

## Preface to the 2017 edition

First published in 2003, this book focuses on the works of Leonardo as well as on numerous original sources, which are discussed in depth in the ten chapters of the main text. The accompanying references and further reading can be found in the Bibliography (pp. 446–472) and in the catalogue section, which also offers a critical appraisal of Leonardo scholarship to date and identifies a number of desiderata for future research.

The analyses in the main text approach Leonardo's works from the perspective of their socio-cultural context and the history of their respective genres. They thereby aim to explore the specific possibilities of a “historical explanation of pictures” (Baxandall 1985) and to offer an interpretation of the content of Leonardo's paintings based on their context and on pictorial tradition. In the chapters of the main text I have furthermore sought to show that Leonardo's theoretical and “scientific” ideas, and their reflection in his art, can likewise only be understood against the backdrop of their historical contingency. The fact that this book has enjoyed enormous, worldwide success since its original publication suggests that this approach was not wholly misguided.

Sensational finds on the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci were not plentiful in the 20th century; only the discovery of documents relating to the *Virgin of the Rocks* (Sironi 1981) and the reappearance of the Codices Madrid (CM I–II 1974) may truly be described as such. By contrast, the 21st century can already point to a whole series of spectacular discoveries. The first of these were the two very different underdrawings rendered visible by infrared reflectography beneath the second version of Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* (Cat. XVI). On the support of the painting today housed in London, as the first of these underdrawings reveals, Leonardo evidently intended to show not the Virgin with the Infant Christ and Infant St John together with Archangel Uriel, but a very much simpler Adoration scene with the Virgin and Child (Syson/Billinge 2005; Syson/Keith 2011). This first underdrawing corresponds in compositional terms with some of his original sketches and was probably executed by Leonardo himself (fig. 1). Only the second underdrawing (fig. 2) corresponds to the figural arrangement that is seen in the two versions of the *Virgin of the Rocks* and which directly reflects the patron's wishes (see Ch. III).



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Diagnostic scanning likewise contributed to the findings yielded by the restoration of a previously disregarded copy of the *Mona Lisa* in the Prado in Madrid (fig. 3). The results are discussed in a monumental catalogue on the *Virgin and Child with St Anne* (Cat. XXVII; Delieuvin 2012) published in conjunction with an exhibition in the Louvre in Paris. During their investigations of the Madrid *Mona Lisa* copy, the conservators discovered a luminous pale blue, Leonardesque rocky landscape in the background, concealed beneath later overpainting in black. They also established that the dimensions and outlines of the female sitter in the Prado copy correspond exactly to the Louvre original. It is likely, therefore, that the copyist employed a cartoon made by Leonardo as the starting-point for his own painting (González Mozo in Delieuvin 2012, pp. 234–239).

On the surface, the significance of the Madrid copy lies in the fact that certain details can be made out more clearly here than in Leonardo's original painting. This is true of the

Fig. 1 and 2  
**Outline diagram of the first and second underdrawing  
 of the *Virgin of the Rocks***

Diagrams created by Rachel Billinge on the basis of infrared reflectography. London, The National Gallery

landscape background, for example, and the folds and decorative trimming of Lisa's dress. Of greater interest, however, are two further insights. Firstly, the investigations point to the conclusion that the copy was executed at the same time as Leonardo's original. This argument is supported by small changes that are common to both portraits and which have been revealed by diagnostic scanning. The close cooperation this implies between master and pupil is not unusual. A number of investigations over the past few years have in fact shown that Leonardo produced or designed paintings of which his pupils made copies and variations (Cat. XXIII–XXIV, XXVIII–XXIX). We also know from written sources that Leonardo occasionally made his own improvements to the works being carried out by his pupils (see p. 222).

It is surprising, secondly, that an autograph portrait by Leonardo was copied in the master's workshop while the original was still in progress. It is possible that Leonardo saw the commission for the *Mona Lisa* as an opportunity to teach one of his pupils the finer points of portraiture. Arguing in favour of the didactic nature of the Madrid copy is the clear discrepancy between its fidelity to detail in the figure, and its greater freedom in other areas. Thus the copyist has reproduced the many folds of Lisa's dress and the filigree ornament around her low neckline with pedantic precision. In other parts of the composition, however, he has allowed himself astonishing departures. A case in point are the slender columns and their bases that are barely visible in the Paris painting and which bound the pictorial space to the left and right. In the Madrid copy these differ from one another in an interesting detail: the base of the column on the right obeys a different perspective construction to its counterpart on the left, since its plinth, with its two visible sides, descends no longer vertically but at a slight angle onto the supporting parapet. This combination of precise imitation and surprising deviation from the original suggests an experiment in perspective.

There is a sense of experimentation, too, in the treatment of the landscape background in the right half of the picture. For whereas the copyist has adopted the rock formations on the left almost exactly, he has taken greater liberties on the right. Thus the rocks in the lower right-hand background are rendered in a far more differentiated fashion, but thereby appear almost stereotypical. Such comparisons of the two portraits also make it clear that the greatest correspondences between original and copy are found in the left-hand side, while the greatest differences are found on the right. It would seem that the copyist proceeded from left to right and in so doing increasingly distanced himself from his visual source. It is possible a striking departure in the colour of Lisa's sleeves, which in the Paris painting are executed in a mustard tone that corresponds in visual terms with the

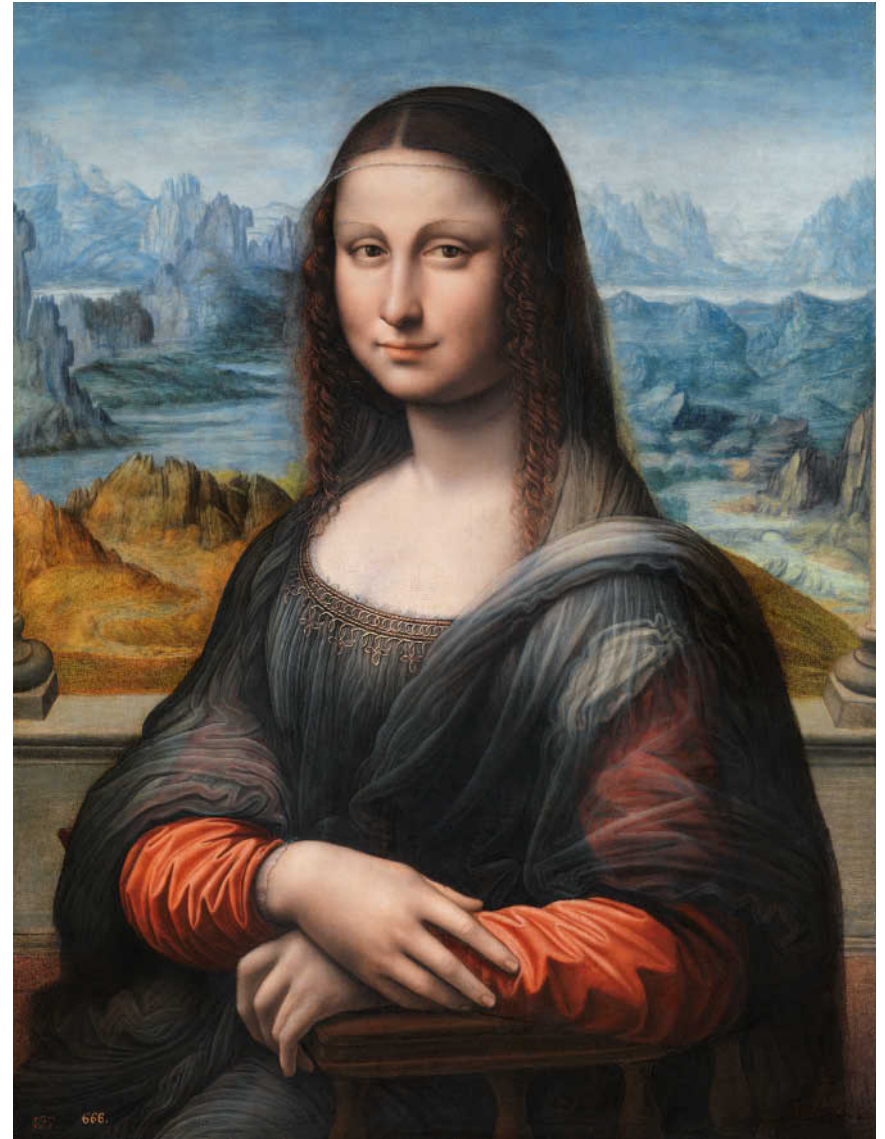


Fig. 3

Workshop of Leonardo da Vinci, **Copy of the *Mona Lisa***, c. 1503–1516 (?)  
 Oil on walnut, 76.3 x 57 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado



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ochres of the middle ground, is also experimental in nature (ill. pp. 238/239). The copyist has opted instead for a reddish fabric that introduces a lively colour contrast in place of the homogenous tonality of the original painting.

The Prado *Mona Lisa* confirms what the results of diagnostic scanning of other works have already suggested: Leonardo's workshop produced paintings not only based on his designs but also based on his paintings even before the originals were finished. And in the case of particularly important commissions, Leonardo stepped in to perfect the results. An insight into the efficient operation of Leonardo's highly skilled workshop was offered by the above-mentioned Paris exhibition devoted to Leonardo's *Virgin and Child with St Anne* (fig. 4 and 5). It thereby appears that Leonardo contributed primarily the innovative figural composition, while his pupils were able to elaborate the landscape backgrounds in very different ways, either to suit their own taste or to meet the expectations of potential customers (fig. 6). The almost complete lack of vegetation in Leonardo's primeval landscapes is thereby supplemented, in many of these workshop versions, by flourishing trees and gentle meadows. The uncompromising barrenness of Leonardo's landscapes was evidently not to everyone's taste in this epoch.

A further focus of the Louvre show fell upon Leonardo's *Virgin and Child with St Anne* and its accompanying sketches and preliminary studies. The Paris painting had previously undergone a programme of complete restoration whose results, however, take some getting used to and have thereby sparked some controversy. In a similar fashion to Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel following their restoration a few years ago, we now find ourselves confronted with an intensity of colour that, in the case of the *Virgin and Child with St Anne*, no longer entirely corresponds with the image of Leonardo that we have held for centuries. With the rigorous cleaning of the darkened and dirty varnish, the painting has also lost areas of *sfumato*, the subtle blurring and shading that lend Leonardo's works their unique atmosphere and are considered his trademark. The difference between Leonardo's *sfumato* and the clearly less suggestive appearance of paintings by his workshop is demonstrated by a look at the Madrid *Mona Lisa*. The copy largely lacks the aura of the *sfumato* so typical of Leonardo, which essentially results from two effects. The first is the original *sfumato* that Leonardo consciously sought to achieve with numerous pigment-like glazes and varnishes; the second is the strengthening of this impression of soft transitions as the varnish has darkened with age. These two effects are inextricably bound up with one another, since



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Fig. 4

Leonardo da Vinci, **Virgin and Child with St Anne**, c. 1503–1519  
Oil on poplar, 168.4 x 113 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre

Fig. 5

**Virgin and Child with St Anne** (after restoration)

Fig. 6

Workshop of Leonardo da Vinci (Gian Giacomo Caprotti da Oreno, called Salai?)  
**Copy of the Virgin and Child with St Anne**, c. 1514–1516 (?)  
Oil on panel, 104.8 x 75.6 cm. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi



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the varnish was intentionally applied by the artist himself but subsequently became the carrier of a patina that only formed over the course of time (Zöllner 2013). This overlap between the effect originally intended by Leonardo and the patina acquired over the centuries is what the *Virgin and Child with St Anne* has possibly now lost as a consequence of its restoration.

Another remarkable discovery concerns Leonardo's portrait of Lisa del Giocondo and has been yielded by what has become known in the art-historical literature as the "Heidelberg Cicero". The name refers to an early edition of the letters of Cicero, published in 1477 and today housed in Heidelberg University Library, whose margins contain numerous hand-written annotations by Florentine chancellery secretary Agostino Vespucci. Some of these marginal notes contain brief but highly illuminating comments by Vespucci on three paintings by Leonardo da Vinci (Burke 2008; Probst 2008; Schlechter 2010).

In a marginal note dated October 1503, Vespucci draws a parallel between the antique painter Apelles and his way of working as described by Cicero, and his own countryman Leonardo. Cicero observes that Apelles, in a painting of Venus, executed her head and bust with particular artistry but left the rest of her body unfinished. Commenting on this passage, Vespucci writes: "The painter Apelles. Thus Leonardo da Vinci does in

all his pictures, as for instance in the head of Lisa del Giocondo and that of Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary. We shall see what he will do with regard to the Great Council Chamber, concerning which he has just reached an agreement with the Standardbearer. October 1503" (*Apelles pictor. Ita Leonardus Vinci facit in omnibus suis picturis, ut enim caput Lise del Giocondo et Anne matris virginis. Videbimus, quid faciet de aula magni consilii, de qua re convenit iam cum vexillifero. 1503 Octobris.*) Vespucci's annotation represents not only the earliest written reference to Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, but one of the earliest sources of information on the artist's work as a whole. It is a particularly fortunate find, too, since few such comments – speaking in specific terms about not one but several artworks still in the process of completion – have come down to us from the period around 1500.

It is the reference to the *Mona Lisa* that has attracted the most interest, since the earliest notes otherwise relating to the painting date from the years after 1517 and moreover contain conflicting information. The assumption that the portrait today housed in the Louvre indeed shows Lisa del Giocondo is based on the later writings of Giorgio Vasari (1550/1568). This identification was nevertheless lent weight 20 years ago by an archival find in Milan (Shell/Sironi 1991) and was subsequently confirmed by further documents (Zöllner 1993; Pallanti 2008). It still encounters occasional opposition, however (Knauer 2009; Rogers Mariotti 2009; Zapperi 2010; Hatfield 2015). With the discovery



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Fig. 7

Raphael, **Maddalena Doni**, 1506

Oil on panel, 65 x 45.8 cm. Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Inv. 59

Fig. 8

Raphael, **Portrait of a Lady**, 1504

Pen over chalk, 22.3 x 15.8 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv. 3882

Fig. 9

After Andrea Solario, **Charles d'Amboise**, 1507

Oil on poplar, 75 x 52 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv. 674

of the “Heidelberg Cicero”, one of the major grounds for doubt has now been removed. The annotation by Vespucci, who knew Leonardo well, provides firm evidence that the artist was working on a portrait of Lisa del Giocondo in October 1503. To the Florentine chancery secretary, the *Mona Lisa* thereby evidently seemed sufficiently prominent to be mentioned ahead of the *Virgin and Child with St Anne* and the *Battle of Anghiari*, even though these two other commissions were more prestigious by the standards of the day. Proof that the *Mona Lisa* was indeed seen as an important painting even in Leonardo’s lifetime is furnished by the young Raphael, active in Florence since 1504, who over the following years produced a number of female portraits based on that of Lisa del Giocondo (cf. ill. p. 243). Suffice to mention here the portrait of *Maddalena Doni* (fig. 7) and the pen drawing of a young woman (fig. 8), whose position within the pictorial space and the shading of whose face correspond to Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*. Independently of Raphael, a follower of Andrea Solario also looked back to the *Mona Lisa* shortly afterwards in his portrait of Leonardo’s patron, Charles d’Amboise, painted around 1507 in Milan (fig. 9).

In view of these portraits inspired by Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* and the information in the “Heidelberg Cicero”, there can no longer be any doubt that the painting housed in Paris indeed shows Lisa del Giocondo. The “Heidelberg Cicero” also allows further deductions to be made. Thus Vespucci describes a *Mona Lisa* that is still unfinished: Leonardo has only executed the head. In October 1503, in other words, the highly unusual background landscape did not yet exist. This blank section of the painting is also reflected in the portraits by Raphael and Solario, for their very different backgrounds deviate significantly from the jagged rock formations in the *Mona Lisa*. The wording of Vespucci’s marginal note and its relation to the remarks by Cicero furthermore imply that Leonardo commenced all of his pictures by developing the face and parts of the upper body in detail. Confirmation that Leonardo employed – as Vespucci surmises – a working method that took the human face as its point of departure is indeed found in a number of Leonardo’s drawings (Nathan/Zöllner 2014, Cat. 15, 17, 21, 23, 52, 54, 187, 202, 209; ill. pp. 99, 126, 177, 192, 196, 253) as well as in his cartoons and unfinished paintings. In the *Burlington House Cartoon* (Cat. XX), for example, the faces have been modelled in considerably greater detail than the draperies and the background. A similar situation is seen in Leonardo’s *St Jerome* (Cat. IX), where the head is substantially more finished than other parts of the painting. Vespucci’s annotation thus also testifies to Leonardo’s great interest in facial expression, an interest that also characterizes his theoretical writings on art and his scientific studies (Zöllner 2010).



Fig. 10

Leonardo da Vinci and Workshop (?), **Christ as Salvator Mundi**, after 1507  
 Oil on walnut, 65.5 x 45.1–45.6 cm. Private collection. © 2011 Salvator Mundi LLC  
 Photograph: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art



Fig. 11

Melozzo da Forlì, **Salvator Mundi**, 1480–1482

Oil on panel, 54 x 40.5 cm. Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Palazzo Ducale

With regard to Leonardo da Vinci's oeuvre, finally, the most sensational discovery to date has been the *Salvator Mundi* (fig. 10 and Cat. XXXII). The painting of Christ making the sign of blessing has been known to art historians since the start of the 20th century but subsequently disappeared from view. In 2005 it appeared on the art market and in 2011 was presented to the public in a spectacular exhibition in London (Syson/Keith 2011); since then its attribution to Leonardo da Vinci has been the subject of heated debate. This attribution is controversial primarily on two grounds. Firstly, the badly damaged painting had to undergo very extensive restoration, which makes its original quality extremely difficult to assess. Secondly, the *Salvator Mundi* in its present state exhibits a strongly developed *sfumato* technique that corresponds more closely to the manner of a talented Leonardo pupil active in the 1520s than to the style of the master himself. The way in which the painting was placed on the art market also gave rise to concern.

Nevertheless, the qualities of the painting cannot be ignored. In particular the handling of light and the treatment of numerous details (hair, hands, crystal orb, robe) argue in favour of an attribution to Leonardo. Striking, too, is the fact that the New York *Salvator Mundi* orients itself, both in the expression of the face and the gesture of the blessing hand, towards Melozzo da Forlì's portrait of Christ in the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino (fig. 11). If its attribution to Leonardo becomes firmly accepted, the *Salvator Mundi* would be the only one of his completed paintings in which Leonardo clearly drew inspiration from the work of a contemporary colleague.