

Allison Zuckerman (AZ)
Athenian Scholars, 2019 – 72” x 180”

Intro.

Can art move the present into the future? Together with science, art aims to go beyond the limits of our knowledge, and venture into new – not yet imaginable – realities. While science is by nature capable of modifying reality, art accelerates the cultural changes. Can art link the present also to the past?

In “Athenian Scholars”, Allison Zuckerman (AZ) redefines the object of her art piece, by changing the context. All her paintings point to the continuing dialogue, “even in the trend-conscious, fashion-mad art world as ours”,¹ between past and present. Painters have many options in terms of ways and means of making art. In any case, today, as in the past, the very best art builds upon tradition.

“The School of Hellas” and “La Scuola d’Atene”

“The clarity of the compositional structure of the School of Athens and the purity of the lines, the combination of the rich variety of figures in their classical poses and the idealized grandeur of the architectures; the harmony of the colours, of which the gold used in the middle ages is virtually absent; and the profane theme evoking the finest achievements of classical philosophy: all of above have rightly made this fresco the epitome of Italian Renaissance.”

Oberhuber²

Classicists endeavor to bring ideals back to the contexts in which they were expressed. In what follows, I will travel through three different time-space coordinates: fifth century Athens, Rome in the Cinquecento, and contemporary New York City. Only the first of these three moments belongs to Classical antiquity, but all three expressions have their own right to be called “classic”.

The first journey takes us to Greece of the fifth century B.C.E. with Pericles’ funeral speech in Thucydides (2.35–46). Here Athens is claimed to be the “school,” or the education, “of Greece” (παίδευσις τῆς Ἑλλάδος, 2.41):

In a word, then, I say that our city **as a whole is the school of Hellas**, and that, as it seems to me, each individual amongst us could in his own person, with the utmost grace and versatility, prove himself self-sufficient in the most varied forms of activity.³

¹ Glueck, G. (1986, June 8). Artist and model: why the tradition endures. *New York Times*, section 2, p. 1; cf: <https://nyti.ms/2ZkB9P2>

² Oberhuber, K. (1982). *Raffaello*. Milan: Mondadori.

³ Thucydides & Smith, C. F. (1999). *History of the Peloponnesian War: In 4 vol.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 333.

In the climax of his praise of Athens, Pericles declares that beyond its political constitution Athens represents the apogee of civilization, art, literature and thought. Since then, within Western civilization, Athens will always be renowned for its art, literature and philosophy.

Perhaps the most eloquent, visual expression of Athens, as school (παίδευσις, *paideusis*), is the fresco by Raphael, “La Scuola d’Atene” (*The School of Athens*).⁴ Its current title appeared in print more than a century after the fresco completion⁵ and is somewhat misleading, as few of the fifty-eight figures in the painting are from Athens: the group rather represent the totality of ancient pagan learning. Raphael dramatized an ideal – the universal knowledge – through a composition of figures organized into three horizontal and two vertical groups, disciples of either Plato or Aristotle, the two central figures who dominate the scene. The various grouping figures seem to represent the subject of medieval and renaissance learning. On the top levels of the fresco are represented the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric, the basics of liberal art education. They prepared the student for the quadrivium, or the four applied sciences, on the lower steps: geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music.

The scene interacts with the open, free, and equalitarian society of Pericles’ ideal Athens. As part of a larger project, Raphael’s “La Scuola d’Atene” championed the idea of Renaissance Rome as the new Athens, the custodian of ancient Greek culture, after Constantinople had fallen.

“La Scuola d’Atene” evokes what the sixth-century writer Boethius, in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, described as “The Temple of Philosophy”.⁶ The fresco’s overarching theme was inspired by Plato’s *Republic*. In this work, Plato teaches the future governing class the need for a solid cultural background, which, by means of gradual steps, as shown in the paintings, and by means of an understanding of philosophical thought and the secrets of arts and sciences, allows people to draw on the work of ideas, hence the greatest good.

Plato, who sports the features of Leonardo, has a printed copy of the *Timaeus*⁷ under his arm, while he raises his right hand to the sky, symbolizing the world of ideas. Aristotle holds his *Ethics*⁸ in his left hand and stretches out his right, his palm facing the ground: an eloquent gesture which indicates the positive dimension of his philosophy.

⁴ A large fresco almost eight meters long and nearly five meters tall at its highest point; Apostolic Palace, Vatican City (1509–1511).

⁵ Celio, G. (1640). *Memoria delli nomi dell’artefici delle pitture che sono in alcune chiese, facciate e palazzi di Roma*.

⁶ Bod, R., Maat, J., Weststeijn, T., & ebrary, Inc. (2010). *The making of the humanities: Volume 1*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 76.

⁷ The *Timaeus* is one of Plato’s dialogues, written c. 360 B.C.E. The work presents an elaborate account of the formation and nature of the physical world and human beings, as well as an explanation of the universe’s impressive order and beauty. See Waterfield, R. (trans.). (2008). *Timaeus and Critias* (with introduction and notes by A. Gregory). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ The *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) is Aristotle’s best-known work on ethics. The work, which plays a pre-eminent role in defining Aristotelian ethics, is understood to be based on notes from his lectures at the Lyceum. In NE, Aristotle argues that the correct approach for studying such controversial subjects is to start with what would be roughly agreed to be true by people of good up-bringing and experience in life and to work from there to a higher understanding. See Aristotle, Bartlett, R. C., & Collins, S. D. (2012). *Aristotle’s Nicomachean ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Raphael epitomized the history of thought and human wisdom, not only in the space he creates, but also in time, lending these ancient philosophers the facial features of some of his most talented contemporaries, including himself. In any case, beyond the variety of theories regarding contemporaries in the fresco, it is an undisputed and astonishing masterpiece; a paean of the nature of the human thought, retrieved from a mythical past, relaunched and turned into concrete action thanks to the new awareness of the Renaissance man.

Plato and Aristotle are in motion, gesturing as they walk, the gestures and facial expression of those in all the other groups amplify the dynamic poses of the two central figures. The scene mainly takes place on two levels, respecting a sort of hierarchy. The work clearly represents the philosophical mind, in which self-awareness leads directly to an awareness of one's own relationship with the cosmos, and one's own place in the world, as a free and creative individual. According to the philosopher Giovanni Reale, the figures next to Plato might be very first successors of his academy; by analogy, the figure next to Aristotle could be the main exponents of his own school.⁹

While Plato and Aristotle proceed with their disciples, the scene expands to the left and right to occupy the area of a large transept. On the left, there are five groups of figures, in dynamic poses, engaged in dialogue, and a few reading and meditating: the Socratics on the top of the stairs, at the center; most probably the Sophists adjacent, on the left; in the foreground, the followers of Orphism, and the Pythagoreans beside them; finally, in the center foreground, alone and lost in his thoughts is Heraclitus.

Vasari reserved most of his praise for the right half of the fresco, with the group of geometricians and astronomers into the foreground. While behind them on a higher level are a teacher dictating and a disciple writing; standing farther over might be Plotinus standing, and from the far corner a group of Cynics seems to be advancing.

... and round them (Aristotle and Plato) in a circle is a great school of philosophers. The astrologers and geometers are using compasses to draw innumerable figures and characters on their tablets; and it is hardly possible to describe how splendid they look.¹⁰

Giorgio Vasari noted that “the entire scene... is convincingly arranged with such order and proportion that by the genius shown in this work Raphael clearly demonstrated his determination to be the undisputed master among those using the brush”.¹¹ The fresco is the epitome of the Renaissance discovery of its ancient classical roots and the adoption of its heritage, as is exemplified by contemporary faces on some of the Greek figures.

However, there is no harmony without some dissonance, no unity without some oddity. No symmetry free from a slight deviation that serves to highlight it. The multilayered sense of harmony is broken by two figures placed in the center front of the fresco: Diogenes and

⁹ Reale, G., & Raphael. (2010). *La “Scuola di Atene” di Raffaello: Una interpretazione storico-ermeneutica*. Milano: Bompiani.

¹⁰ Vasari, G., & Bull, G. (2004). *Lives of the artists*. London: Penguin: 292.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Heraclitus, playing the role of “outsiders,” which highlights the subversive nature of their philosophers.

#whatapaintingsays

Are there any outsiders in AZ's work? If so, do they disrupt the (perfect) equilibrium of the work of art and of the scene itself?

AZ: I would say that the work is composed entirely of outsiders. These outsiders include the figures themselves, as well as the motifs and objects depicted. The referencing ranges as far back as the Middle Ages (the scrolls) to the present moment of emoji tear-drops and computer drawn grass. I seek to present what is regarded as “high” art and culture with “low” and everyday culture on the same, democratic plane. The internet has completely flattened any kind of image hierarchy through the ease in which images are accessed. One can google search a Renaissance painting or a clip art cloud image with the same search engine and same amount of effort. Everything is pastiche within the paintings; most elements would be incoherent without the composing, collaging, and editing involved in the painting process. The most challenging part of making these pictures is creating a sense of harmony within the dissonance.

What is the role of the depictions of Diogenes and Heraclitus in Raphael’s fresco? Their disruptive natures – in terms of philosophy, iconography and aesthetics – are intentional and well-calculated. With this in mind, it would not be hazardous to think that there is a touch of irony in Raphael’s depiction of the splendor and idealization of the staged gathering of lofty mind.

Perfect order and rationality are always challenged by a skeptical perspective, and schools cannot contain some of the most original and creative individual human spirits.

Diogenes subverted the scene from within the scene, as one of its protagonists, who serves as a challenge to order within the Greek philosophical tradition. Raphael added Diogenes after the completion of the fresco, as an homage to Michelangelo. The figure of Diogenes is an expression of recognition and admiration for the new artistic style, which transcends the “classical” renaissance ideal exemplified by the school of Athens. The figure of Heraclitus is a true *post scriptum* which claims the inclusion of the art of painting, left out of the tradition of the seven liberal arts. Michelangelo’s (in the guise of Heraclitus) and Raphael’s self-portraits represents a new phase in the history of art.

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And are there any characters to whom the artist particularly gives a subversive role?

AZ: I enjoy reclaiming Picasso's women. I hope to give them a different life within my paintings. One of empowerment, irreverence and humor.

“Athenian Scholars”

#whatapaintingsays

On its own, “La Scuola d’Atene” depicts a world of intellect, a space of free and open inquiry. The legacy of Athens as the school of learning continue. What AZ’s “Athenian Scholars” says about it?

AZ: “Athenian Scholars” explores the way in which art history can collaborate as one. The scholars are mainly women, which differs drastically from Raphael’s “School of Athens.” The women are carefree yet determined. They are spread out on one horizontal line; they are all equals. All ideas matter. The characters listen and they contribute. The squares and pixelation reference the idea of open inquiry; the scene is simultaneously cohering, while dissolving. This represents the idea that learning is an ever-changing, on-going process.

For my third moment in the ongoing history, I would like to pick up on the ideas of imitation, emulation, and translation. Our coordinates, then, moves to Brooklyn, New York City.

Imitatio – Aemulatio – Translatio: What AZ’s work says?

ἕτερος ἐξ ἑτέρου σοφός / τό τε πάλαι τό τε νῦν.
One learns his skill from another, both long ago and now.

Bacchylides, *Paeans*, fr. 5 Snell-Maeher

All art is derivative: even the revolutionary is inevitably reactionary, in that its novelty depends on what it rejects. A fascinating feature of art is how it acknowledges its predecessors, to what extent it is consciously, knowingly derivative. The classical tradition embraced this reality and turned it into a fruitful tactic of both invention and appreciation. Artists were trained first to imitate, then emulate, and finally invent, but the traces of those first two phases remained even in the most radically inventive new work. What makes an artist a great emulator is a point of departure, a creative spark.

The muse is the daughter of memory. Poets have always learned from other poets and are listeners of readers before they become singers or writers. What about artists? Do artists learn from other artists and are viewers before they become artists? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, imitation (i.e., *mimesis*, ‘imitation’) is the study and conspicuous deployment of features recognizably characteristic of a canonical author’s style or content, so as to define one’s generic affiliation. What about art? Plato¹² and Aristotle¹³ often apply μίμησις, philosophically to the semantic relation by which art represents their object. Ancient discussions of imitation

¹² Cf. *Republic* 10.

¹³ Cf. *Poetics*.

urge emulation and rivalry, not servile dependence, recommend critical study and a plurality of models, and establish as the highest goal a melding of the artist's personality with his/her own model's. In any culture, the imitation of iconic works shapes the art traditions.

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What your mimetic/emulative relation to the original piece?

AZ: My relationship to art historical referencing and appropriation is that of simultaneous reverence and critique. "The School of Athens" is an indisputable masterpiece and crucial to the growth and development of western art history. However, of the 58 characters within Raphael's painting, only one woman appears: Hypatia of Alexandria. In taking on "The School of Athens," I am able to pay homage to the grand painting but also point out its lack of female representation, individuality, and the range of human emotion.

AZ's Athenian scholars: *aemulatio*?

Modernism has never been comfortable with acknowledging artistic influence deferentially. Writers struggle to find their own voices in relation to those of their precursors (the so-called "anxiety of influence").¹⁴ An even stronger reaction was registered by artists of the twentieth-century avant-garde who radically rejected past models and practices as a mean to achieving individual creative expression.

AZ shows thoughtful selection that involves an intellectual process. Peter Brook (NYT, 30 June 1988) stated about his "untroubled" acceptance of influence: "One lives in a field of influences, one is influenced by everyone one meets, everything is an exchange of influences, all opinions are derivative." But he affirms the role of creative invention within that field of influences. He goes on to say: "Once you deal a new deck of cards, you've got a new deck of cards." Which is: when one deals a deck of cards, the deck itself changes and this change constitutes a kind of invention.

What is *aemulatio*? In every era, homage, quotation, copying, and appropriation reveal shifting attitudes and cultural perspective on issues of imitation and originality. Classical distinctions between different types of "imitatio" and "aemulatio" contrast with a largely undifferentiated view of imitation in the twentieth century. Like other works, AZ creates a dialectical process, or interaction with the past, a kind of inter-art discourse.

Classicists as well as those artists, critics, and art historians who attempt to explicate the current situation have much to learn from one other. Emulation as a contemporary reconsideration of the Roman concept of *aemulatio* is neither imitation nor convention, but rather "an honoring of power of images to convey meaning over long periods of time" (Weisberg, 2010:

¹⁴ "Anxiety of influence" refers to a 1973 book by Harold Bloom. It was the first in a series of books that advanced a new approach to literary criticism. See Bloom, H. (1973). *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

45).¹⁵ The art of the past is alive, and artists are in constant dialogue with their sources and their history.

AZ's Athenian scholars: *translatio*?

The impact a translation has upon its own cultural milieu is more important than an impossible equivalence with the original.

Eco¹⁶

From a classicist's perspective, AZ's Athenian scholars is a translation of Raphael's fresco the *Scuola d'Atene*. Translation is always a shift, not between two languages, but between two cultures.¹⁷ In his essay on the linguistic aspects of translation,¹⁸ Jakobson suggested that there are three types of translation: intralinguistic, interlinguistic, and intersemiotic. Building upon Raphael's piece, AZ translated into art Pericle's ideal Athens, which is the "school" of Greece. Her painting is an example of intersemiotic – or transmutation – translation of a text.

Can translation be applied to the art world? The term *translatio* first appeared in the sense of 'change', even of address, 'transport', banking operation, botanical draft, and metaphor. Only in Seneca does it appear a turning from one language to another. Likewise, *traducere* meant 'to lead beyond'. *Tradurre* in its modern sense was common currency in the fifteenth century and it supplemented (in Italy and in France) *translatare* (English, on the contrary, coined to translate). It should be noted that translation is also an act of *transmutatio*, 'interpretation'.

AZ's Athenian scholars is a contemporary interpretation of both a canonical text and painting by means of an emulative exercise. Originality and tradition are constructs not only in relation to the art of the classical past but also in relation to the art of other periods of Western history.

¹⁵ Weisberg, R. (January 01, 2002). *Twentieth-Century Rhetoric: Enforcing Originality and Distancing the Past*. Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. *Supplementary Volumes*, 1, 25-46.

¹⁶ Eco, U. (2003). *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*. G.B: Phoenix.

¹⁷ Nergaard, S. (1995). "Introduzione". In *Teorie contemporanee della traduzione*. Ed. S. Nergaard. Milan: Bompiani.

¹⁸ Jakobson, R. (1959). "On Linguistic aspects of Translation." In Brower, R. A. *On Translation*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.



Raphael, La Scuola d'Atene, 1509–11. Photo by Sara Agnelli.



Allison Zuckerman, Athenian Scholars, 2019. Photo by Sara Agnelli.

#whatapaintingsays

Who are your characters? Any references to contemporary ones?

AZ: These characters have been built through a process of self-cannibalizing my own work and though sampling and remixing art historical moments. For example, the character, "Hopeful Explorer," who also makes an appearance in "Athenian Scholars," is composed of self-generated features (the figure's eyes, mouth, eyebrows), as well as moments from Pablo Picasso, Lucas Cranach, Stuart Davis, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

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What are the words (in Latin?) written in the banderoles?

AZ: The text within the banderoles references the short hand way that we communicate today through texting and social media. So much is lost in translation and it happens, more often than not, that messages are misinterpreted and meaning is skewed. The scrolls are illegible; I do not know what they mean and this is intentional. There is writing, there is a message, but I cannot interpret it. It becomes a futile communicative gesture.

#whatapaintingsays

Is there any reason you have 10 characters (vs 58 in Raphael's)?

I have ten characters within "Athenian Scholars" so that I could empathetically focus on the group: their interactions, dynamics, and individual characteristics. In this way, I am able to pivot to personality and theatricality, rather than emphasize the imposing architecture of Raphael's "School of Athens".

Who is AZ?

Allison Zuckerman has been often called the “DJ of the art world.” She likes to remix, through collage and paint, the male-dominated canon of art with her own creations.

Born in 1990 in Pennsylvania, Allison began painting when she was a child. In 2012, she graduated with a Bachelor of Art Degree from the University of Pennsylvania and in 2015, she earned a Master’s Degree in Fine Arts from the School of Art Institute of Chicago.

Allison first exhibited in New York City at Kravets Wehby Gallery in January 2017. That summer the Rubell family offered her a residency, which turned out into her solo show “Stranger in Paradise” at the Rubell Family Collection, on display from December 2017 through August 2018.

Allison’s body of work derives from her historical, cultural and visual discoveries. Allison picks and chooses images from different moments throughout art history, as well as her own painted imagery, and fuses them by collaging and painting. Her paintings point to the continuing dialogue between past and present.

Humor, love and vulnerability are the key words of her artistic language. Her aesthetic is animated by satire: her art ironically addresses – and at times criticized – controversial topics, while entertaining the viewer.

Vitruvian Women features Allison’s first solo exhibition at the University Gallery. *Mona* (2019), *Athenian Scholars* (2019), and *Hopeful Explorer* (2019) are the fruits of an intensive study into the High Renaissance works of Italian artists Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, and the German artist Lucas Cranach.

Also exhibited in University Gallery are three paintings from the Rubell Family Collection: *Restless Muse*, *The Queen* and *The Music Lesson*.

More works by Allison can be found on her website: allisonzuckerman.com

What creates a great artist? Talent or training?

In the same way as for the best writers and musicians, often we may wonder what makes the best artists shine among others. Are they born with an exceptional natural talent (*ingenium*)? Or do they work hard to acquire a set of artful skills as a result of their practical exercise and theoretical knowledge?

Artists are both born and taught. The necessity of both – natural-born talent and education – rings true in Allison. She learns the tradition to challenge it; and yet, like natural talent, her vision is innate and unique. And she truly shines in the contemporary art scene.

I had the possibility to meet Allison in summer 2019, during her first visit in Gainesville as the featured artist for Creative B. She came down to the hot swamp from New York City to teach two sets of workshops to UF students. They loved her!

Although I was aware of how great she is, it has been beautiful to get to know her in person and spent time together. She is a special one. What impresses me the most is that she is humble, very talented in the most authentic way and last but not least very witty.