

Occult Knowledge in Raphael's Paintings

MUCH IS SAID in certain classes of the Western World about Initiation. This in the minds of most people seems usually to be associated with the occultism taught in the religions of the far East; something that is peculiar to the devotees of Buddhism, Hinduism, and kindred systems of faith, and which in nowise appertains to the religion of the Western World, particularly to the Christian religion.

We have shown in the preceding series on "Symbols of Ancient and Modern Initiation"[†] that this idea is entirely gratuitous, and that the ancient Tabernacle in the Wilderness pictures in its symbolism the path of progression from childlike ignorance to superhuman knowledge. As the *Vedas* brought light to the devotees who worshiped in faith and fervor on the banks of the Ganges in the sunny South, so the *Eddas* were a guiding star to the sons of the rugged Northland, who sought the Light of life in ancient Iceland where the sturdy Vikings steered their ships in frozen seas. "Arjuna," who fights the noble fight in the "Mahabharata," or "Great War," constantly being waged between the higher and the lower self, differs in nowise from the hero of the northern soul myth, "Siegfried," which means, "He who through victory gains peace."

Both are representative of the candidate undergoing Initiation. And though their experiences in this great adventure vary in certain respects called

[†] The first segment of this article's text is excerpted from Max Heindel's *Ancient and Modern Initiation*, pp. 63-66



Planet Art

Oil on panel, Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio), 1483-1520, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden

The Sistine Madonna

Also known as the Madonna of St. Sixtus, the Virgin and Child are shown with St. Barbara and the former Pope Sixtus, later canonized.

for by the temperamental differences of the northern and southern peoples, and provided for in the respective schools to which they are referred for soul growth, the main features are identical, and the end, which is enlightenment, is the same. Aspiring souls have walked to the Light in the brilliantly illuminated Persian temples where the sun god in his blazing chariot was the symbol of Light, as well as under the mystic magnificence of the iridescence shed abroad by the aurora borealis of the frozen North. That the true Light of the deepest esoteric

knowledge has always been present in all ages, even the darkest of the so-called dark, there is ample evidence to

Raphael used his won- with the brush to em- of his great paintings, *Madonna and the Virgin*, advise the examine

show.

derful skill body it in two *The Sistine*

The Marriage of

which we would interested reader to

for himself. Copies of these paintings are pro-

curable in almost any art store. In the original there is

a peculiar tint of golden haze behind the Madonna and Child,

which, though exceedingly crude to one gifted with spiritual sight, is never-

theless as close an imitation of the basic color of the first-heaven world as it is possi-

ble to make with the pigments of earth. Close inspection of this background [detailed above] will reveal the fact that it is composed of a multitude of what we are used to call “angel” heads and wings.

[“In the lower regions of the Desire World the whole body of each being may be seen, but in the highest regions only the head seems to remain. Raphael, who like many other people in the Middle Ages, was gifted with a so-called *second sight*, pictured that condition for us in his Sistine Madonna, now in the Dresden Art Gallery, where the Madonna and the Christ-child are represented as floating in a golden atmosphere and surrounded by a host of genie-heads: conditions which the occult investigator knows to be in harmo- ny with the facts.”—*The Rosicrucian Mysteries*, p. 54]

This again is as literal a pictorial representation of facts concerning the inhabitants of that world as could be given, for during the process of purgation which takes place in the lower regions of the Desire World the lower parts of the body are actually disintegrated so that only the head, containing the intelligence of the man, remains



Detail, The Sistine Madonna, showing the Pope's six fingers, symbolizing his clairvoyance.

when he enters the first heaven, a fact which has puzzled many who have hap- pened to see the souls there. The wings of course have no reality outside the



Oil on panel, Raphael, 1504, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

The Marriage of the Virgin (Il Sposalizio)

picture, but were placed there to show ability to move swiftly, which is inherent in all beings in the invisible worlds. The Pope is represented as pointing to the Madonna and the Christ Child, and a close examination of the hand [at left] wherewith he points will show that it has six fingers. There is no historical evidence to show that the Pontiff actually had such a deformity, neither can that fact be an accident; the six fingers in the painting must therefore have been due to design on the part of the painter.

Planet Art

What its purpose was we shall learn by examination of the *Marriage of the Virgin*, where a similar anomaly may be noted. In that picture Mary and Joseph are represented together with the Christ Child under such conditions that it is evident they are just on the eve of departure for Egypt, and a Rabbi is in the act of joining them in wedlock. The left foot of Joseph [right] is the foremost object in the picture, and if we count we shall find it represented as having six toes. By the six fingers in the Pope's picture and the six toes of Joseph, Raphael wants to show us that both pos-



Detail, *Marriage of the Virgin*, showing six toes on Joseph's foot, indicating Initiate powers.

upon the so-called throne of Peter have had the spiritual sight in a greater or lesser degree. (End of first quote)

Raphael employed the same pictorial device for indicating the possession of spiritual sight in what was probably his first fresco painted in the Vatican, the monumental *Disputà* (*The Disputation on the Holy Sacrament*), commissioned by Pope Julius II, who is also depicted (at left and below) with a hand bearing six fingers.

THE PROBLEM OF LIFE†

Among all the vicissitudes of life, which vary in each individual's experience, there is one event which sooner or later comes to everyone—Death! No matter what our station in life: whether the life lived has been a laudable one or the reverse; whether great achievements have marked our path among men; whether health or sickness has been our lot; whether we have been famous and surrounded by a host of admiring friends or have wandered unknown through the years of our life; at some time there comes a moment when we stand alone before the portal of death and are forced to take the leap into the dark.

The thought of this leap and of what lies beyond must inevitably force itself upon every thinking person. In the years of youth and health, when the bark of our life sails upon seas of prosperity, when all appears beautiful and bright, we may put the thought behind us, but there will surely come a time in the life of every thinking person when the problem of life and death forces itself upon his consciousness and

refuses to be set aside. Neither will it help him to accept the ready-made solution of anyone else without thought and in blind belief, for this is a basic problem which everyone must solve for himself or herself in order to obtain satisfaction.

Upon the eastern edge of the Desert of Sahara there stands the world-famous Sphinx with its inscrutable face turned toward the East, ever greeting the Sun as its rising rays herald the newborn day. It was said in

† Text is from Heindel's *The Rosicrucian Mysteries*, pp. 16-18.



Fresco, detail, Raphael, *La Disputà*, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican

Speaking ex cathedra, Pope Julius II dictates canonical church doctrine which has been informed by spiritual vision.

sessed a sixth sense such as is awakened by Initiation. By this subtle sense the foot of Joseph was guided in its flight to keep secure that sacred thing which had been entrusted to his care. To the other was given a sixth sense that he might not be a blind leader of the blind but might have the "seeing eye" required to point out the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And it is a fact, though not commonly known, that with one or two exceptions when political power was strong enough to corrupt the College of Cardinals, all who have sat





Fresco, Raphael, 1510, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican

The School of Athens

Raphael painted four frescoes in the library of Pope Julius II to show the four aspects of human culture—philosophy, theology, law, and poetry, all inspired by their ideal of the true, the good, or the beautiful. The truth is shown in two manifestations: revealed truth, in the theology of the *Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*, and rational truth in the philosophy of the *School of Athens*.

the Greek myth that it was the wont of this monster to ask a riddle of each traveler. She devoured those who could not answer, but when Oedipus solved the riddle she destroyed herself.

The riddle which she asked of men was the riddle of life and death, a query which is as relevant today as ever, and which each one must answer or be devoured in the jaws of death. But when once a person has found the solution to the problem, it will appear that in reality there is no death, that what appears so, is but a change from one state of *existence* to another. Thus, for the man who finds the true solution to the riddle of life, the sphinx of death has ceased to exist, and he can lift his voice in the triumphant cry, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” Various theories of life have been advocated to solve this problem of

life. We may divide them into two classes, namely the *monistic theory*, which holds that all the facts of life can be explained by reference to this visible world wherein we live, and the *dualistic theory*, which refers part of the phenomenon of life to another world which is now invisible to us.

Raphael in his famous painting, *The School of Athens*, has most aptly pictured to us the attitude of these two schools of thought. We see upon that marvelous painting a Greek Court such as those wherein philosophers were once wont to congregate. Upon the various steps which lead into the building a large number of men are engaged in deep conversation, but in the center at the top of the steps stand two figures, supposedly of Plato and Aristotle, one pointing upwards, the other towards the earth, each looking the other in the face, mutely, but with



Plato, the metaphysician, points to the sky (his *Timaeus* is held vertically); Aristotle, the “realist,” directs his flat hand toward the earth (his *Ethics* is held in a horizontal position). In one simple gesture each illustrates the essence of his philosophy.

deeply concentrated will; each seeking to convince the other that his attitude is right, for each bears the conviction in his heart. One holds that he is of the earth earthy, that he has come from the dust and that thereto he will return, the other firmly advocates the position that there is a higher something which has always existed and will continue regardless of whether the body wherein it now dwells holds together or not.

The question who is right is still an open one with the majority of mankind. Millions of tons of paper and printer’s ink have been used in futile attempts to settle it by argument, but it will always remain, open to all who have not solved the riddle themselves, for it is a basic problem, a part of the life experience of every human being to settle that question, and therefore no one can give us the solution ready-made for our acceptance. All that can be done by those who have really solved the problem, is to show to others the line along which they have found the solution, and thus direct the inquirer how he also, by his own efforts, may arrive at a conclusion. □

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