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Raffaello Sanzio and Albrecht Durer: A Comparative Analysis

The Renaissance period, characterized by a rebirth of creativity, thinking, and science, was undoubtedly one of the most influential periods of history in shaping modern society. This comparative analysis explores the artworks of two of the period's most acclaimed artists: Raffaello Sanzio, known as "Raphael," henceforth, of the Italian Renaissance, and Albrecht Durer of the Northern Renaissance. Raphael, an Italian painter and architect, is best known for his depictions of the Virgin Mary and large works in the Vatican, with his style embodying the visual achievement of the Italian High Renaissance (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica). Durer, with his revolutionary technical skills, was known for his copper engravings, self-portraits, woodcuts, and religious works, and is regarded as one of the greatest German Renaissance artists (Cartwright). Through a comparative analysis of Raphael's *The School of Athens* and Durer's *Knight, Death and the Devil*, we can understand the historical context, compare Elements and Principles of Designs, and critically reflect on the artists lasting contributions to art.

An understanding of the artists' biographies, historical context, as well as the artistic movements they participated in contributes to our contextual understanding of their respective works. According to the editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, Raphael was born in Urbino, Italy, on April 6, 1483, and was introduced to painting by his father, Giovanni, who imputed to his son

the humanistic ideology of the Renaissance movement. From a young age, Raphael displayed impeccable skill, working as an apprentice in Perugia in his late teenage years. Young Raphael had already displayed an increasing capacity to retain his own style when he moved to Florence c. 1504, where he studied the works of Da Vinci and Michelangelo. Here, the humanistic ideals of High Renaissance art continued to influence Raphael, who shifted his work to display human serenity and calmness. He spent the last 12 years of his life painting in Rome, where he was commissioned to paint for Pope Julius II in his Vatican papal apartments. During this period, Raphael painted the *School of Athens*, in which his skill for displaying balance and serenity, combined with High Renaissance humanist ideals, is one of the most representative works of Renaissance art. Raphael's later works displayed another shift, this time towards exaggerated elegance, the defining feature of the Mannerism movement, which stands between the conclusion of the High Renaissance period in the 1520s and the beginning of the Baroque period in the 1590s. Raphael died on his 37th birthday in 1520, shortly after contracting an illness. According to Mark Cartwright of the World History Encyclopedia, Albrecht Durer was born in Nuremberg, Germany on May 21, 1471. Similarly to Raphael, Durer worked as an apprentice during his early life from 1486 to 1489 for Michael Wolgemut, who taught young Durer about painting and engraving. Durer visited Italy in 1495, where he became deeply interested in the concept that mathematical proportions could produce realistic perspective and human anatomy. Throughout his impressive career, Durer would continue to be influenced by Italian painters and engravers. Cartwright notes that Durer even exchanged works with Raphael in 1515, five years prior to the painter's demise. As for the rest of Durer's career, he was never out of work, producing engravings for Maximilian I and Charles V, as well as composing literature on proportion,

perspective, and technical advice for artists. He died on April 6, 1528, a thoroughly famous man whose reputation continued to endure past his death.

A thorough examination of *The School of Athens* (1509-1511) and *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513) reveals their respective Elements and Principles of Design. According to the Visual Arts Encyclopedia, Raphael was commissioned for *The School of Athens* (originally *Scuola di Atene*) by Pope Julius II as part of the décor for the Pope's upper Vatican palace. The fresco painting's subject matter includes a combination of scholars from various disciplines, displaying a combination of Greek and Christian ideologies. Plato and Aristotle are pictured at the center, arguing between the Idealism vs. Realism (Artble). Various philosophers and poets are featured on Plato's side, while scientists and mathematicians are on Aristotle's side, forming a logical organization that guides the eye through the painting. The use of color is particularly interesting and further divides the room between Plato and Aristotle's followers. The light flows logically into the room, enveloping all of the subjects. However, Plato and Aristotle wear red and blue respectively, which are opposite primary colors. Furthermore, the philosophers (left) are seen as separate, many in pose-like stances, and avoiding discourse in favor of writing. The physical scientists (right) are seen engaged in discourse, with many in more natural stances, no doubt a reference to their discipline in more "grounded" disciplines. Both the color palette and brushwork are smooth, enhancing the clarity and calmness of the painting while emphasizing the intellectual depiction of the painting. In terms of composition, Raphael creates a deep linear perspective which creates an illusion of depth, contributing to the grandness of the architecture represented. He also arranges the figures in a symmetrical manner, creating a sense of balance and harmony that emphasizes the order and high importance of the discourses taking place. When considering Durer's *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, it is important to understand that it was

part of a trilogy known as Durer's "Master Engravings" (Artble). This copper engraving was likely inspired by Erasmus of Rotterdam's *A Handbook for the Christian Soldier* (1504), which instructs Christians to be steadfast through the trials of life. As the title implies, the subject matter of *Knight, Death, and the Devil* consists of three main figures: a knight riding on a horse, a grotesque, hybrid "devil" to the right of the knight, and an equally disturbing figure representing death to the left of the knight. Death holds an hourglass to the knight, a traditional symbol for the brevity of life. The landscape, according to Artble, reflects a Gothic style and is meant to showcase the rough, forbidden terrain which the rider journeys through. The horse is characterized by close attention to detail, inspired by Durer's travels to Italy, where he engaged with the work of Da Vinci, whose emphasis on anatomical accuracy inspired Durer. In contrast to Raphael's Renaissance color palette, Raphael uses a black-and-white palette, choosing to emphasize certain aspects of the engraving, especially the anatomy of the horse, through a white tint. Durer's engraving process is highly precise, as can be seen through the foliage in the background, as well as the knight's armor patterns. Lastly, in terms of composition, Durer creates a sense of spatial congestion (closeness) through the depiction of death and the devil in the immediate background. The devil and death lean in towards the knight, highlighting him as the central figure of the engraving. The stride of the horse indicates motion, signifying the moral resolve of the knight to keep pressing forward.

A comparison between the artists' styles and techniques as revealed by their respective works reveals their similarities and differences. Raphael's approach to composition was highly influenced by the Italian High Renaissance period. As can be seen in *The School of Athens*, Raphael emphasized the importance of clarity, balance, and symmetry created by organization and linear perspective. Whereas Raphael creates extraordinary depth in his works, Durer prefers

a dense presentation of symbols, as can be seen in *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. However, the artists' Italian influences are both present in their careful display of anatomy and human form. As noted by Rosie Lesso, an expert in contemporary art theory, Raphael makes extensive use of sfumato, a smoky visual affect that blends objects in a painting, which creates a soft appearance. This is a significant difference to Durer's intense contrast between light and shadow, which heightens the dramatic effect of his works. The use of sfumato is a distinctly Italian Renaissance influence, while strong contrasts between light and dark are a distinct characteristic of the Gothic period, which heavily influenced *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. Next, in terms of human form, Raphael continues with heavy humanist influences in his idealized portrayal of his painting's subjects, choosing to highlight realistic proportions and poses. Due to his visits to Italy, Durer embodied many of the same values when it came to depicting humans. However, with regards to *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, his value for anatomical and proportional accuracy is better represented by his depiction of the horse. The neck and hind muscles are engraved in excruciating detail, along with the complexities of the horse's face and hair. Lastly, in terms of thematic elements, Raphael's work often discusses humanist, philosophical, and religious ideas. *The School of Athens* is perhaps the most striking and comprehensive representation of Raphael's thematic material. Similarly, Durer explores humanist ideals as well as various religious themes, influenced by the religious fervor present in Italy during the Renaissance (Meyer). Indeed, an interesting similarity between the two artists is their ability to merge humanist and religious ideals in their work. *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, while it may represent the need for Christians to display perseverance, is also a commentary on humanity's desire to conquer fear and "press on."

Raphael's contribution to the Italian High Renaissance was significant. Raphael's expert depiction of human form, his blending of ancient and current philosophical ideas, as well as his mastery of linear perspective set a standard for Renaissance Art. As can be seen by *The School of Athens*, Raphael presented art as a means of intellectual discourse, which elevated the status and role of art to influence the culture. Indeed, Raphael's influence on Renaissance Art was so profound that his art has become highly representative of the period itself, a testament to the way his style was received among his contemporaries. Furthermore, Raphael's unique emphasis on graceful, exaggerated expressions served as a precursor for the Mannerism period and later Baroque period. Albrecht Durer's impact on the Northern Renaissance is also of considerable note. Durer influenced the dissemination of art techniques and knowledge through his extensive writings and incorporation of Italian Renaissance influences into his work. Durer's technical skills contributed to his ability to create emotional depth and symbolism, which advanced his exploration of the human condition and religious subjects. This aspect of his work supported the Protestant movement, which began to sweep Europe during the 16th Century. Therefore, not only was Durer's art a display of technical mastery, but a significant influence on the cultural and religious discourses of his time. I would say, therefore, that Durer was the most successful artist, as his work was multi-cultural in nature and included references to past periods (e.g. Gothic). Analyzing Durer's work reveals his deep love for detail, accurate documentation, and emotional impact. These factors were what allowed Durer to elevate printmaking to "the level of an independent art form" (Wisse). Durer's versatility, impact on art culture, and ability to blend influences make him the most successful of the two artists.

Raphael and Albrecht Durer are some of the most phenomenal and influential artists to ever live. By discussing their biographies, we gained an understanding of the society and people

that influence their work. By comparing their acclaimed works, Raphael's *The School of Athens* and Durer's *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, we gained an understanding of the artists' use of Elements and Principles of Design. Furthermore, comparing the works allowed us an improved understanding of the fundamental similarities and differences between Raphael and Durer. Lastly, by evaluating their legacies, we gained an understanding of the importance of their respective styles and techniques in art and culture. The work of these artists continues to impact art to this day, and their legacies, values, and ideas will continue to impact generations of artists.

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The School of Athens (1509-1511), Raphael



Knight, Death, and the Devil (1513), Albrecht Dürer