

Article

Shades of Grace: The *Virgin of the Rocks* and Leonardo da Vinci's Notes on *Paragone*

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Abstract: This essay analyses Leonardo da Vinci's innovative iconography in the making of the panel known as the *Virgin of the Rocks* (Paris, Louvre) in relation to his considerations on the important Renaissance debate of *Paragone*, or comparison among the arts, namely, Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry. It will be argued that this work, as a depiction of a complex religious theme, may be interpreted as a laboratory for *Paragone*-related demonstrations, especially in regards to five points: the optical tangibility of the image; the temporalities involved in the representation; the variety of subjects; and, finally, its iconic stability and semiotic openness as vehicles to further stimulate the devotional value of the painting.

Keywords: Renaissance art and theory; sixteenth-century art literature; Leonardo da Vinci; religious iconography in Renaissance art



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1. Introduction

Leonardo da Vinci has consistently devoted his attention to theoretical considerations of art and has sought, throughout his entire career, to examine the phenomenological causes as well as the conceptual foundations of his creative methods, developing a mutually reinvigorating connection between practice and theory. Many of his stylistic procedures and experimental techniques were in fact the result of—sometimes methodically-conducted—investigations during which the Renaissance master observed natural phenomena in the attempt to come up with more convincing parameters of pictorial representation.

One of the most striking consequences of such a systematic correlation between theory and practice is the artist's inclination to reflect on the means one could adopt in order to attain a more tangible depiction of natural forms, while undertaking, at the same time, a self-referential inspection focused on his own working processes.¹ If the first kind of consideration entails a continuous, meticulous act of translation (from the observation of natural data to their persuasive codification in pictorial signs), the second type of meta-reflections presupposes a recurrent process of self-analysis (centered on the examination of one's modes, models, and principles of representation).

In Leonardo's notoriously slow-paced and not prolific career, theory and practice have constantly met where linguistic paradigms intersect with metalinguistic considerations. Given that Painting is described by the artist as a "*discorso mentale*,"² it should come as no surprise if his working methods, goals, and conceptual concerns have been put under an intellectual scrutiny and have become frequent objects of theoretical as well as methodological examinations. For Leonardo, the very practice of painting stimulates a process of continual self-reflective inquiry.

The interplay of theory and practice characterizes Leonardo's art in its variegated segments, including the habit of juxtaposing well-known iconographies with more nuanced, subtle, and not extensively applied symbols. As this essay intends to demonstrate, the adoption of well-established codes of religious depictions, together with the formulation of new narratives—especially in the making of a devotional work known as the *Virgin of the Rocks*—sets off a process of cultural appropriation that is deeply entangled with the artist's urge to think about his own goals, canons, and tools of visual representation.

Therefore, the analysis of the version of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, now at the Musée du Louvre in Paris, offers a paradigmatic case study to verify the implications of such a cohesive fusion of practical procedures and theoretical reflections in Leonardo's working process. Furthermore, the distinctive morphology of this panel—characterized by a well-balanced contrast between solid bodies, almost carved by means of a powerful *rilievo*, and atmospheric effects, attained through an enveloping use of *sfumato*—is directly related to Leonardo's previous experiments in the art of painting, set forth but never concluded in the preparation of works such as the Vatican *St. Jerome* and, most notably, the *Adoration of the Magi* at Gli Uffizi.³

2. Materials and Methods

In the overwhelming bibliography dedicated to the *Virgin of the Rocks*, much has been written about the historical and theological issues regarding this intricate—and, on many levels, still rather unclear—commission received by the artist on 25 April 1483.⁴ Surprisingly as it may sound, however, within this rich corpus of scholarly contributions devoted to the painting, there have been very few attempts to connect the laborious preparation of this panel with Leonardo's engaging reflections on the defining features of Painting as a field of visual representation and, in particular, on the role played by the theme of *Paragone*—or comparison among the Arts⁵—in the characterization of the pictorial activity as a scientifically-based discourse. It is important to recall that the core of Leonardo's notes on these two interrelated themes—that is, the definition of Painting as science within the horizon of *Paragone*—is mainly constituted by Francesco Melzi's monumental compilation known as *Il Libro di Pittura*, but it can also be found in other manuscripts of the Renaissance master.⁶

In the past, the scholarship on the commission of the *Virgin of the Rocks* has been primarily focused, on the one hand, on the historical reconstruction of the association between Leonardo and his patrons and, on the other, on the analysis of stylistic and attributive matters, in the attempt to verify analogies and discrepancies between the first version of the work, now displayed at the Musée du Louvre in Paris, and the second panel, belonging to the collection of the National Gallery in London. Scholars such as Carlo Pedretti, Pietro Marani, Claire Farago, and, more recently, Luke Syson, as well as myself, have also explored the specific devotional context and the religious milieu within which those paintings were created, in order to explain the iconographic shifts made by Leonardo, plausibly in agreement with indications provided by his patrons.⁷ It is well-known, in fact, that the artist has operated significant changes in the making of the first panel, among which one must mention, for instance, the inclusion of two characters that were not even mentioned in the initial contract signed with the members of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin: in the left side, the image of an infant St John the Baptist, set in a rather prominent position and, to the right, the (arch)angel staring at the viewer while pointing—with a most eloquent gesture⁸—towards the kneeling figure of St John.

Despite the academic rigor of these previous contributions and the different explanations provided by scholars regarding the thematic, iconographic, and symbolic alterations in the painting, very few attempts have been made thus far to examine Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* in relation to his coeval—and rather systematic—reflections on two intertwined topics: the concept of *Paragone* and the particular nature of religious images, in which ethereal metaphysical beings are expected to be depicted by means of tangible, natural-looking shapes. Such a critical gap seems even more astonishing if one considers the chronology of Leonardo's considerations on the theme of *Paragone* and their emergence in the same years in which the artist was involved in the realization of this long, laborious commission.⁹ Moreover, it should not be overlooked the fact that many examples offered by Leonardo in his notes—with the clear intent of illustrating his definition of Painting as a vehicle of representation able to depict not only forms that could be seen in nature but also “invisible

things” or “*cose invisibili*”¹⁰—are chosen amongst images intended to perform, first and foremost, religious or devotional functions.

This paper aims to analyze Leonardo’s notes on *Paragone*, focusing in particular on the artist’s conviction of the rhetorical, cognitive, and emotional power of Painting and its supremacy over all other arts as a persuasive method of representation, capable of surpassing the limits that could be ascribed to other fields of expression, such as Poetry, Music, and Sculpture. It will be argued that Leonardo considers Painting as a superior model for artistic representations on account of its capacity to render not only the external appearances of natural phenomena but also their inner processes and hidden mechanisms, thus producing a strong impact—or *effetti*—on the beholders. It will be claimed that such a rhetorical power of influence ultimately allocates the pictorial method of creation in the position of an authentic domain of first-hand experience, comparable to nature itself. For that reason, as it will be explained in this essay, concepts such as *bellezza* (beauty) and *esperienza* (experience) appear inextricably intertwined in Leonardo’s art theory and carry out special implications when associated, in particular, with the depiction of sacred images.¹¹

The earliest comments made by Leonardo directly related to the topic of *Paragone* had been written in the same decade in which the master was elaborating his first public work in Milan, that is, the *Virgin of the Rocks*.¹² Consequently, the different stages connected to the making of this painting could be considered as the progressive steps of a decade-long laboratory in which Leonardo starts to articulate his own ideas on the nature of *pittura* as a form of visual knowledge, examining, with special attention, the part performed by concepts such as *rilievo*, *ombre e luci*, and *sfumato* in the emulation of three-dimensional bodies and spaces.¹³

Before moving forward into the analysis, however, it is important to clarify an essential point regarding Leonardo’s notes. More than a systematic rhetorical practice or a literary exercise detached from the artist’s concrete working endeavors, the notes composed by Leonardo—including, of course, his considerations on the theme of *Paragone*—testify the master’s attempt to define Painting as a scientific, yet manually oriented activity, organized by a nucleus of pre-established rules that need to be apprehended, mastered, and, eventually, further expanded by those “ingenious painters” who aspire to achieve compelling depictions of models borrowed from the sphere of visual phenomena: visual but, as we shall see, not exclusively natural. In fact, it is worth emphasizing that Leonardo’s arguments on the supremacy of Painting over all other arts lies not only on its incomparable capacity of emulating the variety of forms and phenomena that one could find in nature, but it also relates to its ability to create tangible, almost breathing depictions of beings and things that do not actually exist in the natural world (such as dragons, mythological creatures, and angels) and, for that very reason, could not be seen or perceived during an empirical experience but only evoked through the lens of faith or imagination.

In the following part of this essay, Leonardo’s considerations on the theme of *Paragone* will be examined in relation to the making of the first version of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, which shall be considered, accordingly, as a laboratory for optical and pictorial explorations, through which the artist was able to further develop important technical and formal solutions that will also characterize his future works, such as the use of *rilievo* in association with *sfumato* and *affetti* in the attempt to increase the degree of naturalism and immediacy of a painting. While these explorations were certainly not new to Leonardo (it suffices to recall his concerns regarding the depiction of volumes and his search for dynamic compositional effects in the Vatican *Saint Jerome* and the *Adoration of the Magi*, both works left unfinished, as it is well known), the *Virgin of the Rocks* was the first public, finished panel in which one may see these optical and pictorial experiments at work, thus anticipating from a practical standpoint Leonardo’s theoretical explanations conveyed in the so-called *Libro di pittura*.

3. Results

3.1. *Shaping the Reality of Symbols*

The participation of Leonardo da Vinci in the commission of the *Virgin of the Rocks* starts, as we have already mentioned, on 25 April 1483, when the artist signed, in company of the brothers Ambrogio and Evangelista De Predis,¹⁴ a contract for his first public work in Milan: the depiction of a Madonna and the Child surrounded by angels to be displayed in the chapel of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin in the (now destroyed) church of San Francesco Grande.¹⁵ The painting was part of a much larger altarpiece that included other panels—such as the two angels playing musical instruments, probably painted by Francesco Napoletano, as suggested by Marani¹⁶—as well as a wooden carved sculpture made by Giacomo Del Maino.¹⁷

Unfortunately, no other images have survived from the original altarpiece, except for the painting executed by Leonardo and the ones attributed to Napoletano. Moreover, with the exception of few lines in the contract describing the wooden-made structure, there are no other records or evidence of what the actual altarpiece might have looked like. In the attempt to overcome such a tantalizing lack of information, scholars have provided different hypotheses regarding the general configuration of this devotional machinery, in whose center the *Virgin of the Rocks* might have been plausibly displayed.¹⁸ According to Paolo Venturoli, Leonardo's painting probably performed the function of a “painted cover” made to protect—and, simultaneously, hide from the sight of a daily audience—the most significant element within the entire altarpiece, at least from a devotional standpoint, that is, the full-rounded (lost) image carved by Del Maino, representing the Immaculate Virgin holding the Child.¹⁹ Plausibly, Leonardo's work was a sort of panel able to open, thus showing—in particular occasions—the otherwise hidden statue of the Madonna with the Child. Venturoli suggested that the iconography elaborated by Leonardo and his patrons must have incorporated theological aspects of the cult of the Immaculate Conception that were particularly relevant to the commissioners of the work and were certainly conveyed by the wooden sculpture that used to occupy the center of this imposing altarpiece. Should this hypothesis prove correct, Leonardo's panel would have performed, accordingly, the function of a visual, painted “prelude” in preparation of the actual object of public devotion, or the main pole of religious attraction of the entire altarpiece, that is, the carved statue of the Virgin holding her son created by Del Maino.

While this hypothesis provides a plausible clarification of the structural context in which Leonardo's painting was commissioned, it does not explain the alterations made by the painter after having signed the contract. In other words, how could the cult of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin be associated with the inclusion of St John the Baptist and the Archangel Gabriel in the pictorial narrative? How do these characters contribute to the codification of a symbolic system directly subordinated to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception?

As recent scholarship has pointed out, the peculiar iconography of Leonardo's panel—with the prominent presence of St. John the Baptist and the depiction of a staring, almost hypnotizing Archangel Gabriel—could be understood from a devotional perspective in connection with the preaching activities of one of the most influential religious figures of the time: Friar Amadeus Mendes da Silva, better known as Blessed Amadeus, a Franciscan monk who had started his mission as a preacher in Milan and, more specifically, at San Francesco Grande, the church where Leonardo's work was originally intended to be displayed.²⁰ Profoundly venerated and regarded as a prodigious miracle-maker even after his death, Blessed Amadeus was supported by the members of the Sforza family as well as respected by local authorities living in adjacent areas of Lombardy. Very soon, his fame as a venerable saint would cross the boundaries of Lombardy and reach other regions of Italy and, shortly afterwards, different kingdoms of Europe, such as Portugal and Spain. After having disseminated his word in Northern Italy, Blessed Amadeus was requested to go to Rome, around 1480, when he will become the private confessor of Franciscan pope

Sixtus IV. While living in a grotto on the Janiculum Hill—in the area where stands now the superb *Tempietto* designed by Donato Bramante,²¹ on which, according to the tradition, St Peter would have been crucified—Blessed Amadeus had eight mystic visions, during which the Archangel Gabriel had appeared to him and revealed decisive *arcana fidei*, as described in the pages of a text known as *Apocalypsis Nova*.²²

Both as an influential preacher as well as a fervid, visionary mystic, Blessed Amadeus has unfailingly sustained the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin and thus enhanced the position defended by the members of the Franciscan Order within the general debate of the time. In his public homilies, however, the friar introduces the—potentially problematic—idea that, together with Christ and the Madonna, also St John the Baptist had been conceived through a miraculous manifestation of God’s will and deprived of the sins of the Original Fall.²³ The theme of St John *sine macula*—and, consequently, the centrality of the baptism as a vehicle for salvation—has constituted a recurrent motif in Amadeus’ public preaching, as one can infer from the surviving manuscripts of his *Sermones Johannis Baptistae*, in which those two religious themes—namely, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the sacrament of baptism—appear profoundly interwoven. Moreover, the existence of these sermons certify, beyond any reasonable doubt, that, prior to the opening of the *Apocalypsis Nova* in a ceremony that took place in 1502—that is, many decades after Leonardo had created his painting—some of the most relevant points addressed in that text might have sounded familiar to a Milanese audience, for they had been already promoted by the friar many years earlier, through his ardent, systematic, and largely followed public preaching in places such as the church of San Francesco Grande.²⁴

There is another significant element concerning the mystic predicaments of Blessed Amadeus and the irradiation of his theological ideas that should not be neglected given its connection with the agreement signed by Leonardo and De Predis: after having lived for several years in Rome, the preacher had asked the pope permission to visit, one last time, his community of followers and congregates in Lombardy, thus joining the so-called Amadeite brothers. Once arrived in Milan, however, the friar unexpectedly died on August 10, 1482. For an Amadeite-oriented group of believers—such as the members of the Confraternity who had commissioned the *Virgin of the Rocks* appeared to be—nothing could have sounded more appropriate than to ask the artists who were about to start their works to evoke, in a tangible way, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as it had been fervently described by one of his most venerable defenders: Blessed Amadeus. The scene imagined by Leonardo could be interpreted, therefore, as a visual representation that sums up and successfully condenses many aspects of Amadeus’ beliefs, paradigmatically embodied in the inclusion of St. John the Baptist as an infant, announced by the delicate, yet imposing gesture of Gabriel, which stands in intimate proximity with both the Virgin and the Child. In other words, it is plausible to argue that Leonardo might have been requested to depict, before the trusting eyes of his Amadeite-associated commissioners, an image that could express, in a powerful and palpable manner, the different, but equally important, roles played by Mary, Christ, and John in the path of humankind’s salvation as it had been explained by the archangel during Amadeus’ mystic revelations in Rome.

On the other hand, from a stylistic and formal standpoint, what Leonardo has materialized in this work is not only an image profoundly connected with these religious themes but also a painting that was significantly in line with the reflections the artist was undertaking in those same years on the theme of *Paragone*, as the following paragraphs intend to demonstrate.

In the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Leonardo has created a pictorial discourse that was able to evoke—and provide palpable shapes to—a mystic event that had taken place in the past, within the visionary dimension of Amadeus’ spiritual experience. Despite the metaphysical origins of such an experience, Leonardo was capable to translate it in believable visual forms and set them right before the eyes of the spectator, elaborating a scene that seems to be happening in the very moment in which the beholder is observing it, while enjoying the benefits of its religious powers. The artist has formulated a visual narrative that fluidly

unfolds itself like a tangible, real event happening in a very natural-looking setting. To put it another way, Leonardo's painting does not simply convey or summarize somebody else's experience—such as Blessed Amadeus' mystical vision—but reenacts it with such a convincing naturalism and persuasive verisimilitude that the image seems to be actually *presenting* more than representing the event it depicts so that it could be perceived by the viewer with stunning immediacy and concreteness. The beholder becomes the witness of a (mystic) vision that keeps materializing itself through the (actual) process of seeing.²⁵ Thanks to its mimetic components, the painting provides the opportunity to the spectator to conduct a first-hand experience of a metaphysical revelation. One could go so far as to claim that, on a metaphorical level, Leonardo's image becomes the visual equivalent of a powerful prayer, in which past and present, ethereal and material, natural and spiritual appear inexorably intertwined.

To accomplish such an all-encompassing pictorial materialization of religious entities and ideas, Leonardo had to elaborate an image that could appear to a certain extent as tangible, appealing, and revealing as Blessed Amadeus' own words and preaching skills. At the same time, Leonardo's painting needed to look as palpable, imposing, and concretely present as the wooden carved statue made by Giacomo Del Maino. Finally, Leonardo had to formulate a visual narrative that could display its own forms as spontaneously, immediately, and realistically as Nature itself would have done, so that all elements represented in the panel—including spiritual beings and metaphysical bodies—could deceive the eyes of the believers and appear as if they were real, breathing, living figures like any other member of the audience standing right before them.

In order to come up with such a compelling iconic discourse, Leonardo had to interact, on the one hand, with a textual tradition and, on the other, with an actual sculpture, while dealing simultaneously with the essential quest for temporality and materiality in pictorial representations.²⁶ Thanks to Leonardo's incomparable ability to (re)present any painted form in a most appealing manner and his remarkable capacity to depict images that appear as vivid as if they were truly moving before one's eyes—thus creating what Vasari has once described as “*figure col moto e col fiato*,” that is, figures endowed “with motion and breath” (include footnote²⁷)—the *Virgin of the Rocks* embodies and anticipates some of Leonardo's most significant remarks regarding the theme of *Paragone*. Through his paintings, in general, and the *Virgin of the Rocks*, in particular, Leonardo has attempted to find effective ways to overcome what he considered the inherent limits of other fields of artistic investigation, such as Poetry, Music, and Sculpture. In order to do so, Leonardo had to investigate the cognitive as well as the experiential legitimacy of Painting as a visual discourse and its superiority over any other art-related procedure.

For a taxonomically driven mind such as Leonardo's, always ready to set comparisons among the arts on the basis of a classifying-oriented method, the supremacy of Painting emerges as an unquestionable evidence. As a mode of representation, Painting has the power to convey thoughts, express ideas, and provoke emotions in a most immediate and yet long-lasting way, without ever requiring further translations or any kind of intermediation, unlike Poetry, Music, and Sculpture. Moreover, as a field of expression, Painting creates self-contained universes of forms and persuasive narratives, whose immediacy, inventiveness, multilayered temporality, and highly compelling resemblance with natural beings and phenomena cannot but capture the attention of every viewer, making them experience a new kind of reality: the fictional verisimilitude achieved through the pictorial discourse. No wonder, then, if Leonardo will systematically stress in his notes on *Paragone* five interconnected points that confirm, in his views, the supremacy of Painting over any other art.

3.2. The Sensorial Presence of Painting

Thanks to its mimetic ability to promote illusionism as a form of visual perception, Painting simulates a direct, immediate experience of natural forms in a prompt and faithful manner, thus reassessing the very notion of “simulacrum” and its—potentially limiting—status

of “fictive representation”. The ultimate goal of Painting, according to Leonardo, is in fact to *present* painted forms as if they were actual, tangible entities standing right before the eyes of the viewer: a reality among realities, a phenomenon amidst phenomena. In addition to being a mirror-like depiction of natural as well as invisible and even imaginary forms, Painting may provide believable visual shapes to beings, things, and events that have a particular ontological status—such as spiritual entities, allegorical embodiments, or mythological creatures—giving them a persuasive reality on their own, thanks to its capacity of rendering every element in a convincing way.²⁸ In response to such a concrete sense of presence, spectators cannot help but feel immediately captured by those relatable, yet fictional images, which might include “invisible” or “impalpable” entities too, as Leonardo does not neglect to point out: “*la pittura pare cosa miracolosa, a far parere palpabili le cose impalpabili, rilevate le cose piane, lontane le cose vicine*”.²⁹

In line with this statement, the *Virgin of the Rocks* (re)presents a metaphysical event with the tangible materiality of a scene that seems to be taking place right in front of the spectator’s eyes. Thanks to Leonardo’s mastery in the domains of *affetti* (the representation of human emotions), *ombre e lumi* (the modeling of volume by means of a calculated calibration of shadows and light), and *rilievo* (the illusion of three-dimensionality attained through a well-balanced contrast between shading and lightning effects), the characters depicted in the panel seem to emerge out of the pictorial surface as if they were actual, full-rounded beings, thus creating on the beholder the misperception of solid bodies.

The persuasive modeling of volumes through a wise use of *chiaroscuro* is, in Leonardo’s art theory, one of the truly defining features of Painting as a mimetic enterprise. By adopting these three components—namely, *affetti*, *ombre e luci*, and *rilievo*—Painting is enabled to create convincing visual discourses. “*La prima intenzione del pittore,*” Leonardo clearly postulates, “*è fare ch’una superficie piana si dimostri corpo rilevato e spiccato da esso piano*”.³⁰ This is, in fact, the optical result that an artist may achieve by undertaking a modelling procedure based on a carefully-measured variation of shades and light effects: “*quello ch’in tal arte più eccede gli altri, quello merita maggior laude, e questa tale investigazione, anzi corona di tale scienza [sic], nasce da l’ombre e lumi, o voi dire chiaro e scuro*”.³¹ In other words, *rilievo* together with *ombre e lumi* and *chiaroscuro* are considered by Leonardo the most powerful means with which one could provoke the illusion of volume upon the eyes of the beholder. Consequently, one’s mastery in those particular branches shall become the guarantee of one’s excellency in the art of painting as the Renaissance master proudly asserts: “*Adonque chi fugge l’ombre fugge la Gloria de l’arte apresso alli nobili ingegni, e l’acquista presso l’ignorante vulgo, li quali nulla desiderano nelle pitture altro che bellezza di colori, dimenticando al tutto la bellezza e maraviglia del dimostrare di rilievo la cosa piana*”.³²

While Painting is undoubtedly characterized by many other theoretical components and can be done according to a wide variety of working methods, the concept of *rilievo* stands, nonetheless, as one of its most distinctive features among all elements that constitute the domain of Painting, for it contributes to creating a sense of optical proximity between a painted image and the actual reality that might appear almost physical to the viewer. Thanks to the optical misperception of volumes induced by *rilievo*, the eyes of the spectator can nearly “touch” and, therefore, experience the pictorial composition as a concrete reality. Such a result cannot be achieved, according to Leonardo, by any other art.

Moreover, in regards to the theme of *Paragone*, through *rilievo*, Painting can challenge the very materiality of Sculpture and, at the same time, confirm the superiority of pictorial discourses as intellectually driven results, since the mastery of *chiaroscuro* implies a scientific knowledge of the complex phenomenology in which shadows interact with light effects and does not simply depend on the variable conditions that one may find in the natural world, as in the case of full-rounded statues or bas-reliefs. For this reason, painters must demonstrate their expertise in *rilievo*-based modelling procedures and excell “*in quella parte di che la pittura è tenuta arte eccellente, cioè del fare rilevato quel ch’è nulla in rilievo. E qui,*” Leonardo concludes, “*l pittore avanza lo scultore, il quale non dà maraviglia di sé in tale rilievo, essendo fatto dalla natura quel che l pittore co’ la sua arte s’acquista*”.³³

In addition to this illusion of three-dimensionality, Painting can also represent figures that convincingly express their inner states of mind and psychological reactions by means of *affetti*. For Leonardo, it is essential that every character in a panel clearly convey “*coll’atto la passione de l’animo suo*”.³⁴ Motion and emotion are two entangled sides of a decisive mimetic notion. Moreover, every single member of a figure must echo—and visually embody—its emotional state: “*Le mani e braccia in tutte le sue operazioni hanno da dimostrare la intenzione del loro motore quanto fia possibile, perché con quelle, chi ha affezionato giudizio, s’accompagna l’intenti mentali in tutti li suoi movimenti*”.³⁵

The making of the first version of the *Virgin of the Rocks* anticipates, from a practical and experimental perspective, many stances that will eventually find a more elaborated theoretical explanation in the pages of the *Libro di pittura*, which will become the basis for the 1651 publication of the *Trattato della pittura*.³⁶ The use of *affetti*, for instance, along with the rendering of *rilievo*, are distinctive components of this painting. Likewise, *affetti* and *rilievo* characterize—as we have seen—Leonardo’s theoretical reflections in a very significant way. For the artist, every single part of a figure must appear persuasively tangible in its corporeal dynamics in order to express the specific mental state of a character, mapping out the geography of feelings, emotions, and psychological responses that dwell the vast lands of their bodies. Fused together, *rilievo* and *affetti* increase the relatability of a figure, while stimulating a more intimate connection with the beholder. In the case of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, the overall dark tones that inform the pictorial space—from the foreground to the fading mountains in the background, only sporadically interrupted by strategically-located highlighted areas—further emphasize the palpable physicality of the bodies without disrupting the mystic atmosphere of the sacred scene: *rilievo* and *chiaroscuro* demonstrate, here, Leonardo’s extraordinary familiarity with problems related to the variations of *ombre e luci*, enhancing the atmosphere of mystery and suspension that informs the whole painting as well as the well rendered *affetti* of all figures in it.

It is useful to point out, however, that such a powerful sense of presence achieved by Leonardo in this painting is not only limited to the depiction of stunning *rilievo*-oriented effects but informs the representation of every element or phenomenon depicted in the scene, such as the remarkable atmospheric appearance of the landscape, in which one can almost feel the density of the air that permeates the entire composition. The creation of a scene that appears immersed within such a tangible representation of the air—with the sensorial suggestion of humidity, fogginess, and air motion—transforms the pictorial surface into an enveloping simulation of a first-hand experience of reality, which seems to wipe out, at least for a moment, any separation between the painted panel and the actual space of the beholder.³⁷ The pursuit of optical illusion is thus endorsed by the quest of a sensorial misperception that aims to capture the spectators’ attention and redefine their very status as active, engaged viewers of the scene, given their emotional, psychological, and intellectual involvement while moving their eyes across the painting. By strategically arranging the various elements in the composition in accordance with the criterion that Leonardo calls “*copia e varietà*”,³⁸ a painting such as the *Virgin of the Rocks* offers a visual itinerary to the viewer, provided, however, that “*lla novità e abbondanzia attragga a sé e diletta l’occhio d’esso riguardatore*”.³⁹ In another passage of the *Libro di pittura*, Leonardo further clarifies this point, briefly outlining what could be anachronistically referred to as the emerging draft of a “Renaissance Reception Theory”. By means of a curious comparison, the artist stresses how important it is to find ways, already during the image-making process, that could significantly expand the time later employed for the observation of the painting, dilating its duration for as long as possible:

E tu pittore, studia di fare le tue opere ch’abbino a tirare a sé gli suoi veditori, e quelli fermare con grande ammirazione e dilettazone, e non tirarli e poi scacciarli, come fa l’aria a quel che nelli tempi notturni salta ignudo del letto a contemplare la qualità d’essa aria nubilosa o serena, che immediate, scacciato dal freddo di quella, ritorna nel letto, donde prima si tolse; ma fa l’opere tue simili a quell’aria,

che ne' tempi caldi tira gli uomini de li lor letti, e gli ritiene con dilettazone a possedere lo estivo fresco.⁴⁰

In the artist's views, no other form of art could ever compete with Painting's ability to create narratives able to capture—and keep alive—the viewer's attention in such a prolonged manner. Thanks to the tangibility of painted forms, the domain of *pittura* may attain a degree of immediacy comparable only to that achieved by reality itself, thus attracting the eyes of their audiences and, at the same time, stimulating the devotional fervor of the believers, as the *Virgin of the Rocks* might have surely done while it was displayed in the Confraternity's chapel in Milan. As Claire Farago has suggestively described, “[i]n its setting in the chapel at San Francesco Grande, as part of an enormous gilded ancona of carved and painted elements lit by lamps and candles, the dramatic scene with its overpowering display of artistry constructed on the scientific principles of optical theory must have produced wonder and awe in its beholders”.⁴¹

The depiction of religious images is a genre particularly relevant to understand the impact of Leonardo's art theory and its profound correlation with the artist's working methods, for it requires the ability to elaborate a work that must provoke an immediate feeling of empathy on its beholder throughout the devotional process.⁴² To this end, Leonardo emphasizes how important it is to pay attention to the arrangement of the various elements within a composition in order to move the eyes—and perceptually guide the mind—of the spectator across the pictorial surface. Visual components such as gestures, attitudes, and all sorts of naturalistically rendered forms must be carefully inserted by the artist in order to orient the process of contemplation of the painting, particularly in the case of religious images.⁴³

Compared to the remarkable sense of presence encompassed by Painting, Poetry will appear quite limited in its means of expression (that is, oral speeches or written words), which inevitably requires the participation of an intermediary, otherwise, the sentences created by an author cannot be professed, heard, or read.⁴⁴ Music, on the other hand, may certainly stimulate emotional responses in its audiences and help to create a particular psychological connection between work and public, but it cannot narrate any specific stories or clearly describe any particular episodes, scenes, and events in an immediately understandable way. It may only suggest vague associations and emotion-based reactions.⁴⁵ Finally, Sculpture undeniably possesses a concrete, tangible reality, given its physical three-dimensionality. However, it cannot achieve a compelling mimetic depiction of every natural form, for it cannot represent transparent or ever-changing elements, such as evanescent lights and shape-shifting phenomena like clouds in motion, running waters, or stormy winds.⁴⁶

In conclusion, Leonardo asserts Painting's superiority and, accordingly, commends the supremacy of the painter for “setting before” the viewer forms and stories with the same immediacy and tangibility of nature: “il quale te 'l pone inanti con quella verità ch'è possibile in natura”.⁴⁷ Painting can simulate all sorts of natural phenomena, thus confirming itself as “vera imitatrice delle naturali figure de tutte le cose,”⁴⁸ Poetry can never achieve such a degree of universality and tangibility for it requires the constant presence of “interpreti de le diverse lingue”⁴⁹ in order to be read, heard, and understood. Poetry is, therefore, an art of mediation. Music, on the other hand, is an art of limited, yet powerful, temporal development and emotional impact but cannot tell stories. Finally, Sculpture is an art of undeniable materiality and immediacy, but it cannot represent everything that pertains to the visible world.

Unlike any of her sisters, Painting does not need intermediation to attract the viewers' attention or to move their hearts, given its capacity to render every natural form thanks to the interaction of *rilievo*, *ombre e lumi*, *chiaroscuro*, and *affetti*. More importantly, Painting can create images able to preserve the appearances of any beings, stories, and phenomena far beyond the limits of their time-based lives or duration. This conclusive remark leads

us to consider another essential aspect of Leonardo's notes on *Paragone*, which will be discussed next.

3.3. The Multiple Temporalities of Pictorial Images

The sense of presence achieved by Painting is directly associated with another defining feature of this creative ambit, namely, its capacity to explore multiple temporalities and keep the viewer engaged in different kinds of interactions: optical, psychological, or narrative-related. The ways in which time is interwoven within the pictorial fabric seems to have a close relation with the very process of seeing as it is individually experienced by the beholder. According to Leonardo, Painting possesses, in fact, a communicative and emotional immediacy that no other form of art could ever compete with. In a very eloquent sentence, the Renaissance master asserts that painting "*ti pone inanzi*" every element it represents. In other words, pictorial images set any kind of forms right before one's eyes as if they were real things or actual beings, provoking on the spectator the impression that reality itself is unfolding across the fictional space of Painting. The act of seeing becomes an example of—and no longer a substitute for—empirical experience.

For that reason, Leonardo advises painters to carefully plan their spatial features and choose different narrative strategies—creating, for instance, perspective-built stages or atmospherically rendered landscapes—in order to guide the temporally developed act of observation that will be later performed by the spectator. By expanding, suspending, provoking an acceleration or, on the contrary, inserting unexpected interruptions within the visual flow of a representation, painters may orient the viewer's actual experience of seeing, so that the very act of contemplation becomes similar to—and, sometimes, even more powerful than—the involvement that a beholder could have or feel in real life. To put it another way, Painting entails the elaboration of optical illusions that reach such a level of verisimilitude to become able to manipulate different kinds of temporalities associated with the perception of a pictorial composition. Along with the time embedded by every element present in a work, it is important to also consider the variable amount of time employed by the spectator during the observation of a painting. Creation and perception, production and reception are examined by Leonardo as profoundly interconnected processes that every well-trained artist should take in account while preparing their fictional, yet immediate, tangible, and powerful visual discourses.

In the case of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Leonardo adopts a compositional model and a narrative mode of development that clearly guides the actual process of observation of the image. The variety of poses and the touching naturalness of each character; the eloquent, yet somehow enigmatic network of gestures that unite all figures as if they were—and in fact they are—part of a larger narrative; the blazing gaze of the archangel and the mute dialogue between the infants; the meticulously painted fabrics and their nearly choreographic folds that visually increase the three-dimensional appearance of the image; the unexpected setting of the scene, located amidst powerful rocky formations; the breathing quality of the air and the atmospheric landscape in the background, filled with fading mountains, vanishing clouds, and suggestive aquatic elements; finally, the complex articulation of a symbolic space in which the artist combines familiar iconographies with sophisticated theological and devotional implications: all those components, set together, surely attract the attention of the viewer and imperceptibly guides their eyes across the painted surface, provoking rapid glances as well as meditative pauses. Without asserting that the dynamics of perception involved in the observation of this painting are rigidly conditioned by Leonardo's compositional strategies, it is reasonable to suggest, however, that the visual components listed above—masterfully arranged by the artist across the pictorial plan—builds up an implied guideline that anticipates and, therefore, helps to organize the actual process of looking at the image, inviting the beholder to search for connections or, on the contrary, acknowledge pauses and disruptions.

To that end, Leonardo plays with the iconic—and temporal—power of two components that may appear at first in striking contrast: *rilievo* and *sfumato*.⁵⁰ While *rilievo*

guarantees a solid appearance of volume to all forms represented in the painting, *sfumato* blurs any rigid contours and blends all elements within the composition in a smooth, nuanced, osmotic manner, thus increasing the illusion of an unified space by applying what Leonardo has described as “*la grazia d’ombra*,” that is, the grace of shadows. Through *sfumato*, the sharp edges attained by means of *rilievo* will subtly transition one into the other.⁵¹ Such a process of fusion of all elements in the painting will be further enhanced by the tangible representation of the air that informs the scene, which constitutes one of the defining features of Painting in comparison to the other arts.⁵² While the concept of *rilievo* refers to the tangible physicality and the material stability of every form represented in the painting, the working procedure known as *sfumato* indicates all technical and stylistic means employed by the artist to suggest motion, dynamism, and atmospheric values, thanks to a well-balanced use of shadows and lights. If *rilievo* emphasizes the solidity of shapes, *sfumato* increases the living appearance of the entire work. Thus combined, *rilievo* and *sfumato* enrich immeasurably the degree of verisimilitude of the scene, stimulating a process of observation that will be significantly similar, in Leonardo’s opinion, to the kind of first-hand experience that a viewer could have had while facing actual natural phenomena.

Moreover, the fusion of solid forms caused by the creation of these vague, enveloping atmospheric effects further contribute to alter the temporal experience of the image, since the viewer will be captured by this intriguing openness and indetermination of forms: due to the different degrees of definition of each element depicted in the work, with their contours variably blurred or sharply defined, the spectator will need to constantly readapt their focus of attention from meticulously rendered details to vaguely outlined shapes. Such an unpredictable variation of the modelling procedures used by the artist will have a significant impact on the process of observation of the painting and influence its temporal development as well, for it will incite the spectator to focus on individual, well-recognizable details—such as gestures, poses, and facial expressions—while experiencing, at the same time, the atmospheric, palpably naturalistic, and yet metaphysically suspended tone of the scene. No other art, aside from Painting, could render those atmospheric effects in such a perfect manner.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, if one of the most striking features used by Leonardo in the *Virgin of the Rocks*—that is, the hypnotic gaze of the archangel—may be considered a visual as well as a symbolic gateway to access the entire composition. Attracted by this straightforward call, the spectators will follow the archangel’s gesture while moving their eyes across the pictorial surface in the attempt to make sense out of the visual data they are collecting throughout the process of observation. It is useful to recall, however, that the idea of introducing a character staring directly at the viewer had been already examined—from a theoretical perspective—by Leon Battista Alberti in the pages of *De Pictura*,⁵³ in which the author had listed the advantages of inserting the so-called *risguardatore* (also spelled *riguardatore*) within a scene: a character powerfully embodied by the figure that has been identified as the archangel Gabriel in Leonardo’s panel, depicted with a vector-sounding gaze directed towards the beholder in the clear intent of establishing a mute, yet intense, connection with the audience.⁵⁴

From a symbolic standpoint, this gaze may be considered a very promising starting point from which one could begin to explore the complex pictorial narrative, for it invites the viewers to move their eyes towards the opposite side of the panel, in the direction of St John the Baptist. While one cannot predict, with certainty, the various steps that may occur during the process of observation of an image, it is possible to argue, however, that the imposing, somehow inescapable gesture of the archangel echoes the eloquence of its gaze: together, gaze and gesture perform the functions of two mutually-supportive vectors that lead the spectator in the unfolding of the symbolic discourse conveyed by the painting. Those elements stimulate a more active participation of the beholder, who seems to be invited to follow the implied narratives enclosed in the image. The multilayered temporalities associated with this well-orchestrated pictorial composition increase the agency of the viewers, allocating them in the position of active observers.

One may not neglect, on the other hand, that Leonardo has extensively reflected upon these different kinds of perceptive matters in relation to compositional procedures and has described, in various notes, potential ways in which the spectator's eyes might be effectively guided by the elements represented in a painting. In a passage of the *Libro di pittura*, for instance, Leonardo criticizes certain methods of composition diffused among fifteenth-century painters and provides concrete suggestions as to how improve their pointlessly dispersive ways of organizing the narrative space, lamenting, in particular, the fact that those artists used to represent “una storia in un piano col suo paese ed edifice, poi s'alzano un altro grado e fanno una storia, e variano il punto dal primo, e poi la terza e la quarta, in modo che una facciata si vede fatta con quattro punti”.⁵⁵ In other words, those painters had created spaces that were not accurately ruled by the laws of a mathematically-calculated perspective, nor did they consider the actual position of the beholder while preparing their compositions. For this reason, Leonardo asserts that a knowledgeable painter must “porre il primo piano col punto a l'altezza de l'occhio de' risguardatori d'essa storia, e in sul detto piano figura la prima storia grande; e poi diminuendo di mano in mano le figure e casamenti, in su diversi colli e pianure, farai tutto il fornimento d'essa storia”.⁵⁶ As this remark clearly stresses, Leonardo has devoted particular attention to examining the potential connections between pictorial elements and visual experiences, suggesting the idea that there might be some kind of connection between the way in which forms are painted and placed within a certain composition and the ways in which paintings might be perceived during the actual process of observation.

When looking at the mountains depicted in the background of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, for example, the spectator can enjoy the view of their vanishing shapes again and again, endlessly observing the dynamics of the process of natural transformations of the various elements tangibly represented in the panel, from the movement of the clouds to the haziness caused by the rising fog in the upper side of the composition. The transient nature of these phenomena can acquire, in the painting, an ever-lasting configuration. The cyclical dynamics of natural processes are thus captured and convincingly evoked by Leonardo in an image that gives the beholder the opportunity to observe their endless transformations in a more reflective and gradual pace. Such a temporal dilation allows the painter to represent—by means of stable yet fluid forms—natural phenomena as well as metaphysical events that, otherwise, would have vanished or dematerialized themselves in a second. As we will examine shortly, the painting provides what could be called an “iconic stability” to those ephemeral, shape-shifting phenomena and may also represent past events as though they were still present. In this path of pictorial stability and temporal dilation, it is particularly important to learn, according to Leonardo, how to properly render all sorts of atmospheric effects and weather conditions by means of *sfumato*, without ever losing the solid materiality of *rilievo*.⁵⁷

In line with these comments, there is another significant time-related component of Painting examined by Leonardo in his notes that is also noticeable in the making of the *Virgin of the Rocks*: I am referring to the phenomenon known as “reification” or, to use Leonardo's lexicon, the “*macchia*” effect. Reification describes a psychological process through which a viewer may perceive the emergence of figures, forms, or patterns coming out of an amorphous shape, thus seeing well-defined figures amidst irregular, or chaotic, elements.⁵⁸ Good examples of this phenomenon include the emergence of figures that one may notice within the clouds and the perception of forms in the visual test called “Rorschach”. Leonardo has touched upon this psychological process, emphasizing its incomparable validity as a stimulus for artistic inventions, outlining what could be referred to as his “theory of *macchia*” or “stain-method”:

Non resterò di mettere infra questi precetti una nuova invenzione di speculazione, la quale, benché paia piccola e quasi degna di riso, nondimeno è di grande utilità nel destare lo ingegno a varie invenzioni. E quest'è se tu riguarderai in alcuni muri imbrattati di varie macchie o pietre di varii misti. Se arai a invenzionare qualche sito, potrai lì vedere similitudini de diversi paesi, ornati di montagne,

fiumi, sassi, alberi, pianure grande, valli e colli in diversi modi; ancora vi potrai vedere diverse battaglie et atti pronti di figure, strane arie di volti e abiti et infinite cose, le quali tu potrai ridurre in integra e bona forma.⁵⁹

Thanks to this reifying experience, spectators will not so much look *at* a painting as they will look *through* it, actively contributing, in this way, to the making of the image as a meaningful opportunity to feel and reflect upon phenomena—as well as spiritual messages—that could otherwise escape them. The pictorial panel captures the beholders' attention and, simultaneously, stimulates their senses and intellectual faculties.

With regard to the symbolic meanings conveyed by the *Virgin of the Rocks*, it is worth noting that the amount of time that a spectator might potentially spend in the recognition of the various figures represented in the panel, in order to identify their religious roles, largely depends on the strategic way in which their poses, attitudes, and attributes are displayed. While one can immediately acknowledge the presence of the Virgin, for example, due to her well-established iconography, a different kind of attention will be required to identify the angelic figure as well as to correctly distinguish – between the two infants – who is (the blessing) Christ and (the praying) St John the Baptist. Interestingly, Leonardo has depicted the infants in a rather resembling manner, almost as though they could be exchanged one with the other, at least in a first moment. Once the beholders realize, however, which devotional contents are displayed in the scene—and the particular evangelical message associated with ideas professed by Blessed Amadeus—they will be able to correctly name these central characters, on the basis of iconographic codes and theological principles.⁶⁰ The observation of the panel will thus require forms of attention and, accordingly, the unfolding of multiple temporalities, which will accompany—and somehow guide—the sensorial, emotional as well as religious experience of the scene.

It is important to clarify, however, that Leonardo's remarks on *macchie* and other similarly metamorphic elements such as clouds—indicated above as his “stain-method”—refer to concrete, material, optically-conducted exercises based on the experience of the viewer during the observation of those potentially amorphous forms and figures, while the identification of the characters within a religious painting such as the *Virgin of the Rocks* depends primarily on well-established iconographic factors and stimulates, first and foremost, a symbolic level of interaction with the beholder. Nevertheless, it appears very significant in Leonardo's mimetic pursuits that the artist has adopted optical (material) principles in order to make more believable the sacred (immaterial) aura that characterizes the protagonists of the panel. In other words, it is possible to connect, from a critical perspective, Leonardo's enduring interest for perceptual issues and optical effects with his systematic attention towards visual persuasion and narrative unfolding in painting, in general, and in religious representations in particular. To that end, the master explores the different, yet possibly connectable, temporalities of seeing and recognizing, perceiving and evoking. In the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Leonardo demonstrates in fact how important it is to play with the different temporalities condensed in, or provoked by, a painting. In addition to these time-related aspects of narrative identification and sensorial perception, which ultimately lead the viewer to the construction of the symbolic meanings of the painting, there is also another temporal dimension associated with the devotional function of this work that must be examined: that is to say, its ability to suggest a tangible and immediate connection between material and spiritual worlds and establish a subtle continuity between the visual experience of the viewer and the visionary dimension of the scene. The categories of past and present not only refer to different temporalities but also entail different kinds of experiences: in this painting, Leonardo transforms the mystic revelations of an individual (Blessed Amadeus) into a visual experience that could be shared and reenacted by many (spectators) thanks to the exquisite degree of verisimilitude displayed in the image. Past events become present visualizations, almost as though they could cancel the very distance between memory and perception, recollection and experience.

This explains why Leonardo emphasizes so much the role of Painting as a Custodian of Memory. Painting may in fact preserve the physiognomy of a person as well as capture

forever the most distinctive moment of an event, extending the duration of a particular subject and, consequently, contributing to its conservation over time like an archive-based form of knowledge. Unlike Music,⁶¹ which ceases to create its melodies and sounds as soon as voices or instruments are put to a halt, and unlike Poetry,⁶² which requires being continually activated by a reader, a listener, and a speaker in order to convey its contents through word- or sound-based signs, Painting, on the contrary, is a fully autonomous and self-contained universe of fictional expression.⁶³ Due to its multifaceted treatment of temporal components, Painting can immeasurably expand the duration of events, phenomena, and beings thanks to its unique means of representation, thus ensuring the maintenance of their appearances, values, and messages, long after those same events, phenomena, and beings have ceased to exist. Leonardo emphasizes this point in a lapidary note, in which he praises Painting above any other kind of art: *“O maravigliosa scienza, tu riservi in vita le caduche bellezze de’ mortali”*.⁶⁴

In relation to the conservative value of Painting, it could be argued that Sculpture, too, could provide durable monuments and other long-lasting images, thanks to the use of particularly resilient materials, such as bronze, marble, and silver. For this very reason, however, Leonardo commends the intellectual supremacy of Painting over any form of temporality that might depend exclusively on external factors, such as the physical durability of the materials applied by sculptors. While the duration of a carved image, for example, depends primarily on the resistance of the material used by the sculptor, the time embodied by a painting, on the opposite, depends on the specific means of representation employed by the artist. In other words, the multiple temporalities vehiculated by Painting are related to its morphological ductility, stylistic inventiveness, and technical expertise, and not just subordinated to the very materials used by a master. *“Dirà lo scultore far opera più etterne che ‘l pittore,”* Leonardo interjects, *“qui si risponde esser virtù della materia sculta e non dello scultore, che la sculpisce; e se ‘l pittore dipinge in terra cotta con vetri, essa sarà più etterna che la scultura”*.⁶⁵ In conclusion, Painting is superior to Sculpture even in the creation of memorials and monuments.

As we have discussed so far, Painting offers a long-lasting depiction of beings, events, and phenomena, which does not end, such as in Music, once the score has stopped being performed. By providing more durable results than any song could ever accomplish, Painting plays with both immediacy and duration, thus overcoming the temporal limitations of musical compositions. As a matter of fact, immediacy is a central concept in Leonardo’s definition of Painting as an ambit of verisimilar fiction, which distinguishes it also from the creations of Poetry. As the Renaissance master vehemently points out, the amount of time required to a poet to properly describe a scene or to a reader to read it is drastically different—in its linear progression—from the simultaneity attained by a painting depicting the same scene.⁶⁶ The sequential nature of a literary narrative as well as the mediated duration of a musical score cannot compete, therefore, with the striking simultaneity and long-lasting results achieved by a pictorial representation.

Hic et nunc, Painting makes every form look as if they were present, tangible, and frozen in time, without jeopardizing their living and dynamic appearances. Among all of the arts, the only field of expression that could somehow compete with Painting in this particular regard—that is, the preservation of illustrious identities or significant events through the creation of portraits, monuments, and memorials—is Sculpture, due to its resilient and durable materials. However, as it has been already explained, Sculpture cannot fully embody the remarkable variety of natural phenomena—and depict, for example, thundering weathers or stormy skies—as Leonardo has argued. This last comment leads us to consider another important aspect of Leonardo’s comments on the theme of *Paragone*.

3.4. The Incomparable Value of Variety

According to the Renaissance master, the wide range of natural forms can be represented only by Painting, thanks to the unique degree of naturalness, tangibility, and immediacy it may attain. More than any other field of representation, Painting can ren-

der all sorts of visual shapes, even beyond the strict realm of natural elements that may occur within the boundaries of the phenomenological world. To put it differently, Painting can also provide convincing visual shapes to abstract ideas. On the one hand, it can represent forms directly borrowed from nature (such as mountains, foggy landscapes, or human beings) and, on the other, it can equally well represent forms inspired by one's imagination or collective memory (as in the case of mythological figures and religious scenes). It should come, therefore, as no surprise if Leonardo devotes many notes on the "universality" of Painting and claims that a painter should be praised first and foremost for being "*universale*".⁶⁷

Thanks to the (theoretically unlimited) variety of subjects that Painting could embrace, Leonardo asserts that the experience one could reach through the observation of a pictorial image could be even more powerful than the knowledge one could get out of philosophical disquisitions.⁶⁸ Coherently, Painting is presented as the optimal medium with which one could successfully emulate all sorts of visual manifestations and, for that very reason, it must be proclaimed superior to any other kind of art or reasoning, for it does not simply incorporate materials received from first-hand experiences, but reenacts them right in front of the viewer, without ever losing the freshness or the spontaneity of their original manifestation.⁶⁹

Ultimately, the degree of *bellezza* achieved by a painting will be proportionally related to its capacity of rendering the immediacy of the actual *esperienza* of any phenomena. It is correct to conclude, therefore, that the main aspiration of Painting is to become a "world-sized mirror" and appear as natural-looking as nature itself so that "*la tua pittura parrà ancora lei una cosa naturale vista in un grande specchio*".⁷⁰

While Painting aims to become universal and represent the entire spectrum of visual phenomena, Sculpture, on the contrary, tends to focus primarily, if not exclusively, on the depiction of human bodies, and it is seldom devoted to the representation of any other aspects involved in a narrative, such as settings, landscapes, clothing, or weather conditions as one could see in certain bas-reliefs created by masters of the caliber of Ghiberti and Donatello.⁷¹ Contrarily to the mimetic limits of Sculpture, Painting can depict literally everything that pertains to the domain of visual perception, including effects of transparency as well as shapeless or shape-shifting elements, such as thunders, clouds, water, and air.

The variety of forms that Painting can emulate—through *rilievo*, *sfumato*, *ombre e luci*, and *affetti*—is indeed astonishing, for it encompasses not just the natural world but the entire realm of visuality. Thanks to the palpable naturalness that only pictorial representations can achieve, even when the artist is providing convincing forms to beings, things, or phenomena that cannot be found in nature, Painting is commended by Leonardo as a mirror-like double of the phenomenological reality, in general, and the visual phenomenology, in particular: Painting is the living mirror through which viewers can enhance their own experiences of reality.⁷²

This statement leads us to consider another important side of the *Paragone* debate, which confirms once again, according to Leonardo, the superiority of Painting over all other arts: along with its incomparable mimetic possibilities, Painting has the unparalleled capacity of reinterpreting, reconfiguring, and even reinventing models borrowed from or inspired by nature, thus giving concrete, life-like appearances to all sorts of fictional as well as imaginary figures and spiritual entities. In a nutshell, Painting renders visible even what is intangible, offering plausible forms to imaginary or metaphysical beings as Leonardo paradigmatically demonstrates in the *Virgin of the Rocks*. To that end, it is essential for a painter to be able to make up forms that might have never existed or seen before, which leads us to investigate the next distinctive feature of Painting: its ceaseless inventiveness.

3.5. The Infinite Inventiveness of Painting

The concept of naturalism that emerges from Leonardo's art theory is far from being limited to the emulation of physical, phenomenological appearances and seems to

entail de facto a continuous process of invention based on previous, empirically conducted observations, so that a master can always produce new forms, verisimilar figures, and appropriate settings. The highest goal that an artist could possibly aim to reach is to create an all-encompassing example of verisimilitude beyond the mirror-like replica of the natural world. As a “mental discourse,” Painting can go beyond the variety of elements, entities, and shapes that one may find in nature and explore an infinity of other possible worlds, creating, for instance, grotesque heads and goliardic monsters or, on a different range of topics, compelling celestial figures and relatable religious characters. Thanks to the “naturalness” of these “invented” forms, Painting reaches a new level of immediacy, relatability, and persuasion—exemplary demonstrated in the depiction of sacred scenes—as no other art could possibly compare with. In the *Virgin of the Rocks*, in fact, Leonardo displays before the eyes of his spectators a scene that could not have been seen or experienced in any other way, given its miraculous status and visionary origins. The painting makes it possible for the beholder to contemplate—and have the visual equivalent of a first-hand experience of—an unrepeatable, yet constantly reenacted, event. Paintings such as the *Virgin of the Rocks* may show, therefore, what cannot be otherwise represented or experienced. They visualize the invisible, touch the untouchable, and speak the unspoken as well as the unspeakable,

Through a highly calculated interplay of mimesis, selection, and reinvention of natural models, a painter can modify or rearrange any forms previously observed in life for the sake of a particular purpose, such as the evocation of a prayer or the depiction of a miraculous event. Not only does Painting provide believable visual expressions to beings or things that may not even exist—or manifest themselves—in nature, but it also gives natural-looking shapes to metaphysical manifestations, such as the scene evoked in the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

The essential point for a painter is to maintain a compelling level of verisimilitude in the depiction of no matter what forms or elements. Inventiveness must be measured, therefore, in relation to the degree of verisimilitude and relatability reached by a painting. Such a fundamental balance between naturalism and invention is well summarized by Leonardo in a very eloquent sentence, in which he urges the artist to “*fare di fantasia appresso alli effetti di natura*”.⁷³ In a painting, everything must appear not only tangible but alive—from lightening thunders to monstrous faces, falling waterfalls to enigmatic gazes—in a perfect amalgamation of fantasy and naturalism. The paradigm of verisimilitude will ultimately dictate the boundaries of a successful visual representation, which must be born out of “*esperienza, madre d’ogni certezza*”.⁷⁴ To confirm this remark, it suffices to recall a note by Leonardo, in which the superiority of eye-witnessed experiences is proclaimed over any process of imagination:

Non vede la immaginazione cotal eccellenza qual vede l’occhio, perché l’occhio riceve le specie, ovvero similitudini de li obbietti, e dalli alla impulsive, e da essa impulsive al senso commune, e li è giudicata. Ma la immaginazione non esce fuori d’esso senso commune, se non in quanto essa va alla memoria, e li si ferma e li muore, se la cosa immaginata non è de molta eccellenza.⁷⁵

In other words, the experience achieved through the eyes is considered superior by Leonardo because it expands the mental boundaries of the viewer, connecting the mental processes of an individual to all sorts of external phenomena displayed in nature. This kind of eye-based experience—embodied by Painting—dilates the human faculties of apprehension and perception. On the other hand, Leonardo also claims that, however brilliant an image created by the imagination of an artist might be, it will always be the result of a circumscribed and somehow circular mode of knowledge, since it takes place exclusively within the boundaries of one’s own mind, with no expansion of one’s mental faculties or perceptual habits. While images created on the basis of a direct *esperienza* of reality will trigger a process of interpretation and analysis, paintings executed solely on the basis of one’s imagination may become self-referential and potentially repetitive since they do not interact with the whole variety of natural forms.⁷⁶

In conclusion, Painting provides a mirroring visual translation of first-hand experiences, so it can rescue its audiences from the darkness of an “*occhio tenebroso*,” that is to say, an eye that has not been properly exposed to the observation of natural phenomena.⁷⁷ One may then plausibly infer that, in Leonardo’s views, Painting brings to the table further clarification, enlightenment, improvement: in other words, it transforms the “tenebrous eyes” into a “luminescent agent”. Moreover, Painting does not invent out of nothing: it further enlightens aspects of the phenomenological reality and, while doing so, it increases the level of the audience’s understanding as well as its capacity of imagination. Consequently, the most effective examples of inventiveness in art are those in which forms of nature are captured in their inner dynamism, in their internal processes, without altering, however, their external appearances. As the most praiseworthy field of art, Painting truly reaches its highest heights and offer its most compelling results when it represents, in a persuasive, verisimilar manner, the inner processes that lead to the formation of the outward appearances of natural phenomena.

The ultimate perfection of a pictorial representation—as an art capable of attaining infinite inventions—may be then measured on the basis of the impact that it might have on the spectator and the degree with which it will stimulate their agency and imagination. Interestingly, Leonardo seems to reverse the factors usually mentioned in the comparison between art and nature, imagination and naturalism, asserting that, paradoxically as it may sound, the more naturalistic an image will appear, the more it will increase the level of participation, emotional involvement, and mental engagement of the viewers, thus dilating their imagination in unprecedented ways. On the other hand, the unbridled liberty of an artist could lead to the creation of implausible forms, which would lead, in turn, to the potential disintegration of Painting as a form of knowledge, for such an unrestrained approach would inevitably alter one of the basic principles of Painting as a mode of inquiry: for Leonardo, the imitation of nature achieved by a pictorial representation on the basis of empirical experiences is done with the intent of better understanding and endlessly perpetuating the relevance of those very experiences.

In this regard, Leonardo’s “stain method” or theory of *macchia*—which triggers, as we have seen, a psychological process known as “reification”—shifts the location of imagination as a distinctive factor of the artistic domain, setting it, primarily, on the mind of the viewer.⁷⁸ The concepts of “inventiveness” and “ingenuity” will characterize the master who is able to provoke such a reifying perception on the beholder. Neither Poetry nor Music and not even Sculpture can seriously compete with the all-encompassing universality of Painting and its unstoppable—yet nature-measured—inventiveness.

In the case of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, spectators will recognize a wide range of natural forms depicted in the panel: solid mountains, ethereal clouds, atmospheric setting. At the same time, they will acknowledge the tangible presence of characters that require a religious background to be identified: Mary, the archangel, and the two infants, Jesus and St John the Baptist. However familiar and promptly recognizable these figures might appear, there is a high chance that the viewers may not immediately follow the overall narrative upon which the scene is orchestrated and grasp even less the symbolic implications of such a metaphysical encounter.

Moreover, the highly expressive use of particular gestures, specific poses, and powerful gazes clearly seem to imply the existence of a—tangible, yet mysterious—network of physical, and accordingly symbolic, connections among those characters and their peculiar location. By *looking through* the image and connecting its various elements among themselves, the beholder may realize that the yellow fabric that covers the area corresponding to the womb of Mary is depicted in a strikingly bright, luminous, almost reverberating fashion. Could it carry an allusion to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin? Why does the archangel point towards the kneeling figure of St John, who is represented in a position undeniably higher than the one occupied by Christ, who appears sitting in the foreground? Could one infer any implications out of these elements and their extremely natural-looking arrangement within the composition? At which point does

the process of seeing become an experience of *looking through* the forms in the attempt to understand the implied narratives and the unfolding stories associated with the painting? Could any other form of art render such a scene with similar immediacy and tangibility, while evoking symbolic allusions and multiple theological implications? The naturalness of the painting, in which a variety of elements are represented, plays with the different temporalities embedded in the pictorial surface and attracts the viewers' attention and emotional responses, while simultaneously inciting their imagination.⁷⁹

According to Leonardo, Painting possesses, in fact, the incomparable ability to render all forms of nature and provide the necessary means for the viewer to re-experience them again and again. Even more importantly, Painting has the capacity to continually stimulate the agency of the beholders and, thanks to this active process of engaged observation, it will enhance the viewers' faculty of imagination: while looking at a painting, the spectators might feel compelled to *look through* the forms represented in the pictorial surface, noticing new shapes, discovering unexplored relations, mapping out new territories of *esperienza*. This process leads us to examine, in the conclusive part of this essay, two intertwined aspects of Painting that definitely confirm its supremacy in Leonardo's art theory.

3.6. The Simultaneous Quest for Iconic Stability and Semiotic Openness

In his reflections on the theme of *Paragone*, Leonardo adopts a system of binary categories and tries to find a balance between them. While clearly fictional and man-made, Painting aims to provide, nevertheless, images that could suggest reality and emulate the never-ending dynamism of nature.⁸⁰ By tangibly depicting all sorts of visual phenomena, Painting aspires to open up further layers of realities and explore new directions of sensorial experiences, in which the viewer's participation is an essential factor. The naturalistic agenda of Painting is directly associated, therefore, with the levels of agency displayed by the beholder. Thanks to the distinctive set of practical tools, theoretical principles, and working procedures that characterizes Painting as a field of visual elaboration—employing means such as *rilievo* and *sfumato*, along with the calculated contrast between *ombre e luci* and the use of empathy-inspiring *affetti*—it can create infinite forms and multiple narratives through which the members of the audiences could be exposed to the astounding variety of nature or dive into the endless inventiveness of imagination. Unlike any other science or art, Painting can offer an unparalleled experience to the viewer by putting together naturalism and fantasy and thus propitiating a more articulated and self-conscious way of experiencing reality, thanks also to the multi-layered temporalities involved in the production as well as in the reception of any pictorial discourse. In that regard, Painting emerges as a self-contained universe in Leonardo's art theory, reflecting both the forces of nature as well as the power of human's mind.

For this reason, Leonardo stresses the fact that Painting carries all its distinctive elements—namely, *rilievo*, perspective, *ombre e luci*, *chiaroscuro*, *sfumato*, *affetti*, and many others—within the internal boundaries of the pictorial representation itself.⁸¹ In order to create the illusion of three-dimensionality by means of *rilievo*, for example, Painting must explicitly carry those elements within its very surface, without having the possibility of counting on any external help, such as actual sources of light like candles and lamps. To effectively represent a particular form, Painting must display, within itself, every element involved in the making of a visual representation: shading, modeling, poses, *affetti*, perspective-based settings or atmospheric landscapes, and many more. In other words, Painting must display what could be called an “iconic stability” in order to successfully achieve its illusionistic goals. Sculpture, on the contrary, is not characterized by such a self-contained universe of morphological stability since the actual appearance of its shapes will largely depend on the variable impact of external factors, such as sources of light and points of view. Depending on the interaction of all those external elements, the actual forms of a sculpture may change quite drastically. To confirm this point, it suffices to mention the examples created by Donatello's *stacciato*, whose bas-relief shapes vary continually in accordance with the intensity, direction, and typology of the light sources that are materi-

ally striking the surface of the work. For this reason, Leonardo argues that the shape of a sculpture is never completely stable and compact within the physical boundaries of the sculpture itself but depends on external conditions.⁸²

Painting, on the opposite, contains its inalterable forms within its own pictorial borders: only the viewers, with their imagination and through the process of reification, may expand the iconic stability of a painted image.⁸³ However, even in those cases, spectators must undertake such processes by following the prescriptions or the visual clues represented within the painting itself. Should a beholder claim to be seeing faces in a cloud, or a mystical lightening in a rock, he, she, or they would be just continuing to play the very “reifying game” that Leonardo has written so eloquently about. Painting incites further explorations, but those explorations take place, significantly, in the minds of the viewers, without altering the actual forms present in a painting. One might see beyond the images created by a painter, but the iconic stability of the pictorial discourse is never truly compromised. To put it in theoretical terms, one could claim that the balance between *rilievo* (which contributes to enhance the solidity of a volume) and *sfumato* (which, on the contrary, emphasizes the blending smoothness of forms) culminates in a visual paradox: Painting should guarantee, on the one hand, the “iconic stability” of a representation, while allowing, on the other, a “semiotic openness” of its various shapes, so that viewers may not just recognize a mountain, a saint, or a sacred conversation but simultaneously push forward the (potentially endless) process of reification and symbolic construction inaugurated by the painting itself. While the concept of *rilievo* stresses the iconic stability of the elements depicted in an image, emphasizing how important it is, in a painting, to achieve the optical (mis)perception of volume, notions such as *sfumato*, *macchia*, and *ombra e luci* indicate the equally necessary openness of those same forms, in a process that will take place, however, in the eyes and in the minds of the beholders.

To conclude: unlike Poetry, which is based on a culturally-variable systems of signs—the language of words and sounds—which requires a continuous process of translation in order to be understood across different audiences, Painting possesses a universal language—that is, the immediacy of nature itself—that does not need to be encoded before being perceived or understood by any community. In the case of Sculpture, it is possible to mention cases of “semiotic openness,” such as the already mentioned example of Donatello’s *stiacciato*. However, the potential ambiguity of forms in those cases is not incorporated within the representation itself, but depends on the actual intervention of external factors, such as the variation of source lights. Therefore, while Leonardo certainly commends these features in a sculpture, he clearly differentiates them from the “semiotic openness” that characterizes Painting, since they are not associated with the “iconic stability” of the sculpted image. In a sculpture the semiotic openness is reached in detriment of the iconic stability of the representation, while in a painting, the semiotic openness is always achieved without altering the iconic stability of the image.

For its unparalleled capacity of rendering the sensorial presence of images as if they were actual things; for its unreachable ability to depict multiple time-based experiences; for the incomparable variety of its subjects; for the infinite inventiveness it stimulates on the viewers; and, finally, for its unique ways of providing stable forms, while suggesting, at the same time, the emergence of countless shapes and stories in the mind of the beholders, Painting is—indisputably according to Leonardo—the most effective, perfect, and complete of all arts. The *Virgin of the Rocks* offers an excellent case study to analyze Leonardo’s reflections on the theme of *Paragone*. By putting together *divina bellezza* and *natural essemplio*, this painting provides tangible forms to spiritual entities, thus confirming the precept according to which Painting may give concrete shapes to any *iddea*.⁸⁴ In line with such a stunning capacity to emulate all *cose corporee*, Painting may also capture the ethereal manifestations of all sorts of *cose invisibili*, which further validates its supremacy in Leonardo’s art theory. Leonardo’s explorations on the theme of *Paragone* leads to the conviction that Painting is the most stimulating form of visual-based *scienza* for it generously offers to its spectators

endless opportunities to undertake new *esperienze*. Paraphrasing Martin Heidegger, one could assert that, for Leonardo da Vinci, Painting is indeed the house of experience.

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Notes

- ¹ On the profound relation between theory and practice, Leonardo incisively asserts: (Leonardo and Vecce 1995).
- ² Leonardo, *Libro di Pittura*, op. cit., p. 131.
- ³ On these two works, see (Marani 2020). In reference to the *Adoration*, Marani significantly points out “the sculptural conception of the painting” in Marani, *Leonardo*, op. cit., p. 113. For an insightful overview of Leonardo’s career, see (Arasse 1997; Kemp 2006).
- ⁴ For a summary of this complex commission, see in particular: Ibidem, pp. 128–55; (Syson 2012; Pedretti 1973); Idem, (Pedretti 2017); and (De Mambro Santos 2020, pp. 347–69) (followed by forthcoming Parts II and III). For the interpretation of this painting in relation to the theme of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, see the pioneering studies of (Ferri Piccaluga 1983, 1990).
- ⁵ For a seminal work on Leonardo’s *Paragone*, see (Farago 1992). While an analysis of Leonardo’s contributions to the development of the theme of *Paragone* within a broader Renaissance context of references—in relation to the ideas promoted by other artists and humanists—would be certainly stimulating, it goes beyond the scope of the present essay. For more general considerations on the role played by Leonardo in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century reflections on the *Paragone*, see the well-conducted study by (Hendler 2013).
- ⁶ For Leonardo’s art theory, see C. Pedretti, *Introduzione* in Leonardo, *Libro di Pittura*, op. cit., pp. 11–81.
- ⁷ It is well known, in fact, that Leonardo’s patrons decided to change the characters of the scene—and, inevitably, its theological as well as devotional purposes—from the contract originally signed in 1483. Another important set of alterations was made probably at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the second panel, now in London, was elaborated. For those alterations, see (De Mambro Santos 2006, pp. 471–95).
- ⁸ For an interpretation of the archangel’s gesture in a context of religious practices, see (Dall’asta 2019).
- ⁹ In this regard, see the insightful considerations provided by Claire Farago in her essay (Farago et al. 2018, pp. 98–108). See also the critical points discussed in (Fiorani 2020), especially pp. 146–62.
- ¹⁰ Painting, according to Leonardo, may represent any forms that are—or are not—possible to be found in nature: “Adunque la pittura è da essere preposta a tutte l’operazioni, perch’è contenitrice de tutte le forme che sono, e di tutte quelle che non sono in natura” in LEONARDO, *Libro di Pittura*, op. cit., p. 154. For Leonardo’s comments on the representation of “cose invisibili” cfr. Ibidem, p. 156.
- ¹¹ For the interplay of *bellezza* and *esperienza* in Leonardo’s theory see Leonardo, *Libro di Pittura*, op. cit., p. 156.
- ¹² Farago, *Leonardo’s Workshop Procedures*, op. cit., p.102.
- ¹³ In an eloquent note, Leonardo underlines the relevance of the *rilevo* even over beauty: “Non è sempre buono quel ch’è bello; e questo dico per quelli pittori che amano tanto la bellezza de’ colori, che non senza gran coscienza danno loro debolissime e quasi insensibili ombre, non istimando el loro rilievo” in Ibidem, p. 239.
- ¹⁴ On the De Predis brothers, cfr. (Shell 1998).
- ¹⁵ De Mambro Santos, *Picta Sine Fabula I*, op. cit., pp. 347–48.
- ¹⁶ On the role played by Napoletano in this commission, see Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci*, op. cit., p. 149–50.
- ¹⁷ Cfr. (Venturoli 2005, pp. 62–69).
- ¹⁸ For a reconstruction of the altarpiece, see Venturoli, *L’ancona dell’Immacolata Concezione*, op. cit., pp. 9–12, and also De Mambro Santos, *Picta Sine Fabula I*, op. cit., pp. 358–59.
- ¹⁹ Venturoli, *L’ancona dell’Immacolata Concezione*, op. cit., pp. 9–12. For further hypotheses of reconstruction of the entire altarpiece, see the important study by C. Pedretti, *Leonardo da Vinci. The ‘Virgin of the Rocks’ in the Cheramy Version*, op. cit., pp. 8–18.
- ²⁰ Cfr. De Mambro Santos, *Picta Sine Fabula I*, op. cit., in particular pp. 350–56, which focuses on what has been called the “Amadeite line of interpretation” of Leonardo’s work. For further remarks on Blessed Amadeus, see (Sevesi 1932, pp. 227–32), as well as (Sousa Costa 1985). Two recent publications have examined the connections between Leonardo’s painting and the religious activities of the Blessed Amadeus: (Paliaga 2018; Dall’asta 2019).
- ²¹ On Bramante’s *Tempietto*, with references to the presence of the Blessed Amadeus and the Amadeite in the time of Sixtus IV, can be found in (Cantatore 1994); Idem, (Cantatore 2000); Idem, (Cantatore 2010); (Freiberg 2005); Idem, (Freiberg 2014).
- ²² For the text written by Blessed Amadeus, see the excellent critical edition and Portuguese translation provided in (Dias 2014).

- On the theological implications of Blessed Amadeus' text and preaching experiences, see (Morisi 1977; Morisi-Guerra 1992; Novoa 2009).
- This hypothesis is explained more in detail in De Mambro Santos, *Picta Sine Fabula I*, op. cit., pp. 350–69.
- For further reflections on the depiction of visions, see (Cassegrain 2017).
- For insightful remarks on these properties in relation to the mystic experience, in accordance with an anthropological analysis, see (Fabietti 2014).
- (Vasari 1996, p. 620).
- For a fascinating account of how to create monstrous figures that may appear verisimilar, see LEONARDO, *Libro di Pittura*, op. it., p. 306, in which the Renaissance master explains how to make imaginary animals to look natural (*"Come debbi far parere naturale un animale finto"*).
- Ibidem, p. 162.
- Ibidem, p. 303.
- Ibidem, pp. 303–4.
- Ibidem, p. 304.
- Ibidem, p. 174.
- Ibidem, p. 287.
- Ibidem, p. 288.
- Claire Farago suggests a strong connection between Leonardo's practice, particularly in the years in which he was preparing the second version of the Virgin of the Rocks, now in London, and his contemporary reflections on shadow-related phenomena: "Leonardo's writings about painting intersected with his actual processes of making art during a period when he was especially concerned with *rilievo*," in Farago, *Leonardo's Workshop Procedures*, op. cit., p. 85.
- On the importance of a verisimilar representation of the "thickness of the air," Leonardo comments: *"Provasi, perché l'aria che s'interpone infra l'occhio e la cosa veduta occupa alquanto la detta cosa: e se l'aria interposta sarà di gran somma, allora la cosa veduta si tinge forte del colore di tale aria, e se tale aria sarà di sottile quantità, allora l'obbietto sarà di poco impedito,"* in Leonardo, *Libro di Pittura*, op. it., p. 234.
- Ibidem, p. 220.
- Ibidem.
- Ibidem, p. 300. In relation to the power of the painting to establish a process of empathy with the viewer, Leonardo tells an interesting version of an anecdote that had already become a literary trope by mid-fifteenth century: *"Uno pittore fece una figura, che chi la vedeva subito sbadigliava, e tanto replicava tale accidente, quanto se teneva li occhi alla pittura, la quale anco a lei era finta sbadigliare. Altri hanno depinto atti libidinosi, e tanto lussuriosi, che hanno incitati li risguardatori di quelle alla medesima festa; il che non farà la poesia,"* in Ibidem, p. 150.
- Ibidem, p. 98.
- Interestingly, Leonardo tells an anecdote regarding the paradoxical effects of empathy caused by a religious image turned into an object of lustful desire: *"E già intervenne a me far una pittura che rapresentava una cosa divina, la quale comperata dall'amante di quella volse levarne la rapresentazione de tal deità per poterla baciare senza sospetto, ma infine la coscienza vinse li sospiri e la libidine, e fu forza che lui se la levassi di casa,"* in Ibidem, p. 149.
- In that regard, Leonardo is crystal clear at establishing a symmetry between the use of certain representational devices—such as gestures and gazes—and the beholder's response: *"e se 'l caso è di cosa divota, tutti li [personaggi] circostanti dirizzino li lor occhi con diversi atti di divozione a esso caso,"* in Ibidem, p. 274.
- In reference to the limits of the Poetry is an art based on linguistic, cultural, and also physical intermediation, Leonardo observes: *"E la tua lingua sarà impedita dalla sete, et il corpo dal sonno e fame, prima che tu con parole dimostri quello che in un istante il pittore ti dimostri,"* in Ibidem, p. 140. In another paragraph, Leonardo provides further comments on what could be called the semiotic limitations of Poetry: *"Se la pittura abbraccia in sé tutte le forme della natura, voi non avete se non li nomi, li quali non sono universali come le forme; se voi avete li effetti delle dimostrazioni, noi abbiamo le dimostrazioni delli effetti,"* in Ibidem, 143.
- Interestingly, however, there is a particular field of representation in which Music can excel, that is, the depiction of "invisible things": *"il poeta resta, in quanto alla figurazione delle cose corporee, molto indietro al pittore, e delle cose invisibili rimane indietro al musico,"* in Ibidem, p. 156.
- Ultimately, the most problematic limit of Sculpture seems to lay specifically its inability to render the variety of visual effects and natural phenomena, such as transparency and atmospheric values: *"Le prospettive delli scultori non paiono niente vere, quelle del pittore paiono a centinaia di miglia di là dall'opera. La prospettiva area è lontana da lor opera. [Gli scultori] Non possono figurare li corpi trasparenti, non possono figurare i luminosi, non linee riflesse, non corpi lucidi, come specchi e simili cose lustranti, non nebbie, non tempi oscuri, et infinite cose che non si dicono per non tediare,"* in Ibidem, pp. 161–62. This limit also explains Leonardo's particular admiration for bas-reliefs as the typology of sculpture that could be considered closer to a pictorial composition.
- Ibidem, p. 155.

Ibidem, p. 147.

Ibidem, p. 134.

For Leonardo's recommendation to the painter to refrain from using too sharp contours, see in particular Ibidem, p. 180, in which the author asserts the necessity "*che lle tue ombre e lumi sien uniti senza tratto o segni a uso di fumo*". On the theoretical implications of this concept, see (Nagel 1993).

Leonardo, *Libro di Pittura*, op. it., p. 307.

On this topic, see note 33.

On Alberti's art theory, see: (Alberti 2011; Wright 1984); and also (De Mambro Santos 2015).

For the functions performed by the "*risguardatore*" in Leonardo's art theory see, in particular, Leonardo, *Libro di Pittura*, op. it., p. 198.

Ibidem, pp. 197–98.

Ibidem, p. 198.

Leonardo provides a long list of natural, potentially shape-shifting phenomena that could be perfectly represented and suggested by Painting: "*il pittore ti mostrerà varie distanzie con varimento del color de l'aria interposta infra li obbietti e l'occhio; lui le nebbie, per le quali con difficultade penetrano le spezie delli obbietti; lui le piogge, che mostrano dopo sé nuvoli con monti e valli; lui le polvere che mostrano in sé e dopo sé li cmobattenti d'essa motori; lui li fiumi più o men densi,*" in Ibidem, pp. 164–65.

In connection with this topic, it seems particularly relevant to mention, here, the passage in which Leonardo states that "*nelle cose confuse l'ingegno si desta a nove invenzioni,*" in Ibidem, p. 178.

Ibidem, p. 177.

On the similarity between these two characters and its devotional implications, see (De Mambro Santos Forthcoming).

Contrarily to her sister Music, Painting "*non more immediate dopo la sua creazione, come fa la sventurata musica, anzi, resta in essere, e ti si dimostra in vita quel che in fatto è una sola superfizie,*" in Leonardo, *Libro di Pittura*, op. it., p. 153.

Unlike Painting, Poetry "*non s'avede che le sue parole, nel far menzione delle membra di tal bellezze, il tempo le divide l'un da l'altro, e inframette la obliuione, e divide le proporzioni, le quali lui senza gran prolissità non può nominare*" in Ibidem, p. 147.

The universality of Painting is a recurrent trope in Leonardo's notes: "*la pittura abbraccia e contiene in sé tutte le cose che produce la natura, e che conduce l'accidentale operazione degli uomini, et in ultimo ciò che si pò comprendere con gli occhimi*" in Ibidem, p. 181. The iconic autonomy of Painting as a semiotic system will be discussed further in a different paragraph of this essay.

Ibidem, p. 153.

Ibidem, p. 167.

Cfr. Ibidem, pp. 139–40.

Ibidem, p. 181.

"*La pittura s'astende nelle superfizie, colori e figure de qualonque cosa creata dalla natura, e la filosofia penetra dentro alli medesimi corpi, considerando in quelli le lor proprie virtù, ma non rimane soddisfatta con quella verità che fa il pittore, che abbraccia in sé la prima verità di tali corpi, perché l'occhio meno se inganna,*" in Ibidem, p. 136.

A painting can render the "*proporzionali bellezze d'un angelico viso*" (Ibidem, p. 145) as well as the myriad of forms of nature, from microscopic to monumental ones. Paintings can, in fact, "*li gesti e li componimenti delle istorie, e li siti ornati e dilettevoli con le trasparenti acque, per le quali si vede li verdeggianti fondi delli suoi corsi, scherzare l'onde sopra prati e minute giare, con l'erbe, che con lor si mischiano insieme con li sguiscianti persci, e simili discrezioni,*" in Ibidem, p. 144.

Ibidem, p. 302.

On the superiority of bas-reliefs as the most accomplished forms of Sculpture for its high degree of "*speculazione,*" see Ibidem, pp. 160–61.

For the metaphor of Painting as a mirror or "*specchio,*" see Ibidem, p. 303.

Ibidem, p. 164.

Ibidem, p. 156.

Ibidem, p. 139.

This is in line with Leonardo's definition of Painting as an experience-based science given that "*le vere scienze son quelle che la sperienza ha fatto penetrare per li sensi,*" in Ibidem, p. 157.

Ibidem, p. 140.

Leonardo is well aware of the limits of the *macchia* as a pedagogical method for the artist and does not neglect to point out that "*è ben vero che in tale macchia si vede varie invenzioni di ciò che l'om vole cercare in quella, cioè teste d'omini, diversi animali, battaglie, scogli, mari, nuvoli e boschi et al. tri simili cose; e fa com' il sono delle campane, nelle quali si pò intendere quelle dire quel ch'a te pare. Ma ancora ch'esse macchie ti dieno invenzione, esse non t'insegnano finire nessuno particolare,*" in Ibidem, p. 174.

- 79 In reference to the indispensable symmetry that must be attained between painting and spectator, Leonardo reminds: “*Li componimenti delle istorie dipinte debbono muovere li risguardatori e contemplatori di quelle a quello medesimo effetto, che è quello per il quale tale istoria è figurata,*” in *Ibidem*, p. 221.
- 80 For excellent examples of Leonardo’s description of the vitality and the inner forces of nature, see *Ibidem*, p. 459.
- 81 On the all-encompassing and self-contained nature of Painting as a science of representation, Leonardo affirms: “*A dir meglio, ciò ch’è visibile, è connumerato nella scienza della pittura,*” in *Ibidem*, p. 316.
- 82 On this important topic, see Leonardo’s considerations in *Ibidem*, pp. 160–61.
- 83 The only possible alterations a painting can suffer, according to Leonardo, are the ones caused by the deteriorating action of time or the lack of appropriate maintenance. Leonardo’s *Last Supper* and *Battle of Anghiari* constitute two very good examples of those issues.
- 84 In a passage of the *Trattato della pittura*, Leonardo asserts the incomparable capacity of paintings to express with powerful immediacy all sorts of thoughts as though the “ideas” were actually displayed—and physically present—before one’s eyes, providing the example of sacred images: “*Or non si vede le pitture rappresentatrici delle divine deità essere al continuo coperte con coperture di grandissimi prezzi? E quando si scoprono, prima si fa grande solennità ecclesiastiche de vari canti con diversi suoni. E nello scoprire, la gran moltitudine de’ popoli che quivi concorrono immediate se gittano a terra, quella adorando e pregando per cui tale pittura è figurata, de l’acquisto della perduta sanità e della eterna salute, non altramente che se tale iddea fusse lì presente,*” in *Ibidem*, p. 135.

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