

Where Is Epicurus In The "School of Athens"?

Post by "Joshua" of August 5, 2020 at 2:25 PM

I don't have much really, but I can summarize my thinking.

I disagree with Elli on the probable placement of Epicurus in the fresco. I wouldn't at all expect to find him in a central position on the dais—he always taught in a private setting, far secluded from the gymnasium.

I wouldn't be surprised if we found out that even Raphael didn't identify the clustered figures that frame Plato and Aristotle. A place is often given in Greek art and drama to the *hoi polloi*—in drama, the polis is represented by the chorus. In philosophical dialogues, the 'room' is filled up with named characters who have no speaking parts at all. They exist simply to frame the discussion in a community setting.

I *would* expect to find him pictured with a book. It is easy to forget how prolific a writer Epicurus was—over 300 scrolls is an impressive and unmatched corpus for that time and place. Diogenes Laertius said as much, and he must have been Raphael's primary source.

I would not expect his portrait to resemble the ancient busts. For one thing, it's not clear whether Raphael knew of them. For another, iconography was more important than actual likeness to these Renaissance painters, and mostly they used contemporary people as models.

The humanist on which this portrait was based was Tommaso Inghirami; and that is suggestive. Inghirami was a learned humanist, a prefect of the Vatican Library, and poet laureate. Erasmus complained of an oration in which Inghirami "treated Christ as a self-sacrificing hero rather than the Redeemer." In Raphael's version, the wreathed figure is supporting the weight of a friend or follower who leans on him from behind with bowed head. A hint of the soteriology that clung to Epicurus, perhaps?

There are other hints that are more incidental, but I'll leave it there for now.