

The influence of Bramante on Raphael's paintings and architecture

“Non c'è niente di più perfetto della perfezione.” (Raphael)

“There's nothing more perfect than perfect.” (Raphael)



by

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Abstract

In some of Raphael's paintings, buildings appear that share similarities with structures designed by Bramante. This research examines the lives of both Bramante and Raphael, with a specific question: To what extent did Bramante influence both Raphael's paintings and architectural design?

To answer this question, a comparison is made between works from Bramante and Raphael. The works that have been compared are St. Peter's and The School of Athens, and Tempietto and The Marriage of the Virgin.

The findings suggest that Raphael incorporated Bramante's design for St. Peter's into his fresco The School of Athens. However, despite the similarities between The Marriage of the Virgin and the Tempietto, there is no evidence that Raphael drew inspiration from the Tempietto for his painting.

After Raphael arrived in Rome, Bramante had some influence on his work. As the chief architect of Rome, Bramante's architectural designs served as a source of inspiration for Raphael, who studied and analysed these buildings, incorporating their elements into his paintings and designs. The use of the dome, the Greek cross, and niches, which appear in the painting The School of Athens, were inspired by the design of St. Peter's. This indirect influence of Bramante shaped Raphael's architectural style.

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Note

For this research, literature sources were used. Although these sources were carefully selected, historical accounts from that time are not always consistent. There are multiple theories regarding certain events, and the truth is not always clear. Debates about what happened continue to this day, with differing perspectives on the subject. This thesis is based on the most convincing accounts from that period.

Introduction & Methodology

Raphael, one of the most prominent figures of the Renaissance, lived from 1483 to 1520. He is known as a master painter, sculptor, and architect. Born in Urbino to Giovanni Santi, a painter, Raphael was exposed to art early on. After his father died in 1494, Raphael moved to Perugia to work under Perugino, the leading painter in central Italy at the time. He started as an apprentice and later became a more experienced assistant in the workshop. Raphael's time in Perugino significantly shaped his artistic style, a trend that continued in the years that followed. In 1504, Raphael moved to Florence to further develop his style, where he spent four years studying the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Eventually, his distant relative, Donato Bramante, contacted him with an offer from Pope Julius II to work in Rome. Raphael left Florence and settled in Rome, where he remained until he died in 1520. (B.Hall, 2005, pp. 15-24).

Donato Bramante was a renowned architect of the Renaissance, born to a humble but respectable family in Urbino in 1444 and passing away in 1514. As a child, he focused on arithmetic alongside reading and writing. However, as his father wanted him to earn a living and believed that drawing was a useful skill, he introduced Bramante to painting. Despite this, Bramante's true passion was always architecture and perspective. Eventually, he travelled to Lombardy to study and design buildings. Since he was not well-known or earning much money, Bramante moved to Milan to see the famous Duomo. While there, he met two respected engineers, Cesare Cesariano and Bernardino da Trevio, who inspired him to fully dedicate himself to architecture. In the years leading up to the Holy Year of 1500, Bramante moved to Rome to pursue his career as an architect. He not only worked on smaller projects but also studied the many buildings in Rome, learning from them and incorporating their features into his designs. As time passed, Bramante became a highly respected figure in Rome, with his work earning him great recognition. One of these works was the Tempietto. His reputation grew to the point that he was considered the city's top architect. When Pope Julius II was elected, he selected Bramante as one of his chief architects. When he was awarded the commission to design the new St. Peter's, he encouraged Raphael to paint in the Vatican. Bramante remained in this role for the remainder of his life, serving as the Pope's head architect until he died in 1514 (Vasari, pp. 74-79).

In some of Raphael's paintings, including *The School of Athens* and *The Marriage of the Virgin*, architecture is prominently featured. Some of the buildings depicted in these works closely resemble designs created by Bramante, however, both artists were in Rome at the same time, and the similarities could merely be coincidental. Some works of the two have already been studied for comparisons, but the influence of Bramante on Raphael is yet unclear. This research aims to answer the question: To what extent did Bramante influence both Raphael's paintings and architectural design?

To get an answer to this question, this thesis dives deeper into the works of Raphael and Bramante. Each chapter explores different designs of the two through literature reviews, where a comparison of the paintings will be made in the conclusion. The thesis will specifically investigate and discuss the connections between the works *The School of Athens* and *St. Peter's*, and *Tempietto* and *The Marriage of the Virgin*.

Literature review

School of Athens

Pope Julius II, Fig 1, ascended the papal throne in Rome in 1503 and passed away in 1513. He aspired to restore Rome to its former glory and demonstrate his power, leading him to undertake extensive renovations and reconstructions of architectural masterpieces from previous decades. One of these projects was redesigning his residence in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. During this time, a promising painter from Urbino, Raphael, entered the scene. This commission marked Raphael's first major project upon his arrival in Rome. But how did he manage to establish himself as the master artist and head of the Stanza project in the Apostolic Palace so quickly? While his extraordinary artistic talent played a crucial role, Raphael also possessed another valuable skill: pulling strings.



Figure 1. Julius II, c 1443-1513. (Wikipedia, 2025)

There are two different accounts of how Raphael secured this prestigious position. One version suggests that Bramante, a fellow native of Urbino and a distant relative of Raphael, recommended the young and promising artist to the Pope (Garrigues, 1879). However, other studies indicate that Raphael leveraged his prior connections from his work in Florence, persuading Pier Soderini, the Gonfalonier of the Florentine Republic, to write a letter of recommendation to the Pope's nephew. This letter ultimately helped him obtain the Vatican commission (Carminati, 2012, pp. 4-9).

At the time Raphael was entrusted with decorating the Stanza, some parts of the room had already been embellished, with other artists still working on it. Nevertheless, Pope Julius II granted Raphael complete creative freedom over the project. He preserved some of the existing ceiling decorations but had the walls cleared to make way for his work. He painted large frescoes on each of the four walls, each representing a distinct theme: Theology, Poetry, Philosophy, and Jurisprudence. Among these, the most renowned is the Philosophy fresco, commonly known as "The School of Athens" (Garrigues, 1879, pp. 408-412).

This painting features some of history's most influential philosophers and scholars, including Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. Raphael skillfully translated abstract philosophical concepts into visually compelling imagery, capturing the essence of each thinker's doctrine. For instance, Plato, depicted as the elderly man with a white beard, holds a copy of the *Timaeus* while raising his right hand toward the sky, symbolising his focus on the realm of ideas. To his right, Aristotle carries his *Ethics* in his left hand and gestures toward the ground with his right hand, representing his philosophy's practical, empirical nature. Raphael applied similar symbolic representations to the other philosophers and scholars portrayed in the fresco (Carminati, 2012, pp. 28-44).



Figure 2 School of Athens Plato in the centre on the left and Aristotle on the right. (Wikipedia, 2025)

Raphael set this philosophical scene within an architectural space filled with light. Unlike the traditional paintings of the fifteenth century, which relied on elaborate backgrounds, Raphael's composition was inspired by the grandiosity of Renaissance-style basilicas. This choice aligned with the architectural principles of Bramante, who redefined classical architecture by focusing on spatial proportions rather than surface embellishments (Forcellino, 2006, pp. 127-129). The painting's background features a series of stone arches, open to the sky and adorned with coffered panels reminiscent of the Pantheon's ceiling. This architectural design was closely modelled on Bramante's studies and his plans for the new St. Peter's Basilica (Burke, 2015, pp. 169-170).

St. Peter's

Pope Julius II undertook the task of expanding or reconstructing the old Basilica in Rome in 1505. To explore the possible transformations for the church, he enlisted a team of advisers, among whom Bramante and Giuliano da Sangallo were the most influential (Tamburelli, 2022, pp. 184-192). Over the following years, both Bramante and Sangallo proposed alternative plans for either remodelling the existing basilica or constructing a new structure. The most significant proposal was presented by Bramante in 1506, composed of a centralised scheme with a Greek cross in the middle.

The floor plan of this proposal can be seen in Figure 3. It is only the top part of the floorplan of St. Peter's; the rest of the floorplan has been lost in time. Most scholars expect that Bramante designed the bottom part as a mirrored copy of the top part, which makes it a Greek cross Figure 4. There are also theories that the bottom section of the floorplan was designed as a Latin cross that reuses the old columns of the old basilica for the design of the new St. Peter's (Bosman, 2004, pp. 60-75). Both theories can be plausible due to the lack of existing plans from that time. The most realistic one is the plan of the Greek cross because of the cast bronze medal found of St. Peter's that depicts the central plan of Bramante in 1506 see Figure 5 (Hill, 1931). The fact that there are old columns used in this design of Bramante makes a compelling theory.

The central concept, figure 6, exists today in various forms, including partial floor plans and perspective views, which have significantly influenced the modern appearance of the basilica. Bramante's design gave a geometric structure to Julius II's vision of how a church should be perceived, encapsulating its essence, mission, and purpose as envisioned by the Pope and his court. As a result, Julius II ordered the demolition or a partial demolition of the old basilica to clear the path for the construction of a new one under Bramante's supervision (Burke, 2015, pp. 165-168).

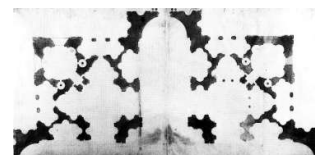


Figure 3 Floor plan of Bramante (*The architecture of St Peter's Basilica, sd*)

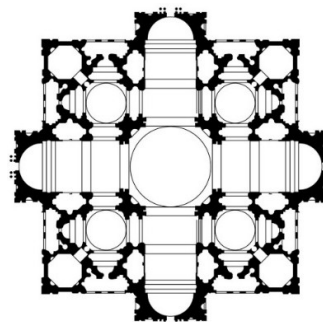


Figure 4 Bramante's central plan (Harris & Zucker, sd)



Figure 5 Caradosso, medal honoring the laying of the foundation stone of the St. Peter's 1506. (Hill, 1931)

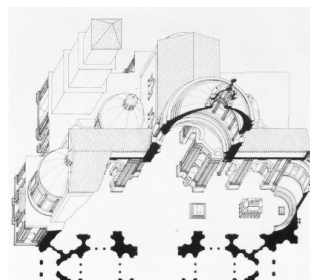


Figure 6 Visualisation central plan. (Burke, 2015)

Bramante's central plan for the basilica deviated from the conventional church architecture of that era Figure 7. The primary concept of the central plan is illustrated through a Greek cross formed by two intersecting main arms (black), with four identical domed chapels (grey) positioned at the corners. Additionally, square chapels were included to support the central dome, accompanied by a cluster of subsidiary domes surrounding them (Hersey, 1992, pp. 65-73).

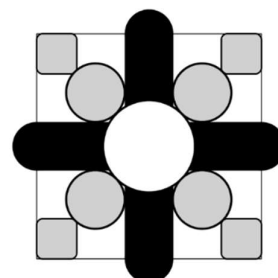


Figure 7 Concept central plan. (Hersey, 1992)

Construction of the basilica began shortly after the cornerstone was laid on April 18, 1506. The project was so immense that by the time Julius II passed away in 1513, it remained unfinished. His successor, Leo X, took over, but soon after, Bramante himself died in 1514. Before his death, Bramante requested that Raphael be appointed as his successor, and Pope Leo X honoured his wish. However, Raphael had limited architectural experience and was therefore supported by two of Bramante's experienced advisers. Raphael developed at least two new designs for St. Peter's, both paying homage to Bramante's vision while modifying the central plan into a more elongated structure with a Latin cross instead of a Greek cross. Despite these changes, he preserved the large central dome and the core design principles of Bramante's concept. Additionally, Raphael introduced a grand and imposing facade, which ultimately became the one seen today Figure 9. Following Raphael's death in 1520, another architect took over the project (Burke, 2015, pp. 171-173).

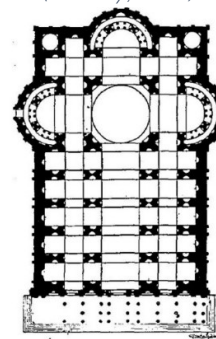


Figure 8 Raphael's design. (Harris & Zucker, sd)



Figure 9 Façade of St. Peter today. (Sint-Pietersbasiliek & Vaticaanstad, sd)

Over the following decade, numerous architects contributed to the construction of St. Peter's Basilica, implementing various minor modifications. Sangallo introduced vaulted central arms, while Antonio's work was later dismantled by Michelangelo. In place of the original design, Michelangelo transformed the circular dome into a parabolic one, a groundbreaking architectural innovation in Rome. After Michelangelo's death, the dome was completed by Porta. Maderno extended the nave by adding three chapels and constructed a facade that largely followed Raphael's 1519 proposal (Hersey, 1992, pp. 85-96).

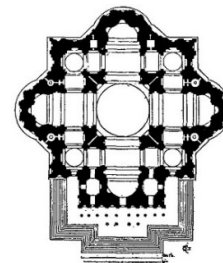


Figure 10 Michelangelo's design. (Harris & Zucker, sd)

On November 18, 1626, exactly 106 years after construction commenced, the new basilica was inaugurated by Pope Urban VIII. The grand colonnades in front of St. Peter's were designed by Bernini and were completed in 1667.

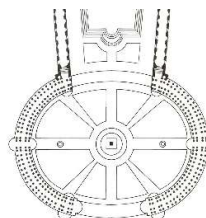


Figure 12 Bernini's colonnades. (ArchEyesteam, 2025)

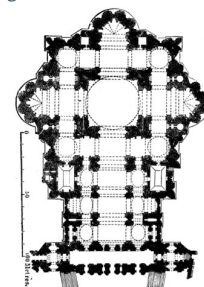


Figure 11 Final floor plan St. Peter's. (Alamy Stock Photo, sd)

Tempietto

Bramante was given the difficult task of designing a remarkable temple at the site where the founder of the Christian Church and the first pope was martyred. This temple, the Tempietto, was positioned within the Church of San Pietro courtyard in Montorio, Rome and functioned as a destination for pilgrims (Karmon, 2021).

Built in 1502, the Tempietto is a domed structure with a centralized design that reflects classical temple architecture. Its layout is perfectly circular and symmetrical, with all elements radiating from a single central point. The structure includes a ground floor, a first floor, a chapel, and a tomb below (Karmon, 2021).

Bramante introduced a high-windowed open wall between the ground floor and the chapel while also emphasizing the exterior with pillars. He balanced the vertical flow of the design with strong horizontal elements such as the three surrounding steps, two entablatures, a balustrade, and the enclosing corridor. By reinforcing and contrasting these architectural elements, he set the Tempietto apart from all classical precedents (Burke, 2015, pp. 162-164).



Figure 13 Tempietto.
(Wikipedia, 2025)



Figure 14 Perspective, floorplan and section of the Tempietto. (Whoop, 2011)

Marriage of the Virgin

Raphael and his mentor, Pietro Perugino, both executed *The Marriage of the Virgin* during the same period (1499-1504), reflecting a prevalent theme in Renaissance art. The composition depicts the moment in which a priest officiates the marriage of Mary and Joseph before the Temple in Jerusalem. Both Perugino's and Raphael's versions were completed circa 1504 (Richetti, 2024).



Figure 15 a. *Marriage of the Virgin* by Pietro Perugino. (Wikipedia, 2024) b. *Marriage of the Virgin* by Raphael. (Haltedefinizione, 2023) c. Zoomed-in picture of Raphael's architecture used in the *Marriage of the Virgin*. (Haltedefinizione, 2023)

While the two paintings exhibit numerous compositional similarities, they also demonstrate significant divergences in artistic execution. The most striking contrast lies in the architectural representation of the temple. Raphael employs a centralized design, giving the scene a heightened sense of clarity and spatial coherence. Conversely, Perugino adopts an octagonal temple structure, which results in a more static and flattened visual effect. Raphael's deliberate emphasis on the temple amplifies the perception of depth and dynamism, whereas Perugino's rigid architectural approach renders the spatial environment less immersive from a standpoint of perspective. (A Digital Comparison of *The Marriage of the Virgin* by Perugino and by Raphael | Haltedefinizione, 2023).

Raphael's architectural composition conforms to a centralized plan, with all elements systematically radiating from a singular focal point. A high, fenestrated wall defines the ground floor of the chapel, while the exterior is characterized by vertical emphases through the use of pillars that establish a cohesive connection to the chapel. This pronounced verticality is counterbalanced by the horizontal structural elements, including the surrounding steps, the two entablatures, and the enclosed colonnade, which collectively contribute to the architectural harmony of the scene (Richetti, 2024).

Discussion

The School of Athens and the design of St. Peter's Basilica were created around the same period. Raphael began painting The School of Athens around 1509, while the construction of St. Peter's Basilica began in 1506. This means that while Raphael was working on his fresco, Bramante's design for St. Peter's was already completed.

If we examine the architectural elements in the background of the School of Athens in Figure 16a, we can identify specific design features. Some of these include the vertical and horizontal axes that intersect at the centre of the building. Above this central point, a dome is positioned, and a long, rounded ceiling extends overhead. Additionally, small niches and hallways are incorporated into the side walls, enhancing the decorative aspects of the structure.

When we compare this with Bramante's design for St. Peter's Basilica in Figure 16b, we find similar architectural elements. The vertical and horizontal axes align with the central Greek cross layout, with a large, centralized dome positioned above the intersection. The design also includes designated spaces for the long, rounded ceilings and niches, visible in both the floor plan and perspective views. This resemblance suggests that Raphael may have drawn inspiration from Bramante's design for St. Peter's when painting The School of Athens.

However, there are also notable differences. Some architectural elements in Raphael's painting do not appear in Bramante's design. For instance, the hallways on the sides of the structure are absent, the back of the building is completely open, a set of stairs is added in the foreground, and a triumphal arch is depicted in the background.

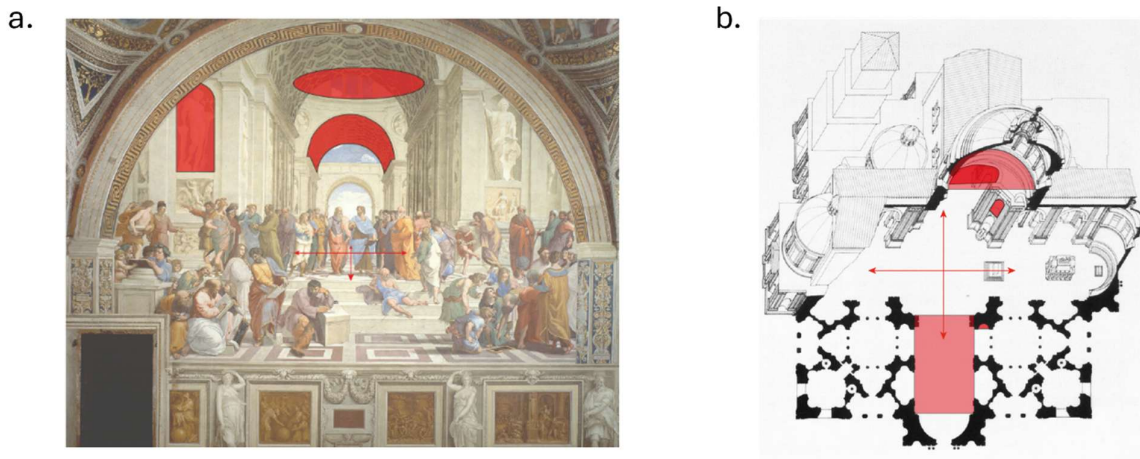


Figure 16 a. Analysis of The School of Athens. Adapted from Wikipedia (2025) b. Analysis of St. Peter, designed by Bramante. Adapted from Burke (2015)

Similarly, The Marriage of the Virgin by Raphael and Bramante's design for the Tempietto share significant architectural similarities. Both feature centralized layouts, symmetrical façades, and a dome at the top. Despite these commonalities Figures 17a,b, there are also key differences. Raphael used arched openings, whereas Bramante opted for square ones. Additionally, the way the lower and upper sections of the buildings connect differs: Raphael incorporated horizontal beams, while Bramante used a rounded railing for the transition. Another distinction lies in the stairways leading to the chapels. While Bramante designed a single central entrance, Raphael envisioned a layout where staircases connect from multiple directions, allowing access from all sides.

a.



b.



Figure 17 a. Analysis of *The Marriage of the Virgin*. Adapted from Halteddefinizion (2023) b. Analysis of the Tempietto. Wikipedia (2025)

Conclusion

Previous studies have already examined the connection of the works made by Bramante and Raphael and drawn comparisons between them. This research investigates the relationship between Bramante and Raphael, focusing on how Bramante's influence is evident in both Raphael's paintings and architectural projects. This research aims to answer the question: To what extent did Bramante influence both Raphael's paintings and architectural designs? To address this question, both a literature review and an observational analysis were conducted.

The findings indicate that Bramante had some influence on certain works by Raphael. This influence emerged after Raphael arrived in Rome in 1508; before that time, it is likely that the two knew of each other but had never met. Although *The Marriage of the Virgin* and Bramante's *Tempietto* share similarities, it is unlikely that Raphael drew inspiration from the *Tempietto*, as he painted *The Marriage of the Virgin* in 1504 and only saw the *Tempietto* after arriving in Rome in 1508.

As the chief architect of Rome at the time, Bramante was a highly prestigious figure for Raphael. He played a significant role in Raphael's career by assigning him the monumental task of painting *The School of Athens*. The architectural background of the fresco bears a strong resemblance to Bramante's design for St. Peter's Basilica, suggesting that Raphael used Bramante's plans as a reference rather than copying them exactly.

This research concludes that Bramante influenced Raphael's later career, though not through direct mentorship. Instead, his impact stemmed from his reputation and the architectural designs he created. By studying Bramante's buildings, Raphael found a valuable source of inspiration, which ultimately shaped his architectural style.

For future research, an in-depth analysis of the architectural style that Raphael developed could be conducted to identify similarities with Bramante's work. Did Raphael merely translate Bramante's style, or did he create his own unique architectural approach?

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