

THE IMAGE OF THE
ANCIENT GYMNASIUM OF
ATHENS, OR, PHILOSOPHY

The title applied to it [the painting] by Vasari is incorrect: the concord of Philosophy and Astrology with Theology, inasmuch as there are neither theologians nor evangelists such as he describes at length, confusing instead this second image with the first one, of Theology and the Sacrament. These errors originated soon after Raphael's death through the inadvertence of those who undertook to interpret his works, as can be clearly understood from the other print, which is incomplete, by Agostino Veneziano, published in 1524, in which the figure of Pythagoras is transformed into the Evangelist Saint Mark, and the youth who leans over beside Pythagoras with the abacus, is transformed also, into an angel with the attributes of the Angelic Salutation. The title *School of Athens* that is commonly attributed to it is more suitable, and comes closer to the properties of the figures, since it concerns a city that is mistress of the disciplines of study. In order to form the image of Philosophy, Raphael intended to bring together the studies and the schools of the most illustrious philosophers, not of one age alone, but of the most celebrated ages of the world, making very appropriate use of anachronism or the reduction of the periods in which

* Translated by Alice Sedgwick Wohl. From Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Descrizione delle quattro immagini dipinte da Raffaele d'Urbino nella Camera della Segnatura nel Palazzo Vaticano, e nella Farnesina alla Lungara, con alcuni ragionamenti in onore delle sue opere, e della pittura e scultura* (Rome: Eredi del q. Gio: Lorenzo Bartolommi, 1751), 29–47.

Translator's note: Bellori must have been looking at a print of the painting as he wrote, for his "lefts" and "rights" are reversed throughout.

they lived. If we therefore call it the *Gymnasium of Athens*, it will not be unsuitable, since we are inspired by the idea of the ancient gymnasiums where, apart from exercising the forces of the body, the soul was cultivated as well through the disciplines of study, as philosophers and other masters of knowledge came together to debate and to teach; this title will have the further advantage of not departing from the one that is already known, and spread by fame to everyone. The painter, then, depicted a magnificent edifice, not in the complete and perfect form of the ancient gymnasiums, with exedras and porticoes where philosophers, rhetoricians, poets, mathematicians and scholars of other disciplines contended and debated, but he depicted an edifice that is suited to the situation and view of the figures, and is decorated with pilasters and arches in perspective.

THE GYMNASIUM

The magnificence, the embellishments, and the entire aspect of the *Gymnasium*, which opens up and out with Doric proportions in the manner of a temple, are very worthy things by virtue of the excellence of the architecture and the artifice of the perspective; but the various figures deployed at various studies, and the number that fills so noble a theater, cause spectators to halt in contemplation of ancient philosophy. The building opens to reveal its interior aspect, raised on four great marble steps; some of the philosophers are practicing their discipline above, others below on the principal plane of the foreground; thus the figures are displayed better, and with a more distinct ordering of views and distance, in the different levels of the site. There Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle can be discerned with their more famous schools, and with them gather mathematicians, astronomers and other ancient sages and cultivators of philosophy.

Beginning, then, with the principal plane and with what is visible in front of the steps, at the right side Pythagoras [Fig. 1, no. 33] is seen sitting, surrounded by his disciples, writing his philosophy based on the harmonic proportions of music. Next to him on the far side, a youth leans and looks at him [no. 32], holding at his feet the abacus, or rather a little panel on which the numbers are depicted and the consonances of song, indicated with Greek names and letters: diapason, diapente, diatesseron, in the

form in which they are drawn here [Fig. 21]. Of these consonances it is thought that Pythagoras himself was the author, and that he drew from them the basis for his philosophy, as Plato after him formed from them the harmonic proportions of the soul. Pythagoras is shown in profile, and sitting down, resting the book on his thigh, and on the book his hand and the pen, and he expresses his attention in applying the rules of music to natural science. Next to Pythagoras come his disciples Empedocles, Epicharmus, and Archytas; one of them, completely bald, sitting at his side behind him, writes on his knee [Fig. 1, no. 34]; but as he looks over at the writings of the master, with one hand he suspends the pen above the page, with the other he holds the inkwell, and in his attentiveness, with great naturalness, he sticks out his face, opens his eyes, closes his lips, showing his mind occupied in transcribing the doctrine. At the back of Pythagoras himself another man advances with his hand on his chest, looking down at the master's page [no. 35]; and this one is depicted with a cap, and a collar on his mantle, shaven chin, and the hairs of his beard hanging from his lips. Farther back is revealed the face and the hand of another man who, bending forward, spreads his thumb and forefinger in the act of counting, and he appears to indicate the doubling tones of the diapason, that is, the double consonance described by Pythagoras. Next, in the far corner, is a clean-shaven man portrayed life-size, who is holding a book on the base or pedestal of a column, in which he is writing attentively [no. 37]; this man wears a wreath of oak leaves, the emblem of Pope Julius, to whose name Raphael dedicated the work signifying the golden age of this pontiff, his benefactor. Nearby, at the edge of the image, an old man [no. 40] is partially visible with a boy [no. 39], who childishly reaches his hand out to the book of the man who is writing, and it looks as though the parent brings him here in order to recognize the boy's propensity. While all the figures described are located behind Pythagoras, on his far side a noble youth appears swathed to the neck in a white cloak decorated with gold, with his hand on his chest [no. 31]. This is held to be Francesco Maria della Rovere, the duke of Urbino, the pope's nephew, aged twenty at that time. And it really appears as if he comes here through desire and longing to learn the noble studies and the most worthy arts.

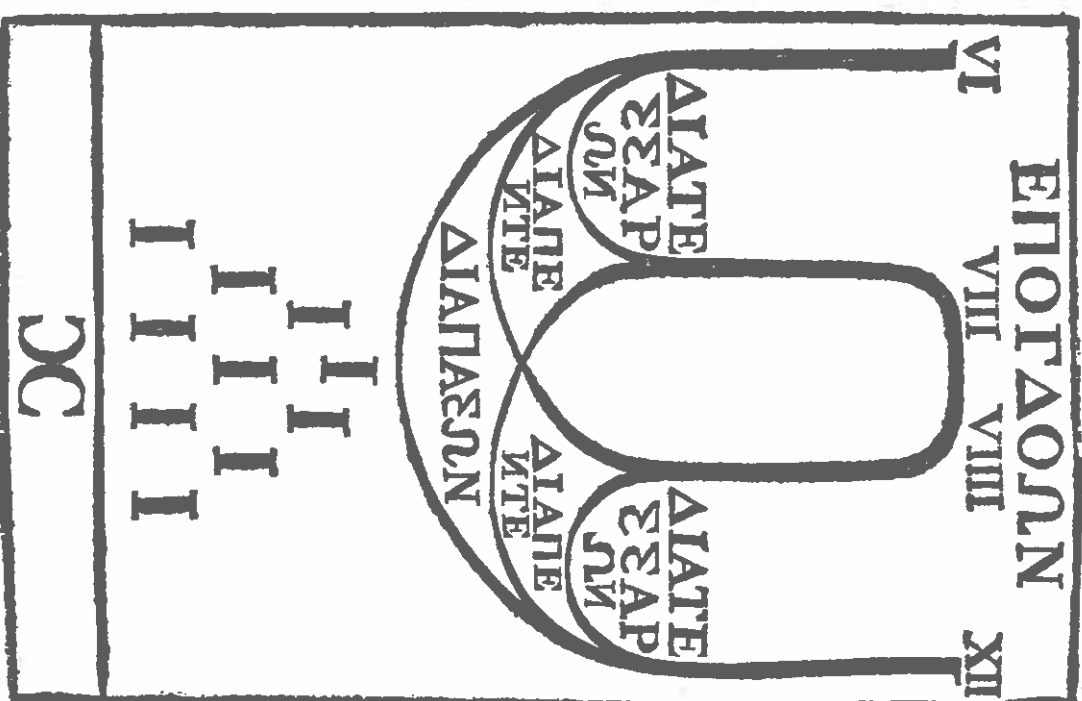


Figure 21. Diagram of tablet held up for Pythagoras. (From Bellori, *Descrizione*. Photo: Clark Art Institute Library.)