

For an artist who is well known for having spent more time on science than his paintings, Leonardo da Vinci has left behind numerous questions with regard to his body of work. One of the most famous problems to occupy art historians with regard to Leonardo's work is the problem of his two Madonnas – that, in a period of approximately thirty years, two very similar paintings that are said to be painted by Leonardo from the same commission emerge: The *Madonna of the Rocks* (1485) hanging in the Louvre, and its fraternal twin, also titled the *Madonna of the Rocks* (1508) hanging in the National Gallery in London. Academics from all fields, ranging from art history to geology,¹ have weighed in on this topic, using Leonardo's style and the original documents concerning their creation to support their arguments. In this paper, I will be comparing and contrasting both versions of Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna of the Rocks*, with particular emphasis placed on the original contract of 1483,² and subsequent appeals to the document. In doing so, I will show that the original *Madonna of the Rocks* that was painted for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in 1483 is the one currently hanging in the Louvre, with the National Gallery painting a copy of the original done under Leonardo's tutelage.

Compositionally speaking, what maintains the argument about the authorship of these paintings is how substantial their similarities and differences are. While the original commission from the confraternity requested a “Virgin and Child, and the angels done in oil with the utmost care, with these, go two prophets painted (on) flat surfaces, to be painted in fine colors”,³ both

¹ Ann Pazzorusso, “Leonardo's Geology: The Authenticity of the Virgin of the Rocks.” *Leonardo* 29, no. 3 (1996): 199. Pazzorusso argues for the Parisian Madonna to be painted by Leonardo, and the National Gallery one painted by a follower of based off Leonardo, based off of a detailed analysis of the geology and the rocks inside the grotto. Leonardo, an avid scientist, kept true to nature in all of his other works, so Pazzorusso claims that the National Gallery version is a copy because the geology of it does not stay true to the rules of nature while the Parisian Madonna does.

² Hannelore Glasser, *Artists' Contracts of the Early Renaissance* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1977): 208.

³ Glasser, 237.

images depict a different subject matter: the Virgin Mary as the central image, Jesus and John the Baptist as children, and an archangel, identified as Uriel,⁴ framing the image. The grouping, described as depicting “Mary [...] the supreme figure in this painting, tenderly sheltering the children and knowingly sanctioning their spiritual dialogue”,⁵ is not a scene found in the canonical gospels. Rather, both paintings illustrate the attention paid to Mary as part of the Marian-emphasized Catholicism that was popular in Milan at the time.⁶ Both compositions, done in oil paint on panel, are in Leonardo’s typical triangular composition, with Mary as the apex of the triangle. Depicting the group inside an unidentifiable, although realistic grotto, the location hearkens back to King Solomon’s *Song of Songs*, linking the Old Testament text to the New Testament family.⁷ As such, both scenes, combined with the detail of light and dark filtering over the forms, makes these depictions seem dreamlike. This effect, showing Leonardo’s skill with depicting light and shadow, creates an illusionary scene taken from the apocryphal writing of *Mary and the children in the desert*.

Despite the similarities in the general appearance of the paintings, there are many important distinctions between the two that must be made. The Louvre *Madonna* has a softer light, making the entire scene seem more illusionary and dream-like; the National Gallery *Madonna*, however, has a starker and more powerful light, which brightens and darkens the image much as a camera flash would do to a photograph. Secondly, the foliage is different: In the

⁴ Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1981): 96.

⁵ Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 96

⁶ Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 94. “The cult of the Virgin, such a shadowy figure in the Bible, was never stronger than during this period and the particular doctrine of her Immaculate Conception (birth without stain of sin) became especially popular in late fifteenth-century Milan. It was a Milanese theologian, Bernardino de’ Busti, who formulated the office for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception which was approved by Sixtus IV in 1480”

⁷ Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 96. This process of linking the Old and New Testaments to try and find biblical evidence to link Jesus – and Mary – to people and prophecies from the Old Testament was very common.

Paris *Madonna*, John the Baptist has a clump of Florentine lilies underneath him,⁸ while in the London *Madonna*, the flowers represent the white lilies of Mary. The National Gallery version is also different from the Louvre version in that it is much easier to identify the subjects of the painting based on iconography. Everyone except for the archangel is given a halo, and the link between Uriel and John indicated by Uriel's pointing hand in the Louvre version has disappeared, replaced with the obvious iconography of John's crucifix staff. As well, Uriel's wings – visible, but in shadow, in the Louvre version – are given much more prominence in the National Gallery; he also turns his gaze inwards, looking towards the group as opposed to out at the viewer, something that he is doing in the Louvre piece. Lastly, the whole colour scheme – emphasized by Leonardo's use of light and shadow – is different in both images. The Louvre *Madonna* has warmer hues of gold and red, possibly hearkening back to late medieval altarpieces,⁹ while the National Gallery version is painted in much more powerful blues and pale tones.

While a stylistic comparison can present a convincing argument for one particular artist's hands over another,¹⁰ in this particular case, we are lucky that the most important document has remained: the original contract for the *Madonna of the Rocks*. The contract, written in 1483, states that the original painting was to be painted for a chapel in the Milanese church of San

⁸ Robert Eisler, "Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks", *The Burlington Magazine* 90, no. 545 (1948), 239.

⁹ Joseph Manca, "The Gothic Leonardo: Towards a Reassessment of the Renaissance," *Artibus et Historiae* 17, no. 34 (1996) provides an intriguing and enlightening argument towards the tendency of Leonardo's oeuvre to have elements of the late Gothic style.

¹⁰ The most convincing account for the National Gallery version of the *Madonna of the Rocks* being Leonardo's original painting is found in Martin Davies' work, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Virgin of the Rocks in the National Gallery* (1947), in which Davies, looking at the original contract as well both paintings, argues for a slightly different interpretation of the shorthand which the contract is written in. Subsequently, responses have been published in *The Burlington Magazine* – this essay uses A. E. Popham's response of 1948 (Vol. 90, no. 544, p.212) and Eisler's response from the same year – already cited in this essay. As well, much of the published work has defended or argued against Davies' response – see Hannelore Glasser, Cecil Gould, and Ann Pazzorusso.

Francesco Grande,¹¹ with the chapel bearing the same name as the confraternity that paid for it: the Chapel of the Conception.¹² It also contains commissions for the entire Chapel – not just the altarpiece – giving the internal decoration to the De Preda brothers, Evangelista and Ambrogio, and giving the commission for the entire altarpiece, frame and painting, to Leonardo da Vinci.¹³ With Leonardo, however, commissions have a tendency of not being completed easily – and in 1491, both Ambrogio de Preda and Leonardo appealed the original contract, arguing that the original 800 lire payment which was agreed upon only covered the cost of the frame – not to mention the other decoration and the painting.¹⁴ It is assumed that by this time, the original *Madonna of the Rocks* was painted – as the appeal mentions that there was an unnamed buyer ready to purchase it.¹⁵ Two more appeals are of note: one in 1503 – while Leonardo was in Florence, Ambrogio de Preda made the claim *in absentia* in a request for more money¹⁶ – and in 1508, where it was requested (and granted) that the *Madonna of the Rocks* could be taken down and copied.¹⁷

Now that the comparison between the paintings, and some of the details of the contract has been laid out, the problem of the Two Madonnas begins. There are three major historiographical positions that have been proposed since the late 1940s – the first, and most obvious one, being found in Frank Zöllner's recent work, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete*

¹¹ Glasser, 212, 216.

¹² Glasser, 216.

¹³ Glasser, 242-243.

¹⁴ Ann Pazzorusso, "Leonardo's Geology: The Authenticity of the Virgin of the Rocks." *Leonardo* 29, no. 3 (1996): 199.

¹⁵ Glasser, 245. Cecil Gould, in his article "The Newly-Discovered Documents concerning Leonardo's 'Virgin of the Rocks' and Their Bearing on the Problem of the Two Versions", *Artibus et Historiae* 2, no. 3 (1981): 76, proposes that this unnamed buyer was Duke Ludovico Sforza – a powerful man whom the Confraternity would not argue with.

¹⁶ Glasser, 251.

¹⁷ Gould, 75.

Paintings.¹⁸ Here, Zöllner proposes that the Louvre version of the *Madonna of the Rocks* is the original 1483 painting, and that Ambrogio de Preda completed the 1508 copy – the one hanging in London - under Leonardo’s guidance. Zöllner continues, stating that Ludovico Sforza bought the 1483 *Madonna* when Leonardo da Vinci started working under him in the early 1490’s, and offers a side note claiming that it was the sale of the first painting that instigated the creation of the London version.¹⁹ Hannelore Glasser argues a similar point, stating that while such investigation into the historiographical issue lies outside her realm of “contract procedure”,²⁰ she believes that the second painting was created due to the Franciscans of San Gottardo commissioning a copy.²¹ In her work, she assumes that the London painting was the 1508 commission that Ambrogio de Preda did under Leonardo’s tutelage, providing a contractual base for this argument.

The second school of thought proposes a similar argument – the original 1483 painting hangs in the Louvre, but Ludovico Sforza bought the original in the 1490s.²² As such, not one, but two copies were made: one for the Confraternity itself in 1506,²³ and a third one from 1508 was created as well.²⁴ Two notable historians that assume this position are Cecil Gould and Martin Kemp. Gould, in his article “The Newly-discovered Documents Concerning Leonardo’s ‘Virgin of the Rocks’ and their Bearing on the Problem of the Two Virgins”, argues that while the original 1483 altarpiece was indeed sold to Ludovico Sforza, the confraternity needed another altarpiece: Sforza “took advantage of the dispute between Leonardo and the Confraternity, and of the fact that Leonardo was on his pay roll, to persuade him to finish the

¹⁸ Frank Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2007): 69.

¹⁹ Zöllner, 69.

²⁰ Glasser, 270.

²¹ Glasser, 262.

²² Gould, 75.

²³ Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 94.

²⁴ Gould, 75.

picture in order to give it as a present, and then to start a second version for the Confraternity.”²⁵ As such, Ambrogio and Leonardo worked together – Leonardo doing the underpainting, and Ambrogio adding the colour – on a 1506 version, which would end up in London.²⁶ Gould proposes that the 1508 commission, which Ambrogio copied, was given to an unnamed buyer, who still has yet to be discovered. Gould ends with this enigmatic claim, stating that the 1508 painting still has to be found, but his overall argument of three paintings is supported by one of the leading scholars of Leonardo da Vinci, Martin Kemp. Kemp, in his monograph *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, proposes that, “two major variants of the *Madonna* are known, one of which belongs stylistically to the 1480s, while the other betrays later characteristics.”²⁷ Kemp is very careful not to stray too far from his original intention of analyzing Leonardo da Vinci’s works stylistically, summarizing why he believes there is a problem. He argues that there were three versions of this painting commissioned, two of which are known, while only one is guaranteed to be in Leonardo’s own hand – the one from the 1480s. Kemp, however, cares more about the stylistic qualities of both the Paris and London *Madonnas*, and later in his book, states that “I believe that he [De Preda] largely fulfilled the demands of the 1506 settlement that the ‘panel or picture on which is depicted the Virgin’ should be finished ‘in two years ... by the hand of the said Master Leonardo.’”²⁸ In stating this, he gives away his position that he falls into the second camp of historians.

The last and most contentious belief is also the one most responded to. Epitomized by Martin Davies’ *Leonardo da Vinci: The Virgin of the Rocks in the National Gallery* of 1948,²⁹

²⁵ Gould, 75.

²⁶ Gould, 75.

²⁷ Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 94.

²⁸ Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 281.

²⁹ Arthur E. Popham, “Review [untitled]”, *The Burlington Magazine* 90, no. 544 (1948): 212.

Unfortunately, due to constraints beyond my control, the original Davies monograph was not available. However,

this view states that the *Madonna* hanging in the National Gallery is the original 1483 commission. Davies proposes that the Parisian version is actually the 1508 copy, providing evidence based on the painting, such as the iconography of the flowers under John in the Louvre *Madonna*.³⁰ These flowers, identified as the Florentine Lily, link Mary to John, who is the patron saint of the City of Florence. The *Madonna* in Paris, filled with Marian and Florentine symbols bringing John closer under the mantle of Mary, is argued by Davies to be the later version, possibly commissioned for a religious space in the Palazzo Vecchio.³¹

Davies, in writing a monograph dedicated solely to the London *Madonna*, also looked at the contract of the original 1483 commission and offers a slightly different translation of the shorthand that the original document contains. Glasser notes that “Davies by reading ‘p(er)’ instead of ‘p(ro)’ turns the abbreviation ‘pfecti’ from ‘p(ro)fecti’ into ‘p(er)fecti’: ... the word ‘two’ can be connected with the two extant angels in the London National Gallery.”³² By understanding the translation in a different way, Davies notes that the De Preda brothers allegedly painted the two angels that still exist on the National Gallery *Madonna*. In doing so, he links the London version to the commission of 1483, which allows him to “maintain that since all documents referred to one and the same commission, no substitution could have taken place between 1483 and the final payment of 1508.”³³ As such, Davies’ firm belief that the National Gallery *Madonna* is the original 1483 painting, supported by what has been called a “rigorous and sober consideration of the extant published documents”³⁴ allows this position to hold.

responses to Davies were plentiful enough (in both Popham, Eisler, and Glasser) to assume a correct thesis in Davies’ work.

³⁰ Eisler, 239.

³¹ Popham, 212.

³² Glasser, 237-238.

³³ Glasser, 211.

³⁴ Glasser, 209.

The responses to each position are as powerful as each position itself. Davies' assertion that the London *Madonna* is the original 1483 painting very quickly gained followers – Robert Eisler and Arthur Popham quickly responded in the “Letters” section of *The Burlington Magazine* in support of his claims, both of them offering slightly different interpretations or new pieces of evidence to support it. However, Davies' position has gained as many opponents as followers – Glasser, in her 1977 monograph looking at artists' contracts, commends Davies for offering a new interpretation of evidence,³⁵ but in terms of his claims, she rebukes him when she brings emphasis to the fact that the Louvre version is “generally favoured as the version by art historians given to stylistic analysis ... it seems to them that this version is not only earlier ... but also decisively higher in quality.”³⁶ As well, she rebukes him for misinterpreting the original Italian language in the contract, pointing out that his translation of *profecti* to *perfecti* ignores the use of such terms in contract language of the Quattrocento.³⁷

The group of historians that place the National Gallery *Madonna of the Rocks* as the legitimate 1483 commission has been largely discredited, both from inside and outside the field. However, there still remains the two ideas promoting the Parisian version: One which claims that the London version is the 1508 copy, and the other which sees the London version as the 1506 copy, with the 1508 version missing or destroyed. Based on the complexity of dealing with the contract and its subsequent appeals, rewrites, and its final decision and payment in 1508 – a process taking longer than 30 years – I am inclined to agree with Kemp, Gould, and the other historians. I believe that the London version is the 1506 copy done by both Ambrogio di Preda and Leonardo da Vinci, and the Parisian *Madonna of the Rocks* is the one specified by the original 1483 contract. The colouring and the use of light and shadow in the London version

³⁵ Glasser, 209.

³⁶ Glasser, 209 – here, the underlining is actually her emphasis.

³⁷ Glasser, 239.

seems different to Leonardo's typical use of these elements – a simple comparison of each version, compared to Leonardo's other works such as the Ginevra de' Benci of 1478,³⁸ reveals this to be true.

Also important is the context that the painting would be placed in. The National Gallery image of the *Madonna* is in the frame it was meant to be in – surrounded by the De Preda angels. A simple comparison of the *Angel Playing the Violin* to the face of the Virgin in the London *Madonna of the Rocks* reveals an easy comparison – the style and incline of their heads are similar, as is the use of the sharp, contrasting light not normally seen in Leonardo's works. I am inclined to agree with Kemp and Gould on the basis of stylistic comparison, although their use of the primary text – its summary, conclusion, and application – is also a strong argument in their favour.

The problem of the Two Madonnas keeps re-appearing in the mind of art historians, primarily because despite the repeated differences between the two images, Leonardo da Vinci's illusionary and ephemeral touch is felt in both images. The contract, as demonstrated above, does not shed a complete light on the subject due to the amendments made over the thirty-year litigation, and the shorthand that the contract was originally written in. The reason I follow Kemp and Gould in their argument is that they acknowledge for Leonardo's touch in the National Gallery, understanding the role he would have played in the 1506 copy. What makes this issue important is that to try to understand one of the greatest minds of the Renaissance – even of mankind – it needs to be clear what images can fully be attributed to his touch, as opposed to what is only similar. As such, the Parisian and London *Madonna of the Rocks* need to be attributed properly to the right hand – an ongoing discussion.

³⁸ Zöllner, 37.

Works Cited

- Eisler, Robert. "Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks", *The Burlington Magazine* 90, no. 545 (1948): 239-240.
- Glasser, Hannelore. *Artists' Contracts of the Early Renaissance*. Garland Publishing, Inc.: New York, 1977.
- Gould, Cecil. "The Newly-Discovered Documents Concerning Leonardo's 'Virgin of the Rocks' and Their Bearing on the Problem of the Two Versions", *Artibus et Historiae* 2, no. 3 (1981): 73-76.
- Kemp, Martin. *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd: London, 1981.
- Manca, Joseph, "The Gothic Leonardo: Towards a Reassessment of the Renaissance," *Artibus et Historiae* 17, no. 34 (1996): 121-158.
- Pazzorusso, Ann "Leonardo's Geology: The Authenticity of the Virgin of the Rocks." *Leonardo* 29, no. 3 (1996): 197-200.
- Popham, Arthur Ewart Hugh. "Review:[untitled]", *The Burlington Magazine* 90, no. 544 (1948): 212.
- Zöllner, Frank. *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings*. Taschen Publishers: Los Angeles, 2007.