

The Byzantine Scholar

...and his influence on the Italian Renaissance

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Thesis / Hypothesis

The Humanist movement during the Italian renaissance was aided by the rediscovery of classical literature which was brought to Italy by Byzantine humanist scholars. They brought with them classical manuscripts and knowledge of Ancient Greek. The Greco-Roman ideas, icons, symbols and mythology contained in the manuscripts sparked an interest in the classics and as a result we see classical iconography reflected in Renaissance era architecture and artwork.

Sources/ Limitations of Study

The primary sources for this study are the pieces of Raphael's artwork. Another primary source are the classical works that inspired the artwork from ancient Greek manuscripts. A limitation of this study is that the content that from classical literature was not taken from primary sources, but rather retold through secondary sources. Another limitation regarding the use of classical Greek literature is that during translation meaning can be lost or misinterpreted by the translator. Unless you have knowledge of Ancient Greek and access to original manuscripts you are still relying on a secondary voice to transmit the information. The secondary sources are interpretations others have written about the paintings in scholarly journals and accounts regarding the life of Byzantine scholar Chrysoloras. The limitations of the secondary sources that analyze the paintings and the Greco-Roman influence are subject to the authors own interpretations. Because of the subjective nature of art there can be debate about intended meaning. In the *School of Athens* the artist Raphael did not offer commentary on the work leaving it open for interpretation. Thus we are lacking the perspective of the artist himself on this particular piece of work. Another perspective that is missing is that of the artist's patron. Artwork such as Raphael's was commissioned by wealthy Italian patrons during the renaissance, or in the case of the *School of Athens*, by the Vatican. How much input did they give into the artwork and if they did make requests where did they draw their inspiration from.

Argument / Discussion / Evidence

During the 15th century a gradual shift occurred in visual art from religious themed to secular themed subject matter. This occurred in response to a revival in interest in the classics. The interest in learning Ancient Greek and translating classical manuscripts can be largely attributed to the work of one man, Manuel Chrysoloras. Chrysoloras was a well-regarded Byzantine humanist scholar and diplomat who was born in Constantinople between 1350-1355. This was a time of crisis for the Eastern Empire as it was devastated by civil war, facing increasing threat from the Ottomans and under pressure from the West to unite the Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic Church. As a result scholars began to leave the deteriorating situation in Constantinople and brought with them classical manuscripts and knowledge of ancient Greek.



Chrysoloras left Constantinople in 1388 with another influential Byzantine scholar, Demetrius Cydones, on a political mission to Italy. His reputation had preceded him and he was invited to teach Greek at the University of Florence. After a time in Florence Chrysoloras did return briefly to Byzantium and brought with him a student, Jacopo Angeli, who went on to translate an important humanist text, Plutarch's *Lives*. The excitement generated from Cydones and Chrysoloras's teachings attracted the interest of an influential figure, Coluccio Salutati, the Chancellor of Florence. Salutati began a correspondence with Cydones and Chrysoloras and played a pivotal role in establishing Hellenistic studies in the West among the humanist scholars. The list of Chrysoloras's students includes the most influential humanist scholars of the time, many of whom went on to further the study of classic literature and philosophy.

The most significant contribution that Chrysoloras made to the humanist movement was not through writing but through his teaching. He exerted a great amount of influence on humanist scholars and was regarded as "the prince of Greek eloquence and philosophy". One of the

lasting legacies that Chrysoloras left was a Greek grammar book called Erotemata. It was smaller and more organized than previous grammar guides and Erotemata was used as a translation aid well into the 16th century. Chrysoloras died in 1415 and he willed his extensive library to his students Palla Stozzi, Roberto Rossi and Vergio. The collection included works by Ptolemy, Plato, Demosthenes, Plutarch, and Thucydides. In many ways Chrysoloras can be considered the seed from which humanist thought grew and flowered throughout Italy and across Europe.

The philosophy of Humanism was based on the reinterpretation of pagan classical literature and philosophy to comply with contemporary Catholic beliefs, and the depiction of classical mythology provided a more ambitious vehicle for the artist than purely devotional subjects. (Haughton) Chrysoloras left a legacy by sparking an interest in classical literature and philosophy in the city of Florence. It has been argued by Haughton that the philosophy of Humanism, which strove to resurrect and emulate the literature and art of the ancient Greeks and Romans, was impetus for the Italian Renaissance. A gradual shift from religious subject-themed art to secular art can clearly be seen in the work of Renaissance artists. Florence is considered to be the birthplace of the Renaissance and like Chrysoloras, the artist Raphael Sanzio spent time in Florence and would have been influenced by the entrenched humanistic views of that city.

School of Athens

Examining the piece of work by Raphael Sanzio titled the *School of Athens* we can observe the influence of Greco-Roman symbology, mythology and iconography. The *School of Athens* long been admired as a monument to Neoplatonism. The work is a fresco in the Stanza della Segnatura, in the Vatican Palace.



The central figures in the fresco are the figures of Plato and Aristotle holding titled manuscripts. In the centuries leading up to the Renaissance the presence of a book in artwork symbolized the holy bible. In *School of Athens* the books represent secular knowledge as a symbol of the era of humanism. Art historians have suggested that nearly every great Greek philosopher and ancient scientist can be found in the piece. Bell points out that one of the difficulties in correctly

identifying the figures is that Raphael could not have based the identification of any philosophers in the School of Athens solely upon archaeological evidence. Many original Roman paintings were discovered around 1480 in the Domus Aurea, the Golden House of the Emperor Nero, and more were found during archaeological excavations in Pompeii. Classical statues were also being unearthed in Rome during this time. Virtually no ancient painting had yet been discovered, so the Renaissance artist had to illustrate classically themed art by copying statues or by reconstructing classical paintings from contemporary ancient descriptions (a complex discipline known as ekphrasis.).

Bell theorizes that in order to depict these historical personages as accurately as possible, Raphael would have been forced to rely on descriptions from the works of classical authors. One of the classical works that art historians believe that Raphael would have drawn on was Diogenes Laertius's *Vitae* which at that time had only been recently translated from Greek. Bell argues that using classical literature Raphael began to construct iconographic motifs for the most celebrated philosophers in the school of Athens. Based on the details and anecdotes in *Vitae* about the philosophers' lives, historians have identified Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Pythagoras, Ptolemy, Zoroaster and Euclid. Not only did artists begin to tell the stories of classical literature through art, they began to develop the iconography and symbology we associate with historical characters and people. Artists of the Renaissance created the visual accompaniment to classical literature and allowed us to see the past.

Relation / Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

The passing of knowledge and ideas across time and throughout the rise and fall of civilizations is a wondrous thing. The transmission of classical literature from Byzantine to Italy is a study in cause and effect or causality, which is appropriate since the philosophy of causality is an Aristotelian philosophy. It was a specific series of events that led to humanist philosophical thinking developing in Florence and that way of thinking prompting a shift in the visual arts from religious to secular. In our own world it is important that we understand the impact that events from the past have had on our future, as well as how the events of today will impact future.

generations. In this particular study we examine the impact that one teacher, Chrysoloras, had on a generation of scholars and how the effects of his teaching reverberated through history. It demonstrates the impact that one teacher can make and emphasises the importance of the pursuit of knowledge and the value of education.

Conclusion

Today it is important understand how delicate our civilization and the knowledge we have acquired is. It is unimaginable to think of what would have happened if the delicate thread that connected Byzantine to Italy had been broken. Priceless collections of classical literature would have been lost and with them knowledge of the ancient world. Western philosophical thought would have died with it and Renaissance art would have lost some of its lustre. But it was saved because of a teacher.

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