"Three ducats in Venice": connecting Giorgione and Leonardo

CLAIRE FARAGO

"Three ducats in Venice." These four words, recorded by Leonardo da Vinci in a memorandum dated April 8, 1503, are the only surviving record of his presence in that city. Despite the nearly total absence of direct evidence, art historians take seriously Vasari's statement that Leonardo, as the first artist to practice the *manneria moderna*, introduced the manner to Giorgione, making his Venetian contemporary the second practitioner of the "style" and radically altering Venetian painting in the bargain. Vasari's *campanilismo* has been noticed especially by Giorgione specialists and the question of who influenced whom has been addressed by historians over the centuries in various ways.

Early Venetian writers such as Ridolli (1640) and Boschini (1660) never mention Giorgione's presumed debt to Leonardo. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Luigi Lanzi, who set new standards for writing the history of art by subsuming individual artistic biography into the narrative of national and school styles, observed structural differences between Giorgione's technique of chiaroscuro and the uniform veils and gradations characteristic of Leonardo's shading. Lanzi consequently claimed Giorgione's coloristic chiaroscuro to be typically Venetian.

Lanzi's history of national and regional styles was soon taken up by Crove and Cavalcaselle, who made the further, bolder suggestion that Leonardo and Giorgione independently developed parallel styles. This remains an interesting hypothesis today, but it needs to be considered apart from the evolutionary scheme of artistic progress that nineteenth-century art historians imposed without exception on the visual evidence. Extensive research efforts resulting in a 1992 exhibition organized by the Venice Accademia, *Leonardo and Venice*, once again assumed the literal truth of Vasari's claims, which the curatorial team pursued with unprecedented lengths. In the words of the exhibition's chief organizer Pietro Marani, the explicit purpose of the Accademia effort was to review whether "Venice gained some suggestions from Leonardo," or whether the artist "left something that leavened and matured after his departure." The curators argued that, although no unmistakable literary responses to his work survive from his presence in the city, Leonardo was in Venice in 1500 for a brief period of less than two months. There is, however, an awkward aspect to the argument: Leonardo's presumed visit to Venice took place at least seven or eight years before any Leonardesque features appear in Giorgione's paintings. To account for the time lag, the curators wondered what visual sources might have served as intermediaries between the two great instigators of the *terza maniera*. The international team of experts reconstructed Leonardo's hypothetical itinerary in the city, fleshing out ghostly speculations with still further speculations. The circumstantial evidence includes the preserved draft of a letter that Leonardo addressed to the Venetian Senate on how to defend Friuli against the threat of a Turkish invasion; Leonardo's successive employment by Venetians on matters of hydraulic engineering; Leonardo's likely assistance to his friend Fra Luca Pacioli's efforts to publish *La Divina Proportione* in the city; and so on. The catalogue essays implicitly refute what contributor Peter Humfrey calls Craig Hugh Smyth's "bold reversal" of the chain of influence, in this way preserving and refining Vasari's original claims. Smyth has argued that Leonardo could hardly have acquired familiarity with Venetian art in so short a time, with so many activities presumably on his plate. For Marani and his contributors, by contrast, a direct relationship indisputably existed between these two artists' styles and the direction of influence flowed from Leonardo to Venice.

In my opinion, the substantive question that the history of writing on Leonardo's and Giorgione's "styles" raises is not how to distinguish Leonardo's impact on Venetian art from its impact on him. Notwithstanding the endless replay of arguments, the relationship between Leonardo and Giorgione, or between Venice and Florence for that matter, is actually mooted. The surviving empirical evidence is unable either to corroborate or demolish Vasari's claim. Moreover, in the last century, Vasari's underpinning scheme that "manneria" names a relationship between the outwardly visible, tangible qualities of works of art and the inward structure of individual human consciousness, has been discredited so many times and in so many different ways that it is hardly worth rehearsing the arguments here. We should rather question the model of personal style itself when we ask why it is so difficult to decide who "influenced" whom.

The following chapter is a case study undertaken to explain the formal properties of works of art in a different framework, one predicated on cultural exchange and the religious function of images as instruments of devotion, rather than personal influence and its direct
manifestation of the artist's individual manner. As such, this study participates in a broader initiative within the discipline of art history to develop relativistic, transcultural approaches to the study of art. The paradox of values, as Heinrich Dilly aptly put it in a study of the institutionalization of art history, is that values which seemed absolute in their own time appear relative when seen from a different historical perspective; in this sense, values are, at the same time, both absolute and relative. Foucault argued against humanism because it prescribes a certain view of the human as a norm. How should our concern with the human be construed after the era of humanism? What, in the context of the present volume, counts as art in the early modern period after our disenchancement with the Enlightenment, after the end of the occidental tradition of humanism with its narrow, normative definition of art?

These large questions raise ethical questions for the historian that cut across all fields of material culture studies, including art history, archeology, and anthropology. The effort to understand art in a relativistic framework impacts on Renaissance art history in a number of specific ways. Renaissance art history, conventionally construed, evaluates aesthetic appreciation on the basis of a system of the fine arts that fully came into being only in the eighteenth century. Popular religious imagery, for example, is relegated to the distant periphery of art history, observes Fredrika Jacobs in an essay that proposes alternative strategies so that canonical works of art and popular religious objects of no aesthetic merit by current conventional standards, such as ex-votos, can be evaluated historically in the same frame of reference. Jacobs not only questions what should count as art, but also what the domain of “Renaissance” art history is. Hans Belting, perhaps the leading proponent of an anthropological approach that studies images as they are embodied in material form, proposes to distinguish the Renaissance period as the era when cult images give way to the “cult of images,” that is, to the appreciation of the artist and his work on purely aesthetic grounds. Yet, as Jacobs and others emphasize and this chapter will also make clear, even canonical works of art functioned as religious instruments during the early modern period and beyond. Belting's temporal scheme plays blindingly into old humanist values, Jacobs, citing a range of recent scholarship on miraculous images and other objects of popular piety in the Renaissance period, proposes a series of possible theoretical frameworks that do not resort to mutually exclusive categories such as “high” and “low” art. The kinds of approaches she advocates complement Michael Zimmermann’s call for a historical anthropology of art that retraces the history of cultural exchanges and encounters, such as the hegemonic strategies of Europeans who appropriated “exotic” art into their own frames of reference.

The next question is, how can we get from a general call for reform to concrete strategies? With the intention of developing a kind of art historical practice that seeks a historical definition of art as it is embodied in social practices, this chapter traces Leonardo’s descriptions of nature to previously unrecognized sources in Greek (Byzantine) ekphrastic descriptions of works of art and iconophilic justifications of images. By looking to the religious function served by the new style of naturalism grounded in the study of optics and anatomy that we associate with Leonardo around 1500, this chapter argues for developing trajectories of art historical investigation that consider broad epistemological and sociological frameworks, broader than any existing or even imagined disciplinary formation. Previous scholars have tried to elucidate the mystical strains in Leonardo’s paintings by relying on their own emotional response to the artist’s psyche, as they consider it manifested directly in the visual register. Most of these discussions take place under the rubric of “style.” But the format of the discussions — that is, the genre, or its “style” in the sense that Hayden White has popularized the term among historians — has a history of its own. This chapter will conclude with the argument that the historical trajectory points to a problematic of style that reintegrates contemporaneous, “secular” subjective interpretations into a historical framework of response to sacred images. When the act of beholding is construed within a historical framework, the socially constructed nature of subjectivity acquires a new resonance. Viewed in terms of an institutionally sanctioned discourse, the aesthetics of “style” raise further ethical considerations; historically speaking, the artifice of religious images has served as the means through which Christian ideology shapes individuals, engaging their senses in a devotional routine that promises to meet such classic ethical goals as self-realization, serving the highest good, and achieving true happiness.

Specifically, Leonardo da Vinci’s descriptions of nature were offered not as objective renderings of external appearances, which is the way his claims for painting are usually contextualized, but in terms of the emotional response that his images were intended to elicit from viewers, a topic that Mary Pardo touches upon in her contribution to this volume. Leonardo’s descriptions of nature, verbal and visual, while they are expressions of his lifelong scientific interests, also conjure up the interplay of the senses in the drama of the liturgy that Byzantine ekphrastic literature celebrates. Movement of the senses expressed through optical effects is a fundamental trope that Byzantine religious ekphraseis passed on to the Latin West and it is one of Leonardo’s central concerns. Through a re-reading of his defense of painting and the Greek (Byzantine) precedents of his arguments, I will suggest that implicit devotional metaphors
for the purification of the soul and its return to a state of grace are present in Leonardo’s paintings and his verbal descriptions of painting in ways that would have been widely understood by early modern audiences and beholders, educated and uneducated alike. In all likelihood, Leonardo’s understanding of painting is indebted to Byzantine (Greek) literary texts that the artist did not know directly and to visual sources that he probably did not recognize as originating in Byzantine pictorial formulae. Then why is it important to acknowledge the Byzantine sources of themes and arguments that had pervaded the West for hundreds of years before Leonardo came along?

A great deal has been published in the last twenty years on the conventions of art historical prose, although we are still caught in a double bind.12 First, the investigator’s own subjective experience of the works of art under study usually remains outside the framework of evaluation. Second, the discipline lacks the means (methodology, expectation, or routine) for evaluating how the investigator’s own “subjective experience” is socially constituted. At the moment of this writing, few authors acknowledge their own subject positions with respect to their objects of study, let alone justify them. Currently, the decision to include such a self-reflexive component is a matter of individual discretion, rather than a matter of ethical necessity or professional intellectual expectation. Yet, as historians, observes Joan Wallach Scott, it is important to recognize the socially constructed nature of our own experience, as well as the socially constructed nature of our subjects’ experience.

Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.13

Transposing Scott’s recommendations to the case of art, the primary analytical objective becomes understanding how the object frames historical beholders’ experience of it, and thereby to address the larger question of how the object constitutes its subjects. The second order objective, exponentially more complex but part of the same continuum, is to understand the socially constructed nature of the investigator’s experience, as it is expressed in/by the study. How does the historian establish difference from her object of study? How does this difference then operate in the text, and how does the difference established by the text constitute subjects who see and act in the world?

The historian of art is in a compromised situation whenever the object under study—unlike historical events by definition—survives, making “history” directly available to present-day experience. The historian’s direct experience of the object produces invaluable data, the status of which is deeply problematic. First and foremost, it calls into question the entire historical project—for how can an object simultaneously be in the past and the present? How does the historian link as well as distinguish between the two kinds of experience, one’s own in the present and the absent historical subject’s in the past, when the object was “new.” In the case of surviving material culture, generally speaking, the same object appears to live in a virtual reality because it occupies both present and past “worlds.”

Granting the privilege of universality to one’s own culture does not provide a solid epistemological foundation for an argument—it is only a rhetorical strategy that masks the point of real inquiry.14 Whatever their relationship, the contemporary historian’s experience and that of historical viewers cannot be the same. Yet art historians seldom acknowledge any difference at all. Art historians routinely link analyses of artistic composition directly to inquiries about the artistic identity of the individual maker. Consequently, questions of artistic production establish the intellectual horizons of our investigations, at the expense of other issues that are just as much a part of the history of aesthetics. Such is the heritage of connoisseurship, an interpretative method that is fundamentally concerned with the affective aspects of viewer response but treats works of art as if viewers were an ever-present, homogeneous entity, transcending all historical considerations save the artist’s self-expression.

Studies that emphasize iconography rebalance the same formula of form and artistic invention (the art and/as the artist), but they do not depart from it in principle. Iconographic studies have also avoided considerations of historical reception. Leo Steinberg’s study of Leonardo’s Last Supper, with its extended analysis of the relationship of form and religious content, would appear to be a notable exception to the ingrained pattern of scholarly exegesis. Yet Steinberg, too, treats the initial reception of the painting only cursorily, with respect to the shape of the space in which the mural is displayed. He substitutes the historian’s erudition for the mental horizons of the period viewer.15 In Steinberg’s own words, “it is assumed that intelligent reactions to the Last Supper constitute a source of insight into the work itself.”16 Now I do not wish to suggest that there is anything wrong with investigations of artistic production. Contemporary categories of subjective experience, however—those we routinely encounter in writings on connoisseurship and iconography—have long histories of their own.
This returns us to the problematic of constructing alternatives to the work-as-the-artist model for explaining “style.” What else can the formal properties of visual art yield in the way of historical evidence? Take, for example, one of Leonardo’s religious subjects, a painting about which surprisingly little has been written aside from addressing rather thorny issues of documentation which have still not been laid to rest. In 1483, the Milanese Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, a lay organization of the Franciscan Minors founded in 1475, commissioned the Virgin of the Rocks for the altar of its parent chapel in the church of San Francesco Grande (Plate 5). There are two extant versions of the altarpiece. Whether the earlier version, reproduced here, ended up in northern Europe through one particular gift exchange or another, the second version now in the National Gallery in London apparently occupied the chapel in San Francesco Grande throughout the sixteenth century.

The following is a case study of the Virgin of the Rocks from the standpoint of the ethical purpose that formal elements of the painting were meant to serve. For the purposes of the present discussion, it is unnecessary to put too fine a point on which painting was displayed in Milan, since the similarities of their subject and design far outweigh their differences. Notwithstanding nuanced revisions in the later version, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception received an image of a vision of Mary adoring the Christ Child accompanied by the Infant St. John the Baptist and an Angel. The four luminous, sculpturally conceived figures are set into a jewel-like woodland landscape with running water, and a bright and cloudless sky visible between the rocky crags. The image is based on the vision of St. Bridget of Sweden, one of several Franciscan texts with visual traditions. St. Bridget’s vision of the Virgin in the wilderness was fused with the mysterious woman of the Apocalypse (Revelations 1:12), shown with a crescent moon at her feet. 7

The synaxis (literally, get together) of the Immaculate Conception was imported from the Eastern Church, as were many of the visual traditions associated with it. 16 Surprisingly—or perhaps not, given the dominating role played by genre conventions in the field—ways in which sixteenth-century beholders responded to Leonardo’s altar painting in situ have not been discussed. Leonardo recorded his interest in Roger Bacon’s writings on the multiplication of species and other texts on formal optics during approximately the same period that the altarpiece commission was fulfilled. 19 But the complex, scientifically correct optical effects and other naturalistic details that the artist sought were not merely, or perhaps even primarily, regarded as manifestations of his inventive powers, as modern scholarship would lead one to assume. The painting’s intercessory religious role is in keeping with the original commission awarded by a lay organization for its main chapel. As late as 1576, a group of Milanese citizens dedicated a special devotion to the image to intercede during a plague, according to the testimony of the notary Giacomo Filippo Besta recorded at the height of the Catholic Reform movement. 20 Besta’s testimony has been widely cited in the scholarship on the Virgin of the Rocks, but only because it is the earliest identifiable reference to the image in situ. 21

Although additional documents may be awaiting discovery in the archives, the published excerpts are sufficient to testify that, well into the sixteenth century, the Virgin of the Rocks functioned as an intercessory image for a secular (in the period sense of worldly) audience. In this connection, it is important to bear in mind that San Francesco Grande was one of the greatest depositories of saints’ relics in Milan, located in one of the city’s most ancient and illustrious districts. The history of the building and its location were, moreover, important sources of civic pride in the sixteenth century. Bonaventura Castiglione’s Lives of Eleven Archbishops of Milan before St. Ambrose, which remains an unpublished chapter of his ancient history of Gaul published in 1541, expressed the opinion that the Franciscan Minors had constructed the choir of San Francesco Grande directly over an ancient basilica dedicated to all the martyr saints, a building that housed the bodies of the Milanese Sts. Nabore and Felice, who were martyred near the gate of Codl Vecchio ca. 290 and buried in the church which for many years bore their names. 22 Besta’s guidebook to the city, finished in 1598, gives the details of the saints’ lives just cited and he also understood that the site— not only the church, but the surrounding garden and forest— was consecrated in honor of Christ and all the saints for fifteen hundred years. 23 Besta cites another historical account, Cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto’s (d. 1585) Life of Milanese Archbishop St. Castriciano, which reports that the church, long known as San Francesco Camerio de’ Santi, was a place of great devotion for the city as well as the surrounding countryside: people went there to ask for health from their infirmities, “as written on a marble tablet to the left of the entrance to the choir.” In other words, the testimony that the site was a miraculous one was displayed next to the chapel in which the Virgin of the Rocks was itself on view. With its extensive landscape setting, the altarpiece in context was also a testimonial to the healing powers of the sacred setting of the church.

It is certain that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, San Francesco Grande was considered one of the most sacred centers of Latin Christianity since early Christian times. Noting that the building was consigned to the Franciscan Frati Minori in 1233, Besta describes the “sumptuous and great tabernacle” for housing the Sacrament, adding
that many indulgences were granted there on account of the numerous bodies of saints deposited in the tabernacle itself. This includes the ashes of St. Barnabas, which were translated there from the chapel dedicated to the saint by Milanese Archbishop Carlo Borromeo himself (leading figure of the Catholic Reformation during and after the Council of Trent’s decree on sacred images). That is to say, unlike many popular shrines that were the subject of ecclesiastical criticism and reform, this sanctuary carried the blessing of Church leaders themselves, starting with one of the most major figures of all, Carlo Borromeo. And throughout this period, Leonardo’s innovative design was in a prominent place in the building — whatever theological doctrines it proclaimed, neither they nor the symbolism was evidently seen as transgressive.

It is undeniable that Leonardo’s design, executed in two versions, served a religious function as an intermediary between the earthly and divine realms. As an instrument of religious devotion, the formal qualities of this sacred painting — Leonardo’s scientific treatment of light, dark, and color, his attention to such ephemeral aspects as the subtle gradations of light and shadow on flesh and water — had both symbolic value and a perceptual function. Together, these define the cognitive field of the viewer’s experience. Optical phenomena guided worshipers on an inner journey, exciting the imagination through external stimuli, moving the soul through contemplation of the external image to internal “imaginative vision” and toward salvation. To supplement Jean Scott’s terminology with Derrida’s, the picture organizes the subject and constitutes the subject’s world, but the viewer’s “constructed” experience is never saturated, because new visual discoveries and associations are always possible. The openness of the signifying process keeps the beholder engaged.

Modern iconographic studies further suggest that the visual imagery, though it is innovative and was specifically suited to the patrons’ desires, was accessible to a wide audience. In the present discussion of historical reception, it is important to emphasize that the individual visual motifs were commonplace and therefore widely accessible, although some viewers might not have interpreted the Confraternity’s ideology “correctly.” Leonardo’s interweaving of such conventional imagery as a grotto, sacred spring, mirror brooch, crescent moon, and the play of color, light, and shadow, spoke volumes to a broad audience. In effect, the painting as an icon played the same role for the faithful as a relic did: it demonstrated the basic Christian doctrine of salvation by offering a concrete manifestation of the real presence of the Divine. The idea that “art” is the product of human contact with the Divine is not new (in the neo-Aristotelian Scholastic literature, the exemplum is given to the artist by God), but Leonardo’s interpretation of that contact in terms of his privileged scientific understanding of nature is.

More significant historically than any particular interpretation for understanding the initial horizon of viewer expectations is the procedure of looking for symbolic meanings — that is, the meditational practices described by St. Augustine in De doctrina christiana (3.5.9), by St. Gregory in In Canticum, St. Bonaventure, and numerous other sources. To take a specific example of the various connections that religious beholders of the time could have made while contemplating Leonardo’s painting, the most salient symbol in the Virgin of the Rocks (aside from the holy figures themselves) is the grotto, an age-old locus throughout Magna Graecia for access to the Divine.

Viewing Leonardo’s painting in its performative context of lay devotion establishes a different horizon of interpretation for understanding the “style” of the painting than one confined to the relationship between the artist’s inward process and their perceptible manifestation. The culturally aligned meaning of color, light, and other optical phenomena in Byzantine art, as documented in the ekphrastic literature, also suggests numerous parallels with Leonardo’s paintings, despite the great visual differences between Byzantine and Italian Renaissance pictorial style. If the lifeliness of the image, as described by Byzantine ecclesiastical writers, conveyed theological truths at the experiential level, then the possibility also exists that Leonardo’s painted descriptions of nature were meant to do the same thing — that is, provide material signs of the presence of the spiritual world.

Leonardo’s descriptions of nature, and his claims for painting generally, are usually contextualized as objective renderings of external appearances. Yet, as the producer of these effects, Leonardo saw himself from the standpoint of reception, claiming that the painter so faithfully imitates the created world that he “transmutes himself into the actual mind of nature.” This act of transformation enables the painter to render truthfully nature’s most ephemeral and subtle details by his art.

Similar claims for sensate judgment are at stake in both Greek Orthodox justifications of religious images and Leonardo’s polemical defense of painting as a form of scientific truth that appeals to the sense of sight. Byzantine apologists for images saw icons as representations of the truth. Leonardo saw scientific painting as doing the same thing. It is not just Leonardo’s defense of painting as the superior art, however, that bears a striking resemblance to Byzantine justifications of images. The Byzantine ekphrastic literature that makes use of metaphors of light, color, and other natural phenomena reverberates in Leonardo’s texts, too.
Radically different visual traditions developed in Greek and Latin Christianity on the basis of the same Greco-Roman heritage in literature and science. But artistic resemblances due to a shared textual tradition need not be visual—they can be conceptual. Eleven centuries of intensive cultural interaction between Greek and Latin Christendom—a significant portion of which took place on the Italian peninsula—produced two cross-fertilized but institutionally segregated visual traditions. Modern disciplinary subdivisions between Byzantine and Renaissance art—corroborated by Vasari’s total rejection of the “modern” Greek manner and rooted in the humanist culture his position exemplifies—discourage inquiry into the interactions that actually transpired between them.

The upward movement of the soul is a fundamental symbolic expression for the doctrine of salvation throughout Christendom. 
30 Since early Christian times, the Church used the metaphor of “motion” to convey its deepest theological message through appeals to the senses, above all the sense of sight. A cluster of fundamental Christian metaphors focused on light metaphysics and dynamis, the implied movement of the image due to the presence of the soul, was communicated to Christian worshipers in the Greek East and Latin West through optical and coloristic effects.
31

While I do not wish to discount the important differences between texts written five hundred years apart—any more than I wish to discount the great differences in imagery between Latin-speaking parts of the former Roman Empire and Greek-speaking regions under Byzantine control—here my concern is with the ontology implied when movement is described by Chorikios, Psellus, and many other writers as visual delight. This movement is psychological in the sense that it takes place entirely within the beholder, just as in the Latin West, but the imagery that catalyzes it was not based on the direct imitation of natural appearances.

The significant point of similarity between Leonardo’s descriptions of nature in painting and Byzantine ekphrasis is the role of light, color, and other sensed data in the spectator’s experience of the image. For the Byzantines, the actual materials—not so much the illusionism as the actual colors themselves interacting with their environment—were responsible for moving the viewer. The shimmering effect of light passing over the surface of mosaics in a darkened church interior lit by candles is analogous to the effect Leonardo envisioned in his depictions of smoke, dust, transparent water, mists, and other natural phenomena would have on his audience. Although we lack textual evidence for most artists, we may reasonably infer that the same held true for Giorgione, Correggio, and many of their contemporaries. Similarities of “style” by this account are not solely dependent, if dependent at all, on the direct transmission of ideas from artist to artist. To say the same thing another way, the likenesses we perceive among works of art do not necessarily depend on an indexical relationship of artists, one leaving his “mark” on another, as if artists behaved like natural phenomena in a continuous chain of cause and effect, cause and effect.

The icons made by Byzantine artists may look different from Leonardo’s religious images, but they share an underlying, widely held assumption that human understanding of the Divine is reached through the senses, above all, through the most noble sense of sight. Luminosity was the vehicle of a Christian iconography of light. Texts known in both the Latin West and the Greek East, like the Pseudo-Dionysian Celestial Hierarchy perhaps known directly to Abbot Suger, facilitated cultural exchange and appropriation of language about the formal qualities of images and materials. In the Latin world, the popular rhetorical figure of descriptio, which is the medieval term for ekphrasis, was reserved largely for paradoxical descriptions of materials and processes. Far from negating the divine power of icons, evidence of artistry provided Byzantine writers with opportunities for inventing new theological metaphors. And vice versa, the expectation of ekphrastic commentary must have invited the conspicuous display of artistry. Across a broad spectrum of religious orders and writers, sensation was the path to achieving a heightened state of religious awareness.

It bears repeating that, viewed in terms of an institutionally sanctioned discourse, the aesthetics of “style” examined in this study raises ethical considerations on two different levels. Historically, the artifice of religious images has served as the means through which Christian ideology shapes individuals, engaging their senses in a devotional routine that promises to meet such classic ethical goals as self-realization, serving the highest good, and achieving true happiness. Methodologically, considering the religious function of canonical works of art, in the manner that this case study has done, addresses the question of what my ethical responsibilities are as a scholar, as an engaged intellectual. What kind of knowledge do I wish to be responsible for producing? My aim in sketching these historical and cultural continuities has not been to collapse the distinctions between Latin and Greek Christianity, but rather to set them into a dialectical relationship with one another. The socially constructed nature of subjectivity acquires an entirely new resonance in this historical context. The modernist convention of subjective response to works of art that relies on language to articulate emotion, feeling, and other experiential states deserves to be reintegrated into the historical framework out of which it emerged, most of all because the constructed relationship...
between subjects and objects provides a very important insight into the whole art historical and museological enterprise. Resemblances between Leonardo’s optical color and the effect of shimmering glass tesserae in a Byzantine church interior, for example, or the way in which both pictorial traditions appeal directly to the judgment of the eye, have been noted by others—recently, Paul Hills characterized the commonalities of Venetian style in terms of their common appeal to visual judgment. 34

As Hills understands well, without a framework of interpretation to situate and judge their historical significance, however, such intuitions function merely as perceptive asides in an institutionally sanctioned discourse centered on the problematic assumption that an artist’s “style” solely or primarily reflects individual temperament and technical proficiency—regardless of the lack of surviving historical data to enable such claims, regardless of the universal discreditation of the theory on which such observations about style depend. 35 The intellectual responsibility of the art historian—our ethical charge is to be self-reflexive—entails negotiating the difference between the traditional organization of our inherited archives according to stylistic categories and our contemporary understanding of the past.

Notes
1 London, British Museum, Codex Arundel, fol. 229v. Translated in Richter, ed. The Literary Works, 3rd edn, 2: 457, no. 1525; cited in Marani, “Leonardo in Venice,” 23. The most extensive effort to identify evidence of Leonardo’s brief stay in Venice has been published by Jaynie Anderson, Giorgione, who argues that Giorgione was indebted to several of Leonardo’s original themes and compositions. Certainly the sharing of inventions among artists is the most productive avenue to investigate their contact, though whether direct or indirect through the circulation of drawings seems to me impossible to distinguish in this case.
3 Crowe, and Cavalcaselle, History of Painting, 139, cited in Humfrey, “Leonardo,” 40. The most recent amendment to Vasari was first proposed by Craig Hugh Smyth, whose interpretation—oscillating between the more familiar extremes—reverses Vasari’s claim that Giorgione’s teacher Bellini shaped Leonardo’s style, Smyth, “Venice and Florence,” 222–3, citing the Virgin of the Rocks as evidence that Leonardo may have visited Venice as early as ca. 1433; cited in Humfrey, “Leonardo,” 42.
6 On the current status of long-standing debates over the value of style, and in particular, the development of Vasari’s concept to fit a Social Darwinist scheme of artistic progress that we might find tenable today, see Elmer, “Style”; Summers, “Form”; and Saucierländler, “From Stilus to Style.”
7 Dilly, Kunstgeschichte als Institution, cited by Zimmermann, “Art History as Anthropology,” 169.
8 Jacobs, “Rethinking the Divide.”
9 Belting, Presence and Likeness, 476–90. More recently Belting has developed an anthropological approach to embodied (versus virtual, disembodied) images considered in the global sphere in which the human circulates, an approach in which art history is bracketed as the shadow of a religion: Belting, BildAnthropologie.
11 The research presented in the main body of this essay is condensed and revised from “Aesthetics before Art: Leonardo Through the Looking Glass.”
12 Among recent contributions see Carrier, Artwriting; Preziosi, Rethinking Art History; Meexy, The Practice of Theory; Holly, Past Looking; and Sussloff, The Absolute Artist.
14 See White, The Content of the Form.
15 Steinberg, “Leonardo’s Last Supper.”
16 Ibid., 293.
17 Levi D’Ancona, The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception, 64–5, on Leonardo’s second version of the painting. On this iconography, see also Robertson, “In Fararminibus Petreia.”
18 D’Ancona, The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception.
19 In his earliest writings on optics, ca. 1345–56, and MS A, ca. 1490–92; on which see Brizio, “Correlazioni.” On Leonardo’s knowledge of Bacon, see also Lindberg, Theories of Vision, 154–66.
21 The innovative opinion today is that Besta refers to the panel later bought by Gavin Hamilton that now hangs in the London National Gallery, see Cannell, “Leonardo da Vinci, ‘Virgin of the Rocks,’” 105.
25 For a succinct and well-informed introduction, see Ringboom, “Devotional Images.” Among notable recent contributions, see Botvinick, “The Painting as Pilgrimage.”
26 Derrida, “Signature Event Context.”
27 See Cahn, Masterpieces, 438, n. 8, noting that similar principles were applied to poetry, for example, by Petrarch, Invective, ed. Ricci, Rome, 1950, 69–70.
6

Sfumato and acuity perspective

JANIS BELL

Leonardo has been celebrated as the paragon of the intellectual artist: he provided an example of consummate artistic ability working in accordance with an articulated philosophical and theoretical program. If there is one aspect of his painting that has been held to demonstrate this accord, it is the so-called technique of sfumato. 1

In his Lives of Italian artists from the fourteenth century to his own day, Giorgio Vasari distinguished three historical epochs or styles which he labeled as “the first,” “the second,” and “the third style,” thereby expanding the concept of an artist’s personal style to shared elements of concept and technique between artists living at the same time. Leonardo was acknowledged as the founder of the third style; sfumato was one of its essential features. Therefore, in this chapter we reexamine Leonardo’s sfumato to better understanding its significance in Leonardo’s personal evolution and his impact on later generations of painters.

Sfumato derives from the Italian word for smoke, fumo, and the verb sfumare which means to rub or blend together the edges of colors the way smoke diffuses. Only in relatively modern times did the term sfumato come into use as a substantive, where it was used to describe the effect of murky shadows obscuring the definition of edges. 2 The association of sfumato with darkness continued unchallenged until sometime in the early 1960’s, when, after the cleaning of the London Virgin of the Rocks, E. H. Gombrich entered into a heated debate about Leonardo’s sfumato with the restorers at the National Gallery. These debates were published in a series of articles in which Gombrich, culling texts from Leonardo’s writings and historical discussions of dark varnishes, argued that the restorers had removed a darkly tinted covering to the painting which was intended by Leonardo to reduce the clarity of edges, details, and colors, to make it seem as if the figures and landscape were seen through a veil of murky atmosphere. 3 Gombrich rightly pointed out that our historical concept of sfumato was based upon Vasari’s account of