

Harald Schwaetzer, Stefan Hasler, and Elena Filippi. *Raffaels Sixtinische Madonna: Eine Vision im Dialog*.

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A philosophical investigation of the *Sistine Madonna* has appeared on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the creation of the altarpiece, begun by Raphael at the behest of Julius II in about 1512. Harald Schwaetzer, Stefan Hasler, and Elena Filippi have contributed five interlocking essays on the iconographical meaning and the formal qualities of the image. As Filippi announces, their desire is to move away from the tendency, especially in the German commentary since Winckelmann's

eulogy of 1755, to attribute spiritual inspiration to the image by a form of romantic transference of the self. Instead, the authors seek to understand the meaning by placing the artist and his unique creation into historical context. For these scholars, the context involves three spheres: the scholars and theologians of Raphael's day, whose ideas may illuminate Raphael's apparition of the Madonna and Child; the visual precedents in earlier paintings of visionary experiences, particularly Flemish works; and the Pythagorean and Platonic theories about the underlying geometrical perfection of God's cosmos.

In their essays, these scholars further a Neoplatonic reading of Raphael's painting. Indeed, Filippi contends that Raphael was completely under the sway of the most intelligent Neoplatonists of his day, most notably, Egidio da Viterbo and Luca Pacioli. She identifies Neoplatonic influence in a sequence of Raphael's important commissions, beginning with the Stanza della Segnatura, and holds the Sistine Madonna to be the "high point" (14). Building on the thought of Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, Egidio da Viterbo used Neoplatonic language to describe the spiritual journey of the human soul in its striving to reach the godhead. He discussed the role of love and beauty in the dynamic flow from the celestial down to the terrestrial realm and back up again, and believed numbers and geometrical forms were mystical embodiments of divine perfection.

Harald Schwaetzer follows with an examination of how visionary experiences have been represented, focusing on the inclusion of the donor experiencing the vision, in panels by Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden. Schwaetzer confirms (as several previous scholars had also demonstrated) that Raphael was remarkably innovative because, in the *Sistine Madonna*, he painted a true vision. Now the spectator outside the frame is effectively the beholder, whereas before, the vision was part of the painting and the beholder was the donor within the frame. In his second essay, Schwaetzer attempts to interpret the new role of the spectator in relation to Neoplatonic ideas about the mental and spiritual journey of the human soul toward God.

In turn, the mathematical strands in Neoplatonic theology are brought to bear on the *Sistine Madonna* in two essays by Stefan Hasler. Hasler includes numerous images to illustrate how a variety of lines, ratios, and geometrical forms can be mapped onto the painting. Most importantly, he explores whether the divine proportion, or "golden section," can be shown to correspond in significant ways with the size, position, and design of the figures in Raphael's composition.

After considering these intellectual inquiries into the essential meaning of Raphael's altarpiece, it is interesting to return to the perspective of Jürg Meyer zur Capellen on this painting, published in 2005 as part of his four-volume corpus on Raphael. For Capellen, the most essential aspects of the historical context involve the function of the altarpiece in its original setting on the high altar of San Sisto in Piacenza, where famous relics of the martyr-pope Sixtus II and St. Barbara were housed. The altarpiece type chosen by Raphael was a variation on the traditional *sacra conversazione*, with the two saints, who were patrons of the church because of their relics, featured prominently as intercessors between the devotee and the Virgin

and Child. He credits Raphael with the development of the painting as a true vision, which he sees as an inspired new idea, following closely upon but transforming the nature of the apparition in the *Madonna di Foligno*. Based on technical examination of the painting, however, Capellen stresses that Raphael seems to have worked quickly and that the entire image was not in place as a complete intellectual whole at the outset. The two famous putti at the bottom actually were not part of the original cartoon, but only added later after the cloud layer had been finished.

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