Oil painting - The School of Athens (after Raphael)

Object: Oil painting

Place of origin: Rome (painted)

Date: 1752-1755 (painted)

Artist/Maker: Mengs, Anton Raphael, born 1728 - died 1779 (artist)
Raphael, born 1483 - died 1520 (artist)

Materials and Techniques: oil on canvas

Credit Line: Given by the Duke of Northumberland, 1926

Museum number: P.36-1926

Gallery location: Cast Courts, Room 46b, The Weston Cast Court, case WE

Public access description

Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779) was born in Bohemia now Czech Republic. He accompanied his father, who was a painter, in Rome and Dresden where he became a successful portrait painter. Having been appointed Hofmaler in March 1751, he left Dresden the following September, eventually spending the next ten years in Italy and never returning to Dresden again. In Rome and Naples, Mengs produced classical and religious scenes. He also wrote some theoretical texts under the influence of Johann Joachim Winckelmann.

This painting is a full-size copy of the famous fresco the School of Athens painted by Raphael in 1508 in the Vatican. This copy was commissioned by the Duke of Northumberland in 1749 and represents the ancient knowledge of the most famous philosophers with in the centre Plato and Aristotle whose doctrines would dominate the Western thought from Antiquity up to the late 17th century. The painting was originally on display in the long gallery of Northumberland House in London. Destroyed in 1874, the painting was transferred in his new residence, 2 Grosvenor Place, before being given to the museum in 1926.

Descriptive line

Oil on canvas copy of Raphael's 'School of Athens', painted by Anton Raphael Mengs. German School, 1752-1755.

Physical description

A large number of figures wearing classical dress stand in groups, engaged in debate, or sit alone absorbed in thought, within a classicizing architecture partially open to the sky and ornamented by sculptures in niches.

Dimensions

Height: 4.25 m estimate, Width: 8.4 m estimate

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Object history note

Long gallery, Northumberland House, Strand, London from 1755, demolished in 1874 and transferred to 2 Grosvenor Place; on loan to the museum from 1917; given by the Duke of Northumberland to the museum in 1926.

Historical significance: This painting is a full-size copy of Raphael's School of Athens, commissioned in 1749 by Hugh Smithson Percy, 1st Duke of Northumberland, for the long gallery at his House in London.

The School of Athens is the title of fresco commissioned by Pope Julius II in 1508 for the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican, Rome. It represents the ancient knowledge of the most famous philosophers. Set within an imposing Renaissance architecture inspired by Bramante's project for the renewal of the early Christian basilica of St Peter, the philosophers are depicted engaged in study and debate, with in the centre of the composition, Plato and Aristotle whose theories would dominate the western thoughts from Antiquity up to the late 17th century. Plato points upwards with a finger, alluding to his system relying upon the cosmic spheres, holding one his most famous dialogues, the Timeus which explains the beginning of the world, whereas besides him Aristotle, his disciple, points downwards alluding to his controversial theory and holds his most influential treatise, the Ethics.

On the left is Socrates conversing with a group of young men while in the left foreground Epicure reads a book held by a young boy and Pythagoras annotates an important codex. Behind him stands Averroes wearing a white turban. On the right foreground, Euclid draws on the floor a geometric figure; behind him stands Zoroaster holding the heavenly sphere and Ptolemy holding the earthly sphere while Diogenes lies on the stairs with a dish, a reminder of how he destroyed the single bowl he possessed upon seeing a peasant boy drink from the hollow of his hands. The pessimist philosopher, Heraclitus, a portrait of Michelangelo then working on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, is leaning against a block of marble, writing on a sheet of paper whereas the personage on the extreme right with the black beret is a self-portrait of Raphael.

Raphael's oeuvre and in particular the School of Athens was extensively copied because of its innovative design and the virtuoso of the execution up to the late 19th century.

This copy was Mengs first major commission in Rome and was part of a series of five copies of famous paintings for the Earl of Northumberland, who like many other English collectors at the time, wished to own copies representative of the Italian Renaissance art. He asked Horace Mann who with the help of the cardinal Albani and Matthew Brettingham in Rome, submitted a list of suitable subjects and artists comprising Mengs (Pelzel, 1979).
The final agreement included five copies, each in the original size, after famous frescoes in Rome: three after Raphael, the School of Athens by Mengs, the Assembly of the Gods and the Marriage of Cupid and Psyche in the Farnesina by Pompeo Batoni, Guido Reni’s Aurora in the villa Rospigliosi by Agostino Masucci and Annibale Carracci’s Bacchus and Ariadne in palazzo Farnese by Placido Costanzi. Mengs executed this copy between 1752 and 1755 and gave it a new title: Philosophy. He adapted the original format to a rectangular shape by truncating and compressing the architectural elements and sculptural forms at the top, while inserting additional figures at the side. Where the original fresco is disturbed (on the left) by the top of a door, Mengs has inserted a plinth bearing his signature, the title and date. It appears that Mengs accepted the commission also because it enabled him to improve his knowledge of Raphael’s art, which he exposed in his essay: Riflessioni sopra i tre gran pittori, Raffaello, il Correggio e Tiziano e sopra gli Antichi (Cioffi Martinelli, 1981).

**Historical context note**

History painting, i.e. depictions of non recurring events based on religious, classical, literary or allegorical sources, particularly developed in Italy during the Renaissance (15th-16th centuries). History painting could include religious themes, or depictions of momentous recent events, but the term was most frequently associated with Classical subject-matter. However a renewed impetus was given to religious subjects after the Council of Trent (1545-63), which stipulated new iconographical programmes. The development of art treatises, in which the compositional rules guiding the art of painting were discussed also notably, influenced the evolution of history painting. From around 1600 history painting’s principal rivals: still-life, landscape and genre painting began to emerge as independent collectable genres. Furthermore, the Rococo taste for the ornamental in the early 18th century prioritised the decorative quality of history painting, so that subject matters became more entertaining than exemplary. There was a renewed interest in history painting during the Neo-Classical period after which the taste for such pictures faded towards the end of the 19th century when an innovative approach to the image was led by the Symbolists and was developed further by subsequent schools in the early 20th century.

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O89799/the-school-of-athens-after-oil-painting-mengs-anton-raphael/