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From the Face to the Aura
Leonardo da Vinci's Sfumato and the History of Female Portraiture

There are four extant portraits that are undoubtedly by the hand of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519): the portraits of Ginevra de' Benci, of Cecilia Gallerani and of Lisa del Giocondo as well as the so-called *Belle Ferronière*. In addition there is a cartoon showing the portrait of Isabella d'Este, held at the Paris Louvre, and the *Musician* at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan, whose attribution to Leonardo cannot be supported, however. With the exception of the *Belle Ferronière*, the undisputedly genuine individual portraits are considered well researched and there is no shortage of surveys of Leonardo's portrait painting.[1] Less attention has been paid in recent research and public perception to the question of what exactly makes Leonardo's portraiture stand out as a whole in the typological history of portraits and why it occupies such a prominent place in the history of European portrait painting. For this reason, I will consider the specific properties of Leonardo's portraits that have earned them such a prominent place in the canon of art history, namely their dynamics and their tension-filled composition in the representational mode as well as the suggestive atmosphere and their auratic effect. With the *Ginevra de' Benci*, held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC (fig. 1) the first note was struck in the redefinition of the modern portrait.[2] This is not only the earliest of the four portrait paintings that have been verified as being by Leonardo's hand, it also provides the first definite point of reference in his oeuvre because it relates to two well-documented public figures: to the depicted Ginevra de' Benci, who was very well known in Florence at the time, and to the presumed patron, Bernardo Bembo, who, during his stay in Florence between 1478 and 1480, very likely commissioned the painting from Leonardo.[3]

The most obvious feature of the *Ginevra de' Benci* is the very cramped organization of the pictorial space. Ginevra is placed in front, next to the border of the image while also appearing to sit directly in front of a juniper bush. Comparable close-up views can be found in earlier Flemish portrait painting. Another noteworthy characteristic of the painting consists in the sophisticated tensions. For example, Ginevra's upper body is angled almost diagonally to the picture plane, contrasting with her face, which is turned almost completely toward the viewer, almost parallel to the picture plane. Paradoxically, the depicted woman thus emanates a certain liveliness in spite of her somewhat lifeless facial expression. A similar tension is created by the contrast between the juniper in the middle ground and the pale flesh tones especially in the upper half of the sitter's face. Ginevra's pallor would have corresponded to the widespread ideal of female beauty. Indeed, women were expected to have a light complexion, as this seemed to bespeak health and a pure character.[4] Yet Ginevra's paleness could also be explained by her sickly nature, which her husband mentions explicitly in an extant document.[5] The sources further indicate Ginevra's poetic ambitions and her veneration of Petrarch, which she shared with her platonic lover Bernardo Bembo[6] and which may be considered the basis of their friendship.

1 For Leonardo as a painter of portraits in general see Schiaparelli 1921; Arasse 1998, pp. 358–413; Marani 1999, pp. 157–207; Zöllner 2003.
2 *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*, ca. 1479/1480, oil and tempera on wood (poplar), 38.8 × 36.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC (Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1967), inv. 2326. – Möller 1937/38; Walker 1968; Fletcher 1989; Brown 1998, pp. 101–121; Woods-Marsden 2001, pp. 72–73; Zöllner 2011, pp. 37–39, and no. VII.
3 Fletcher 1989.
4 Rubin 2011, p. 17.
5 Möller 1937/38, p. 198.
6 Ibid., pp. 185–209; Walker 1968; Fletcher 1989.

1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*, ca. 1479/80, oil and tempera on wood (poplar), National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The juniper bush contrasting with the pale flesh tones of Ginevra's countenance dominates our over-all impression of the image. Placed in the middle ground, the juniper is more than a mere ornamental accessory; it was regarded as a symbol of female vir-tue.[7] Further, the Italian word for juniper, *ginepro*, alludes to the name of the sitter. These references are taken up again on the reverse (fig. 2) through the depiction of a combination of plants. On a ground of imitated porphyry marble are displayed twigs of

7 Levi d'Ancona 1977, pp. 197–199, 201–204, 279–289.

laurel, juniper and palm, joined by a waving banner that reads in all capital letters: VIRTVTEM FORMA DECORAT (Beauty Embellishes Virtue). The inscription and the plant attributes underscore the connection between virtue and beauty. The laurel and palm twigs also refer to Ginevra's literary inclinations because the twigs of these two plants were seen, in poetry inspired by Petrarch, as the expression of poetic ambition. In addition, the palm twig is a traditional symbol of virtue. The inscription VIRTVTEM FORMA DECORAT, closely intertwined with the plant symbols of virtue, establishes the connection between beauty and virtue as it was expressed in contemporary literature and as can be seen in the portrait itself, in which Ginevra's physical beauty must also be understood as an expression of her virtue. Thus the front and back sides of the painting are very closely connected as they address the overlapping themes of virtue and beauty. Then again, the front and back employ two very different modes of artistic representation. The mode of the painting on the back of the portrait is strictly symbolic and refers to Ginevra's character traits and poetic ambitions. The front, showing her likeness, exhibits a less symbolic and much more autonomous mode,[8] broken up only by the symbolism of the juniper bush in the middle ground. Beside the dynamic tension of the portrait, these esthetics of artistic representation – aimed at autonomy and a freedom from symbols – are a formal leitmotif that Leonardo would develop further in his subsequent portraits of women.

The special position of the *Ginevra de' Benci* within a typological history of portraiture is further seen in the circumstance that Leonardo, in creating this small painting, broke with the Florentine tradition of the female profile portrait, a mode of representation that is not very dynamic at all.[9] Leonardo himself reflects on this change in his 1490 writings on art theory, pondering the rhetorical question of whether or not the profile was a better mode of reproduction than its alternative, creating a portrait
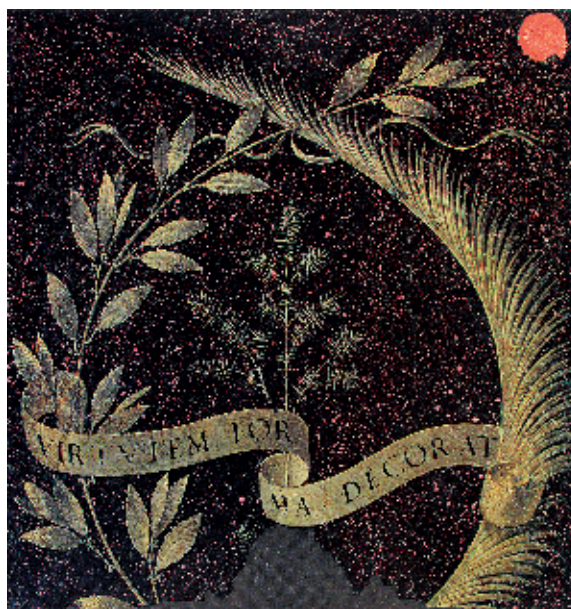
2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*, reverse of fig. 1.

using light and shadow.[10] Throughout the 1480s female portraits were completed predominantly in profile. Such portraits were often created for weddings or engagements and were usually expressive of a relatively rigid female code of conduct. The situation was very different with male portraits, for which the more dynamic chest-length three-quarter image began to assert itself at the latest with Andrea del Castagno's (ca. 1419–1457) portrait of a young man (Washington DC, National Gallery of Art), that is, around 1455.

The best example of a mode of representation that is determined by type and gender is the double portrait of a married couple, attributed to Davide Ghirlandaio (1452–1525), which is held at the Berlin Gemäldegalerie and likely dates from around 1490 (fig. 3 and 4).[11] While the husband, shown as face and torso, is turned about three quarters of the way to the viewer and has the busy wide world as a backdrop, his wife remains in profile view, surrounded by a domestic atmosphere that is defined by the accessories in the right-hand background (rosary, glass decant-

8 Belting 2001, pp. 115–142.
9 Simons 1988; Kress 1995, pp. 237–255; Tinagli 1997, pp. 87; Woods-Marsden 2001, pp. 70–74.
10 Richter 1970, § 486.
11 Davide Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of a Man and a Woman*, ca. 1490, tempera (?) on wood, 43 × 33 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Exh. cat. Berlin / New York 2011/12, pp. 154–155.

3–4. Davide Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of a Man and a Woman*, ca. 1490, tempera (?) on wood, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

er, prayer book and jewelry).[12] Even the orientation of the body follows a gender-specific hierarchy in this double portrait: the husband presents his right and in heraldic terms more valuable, masculine side. The wife shows her left side, which is heraldically speaking the less respected, feminine side. This very widespread mode of portrayal follows an organizational principle that had been pervasive in heraldry, liturgy and the general moral concepts as well as in fine arts' conventions of representation ever since antiquity.[13] The effect of this organizational principle could still be felt far into the twentieth century.[14]

Leonardo's reasons for breaking with the predominant typology and notions of organization are quickly told. Leonardo did not depict Ginevra de' Benci as a bride or in her capacity as a wife[15] but as

a poetess and, in this role, she was an equal partner to Bembo. This is why he portrayed her in three-quarter view, which had largely been reserved for men up to this point and which lent the depicted person more presence. For the same reason, Ginevra does not show her left side, as per the convention for portraits of women, but instead her right side. Lastly, Leonardo's break with the conventions of representation can be explained with his predilection for dynamic compositions. Even in the *Baptism of Christ* by his teacher Andrea del Verrocchio (1435–1488), he had painted an angel that was remarkable for its novel dynamics. These dynamics can also be found in his works of the subsequent years; essentially, they are a central characteristic of both his art and his art-theoretical and scientific thought.[16]

12 See Simons 1988, p. 24; Zöllner 1994 (revised edition 2006, *Leonardos Mona Lisa. Vom Porträt zur Ikone der freien Welt*), p. 60; Exh. cat. Princeton 2001, cat. no. 91.
13 Lurker 1980; Ennenbach 1996; Lexikon des Mittelalters, VIII, Stuttgart / Weimar 1999, col. 518 (U. Nilgen); Weigel 2001; Luschey 2002; Poséq 2007; Hall 2008.
14 As an example, see Recht 1933.
15 Tinagli, 1997, p. 88.
16 Hart 1925; Suida 1929, pp. 262–267; Gombrich 1966, pp. 144–145; Kemp / Roberts (eds.) 1989; Perrig 1999; Long 2004; Zöllner 2010.

Late in 1482 or early in 1483, Leonardo relocated from Florence to Milan to begin his career as a court artist with the Milan ruler Ludovico Sforza, known as il Moro. It appears that the first painting which Leonardo completed in his capacity as court painter is the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (fig. 5).[17] The portrait shows a young woman in valuable clothing, holding a small beast of prey, which – although zoologically not quite correct – is usually identified as an ermine. The painting's composition as a whole is in stark contrast with most of the female portraits commonly painted in Milan up until then. Here, too, Leonardo broke with the portrait types prevailing in Northern Italy at the time such as the dowry or bridal portrait. An apt example we can draw on for comparison is Ambrogio de Predis' (1455 – after 1508) portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza (fig. 6).[18] Leonardo avoided this portrait type, still popular among the nobility, because Cecilia Gallerani, as Ludovico Sforza's favorite mistress, stood above the contemporary representational conventions for women. Leonardo also left behind the traditional, rather wooden mode of representation that had the head and upper body oriented in the same direction. In the *Cecilia Gallerani* he introduced juxtaposing movement: the sitter's torso is oriented to the left but her head to the right. In this way the portrait corresponded to the dynamic style of portraiture that Leonardo had tentatively introduced in his *Ginevra de' Benci* and which, soon after in his treatise on painting, he would recommend for figurative representation in general: the sitter's body and gaze in paintings should never be pointing in the same direction.[19] This concept of a dynamic mode of representation speaks not only through the rotation of Cecilia's body but also through the posture of the ermine, seemingly emulating the woman's movement with the turn of its own body. Cecilia's hand, elegantly curved while noticeably oversized, in turn corresponds with the ermine. As opposed to
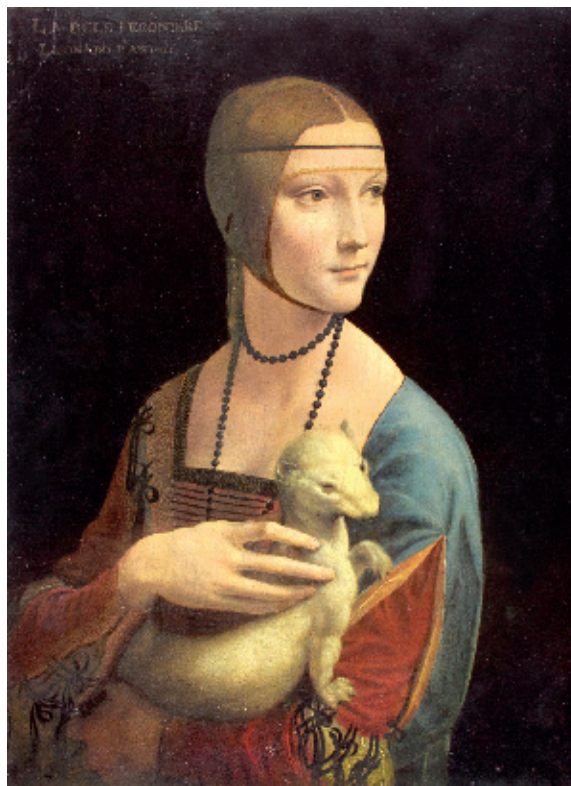
5. Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani*, ca. 1489/90, oil on wood (walnut?), Czartoryski Museum, Krakow.

other female portraits, her hand does not communicate a gesture of virtue or modesty but is an element of subtly staged sensuality.[20]

The touching hand guides the viewer's eye to the likewise somewhat oversized ermine, which is the subject of a number of vastly different interpretations. On the most basic level it is a play on Cecilia's family name because the sound of the name Gallerani may remind one of the Greek word for ermine, *galée*. Accordingly, the ermine would be an attribute of the sitter. In addition, the small animal was seen as a symbol of purity and modesty because legend had it that ermines shied away from dirt and only ate once a day. Leonardo himself helped circulate this legend in his writings on the allegorical meaning

17 Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani*, ca. 1489–1490, oil on wood (walnut), 55 × 40.5 cm, Krakow, Czartoryski Museum, inv. 134. – For this portrait see Malaguzzi-Valeri 1915–1923, pp. 37, 503–504; Brown 1983/ 84; Brown 1990, pp. 4761; Shell / Sironi 1992; Moczulska 1995; Exh. cat. Rome 1998; Exh. cat. London 2011, cat. no. 10.
18 Ambrogio de Predis, *Portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza*, 1491, tempera and oil (?) on wood, 51 × 32.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. – Exh. cat. London 2011, cat. no. 8.
19 Pedretti / Vecce (eds.) 1995, no. 357.
20 Exh. cat. Berlin 2011, p. 99.

of certain animals.[21] Dating probably from around 1490, there is also a pen and ink drawing by Leonardo that has the legendary virtue of the ermine as its subject. It shows an ermine letting itself be beaten to death by a middle-aged man rather than escaping through the flowing water in front of it. In this allegory, Leonardo depicts the traditional belief that an ermine would rather let itself be killed than to sully its white fur whilst escaping through foul water.[22] At first glance, then, the motto "Better dead than dishonored" is articulated, and by extension so too is an overtly moral lesson which seems to contrast with the overall character of the painting that is, after all, the portrait of a mistress.

The meeting of attribute and symbol, of demureness and sensuality, of different concepts of virtue and honor is of course confusing to today's viewer, as it goes against modern moral sensibilities. But perhaps this was intentional; in any case, the contradiction invested in the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani is intriguing. Born as Cecilia Bergamini in 1473 or 1474, the young woman had formally ("*pro verba*") been married to Giovanni Stefano Visconti in 1483 but the union was dissolved as early as 1487. Only a short time after, likely in 1489, the now 15-or 16-year-old Cecilia became the mistress of Ludovico Sforza, who for his part had been formally married to the even younger Beatrice d'Este since 1480.[23] It appears that Ludovico's intimate relationship with Cecilia delayed the official conclusion of his marriage to Beatrice d' Este, planned for the year 1490, until January 1491. Confirming this is a note by Giacomo Trotti, the ambassador of Ferrara in Milan, who wrote in November 1490[24] that Ludovico was not exactly expecting the arrival of his lawfully wedded wife Beatrice with joy because his mistress was beautiful as a flower and pregnant besides.[25] Cecilia gave birth to their son Cesare on May 3rd 1491, but Ludovico moved her out of the ducal palace only the

following year when his lawful wife Beatrice began to get annoyed with the situation. It has been shown that Cecilia owned the painting of herself, which had long since been completed,[26] and it might have served the favorite mistress as a memento of the premarital joys shared with the ruler. The portrait might also have been intended as a small compensation for the embarrassment that Cecilia had to endure in the face of Ludovico's marriage to Beatrice. It was a delicate situation that led to a delicate painting and, its moral incongruity, incidentally, corresponded with the ethically contradictory conception of life held by the ruling elites of the day.

Naturally, not a word can be found in the courtly panegyrics about the pre-marital conflicts and joys that are possibly expressed in the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani. For example, the court poet Bernardo Bellincioni, who died in 1492, wrote in his effusive praise of Cecilia and her portrait:

The poet: "Nature, who stirs your wrath, who arouses your envy?"
Nature: "It is Vinci, who has painted one of your stars!
Cecilia, today so very beautiful, is the one
Beside whose beautiful eyes the sun appears as a dark shadow."
The poet: "All honor to you [Nature], even if in his picture
She seems to listen and not talk.
Think only, the more alive and more beautiful she is,
The greater will be your glory in future times.
Be grateful therefore to Ludovico, or rather
To the talent [ingegno] and hand of Leonardo
Which allows you to be part of posterity.
Everyone who sees her – even if too late
To see her alive – will say: that suffices for us
To understand what is nature and what art."[27]

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21 Richter 1970, no. 1234.
22 Popham 1994, no. 109A; Zöllner 2011, no. 399.
23 Shell / Sironi 1992; Exh. cat. Rome 1998, pp. 51–65 (J. Shell).
24 Villata 1999, no. 49.
25 Malaguzzi-Valeri 1915–23, pp. 503–504; Moczulska 1995, pp. 59, 79; Exh. cat. Rome 1998, p. 54.
26 Villata 1999, nos. 129–130 (exchange of letters between Cecilia Gallerani and Isabella d'Este).
27 "'Di che te adiri, a chi invidia hai, natura?' / 'Al Vinci, che ha ritrato una tua stella, / Cecilia sì belissima hoggi è quella / che a' suoi begli ochi el sol par umbra oscura.' / 'L'honor è tuo, se ben con sua pictura / la fa che par che ascolti et non favella. / Pensa quanto sarà più viva et bella, / più a te fia gloria in ogni età futura. / Ringratiar dunque Ludovico or poi / et l'ingegno et la man di Leonardo / che a' posteri di lei voglian far parte. / Chi lei vedrà così ben che sia tardo, / vederla viva,

In his fictitious dialogue, Bellincioni principally addresses the topos of the rivalry between artist and nature. Additionally, he includes the common references to the beauty of the portrayed lady and the favor of the ruler and, more specific to this case, he makes remarks to the effect that the appropriate role for the young woman is only brought out properly in this artistic representation: only in the portrait does she no longer talk ("*favella*") but listen! Apart from this jocular reference to the ideal behavior of women, which apparently consisted of polite silence, Bellincioni's poem also sheds light on contemporary attitudes toward the function of the portrait: the portrait was to hand down a likeness of the young woman for posterity.[28] Bellincioni mostly indulges in topoi. The dynamics of Cecilia's likeness, so obviously different from other portraits of the time, seem to have been of no interest to him.

Alongside the *Cecilia Gallerani*, Leonardo's works as court painter include the so-called *Belle Ferronière*, held at the Paris Louvre (fig. 7).[29] The portrait possibly depicts Lucrezia Crivelli, another mistress of Ludovico Sforza. If this is the case, we may understand the following poem by a contemporaneous poet (likely Antonio Tebaldeo) as referring to Leonardo's painting. It, too, indulges the commonplaces of the time:

> How well high Art here corresponds to Nature!
> Da Vinci could, as so often, have depicted the soul.
> But he did not, so that the painting might be a good likeness.
> For the Moor alone possessed her soul in his love.
> She who is meant is called Lucretia, and to her the gods
> Gave everything with a lavish hand.
> How rare her form! Leonardo painted her, the Moor loved her:
> The one, first among painters, the other, first among princes.

6. Ambrogio de Predis, *Portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza*, 1491, tempera and oil (?) on wood, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

dirà; basti ad noi / comprender or quel che è natura et arte.'" Bernardo Bellincioni, Rime, 1493, c. 6v-7r, text quoted in Villata 1999, no. 72c.

28 For the memorial function of portraits see Wright 2000.

29 Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of a Lady (La Belle Ferronière)*, ca. 1490–1495, oil on wood (walnut), 63 × 45 cm, Louvre, Paris – Ottino della Chiesa 1967, no. 28; Brown 1983/84; Marani 1999, pp. 178–187; Zöllner 2011, pp. 98–99 and no. XV; Exh. cat. London 2011, cat. no. 17.

Surely the painter has offended Nature and the high goddesses

With his picture. It galls the one that a human hand was capable of so much,

The other that a figure which was soon to perish Has been granted immortality.

He did it for the love of the Moor, for which the Moor protects him.

Both gods and men fear to upset the Moor.[30]

More closely than Bellincioni, the poet reflects on the competition between art and nature and he stresses the patronage of Ludovico Sforza, *il Moro* (the Moor), claiming that he alone was able to protect the artist from the jealousy of nature provoked by art. The subject of the portrayal of the soul – central to portrait paintings of individuals in the modern age – is brought up, too.[31] While affirming that Leonardo was in a position to portray the sitter's soul, he stresses that, ultimately, it was owned by the patron and ruler, here Ludovico il Moro, the absolute ruler and man who was used to commanding over the body and soul of his mistress.

The Louvre painting, probably completed around 1495, has been recognized as a firmly established work within Leonardo's oeuvre only in the last years and rightly so because it does exhibit the aforementioned dynamics recommended by Leonardo for the depiction of figures in general: the torso and face are oriented in different directions. Moreover, the *Belle Ferronière* emanates a certain atmosphere resulting from a subtle method of shading that soon became known as *sfumato*.[32] Applying numerous layers of low-pigmentation glazes, Leonardo created tonal unity[33] and caused the exact contours of depicted objects to blur (see below). Also, the definition of the depicted body eludes straightforward visual access

7. Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of a Lady (La Belle Ferronière)*, ca. 1490–1495, oil on wood (walnut?), Musée du Louvre, Paris.

by the viewer. The visual information communicated by the portrait is thus not so much tied to the object character of the depicted person or to the expressive power of a symbol, which is still partly the case with the *Ginevra de' Benci* and the *Cecilia Gallerani*, but instead to a created atmosphere, which in turn tends to make a painting more autonomous and more auratic.

Without a doubt, this autonomization and auratification of artistic expression by means of tonal unity and the *sfumato* technique reached its high point in Leonardo's last portrait painting, the *Mona Lisa* (fig. 8).[34] This portrait is a special case in several respects: not only does it stand out as an exam-

30 "Ut bene respondet naturae ars docta, dedisset / Vincius, ut tribuit cetera, sic animam. / Noluit, ut similis magis haec foret, altera sic est: / possidet illius Maurus amans animam. / Hujus quam cernis nomen Lucretia, divi / omnia cui larga contribuere manu. / Rara huic forma data est, pinxit Leonardus, amavit / Maurus, pictorum primus hic, ille ducum. / Naturam et superas hac laesit imagine divas / pictor; tantum hominis posse manum haec doluit. / Illae longa dari tam magnae tempora formae, / quae spatio fuerat deperitura brevi. / Has laesit Mauri causa, defendet et ipsum / Maurus, Maurum homines laedere diique timent." Villata 1999, no. 122.

31 Pope-Hennessy 1966, pp. 101–154; Shearman 1992, pp. 112–122; Tinagli 1997, pp. 88–89; Zöllner 2005.

32 Gombrich 1962; Shearman 1962; Nagel 1993; Zöllner 2010, pp. 258–261.
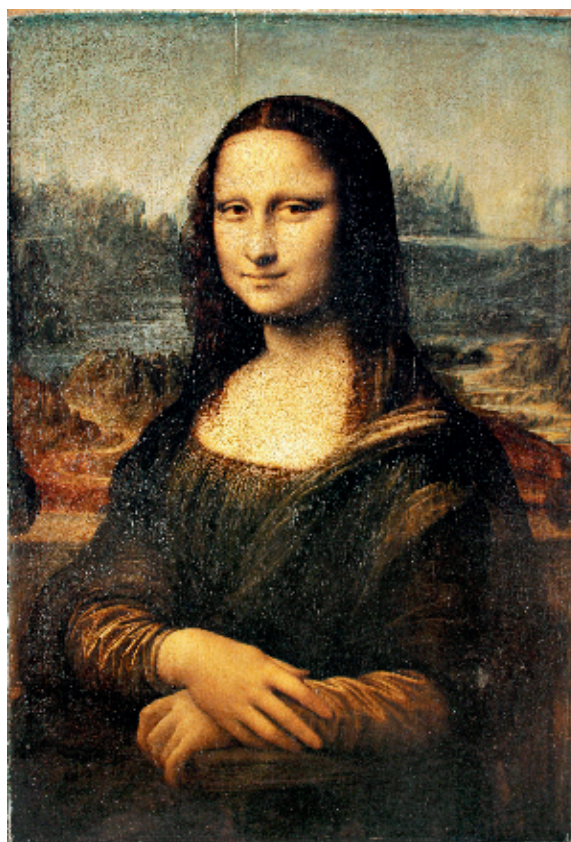
33 Shearman 1962.

34 Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Lisa del Giocondo (Mona Lisa)*, 1503–1506 and later (1510?), oil on wood (poplar), 77 × 53 cm, Museé du Louvre, inv. 779. – Poggi 1919, pp. 34–35; Shell / Sironi 1991 a; Zöllner 1993; Zöllner 1994 (2006); Arasse 1998, pp. 386–412; Kress 1999; Zöllner 2011, pp. 5, 7, 154–161, 251–252 and no. XXV.

ple of the portrait genre and as a portrait by Leonardo's hand but it also is a distinctive product of the imagination and is unique in terms of its reception in history in later years and centuries. With the establishment of public museums as temples of art that are devoted to the modern cult of the artist and at the same derive their legitimization from the artist, and especially with the rise of the Paris Louvre as the center of this cult, the *Mona Lisa* experienced a heightening of significance that would ultimately make her a "hieroglyph of art" par excellence.[35] In other words, we still view the Mona Lisa with nineteenth-century eyes, forgetting all too easily about the deepening of meaning, mystification and auratization that the painting has experienced in more recent times.[36]

In his painting, Leonardo depicts a young woman, around twenty-five years in age, who is turned almost completely toward the viewer, seated on a wooden piece of furniture in front of a balustrade. Her hands, one laid over the other, dominate the foreground; her upper body and face create the middle ground; and wildly rugged mountain ranges that seem to vanish into a distant green-blue sky form the background. In the barren landscape to the left, we see a road and on the right a river that appears to have run dry. The individual elements of the background give the viewer no clear indication of the time, place or significance of the scene.[37] A bridge across the river bed, while remaining mysterious, signals a human intervention in a natural landscape that seems otherwise untouched.

Further indications of a human reality are given by the portrait itself: the delicate movement of the woman's facial muscles clearly indicate a smile; a gossamer veil covers her free-flowing hair; her dark gown has intricate pleats and embroidery with geometrical patterns, particularly below the neckline. The larger folds of the mustard-colored sleeves indicate a somewhat heavier fabric. The hands in their soft plasticity rest on a wooden armrest with a simple profile.

8. Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Lisa del Giocondo (Mona Lisa)*, 1503–1506 and later (1510?), oil on wood (poplar), Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Not least of all for its perfect execution of detail the *Mona Lisa* was considered the most consummate expression of painterly ability and a prime example of an artistic mimesis of nature.[38] At the same time, the unreal appearance of the possibly unfinished landscape along with a complete absence of the symbols and attributes that were otherwise so common in Renaissance portraits stood in the way of an unequivocal interpretation. At least the identity of the sitter has been determined as Lisa del Giocondo. This knowledge is owed to Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the first thorough artist biographer in the art history of the modern age.[39] Vasari never saw the painting but he describes it more euphorically and in much more detail than other works. Begin-

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35 Belting 1998, pp. 63–82, 167–186, 312–332.
36 Chastel 1988; Sassoon 1992, pp. 59–170; Belting 1998; Bickmann 1999, pp. 13–105.
37 There are, however, attempts to identify Mona Lisa's landscape background. See for example Starnazzi 1996 (identifies the bridge in the background as Ponte Buriano near Arezzo); Pezzutto 2011 (identifies the landscape with the Val di Chiana which Leonardo drew in 1503; see Windsor Castle, RL 12278; Zöllner 2011, no. 466).
38 Boas 1940.
39 Vasari 2006, pp. 37–40, 104–106 (with full bibliography).

9. Raphael, *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1504, pen, ink and black chalk on paper, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

10. Raphael, *Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn*, ca. 1504, oil on wood, Galleria Borghese, Rome.

ning in the twentieth century, doubt was cast on Vasari's identification due to the circumstance that he had never seen the painting personally.[40] Today, however, much more is known than one hundred years ago about the early history of the painting: a recently discovered document dated October 1503 – the so-called Heidelberg Cicero incunable – identifies the painting in Leonardo's Florence Workshop, and attests to its half-finished state.[41] The document itself sparks a small sensation because its author, Agostino Vespucci, an acquaintance of Leonardo, describes not one but three of the artist's paintings that were in the making: alongside the *Mona Lisa*, he mentions a Saint Anne and *The Battle of Anghiari*. Preceding the discovery of this document, a piece of writing published in 1991 was able to show that, in 1525, the *Mona Lisa* was in the estate of

Leonardo's student Salaì in Milan.[42] Further documents provide insights into the context of the painting's creation between 1503 and 1506.[43]

Vasari's enthusiastic description of a portrait he had not actually seen is more than curious. Accordingly, it is generally assumed today that the biographer could not have written his extensive collection of vitas alone but that he relied on help from coauthors and informants.[44] It seems plausible that he would have gained all the information about the *Mona Lisa* from these sources and, in this way, arrived at his detailed description. Another thought follows from this: did Leonardo's portrait of Lisa del Giocondo perhaps seem so unusual and impressive to the contemporary viewer that news about it travelled to other artists and later Vasari? Much speaks in favor of this thesis.

40 See Zöllner 2011, pp. 5, 241, 251–252.
41 Probst 2008; Zöllner 2011, I, pp. 251–252; Schlechter 2012.
42 Shell / Sironi 1991 a; Shell / Sironi 1991 b.
43 Zöllner 1993; Zöllner 1994 (2006); Pallanti 2006.
44 Hope 2005.

Indeed, the works of the artist, who returned to his hometown and lived there between 1503 and 1506, caused quite a stir. Four decades later, Vasari would still mention the enormous rush of people at Leonardo's public exhibition of his Saint Anne in Florence. This interest is paralleled by the significant influence of Leonardo's work on other artists of the day, especially the young Raphael (1483–1520). Having arrived in Florence from Urbino in 1504, the painter visited Leonardo's workshop, where he created sketches after Leonardo's designs, to which he would take recourse time and again in later years.[45] Above all, Raphael took his orientation from the portrait of Lisa del Giocondo.[46] Likely the earliest evidence of Raphael's viewing of the *Mona Lisa* is a pen drawing, held today at the Paris Louvre (fig. 9).[47] The important elements in this pictorial approach are adapted from Leonardo: the position of the figure in the foreground, the hands resting on one another below the chest, its orientation toward the viewer, the slightly curled wisps of hair framing the face, the background opening up into a landscape, as well as the shading of the left half of the face and the respective upper part of the neck. In the following months Raphael would even use these elements of the *Mona Lisa* in some of his paintings, for example the *Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn* (fig. 10)[48] and the portrait of Maddalena Doni (Galleria Palatina, Florence).

The presence of Leonardesque elements can be felt in portraits by Italian artists throughout the subsequent years. The portrait of Charles d'Amboise, painted by Andrea Solario (ca. 1460–1524) around 1507, may serve as evidence (fig. 11).[49] Like Raphael before him, Solario took his orientation from the *Mona Lisa's* figurative arrangement and shading. And this is also where he found the horizon that is relatively high for portraits from this time. Further evidence for the success of the *Mona Lisa* can be found in Raphael's later portraits. With the persistent success of Raphael's art far beyond the borders

11. Andrea Solario, *Portrait of Charles d'Amboise*, ca. 1507, oil on wood, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

45 Weil Garris Posner 1974.
46 Freedman 1989; Zöllner 1994 (2006), pp. 18–24; Scailliérez 2003, pp. 85–88; Chapman / Henry / Plazzotta 2004, pp. 174–195.
47 Raphael, *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1504, pen, ink and black chalk on paper, 22.3 × 15.8 cm, Musèe du Louvre, Paris, inv. 3882
48 Raphael, *Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn*, ca. 1504, oil on wood, 65 × 54 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome.
49 Andrea Solario, Portrait of Charles d'Amboise, ca.1507, oil on wood, 75 × 52 cm, Museé du Louvre, Paris, inv. 674 (for comparison: the measurements of the Mona Lisa are 77 × 53 cm).

12. Agnolo del Mazziere (?), *Portrait of a Young Lady*, tempera on wood (poplar?), Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

13. Lorenzo di Credi, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, ca. 1490, tempera on wood, Pinacoteca Civica Forlì.

of Italy, the pictorial code created with the *Mona Lisa* would ultimately become the very prototype of European portraiture. Even the portraiture of the nineteenth century still used it as its point of departure.[50]

To understand the remarkable influence of the *Mona Lisa* on sixteenth-century artists, we need to consider the tradition of female portraiture in the late fifteenth century. In terms of the figure's positioning in the pictorial space, the depiction of women in three-quarter view and in front of a wide landscape had been tested in Florence prior to 1500. Agnolo del Mazziere's (1466–1513) *Portrait of a Young Lady* of 1490 may serve as an example (fig. 12).[51] But the painting, held today at the Berlin Gemäldegalerie, also shows characteristics that are

very different from the more dynamic composition of the *Mona Lisa*. For example, the head and upper body in the Berlin painting point in the same direction. This was precisely the rigid mode that Leonardo sought to leave behind in both his art theory (see above) and his portrait of Lisa del Giocondo.

A further example to compare is Lorenzo di Credi's (1456/59–1536) *Portrait of a Young Woman* at the Pinacoteca Civica di Forlì, dating from around 1490 (fig. 13).[52] This portrait, too, in its pose and framing is an anticipation of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. Yet, the differences are more instructive than the commonalities. While Lorenzo di Credi has the head of the young woman turned in exactly the same direction as her torso, Leonardo turns Lisa del Giocondo's face ever so slightly toward the viewer.

50 Chastel 1988.

51 Agnolo del Mazziere (?), *Portrait of a Young Lady*, tempera on wood (poplar?), 45 × 29 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, – See Gemäldegalerie Berlin 1975, no. 80, p. 122 (here attributed to Lorenzo di Credi). Recently attributed to Agnolo or Donnino del Mazziere in Exh. cat. Princeton 2001, pp. 91–92.

52 Lorenzo di Credi, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, ca. 1490, tempera on wood, 75 × 54 cm, Pinacoteca Civica, Forlì; see Giordano Viroli, La Pinacoteca Civica di Forli, Forli 1980, p. 258. See also Zöllner 1994 (2006), pp. 28–40; Scailliérez 2003, pp. 43–58.

Leonardo also gives the sitter an appearance that is more monumental and more present as, for one thing, she rises above a landscape whose vanishing point lies deep in the pictorial space, and, for another, she is closer to the image's boundary. The depth of the pictorial space corresponds with the great plasticity of the depicted young woman. And Leonardo further intensifies the image's powerful impression with subtle shading, as much in the fine rendering of the garment's fabrics as in the modeling of the face. Finally, there is the landscape: while Lorenzo di Credi and even Raphael continued to create backgrounds from rather stereotypical realist nature imagery, Leonardo turned the landscape into a subject in its own right.[53]

Even more than Leonardo's mastery of suggested spatial depth, his subtle use of shading is seen as one of his trademarks. It takes the place of the symbol, the attribute and accessory that were commonly found in contemporary portraiture. For comparison, we may once more draw on Raphael's *Lady with a Unicorn* (fig. 10). Leonardo's conception of art was fundamentally different from such conventions, something that could already be observed in his religious works in which he did not give figures the traditionally used halos. Already, autonomous painterly means had taken the place of attributes and symbols: in the case of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, it was the evocative atmosphere of a rugged place high in the mountains; in the case of the *Last Supper*, it was the dramatized prediction of Jesus' betrayal. In his portraits, especially the *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo renewed his preference for autonomous means of expression that are intrinsic to the painting.

Leonardo's use of autonomous elements stemmed from his insight that visually convincing painterly expression could be achieved above all through the subtle use of lighting and shading.[54] The portrait of Lisa del Giocondo, created with variations of light

and shade, exemplifies this insight. It draws directly on studies Leonardo had begun around 1490. For example, he considered whether the widespread profile portrait of the time should be replaced by another type of portrait, in which the intensity of the expression would come from the use of lighting and shading. What is more, the issue of creating a powerful painterly expression through a dramatic treatment of the painted surface, using light and shadow, was central to Leonardo's art-theoretical and scientific studies.[55] Particularly in the period after 1500, Leonardo engaged in a thorough contemplation of light and shade as creative elements, which can be found in all his painted late works and in his increasing use of the aforementioned *sfumato* technique.[56] Central in the description of the expressive qualities achieved through the *sfumato* is the term "aria," known from classical and post-classical literature, as well as from theater, music and dance. [7] This is the ambiguous term Leonardo uses to describe first of all the lighting conditions of an ideal place for portrait painting (such as an inner courtyard) which alone allows the grace and softness of a face to be brought out. Yet, the term *aria* not only denotes certain conditions of lighting but also the expression of the human face, as much in reality as in the painterly depiction of this reality.[58] This expressive quality which evokes an aura – referred to as *aria* and realized through the *sfumato* – is not a property that the artist alone creates in an active effort. Especially with paintings like the *Mona Lisa*, the *sfumato* effect that evokes the *aria* and aura becomes more pronounced over time. Basically, two mechanisms are responsible for the *sfumato*, and by extension for the *aria* and aura. For one thing, Leonardo worked with numerous pigment-containing glazes and varnishes to create the *sfumato* effect; for another, the varnish, darkened in the course of the centuries, intensifies this impression of blurred transitions.[59] Today, the two effects can hardly be distinguished

53 On the Mona Lisa landscape see Perrig 1980; Smith 1985.
54 Richter, 1970, no. 486.
55 Rzepinska 1962; Shearman 1962; Richter 1970, pp. I, pp. 163–207; da Costa Kaufmann 1975; Pedretti 1977, I, pp. 151–152; Veltman 1986; Fiorani 2009.
56 Rzepinska 1962; Shearman 1962; Zöllner 2011, pp. 253–277.
57 Summers 1981, pp. 56–59; Baxandall 1986, pp. 25–27; Summers 1987, pp. 117–124; Summers 1989; Spreti 1993, pp. 11, 96–97, 116–117, 217; Zöllner 2010, pp. 256–261.
58 Leonardo da Vinci, Libro di pittura, nos. 66, 137, 138, 186, 287, 290, 365, 422, 426.
59 Mohan / Menu 2006.

from one another: while the varnish represents the originally intended effect, it also has become the substrate for a patina that has formed over time. We see the painting literally through the patina and at the same time the patina creates an impression produced only by the action of light and the dirt of centuries. After a recent, very intensive technical analysis of the *Mona Lisa*, the restorers even arrived at the conclusion that the marks of aging left after centuries, in particular the yellowed, darkened varnish, ultimately "hallowed" the painting, lending it a special aura.

The extent to which the expressive qualities – *aria, sfumato* and aura – are stylistic features of Leonardo's work that are difficult to imitate becomes evident in a recently rediscovered and restored contemporary copy of the *Mona Lisa*, made by a student of Leonardo under his close supervision (fig. 14). Held at the Prado in Madrid, this copy of the *Mona Lisa* largely lacks the *sfumato* effects typical of Leonardo's work and thus the basis for the auratic.

With Leonardo's typical *sfumato* largely missing in this copy of the *Mona Lisa*, some of the details can be made out more clearly than in the original. This is true of the landscape background on the left and the folds and ornamentation of Lisa's gown. But two further details deserve more attention. For one thing, research has shown that the copy was created at the same time as Leonardo's original painting, which is reflected in small changes, made visible with x-ray imaging, that were made to both paintings. The close cooperation of teacher and student that is revealed in this way is actually not as uncommon as it may seem. In fact, several studies of the last years have shown that Leonardo painted or sketched paintings, of which his students created copies or variants.[62] In addition, written sources show that he occasionally perfected such "classroom paintings" personally.[63]

What is surprising is that a portrait by the hand of Leonardo was copied in his workshop even while it was being created. There may be several explanations for this deviation from the normal case. Either the customer desired a second version or, more likely, Leonardo recognized in this portrait the opportunity of teaching a student the subtleties of portrait painting. The marked discrepancy between close attention to detail in copying the sitter, on the one hand, and deviation in other parts of the painting, on the other, speak in favor of the copy's didactic character. For example, the copyist imitated the many pleats of Lisa's gown and the fine ornamentation below the neckline pedantically. In other areas, however, he allowed himself to deviate considerably from the original. Here, very slender sections of columns flank the pictorial space to the left and right. The columns are one of the elements that are more visible in the copy and they exhibit an interesting variation: the basis of the right-hand column shows a different perspective construction than that on the left, in that the sides of the base are not plumb with the balustrade but join it at an angle. This makes the painting seem like an instructive experiment in perspective painting.

The landscape background in the right half of the image likewise seems to exhibit an experimental character. While the copyist adopted the rock formations on the left almost to the letter, he allowed himself more freedom on the right. The rock cliffs on the lower left are created in much more detail, yet they seem almost stereotypical. It becomes clear that the greatest agreement between original and copy is found in the left half, while the right shows most of the differences. In copying the painting, the student would have moved from left to right, deviating from his model more and more as he progressed.

Possibly also of experimental character is a striking difference in the coloration of the gown, whose sleeves in the Paris painting have a mustard tone that corresponds to the earthy tones of the middle ground. The copyist, however, decided in favor of a reddish fabric, which, instead of the homogenous tonality of the original, creates a livelier color contrast between

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60   Ibid., p. 78.
61   Workshop of Leonardo da Vinci, *Copy of Mona Lisa*, ca. 1503–1516 (?), oil on wood (walnut), Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, xP-504. See Delieuvin 2012, pp. 234–239 (A. Gonzàles Mozo).
62   Zöllner 2011, nos. XXIII–XXIV, XXVIII–XXIX; Delieuvin 2012.
63   Villata 1999, no. 150.
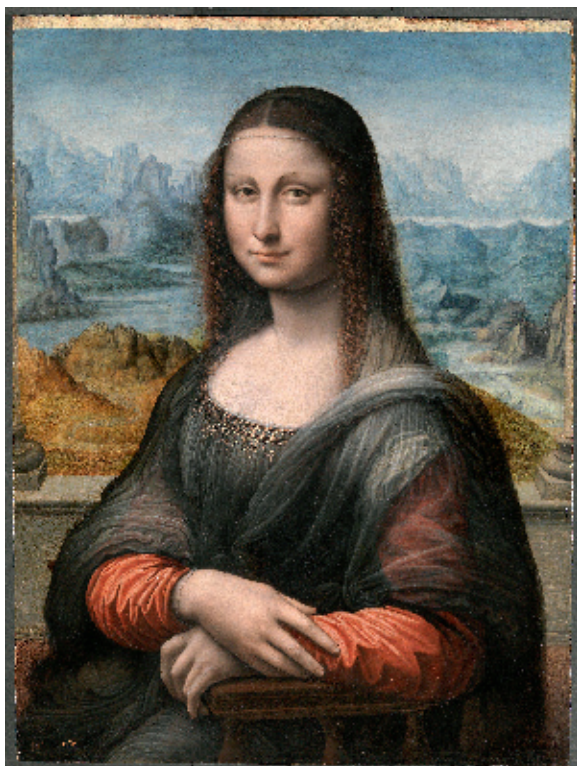
14. Workshop of Leonardo da Vinci, *Copy of Mona Lisa*, ca. 1503–1516 (?), oil on walnut, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

the sitter's gown and the painting's background. Thus, the student's work exhibits far less of the original's auratic tonality, and it provides us not only with instructive insights into the experimental practice at Leonardo's workshop but also gives us a good idea how, in his own paintings, the *aria* and aura were established from the outset, unlike in the copies. While the copy depicts a simple countenance, the authentic original creates an aura that has even intensified over time. More than comparisons with other portraits of the period would allow, the Prado's *Mona Lisa* illustrates Leonardo's fundamental contribution to a new portraiture. Contrary to what researchers have assumed for more than a century, perhaps this new portraiture is not about creating a likeness and bringing out the individuality of the face but instead much more about the aura of the painting as a whole, evoked through the painterly depiction.

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