

The moment of Paris's judgment has been rendered hundreds of times in the history of Western Art. Just as there is no original text for the story itself, there is no original visual template for the numerous interpretations and versions. But there is something close to a canonical rendering. Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving to Raphael's design is shown below. This work will be our starting point to introduce the visual motifs and symbols associated with the Judgment of Paris in visual art.

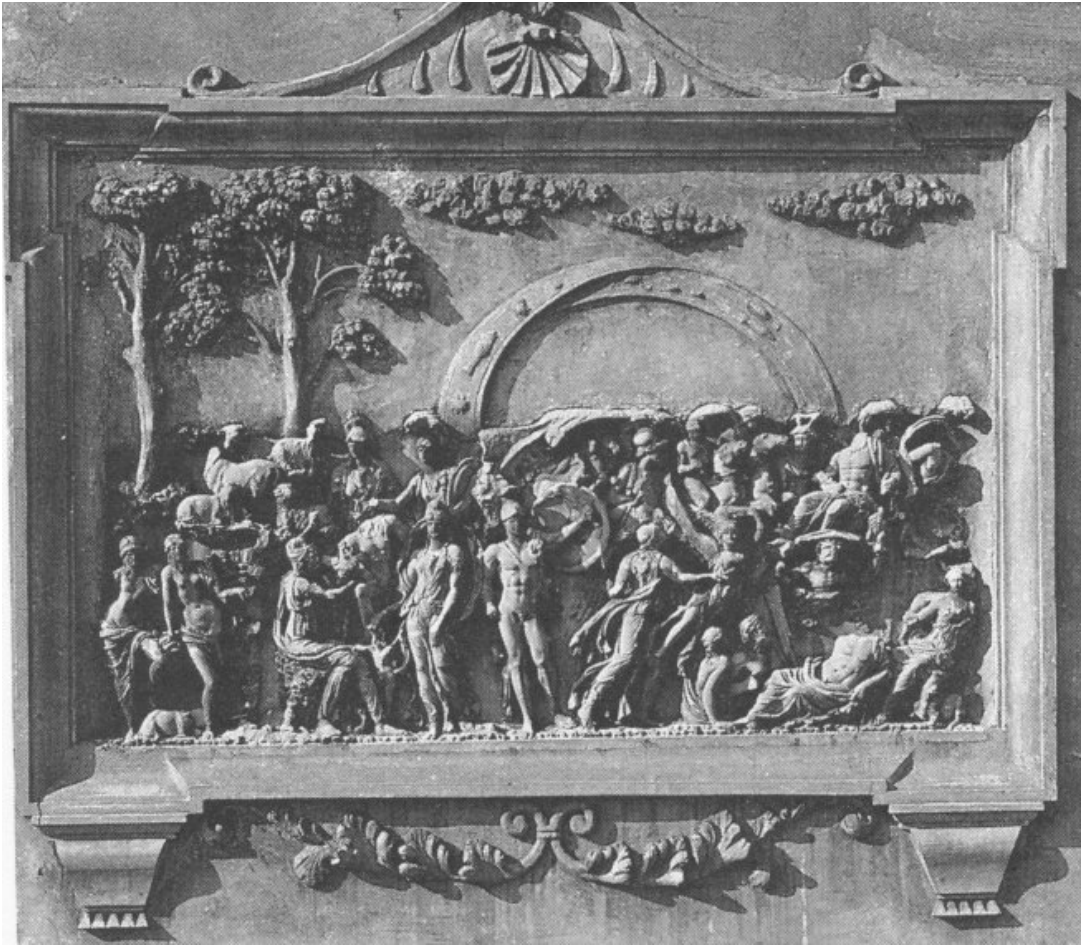


Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *The Judgment of Paris*, Engraving

The main action of the picture takes place left of centre with Aphrodite accepting the apple from Paris while Hera (behind) points her finger accusingly at Paris, and Athena (central and with her back to us) is getting dressed. The goddesses are identified by symbols: Eros clinging to Aphrodite's leg, Hera's peacock just behind her to her right, and Athena's helmet and shield on the ground beside her. Just visible on Athena's shield is the head of Medusa the gorgon. Hermes stands behind Paris wearing his winged helmet. As symbols of his occupation, Paris holds a crook, and his dog sits at his heel.

In the sky a Nike is about to crown Aphrodite, while, higher, the Sun rides by in his chariot, and to the right, Zeus sits enthroned in the clouds with Selene (the moon) behind, and Tellus beneath, supporting the sky. On the ground the main action is framed by two groups of demi-gods and nymphs. Within each group of three one member turns away from the centre of the picture, isolating the groups from the main action.

Raphael's version was once thought to be a copy of an ancient relief that Raphael had copied and then destroyed, so that the source would be secret. However, nineteenth century scholarship uncovered the true sources - two sarcophagi in the Villa Medici and Villa Pamphili<sup>1</sup>. These are shown below.



*The Judgment of Paris*. Hellenistic relief, second or third century AD, Rome, Villa Medici



*The Judgment of Paris*. Hellenistic relief, second or third century AD, Rome, Villa Pamphili

<sup>1</sup> "The Complete Works of Raphael", Reynal and Company, New York, 1969, p 515.

The synthesis of the engraving from the sarcophagi illustrates Raphael's ability to extend the tradition in a specific way - by forming a new composition from elements of classical originals. Briefly, we can see that some of the patterns and groupings have been preserved, as for example, the figures in the sky in the top right of the Villa Medici sarcophagus. Paris is seated left of centre in all three versions. But there are three major aspects in which the new work is Raphael's rather than his unknown Roman predecessors: the composition, the figures' shapes and the figures' poses.

The medium of engraving demanded and allowed different composition to that of the reliefs. Raphael made artistic choices based on a pure two-dimensional medium, rather than one with three-dimensional mass, but which was able to carry considerable detail. He rendered a framing landscape and set the action in the sky in deeper perspective. He balanced the picture by rearranging the elements - at ground level establishing a rhythm of human forms, interrupted near the centre by Athena's robe, then sparser on the right than the left, countered by landscape elements at the top on the left and the busier right-hand sky. He put all three goddesses at ground level, with Athena (the modest goddess) turned away from us at the centre of the composition.

Renaissance pictures sometimes appear crowded to modern eyes. This is true of *The Judgment of Paris*, but the arrangement of forms, shading and detail gives balance and coherence. It is when we focus in on individual figures and groups however that we see the appreciation of human form and the meticulous planning that has gone into each.



Details from Raphael/Raimondi *The Judgment of Paris*

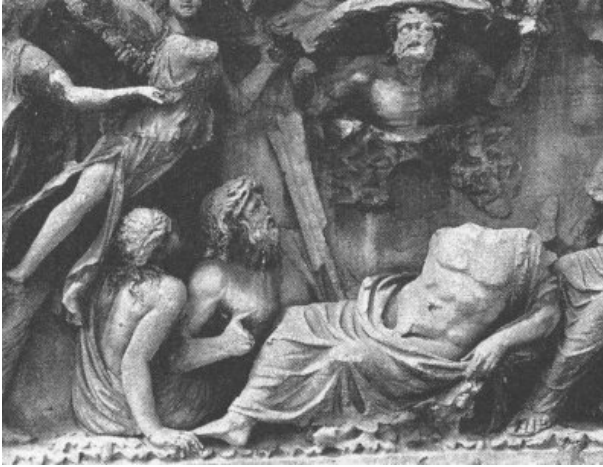
Becatti comments that the figures are Raphaelesque, but close to the Classical style<sup>2</sup>. The most notable difference from the Roman originals is that every figure is nude or nearly nude. Venus is nude on the Pamphili sarcophagus, but no-one else is – just as would be expected at the moment of decision, according to the classical versions of the story. Almost all painters of Raphael's time and after show all three goddesses naked, but he is unusual in unclothing everyone else. While he may have been familiar only with an oral version of the story, surely even that would not have had Paris herding his cows in the nude. His choice to render so many nudes is doubly surprising because, of the many figures Raphael painted, almost all were clothed. He prepared for figure paintings by drawing nude figure studies, then redrawing the same groups with clothing. The painted version would follow the drawings closely. This raises the possibility that the drawing from which Marcantonio worked was originally intended by Raphael as a first study. Perhaps at that stage he made an aesthetic decision to leave everyone naked, to avoid imbalance between the male and female figures. *The Judgment of Paris* is exceptional in being a finished Raphael in which female nudes are prominent<sup>3</sup>. While his contemporaries and successors accentuated this prominence by clothing the males, Raphael's divergence from the story takes away some of its sexual tension, presumably deliberately.

We will later consider the standard of human beauty represented by Raphael's goddesses. Their figures are womanly rather than girlish (in happy contrast to the waifish figures of Cranach – see below). But it is interesting that some of the unbearded secondary characters are androgynous – in particular the nymph seated on the right hand side, looking out of the picture. Male models were widely used, and Raphael could have been working from imagination rather than life. But elsewhere he painted and drew figures of clear femininity. (We shall see some of these in Section 5.) Furthermore, the corresponding character on the Medicis sarcophagus is obviously female. In considering why he made this change, we are confronted with another difference between the classical model and Raphael's rendering – the nymph's pose. Perhaps of all the touches of originality in the Raphael/Raimondi *Judgment of Paris*, this is the most intriguing.

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<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Becatti, "Raphael and Antiquity" in *The Complete Works of Raphael*, Reynal and Company, New York, 1969, p 515.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from *The Three Graces*, Raphael's females – even in mythology – are draped and posed modestly. See *The Nymph Galatea* below.



*The Judgment of Paris*. Hellenistic relief, second or third century AD, Villa Medici. Detail.



Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *The Judgment of Paris*, Engraving. Detail.



Edouard Manet, *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*

As shown in the sequence on the previous page, Raphael's rendering of the group in the right foreground of *The Judgment of Paris* is an evolutionary step between a classical original and the original modern<sup>4</sup>. Clearly the three pictures are structured around the same grouping and posing of three figures. In the Medici relief, all three are looking upwards to the sky at Tellus (visible on the detail shown) and above him to Zeus. Although diverted from the main action of Paris and the goddesses, they are engaged in the action of the picture. In the Raphael/Raimondi engraving the nymph turns towards the viewer, resting her chin on her hand, and with her leg now visible. She has withdrawn from the picture's world and appears to connect with ours. The other two figures in the group have only a slight adjustment in pose. In Manet's painting, both the woman and the central man look out of the picture towards the viewer. The woman seems to be looking *at* the viewer, whereas the man appears to stare into space, as though his voluble friend's conversation, and being seated next to a naked woman, were rather tedious.

Manet's familiarity with Raphael's work is unsurprising: The variety of interesting poses in the *Judgment of Paris* made the engraving popular with artists down the centuries<sup>5</sup>. There are extant copies of drawings by Delacroix, Degas, Corot and many anonymous artists, reproducing single figures or groups. The group with the androgynous nymph was particularly popular, perhaps because of its ambiguous gaze. Thus Manet quoted and reworked Raphael, just as Raphael had quoted and reworked his classical predecessors. Undeniably, though, part of the power of Manet's painting comes from the pose of the woman, found naked with clothed men, looking towards us. The outward gaze is Raphael's invention, and we will now consider what it means.

Raphael's contribution to figure painting is of the highest significance, and a fascinating study. Many of his pictures teem with human forms in energetic, character-interpreting gestures. An example, shown overleaf, is the famous *School of Athens*. This includes representations of Greek philosophers, portraits of contemporaries, and sometimes both in a single character. For example, the seated figure in the foreground slightly left of centre is believed to be a portrait of Michelangelo representing Heraclitus. The poses, facial expressions and interactions between characters are in some cases meaningful (the classic example being in the two central figures of Plato pointing to the heavens and Aristotle gesturing to the earth), and at other times, simply expressions of attitude and character (for example in the enthusiasm of the group surrounding Euclid in the right foreground). The small figure, circled in red (by me, not Raphael!) in the lower right corner, is a self-portrait. This figure seems to detach himself from the action, looking out of the picture at the viewer with an expression as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa's. There is the suggestion of a smile and the eyebrows appear to be slightly raised. It is certainly not clear whether the artist is looking outwards for approval, complacently, or sharing a joke with the viewer.

<sup>4</sup> Manet's quotation and reworking of the Raphael group has been called the first modern painting. It dares the viewer to respond to the social implications of the picnicking foursome and, by extension, to the place of the nude woman in a world of clothed men. Aesthetics is secondary to the cognitive and cultural challenge.

<sup>5</sup> The Raphael/Raimondi *Judgment of Paris* was the first widely reproduced engraving. It "astounded all Rome" (*Complete works of Raphael*, op cit) and was much copied and reworked in other media. It was therefore the first artefact of Benjamin's "Age of Mechanical Reproduction", illustrating, perhaps, that for artists the aura of a single original was never as compelling as the aura of any copy of a masterpiece.





Raphael, *The School of Athens*, Vatican



Raphael, *The School of Athens*, Vatican. Detail (Self portrait)

Another self portrait appears in *The Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple*, where Raphael again looks out at us, detaching himself from the action (while bearing a pole of a carried chair).

The mechanics of painting a self-portrait using a single mirror entail that a faithful rendering from life will look outwards, but this does not provide an explanation for the figures in *The School of Athens* and *Heliodorus*. Raphael's sketchbooks confirm his ability to turn faces and figures mentally. Even if he were not able to do this, his decision to include figures looking out from the paintings must have been fully conscious and deliberate. Indeed, the outward look is a kind of signature, and appears to have been Raphael's invention. By including a character, detached from the action of the picture, but with a level outward gaze, Raphael introduces a kind of interaction between viewer and viewed. Inasmuch as the figure in the painting appears to exchange looks with the viewer, that interaction is "modern" in the way that *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* is modern. Inasmuch as the figure appears to be inviting, making or sharing judgment on the work itself, the effect is post-modern!

What of the nymph in the lower right group in the *Judgment of Paris*? Her expression is similar to Raphael's in his self-portraits: a tranquil indifference to the activity around her and the hint of enquiry directed at the viewer. As with Raphael, we are not sure whether she is asking us, "What do you think of this?" or "Why should I care what you think of this?" The rendering of the face is crude, because of the medium of engraving, but the androgyny of the figure does make it tempting to see how closely this picture matches Raphael's other outward-looking faces. The face structure is different, but the pose and expression could have come from the artist himself.



Raphael, Details from *The Judgment of Paris* and *The School of Athens*. The latter is mirrored left to right.