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The 2011–2012 exhibition season was exceptionally rewarding for scholars of Leonardo da Vinci, as well as for members of the general public interested in this canonical artist of Western art who moved with equal ease in artistic, scientific and literary circles. Two memorable exhibitions were dedicated to his activity as a painter: Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan at the National Gallery in London (November 2011–February 2012) and Saint Anne: Leonardo da Vinci’s Ultimate Masterpiece at the Musée du Louvre in Paris (March–June 2012).1

The two institutions partnered in exceptional loans. The Musée du Louvre loaned its version of Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks to the National Gallery, for the first time making it possible to compare it with the London version, which had just undergone a major restoration. The National Gallery reciprocated and sent the large cartoon representing the Virgin and Child with St Anne to Paris where it was displayed side-by-side with Leonardo’s painting of the same subject, which had also just been restored. These extraordinary loans made the exhibitions unique experiences, but it is the scholar-ship they propelled, not just what was gathered, that set them apart. It will take years to process the new lines of inquiry opened by these exhibitions, especially in relation to Leonardo’s painting technique and the practices of his bottega.

London

The exhibition at the National Gallery in London focused on Leonardo’s activity in Milan because, as its curator Luke Syson explains, “Leonardo da Vinci’s 18 years in Milan were the making of him”.2 On display were seven of Leonardo’s original works (eight if one counts a newly proposed – but debated – addition) alongside many drawings by the master and works by his closest Milanese associates. The catalogue proposes numerous re-attributions and re-dating of works by Leonardo and his followers, but it is fair to say that opinions shifted as the exhibition progressed and scholars, including the curator, refined their views in light of the prolonged comparative study that the exhibition encouraged. Such sustained analysis was particularly fruitful for gauging the influence of Leonardo’s Milanese portraits – the Musician, Cecilia Gallerani and Belle Ferronnière, which were all on display at the National Gallery – on portraits by Milanese artists such as Ambrogi de Predis, Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, Marco d’Oggiono and Francesco Napolitano. Equally revealing was the analysis of the Madonna Litta from the Hermitage in relation to works by Boltraffio, especially his panels of the Virgin and Child from Budapest and Milan. Boltraffio emerges as one of Leonardo’s strongest followers, but the diplay of the Madonna Litta – which is often, although not unanimously, attributed to him – alongside his known paintings reopened the attribution.3

Also included in the exhibition was Leonardo’s St Jerome, a devotional painting traditionally dated to his Florentine years, but that was presented instead as a work of the early Milanese period. The proposal rests on stylistic grounds and on the basis of the painting’s walnut panel, which the curator regards as typical to Milan, even though the wood is documented elsewhere for panels of comparable size; often it was the size of a painting, rather than its place of production, that defined the selection of a panel’s material. The exhibition also included religious works that Leonardo created after the Milanese period, but that were nonetheless associated, one way or another, with French patronage – the Burlington House Cartoon, the Madonna of the Yarnwinder and the newly attributed Salvator Mundi.

By far the most spectacular feature of the entire exhibition was the joint display of the two versions of the Virgin of the Rocks (fig. 1 and 2). The comparison between the two paintings had to be experienced from afar, as the works were displayed at opposite ends of a long hall, but was nonetheless invaluable for understanding fully not only their compositional and stylistic differences, but also the radical disparities in the lighting of each panel and consequent variations in the treatment of lights, shadows and reflections. The open landscape that creates complex reflections of colour and light in the Paris panel is transformed in the London version into a closed grotto, which generates more restrained reflections of colour and light.

One of the outcomes of the London exhibition is renewed scholarly interest in why Leonardo, who hardly finished anything, made two versions of the Virgin of the Rocks. Scholars agree only on a few facts: Leonardo painted the Paris Virgin of the Rocks before the London version; the London panel was in the church of San Francesco Grande in Milan until 1781. On all other points – the story of the two panels, their dating, authorship, iconography and meaning – the scholarly debate is ongoing. Since the surviving documentation is not unequivocal and interpretations abound, it is useful to review the basic events.

It is indisputable that on 25 April 1483 Ambrogio de Predis, his brother Evangelista and Leonardo received the commission for the Virgin of the Rocks from the confraternity of the Immaculate Conception as part of the altar for their chapel in the church of San Francesco Grande in Milan. The commission also included paintings of four angels singing and playing music, as well as the gilding and colouring of the wood ancona which Giacomo del Malano had completed between 1480 and 1482. The artists were to receive 800 imperial lire and whatever additional payment the patrons deemed appropriate after the completion of the work, which was to be delivered, ideally, in time for the feast day of the Immaculate Conception proxime futuri, in the near future, thus presumably by 8 December 1483. The artists received regular payments throughout 1484 for a total of 730 imperial lire. It is unknown when the artists delivered the painting, although it is plausible they did so shortly after 1484, since by then they had received most...

...easier to take the panel down and have Ambrogio make a copy for the artists who would be able to sell it and divide the proceeds.

The problem has always been to establish when Leonardo started the second version – that is, the London panel and what had happened to the first one, the Paris panel – and why, from the first to the second version, he changed certain details that seem iconographically significant (the angel’s pointing hand and gaze, among others).

In 2005, new visual evidence from the restoration of the London Virgin of the Rocks emerged that enriched the documentary evidence. Underneath the London panel an early underdrawing representing a different composition was discovered: a Virgin kneeling with an outstretched arm in a landscape, possibly in the act of adoring her Child, who is not visible, but imaginable on the ground (fig. 3). Luke Syson and Rachel Billinge, who reported the discovery, have named the underdrawing “Composition A” and suggest that Leonardo drew it around 1490. They base this dating on Mary’s monu- mentality, which they compare to the figure of St Philip in the Last Supper; on her outstretched arm, which they relate to the arm in St Jerome; and on the document of 1490, in which the painters requested additional pay- ment and mentioned a potential buyer for the original panel. It is unknown why Leonardo discarded Com- position A and reused the panel to paint another version of the Virgin of the Rocks. Moreover, no consideration has been given to the possible iconographic link be- tween Composition A and the Virgin of the Rocks. In the catalogue of the London exhibition, Syson returns to the history of the two panels and proposes the following sequence of events: the Paris Virgin of the Rocks was installed on the altar sometime after 1484. Between 1481 and 1494 Leonardo started the London Virgin of the Rocks re-using a panel on which he had previously drawn Composition A. At this time Leonardo painted only the angel’s head and arm to a high level of finish. He returned to the panel in the mid 1490s, when he changed the angel’s drapery and Christ’s head, and then again between 1506 and 1508, when he finished it and delivered it to the patrons. Syson also suggests that the uneven level of the London version is “a measure of Leonardo’s changing methods over the 15 years or so of its execution.”

Matters, however, became even more complicat- ed after the original underdrawing of the Paris Virgin of the Rocks became visible for the first time in 2009. Astonishingly, the underdrawing of the Paris panel does not correspond to the painted image: the hand of the angel is not present, the angel’s gaze is not directed to- ward the viewer, and the head of the Christ Child is in profile. It corresponds instead to the painted composi- tion of the London panel. This infrared image disrupts the traditional relations between the two panels: the London panel, which is unanimously considered later than the Paris panel, documents the first composition for the Virgin of the Rocks, while the painted image on the Paris panel, which is universally believed to have been painted before the London panel, documents later revisions.

As a result, what was already a complex story has become even more convoluted, and reconstructions on stylistic grounds contradict reconstructions based on iconography. Undoubtedly, in coming years new proposals attempting to reconcile the currently conflict- ing accounts of style and iconography will appear. It may well be that a solution will surface when the two versions of the Virgin of the Rocks are reconsidered within the context of Leonardo’s workshop practices and in light of the results that emerged from the Paris exhibition.

Paris

Closely tied to the restoration of Leonardo’s Virgin and Child with Saint Anne, the Paris exhibition concentrated on this single painting by Leonardo, which was presented to the public for the first time without the layers of yellowed varnishes that had obscured its ap- preciation for decades. It was “above all, a celebration of the extraordinary rebirth – or ‘renaissance’ – of the painting” as Vincent Delieuvin, who curated the exhibi- tion, put it. But the exhibition also included a wealth of textual, visual and scientific documentation to explain the genesis, history and legacy of Leonardo’s St Anne. Paintings, documents from archives, contemporary books, drawings, the Burlington House Cartoon from London, a full-scale infrared image and a photograph from before the restoration were brought together to shed light on how this composition evolved in the artist’s mind over a period of twenty years. The exhibition...
followed the making of Leonardo’s St Anne stage by stage, skilfully reconstructing the sequence of events, from Leonardo’s early drawings in 1500 to the intermediary stages in 1501 and 1502—documented in drawings and copies—up until 1503, when Leonardo began to paint the panel, which remained incomplete at the time of his death in 1519 (fig. 4–8). Leonardo took the painting with him to France, but it is unclear when it entered the French royal collection, perhaps as early as 1518, when the French king acquired “quelques tables de peinture” from Andrea Salai.

One of the most consequential contributions of the Paris exhibition is a new understanding of Leonardo’s bottega. The Paris show included sixteenth-century copies of the St Anne executed by artists close to Leonardo, none of which reproduced exactly Leonardo’s painting. Each introduced variations—and in the Child, the lamb or the landscape—which are documented in Leonardo’s drawings, but which were never transferred to the painted panel. It has always been thought that Leonardo’s pupils and assistants created these works by copying Leonardo’s painting or his cartoons or even his drawings, but the catalogue of the Paris exhibition makes it clear that these “copies” were actually produced while the original was in the making and that they reflect alternative solutions Leonardo imagined for it.

In fact, the copying of the St Anne emerges as entirely consistent with evidence from other paintings, including small devotional images, such as the Madonna of the Yarminder, and the Mona Lisa, an early copy of which (now in the Prado) was one of the revelations of the Paris exhibition. Traditionally regarded as a seventeenth-century copy because of its black background, the Prado Mona Lisa was analysed in preparation for the Paris exhibition and at the suggestion of its curator. Infrared reflectography revealed that a well-preserved original landscape was underneath the black background. When the black pigment was removed, it became clear that the Prado Mona Lisa included compositional choices that are documented in Leonardo’s drawings but which are not present in the original Mona Lisa at the Louvre.

Evidence from these early copies is fundamental for understanding how things worked in Leonardo’s bottega. It seems that for major compositions Leonardo prepared at least two panels at the same time. One panel was the master version that he himself painted, the one that he brought along on his travels around Italy and in France, the one that he could not be parted from, the one that he never “finished.” The other panel or panels were the versions that his assistants and pupils painted based on his composition and drawings, with his permission and under his supervision. The assistants’ copy or copies left the workshop and were delivered to patrons, who more likely than not regarded them as works “by Leonardo”. At that time, to say that a work was “by Leonardo” meant that it came out of his bottega, while for us today it means that Leonardo painted it.

Leonardo’s painting technique

The two exhibitions were the occasions to present the results that emerged from the restoration of the London Virgin of the Rocks and the Paris St Anne, and they have contributed immensely to our knowledge of Leonardo’s painting technique. Larry Keith wrote an illuminating essay in the London catalogue, which has to be read together with his contribution to Leonardo da Vinci: Pupil, Painter and Master, volume 32 of the National Gallery Technical Bulletin (2011). Marie Lavandier, Myriam Ereno, Bruno Mottin and Eléisabeth Ravaud from the C2RMF, Pierre Curie and the restorer Cinzia Pasquali wrote for the Paris catalogue. In addition, two exceptional symposia organized in conjunction with these exhibitions brought together specialists from conservation and restoration laboratories around the world to further evaluate Leonardo’s technique in different paintings and periods of his life and in relation to the artists of his bottega.

This wealth of new information makes it possible to establish that Leonardo was consistent in the preparation of his panels and that, by and large, he used common pigments and followed traditional practices. For the St Anne and the Virgin of the Rocks, he prepared a cartoon for the overall composition, which he transferred onto the panel and complemented with drawings of specific areas—hands, heads and drapery. As was typical, he traced the drawing with fluid ink and fixed it with a layer of imprimatura. Unlike most painters, he continued to revise the drawing above the imprimatura. This is certainly the case in the London Virgin of the Rocks, but the evidence is less clear for the St Anne, although the comparative analysis of Leonardo’s paintings, especially of his unfinished paintings, shows unequivocally that he had the habit of drawing both below and above the imprimatura, often working atop this layer to correct outlines and details that he had transferred from paper to the gesso of the panel.

This drawing practice matches Leonardo’s own recommendation to young painters: “A painter, when you compose a narrative painting, do not to draw the limbs of your figure with hard contours or it will happen to you as to as many different painters who wish every little stroke of charcoal to be definite. These kind of painters […] will not acquire praise for their art for on many occasions the figure represented does not move his limbs in a manner that reflects the motions of his mind. When the painter has achieved a good and graceful and well-defined rendering of these limbs, it seems to him an outrage to raise or lower the position of the limbs, or move them further back or forward, and these painters do not deserve any praise for their science.”

Above the imprimatura, he applied a layer of brownish underpaint to sketch the basic modulation of light and shadow, a technique that was not uncommon among Renaissance painters but that Leonardo exploited in new ways. His treatment of the painted layers differs from painting to painting, and often from one area
to another in the same painting, but the evidence from recent restorations is consistent in suggesting that he painted the image simultaneously from pictorial and optical points of view. To capture the precise movements of his figures in the atmosphere and in relation to one another, Leonardo did not rigidly separate the different stages of painting, undermodelling, underpainting and the application of final paint layers; rather, he freely mixed one with the other.

This mass of new materials on Leonardo’s painting technique calls for a fresh examination of how exactly Leonardo translated his optical knowledge into visual form or, vice versa, if and how his painting practice inspired further optical research. Indeed, it seems particularly urgent to re-evaluate Leonardo’s painting practice alongside his optical writings, since these two important branches of Leonardo’s studies are more often treated separately, often even from the very beginning, for Leonardo they were constituents of the same thought process.

Such a joint consideration of pictorial practice and optical theory might perhaps help to explain why Leonardo left the middle ground unfinished in so many of his paintings, including in the London Virgin of the Rocks, the St Anne and the Mona Lisa – in these examples the brownish underpaint of the middle ground is clearly visible. Such consistent evidence regarding the lack of a finished middle ground strongly suggests that Leonardo painted it last, that is, only after he had deemed the foreground and background. From an optical point of view, which was the dominant one for Leonardo the painter, the middle ground combines and mediates the light, shadows and reflections of the background and foreground. Translated into artistic practice, this principle means that the light and reflections of the middle ground can be painted only after other parts of the painting are completed.

The two Virgin of the Rocks, again

The cumulative evidence emerging from the London and Paris exhibitions will help to clarify many aspects of Leonardo’s work. It may also prove decisive in reconstructing the story of the two versions of the Virgin of the Rocks. In working toward a hypothesis perhaps it is worthwhile to entertain the possibility that the two panels were in Leonardo’s workshop at the same time, perhaps even from the very beginning. As far as we can tell, this would have been the first time that two painted panels with the same composition were put in the same workshop at the same time. Leonardo, even from the very beginning, may have thought it worthwhile to entertain the possibility that he had experimented with it in a series of drawings during his Florentine years, which were generally included in the London exhibition [fig. 8]. Leonardo explored different solutions for the Virgin: he inverted the direction of her movement from left to right, changed the position of the Virgin kneeling before the Child and added another one, represented her with her hands to her head and also with outstretched arms, and then with one arm outstretched and the other to her chest. It is unknown why Leonardo toyed with this composition in his Florentine years, but it is highly possible that these drawings, or similar ones with similar shapes, were presented as evidence of his ability to interpret the iconography desired by the Milanese confraternity. And of course, by 1483 Leonardo had a strong record as a skilled painter of landscapes, which is what the iconography demanded.

Quite striking is the similarity of the basic elements present in the image of the Immaculate Conception envisaged by the confraternity in 1479 that – in terms of iconography – the traditional sequence between the two panels has to be revised: the iconography of the Paris panel precedes that of the London panel. If Leonardo started from Composition A, as this is closer to the “offical” image of the Immaculate Conception envisaged by the confraternity in 1479 that – in terms of iconography – the traditional sequence between the two panels has to be revised: the iconography of the Paris panel precedes that of the London panel. If Leonardo started from Composition A, as this is closer to the “offical” image of the Immaculate Conception, he soon revised the composition radically and drew a new cartoon. This cartoon he transferred to panel, either the same panel as Composition A or, more likely, a second panel, which he painted, finished and delivered. This second panel would be the Paris panel, and its composition would correspond to the under-drawing of the Paris panel rather than to its painted image. Only at a later moment would Leonardo revise the composition of the Paris panel. He is the one who first pointed his finger at the Virgin’s pointing hand, changed the direction of the angel’s gaze to address the viewer, turned the head of the Child to a near profile, and even adjusted the fingers of Mary’s outstretched hand. It is impossible to establish when he introduced these changes, and now it is impossible to know how the Paris Virgin of the Rocks looked when it was on the altar of the chapel of the Immaculate Conception. Was it as we see it today, with the angel pointing to St John, its gaze directed at the viewer, the Child in near profile? Or did it look like the under-drawing of the Paris panel? Why did the patron select this iconography? A reconsideration of the iconography of the Paris panel remains to be made. As fas as we can tell, the first panel with Composition A remained untouched until 1508, when Ambrogio used it to make a copy of the painting that was on the altar and that had been taken down for the specific purpose of copying it. Left to right, changed the position of the Virgin kneeling before the Child and added another one, represented her with her hands to her head and also with outstretched arms, and then with one arm outstretched and the other to her chest. It is unknown why Leonardo toyed with this composition in his Florentine years, but it is highly possible that these drawings, or similar ones with similar shapes, were presented as evidence of his ability to interpret the iconography desired by the Milanese confraternity. And of course, by 1483 Leonardo had a strong record as a skilled painter of landscapes, which is what the iconography demanded.

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Quite striking is the similarity of the basic elements present in the image of the Immaculate Conception envisaged by the confraternity in 1479 that – in terms of iconography – the traditional sequence between the two panels has to be revised: the iconography of the Paris panel precedes that of the London panel. If Leonardo started from Composition A, as this is closer to the “official” image of the Immaculate Conception envisaged by the confraternity in 1479 that – in terms of iconography – the traditional sequence between the two panels has to be revised: the iconography of the Paris panel precedes that of the London panel. If Leonardo started from Composition A, as this is closer to the “official” image of the Immaculate Conception, he soon revised the composition radically and drew a new cartoon. This cartoon he transferred to panel, either the same panel as Composition A or, more likely, a second panel, which he painted, finished and delivered. This second panel would be the Paris panel, and its composition would correspond to the under-drawing of the Paris panel rather than to its painted image. Only at a later moment would Leonardo revise the composition of the Paris panel. He is the one who first pointed his finger at the Virgin’s pointing hand, changed the direction of the angel’s gaze to address the viewer, turned the head of the Child to a near profile, and even adjusted the fingers of Mary’s outstretched hand. It is impossible to establish when he introduced these changes, and now it is impossible to know how the Paris Virgin of the Rocks looked when it was on the altar of the chapel of the Immaculate Conception. Was it as we see it today, with the angel pointing to St John, its gaze directed at the viewer, the Child in near profile? Or did it look like the under-drawing of the Paris panel? Why did the patron select this iconography? A reconsideration of the iconography of the Paris panel remains to be made.


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