

Nature as the Supreme Master – Giotto and Masaccio

16 Leonardo said that Giotto and Masaccio were the masters behind the rebirth of painting after long periods of decadence. He almost seems to have seen Giotto as an alter ego: “Born in the lonely mountains”, wrote Leonardo, Giotto was not “content to copy the works of his master Cimabue”.

After another period when “art fell back into decline, because everyone copied the pictures that had already been done, and thus from century to century the decline continued,” Masaccio “showed to perfection in his work how those who take as their authority any other than nature, mistress of the masters, labour in vain”.⁸

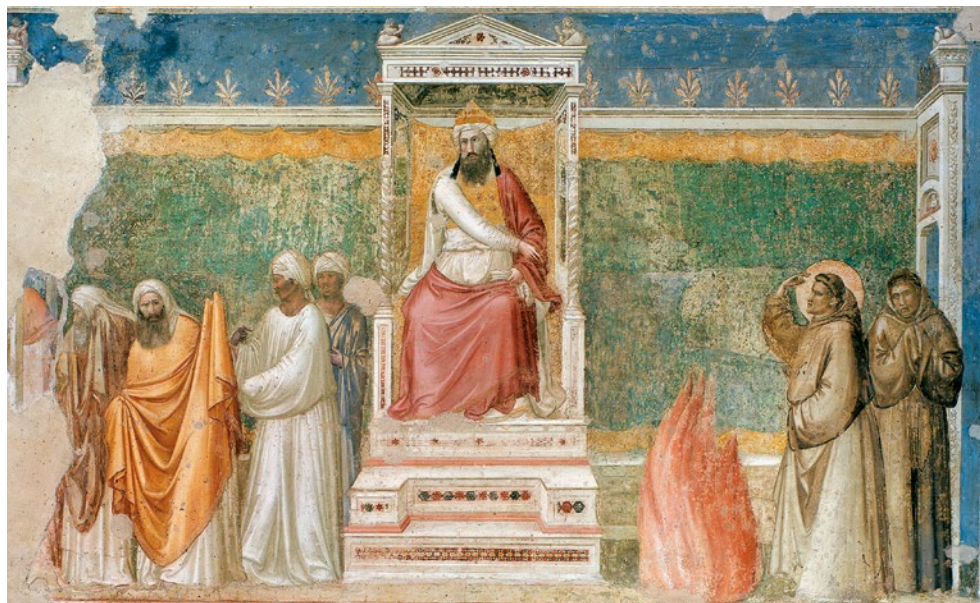
He thus traced the principles of his core conviction about the need for originality and the importance of a new painting free from imitation – but not without contradicting himself. Around 1490, he wondered: “Which is best, to draw from nature or from the antique?”⁹ His reply was that “the imitation of the antique is more praiseworthy than that of the modern”,¹⁰ and after 1510 wrote: “As much as you can, imitate the Greeks and Latins in the way in which the limbs are revealed when the wind presses draperies against them.”¹¹



Masaccio

The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden

1424/25, fresco, Church of Santa Maria del Carmine, Brancacci Chapel, Florence



Giotto
St Francis before the Sultan (Trial by Fire)
c.1325, fresco, Basilica of Santa Croce, Bardi Chapel, Florence
(left wall, detail from the second scene)



Giotto and workshop
A likeness of Dante on a fresco painted between 1332 and 1337
in the Chapel of Mary Magdalene, Bargello Museum, Florence

In the *Book of Painting* no less, he warns: “One painter ought never to imitate the manner of any other.”¹² As Eugenio Garin wrote, Leonardo manifested a “profound tension, which it would be too easy to reduce to mere contradiction.”¹³

His first biographer, Paolo Giovio, noted that Leonardo “elevated painting to the highest dignity, revealing the secrets of the ancients with untiring sagacity.”¹⁴ The artist coupled the study of nature, primarily in the drawing that preceded the painting, with a rediscovery of the *veterum artis arcana*, which skilfully but not esoterically introduce an initiatory and cryptic relationship.¹⁵

Michelangelo was not alone in being inspired by Dante Alighieri. Leonardo studied *The Divine Comedy* and also *The Convivio* and *Quaestio de aqua et terra*, drawing comparisons of representations, “delights and terrors”, moral notes and cosmologies, and expressing the famous words: “The natural desire of good men is knowledge.”¹⁶

Apprenticeship in Florence – Leonardo between Pollaiuolo and Verrocchio

According to the Florentine traveller and writer Benedetto Dei, cited by Leonardo with regard to the “dream of the Orient”,¹⁷ around 1470, Florence had thirty-one painters, fifteen sculptors, plus “masters of perspective”, that is to say, inlayers.¹⁸

The workshop was a world in itself: a workplace, a school and a salon of exchange and discussion also frequented by scientists and philosophers. Leonardo trained in such surroundings, particularly those of Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo and Andrea del Verrocchio, artistic rivals but originating from the same circles as Ghiberti and Donatello.

There were multiple connections between the Pollaiuolo brothers’ workshop and that of Verrocchio, with probable collaborations and rivalries, as in the case of the Forteguerri monument in Pistoia and the silver reredos for the Florence Baptistery. Piero del Pollaiuolo is erroneously referred to as “Piero del Verrocchio” in a document of 18 August 1469.

Verrocchio (1434/37–1488) was the son of a ceramic artist and distinguished himself as a goldsmith, painter, sculptor, wood-carver and as “a master of perspective and a musician”.¹⁹ He played an entrepreneurial role in his workshop, managing the execution of grandiose works with several assistants. He was barely seventeen when he entered a sculpture competition for Orvieto Cathedral against Desiderio da Settignano and Giuliano da Maiano.

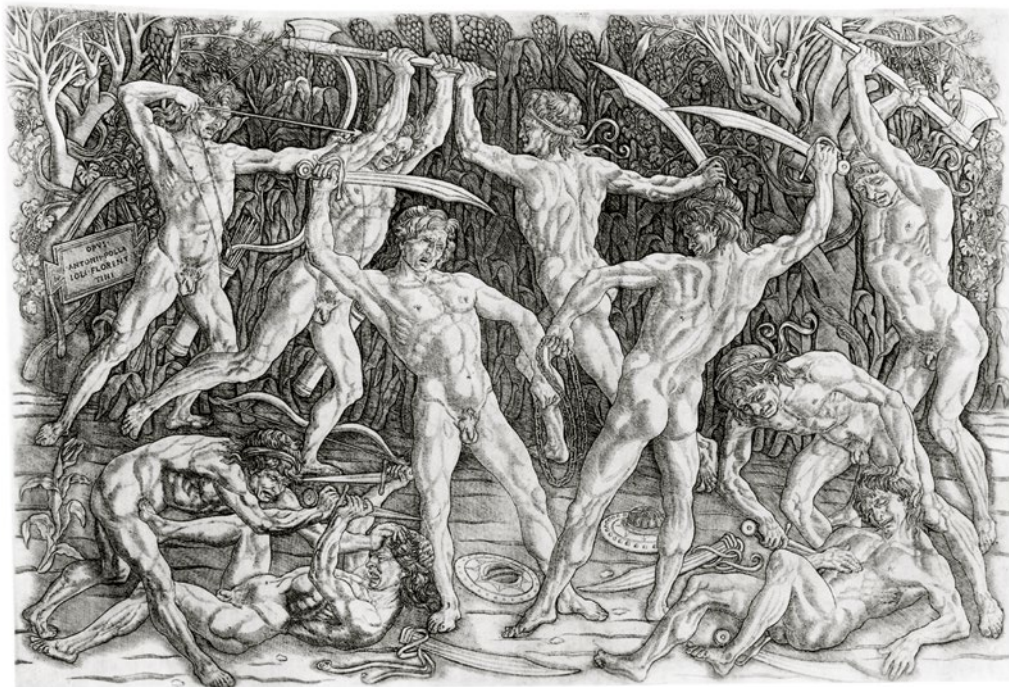


Antonio, Piero or Silvestro del Pollaiuolo

St John the Baptist

c.1470, pen-and-ink drawing, with a study of a right hand sketched beneath it in black chalk, Uffizi Gallery, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, Florence, inv. 699 E (recto)

Piero del Pollaiuolo clearly had a strong influence over the young Leonardo.



Antonio del Pollaiuolo

Battle of the Nudes

c.1460–75, engraving, Uffizi Gallery, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, Florence

Verrocchio worked on the tombs of Cosimo, Piero and Giovanni de' Medici in San Lorenzo between 1465 and 1472. Aside from Leonardo and Perugino, Sandro Botticelli, Francesco Botticini, Cosimo Rosselli, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Bartolomeo della Gatta and Lorenzo di Credi (who was to become the master's heir) were all active in Verrocchio's workshop in the early 1470s.

Leonardo's apprenticeship and work in Andrea's workshop shines through in the style and concept of several paintings and drawings, as well as being recorded in specific citations.

A late Leonardo memo in Ms. G (84v) mentions how he and Verrocchio carried out a technical intervention to secure a large copper ball, which had been commissioned to Verrocchio in September 1468 and mounted onto the lantern on the dome of Florence Cathedral on 28 May 1472. In the same year, Leonardo was already listed as a "painter" in the register of the Guild of San Luca.²⁰

Raphael's father, Giovanni Santi, described Andrea del Verrocchio as one of the great masters of the early 1470s and also praised his pupils and assistants: Leonardo, who was about twenty at the time, along with Perugino, Luca Signorelli and Filippino Lippi.²¹

When Leonardo was anonymously accused of acts of sodomy in 1476, the trial documents referred to him as: "Leonardo, son of Ser Piero from Vinci, residing with Andrea del Verrochio". The court proceedings ended with his acquittal.

In his 1504 treatise *De Sculptura*, the Neapolitan humanist Pomponio Gaurico exalted "Leonardus Vincius", a pupil of Verrocchio, as a sculptor and painter and for being notable for his "Archimedean genius".

Vasari recalls how Leonardo came to be apprenticed to Verrocchio: "[...] he never ceased drawing and working in relief, pursuits which suited his fancy more than any other. Ser Piero, having observed this, and having considered the loftiness of his intellect, one day took some of his drawings and carried them to Andrea del Verrocchio, who was much his friend, and besought him straitly to tell him whether Leonardo, by devoting himself to drawing, would make any proficience."

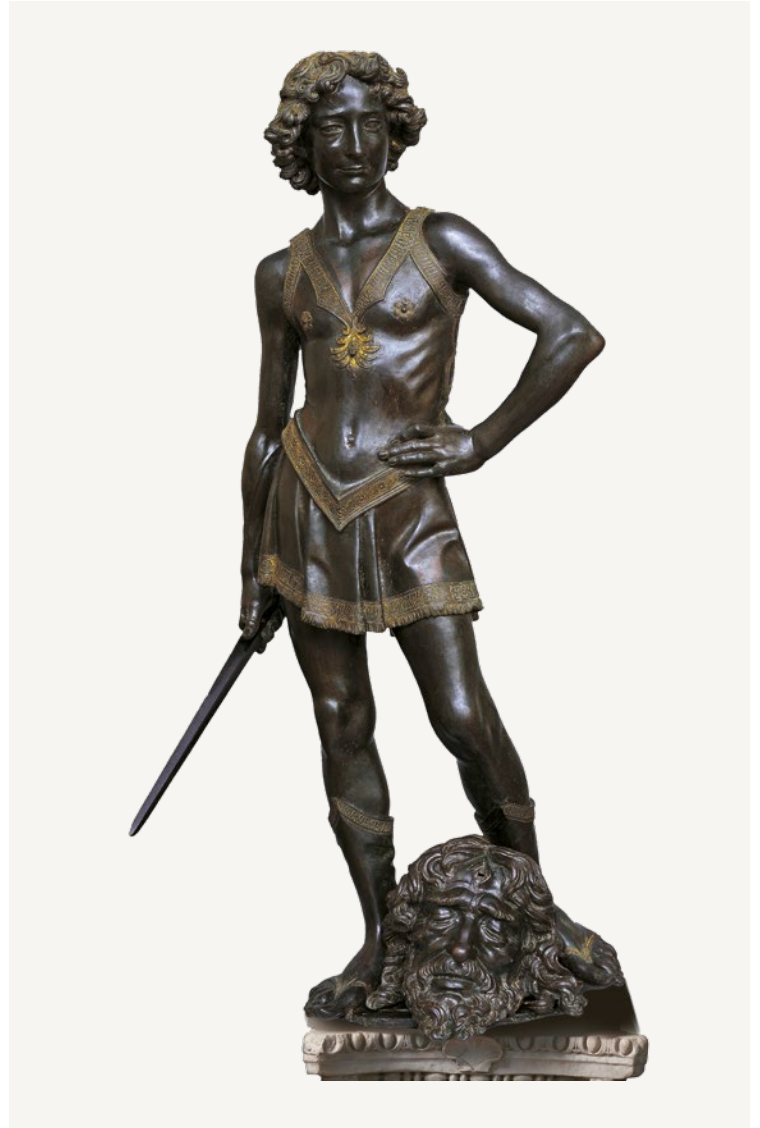
Given Leonardo's talents, Verrocchio introduced him into his workshop, where the young man "practised not one branch of art only, but all those in which drawing played a part".



Andrea del Verrocchio

Christ and St Thomas

c.1468–83, bronze, Museo di Orsanmichele, Florence
The work was commissioned on 15 January 1467 and unveiled on 21 June 1483.



Andrea del Verrocchio

David

c.1470–75, bronze, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence
The facial features of *David* are often considered to depict a young Leonardo.

Although Leonardo never mentioned Antonio del Pollaiuolo, he was clearly inspired by his works, particularly his dynamic figures, their anatomical conception and the spatiality of the landscape; a good example here, also in relation to the *Battle of Anghiari*, would be the large engraving of the *Battle of the Nudes*, datable to the second half of the 1400s and the time of his drawings for embroidery depicting the *Life of St John* for the Florence Baptistery.

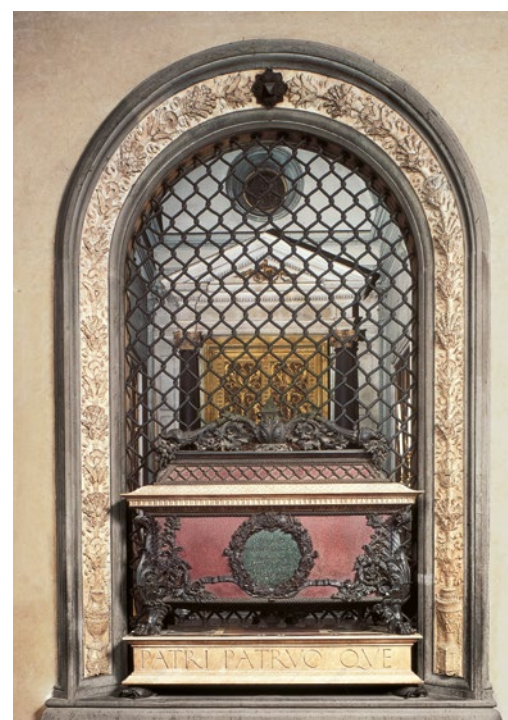
Vasari writes that Antonio “had a more modern grasp of the nude than the masters before his day, and he dissected many bodies in order to study their anatomy”, and cited “the design and model that he had made at the command of Lodovico Sforza for the equestrian statue of Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan”,²² which Leonardo later almost completed.



Drapery study

c.1470–75, grey tempera and lead-white heightening on grey prepared linen canvas, Uffizi Gallery, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, Florence, inv. 433

It is interesting to compare this with the drapery in Verrocchio's sculptures.



Andrea del Verrocchio (with the participation of Leonardo's workshop)

Tomb of Giovanni de' Medici

1469–72, marble, bronze, porphyry and pietra serena, Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence



Drapery for a seated figure

c.1470–75, grey tempera and lead-white heightening on grey prepared linen canvas, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, Paris, inv. 2255

The drawing was initially acquired by the Louvre as a work by Albrecht Dürer.

Inhabited Cloths and Draperies

One of the great topics of investigation linked to the works of Leonardo's youth are his monochrome *Drapery* sketches, mostly executed between 1470 and 1475 in grey tempera with white-lead heightening on fine, grey prepared canvases. That of the Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica in Rome, produced in washed charcoal with heightening on vermillion prepared paper, and that of the Royal Library of Windsor (12521r), in carbon black on pale blue prepared paper, can be dated to a later period.

In part four of the *Book of Painting*, Francesco Melzi gathered the sixteen paragraphs in which Leonardo focused on these representations that allow us to imagine the bodies inhabiting the drapery: "On ways of dressing your figures and various kinds of clothing". This was no academic exercise for its own sake but a life study later applied in large paintings such as the *Annunciation* in the Uffizi Gallery. The result is what I, in 2008, called the anticipation of a metaphysical "concealment" that leaves room for the imagination, as in René Magritte's magical Surrealism.

Giorgio Vasari collected some of these drawings and wrote this of them: "[...] he studied much in drawing after nature, and sometimes in making models of figures in clay, over which he would lay soft pieces of cloth dipped in clay, and then set himself patiently to draw them on a certain kind of very fine Rheims cloth [...] so that it was a marvel". Leonardo resumed the tradition of studying from life, customary in the workshops of Renaissance Florence, which Vasari also mentioned in reference to Piero della Francesca, one of da Vinci's ideal role models.²³



Drapery for a kneeling figure

c.1475–80, metalpoint and lead white on vermillion prepared paper, Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Fondo Corsini, Rome

Leonardo's *Draperies* are conserved in the collections of the Louvre and the Fondation Custodia in Paris, the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome, the Royal Library in Windsor, the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe of the Uffizi Gallery, the British Museum, the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rennes.

Some attributions are controversial, extending to Granacci, Lorenzo di Credi and Fra Bartolomeo, as well as Verrocchio himself and his school in general. However, Leonardo's appear more sculptural and stripped down, less prettified.

Recent non-invasive analytical research by the Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France (C2RMF) and other French institutions²⁴ has sought to cast light on this unresolved issue regarding the Renaissance workshops, also in terms of dating.



Young woman washing the feet of a toddler

c.1482, pen and brown ink on black chalk, University of Porto,
Faculdade de Belas Artes, Porto, inv. 99.1.1174



Life studies for a Madonna and
Child with a cat

c.1480, pen and brown ink over traces of metalpoint,
British Museum, London, inv. 1857,0110.1



Sketch for a Virgin and Christ Child
with a cat

c.1480, pen and brown ink over a stylus underdrawing,
British Museum, London, inv. 1865,0621.1v

The Problem of His Early Madonnas

At first glance, Leonardo's early Madonnas appear to need no further explanation, yet they include many innovations on a known theme and links to basic issues regarding his oeuvre. This may have to do with his family background and the fact that he was an illegitimate child who was not raised by his own mother but grew up with no fewer than four stepmothers and at least twenty-one half-siblings. Suffice it to think of his many drawings on the topic of the "Madonna and Child with a cat", "with flowers" and "with the fruit bowl", or the young woman bathing a baby – scenes that often express a certain intimacy and playfulness.

In the absence of archive sources, the first document on this religious subject is a simple recorded memory of November 1478: "I began the two Virgin Marys." One of these was probably the *Benois Madonna*. The other – as we shall see – is hard to identify, as the execution of the Munich *Madonna* cannot be so late and coeval.

Of the Madonnas cited in ancient times as Leonardo works, more than forty are mentioned in the *Storia dell'opera pittorica di Leonardo da Vinci* published by Aldo De Rinaldis in 1926. Many more have been reported, albeit without being critically acclaimed, from the *Camaldoli Madonna* to the *Detroit Adoration*.

Recent attributions involving links between Verrocchio's workshop and Leonardo notably include the *Ruskin Madonna* (Scottish National Gallery), exceptional in its complex and refined geometric floor and symbolic crumbling architecture

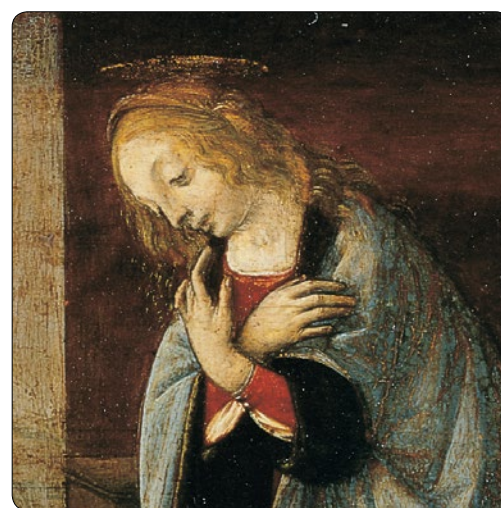


Verrocchio's workshop

The Virgin Adoring the Christ Child (Ruskin Madonna)

c.1470–75, egg tempera on panel transferred to canvas,
Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, inv. NG 2338

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Attributed to Lorenzo di Credi (after a design by Leonardo?)

The Annunciation (detail of the Virgin)

c.1478, tempera and oil on poplar panel, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Lorenzo di Credi (?)

Madonna with a brooch

(study for the Dreyfus Madonna?)

c.1475, lead and silverpoint, brown pencil with touches of lead white on grey prepared paper, Kupferstich-Kabinett, Dresden, inv. C 32



Verrocchio's workshop

Madonna and Child with a Pomegranate

(Dreyfus Madonna)

c.1470 or 1475, oil on poplar, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection, Washington D.C.

(but not with regard to Mary's face), and the *Dreyfus Madonna* in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. The latter features a landscape that, although static, may be plausible for a very young Leonardo, as are some refinements in the head and the enveloping arrangement of her veil and dress. The young mother should instead be considered the work of Lorenzo di Credi, given his drawing in Dresden. The Child is most unacceptable in relation to Vinci and to Lorenzo, as is the execution of the hands. Not even the museum conserving the *Dreyfus Madonna* believes in a Leonardo autography, and its curator, David A. Brown,²⁵ has stated that some restoration work in the first half of the twentieth century intentionally altered certain parts of the painting to match Leonardo's style.

One remarkable case is the *Madonna of the Pinks* in the National Gallery in London, with details (the flower and more so the landscape) that can reasonably be linked to Leonardo.

Multiple Contributions from Verrocchio's Circle

The paintings produced by Andrea del Verrocchio's workshop feature several forms of contribution: from draft designs and compositional drawings to the use of pre-prepared design patterns and the execution of background figures and key details.

Regarding paintings from the Verrocchio workshop, a question mark still hangs over *Tobias and the Angel* in London's National Gallery. Since Wilhelm Suida, other scholars – from Pietro C. Marani to David A. Brown – have linked certain details such as the small dog and the fish to Leonardo. I am also fascinated by the lively gracefulness of Tobias' head, stylistically

very different from that of the angel. The forced position, splayed and arched, of the little fingers of both the angel and Tobias is extraordinary; it recurs in the *Madonna of the Pinks* (also in London's National Gallery) and is reminiscent of the Virgin Mary's right hand in Leonardo's *Annunciation* in the Uffizi Gallery.

The story of the role played by Lorenzo di Credi (1459–1537) with regard to Verrocchio and Leonardo is complex. Lorenzo was not only “an excellent goldsmith in his day”,²⁶ but was also, for a long time, attributed with Leonardo works such as *Ginevra de' Benci* and *Lady with an Ermine*.

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Andrea del Verrocchio and Lorenzo di Credi
(with help from Leonardo in its design?)

Piazza Madonna

c.1474–86, oil on panel, Cathedral of San Zeno,
Chapel of the Santissimo Sacramento, Pistoia