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MANY ARE FAMILIAR with the timelessness of Raphael's *School of Athens*, one of the most famous frescoes by the Renaissance painter found in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. Depicting an ideal community of the greatest thinkers, artists and scientists of classical antiquity, the work's vanishing point centres on Plato on the left and Aristotle, his student, on the right. However, if we are to look closely at the image above, we will notice how this photograph is a compelling reenactment of the Renaissance scene from a group of 61 staff, faculty and students at the American University of Sharjah (AUS). Plato is in fact played by Professor Martin Giesen, the founding dean of AUS's College of Art, Architecture and Design (CAAD) and to his left, the current acting Dean Varkki Pallathucheril, plays Aristotle.

Seven graduating female architecture students at the American University of Sharjah are challenging the timeless elements of the masterpiece, professing their love for Renaissance. They choreographed a complete reenactment of painting's iconic scenes, staged in places from the Hatta dam to the AUS campus. Over the years, they have reenacted paintings which culminated in *The School of Athens* as part of a series titled *Redressing the Renaissance*, which they exhibited in their college last month. *Redressing the Renaissance* looks to reconsider the inherent themes and stereotypes of the canon of Western art history while firmly grounding the work within the local cultural context.

This reenactment of Raphael was dedicated by these seven students to their Professor Giesen. They surprised him early one Friday morning after he was brought to the

REDRESSING THE RENAISSANCE

A recreation of Italian Renaissance master Raphael's School of Athens by students of the American University of Sharjah demonstrates how art history is shared by all, writes Suzy Sikorski

main faculty building by Dean Varkki and subsequently "stepping into" a fully choreographed frame of 60 other faculty, staff and students. All were perfectly in position in accordance to their respective roles, each expected to study the work, in an attempt to mimic their role's demeanor. The process materialised into a shared sense of community at the college, culturally specific to their education and careers in Sharjah.

As these seven students mention, "The overarching themes of our recreations are to reconsider the rather limited representation, per today's context, in celebrated works from the past and to spark conversation about accepted conventions."

Here, Raphael's scantily clad figures are swaddled in an abundance of fabrics while the Roman Catholic elements in the Vatican fresco are played out by Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Adorned in shaylas, bedsheets and saris and armed with architectural tools, the sitters were colour-coded in accordance to the labeled sections to which they were assigned, each organised by a member of the group.

"The students' re-enactment debunks

Renaissance notions in post-modern fashion," says Professor Giesen. "High and low culture hierarchy is shattered. Commercial exploitation of an original product is avoided. The cult of originality, embodied in the single-minded grouchiness of Michelangelo, is replaced by cheery teamwork. The almost all-male cast in the fresco is rebalanced by plenty of women, in recognition of the gender ratio of the College's student body. High-brow pretensions of the fine art of painting—a solitary affair of the lonely genius—is replaced by clever crafts, historically associated with women's work: the textile world, linked to weaving, tailoring and dressing."

The evolution of these students' project is compelling. *The School of Athens* is their most advanced recreation, requiring weeks of Photoshop, most notably from one of their creators, Tasnim Tinawi, to fine-tune its details. The work not only celebrates their passion to savour this fleeting moment of the students' senior year, but also complements well the vibrancy of the Sharjah arts community with biennials and museum exhibitions that set out to reanalyse the canons of art history within the Middle Eastern and local context.

School of Athens reenactment image posted to Instagram