojciehowski, and Kati Wojciehowski also read the entire manuscript and commented extensively on it. My friends Marilyn Migiel and Jeffrey Kahan, and my brother Jim Wojciehowski read and also helped to conceptualize the Freudian Foreword and the Introduction. Karen Pagani helped with translations from the French in these chapters and throughout the book.

Chapter 1 of this book began to take shape after a 2003 Telluride Summer Association Program course at the University of Texas. D'Arcy Randall, the co-teacher of the course, and our group of eighteen remarkable students taught me an enormous amount about the mystery of creativity in groups. Marilyn Migiel, Susan Gaylard, Dan Birkholz, Jorie Woods, Doug Biow, and the European Studies group at the University of Texas provided highly useful advice on the chapter. Philippe Dambournet and Robert Corum assisted with translations from the French, as did Marilyn Migiel from the Italian.

Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Alida Metcalf, and Miguel Santos-Neves suggested several improvements to Chapter 2. Sam Wilson provided useful anthropological information on the history of Caribbean peoples, and Jeffrey Chipps Smith helped me to sort out some art historical conundrums in that chapter. Marsilio Publishing extended permission to republish portions of the David Jacobson translation of Amerigo Vespucci's *Letters from a New World*, edited by Luciano Formisano (New York: 1992). Miguel Santos-Neves provided assistance with translations from the Portuguese, both here and in Chapter 4.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

xi

Doug Bruster, Jeffrey Kahan, Daniel Lochman, and Su Fang Ng read versions of Chapter 3, suggesting useful ways to frame the material. Ria Vanderauwera and Su Fang Ng provided translations from the Flemish. Conversations with James Hammond also improved the chapter.

Chapter 4 has the longest history of all those included in this book. The story of the tooth relic was first relayed to me by Michael Pearson during my initial trip to Goa. Members and fellows of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities helped me to shape the chapter in its earliest stages. Madhu Kishwar published a short version of the essay in the June 2004 issue of *Manushi*, and João Camilo published a longer version in the 2007 issue of *Santa Barbara Portuguese Studies*. Gerry Heng, Jorie Woods, Alison Frazier, Judith Kroll, K. David Jackson, Susantha Goonatilake, Susan Glenn, Don Stadtner, Michael Pearson, and Pamila Gupta read drafts of the essay as it evolved, and provided many helpful suggestions on how to extend and improve it. Marcella Rossman and Paul Harford provided guidance on translations from the Spanish. Ishan Chakrabarti provided input on Pali and Sanskrit transliterations, here and in Chapter 6, and also helpful commentaries on Chapters 4–6.

Krystyna Kujawska Courtney published the kernel of what would ultimately become Chapter 5 in *On Page and Stage: Shakespeare in Polish and World Culture* (Krakow: 2000). Kathleen Perry Long provided many helpful insights into the material for this chapter when we collaborated on a 2007 Telluride Summer Association Program course at Cornell University on the Renaissance Body (as did the remarkable students in that group). Daniel Lochman, Eric Mallin, and Noel Radley read recent versions of the chapter, offering their very useful feedback.

A number of friends and colleagues helped me with Chapter 6, including Virendra K. Jain, Manish Modi, Babu Suthar, Jerry Bump, Judith Kroll, Antonio dell'Andrea, Nathalie Hester, and Matthew Reilly.

Securing the permissions for use of the images in this book was no small task. A generous University Co-operative Society Subvention Grant awarded by the University of Texas at Austin made possible the use of color images in this book. Administrative Associate Donetta Dean-Gibbs processed endless paperwork concerning rights and permissions, for which I am truly appreciative.

Thanks to W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., for granting me permission to quote from *UTOPIA: A Norton Critical Edition*, Second Edition by Sir Thomas More, translated by Robert M. Adams (1992, 1975).

I would like to thank Thomas Staley, the Director of the Henry Hunt Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, as well as Associate Director Richard Orem, Librarian Margaret Tanney, and Library Assistant Patricia Fox for all their help over the years in the creation and

production of this book. I would also like to thank the staff of the Benson Latin American Collection at UT, especially Jorge Salinas, who helped me many times over the years.

I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the following people: Dirk Imhof and Patricia Kolsteeg of the Museum Plantin-Moretus/Prentenkabinet – UNESCO World Heritage in Antwerp; Cynthia Franco of the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University in Dallas; Sinead Ward of the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin; Lou Stancari of the National Museum of the American Indian in New York; Giema Tsakuginow of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia; John Henry Rice and Howell Perkins of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia; Katie Holyoak of the Royal Collection in London; Tânia Olim and Claudia Sequeira of the Instituto dos Museus e da Conservação in Lisbon; Pieter Muys of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels; Ruth Janson of the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn; Dominik Hunger of the Universitätsbibliothek in Basel; Erin Schleigh of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; the staff of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich; Glen Worthey of Special Collections at Stanford University in Palo Alto; Rita Apsan of the Freud Museum in London; John Powell of the Newberry Library in Chicago; Qamar Banerjee of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco; Tricia Smith and Michael Slade of Art Resource in New York; Thomas Haggerty of the Bridgeman Art Library in New York; and David Corson of Cornell University's Carl A. Kroch Library in Ithaca, New York.

Adoration is how I would describe my feelings about the staff at Cambridge University Press, including the Publishing Director, Humanities & Social Sciences, Beatrice Rehl; Assistant Editor, Humanities and Social Sciences, Emily Spangler; and Senior Production and Design Controller, James Dunn; and about Shana Meyer, Senior Project Manager at Aptara, and copy editor Mary Ruff. My two readers for the Press provided exceptionally helpful advice and feedback about the manuscript, guiding it to its final form. It has been a privilege to work with such a professional team.

I would also like to thank the friends, family, and fellow travelers who provided their support over the years, listened to my ongoing litany of complaints about the writing process, helped me persevere, and gave me great ideas and inspiration all along the way: Sidney Monas, Albert Ascoli, Xianchun Vendler, David Vendler, Leah Marcus, Marilyn Migiel, Eric Mallin, Jeffrey Kahan, Cathy Caruth, Daniel Lochman, Gerry Heng, Helena Woodard, Jorie Woods, Alison Frazier, Carol MacKay, Dan Birkholz, Julia Mickenberg, Janice Inskeep, Marcella Rossman, Charles Rossman, Sandy Dunn, Paul Harford, Liz Cullingford, Su Fang Ng, John Rumrich,

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

xiii

Susan Glenn, Molly Campbell, Charles McClelland, Brent Turnipseed, Jacque Webster, John Rowley, Arlen Nydam, Kazel Morgan, Emma McClelland, Luanne Electra McKinnon, Daniel Reeves, Vittorio Gallese, Bart Wojciehowski, Dana Milne, and Cathy and Steve Lyders. What would I do without you? The remarkable students of the University of Texas also helped and inspired me. I would especially like to thank four students who magically changed my life from 2005 to 2008, and who inspired me with my own work: Ishan Chakrabarti, Kevin Cloud, Ann Terrill, and Michelle Ty.

There is one person I wish to thank again and again. My husband Eric Chapelle was with me every step of the way, showing me, quite literally, a whole new world and sharing the creative process with me. You are the music in my life.

To each and all of you, and to those I do not mention here, but who helped bring this work into being, you have my gratitude, love, and appreciation.

And, finally, to the reader of these lines and of this book: thank you and welcome!

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

F.1.	Raphael, <i>School of Athens</i> . Stanza della Segnatura (1509–1510).	page xxii
F.2.	Raphael, <i>Parnassus</i> . Stanza della Segnatura (1510–1511).	xxiv
F.3.	Raphael, <i>Parnassus</i> , detail of Dante, Homer, Virgil, and Statius.	xxvi
F.4.	Raphael, <i>School of Athens</i> , detail of Heraclitus/Michelangelo.	xxvii
F.5.	Raphael, <i>School of Athens</i> , detail of Zoroaster, Ptolemy, Apelles/Raphael, and possibly the painter Sodoma or Raphael’s mentor Perugino.	xxviii
F.6.	Raphael, <i>School of Athens</i> , detail of Pico della Mirandola and/or Francesco della Rovere.	xxix
F.7.	Raphael, <i>School of Athens</i> , detail of Plato/Leonardo da Vinci and Aristotle.	xxx
F.8.	Raphael, <i>School of Athens</i> , with perspectival lines superimposed.	xxxi
I.1.	Jacob Burckhardt. Photograph (1892).	3
I.2.	The Committee at the Seventh International Psychoanalytic Congress. Photograph (Berlin, 1922).	19
I.1.1.	<i>Laocoön</i> , with restorations made in 1960.	39
I.2.	Hendrik van Kleeef, painting of the Antiquarium established by Julius II (1589[?]).	40
I.3.	Marco Dente da Ravenna, <i>Laocoon</i> . Engraving (1522–1525).	43
I.4.	Vatican <i>Laocoön</i> with Renaissance restorations (16th century to 1960).	45
I.5.	Federico Zuccaro, <i>Taddeo Zuccaro Copying Laocoön. Julius II’s Antiquarium with Bramante Corridor, S. Peter’s and Vatican Palace in background</i> . Pen and ink drawing (ca. 1595).	46
I.6.	Michelangelo, “The Creation of Adam.” Sistine Chapel. Fresco (1508–1512).	53
I.7.	Michelangelo, “The Creation of Adam,” detail of God and surrounding angels.	54
I.8.	Michelangelo, “The Creation of Adam,” detail of Eve.	55

xvi	LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	
1.9.	Raphael, <i>Parnassus</i> , detail of Apollo and Muses. Stanza della Segnatura.	57
1.10.	Pierre Mignard, cupola of the Church of the Val-de-Grâce, Paris. Fresco (1662–1666).	59
2.1.	<i>Adoration of the Magi</i> , Studio of Grão Vasco. Oil on wood (1501–1506).	77
2.2.	<i>Jar in the form of a woman or the Taíno Earth Mother Cahubaba</i> . Ceramic sculpture (Chicoid/Taíno, 1200–1500).	84
2.3.	Mythological Figure of Deminán <i>Caracaracol</i> . Ceramic sculpture (Chicoid/Taíno, 1200–1492).	85
2.4.	Female cannibals. Engraving on wood. From Amerigo Vespucci, <i>Von der neuen welt</i> (Strasbourg, 1509).	93
2.5.	<i>Universalis cosmographia</i> . Woodcut (St. Dié, 1507).	96
2.6.	<i>Universalis cosmographia</i> , detail of “America.”	99
2.7.	Johann Froschauer, broadsheet representing Vespucci’s cannibals. Woodcut (Augsburg, 1505).	105
2.8.	<i>Caraïbes</i> . Woodcut of a Tupinamba dancer and a <i>maraca</i> player from Léry’s <i>Histoire d’un voyage</i> (Geneva, 1611).	113
3.1.	Anonymous, <i>Antverpia mercatorum emporium</i> . Woodcut (Antwerp, 1515).	132
3.2.	<i>Antverpia mercatorum emporium</i> , detail of the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal (Cathedral of Our Lady).	135
3.3.	Master of the Morrison Triptych, <i>Adoration of the Magi</i> . Oil on panel (Antwerp, 1504).	142
3.4.	Master of the Morrison Triptych, <i>Adoration of the Magi</i> , detail of the Magus Balthasar and other worshippers.	143
3.5.	<i>Utopiae insulae figura</i> . Anonymous woodcut from the first edition of <i>Utopia</i> (Louvain, 1516).	147
3.6.	Albrecht Dürer, <i>Katharina</i> . Drawing (Antwerp, 1521).	163
3.7.	<i>Tabula moderna prime partis Aphricae</i> , from Waldseemüller’s <i>Ptolemy Atlas</i> (Strasbourg, 1513).	168
3.8.	<i>Tabula moderna prima partis Aphricae</i> , detail of Madeira and the Canaries.	170
3.9.	<i>Tabula moderna prima partis Aphricae</i> , detail of São Tomé, Principis, and the Gulf of Guinea.	171
3.10.	Waist pendant with oba and two attendants. Copper alloy (Benin, Edo State, Nigeria; mid-16th to early 17th century).	172
3.11.	Plaque of a Portuguese explorer. Copper alloy (Benin, Edo State, Nigeria; 16th or 17th century).	173
4.1.	Solias Mendis, <i>Danta and Hēmamālā Transporting the Sacred Tooth Relic to Sri Lanka</i> . Mural (Kelaniya Temple, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka; 20th century).	181



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS xvii

4.2.	The Māligāwa temple complex in Kandy today.	183
4.3.	The Mahazedi Pagoda, Bago (Pegu), Myanmar.	191
4.4.	Joannes à Doetechum, The Leilaõ of the City of Goa, from <i>Iohn Hvighen van Linschoten. His Discours of Voyages into ye Easte &amp; West Indies</i> (London, 1598).	194
4.5.	Baptista à Doetechum, Indian Pagodas and Mosques, etching from <i>Iohn Hvighen van Linschoten. His Discours of Voyages into ye Easte &amp; West Indies</i> (London, 1598).	197
4.6.	Francisco de Sousa, S.J. Frontispiece, <i>Oriente conquistado</i> (Lisbon, 1710).	205
4.7.	Tablet from the Cochangadi Synagogue, built in 1345 and rebuilt in 1539 CE. Now in the courtyard of the Paradesi Synagogue (1568).	212
4.8.	Paradesi Synagogue, Cochin, India.	213
5.1.	Carl Decker, <i>Destruction of the bridge of Farnèse</i> . Etching (second half, 17th century).	234
5.2.	Leonardo da Vinci, anatomical drawings and notes on the mechanisms of breathing. Royal Collection (RLW), 19015v; K/P 149v (detail).	238
5.3.	Leonardo da Vinci, anatomical drawings and notes on the mechanisms of breathing. RLW, 19061v; K/P 154v (detail).	239
5.4.	Prosthetic hand from Ambroise Paré, <i>The Workes of that famous chirurghion Ambrose Parey</i> (London, 1649).	243
5.5.	Water pump and fountain from Agostino Ramelli, <i>Le diverse et artificiose machine</i> (Paris, 1588).	244
5.6.	Portable bridge from Agostino Ramelli, <i>Le diverse et artificiose machine</i> (Paris, 1588).	245
5.7.	Device for hauling heavy loads from Agostino Ramelli, <i>Le diverse et artificiose machine</i> (Paris, 1588).	246
5.8.	Fountain with automata, Salomon de Caus, <i>Les Raisons des forces mouvantes</i> (Paris[?], 1624).	255
5.9.	Leonardo da Vinci, Treadmill-powered multiple crossbow, <i>Codex Atlanticus</i> , fol. 1070r recto (1485–1487).	262
6.1.	Pietro della Valle. From <i>Les famevx voyages de Pietro della Valle</i> (Paris, 1664).	272
6.2.	Sitti Maani Gioerida. From <i>Les famevx voyages de Pietro della Valle</i> (Paris, 1664).	273
6.3.	Joannes à Doetechum, Goan Merchants, Banians of Cambay, and Brahmans of India, etching from <i>Iohn Hvighen van Linschoten. His Discours of Voyages into ye Easte &amp; West Indies</i> (London, 1598).	285
6.4.	<i>Mahāvīra Enthroned in Heaven</i> . A page from a manuscript of the Kalpasūtra. Opaque watercolor and ink on paper (1416).	286

xviii	LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	
6.5.	Ganadharavālaya Yantra. Opaque watercolor on cloth. (Gujarat, possibly Cambay; 1600–1650).	287
6.6.	Narsingh, illustration from <i>The Akbar nāmā</i> ; Akbar, Jesuit missionaries, and others debating religious beliefs. Painting (1605).	291
6.7.	Kesu Das, <i>Salim Album</i> : A Jesuit. Painting (ca. 1595–1600).	293
6.8.	Miskin and Ibrahim Kahar, Mango Trees and Peafowl. Painting on paper from the <i>Babur nāmā</i> (Agra, ca. 1590).	295
6.9.	Catafalque for Sitti Maani’s memorial service in the Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome, 1627. From <i>Les famevx voyages de Pietro della Valle</i> (Paris, 1664).	311

## DREAMING THE GROUP: A FREUDIAN FOREWORD

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.

– Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

At the turn of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud investigated the underlying structures of dreams, seeking to locate within them a hidden logic governing our unconscious lives. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), he proposed that while certain elements of dreams may appear strange or random, in fact they are not. Even in dreams – or rather, especially in dreams – things go together for a reason. To illustrate their combinatory logic and their relation to the subtending thoughts and fantasies from which dreams emerge, Freud proposed the following pictorial analogy:

In the first place, dreams take into account in a general way the connection which undeniably exists between all the portions of the dream-thoughts by combining the whole material into a single situation or event. They reproduce *logical connection* by *simultaneity in time* [*Gleichzeitigkeit*]. Here they are acting like the painter who, in a picture of the School of Athens or of Parnassus, represents in one group all the philosophers or all the poets. It is true that they were never in fact assembled in a single hall or on a single mountain-top; but they certainly form a group in the conceptual sense.

Dreams carry this method of reproduction down to details. Whenever they show us two elements close together, this guarantees that there is some specially intimate connection between what correspond to them among the dream-thoughts.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the *Interpretation of Dreams*, in *Standard Edition*, 4: 314. *Die Traumdeutung*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 2–3: 319.

In this account of how dreams work – and also, implicitly, of how groups work – Freud refers his readers to two frescos painted by the Renaissance artist Raphael on the walls of the Vatican’s Stanza della Segnatura between 1509 and 1511 (Figures F. 1 and F. 2). Freud suggests that these two paintings demonstrate by analogy the associative properties of dream-work. In *The School of Athens*, Raphael had depicted the great philosophers of classical antiquity in conversation with each other. At the center of the painting, where the perspectival lines of the cavernous hall converge, the artist positioned the two founding fathers of western philosophy, Plato and his disciple Aristotle. They are rapt in speculation. Around them other legendary thinkers congregate, including Socrates, Zeno, Epicurus, Pythagoras, Euclid, Parmenides, Diogenes, and numerous others.<sup>2</sup> To explain the principle of *Gleichzeitigkeit*, or “simultaneity,” in dreams – that is, the phenomenon of unexpected temporal and/or spatial conjunctions – Freud evokes Raphael’s painterly fabrication of a “single situation or event.” *The School of Athens*, an imagined dialogue between philosophers who lived in widely different historical periods and geographic regions, yet who nevertheless appear together on the vaulted stage of Raphael’s philosophical fantasy.

Similarly, in the *Mount Parnassus* fresco, Apollo, god of poetry and music, together with the nine Muses, presides over a gathering of renowned poets – nine ancient and nine contemporary. The artist envisioned a meeting of literary minds transcending time and space. In one grouping to the left of Apollo and the Muses, the poets Dante, Homer, Virgil, and Statius stand (Figure F.3). In art, as in dreams, such conjunctions are possible. Here the honored poets gather under the auspices of their patron god, perhaps to converse, perhaps to compete, perhaps to share poetry, ideas, and inspiration. Viewers are left to speculate on the nature of their engagements or even to imagine themselves joining the group. Similar to Raphael, who placed together in these frescos persons from different historical periods, as well as imaginary beings (Apollo and the Muses), Freud suggests, so does the dreamer combine diverse memories, experiences, and ideas organized into a narrative structure. These seemingly arbitrary juxtapositions within dreams reveal, on deeper examination, a guiding intentionality at work.

<sup>2</sup> From Vasari’s time down to our own, the identities of the figures in Raphael’s *School of Athens* have been much debated. See, for example, Vasari, *Lives*, 4: 216–218; Passavant, *Raphael of Urbino*, 89–99; Garello, Rossi, and Salomone, *Raffaello: La Scuola di Atene*; Bell, “New Identifications,” 638–646; Rowland, “The Intellectual Background of the *School of Athens*,” 131–175; and Joost-Gaugier, *Raphael’s Stanza della Segnatura*.

The principle of simultaneity extends still more deeply within Raphael's composition, however, because several images of the philosophers are thought to be portraits of the artist's contemporaries. Michelangelo might have served as the model for the brooding figure draped in purple who dominates the center foreground of the painting, thought to be Heraclitus, ancient philosopher of change and flux. On the extreme right, Raphael painted himself, possibly as the sharp-eyed Apelles, and the androgynous figure in a white robe could represent Pico della Mirandola or Francesco della Rovere, or, according to popular speculation, Hypatia, as Raphael's mistress. Leonardo, bearded and magisterial, is said to appear as Plato (see Figures F.4–F.7).<sup>3</sup> In one painted figure, two (or perhaps more) historical persons converge, just as in dreams one person can stand in for another, or multiple meanings may be condensed within a single symbol. In this pivotal passage in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud paves the way for his famous analysis of condensation and displacement, the twin mechanisms employed by the unconscious to distort, displace, compress, or magnify the image-text of the dream – namely, the feelings or impulses that are given expression in dream-work.

Although Raphael's two frescos appear at first glance to be limpid illustrations of Freud's concept of *Gleichzeitigkeit*, or simultaneity in dreams, we may well ask why he chose these two images in particular. There would, of course, have been any number of ways to analogize the placing together of disparate persons, objects, or themes in dreams. Was there a deeper logic driving this choice, which appears at the crux of Freud's explanation of dream-work, and which serves in a sense as the vanishing point of his own argument?

It is probably not a coincidence that Freud explains the phenomenon of *Gleichzeitigkeit* through the previously discussed visual analogies to two

<sup>3</sup> Michelangelo is generally thought to have served as the model for the figure of Heraclitus. See Rowland, 157. Similarly, Plato's image is frequently taken to be a portrait of Leonardo da Vinci. See Garello, v–vi, and Redig de Campos, *Raffaello nelle Stanze*, 17. Vasari may have been the first to identify the Raphael portrait in the painting. See *Lives*, 4: 217.

The image of the striking young blond in the white cape may be a portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, as suggested by Redig de Campos (13) and Passavant (92). More recently, Joost-Gaugier has argued that the figure may represent the Florentine philosopher Pico della Mirandola (93–96). The popular notion that this image portrays the ancient philosopher Hypatia, modeled on the features of Raphael's mistress Margarita, has not been accepted by art historians. Because of its polysemy, this particular figure provides an interesting example of dreamlike simultaneity, since there is little agreement on the identity of this figure, its doubleness, or even its sex.

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F.R. Raphael, *School of Athens*, ca. 1509–1510. Fresco, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Vatican State. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, New York. Freud's first example of *Gleichzeitigkeit* (simultaneity) in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. (See color plate.)

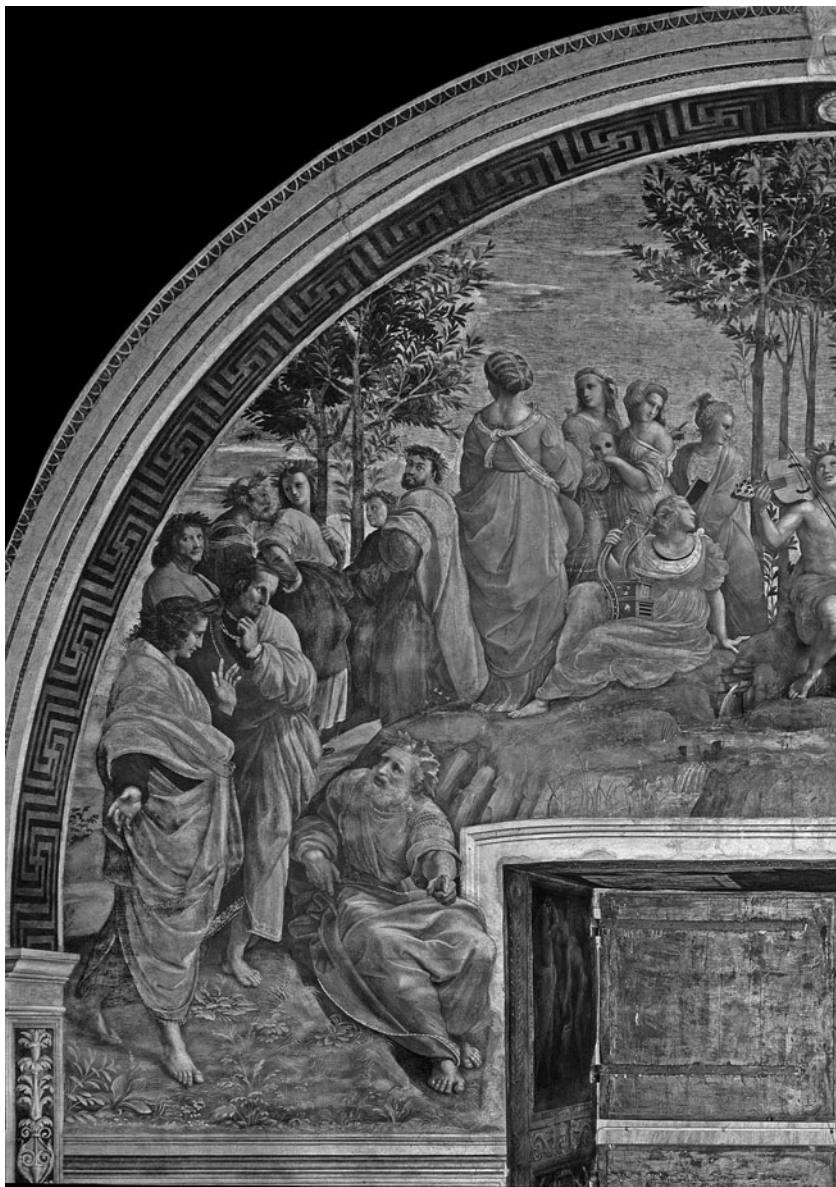


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F.1

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F.2. Raphael, *Parnassus*, ca. 1510–1511. Fresco, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Vatican State. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, New York. Freud's second example of *Gleichzeitigkeit*.



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F3. Raphael, *Parnassus*, detail of Dante, Homer, Virgil, and Statius. Photo credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, New York.

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F4. Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of Heraclitus/Michelangelo. Photo credit: Alinari / Art Resource, New York.

well-known works of art from the Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> That period of history extending from the late fourteenth century in Italy to the early seventeenth

<sup>4</sup> Freud would return to these two frescos in his 1915 essay “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death.” Describing a time before WWI, he wrote,

Nor must we forget that each of these citizens of the civilized world had created for himself a “Parnassus” and a “School of Athens” of his own. From among the great thinkers, writers





F5. Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of Zoroaster, Ptolemy, Apelles/Raphael, and possibly the painter Sodoma or Raphael's mentor Perugino. Photo credit: Alinari / Art Resource, New York.

century has long been celebrated – or disparaged – as an era of extravagant individualism. This book explores how that era also heralded the transformation of the group, and of the community, because one change could not have occurred without the other. This transformation and reorganization of collective identities took place for the first time on a truly global scale. In his two telling analogies explaining the logic of dreams, Freud inadvertently highlights an aspect thereof – the combination of people in new, unexpected, and unconventional groupings, organized by choice and by fantasy. In doing so, he suggests another significant feature of collectives: namely, that groups do

and artists of all nations he had chosen those to whom he considered he owed the best of what he had been able to achieve in enjoyment and understanding of life, and he had venerated them along with the immortal ancients as well as with the familiar masters of his own tongue. None of these great men had seemed to him foreign because they spoke another language – neither the incomparable explorer of human passions, nor the intoxicated worshipper of beauty, nor the powerful and menacing prophet, nor the subtle satirist; and he never reproached himself on that account for being a renegade towards his own nation and his beloved mother-tongue.

*Standard Edition*, 14: 271–302, pp. 277–278.

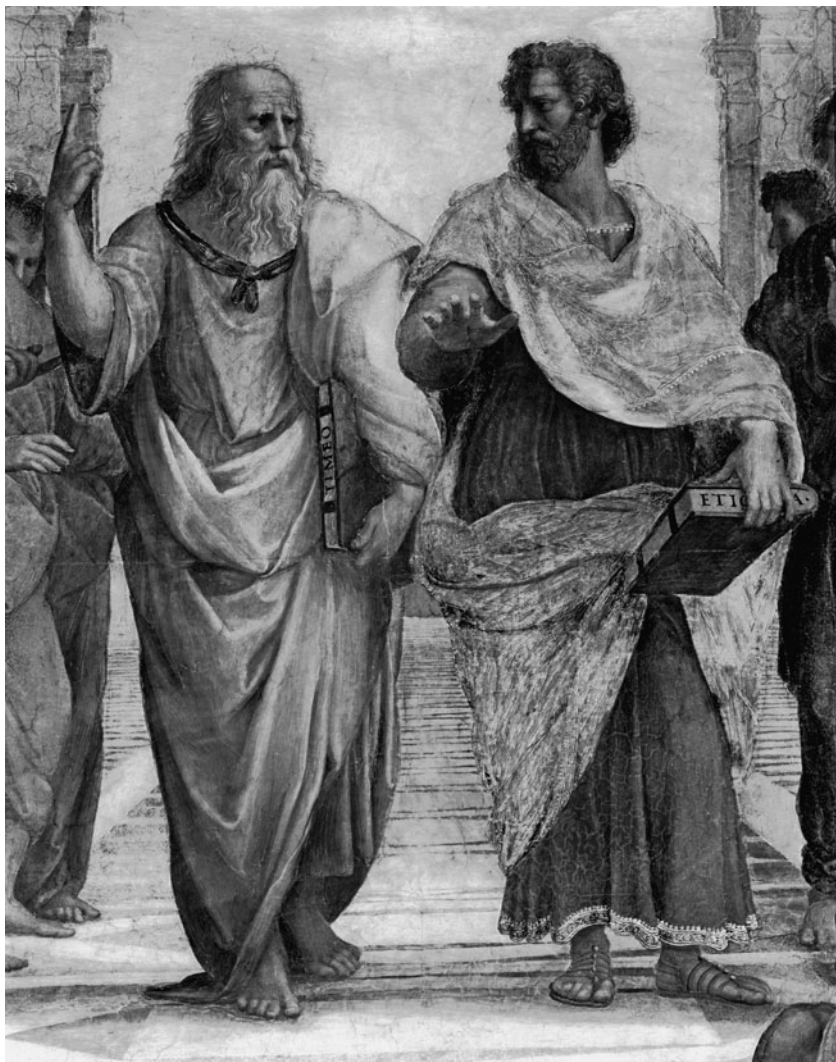


F6. Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of Pico della Mirandola and/or Francesco della Rovere; alternately, Hypatia/Margarita. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, New York.

not have to be real – historical, concrete entities – to exert a powerful influence on cultures. Through these illustrations in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud throws into relief the virtual group, the group as fantasy. It is possible not just in dreams but also in our imaginative lives to create new groupings of people, as well as animals, objects, and concepts.

Perspectival tour de force that it is, *The School of Athens* can be said to illustrate yet another conceptual phenomenon of which it serves as visual analogy: the unconscious lives of groups. Mastering the art and science of perspective, a new development of the Renaissance,<sup>5</sup> Raphael organized his

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*; Kemp, *The Science of Art*; and Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*.



F7. Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of Plato/Leonardo da Vinci and Aristotle. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, New York.

fantasy around a vanishing point at the center of the painting, a point where multiple lines of perspective converge. That vanishing point has been carefully, perhaps ironically, obscured by the artist, who positions the two leading

As Kubovy notes, “The most obvious function of perspective was to rationalize the representation of space: With the advent of perspective, it became much easier to stage, as it were, elaborate group scenes organized in a spatially complex fashion” (1).