

Walls and Bridges

Robert Zwijnenberg

In this essay I should like to explain what I think is “wrong” with the *Mona Lisa* and why *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* is Leonardo’s finest painting in both an artistic and an art theoretical sense. My personal top three Leonardo paintings are, at number 3, *St. John the Baptist* (circa 1508-13), at 2, *The Virgin of the Rocks* (Louvre version: 1483-86, though I prefer the National Gallery version: 1503-06) and, as I stated, at 1, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (circa 1508 onwards). The reasons for choosing these three paintings as Leonardo’s best works are twofold. Firstly, in an art theoretical sense, these paintings reveal how the means Leonardo uses correspond with the subjects he is depicting. Secondly, in artistic terms these works resist any attempt at a fixed description of their meaning. Indeed, these paintings possess an openness and an ambiguity that make their meaning difficult to capture in words, as can be seen in the literature on them.¹

The main aim of my essay is to show that knowledge of art history alone does not suffice to comprehend an Early Modern painting; rather I am looking for a mode of academic art history in which the personal experience of a painting can provide a *theoretical* argument in the analysis of a work of art.² In this article I examine different options and theoretical concepts to achieve such an art-historical approach.

Material presence and subjective experience

In various interviews, British painter Lucian Freud maintained that Leonardo that ‘someone should write a book about what a ghastly painter Leonardo da Vinci was’.³ Freud accuses him of a fondness for beauty and higher aesthetics. At first glance, these seem like fairly unremarkable, albeit slightly provocative, remarks that say more about Freud than about Leonardo. Freud’s ruthless and analytical approach has little in common with Leonardo’s painting. The two are separated by five centuries of development in painting.

¹ *St. John the Baptist* is at number 3 in my list of favourite Leonardo paintings, even though it is so different from numbers 1 and 2. It is above all the ambiguity of *St. John the Baptist* that makes it such a fabulous painting. To me, *St. John the Baptist* is an exciting intellectual puzzle, though it does not have the level of *transhistoricity* that – as I will explain – I see in *The Virgin of the Rocks* and *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. See R. Zwijnenberg, ‘John the Baptist and the Essence of Painting’, in: *Leonardo da Vinci and the Ethics of Style*, C. Farago (ed.), Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008, pp. 96-118.

² Such an approach is already visible in Panofsky’s *Studies in Iconology* (1939) with the distinction between *equipment for interpretation* and the *corrective principle of interpretation* and with more philosophical sophistication in Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Method* (1960) referred to as *Horizontverschmelzung* (*Fusion of Horizons*).

³ Martin Gayford, ‘My 130 hours sitting for Lucian Freud’, *The Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8655781/My-130-hours-sitting-for-Lucian-Freud.html> (5 December 2019).

Their different aesthetic preferences and views on painting are more reassuring than surprising.

At the same time, Freud's remarks do highlight a crucial issue in the academic discipline of art history. How do we as art historians relate to a historical painting? Traditionally, art historians are interested in answers to questions about the origin of a work of art, its material qualities, its maker, the intentions of the maker, its patronage or the institution that commissioned the work. Moreover, they are interested in putting the work back into its cultural and ideological context, meaning its original historical setting, and in reconstructing its significance in that setting. Given the materiality of the objects with which art-historical scholarship is concerned, this leads to an interpretive paradox that is frequently absent from other historical investigations. After all, in many ways artworks can be simultaneously present and absent. Art history is particularly concerned with what is absent, with what we do not have anymore and never will have direct access to: the artwork's origin, the artist, the artist's intentions, the artwork's cultural context – which are all directly associated with artistic production.⁴

There is, however, also a concrete presence, namely the painting that somehow survived the passage of time and that captivates us – just as it was designed to do – through its visibility or its visual force. This force does and does not emanate from the historical nature of the object, including all the historical details of its context; or, to put it another way, a work of art has a specific visual presence, which has a concrete attraction for us. Yet a complete reconstruction of the historical context is hardly necessary for us to experience this attraction; the visual force of a painting can catch us by surprise and overpower us on the spot. Suddenly we are confronted by a painting that entirely draws us in through its sheer visual power. Judged against such an experience, information on who painted it, or other contextual knowledge, is of only secondary importance.

Of course, art historians are well aware that a work of art is more than its reconstructed history. Everybody “knows” that what we call a work of art – even a historical work of art – is a work of art because it provokes a very special subjective experience that we usually call an aesthetic experience. A number of art historians have testified eloquently to the ways in which they have been moved by the presence of an object in the midst of their historical labours. It is not at all common practice, however, to acknowledge the formative role of this personal experience in art historical methodology and the analysis of works of art. We treat descriptions of an aesthetic experience as an excursus that informs us about the author and adds colour to his or her text. Unlike essayists from earlier generations, such as Walter Pater, or connoisseurs past and present working in the tradition of Bernard Berenson, many scholars today deny or refuse to recognise that their engaged, embodied responses constitute an intrinsic and necessary part of their scholarly art historical investigation.⁵

To the “material presence” of historical works of art, visual and otherwise, the discipline of art history has barely offered an answer – and certainly no sustained critique – other than to retreat to conventional forms of historical inquiry: art historians value the same things as historians concerned with past events, such as archives, contemporary testimonies and other historical traces. But as 21st-century visitors to the

⁴ Cf. M.A. Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and The Rhetoric of The Image*, Ithaca-New York, Cornell University Press, 1996.

⁵ Cf. C. Farago & R. Zwijnenberg (eds.), *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in And Out of History*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

National Gallery, standing before the paintings of Leonardo armed with all the art historical knowledge that has been gathered, we have little with which to refute or confirm Lucian Freud's opinion. His remarks highlight for us the fact that, when we stand before a work of art, it is to ourselves that we must turn to understand why a painting affects or moves us, or simply leaves us cold. This at any rate requires more than simply a knowledge of art history. It also raises the question of the meaning of the word *art* in art history. History of art is about the historical study of a specific category of historical objects that are referred to as works of art in distinction to other historical objects that are not studied within art history. Why we call Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* a work of art worthy of study within art history is hardly reflected in academic art history and at the same time seems to be related to its current material presence – the visual force of its current material state – and our personal experience of it.

Georges Didi-Huberman has pondered the paradox of an art-historical approach to historical artworks more than any other art historian:

Whenever we are before the image, we are before time. Like the poor illiterate in Kafka's story, we are before the image as before the law: as before an open doorway. It hides nothing from us, all we need to do is enter, its light almost blinds us, holds us in submission. Its very opening – and I am not talking about the doorkeeper – holds us back: to look at it is to desire, to wait, to be before time. But what kind of time? What plasticities and fractures, what rhythms and jolts of time can be at stake in this opening of the image?⁶

Didi-Huberman is an art historian who makes his own position in time – and his reflections on this position – an explicit element of his historical writings on Fra Angelico. Didi-Huberman 'seeks to disrupt chronology, a radical reorganization of chronological art history' out of a necessity intrinsic to art history itself, as a discipline always 'in time' and never untimely, and thereby acknowledging on a theoretical level our own inescapable presence in our historical explorations.⁷ What counts as an art historical object and how it is theoretically approached and interpreted echoes the intellectual and cultural background of the art historian. In this sense, a historical work of art is indeed more than merely its reconstructed history. The interpretation of a work of art must activate the self-reflective capacity of art historical inquiry. When we stand before a painting by Leonardo, as art historians we must reflect upon the fact that an Early Modern artwork is a place where knowledge of history and art history, and the immediacy of an aesthetic experience, must be connected. As a museum visitor, the challenge that a Leonardo painting places before me is basically the same.

***Mona Lisa*, Poets and Philosophers**

Freud's remarks highlight our individual responsibility while engaging with a painting, not to slip too readily into art history and the reassurances of art historians that these really are icons of Western art, and that therefore we really should admire them. Freud's comments on Leonardo at any rate are discomfiting for me as I stand before Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. I have studied Leonardo for many years, with a great deal of pleasure and

⁶ G. Didi-Huberman, 'Before the image: before time. The sovereignty of anachronism', in: Farago & Zwijnenberg (eds.), *Compelling Visuality*, cit., p. 31.

⁷ J. Elkins, 'The Art Seminar', in: J. Elkins & R. Williams (eds.), *Renaissance Theory*, London, Routledge, 2008, p. 226.

interest.⁸ Leonardo is indisputably one of the most important painters in Western art, and his notebooks are testimonies to his sharp philosophical and theoretical insight into the workings of the natural world, the human body and the objects and machines that surround us. But as I stand there before the *Mona Lisa*, I have the feeling that this painting has somehow fallen short. Or rather, that something is not quite right in the painting. And this question of whether something is not quite right is not strictly speaking an art historical matter. The concept of 'not quite right' cannot be investigated by any art historical method.

What is not quite right for me is the bridge in the landscape behind *Mona Lisa*. It is like a carbuncle disfiguring the painting. Once I had noticed the disruptive effect of the bridge, I discovered another carbuncle: the arm of a chair on which *Mona Lisa*'s left arm rests, around which she curls her left hand. And behind her we also see a balustrade with, on the right and left of the image, two floral ornaments. There has been much speculation about the bridge in the background. It is said to be near the village of Buriano, or the village of Bobbio. However, most art historians regard the landscape behind *Mona Lisa* as an idealised landscape, and give no more thought to the bridge. The bridge and the balcony on which *Mona Lisa* sits are the architectural elements in the painting, and as such seem to refer to each other. The bridge at any rate links the landscape and the person in the foreground. *Mona Lisa* is firmly embedded in an architectural setting. In this respect, the composition of the painting is reminiscent of an early painting by Leonardo, the *Annunciation* (circa 1473-75), in which Mary is firmly planted at the entrance to a building. However, the difference with the *Mona Lisa* is much more important in helping us understand the development and significance of Leonardo's paintings. The background to the *Annunciation* features the same type of landscape as that in the *Mona Lisa*: water and high rocky mountains. However, a small town or fortification can be seen in the landscape, and boats sailing on the water. The foreground and background are full of human activity and artefacts, creating a continuity between them. The annunciation takes place in our world, which extends at any rate to the horizon, where the rocks begin. In the *Mona Lisa* the landscape is connected to the world of the woman sitting on the balcony by an architectural element: the bridge. There is another trace of human presence and activity, what appears to be an old dirt road on the left side of the painting. However, a dirt road adapts to the landscape, while a bridge is a much stronger human intervention in the landscape. Of course, that is precisely the reason why to me the bridge is such a carbuncle. Why did Leonardo feel he needed to paint the bridge in order to connect the human and natural worlds, visually at any rate?

There are two possible answers. From an art historical perspective, for instance, Martin Kemp has shown that the *Mona Lisa* can be read as Leonardo's depiction of the microcosm-macrocosm analogy: the idea that the individual (*Mona Lisa* in this case) is like a tiny world, or microcosm, whose composition and structure are the same as those of the natural world or the universe, the "big world" (macrocosm). All kinds of processes occurring in *Mona Lisa*'s body are reflected in the natural processes visible in the landscape.⁹ The bridge can then be said to represent the bridge between the microcosm and the macrocosm; i.e. the epistemological relationship between the two worlds, the lesser world of human being and the larger world of nature.

⁸ R. Zwiijnenberg, *The Writings and Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci - Order and Chaos in Early Modern Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁹ M. Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 256-258.

Another answer – of a more art theoretical nature – to the question of why the bridge is there (which does not preclude art historical answers) is that it introduces a metapictorial element into this wild, inhospitable landscape. A visual artwork contains metapictorial elements when it is itself a reflection on the act of depiction – on the art of painting in general, or on what it means that a painting is a representation of something. A close analysis of metapictorial paintings may tell us more about theoretical views artists have about their own art and artistic involvement.¹⁰ In Western painting, there are countless artworks that have a metapictorial level; famous examples are Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) and Vermeer's *De Schilderkunst* (1665). As a metapictorial element the bridge in *Mona Lisa* is a symbol of the painting as an image. The bridge refers to the constructed nature of an image. A painting is created by the labour and imagination of the painter. By including the bridge, Leonardo is reflecting on the nature of artistic representation as an artifice.

Although both explanations can be explained through different critical approaches, looking at Leonardo's *The Virgin of the Rocks* and *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* I provide yet another explanation. What if the bridge is a *faux pas* showing Leonardo's inability to control the painting?

Both the art historical literature and literary/poetic responses to Leonardo have focused on the water and the landscapes in paintings like the *Mona Lisa*, *The Virgin of the Rocks* and *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. Martin Kemp interprets *The Virgin of the Rocks*, which incidentally does not appear to include any buildings or other architectural elements, as a reference to the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs was especially popular with the Brothers of the Immaculate Conception, who commissioned the painting, as a source of metaphors for Mary: 'My dove in the chasm [*in foraminibus petrae*], hidden in the mountain side [*in caverna maceriae*], show me your face'.¹¹ Such an iconographical interpretation of this work is certainly plausible, although the question is whether this kind of interpretation – which emphasises the Christian connotations and iconography of the painting – exhausts all the possible meanings of the painting. In her article 'On looking into the abyss: Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*', art historian Regina Stefaniak connects the water in the background of the painting with the 'primeval flood' in Genesis 1:2, and the whole picture with Proverbs 8:22-25:

The Lord has acquired me before all other things; when He started his creation He first created me. I was made in the beginning, even before everything, even before the earth was shaped. When there were no oceans I was originated, even before the springs with their flows of water. Before the mountains were erected I was originated, even before there were hills.¹²

The expression 'primeval flood' referred to in both biblical texts is a translation of the Greek term 'abyss', which literally means 'bottomless'. In commentaries from the 7th century on the Latin Vulgate translation the notion is extended to *matrix abyssus*. In Late Latin matrix means *uterus*, *source*, *origin*, or *cause*. From this matrix all rivers and springs on earth originate and they also flow back to it. Although it is not possible here to discuss Stefaniak's interpretation in great detail, she convincingly demonstrates that Leonardo evokes the

¹⁰ Cf. V. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image. An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

¹¹ Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci*, cit., p. 75.

¹² R. Stefaniak, 'On Looking into the Abyss: Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*', *Konsthistorisk tidskrift*, 66, 1 (1997), pp. 1-36.

primeval flood in this painting, offering the theological interpretation of the Virgin Mary's uterus as the *matrix abyssus*.

Stefaniak's interpretation suggests that *The Virgin of the Rocks* has its roots in a tradition that is much older than Christianity. A woman in front of a cave near water. For many people this scene will recall myths in which a cavernous space, water and a woman play a key role. Myths which to this day influence our ideas, not least due to the authors who have used them in their writings, including Homer, Plato, Virgil and, later, Dante.

In Walter Pater's essay on Leonardo da Vinci, part of his famous work *The Renaissance* (1873), he observed that in many of Leonardo's paintings the women are represented with water in the background: the *Annunciation*, *Ginevra de' Benci*, *Mona Lisa*, *The Madonna of the Yarnwinder*, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, and both versions of *The Virgin of the Rocks*. Pater mentions the 'solemn effects of moving water' and he describes the women as clairvoyants who do not belong to the Christian family. Furthermore, his description of *Mona Lisa* includes a reference to the sibyl: 'She is older than the rocks among which she sits, like a vampire of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas'.¹³

One of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Sonnets for Pictures* also explores *The Virgin of the Rocks*:¹⁴

Mother, is this the darkness of the end,
The Shadow of Death? and is that outer sea
Infinite imminent Eternity?
And does the death-pang by man's seed sustain'd
In Time's each instant cause thy face to bend
Its silent prayer upon the Son, while he
Blesses the dead with his hand silently
To his long day which hours no more offend?

Mother of grace, the pass is difficult,
Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered souls
Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through.
Thy name, O Lord, each spirit's voice extols,
Whose peace abides in the dark avenue
Amid the bitterness of things occult.

The main motifs in this poetic reflection on *The Virgin of the Rocks* are death, the kingdom of the dead ('that outer sea') and transition or initiation ('the pass is difficult', 'the dark avenue'). Mary is at the boundary of life and death ('Infinite imminent Eternity'). In both art historical interpretations and in poetic reflections *The Virgin of the Rocks* is seen in the long tradition of Western cultural, religious and philosophical ideas which Pater and Rossetti still have at their instant disposal and which Stefaniak presents as a cultural and intellectual context for Leonardo through precise historical research. All three interpret the landscapes behind Leonardo's women as an abstract cognitive space from which all kinds of philosophical and religious ideas spring.

In a 1902 essay German poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote about the background of the *Mona Lisa*:

¹³ W. Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980 (original ed. 1873), p. 91.

¹⁴ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Sonnets for pictures, and other sonnets*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013 (original ed. 1870), p. 259.

To see landscape thus, as something distant and foreign, something remote and without allure, something entirely self-contained, was essential, if it was ever to be the means and the occasion for autonomous art; for it had to be far and very different from us in order to be a redeeming parable of our fate.¹⁵

Although not an art historian, and although his language clearly reveals the aesthetic preferences and concepts of his age, Rilke also presents the background to the *Mona Lisa* as an abstract cognitive space, just like Pater, Rossetti and Stefaniak for the *Mona Lisa* and *The Virgin of the Rocks*. At this stage, one might wonder why Stefaniak's interpretation, which is the result of careful historical research, should be worth more than the views of Pater, Rossetti and Rilke, which result from their being part of a living cultural and intellectual tradition. Moreover, art historical investigations that explain landscapes in the background as representations of the Alps are historically interesting, but one can ask to what extent they are relevant to the overall significance of the painting. Nor does the art historical concept of an "idealised landscape" help us grasp the meaning of Leonardo's paintings.

On a theoretical level, I agree with philosopher Paul Crowther who, in his book *The Transhistorical Image*¹⁶ makes a conceptual link between determining what is art (or valuable art) in a certain period and diachronous history. The decisive factor is what Crowther calls *formative power*, the cognitive power of an artwork to express constant factors in human experience. The question of how this is possible is the central theme of his book, and his answer is encompassed in the term *transhistorical image*. An image or artwork can be 'transhistorical', continuing to say something to us even centuries later, because it depicts a universally recognisable human experience. This 'transhistoricity' results from the capacity of art to appeal to the viewer's imagination, even centuries after the work first saw the light of day. It is as if the cognitive power in the work were inexhaustible. It is this 'transhistoricity' that for me legitimises the idea that as art historians we cannot simply ignore poets and writers as historical sources when we interpret an artwork.¹⁷

The fragment from Rilke is helpful to see why bridge in the landscape behind *Mona Lisa* can be considered as a *faux pas*, a carbuncle. Rilke's description of the landscape as 'something entirely self-contained' is derailed by the presence of the bridge. The bridge embeds the depiction of the landscape in the everyday; the bridge is a sign of a real situation, a here and now.¹⁸ The bridge belies the notion of the landscape as a cognitive space and gives it human presence, brings it back to the quotidian domain of human existence. *Mona Lisa* could simply come down from her balcony and go for a walk across the bridge. Rilke had a very good sense of Leonardo's intentions, but he did not look at the painting properly. The bridge destroys the 'entirely self-contained' landscape. It is as if Leonardo shrinks from giving the landscape autonomy.

¹⁵ R.M. Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 5, Wiesbaden-Frankfurt a.M., Insel Verlag, 1955-1966, pp. 516-522 (520): 'Und Landschaft so zu schauen als ein Fernes und Fremdes, als ein Entlegenes und Liebloses, das sich ganz in sich vollzieht, war notwendig, wenn sie je einer selbständigen Kunst Mittel und Anlaß sein sollte; denn sie mußte fern sein und sehr anders als wir, um ein erlösendes Gleichnis werden zu können unserem Schicksal'.

¹⁶ P. Crowther, *The Transhistorical Image, Philosophizing Art and its History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

¹⁷ Stefaniak's interpretation strongly supports Crowther's thesis on transhistoricity and to a large extent also confirms Didi-Huberman's thesis that an early-modern painting can appear as 'an extraordinary montage or heterogeneous times forming anachronisms'. Didi-Huberman, 'Before the image: before time', cit., p. 38.

¹⁸ Research by the Louvre in 2014 shows that the bridge is not present on the underdrawing of the *Mona Lisa* but was applied during the painting process.

The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and Cognitive Spaces

Leonardo did succeed in this in *The Virgin of the Rocks* and, to my way of thinking, even more so in *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. No man-made structures can be seen in either of these paintings. There are a number of reasons why I think Leonardo's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* succeeds slightly better than either version of *The Virgin of the Rocks* in this respect. First, *The Virgin of the Rocks* has a clear Christian iconography and narrative structure, as has been convincingly demonstrated in the art historical literature. In both the Louvre and National Gallery versions the rocky environment gives the impression of a ruin. The rock formations have an architectural structure that protects the group of people in the foreground. The compositional structure of the painting suggests that Mary has direct access to the water in the background; she could stroll right up to it. This gives a certain continuity between foreground and background. There is also little difference in the technique Leonardo used to paint the rocks in the background and the rock formations in the foreground. The figures harmonise with the rocky nature in which they are set in a technical sense, too. But how different is *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*.

Quattrocento painting before Leonardo includes plenty of examples of paintings of Mary in Anne's lap and Christ in Mary's lap. In this respect the painting places Leonardo in an existing Christian iconographic tradition. However, he breaks entirely with tradition with the addition of the lamb, the entire composition and also the unusual setting in a rocky foreground. This makes it possible to interpret this painting, even more so than *The Virgin of the Rocks*, outside the framework of a strictly Christian iconography. In this painting there is a strict division between foreground and background. Indeed, it is not entirely clear whether there is an accessible connection between the two. Rilke's description of the landscape in *Mona Lisa* 'as something distant and foreign, something remote and without allure, something entirely self-contained' fits well to describe the landscape behind St. Anne. The figures in the foreground are entirely self-absorbed. They make no contact with the viewer. It is as if a space ship had landed at a remote place, far from the view of humans, from which Christ hesitantly emerges, pressed against the struggling lamb; or as Daniel Arasse puts it, the painting forms 'a living organic whole in a state of restrained separation'.¹⁹ The palette of the background and its technical execution also differ from the foreground, enhancing the division between them.²⁰ This is not to say that the landscape in the foreground is less wild than the natural scene in the background. It is a far cry from the safety of the balcony from which *Mona Lisa* can view the world. This nature still has to be tamed. This is nature as a physical and intellectual challenge to humankind, depicted here by Leonardo within the apparently reassuring context of a Christian myth.

The Virgin and Child with St. Anne reminds me of a Medieval literary work in which the landscape is described as an abstract cognitive space in a way that seems to foreshadow Leonardo's landscape. *La Queste del Saint Graal*, written in the first half of the thirteenth century, tells the well-known story of the quest for the holy grail. The knights' quest is an intellectual and spiritual journey that takes the form of physical rambling through a labyrinthine natural landscape. For the knights 'the place of testing and significant choice, then, is the trackless forest waste land'. We find many such landscapes in Medieval literature: Ambrose's wilderness, Jerome's ocean, Gregory Thaumaturgus' forest and swamp

¹⁹ D. Arasse, *Leonardo da Vinci*, London, William S. Konecky Associates, 1998, p. 456.

²⁰ In the restoration of the painting carried out in 2011/12, some sfumato was lost, widening the gap between background and foreground. See V. Delieuvin (ed.), *La Sainte Anne: L'ultime chef-d'œuvre de Léonard de Vinci*, Paris, Louvre, 2012.

– all impenetrable, inextricable and unpatterned.²¹ This waste land as a space for intellectual and spiritual development that I have repeatedly referred to as an abstract cognitive space from which all kinds of philosophical and religious ideas spring is literally present in *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. Leonardo's painting opens up the waste land, but does not make it immediately accessible to the viewer. This gives the painting an open and indeterminate character and ambiguity that makes it what Crowther calls a 'transhistorical image'.

The painting forces me as a viewer to undertake an intellectual and emotional quest if I want to understand what is happening in the image. At the same time, this openness is also boundless. An image will always defy the structure of language, as Leonardo argues again and again in his manuscripts (particularly in the *Paragone*). Nevertheless, language can to some extent capture an image, depending on its character and visual structure. In *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* Leonardo succeeds in realising his ideal of an absolute division between word and image. When we stand before *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, we experience what it truly means to stand before a painting. That is why *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* is in all respects Leonardo's finest painting.

Someone who used the interpretive space in *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* to the full was another Freud, Lucian's grandfather Sigmund. In his essay *Leonardo da Vinci, A Memory of His Childhood* (1910), Sigmund analyses this painting, arguing among other things that Anne and Mary represent the artist's two mothers: his real mother and his father's wife with whom he grew up. The essay is first and foremost a statement of Freud's views on the role of the 'unconscious' in art, and Leonardo serves above all to illustrate his theory. Art historians have not failed to point out the inaccuracies in Freud's account. Nevertheless, Freud's essay still proves the transhistorical nature of *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. Lucian should have listened to his grandfather. Or can we explain Lucian's aversion to Leonardo in Freudian terms?

In the End

In *Shakespeare's lives*, in which Samuel Schoenbaum follows the historical quest for "Shakespeare the man" in the various lives of Shakespeare written since his death, the author refers to the idea that 'trying to work out Shakespeare's personality was like looking at a very dark glazed picture in the National Gallery: at first you see nothing, then you begin to see features, and then you realize that they are your own'.²² This statement is of course recognition of the well-known fact that biography tends towards oblique self-portraiture or biographers' recurring self-identification with their subject. The situation described here does not differ much from when I stand in front of the *Mona Lisa* and try to understand what meaning this historical painting can have for me as a work of art. So, what then of my views on *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*? Ultimately, the confrontation with a work of art is a confrontation with your position in your own life.

Keywords

Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, meta-painting, transhistoricity, poetry

²¹ P. Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. 43-48.

²² This statement is attributed to Desmond McCarthy in S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. viii.

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RIASSUNTO

Walls and bridges

Nel saggio si sostiene che non è sufficiente applicare conoscenze storico-artistiche se si vogliono capire i significati e valori profondi che un dipinto premoderno possa trasmettere a uno spettatore del ventunesimo secolo. Attraverso una discussione di tre quadri di Leonardo – la *Gioconda*, la *Vergine delle Rocce* e la *Madonna col Bambino e Sant’Anna* – si spiega come filosofi, scrittori e poeti che hanno reagito a questi dipinti nel corso dei secoli, possano guidarci nella teorizzazione e concettualizzazione della propria esperienza da spettatori odierni. In questo percorso personale di lettura si applicano concetti filosofici come trans-storicità, anacronismo e meta-pittura, al fine di integrare l’esperienza personale nella riflessione teorica sull’arte.