

1478, a Year in Leonardo da Vinci's Career

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By

Edoardo Villata

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-6393-6

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6393-3



Support for this publication has been provided by Robert Simon Fine Art, New York; Gian Marco Savio Antichità, Trino; Longari Arte, Milano

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vi
Foreword	xv
1. Introduction. A Sheet at the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi... 1	
2. Young Leonardo: Verrocchio's pupil and co-worker	13
3. Leonardo as Verrocchio's co-worker: available dates	18
4. Leonardo and Memling: the competition with Flemish painting	37
5. Problems of chronology.....	44
6. In Verrocchio's workshop: from pupil to co-worker	57
7. Pistoia	72
8. Young Leonardo as a sculptor	90
9. "Incominciai le due Vergine Marie"	132
10. The Benois Madonna	152
11. Epilogue.....	165
Photograph Credits	172
Bibliography	174
Index of Names.....	195

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES

I. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies of heads and machinery, with personal notes, 1478. Pen and brown ink over leadpoint on paper, mm 201 x 268. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, f. 446 E recto

II. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies of machinery, 1478. Pen and brown ink over leadpoint, mm 268 x 201. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, f. 446 E verso

III. Leonardo da Vinci, Study of a landscape, 1473. Pen and two brown inks over leadpoint on paper, mm 196 x 286. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, f. 8 P recto

IV. Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, 1475-1476. Oil on poplar wood, cm 38,1 x 37. Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art

V. Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, 1475-1476. Oil on poplar wood, cm 38,1 x 37. Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art

VI. Leonardo da Vinci, Madonna of the carnation. Oil on poplar wood, cm 62 x 48,5. Munich, Alte Pinakothek

VII. Hans Memling, Madonna and Child. Oil on panel, cm 81 x 55. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

VIII. Leonardo da Vinci, Annunciation. Oil and tempera on poplar panel, cm 98 x 217. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

IX. Leonardo da Vinci, Drapery study. Brush with brown ink wash, gray tempera and white gouache on gray-brown prepared linen, mm 164 x 169. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, f. 420 E

X. Andrea del Verrocchio and Leonardo da Vinci, Cupid with a sleeping Nymph (or Venus?), 1469. Metalpoint, pen and pale brown ink, brush and brown wash on paper prepared with buff-cream color, mm 148 x 258. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, f. 212 E

XI. Leonardo da Vinci (?), Madonna and Child with two Angels black chalk and metalpoint on paper, mm 190 x 190. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 445 E

XII. Andrea del Verrocchio (and Leonardo da Vinci ?), Madonna and Child with two Angels. Tempera on panel, cm 91 x 71. London, The National Gallery

XIII. Andrea del Verrocchio, Biagio d'Antonio (and Leonardo da Vinci?), Tobias and the Angel. Tempera on panel, cm 84,4 x 66,2. London, The National Gallery

XIV. Detail of plate XIII

XV. Detail of figure 28

XVI. Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, Madonna Adoring the Christ Child (Ruskin Madonna). Tempera and oil on panel transferred on canvas, cm 106,7 x 76,3. Edinburgh, national Gallery of Scotland

XVII. Andrea del Verrocchio and Lorenzo di Credi, Madonna and Child with Saint John and Saint Donatus (*Madonna di Piazza*). Oil on panel, cm 196 x 196. Pistoia, Cathedral

XVIII. Andrea del Verrocchio (?), Angel. Terracotta, cm 36,5 x 32,8 x 5,5. Paris, Musée du Département des Sculptures

XIX. Leonardo da Vinci, Angel. Terracotta, cm 37 x 37 x 4,5. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Sculptures

XX. Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo da Vinci (and Biagio d'Antonio?), Baptism of Christ. Tempera and oil on poplar wood, cm 180 x 152. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

XXI. Andrea del Verrocchio (?), Madonna and Child. Terracotta, cm 49 x 27 x 24.5. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

XXII. Andrea del Verrocchio, Study for a Madonna and Child. Black chalk and dark brown chalk on cream prepared paper, mm 283 x 193. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 444 E

XXIII. Leonardo da Vinci, Old man reading a book (Saint Jerome?). Terracotta, cm 51 x 45. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

XXIV. Andrea del Verrocchio, Sleeping Youth. Terracotta, cm 36 x 67 x 25. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst

XXV. Leonardo da Vinci, Study for a Madonna and Child with a cat. Pen and brown ink on paper, mm 131 x 95. London, British Museum, 1856.0621.1 recto

XXVI. Leonardo da Vinci, Study for a Madonna and Child with a cat. Pen and brown ink on paper, mm 131 x 95. London, British Museum, 1856.0621.1 verso

XXVII. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for a Madonna and Child with a cat. Leadpoint, pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 232 x 175. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat-Hellen, AI 152; NI 17721

XXVIII. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for a Madonna and Child. Leadpoint. Pen and brown ink on paper, mm 202 x 157. London, British Museum, 1860.0616.100 verso

XXIX. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for a Madonna and Child. Leadpoint. Pen and brown ink on paper, mm 202 x 157. London, British Museum, 1860.0616.100 recto

XXX. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies of a male figure, human and animal heads, and for a Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist. Pen and brown ink on paper, mm 405 x 290. Windsor Castle, Royal Library, 12276 recto

XXXI. Leonardo da Vinci, Madonna and Child (Benois Madonna). Oil on panel transferred on canvas, cm 49,5 x 31. St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum

XXXII. Hans Memling, Madonna and Child with two Angels. Oil on panel, cm 57 x 42. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

XXXIII. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for an Adorations of the Shepherds. Metalpoint, pen and brown ink on pale pink prepared paper, mm 222 x 152. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat-Hellan, AI 658, NI 1776

FIGURES

1. Giovanni di Antonio di Banco, called Nanni di Banco, Assumption of the Virgin and the Passing of the Girdle to St. Thomas, 1414-1421 (detail before restoration). Florence, Santa Maria del Fiore, Porta della Mandorla

2. Detail of plate I

3. Giovanni di Antonio di Banco, called Nanni di Banco, Assumption of the Virgin and the Passing of the Girdle to St. Thomas, 1414-1421: Florence, Santa Maria del Fiore, Porta della Mandorla

4. Andrea del Verrocchio, Model for the Monument of Cardinal Niccolò Forteguerri, 1476. Terracotta, cm 39,4 x 26,7. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

5. Giovanni di Michele da San Pietro a Monticelli, Wooden banks (detail), 1476. Piesca, Cathedral, Sagrestia Vecchia

6. Leonardo da Vinci, Study of a landscape, figures and a personal note 1473. Black chalk, pen and brown ink on paper, mm 196 x 286. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, f. 8 P verso
7. Alesso Baldovinetti, Adoration of the Shepherds, 1460. Fresco. Florence, Santissima Annunziata, Chiostrino dei Voti
8. Jan van Eyck, Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata. Oil on vellum on panel, cm 12,4 x 14,6. Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection.
9. Workshop of Lorenzo di Credi, Madonna and Child. Tempera on panel, cm 73 x 57. Bergamo, Pinacoteca dell'Accademia Carrara
10. Workshop of Lorenzo di Credi, Madonna and Child. Tempera on panel, cm 80 x 59,7. Miami, Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami
11. Pietro Perugino, The Miracle of Giannantonio Perazio da Rieti's daughter, 1473. Tempera on panel, cm 79,1 x 56,9. Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria
12. Lorenzo di Credi, Portrait of a Woman (Ginevra di Giovanni di Niccolò?). Oil on poplar wood, cm 58,7 x 40. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art
13. Andrea del Verrocchio, Lady with Flowers. Marble, cm 60 x 48 x 25. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello
14. Hans Memling, Portrait of a man with a medal (Bernardo Bembo?). Oil on panel, cm 29 x 22. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten
15. Hans Memling, Saint John the Baptist. Oil on panel, cm 30 x 24. Munich, Alte Pinakothek
16. Hans Memling, Allegory of the Chastity. Oil on panel, cm 36 x 29. Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André
17. Leonardo da Vinci, Drapery study. Brush with brown ink wash, gray tempera and white gouache on gray-brown prepared linen, mm 206 x 281. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, n. 2256
18. Leonardo da Vinci, Drapery study. Brush with brown ink wash, gray tempera and white gouache on gray prepared linen, mm 266 x 233. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, n. 2255
19. Francesco di Simone Ferrucci, Faith (detail). Marble, cm 55 (high). Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André
20. Andrea del Verrocchio, Drapery study, Brush with brown ink wash, gray tempera and white gouache on linen, mm 282 x 181. Princeton (N. J.), The Estate of Barbara Piascka Johnson

21. Detail of plate VIII

22. Andrea del Verrocchio. Tomb of Giovanni and Piero de' Medici, 1469-1474 (detail). Florence, San Lorenzo

23. Andrea del Verrocchio, David with the head of Goliath. Bronze with partial gilding, cm 120 (high). Florence. Museo Nazionale del Bargello

24. Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Battle of naked men, bulin on paper, mm 409 x 592, inv. St. Mal. 1602.

25. Andrea del Verrocchio, Head of a young woman. Charcoal, brush and white gouache, pen and brown ink on paper prepared with bydd-cream color, mm 324 x 273. London, British Museum, 1895.0915.7851

26. Andrea del Verrocchio, Head of a boy. Red chalk, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 2009 x 181. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 130 E

27. Andrea del Verrocchio, Madonna and Child. Tempera and oil on panel, cm 75,8 x 54,6. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

28. Andrea del Verrocchio, Biagio d'Antonio (and Leonardo da Vinci?), Madonna and Child with Five Saints and two Angels (*Pala del Maglio*). Tempera on panel, cm 168 x 177,5. Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum.

29. Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, Madonna and Child. Tempera on panel transferred to hardboard, cm 73 x 50,2. Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art

30. Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, Madonna and Child with Four Saints, before 1479. Tempera on panel, cm 161 x 155. Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo

31. Detail of plate XII

32. Lorenzo di Credi, Annunciation. Oil on panel, cm 16,2 x 60,7. Paris, Musée du Louvre

33. Lorenzo di Credi, The Miracle of St. Donatus. Oil on panel, cm 16,2 x 53,5. Worcester (Mass.), Worcester Art Museum

34. Pietro Vannucci called Il Perugino, The Crucifixion and the Saints Jerome and Mary Magdalene (Galitzin Triptych). Oil on panel transferred on canvas, cm 101,3 x 127,5. Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art

35. Leonardo da Vinci, Head of a Madonna. Leadpoint, pen and brown ink, brush with pale brown wash and white gouache on paper, mm 281 x 200. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 428 E

36. Lorenzo di Credi (Follower of?), Madonna and Child, oil on panel, cm 97,7 x 74,9. Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art

37. Lorenzo di Credi, Madonna and Child with a Pomegranate (Dreyfus Madonna). Oil on panel, cm 16,5 x 13,4. Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art

38. Lorenzo di Credi, Study of a half-length Madonna. Silverpoint, brush, brown ink and white gouache on paper, mm 190 x 167. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kupferstich-Kabinett, C 52

39. Filippino Lippi and Sandro Botticelli, Madonna and Child (Corsini Madonna). Tempera on poplar wood, cm 74,5 x 54,5. Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art

40. Leonardo da Vinci, Study of a Saint John the Baptist. Silverpoint, brush and white gouache on blue prepared paper, mm 178 x 162. Windsor Castle, Royal Library, 12571 recto

41. Lorenzo di Credi, Study for the Saint John the Baptist in the *Madonna di Piazza*. Metalpoint, pen and brown ink, brush and white gouache on pink prepared paper, mm 276 x 128. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, RF 455

42. Filippino Lippi, Madonna and Child with Four Saints (*Pala degli Otto di Pratica* Louvre), 1486. Tempera on panel, cm 355 x 225. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

43. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for an Allegory of the Fortune. Metalpoint, pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 249 x 202. London, British Museum, 1895. 0915. 482

44. Detail of plate XIX

45. Detail of plate XIX

46. Leonardo da Vinci, The Virgin of the Rocks, 1489 (detail). Oil on poplar wood, cm 189,5 x 120. London, The National Gallery

47. Detail of plate XX

48. Francesco di Simone Ferrucci, Tabernacle, 1483. Marble, cm 250 x 130 x 15. Perugia, Church of Santa Maria a Monteluca

49. Lorenzo di Credi, An Angel and a Study for Drapery. Metalpoint, brush, brown ink and white gouache on paper, mm London, The British Museum, 1860. 0616.29

50. Desiderio da Settignano, Madonna and Child (Foulc Madonna). Marble, cm 59 x 45: Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art

51. Desiderio da Settignano, Bust of a Laughing Child. Marble, cm 31 x 21,15 x 13. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum
52. Workshop of Desiderio da Settignano, Reliquiary Bust of Saint Constance. Gilded and painted wood, cm 55 x 47 x 27. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Sculptures
53. Detail of plate XXI
54. Detail of plate XXI
55. Detail of plate VIII
56. Andrea del Verrocchio (?), Madonna and Child. Terracotta, cm 49 x 27 x 24.5. London, Victoria and Albert Museum
57. Francesco di Simone Ferrucci, Personal notes and studies for a Madonna and Child and other subjects. Black chalk, pen and brown ink on pink prepared paper, mm 278 x 200. Chantilly, Musée Condé, D 22 recto
58. Desiderio da Settignano, Tabernacle of the Sacrament, before 1461. Marble. Florence, San Lorenzo
59. Donatello, Deposition (detail of a pulpit), 1461-1466. Bronze. Florence, San Lorenzo
60. Leonardo da Vinci, Old man reading a book (Saint Jerome?), back. Terracotta, cm 51 x 45. London, Victoria and Albert Museum
61. Andrea del Verrocchio, Incredulity of Saint Thomas, 1467-1483. Bronze partially gilded, cm 242 x 140 x 105. Florence, Chiesa e Museo di Orsanmichele
62. Detail of plate XXIII
63. Lorenzo di Credi, Drapery study. Metalpoint, brush with brown ink and white gouache on paper, mm. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 493 E
64. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for an Adoration of the Shepherds. Silverpoint, two pens and two brown inks on pale purple prepared paper, mm 173 x 121. Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle, 21488 r
65. *Rime del arguto et faceto poeta Bernardo Belinzzone fiorentino*, Milan, Filippo Mantegazza, July 15, 1493, c. aiiiii r
66. Workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio. Bust of an old man. Stucco, cm 59,1 high. London, Victoria and Albert Museum
67. Detail of plate XXIII

68. Leonardo da Vinci, Study of a human skull, (detail) 1489. Pen and brown ink on paper, mm 183 x 130. Windsor Castle, Royal Library, 19058 recto
69. Leonardo da Vinci, Study of a human skull, (detail) 1489. Pen and brown ink on paper, mm 183 x 130. Windsor Castle, Royal Library, 19058 verso
70. Leonardo da Vinci, Madonna and Child. Black chalk or leadpoint, pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 126 x 111. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 421 E recto
71. Follower of Andrea del Verrocchio (Michele Marini da Fiesole?), Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist. Painted terracotta, cm 75,7 x 57,2. Washington, National Gallery of Art
72. Leonardo da Vinci, Study for a Christ Child. Black chalk or leadpoint, pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 126 x 111. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 421 E verso
73. Andrea del Verrocchio, Putto with a Dolphin, Bronze, cm 70,3 x 50,5 x 35. Florence, Musei Civici Fiorentini-Museo di Palazzo Vecchio
74. Follower of Leonardo da Vinci, Copies after lost compositions by Leonardo. Pen and two brown inks, red chalk on paper, mm 202 x 151. Windsor Castle, Royal Library, 12564 recto
75. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for a Madonna and Child with a cat. Black chalk or leadpoint, pen and brown ink on paper, mm 281 x 199. London, British Museum, 1860. 0616.98 recto
76. Francesco Galli called Napoletano, Madonna and Child. Oil on panel, cm 41 x 30. Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera
77. Ferrando Yañez de Almedina (and Lombard follower of Leonardo?), Madonna and Child with a lamb. Oil on panel, cm 52 x 60. Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera
78. Leonardo da Vinci, Study for a Madonna and Child. Leadpoint, pen and brown ink on paper, mm 355 x 253. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, RG 486 recto
79. After Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for a Madonna and Child. Pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 107 x 113. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 17050 E
80. After Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for a Madonna and Child. Pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 89 x 119. Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, 17052 E

81. Mathis Gothart Nithart called Grünewald, Madonna and Child, 1519. Oil on canvas on panel, cm 186 x 150. Stuppach (Bad Mergentheim), Parish Church.
82. Bartolomeo Della Porta called Fra Bartolomeo, Madonna with Child and Saint John the Baptist. Oil on panel, cm 58,4 x 43,8. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art
83. Attributed to Donatello, Madonna and Child (Dudley Madonna). Marble, cm 27,2 x 16,5. London, Victoria and Albert Museum
84. Lorenzo di Credi, Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist. Oil on panel, cm 49 x 40. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister
85. Leonardo da Vinci, The hanged Bernardo Baroncelli, 1479. Black chalk, pen and brown ink on paper. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat-Hellen, AI 659; NI 1777
86. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for an Adoration of the Shepherd. Leadpoint or black chalk, pen and two brown inks, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 117 x 135. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, 256 recto
87. Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for an Adoration of the Shepherds. Leadpoint or black chalk, pen and two brown inks, brush and brown wash on paper, mm 110 x 125. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, 259 recto
88. Follower of Botticelli, Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist. Tempera on panel, cm 161,3 x 137,4. Columbia (S. C.), Columbia Museum of Art

FOREWORD

There are essentially two reasons for this book being published at this time: the first one is ideological, while the second is more practical in nature.

The ideological reason is my desire to keep this work distinct from the numerous publications spawned by the fifth centenary of Leonardo da Vinci's death, celebrated in 2019. I consider it a way of highlighting that I did not intend to write this just for that occasion. This is, much more simply, an art historical essay, centred on the specific theme of Leonardo's youth; more precisely, it explores some of the themes glimpsed on a mutilated sheet of the *Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi* (446E), dated 1478. This was a very important year for Leonardo, during which he obtained his first relevant public commission (which he never actually started), witnessed the Pazzi conspiracy and the bloody repression that followed, probably opened his own independent workshop, and later began to work on two paintings of the Madonna. One of them, almost certainly, is the *Benois Madonna* at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, a work that marks a radical turn in Leonardo's artistic career. The task of this book is to illustrate the story of Leonardo's development, culminating in 1478; that is the reason why the book ends before arriving at the *Adoration of the Magi*, which belongs to a phase of more accomplished maturity for the artist.

To say that this is an art history text may seem an exceedingly banal statement: because Leonardo is the subject, however, it is not. More and more I have realised that the traditional "Leonardo-scholar" approach is not always the most appropriate if we want to understand and contextualise the historical role of Leonardo, in its essence, and not as a scientist who paints but – as Vasari pointed out – as a painter who also has scientific or sometimes pseudoscientific interests, that are important for us insofar as they help to clarify his artistic choices. I then approached the topic using the tools and methodological beliefs that always assist me in my work, regardless of the subject examined. As it will become clear to the attentive reader, I have privileged stylistic analysis, while always relating it to the appropriate historical context and documentary evidence.

I am in fact sure, as Roberto Longhi argued, that masterpieces are always “relative”, by which he meant that they are engaged in relations of give and take with other works of art, which is the task of the art historian to recognise and illustrate. Obviously, this is particularly difficult when the artist in question has such a vast and ever-increasing bibliography as Leonardo.

Given the non-encyclopaedic character of this work, I did not think it appropriate to overwhelm the reader (who I presume is already acquainted with the subject) with torrential notes that would be essentially self-serving (there are only very few exceptions to this rule). Since much of my text is a discussion about the most recent reconstructions and interpretations, I opted to focus on the literature of the last 20 years, starting from which one can easily go backwards. The historical bibliography, which I am so familiar with, is explicitly mentioned whenever it is deemed necessary for the *hic et nunc*.

My ambition is therefore to consider Leonardo (in a specific and limited phase of his career) as a “normal” great artist, curious about innovations, and ready to learn as much from his contemporaries (both Florentine and Flemish) as from the great tradition from which he himself originated. In recent times I have reflected considerably on Leonardo’s formative years. Looking back on my short Leonardo monograph of 2005, I realise now that this period of his life was approached in a generic and ultimately unsatisfactory way (most of all for me). However this book may be received, I consider that I have filled that gap.

The relevant space devoted in this discussion to sculpture is logical, because Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo’s master, was probably the greatest Florentine sculptor of his generation (his only real competitor was Antonio del Pollaiuolo), and because thinking of images as three-dimensional became a life-long habit for Leonardo. Philippe Sénéchal, reviewing the manuscript in a private letter addressed to me, has provided what I consider to be the best assessment of this concept: “*S’il est fondamentalement peintre, il prend toujours les formes en suggérant qu’elles sont vivantes dans l’espace, comme si l’air circulait autour, bref, sa pratique de sculpteur l’a marqué à jamais.*”

The second, more practical reason for this book appearing now is that it was almost entirely written during the very long quarantine that characterised the year 2020: a strange and complex period, in which anguish for the general situation and the forced quiet of the lockdown

created the condition for a “frenzied and quite desperate” (*matto e disperatissimo*, to use a famous expression by Vittorio Alfieri) effort of writing. It is only a chance that 1478, too, was a year of severe plague epidemic in Italy. Additionally, this has been a time of important changes in my own life. I hope that the effort of abstraction from the contingent situation that I have imposed on myself has produced a text which is clear and organic in its logical development; if that is the case, only my present and future readers will be able to tell.

Of course, this work benefits from the precious collaboration of many friends and colleagues. The entire text has been read and commented on (mostly in a positive and sometimes even enthusiastic way) by Raffaele Argenziano Bisogni, Chiara Cassinelli, Cecilia Cavalca, Chrysa Damianaki, Andrea Franci, Francesca Pasut, Philippe Sénéchal, Vilmos Tátrai, and when divergent opinions have emerged, I have always noted so. Francis Ames-Lewis, Claire Farago and Jonathan Nelson, in addition to their critical reading, also offered significant linguistic suggestions, which accompanied the critical reading by Elena Miserotti, and the general revision, skilfully and enthusiastically undertaken by Studio Traduzioni Dott. Annita Brindani, Busseto (Parma), and ultimately by Laurence Fenton.

I received a great deal of advice and material assistance as well as many suggestions, opinions and facilitations from Laura Aldovini, Tiziana Andina, Vanna Arrighi, Isabelle Artaud, Roberto Contini, Gigetta Dalli Regoli, Marzia Faietti, Corinna Tania Gallori, Robert G. La France, Zoryana Mishchiiy, Stefaan Missinne, Tommaso Mozzati, Veruska Picchiarelli, Marco Pierini, Susi Piovanelli, Cristina Quattrini, Neville Rowley, Dóra Sallay, Cristina Seghi, Lei Song, Michele Tavola, Giovanni Valagussa, Lucy Withaker, Diana Ziliotto.

I am particularly grateful to Adam Rummens and the Cambridge Scholars Publishing Board, who, once my proposal was approved, decided to publish the book at their own risk; many thanks also to the editor Amanda Millar. My gratitude goes equally to Marco Longari, Gian Marco Savio and Robert Simon, who generously contributed to the expense for the numerous images that accompany this volume.

Vercelli, 27 October 2020
Edoardo Villata

1.

INTRODUCTION. A SHEET AT THE GABINETTO DEI DISEGNI E DELLE STAMPE DEGLI UFFIZI

The sheet 446E at the Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi (GDSU) shows on the recto [plate 1] the heading of a letter at the top, two sketches of men in profile just below, and a personal note dated 1478 at the bottom; on the right-hand side, there are a few studies of a machine for throwing darts.

On the verso [plate 2], there are more studies of civilian and military machines. An exploration of this sheet, almost a palimpsest, may provide considerable insight into the important issue of Leonardo's early activity in Florence. The handwritten notes are no less important, for they allow us to date these drawings to a precise moment in his career.¹

¹ The most important bibliography about f. 446E at the GDSU: Ch. Ravaisson-Mollien, "Les écrits de Léonard de Vinci", in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXIII, 1881, I, 225-248, 331-349, at 242; J. P. Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1883), I, 343-345 n. 663, II, 422 n. 1363; G. Uzielli, *Ricerche intorno a Leonardo da Vinci, Serie Seconda* (Rome: Salviucci, 1884), 265-266; P. Müller-Walde, *Leonardo da Vinci. Lebensskizze und Forschungen über sein Verhältniss zur Florentiner Kunst und zu Raffael* (Munich: Hirth, 1889), 79; P. Ferri, *Catalogo riassuntivo della Raccolta di Disegni antichi e moderni posseduti dalla R. Galleria degli Uffizi di Firenze* (Rome: Fratelli Bencini, 1890), 164; I. Lermolieff (G. Morelli), *Die Galerie Borghese und Doria Pamphili in Rom* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1890), 225; G. Séailles, *Léonard de Vinci l'artiste et le savant 1452-1519. Essai de biographie psychologique* (Paris: Perrin et C., 1892, ed. 1906), 23; G. Uzielli, *Ricerche intorno a Leonardo da Vinci, Serie Prima*, 2nd ed., (Turin: Loescher, 1896), 49; A. Rosenberg, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Bielefeld and Leipzig: Velhagen und Klasing, 1898), 32; E. Müntz, *Léonard de Vinci. L'artiste le penseur le savant* (Paris: Hachette, 1899), 514; E. Solmi, *Leonardo (1452-1519)* (Florence: Barbèra, 1900), 35; B. Berenson, *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters* (London: Murray, 1903), 2nd ed.

(Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1938), II, 111 n. 1016; G. Gronau, *Leonardo da Vinci* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1903, ed. 1914), 15; E. Jacobsen, "Die Handzeichnungen der Uffizien in ihren Beziehungen zu Gemälden, Skulpturen und Gebäuden in Florenz", *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, XXVII, 1904, 112-132, 401-419, at 418; E. McCurdy, *Leonardo da Vinci* (London: Bell, 1904) 6; M. Herzfeld, *Leonardo da Vinci der Denker Forscher und Poet* (Jena: Diederichs, 1911), XV; G. Poggi, *I disegni della R. Galleria degli Uffizi. I disegni di Leonardo da Vinci* (Florence: Olschki, 1912), XVII; J. Thiis, *Leonardo da Vinci. The Florentine Years of Leonardo and Verrocchio* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1913), 148-152; O. Sirén, *Leonardo da Vinci the Artist and the Man* (New Heaven, London and Oxford: Yale University Press, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1916), 30; L. Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie riguardanti la vita e le opere di Leonardo da Vinci in ordine cronologico* (Milan: Allegretti, 1919), 11; W. von Bode, *Studien über Leonardo da Vinci* (Berlin: Grote, 1921), 85; T. Cook, *Leonardo da Vinci Sculptor. An Illustrated Essay on the Albizzi Madonna, Formerly Known as the Signa Madonna, carved by Leonardo in 1478* (London: Humphreys, 1923), 38-43; G. Calvi, *I manoscritti di Leonardo da Vinci dal punto di vista storico cronologico e biografico* (Bologna: Zanuchelli, 1925) 2nd ed., ed. by A. Marinoni (Busto Arsizio; Bramante, 1982), 45, 48-49; A. Venturi, *Storia dell'arte italiana*, IX, *La pittura del Cinquecento*, tome I (Milan: Hoepli, 1925), 125; R. Annand Taylor, *Leonardo the Florentine* (London: The Ricland Press, 1927), 48, 489; W. Suida, *Leonardo und sein Kreis* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1929), 25, 86; E. McCurdy, "The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci", *Apollo*, XII, 1930, 173-182, 249-257, at 176; W. R. Valentiner, "Leonardo as Verrocchio's Co-worker", *The Art Bulletin*, XII, 1930, I, 43-89, at 60; *I Manoscritti e i Disegni di Leonardo da Vinci pubblicati dalla Reale Commissione Vinciana*, Disegni, ed. by A. Venturi (Rome: La Libreria dello Stato, 1928-1952), II, 1930, 15, 25, VII, 1952, 35; H. Bodmer, *Leonardo da Vinci. Des Meisters Gemälde und Zeichnungen* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 1931), 115; K. Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci. An Account of His Development as an Artist*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 20, 26 (new edition revised and introduced by M. Kemp, London: Penguin Books, 1988, 62-63); *Mostra di Leonardo da Vinci. Catalogo* (Milan; Comune di Milano, 1939), 148; S. Bottari, *Leonardo* (Bergamo Milan and Rome: Istituto d'Arti Grafiche, 1942), 8; C. Fusero, *Leonardo* (Milan: Corbaccio, 1943), 82-83; O. H. Giglioli, *Leonardo. Iniziazione alla conoscenza di lui e delle questioni vinciane* (Florence: Arnaud, 1944), 92; R. Langton Douglas, *Leonardo da Vinci. His Life and His Pictures* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1944), 10, 72; A. E. Popham, *The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946, ed. by M. Kemp, London: Pimlico, 1994), 13, 129, n. 127; 9-47, particularly p. 16; C. Baroni, *Tutta la pittura di Leonardo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1952, ed. 1958), 11, 25; A. Bovi, *Leonardo filosofo artista uomo* (Milan: Hoepli, 1952), 68; G. Brunetti, *Disegni*, in *Quinto centenario della nascita di Leonardo da Vinci. Mostra di disegni, manoscritti e documenti* (Florence: Biblioteca medicea Laurenziana, 1952), 15-16; G. Castelfranco, in *Mostra didattica leonardesca* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello

Stato. 1952), p. 28; Leonardo da Vinci, *Scritti scelti*, ed. by A. M. Brizio (Turin: Utet, 1952, 2nd ed. 1966), 621; B. Berenson, *Disegni di maestri fiorentini del Rinascimento in Firenze* (Turin: Ilte, 1954), tav. XXXV; E. H. Gombrich, *Leonardo's Grotesques Heads*, in *Leonardo. Saggi e ricerche*, ed. by A. Marazza (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1954), 197-219, reprinted in Idem, *The Heritage of Apelles. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 65; L. H. Heydenreich, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Basel: Holbein Verlag, 1954), vol. II, III; G. Castelfranco, *La pittura di Leonardo da Vinci* (Milan: All'insegna del Pesce d'Oro, 1956), 16; *Mostra di disegni di grandi maestri*, foreword by G. Sinibaldi (Florence: Giuntina, 1960), 47; K. Eissler, *Leonardo da Vinci. Psychoanalytic Notes on the Enigma* (New York: International University Press, 1961), 105-109; G. Castelfranco, *Studi vinciani* (Rome: De Luca, 1966), 76; A. Ottino Della Chiesa, *L'opera pittorica completa di Leonardo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1967), 111; C. Pedretti, *Leonardo. A Study in Chronology and Style* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973), 33; C. Gould, *Leonardo. The Artist and the Non-Artist* (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975), 32-36; C. Pedretti, "Eccetera, perché la minestra si fredda", XV *Lettura Vinciana* (Florence: Giunti, 1975), 10-12; Idem, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci. A Commentary to Jean Paul Richter's Edition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), I, 380, II, 327-328; A. Chastel, *Le Madonne di Leonardo*, XVIII *Lettura Vinciana* (Florence: Giunti, 1979), reprinted in Idem, *Leonardo da Vinci. Studi e ricerche 1952-1990*, ed. by G. Caccioli (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 115; M. Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci. The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* (London and Toronto: Dent, 1981), 44, 79-90, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2006, 23; M. Rosci, *Leonardo* (Milan: Mondadori 1979), 27; G. Dalli Regoli, *Catalogo*, in *I disegni di Leonardo da Vinci e della sua cerchia nel Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi in Firenze*, ed. by C. Pedretti and G. Dalli Regoli (Florence: Giunti, 1985), 55-58; F. Caroli, *Leonardo. Studi di fisiognomica* (Milan: Leonardo, 1990), 180; A. Cecchi, entry no. 6.6 in *Il disegno fiorentino al tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, exhibition catalogue (Florence), ed. by A. Petrioli Tofani (Venice: Marsilio, 1992), 134-135; J. Shell, *Leonardo da Vinci* (London: Scala Publications, 1992), 19; G. Derenzini, *La "sinistra mano" di Leonardo. Scritture e lettere dei manoscritti vinciani* (Brescia: Centro Ricerche Leonardiane, 1993), 9; A. Vezzosi, *Leonardo da Vinci. Arte e scienza dell'universo* (Milan: Electa/Gallimard, 1996), 41-42; D. A. Brown, *Leonardo da Vinci. Origins of a Genius* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 210; C. Vecce, *Leonardo* (Rome: Salerno, 1998, 2nd edition 2006), 60; *Leonardo da Vinci. I documenti e le testimonianze letterarie*, ed. by E. Villata (Milan: Ente Raccolta Vinciana, 1999), 11; P. C. Marani, *Leonardo. The Complete Paintings* (New York: Abrahms, 1999), 83; M. E. Rosheim, *L'automa programmabile di Leonardo*, XL *Lettura Vinciana* (Vinci, April 15, 2000, Florence: Giunti, 2001), 21; F. Viatte, *Les premières Vierges à l'Enfant*, in *Léonard de Vinci. Dessins et manuscrits*, exhibition catalogue ed. by F. Viatte and V. Forcione (Paris: Réunion des Musées

There is no doubt that Leonardo began to use this sheet from the top left of the recto, where he wrote, evidently, the heading of a letter: “*Fieravantj di Domenico in Firenze e chompal amantissimo quanto mio j [...] unicho amj*” (Jean Paul Richter’s translation is loose but very clever: “... at

Nationaux, 2003), 74-76, at 74; Ch. Nicholl, *Leonardo da Vinci. The Flights of the Mind* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 124-125, 151; G. Fornari, *La bellezza e il nulla. L’antropologia cristiana di Leonardo da Vinci* (Genua: Marietti 1820, 2005), 126-146; S. Cremante, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Florence: Giunti, 2005), 108; E. Villata, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2005), 14; E. Villata, entry no. III.17 in *Leonardo da Vinci la vera immagine. Documenti e testimonianze sulla vita e sull’opera*, exhibition catalogue ed. by V. Arrighi, A. Bellinazzi and E. Villata (Florence: Giunti, 2005), 130-131; G. Dalli Regoli, entry no. I.B.b in *La mente di Leonardo. Nel laboratorio del Genio Universale*, exhibition catalogue ed. by P. Galluzzi (Florence: Giunti, 2006), 88-89; R. Battaglia, *Leonardo e i leonardeschi* (Milan and Florence: Il Sole 24 Ore-Education.it, 2007), 38-39; H. Tanaka, *Leonardo da Vinci. L’arte la vita e il doppio*, ed. by F. Lizzani (Rome: Feltrinelli, 2008, or. ed. Tokyo 1978), 59-60; L. J. Feinberg, *The Young Leonardo. Art and Life in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 88; L. Syson, *The Rewards of Service. Leonardo da Vinci and the Duke of Milan*, in *Leonardo da Vinci Painter at the Court of Milan*, exhibition catalogue (London: The National Gallery, 2011), 12-53, at 16; G. Fornari, *Mediazione, Magia, Desiderio in Leonardo e nel Rinascimento* (Poggio a Caiano: Cartei e Bianchi, 2012), 323-344; E. Villata, *Leonardo* (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 2015), 8, 58; M. Versiero, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Florence: Mandragora, 2016), 56; J.-P. Isbouts and Ch. Heath Brown, *Young Leonardo. The Evolution of a Revolutionary Artist, 1472-1499* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2017), 87-88, p. 16; C. Vecce, “The Fading Evidence of Reality: Leonardo and the End”, *Insights*, 10, 1017, 2-10, at 5; C. C. Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci Rediscovered* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), I, 201-208; C. Bertelli, *Leonardo inventa una nuova figura di Maria*, in *Leonardo. La Madonna Benois dalle collezioni dell’Ermitage*, exhibition catalogue (Perugia), ed. by T. Kustodieva and C. Bertelli (Milan: Skira, 2019), 19-27, at 22; P. Brioiest, *Les audaces de Léonard de Vinci* (Paris: Stock, 2019), 87; V. Delieuvin, *La licence dans la règle*, in *Léonard de Vinci*, exhibition catalogue ed. by V. Delieuvin and J. Frank (Paris: Musée du Louvre-Hazan, 2019), 90-167, at 91; E. A. Eisenberg, “A Verrocchio Sculpture as a Source for Leonardo and Raphael: the Evidence of Drawings”, *Master Drawings*, 57, 2019, I, 5-32, at 27; R. Giorgi, *Le Madonne di Leonardo* (Milan: Ancora, 2019), 15; M. Cursi, *Lo specchio di Leonardo. Scritture e libri del genio universale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020), 64-66; G. Dalli Regoli, “Codicillo vinciano: a Leonardo quel che è di Leonardo...”, *Raccolta Vinciana*, XXXIX (2021), 89-111, at 97; R. Langton Douglas, *Leonardo da Vinci. His “San Donato of Arezzo and the Tax Collector”* (London: Chiswick Press, without year of edition), 28-29.

Pistoja, Fioravante di Domenico at Florence is my most beloved friend, as though he were my [brother]"²).

The pretensions to elegance of the handwriting, so rich in flourishes, suggest that Leonardo intended to write a somewhat formal letter.³

² The reading of the last three words, or, actually, fragments of words, is entirely conjectural: as Gerolamo Calvi, the greatest Leonardian paleographer, wrote in 1925, "I was not able to plausibly read the last part of the second line" (Calvi, *I manoscritti*, 1925, ed. 1982, 49 footnote 14).

³ In the *Formulario di lettere et di orationi volgare con la proposta et risposta* (*Model of letters and vernacular orations, with question and answer*) by Bartolomeo Miniature, first published in Bologna, Ugo Ruggeri, June 23, 1485, and reprinted many times until 1584, almost always under the much more famous and appealing name of Cristoforo Landino, we can find the expression "Frater amantissime" (beloved brother), as opening of letter models for the following cases: "Good introduction when the writer intends to request a favour of a friend or relative" (*Exordio optimo quando si volesse adimandare uno servitio a uno amico o parente*), "Introduction with the complete letter and reply to another one received from one of your friends with very kind words" (*Exordio con la epistola fornita et risposta d'un'altra ricevuta da uno tuo amico con parole humanissime*), "Proper and fine introduction when writing to someone with whom you have not closeness or familiarity, in order to gain benevolence" (*Exordio optimo et bello quando s'avesse a scrivere a una persona con la quale non s'havesse gratia o familiarità captando benivolentia*), and in this case the *incipit* is "Nobilis vir et uti frater amantissime" (I quote from the edition printed in Florence, Bartolomeo de' Libri, 1490, cc. b5verso, c1verso, c2verso). We can also find (c. f2verso) a "Compare carissimo" (my dear crony), *quando si volesse ottenere uno servizio da uno compare o altro amico* ("when you want to obtain a favour from a crony or another friend"). On the *Formulario di lettere e orationi*, also known as *Formulario di epistole*, see C. Landino, *Scritti critici e teorici*, ed. by R. Cardini (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974), I, 177-180, and especially M. C. Acocella, "Il Formulario di epistole missive e responsive di Bartolomeo Miniature: un secolo di fortuna editoriale", *La Bibliofilia*, 113, 2011, 3, 257-292. Of course, the text by Bartolomeo Miniature, often under the name of Cristoforo Landino, appears in print much later than Leonardo's work on sheet 446E at the GDSU, and cannot, therefore, be considered a direct source, but it is indicative of both epistolographical conventions and Leonardo's cultural level. In any case, the "formulario di pistole" (models of letters) annotated by Leonardo among his books in a sheet of the Codex Atlanticus datable around 1495, was almost certainly one of the editions of this text, as rightly assumed by C. Vecce, *La biblioteca perduta. I libri di Leonardo* (Rome: Salerno, 2018), 71. See also *Lettres de Léonard de Vinci aux princes et aux puissants de son temps*, ed. by P. C. Marani (Rome: De Luca, 2019), 20; C. Amendola, entry in *La biblioteca di Leonardo*, ed. by C. Vecce (Florence: Giunti, 2021), 276.

Moreover, Vanna Arrighi points out helpfully that Fieravante, or Fioravante di Domenico, could be a member of the commercial firm of the Fioravanti family, well documented in connection with the Medicis. In late-fifteenth-century epistolography “*amantissimo*” is substantially equivalent to our “my dear”.⁴ Therefore, we can discard as baseless any interpretations tending to identify in these two lines a window into the intimate life of Leonardo, in which Fieravanti is arbitrarily transformed into a lover. However, Leonardo always had a difficult time with letter composition, as shown by the tormented drafts that accompany his entire career; in this case, too, it is likely that he stopped, dissatisfied, as soon as he started and tried, apparently without success, to improve the text. This can be seen in the lines below “*In dei nom[ine] and amant ... quanto*”, and again in the extreme margin at the bottom, mutilated because the initial portion was written in the lower left corner, now missing: “*e chompa' in Pistoja*”.⁵

In 1925, Gerolamo Calvi convincingly juxtaposed these lines with other sheets from the Codex Atlanticus, similar in their rich and flourishing writing and therefore chronologically proximate: “Vante di Francesco da Castello Fiorentino e comp” (f. 1112 verso, ex 400 verso, ca. 1478); “Francesco d’Antonio in Firenze e compa’ in Bacchereto deono dare fiorini m cccc iiii” (f. 878 verso, ex 320 verso a); “In Dei nomine amme<n>” (1054 recto, ex 379 recto a).⁶

⁴ The first to suggest such an interpretation was Thiis, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 148-152, followed by Annand Taylor, *Leonardo the Florentine*, 48, 489, who proposed the absurd translation “Fioravante, the son of Domenico, who is *amantissimo* towards me as any maid, I could love”; then follows, with a professional psychoanalytical approach, Eissler, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 1961, 105-109, abided *en passant* by Kemp, 44, D. A. Brown, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 210 footnote 4, Tanaka, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 59, and Briost, *Les audaces*, 16. Even more extreme is Fornari, *La bellezza*, 126-146, and *Mediazione, Magia*, 323-344, who, on the basis of a very imaginative interpretation of this sheet, elaborates a sort of amorous novel, in a prose that perhaps would like to sound lyrical.

⁵ Pedretti, *Commentary*, II, 422, believes this line of text to be independent from the two above, although the common reference to one or more “companions” would seem to unify them.

⁶ Calvi, *I manoscritti*, ed. 1982, 48-49. These three sheets from the Codex Atlanticus referred to by Calvi are dated around 1478, precisely because of their proximity to the GDSU 446E now in question, by Pedretti, *Leonardo da Vinci Codex Atlanticus. A Catalogue of Its Newly Restored Sheets* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1978-1979), II, 1979, 260, 287, 159.

It is possible that the vertical fold, which divides sheet 446E into two parts, was made by Leonardo himself when he decided to write the letter; even if this were the case, the fold did not establish itself as a characteristic element beforehand, given that Leonardo used the sheet in its entire extension. In fact, he drew the reclining head of a young man on the sheet while most of it was still blank, in a substantially central position. Therefore, we must deduce that this sketch was drawn when only the aforementioned writing was present on the otherwise blank paper. The profile of a mature man on the left was probably drawn later, inserted in the remaining space, and as such it should not be viewed in a strictly dialectical relation with the youthful face. At a later time, Leonardo added the note below, now mutilated, written in any case when the sheet was still used unfolded: “...bre 1478 *Inchominciai le 2 vergine Marie*” (in Richter's translation: “[In the autumn of] 1478 I began the two Madonna [pictures]”⁷). The verso, rotated 45 degrees to the left, is instead used for technological drawings, which are continued on the recto.

However, while the studies on the verso [figure 2] occupy all of the available space, those on the recto are confined to the left half, proof that in the meantime Leonardo had again, and this time more energetically, folded the sheet, perhaps to carry it more easily. As Gigetta Dalli Regoli has pointed out, based a suggestion by Carlo Pedretti, a rounded “d”-rod is visible above the lost portion, which would lead us to deduce the missing month as December. This is the first known occurrence of Leonardo's habit of indicating the day on which he has begun a work, not necessarily pictorial, which is considered particularly important. In fact he wrote at a later time, for instance, “*adi 23 d'aprile 1490 cominciai questo libro e ricominciai il cavallo*” (i. e., the equestrian monument in honour of Francesco Sforza: Ms. C. f. 15v, in Richter's translation “On the 23rd of April 1490 I began this book, and recommenced the horse”⁸), “*Libro titolato de trasformazione, cioè d'un corpo 'n un altro senza diminuzione di materia. Principiato da me Leonardo da Vinci a dì 12 di luglio 1505*” (Ms. Forster I, f. 3r: “Book entitled About transformation of a body into another without loss of matter”), and “*Cominciato a Milano addì 12 di settembre 1508*” (Ms. F, f. 1r).

⁷ Richter, *The Literary Works*, II, 422 n. 1383.

⁸ *Ibidem*, II, 14 n. 720.

Having introduced the material structure of this sheet, we can now delve into its contents, following the sequence of Leonardo's interventions as indicated by the chronological order here proposed.

The writings on the lower part of the page, with the exception of the memorandum on the "two Madonnas", seem to be conceptually linked to the heading at the top, considered above: first Leonardo repeats the "amant[issimo] quanto", and then he refers to one or more "companions in Pistoia", which seems to be connected with the attribute "compare" given to Fieravante di Domenico. For some reason, possibly professional or economic in nature, Leonardo had relations with Pistoia in a period towards the end of 1478.⁹

Once Leonardo interrupted the incipit of the letter he had just begun writing (another attempt at which can be found at the bottom), the sheet became available for other uses. Leonardo, therefore, used it to draw the face of a young man, which occupies more or less the centre of the white space. Too often this drawing has been read in close and exclusive relationship with the profile of a mature man added on the left, as if it were one of the many profiles of ephebic, young men facing grim, old men which populate Leonardo's sheets. However, the considerations already made clearly demonstrate that the profile, outlined somewhat differently, was added at a slightly later date. The head of the languidly reclining young man was conceived as isolated, not in "dialogue" with the other. The stylistic interpretation proposed by Carlo Pedretti links the two faces, considered together, to the studies for an *Adoration of the Shepherds*, a very early study for what would become the *Adoration of the Magi*¹⁰; so he proposes a dating between 1480 and 1481, when Leonardo was engaged in the preliminary phase of the altarpiece developed for the Augustinians of San Donato a Scopeto, left unfinished in 1482. It seems difficult to assert the precedence of the drawing with regard to the annotation about the beginning of the two Madonnas at the end of 1478 but, certainly, the chronological distance must be minimal. This conclusion is strengthened by the proximity of the

⁹ It is very unlikely that one of these "companions" could have been the poet Antonio Cammelli, called Il Pistoia, mentioned by Leonardo in a sheet of the Codex Atlanticus (Vecce, *Leonardo*, 60)

¹⁰ Pedretti, "*Eccetera, perché*", 10-12; the sheets from the Codex Atlanticus mentioned in the previous note also present sketches for an *Adoration of the Shepherds*, put in relation by the same scholar with an altarpiece commissioned to Leonardo in the same 1478, which will be discussed hereafter.

technological studies which, as already observed, were drawn later, at a time close to the other sheets of the Codex Atlanticus. The last note is more accurately datable at the end of the 1470s, according to the precise suggestion of Gerolamo Calvi, which was then taken up by Pedretti.

The young man seen from behind is not addressing the profile of a mature man, nor does he allude to any intimate confession by Leonardo. It is rather a quick but sufficiently precise record of a detail of the Porta della Mandorla in Santa Maria del Fiore, by Nanni di Banco [figures 1-2]: the almond-holding angel in the lower right bends the neck in the same way, exhibits the same dreamy air and even the same rebel tuft on the forehead.



1. Detail of figure 3 (before restoration)

2. Detail of plate I

In itself, this should not be particularly surprising: surely young Leonardo had always looked carefully at the Florentine artistic tradition, from Giotto to Ghiberti to Donatello. Nonetheless, this specific interest, just at this very moment – that is, almost certainly, around 1478 – is neither accidental nor casual. The composition elaborated by Nanni di Banco for the northern door of Florence Cathedral [figure 3] was in fact at that very time being studied by Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo's master, and therefore by his workshop. This interest relates to a work intended for the Pistoia Cathedral: the cenotaph of Bishop Domenico Forteguerri. The cenotaph, as is known, was commissioned to Verrocchio in 1477, after a

fairly complicated story, finally resolved by Lorenzo de' Medici who, by the weight of his authority, assigned the work to Andrea. However, the first terracotta model, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London [figure 4], is documented as early as 1476¹¹, and in this work the Christ in *mandorla* is supported by four angels in its upper part, making it read explicitly as a tribute to the composition of the Porta della Mandorla.



3. Giovanni di Antonio di Banco, called Nanni di Banco, Assumption of the Virgin and the Passing of the Girdle to St. Thomas, 1414-1421: Florence, Santa Maria del Fiore, Porta della Mandorla

¹¹ J. Pope-Hennessy and R. Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: Her Majesty's Stationer Office, 1964), I, 164-166 (with full bibliography); A. Butterfield, *The Sculptures of Andrea del Verrocchio* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 228; D. A. Covi, *Andrea del Verrocchio. Life and Work* (Florence: Giunti, 2005), 121-128; G. Fattorini, entry no. 8. 2 in *Verrocchio il maestro di Leonardo*, exhibition catalogue (Florence), ed. by F. Caglioti and A. De Marchi (Venice: Marsilio, 2019), 234-235; Ch. Hubbard and P. Motture, entry no. 12 in *Verrocchio Sculptor and Painter of Renaissance Florence*, exhibition catalogue (Washington), ed. by A. Butterfield (Washington, Princeton and Oxford: National Gallery of Art, Washington-Princeton University Press, 2019), 150-153.



4. Andrea del Verrocchio, Model for the Monument of Cardinal Niccolò Forteguerri, 1476. Terracotta, cm 39,4 x 26,7. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

The convergent interest of Verrocchio and Leonardo towards this masterpiece of early fifteenth century sculpture in Florence suggests that the younger artist had not yet left his master's workshop; the reference to the "companion(s) in Pistoia" also confirms that both of them were at the time present in that town.

It is known, thanks to the documents, that Leonardo became an independent master in 1472, but that he still offered his services inside Verrocchio's workshop until at least 1476; in 1481 he was documented as the owner of an atelier his own, albeit a smaller one. Furthermore, the year 1478, mentioned at the bottom of the sheet in the passage relating to the beginning of two paintings representing the Madonna, is also the year in which Leonardo obtained his first important public commission.

The next chapter will be dedicated to a short examination, with some new considerations, of Leonardo's training with Andrea del Verrocchio, and his early activity as his co-worker. I will then analyse a terracotta model conserved today at the Louvre, which is closely connected to the development of the Forteguerra cenotaph; this is with some frequency attributed to Leonardo by recent scholars, and it allows us to investigate some critical issues related to his sculptural production. Finally, I will investigate the pictorial projects begun in 1478, a time which turns out to be a crossroads for Leonardo: firstly the altarpiece commissioned in January of that year, of which only possible preparatory studies remain, and then "the two Virgin Mary", one of which would almost certainly appear to be the *Benois Madonna* at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, which seems to be the first turning point in Leonardo's development as a painter.