The School of Athens

Raphael (1483–1520)

THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS is arguably one of the greatest works of art to come out of the Italian Renaissance. Sponsored by Pope Julius II and commissioned for a room in the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican (now known as the *Stanze di Raffaello*), it is one of four frescos, each depicting a different branch of knowledge: Poetry and Music, Theology, Law, and Philosophy. *The School of Athens* represents Philosophy, in which great thinkers and ancient philosophers lounge and discuss their ideas in the idealistic style of the Renaissance.

By using precise linear perspective, Raphael masterfully directs our eyes where he wants them to go. Even the architecture—which many interpret to be in the shape of a Greek cross—guides us to the focal point. The sculptures flanking the background are of two Greek gods: Apollo, the god of light, and Athena, the goddess of wisdom. At the very center, which is the painting's vanishing point, stands Plato (left) and Aristotle (right). Plato holds the *Timaeus*, his most important dialogue throughout the Medieval period, and points upward with his other hand, emphasizing his Theory of Forms. Aristotle is shown holding the *Nichomachean Ethics*, which explores how individuals should best live, as he gestures forward towards us, the audience.

While Plato and Aristotle are the only figures we can identify for certain, many historians have surmised who they likely are based on clues Raphael left behind. Some of these great figures could include Pythagoras, Socrates, Diogenes, Heraclitus (modeled on Michelangelo), Alexander the Great, Averroes, Euclid, and many others.

Mary, Mary Quite Contrary

Jessie Wilcox Smith (1863–1935)

JESSIE WILCOX originally trained to be a teacher, but when her health became an issue, she decided to take an art class where she discovered her talent for drawing. She studied at the School of Illustration at Drexel Institute and graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in the late nineteenth century, when an artistic career for a woman was very limited.

She became known in the advertising world for her work in magazines and books of poetry, eventually finding a clear, distinct style in which she demonstrated a beautiful and touching sensitivity to motherhood and children. Smith did not like to utilize actors as her models, but preferred to watch her friends and family with their children for inspiration. This helped her achieve a sense of authenticity in her work. There is a loveliness in the drawings she made for her Mother Goose book of nursery rhymes, in which even a casual observer can see the care she used to illustrate each child's expression and body language. On the subject, she said, "A child will always look directly at anyone who is telling a story; so while I paint I tell tales marvelous to hear."

In *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary,* the young girl's small stature is emphasized by her surroundings. The too-long apron that drapes onto the ground at her feet and the hat that is slightly too large for her evoke memories of when one was small and everything felt so much larger. Even the tulips are exaggerated in size, which also allows the viewer to notice the "pretty maids all in a row."

To this day, many consider Smith to be the greatest children's book illustrator. During her life, she helped redefine the world of art by pushing the boundaries of illustration and the stereotypes of being a female artist. "The Golden Age of American Illustration" saw Smith become confident and vocal in her art, leaving behind a lasting impression on American life at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

John Trumbull (1756–1843)

JOHN TRUMBULL is remembered as "The Painter of the Revolution," having fought in the Revolutionary War and focused his artistic eye on the history of a burgeoning United States. He took a realistic approach to his portraiture, preferring to paint from life. He painted hundreds of miniature portraits and small paintings representing the War of Independence during his life. His portrait of Alexander Hamilton is one that you see very often, even to this day, gracing the ten dollar bill.

This particular painting, however, is an ambitious 12 by 18 feet and his most celebrated work. Originally a much smaller painting, members of Congress commissioned the larger reproduction along with three others to be hung in the Capitol Building. It depicts the presentation of the Declaration of Independence at the Pennsylvania State House, indicated by the five men standing near the center, surrounded by the Second Continental Congress. The tallest of the five men is Thomas Jefferson who is presenting the document to John Hancock, with Benjamin Franklin directly to the right and Robert R. Livingston, Roger Sherman, and John Adams to the left. These men made up the committee that wrote the Declaration of Independence, and here they present their draft on June 28, 1776.

Nearly a month later, on July 2, the Declaration would be signed by 42 of the men depicted in this painting (56 in total) and then on July 4, finally voted on and approved. This painting has often been confused with the event of signing the Declaration, with even Trumbull naming it *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776* to further confuse us. However, Thomas Jefferson described this scene to him as the presentation of the committee's draft, not the actual signing.

Conversation with Smaug

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973)

UNDENIABLY, Tolkien's greatest legacy is his writing. However, the author held a little-known interest for art, particularly Japanese ink drawings, Art Nouveau, and Expressionism. He took art classes and explored different media in his undergraduate studies, creating illustrations that eventually would come to support his unique story-telling.

In the year he drew this vivid watercolor, Tolkien wrote: "A dragon is no idle fancy. Whatever may be his origins, in fact or invention, the dragon in legend is a potent creation of men's imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold."

This illustration is one of five, painted by Tolkien in 1937 for the first American edition of *The Hobbit*. The author included details that only he could, giving context to the scene with the bones of individuals who had previously attempted to steal from Smaug and showcasing the mysterious writing on the large terracotta jar that he revealed later to be his own invented Elvish script, Tengwar. This was the first time Tolkien had displayed one of his languages, but it wasn't until eighteen years later that he provided the tools to translate the script, which were found in appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*. This addition allowed readers to decipher the Elvish words as a curse on thieves.

Tolkien illustrates Smaug as a playful cartoon of a dragon, grinning and haughty and vibrant, curled around his piles of gold, which is perfectly in line with his description of the beast in *The Hobbit*; "a most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm."