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## “Some Marvelous Thing”: Leonardo, Caterina, and the *Madonna of the Rocks*

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“Some Marvelous Thing”: Leonardo, Caterina, and the *Madonna of the Rocks*

by

Michael Thomas Jahosky

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Liberal Arts  
Department of Humanities  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this labor of love and passion to the two principal sources of my inspiration and teachers of love: God and my wife Sarah. Without the model Jesus has provided for me throughout this writing project, I would have failed long ago. Sarah, you have never left my side: neither at my conference, nor my thesis proposal defense, nor the actual defense of the following work. You have supported me every day and have not complained once, instead always encouraging me to be diligent and to never stop pursuing my dreams. You are my muse, my best-friend, my wife, and my strength: thank you from the bottom of my heart. *Sempre Roma*, my love.

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“Some Marvelous Thing”: Leonardo, Caterina, and the *Madonna of the Rocks*

Michael Thomas Jahosky

ABSTRACT

Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* (or *Madonna of the Rocks*, c.1486) is a masterpiece. Scholars have been unclear, however, about the unconventional cave setting and where Leonardo's inspiration came from. The *Song of Songs* mentions a beautiful bride being invited to come “*into the wall of rocks*,” and the apocryphal Gospel of James (written around 150 A.D.) tells the story of Jesus being born in a cave outside of Bethlehem. But Leonardo's own personal cave experience in 1481 spurred his desire to find literature that placed Jesus' birth in a cave, or a “wall of rocks.” This thesis focuses on a specific discourse prominent in Leonardo scholarship which has taken place over the years, chiefly concerning Leonardo's strange cave background in the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

## INTRODUCTION:

### “OGNI PITTORE DIPINGE SE”

*“The painter’s works will have little merit if he takes for his guide others pictures, but if he will learn from natural things he will bear good fruit...those who take for their guide anything other than nature—mistress of masters—exhaust themselves in vain.”<sup>1</sup>*

There is some marvelous thing within each piece of Renaissance art. Leonardo da Vinci was, as Giancarlo Maiorino called him, a “daedalian mythmaker” due to the number of disciplines he dabbled in and the number of his creative outpourings.<sup>2</sup> Leonardo’s principal discipline—and training—was in the art of painting. Leonardo’s love of nature and appreciation of its terrestrial power manifested itself most potently in the *Virgin of the Rocks*, painted between 1483 and 1486.<sup>3</sup> There was a Tuscan proverb which read “*ogni pittore dipinge se,*” prominent during Leonardo’s lifetime. It translates from Italian as “every painter paints himself,” and it is important to the present study of Leonardo da Vinci.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonardo’s Codex Arundel, 387r or see Kemp, 83.

<sup>2</sup> Referring to his book *Leonardo da Vinci: The Daedalian Mythmaker*.

<sup>3</sup> This thesis will refer to the painting as *The Virgin of the Rocks* from hereafter, despite the titles being equally appropriate. I am also using the Louvre version. In Italian, the painting is known as *La Vergine delle Rocce*.

This proverb was well-known to Leonardo as it originated in Florence and was being discussed in intellectual circles.<sup>4</sup> Marsilio Ficino, Thomas Aquinas and Cicero have all, to some degree, addressed the issue of automimesis.<sup>5</sup> Leonardo, however, was the most articulate in addressing this proverb, and his primary conviction was that painters are governed by the connection between the soul and body. He goes on to explain that the soul is the spring of each person's judgment rather than the ethereal center. The soul, wrote Leonardo, predetermines for the artist's hand the shape of a man on canvas.<sup>6</sup> There is a connection between the auto-mimetic account of the cave and Leonardo's conviction that nature was *maestra* ("female teacher of all things") discernible in the *Virgin of the Rocks*. The cave background was unique to the painting exactly because it was rooted in a real-life experience with Leonardo's *maestra*, and his utilizing this scene makes it a work of "self-representation"—or auto-mimesis.

With this understanding comes another intriguing facet of Leonardian thought that surely exerted influence on his cave encounter in 1481 and thus on the *Virgin of the Rocks*. "*Fantasia*—active, combinatory imagination—which continually recombines sensory impressions...in unending abundance," was unquestionably part of Leonardo's creative genius.<sup>7</sup> *Fantasia*, or a "creative

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<sup>4</sup> Ficino and Poliziano most notably. Later in the thesis, I quote a sermon from Savonarola that deals with this aphorism. It was a prominent proverb from the late 1470's-1490's.

<sup>5</sup> This is what it is known as today.

<sup>6</sup> Zwijnenberg, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Kemp, 146.

imagination,” was one of Leonardo’s defining traits and an obvious characteristic of the cave scene in the *Virgin of the Rocks*. Furthermore, *fantasia* pervaded all of Leonardo’s projects whether it was in writing, painting, or inventing; creative imagination was an indispensable factor in creating art. One of the most fascinating contradictions about the cave scene—a scene which not only astounded Leonardo’s contemporaries but historians today as well—is that Leonardo’s broad and varied imagination conjured forth both holy and unholy images in deciding upon this scene. I argue that the “fear and desire” that Leonardo felt during the autumn of 1481 embodies this idea poignantly. Evidence for this can be found in Leonardo’s own notebooks, in which he said “If the painter wishes to form images of animals or devils in the inferno, with what abundance of inventions his mind teems.”<sup>8</sup> Leonardo’s creativity and personal ambitions to prove himself within the “New Athens” (Milan) had much to do with the stylistic choices of his paintings, but none more profoundly than what historians can find in the cave of the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

Take, for example, a small example of Leonardo’s imaginative mind: “The basilisk is so cruel that when it cannot kill animals with its venomous glance, it turns to the herbs and plants, and fixing its gaze upon them withers them up.”<sup>9</sup> In Leonardo’s notebooks, there is an imaginarium of mythical beasts, *profezie*, *favole*, and autobiographical, literary reflections such as his encounter with the cave in 1481. We should understand in approaching the subject of Leonardo’s

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<sup>8</sup> Leonardo’s notebooks, see Kemp 147.

<sup>9</sup> Kemp, 140.

creative outpourings that many, many factors influenced his decisions in painting. For the present, however, we should take this evidence—and that presented further within the work—and weigh it with the scholarly consensus concerning one of Leonardo's most mysterious backgrounds, found in the Marian masterpiece the *Virgin of the Rocks*. The “fear and desire” which Leonardo felt in the cave exerted emotional influences on the painting of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, which historians can classify as a work of automimesis, or “self-representation.” The influence of *fantasia* on the *Virgin of the Rocks* will be argued, for Leonardo argued that the power of the artist to create “fictions which signify great things” was profound. In presenting viewers with an unconventional scene for a Virgin and Child, Leonardo was able to create and present allegorical devices (such as the cave) to express profound truths.<sup>10</sup> All of this was rooted in observation of nature, “mistress of masters.”

Leonardo wrote assuredly concerning his belief that the soul forms the human body, and wrote that a painter can only “protect himself through all his study from falling into the same faults in the figures created by him” by studying from nature, whom he called *maestra* of “all things.”<sup>11</sup> For example, a painter could not claim he knows how to paint a realistic Tuscan landscape if he never spent any time in its beautiful countryside, full of olive trees, osier willows, and vineyards. How could an artist accurately depict flora in their natural habitat

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<sup>10</sup> Kemp, 148 and Leonardo's notebooks; see Kemp for source.

<sup>11</sup> Zwijnenberg, 54, quoting Leonardo's notebooks. For nature as *maestra*, please see Nicholl's biography of Leonardo 54-55.

without having spent an exorbitant amount of time recording the details of that which he was seeing?<sup>12</sup> Leonardo, however, practiced what he preached: *vigorously*. To round out an explanation of this aphorism, let us say that each artist has a *concetto*, or “concept,” which is his trademark. Naturally, one would safely assume that their trademark would appear ubiquitously throughout their collection of work, but a *concetto* can also mean a particular conceit within a work of art.

Each and every painter had a *concetto*, or “concept,” that could be expected in their art, but Leonardo seemed to have difficulty expressing the possibility of this occurring for himself unless tempered by natural observation. If it was looked down upon to see the same face or figure present in each and every painting of an artist’s repertoire, then it was acceptable for this to occur if—and only if—the artist were to paint each subject faithful to nature.<sup>13</sup> Leonardo was praising the diligent painter and ridiculing the lazy. He was probably referring to the *gente gonfiata* of his day who were “the trumpeters and reciters of the works of others.”<sup>14</sup> These were the “puffed up men” who claimed they knew how to represent a man *di sotto in su* (“seen from below”) but only from the example of another painter who discovered it through introspection. According to Kemp, however, “as in artistic practice we have seen [Leonardo] building upon

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<sup>12</sup> For the authenticity of Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*, see Ann Pizzorusso’s article.

<sup>13</sup> Zwijnenberg, 54 and Leonardo’s notebooks.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholl, 55.

the solid foundations of Florentine traditions.”<sup>15</sup> Leonardo vehemently argued in favor of natural observation, but Kemp has argued that without the precedence of Medieval and Renaissance traditions, Leonardo would not have had anything to build upon. In 1487, just after completing the *Virgin of the Rocks*, one can find Leonardo trying to learn Latin to keep up with the intellectual crowd, whom he attempted to impress by using the Gospel of James and the Latin Vulgate Bible’s *Song of Songs*. Later on we will see that Italian translations of such works were rare, but Leonardo seemed to have found one of the few translations or heard of Pietro Cavalca’s apocryphal telling of John and Jesus’ meeting in the wilderness.<sup>16</sup> Leonardo was, however, among the first individuals during this time to begin innovating the way in which artists were to paint; for example, during Michelangelo’s last years, he was stopped on his way to the Roman forum where he went to observe nature and architecture. Leonardo began to change the way art represented nature and all organic beings, and this has been confirmed by all of his historians. It was Leonardo’s automimetic style that accomplished this.

With this understanding of Leonardo’s beliefs about self-representation (automimesis) in art, it is possible now to explore one alluring and elusive example of Leonardian automimesis: the cave of the *Virgin of the Rocks*. In defining automimesis, historians are not referring to an example such as with Botticelli’s *Adoration of the Magi*, in which Botticelli painted his own figure.

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<sup>15</sup> Kemp, 83.

<sup>16</sup> This will be discussed in chapter two, where I provide sources for these claims.

Instead, automimesis—when appropriately tempered by nature—shows a unique *conchetto* discernible in an artist’s works.

I agree with Frank Zollner’s article in which he argues that there is no more impressive way to “express oneself than the desperate attempt not to do so,” referring to Leonardo.<sup>17</sup> As we have already seen, Leonardo made one exception to the rule of good painting. The Leonardian definition of good painting is that good painting represents nature faithfully. Leonardo referred to nature as the “teacher of all things” in his notebooks ubiquitously, always asserting the power of the feminine over the masculine. In Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*, scholars have been unable to sufficiently address the source of inspiration for the cave setting. Many scholars and art historians: Kenneth Clark, Martin Kemp, Patricia Emison, D.W. Robertson Jr., Charles Nicholl, and Giancarlo Maiorino have all touched upon the apocryphal gospel of James as a source for the scene, but have not followed the trail closely enough. In fact, this thesis argues that the scene is an amalgamation of two parallel narratives within the text, which Leonardo combined with a metaphor from the *Canticum (Song of Songs)* to further support the authenticity of his cave scene.

This thesis will address, as the abstract laid out, the sources which inspired Leonardo’s cave scene: Leonardo’s personal encounter with a *caverna* in 1481, the Gospel of James, written in 150 A.D., and the metaphor from the *Song of Songs*.<sup>18</sup> The gospel came out of Egypt and was therefore originally

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<sup>17</sup> Zollner, 8.

<sup>18</sup> I believe the original was in Coptic Greek and then translated into Latin and Italian.

written in Greek, a language which Leonardo did not know due to his illegitimacy and lack of formal education.<sup>19</sup> The word “apocrypha” is a Hebrew one which means “forbidden.” That means this gospel was prohibited by the church in its early history<sup>20</sup> and disappeared from studies for many centuries. And because “the body of literature available in Italian was extremely limited,” Leonardo had to find translations of the Gospel of James and the *Canticum* in Florence or Milan. We will return to this point later in chapter two.<sup>21</sup>

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter one, entitled *The Virgin of the Rocks*, deals with the commissioning of the painting and focuses on reviewing the scholarship around the painting. What I hope to contribute to the scholarly discourse is this: an in depth examination and explanation of what Leonardo’s automimetic inspirations for painting the *Virgin of the Rocks* was. Chapter two, entitled “Some Marvelous Thing,” focuses on the primary source of Leonardo’s automimetic inspiration: his encounter with a cave in 1481. We will look at Leonardo’s Codex Arundel, the notebook in which he recorded this peculiar and fascinating encounter. In this chapter, I will also discuss the scholarly consensus around the influence the Gospel of James exerted on Leonardo’s painting and provide my interpretation of the text. Lastly, chapter three, entitled “*In Foraminibus Petrae*,” I will conclude with a brief discussion of what Martin Kemp calls a Marian metaphor found in the Vulgate Bible’s *Song of*

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<sup>19</sup> Leonardo’s illegitimacy barred him from any formal education and learning Greek and Latin.

<sup>20</sup> Sometime in early church history, this gospel was ousted from the canon.

<sup>21</sup> Kemp, 83.

*Songs*.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, I will illustrate that it was this source that inspired much of Leonardo's symbolism found in the painting. Here we will conclude with a wish for further study. In further study, it is my hope to further prove Leonardo's connection with nature, his relationship with Caterina (his mother), and the iconographical depiction of Mary and Jesus in the painting. It is my hope that my research makes an original contribution to the discourse around the cave imagery found in the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

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<sup>22</sup>

Kemp, 77.



FIGURE 1.1: LEONARDO DA VINCI, *VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *The Virgin of the Rocks*, Wikimedia Commons (accessed July 8, 2010).

## CHAPTER ONE:

### *THE VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS*

*“When fortune comes grasp her with a firm hand—in front, I tell you, for behind she is bald.”<sup>24</sup>*

*“Venite, dicho, a Athene hoggi Milano, Ov’e il vostro Parnaso Ludovico.”<sup>25</sup>*

In the original commission for the *Virgin of the Rocks*, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception asked Leonardo to paint Mary, God the Father, and two angels against a background of mountains and rocks depicted in a “colorful manner.”<sup>26</sup> There are historians who argue that the confraternity had a significant role in determining John the Baptist’s presence in the scene as well as what the background was to look like. I argue that despite these facts, Leonardo was honoring his interpretation of the Tuscan proverb that he grew up around: to paint oneself according to one’s concept in art is no bad thing so long as the artist relies on personal, natural observation. If the confraternity had originally asked for mountains and rocks painted in a colorful manner, Leonardo’s *Virgin of*

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<sup>24</sup> Nicholl, 256 quoting Leonardo’s *Codex Atlanticus*, fol. 289v.

<sup>25</sup> Translates from the Italian into English as “Come, I say, to today’s Athens in Milan, for here is the Ludovican Parnassus,” Bernardo Bellincioni. See Kemp, 137.

<sup>26</sup> See Zollner’s book printed in Germany, entitled *Leonardo*.

*the Rocks* may be seen as an exemplum of automimesis since he used his own personal experience with a cave in 1481.

Throughout the painting of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Leonardo suffered financial setbacks and the painting eventually was not handed over to his patron, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception. After arriving in Milan in March 1481, Leonardo spent his first few years proving himself to Ludovico Sforza, the imminent duke of Milan.<sup>27</sup> Leonardo brought an impressive letter of introduction with him which stated all types of machines he could both create and implement for Sforza. In Milan, Leonardo “was forced to comply with some of the rules of the game” Kemp writes, since in Milan Leonardo was to find a competitive proving ground for a “man without letters.”<sup>28</sup> This meaning that Leonardo had to keep up with the intellectual crowd. It was difficult adapting to a new city, and Leonardo would not set up his own *bottega* until the mid-late 1480’s. Here in Milan he was known as “Il Fioretino,” despite sharing the spotlight with other notable men such as Benedetto Dei and Donato “Donnino” Bramante. Leonardo was wanted for his Florentine aesthetic; the soft, luminescent glow of Mary’s skin, the ringletted hair, the heavily lidded, downcast eyes, and of course, Leonardo’s famous *chiaro e scuro* technique. Leonardo was able to delicately blend light and shadow together to make for a stunningly realistic work; he could determine distances, create spatial differences between different sections of a painting, and portray natural phenomena—such as caves—by contrasting light and dark. Within the

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<sup>27</sup> He was not duke yet when Leonardo arrived. See Kemp, 75-80.

<sup>28</sup> Kemp, 82.

cavern walls of the *Virgin of the Rocks* Leonardo was able to demonstrate the way “in which a bright object was enhanced by a dark background” via the “dark teeth of the overhanging rocks as they bite into the bleached radiance the distant haze.”<sup>29</sup> This is but an example of the mastery Leonardo possessed in depicting nature. These were the skills Leonardo was known for, and in 1483, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of San Francesco Grande commissioned “*magister Leonardus*,” to paint an *ancona* for their church.<sup>30</sup>

On 25 April 1483, a notary named Antonio de’ Capitani drew up the contract between patron and artist. Michelle O’Malley’s asserts in her book on patron and client relationships that “the number and kinds of tasks a painter agreed to undertake affected the time and expenses of production and influenced his earnings”—a reality, as we will see, which greatly affected Leonardo.<sup>31</sup> The confraternity seemed in no rush to pay Leonardo and his assistants the contracted sum of 800 lire, as they only received 100 lire on 1 May and were to receive 40 lire a month thereafter.<sup>32</sup> This isn’t a lot of money, and for the scene Leonardo wanted to paint, he would require more than 40 lire a month. From this point forward, the historical documents concerning the *Virgin of the Rocks* are unclear as to whether or not the painting was delivered to the confraternity by its completed date in 1486. Perhaps because Leonardo took two additional years to

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<sup>29</sup> Kemp, 76-77.

<sup>30</sup> An *ancona* is a gilded altarpiece set in a church used for worship.

<sup>31</sup> O’Malley, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Nicholl, 197.

paint the scene, the confraternity seemed reluctant to pay him his contracted sums. The next time we hear of the painting is 1493, according to Gould, who says that “the Anonimo Magliabechiano and Vasari all speak of an altarpiece which was a wedding present for Ludovico il Moro when his niece, Bianca Sforza, married the Emperor Maximilien in 1493.”<sup>33</sup> Who were Leonardo’s patrons?

The Confraternity was, according to Nicholl, “a tight knit club of rich Milanese families: the Corio, the Casati, the Pozzobonelli, et al.”<sup>34</sup> These rich men wanted Leonardo and his assistants to create a devotional *ancona*, or gilded altarpiece, that would adorn the largest church in Milan: San Francesco Grande. According to Kemp, it was the famous theologian Bernardino de’ Busti who created the office for the feast day of the Immaculate Conception in Milan in the year 1480.<sup>35</sup> The cult of Mary, Kemp argues, was never stronger than during the late 15<sup>th</sup> century in Milan, for he says that there, under Busti’s leadership, iconographic depictions of the Immaculate Conception were very popular. Leonardo, Kemp goes on, “did not conform to the terms of the contract; he has unexpectedly included St. John and only one of the required ‘angels.’ In fact, he has not simply painted a devotional image of the Virgin and Child but illustrated a popular story from the early lives of John and Christ.”<sup>36</sup> This was how Leonardo

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<sup>33</sup> Gould, 76.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholl, 197.

<sup>35</sup> Approved by Pope Sixtus IV. See Kemp, 75.

<sup>36</sup> Kemp, 75.

diverged from the original contract, which simply stipulated a portrayal of “Our Lady with Her Son” with two prophets and two angels.<sup>37</sup>

The painting that would become the *Virgin of the Rocks* was to be at the center of a triptych, whereas the other two panels would depict angels with musical instruments. They were to complete this work by the feast-day of the Immaculate Conception, which was 8 December 1483, giving them roughly eight months to complete the paintings. The *ancona* that Leonardo was responsible for was previously—and traditionally—made and gilded by Giacomo del Maino, an *intagliatore*, who had finished this 6 foot by 4 foot project in 1480.<sup>38</sup>

Leonardo’s belatedness in delivering the painting on time probably prompted the confraternity’s tardiness on payments, but this was not the exclusive reason for the divergences. The *Virgin of the Rocks* was always a personal, automimetic piece from the outset of the project, as it seems Leonardo never had any intention to listen to the patrons. Leonardo was ambitious to make his mark in Milan, which may have also led to his divergent finished project: “Whatever his reasons for visiting Milan, he settled there presumably because he considered that it offered a better arena for his talents.”<sup>39</sup> Milan would prove to be a relatively stable workplace for Leonardo, despite suffering initial setbacks. Traditionally, patrons were in charge of dictating what a painting should and should not contain, but it was solely up to the artist to decide how to go about painting it. In

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<sup>37</sup> Kemp, 75.

<sup>38</sup> An *intagliatore* is an individual who specializes in gilding and lining things. See Nicholl 197-200.

<sup>39</sup> Kemp, 71.

this way, Leonardo delicately manipulated what turned out to be a sour business transaction anyway. There are some scholars, however, who have argued that the painting was begun in Florence around 1479-1480 and taken with Leonardo to Milan, but it does not seem to stand up to the contrary evidence. It is more plausible that Leonardo had not found his inspiration to paint such a scene yet; the painting itself reveals evidence that it was created amidst the circumstances Leonardo endured in Milan, most notably the Bubonic Plague. Furthermore, it bears the mark of an ambitious Milanese newcomer, anxious to astound a new city with a never-before-seen Immaculist setting and a Florentine painting style.

We will see further in the thesis how Leonardo took the reference to a “wall of stone” in the *Song of Songs* and the Gospel of James to assemble one scene for Mary, Jesus and John. Ultimately this scene surprised and appeared rather strange to the Milanese population, which Kemp confirms: “One suspects that the painting would have seemed formidably odd to the Milanese, who had seen nothing like it before.”<sup>40</sup> That is precisely because of the esoteric inspirations which encouraged Leonardo to paint the *Virgin of the Rocks*, and also because it was a deeply automimetic painting. Moreover the painting imitated a style that the Milanese were not acquainted with, being Leonardo’s Florentine-Flemish influenced background. Because of this, some scholars have argued that it was painted in Florence. Vincian expert Kenneth Clark has argued that Leonardo began the painting earlier in Florence, which would explain its Florentine touches, but scholars Nicholl, Emison, and Pizzorusso all argue

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<sup>40</sup> Kemp, 78.

that Leonardo began and finished the painting in Milan. It cannot be assumed that everyone knew of the apocryphal Gospel of James, but it was an artist's job to research and decide upon the composition of the painting.<sup>41</sup>

Clark argues that since the painting *looks* Florentine, it *is* Florentine, but these other Leonardo scholars believe that the *Virgin of the Rocks* depicts a real-life experience with the countryside of Italy, and agree with the evidence that asserts the painting was begun in Milan.<sup>42</sup> Scholars Emison and Pizzorusso and journalist Nicholl also believe that the painting has personal, autobiographical touches apparent within the scene.<sup>43</sup> Nicholl tries to play devil's advocate: "It is true that the painting has a Florentine feel: in the prettiness of the face, the movement of the head, and the long ringletted hair, the Madonna and the angel are still Verrocchi-esque."<sup>44</sup> Nicholl is referring to Leonardo's work with Verrocchio on the *Baptism of Christ*, the *Annunciation*, and his earliest Madonna painting, the *Madonna of the Carnation*, which all bear these features.

This thesis focuses on a specific discourse prominent in Leonardo scholarship which has taken place over the years, chiefly concerning Leonardo's strange cave background. According to a more recent scholarly work by Fritjof Capra, "the confraternity may have had good reasons to be dissatisfied with the

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<sup>41</sup> That is, of course, that the artist also had to stay in line with their patron's request—which Leonardo did not. But there is no evidence to prove the Confraternity ever tried to check his progress, just evidence explaining their late payments and later dispute with the artist.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholl, 198.

<sup>43</sup> See Nicholl, 167-168, 198-201, Emison 116-117, Pizzorusso, 197.

<sup>44</sup> Nicholl, 198.

*Virgin of the Rocks*, but in the *botteghe* and intellectual circles of Milan, Leonardo's masterpiece caused a sensation."<sup>45</sup> Capra explains that the use of low color tones such as the green of the angel's robe and the grey, somber rocks of the scene stood in "stark contrast with the bright colors of the quattrocento," and that the "Milanese could not have failed to notice the subtle gradations of light and shade, *nor the powerful effect of the surrounding grotto.*"<sup>46</sup> Obviously the *Virgin of the Rocks* had quite an effect on the intellectuals in Milan, for they knew Latin and the existence of apocryphal literature that described the birth of Jesus in a cave.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, the cave scene astounded the better part of the populace who did *not* know or understand the story of Jesus' birth in a cave. Kemp pointed out earlier that the Milanese had seen nothing quite like the *Virgin of the Rocks*. It is possible, however, that due to the painting's fate (see the conclusion) that "the Milanese may have had little chance to see this first version," writes Kemp.<sup>48</sup> The painting disappeared in 1493 after many financial squabbles between the confraternity and Leonardo's *bottega*. Leonardo became popular for this use of light and shade and cooler color palette while he was in Milan from 1481-1499 (his first stay there at least), and this was what earned him the nickname "Il Fiorentino:" the Florentine. Leonardo's unconventionality earned him many patrons and many prominent commissions

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<sup>45</sup> Capra, 84.

<sup>46</sup> Capra, 84. Emphasis my own.

<sup>47</sup> Because the original document was in Coptic Greek.

<sup>48</sup> Kemp, 78.

from Ludovico Sforza, the duke of Milan, but it displeased the confraternity in 1486 when the finished product was completely different than what they expected. This thesis will not focus on the figures of Mary, Jesus, John and the angel, but will instead answer *what* inspired Leonardo to paint the *Virgin of the Rocks* and *why* that caused him to paint an entirely automimetic project rather than paint what he was asked.<sup>49</sup> For Leonardo, the experience nature passed to the diligent student was the key to tempering man's natural inclination to "paint for oneself." Leonardo demonstrated that it was possible to paint for oneself by allowing nature to guide his technique.

As we have already observed, the painting was to adorn a gilded altarpiece in the largest church in Milan, and was to be used to commemorate the feast day of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December 1483.<sup>50</sup> We have seen that Leonardo did not *directly* depict the Immaculate Conception, as Leonardo did earlier in his *Annunciation* (mid 1470's.) Furthermore, by furnishing the painting with *acanthus*, *aquilegia*, authentic geology, symbolic hand gestures, and an apocryphal setting, Leonardo was honoring his inspirations for painting it.

Leonardo probably acquired the Gospel of James because of an encounter he had had with a cave two years prior to beginning the painting. This text had already been interpreted and disseminated orally in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Pietro Cavalca, a Dominican monk, whose story of Jesus and John meeting in

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<sup>49</sup> Frank Zollner's article discusses this *concetto* of "automimesis" which means, roughly, to paint for oneself.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholl, 197 and Gould, 73.

the wilderness was incorporated with the well-known Gospel of Luke 2. In using the Gospel of James, Leonardo still used a religious text to create a scene in which Mary's virginity was being praised and asserted. There seems to be a misunderstanding, however, by Nicholl concerning the Gospel of James since he argues that "Leonardo's painting shows the meeting of the infant Christ and St. John, which traditionally took place during the Holy Family's flight *from* Egypt."<sup>51</sup> The scene, according to the Gospel of James, depicts their *to* Egypt, a point we will discuss in chapter two. Leonardo amalgamated two narratives from the Gospel of James and borrowed a metaphor from the *Song of Songs* and integrated that with his own experience in 1481 to portray Mary, Jesus and John together in a cave.<sup>52</sup> It seems highly likely that Leonardo took advantage of this literature and his own cave experience because of the discrepancies between what the confraternity ordered and what Leonardo painted. The scholarly consensus on the use of these biblical and extra-biblical sources corroborates the present argument. Leonardo's devotion to nature and his zeal in conforming to his own interpretation of the Tuscan aphorism combined with the cave experience forms a connection between the painting and the painter that is irresistible. In chapter two, we will take a look into Leonardo's cave which he

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<sup>51</sup> Nicholl, 200. Emphasis my own. It is actually, confirmed by Kemp, the flight *to* Egypt.

<sup>52</sup> The Gospel of James tells the story of John's escape into a "split asunder" mountain, being led by an angel. This, added together with the metaphor from the *Song of Songs* which references a "cleft in the rocks" was used by Leonardo to argue that John belonged in the same cave with Mary and Jesus, despite the distance which separated Jesus and John in the narrative. If one wants to get creative, the *Song of Songs* text explains *how* John came to travel to the particular cave where Mary and Jesus were, since John also retreated into a cleft in the rocks.

found in 1481. There in the Italian wilderness, Leonardo made his way from Florence to Milan, where on the road he discovered “some marvelous thing.”<sup>53</sup>

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This is a quote from Leonardo’s passage about the cave, to which we now turn.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### “SOME MARVELOUS THING”

*“When Pluto’s paradise is opened, then there will be devils who play on pots to make infernal noises; here will be death, the furies, Cerberus, and many cherubs who weep.”<sup>54</sup>*

Art Historians of Leonardo da Vinci have dated the following page of the Codex Arundel to the early 1480’s which would put Leonardo en route from Florence to Milan. Leonardo stopped on the side of the road he was travelling on in the autumn of 1481 to marvel at the beauty and power of nature. “Wanderings in the hills, valleys and villages of Lombardy, always looking, asking, thinking and recording” fueled Leonardo’s intense imagination and satisfied his propensity for Socratic enquiry.<sup>55</sup> In the rolling hills and cool grottoes of Northern Italy, Leonardo’s love of *fantasia* intensified and encouraged his desire to paint imaginatively. Leonardo had stumbled upon a huge *caverna* somewhere in the Tuscan or Lombardian countryside and recorded this stunning and poignant encounter:

Having wandered some way among somber rocks I came upon the mouth of a huge cavern, in front of which I stood some while, astounded by this place I had not known about

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<sup>54</sup> Codex Atlanticus (B.L. 224r and 231v) or see Kemp, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Kemp, 166.

before. I stooped down with my back arched, and my left hand resting on one knee; and with my right hand I shaded my lowered and frowning brows; and continually bending this way and that I looked in and tried to make out if there was anything inside, but the deep darkness prevented me from doing so. I had been there for some time, when there suddenly arose in me two things, fear and desire—fear of that threatening dark cave; desire to see if there was some marvelous thing within.<sup>56</sup>

Historians have already recognized that “Leonardo’s own notebooks attest to his experience of such a place as the painting shows,” writes Emison.<sup>57</sup> The encounter with the cave is not only a unique episode out of Leonardo’s own notebooks, but out of Renaissance art history as well. As we said in the introduction, Zollner asserts that Leonardo exempted himself from the rule of “painting oneself” in one’s own paintings by arguing that the artist can temper this urge by studying nature. No other artist was quite as reflective about the natural world and as faithful to depicting it in art as Leonardo was. It is quite clear that this text is an example of Leonardo’s devotion to his own aphorism about the tempering teaching power of nature.

Leonardo tells us that once he had stood there for quite some time, he suddenly felt “fear and desire” rise up in him. The “fear and desire” which Leonardo felt could describe his fear and love of nature as *maestra*—the observer is grasped by fear of the unknown beauty concealed deep within the earth. Nature commands obedience from her students and offers experience for

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<sup>56</sup> Codice Arundel,155r, R1339.

<sup>57</sup> Emison, 116.

the painter seeking to avoid “painting oneself” literally; instead, she offers a chance to learn how to paint her accurately in art. Leonardo was devoted to representing nature’s authenticity, especially in the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

There was a sermon delivered by Girolamo Savonarola in Florence (1497) in which he argued that the painter does not paint “himself,” but instead “produces images of lions, horses, men, and women which are not identical with himself, but he paints himself as painter, that is according to his concept (*concetto*).”<sup>58</sup> Leonardo was able to do exactly as Savonarola describes in the *Virgin of the Rocks* by allowing his beliefs about self-representation of nature as *maestra*, or “female teacher,” to instruct him in painting the cave scene.

Leonardo wanted to focus on this concept, so he went to the available theological and historical sources and used their precedence to allude to his own personalized encounter with the cave. In this way, Leonardo avoided the negative connotations of the painting oneself proverb. This line of thought keeps with Robertson’s assertion that Leonardo’s “rocks were deliberately contrived so that their departure from historical meaning would call the observer’s attention to symbolic meanings.”<sup>59</sup> By using esoteric sources, Leonardo also demonstrated his understanding of the intellectual milieu in Milan. If a man without letters could demonstrate his understanding of such scholarly sources, then he perhaps may have been accepted into intellectual circles. Perhaps Leonardo believed the confraternity would still be content with the scene, but caves were typically

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<sup>58</sup> Zollner, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Robertson Jr., 92-94.

viewed as entrances to hell, which we can observe in Leonardo's quote above concerning Pluto's domain. By allowing nature to instruct his painting and therefore temper the urge to paint himself literally into the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Leonardo was able to, as I stated above, convey his *conchetto*—hauntingly beautiful realistic landscapes. The cave is one of those such landscapes.

Patricia Emison's article on the landscape in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* muses that "if, then, there was specific respect for nature directed toward its wild aspect, it is possible to interpret Leonardo's painting not as referring to the Immaculate Conception, but as boldly dispensing with the idea of the human figure as exemplar of natural perfection."<sup>60</sup> Emison seems to believe—I think reasonably—that Leonardo's painting goes beyond alluding to the Immaculate Conception to demonstrate Leonardo's conviction that nature, combined with these holy individuals is perfect. The human body is the most expressive gift bestowed upon us by nature: "This labor of mine," wrote Leonardo on the majesty of the human body, contains "the marvelous works of nature."<sup>61</sup>

Leonardo was referring to his anatomical studies and his ruminations upon the connection between the soul and body. In the *Virgin of the Rocks*, it is not the figures of Mary, Jesus and John themselves that represent the redemptive message of Christianity but *their juxtaposition* to nature which elevates their status as redemptive figures. Nature is *perfected* through the figures of Mary and Jesus, as their roles as Second Adam and Eve move human nature towards

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<sup>60</sup> Emison, 118.

<sup>61</sup> Nicholl, 499 quoting Leonardo's notebooks.

perfection; the human figure is perceived, in the presence of the cave, as the exemplar “of natural perfection.” This is in keeping with Leonardo’s views on the perfection of nature and the perfection of the human body.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. when the Gospel of James was written (c.150 A.D.), Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons also stated that:

And just as it was through a virgin who disobeyed that mankind was stricken and fell and died, so too it was through the Virgin, who obeyed the word of God, that mankind, resuscitated by life, received life. For the Lord came to seek back the lost sheep, and it was mankind that was lost; and therefore He did not become some other formation, but He likewise, of her that was descended from Adam, preserved the likeness of formation; for Adam had necessarily to be restored in Christ, that mortality be absorbed in immortality. *And Eve in Mary, that a virgin, by becoming the advocate of a virgin, should undo and destroy virginal disobedience by virginal obedience.*<sup>62</sup>

Jesus’ presence in the cave of Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks* wipes the sin of man clean, for the Lord God “formed [the first] man from the dust of the earth” by blowing “into his nostrils the breath of life.”<sup>63</sup> Adam was led to sin by Eve, whose redeeming figure in the painting is Mary. Marian historian Jaroslav Pelikan comments that there is a “contrast between a calamitous disobedience by someone who was no more than human, Eve, and a saving obedience by someone who was no more than human, who was not ‘from heaven’ but

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<sup>62</sup> Pelikan, 42-43 reading from Bishop Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies and Apostolic Preaching*.

<sup>63</sup> Torah, Genesis 2:7.

altogether 'of the earth.'<sup>64</sup> Mary and Jesus, then, are representations of the redemptive message of Christianity, but also are vessels of Leonardo's belief in nature's perfection. The cave mouth, which we are looking into, is both terrestrial and celestial, represented by the rocks and the sky; there is both the presence of earth and ethereal matter, representing the redemptive qualities of Jesus and Mary over Adam and Eve. Nature, then, can be seen as the catalyst for man's redemption; the cave is the waypoint between the past and future of Christianity.

Leonardo might have used his experience with nature in 1481 to prove to himself that his own opinions about "*ogni pittore dipinge se*" were justified because he was gathering empirical experience from nature rather than literally painting himself in the *Virgin of the Rocks*. Leonardo believed the exception to the rule of painting one's *concetto* in art was to demonstrate—what Italians of the 15<sup>th</sup> century called—*sprezzatura*. This word translates into English as "effortlessness" or "graceful ease," and it was how Leonardo exploited a loophole in the aphorism. His observations in the cave provided a self-justification for exempting himself from the negative connotations that the Tuscan proverb could contain.<sup>65</sup> Leonardo always strived to separate himself from binding rules, and consistently demonstrated his desire to elevate his craft above his competitors. When he began to paint the *Virgin of the Rocks*, then, Leonardo demonstrated an ease and effortlessness in portraying his *concetto*, which were his authentic natural landscapes. This justification must have fit the bill nicely for Leonardo, an

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<sup>64</sup> Pelikan, 43.

<sup>65</sup> Zollner argues this as well.

artist who obviously had difficulty justifying to himself the idea of self-expression in art.

D.W. Robertson Jr., Kenneth Clark and Martin Kemp all agree that both the Gospel of James and the *Song of Songs* were the theological and historical sources which informed Leonardo. Although Robertson argues that the apocryphal source theory had been disproved in favor of his note from the *Song of Songs*, he argues that this was because there was a discrepancy about John's presence in the scene.<sup>66</sup> We will discover "some marvelous thing" first by understanding that Leonardo's inspiration for the painting came from his own experiences. This is how the *Virgin of the Rocks* can be seen as automimesis. Leonardo has demonstrated his philosophical and practical beliefs about learning from nature, who instructs the painter in all things. While in Milan, however, Leonardo paused to reflect on his lack of book knowledge:

I well know that, not being a literary man, certain presumptuous persons will think that they may reasonably deride me with the allegation that I am a man without letters. Stupid fellows! Do they not know that I might reply as Marius did in answering the Roman politicians, by saying that they who adorn themselves with the labors of others will not concede to me my very own; they will say that, not having learning, I will not properly speak of that which I wish to elucidate. But do they not know that my subjects are to be better illustrated from experience than by yet more words?—experience, which has been the

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<sup>66</sup> See Robertson's article, page 92. Robertson asserts that Kenneth Clark's article about the *other* Madonna of the Rocks painting (in the National Gallery, London) disproved the apocryphal source. I could not access Clark's source.

mistress of all those who wrote well, and, thus as mistress, I will cite her in all cases.<sup>67</sup>

Leonardo was quoting Sallust's *Jugurthine War* because Marius, who was a *novus homo* in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., rose to prominence as a seven-time consul in the Roman government. Like Marius, Leonardo was derided for being a "new man" in the midst of lettered, accomplished men. Leonardo drew inspiration from the fact that no matter who told him he could not accomplish a task, anything could be accomplished with "the marvelous works of nature." This ambition was a principal motivating factor that led him to distinguish himself in Milan. The *Virgin of the Rocks* was his first major commission and, as we have already seen, it made quite the impression. Perhaps Leonardo's ambition to prove himself a learned, lettered man led him to the Gospel of James and *Song of Songs*, for we know he attempted Latin conjugations and minor translations during the 1480's and 1490's.<sup>68</sup>

Peering into this cave in 1481 led Leonardo to the Gospel of James and the *Song of Songs* which were already circulating during the Renaissance. Wilhelm Schneemelcher has said that "in fact these writings, in antiquity, in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, exercised a stronger influence on literature and art than the Bible itself."<sup>69</sup> Leonardo did, then, have access to the

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<sup>67</sup> Kemp, 82 quoting Leonardo.

<sup>68</sup> I saw a hand-copy of the *Trivulziano* notebook when it was on display at the "Genius of Leonardo da Vinci" exhibit, an exhibit in which I worked in 2010 in Tampa, Florida. This notebook can be found in Milan.

<sup>69</sup> Schneemelcher, 418.

*protoevangelium* of James, (Gospel of James). Schneemelcher goes on to say that even before Leonardo's time during the Middle Ages, artists were influenced by the stories found in the Christian Apocryphal works, citing a special interest for the infancy gospels.<sup>70</sup> How can historians be sure that Leonardo had access to the Gospel of James and the Vulgate *Song of Songs*?

### *The Gospel of James*

*"The times of Herod will return, when innocent children shall be taken from their nurses, and will die with great wounds at the hands of cruel men."*<sup>71</sup>

The popular tale that was circulating in Italy since the 14<sup>th</sup> century was that of Jesus and John meeting in the wilderness, long before the baptism in the Jordan. This story was circulated by Pietro Cavalca, and the story also told of an infant John the Baptist under the protection of the Angel Uriel, who escorted John away from the massacre of the innocents to meet Jesus and Mary during their flight to Egypt.<sup>72</sup> This story told by Cavalca and the Gospel of James (probably Cavalca's source) were the theological and historical sources which Leonardo certainly was familiar with, but his own cave experience prompted him to

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Nicholl, 221 quoting one of Leonardo's many *profezie*, having to deal with the "idea of Nature as the wounded, exploited victim of man's rapacity." Leonardo obviously had a familiarity with the Bible and its stories.

<sup>72</sup> Kemp, 75. This story was told, as I said, by Pietro Cavalca, a Dominican monk of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Italy. See Bramly's biography, page 185. It seems that Cavalca's interpretation of the Gospel of James, which itself is based on the Gospel of Luke, weaves together certain stories and perhaps fabricates some others to create this scene.

investigate these sources. Martin Kemp's explanation of the scene in the *Virgin of the Rocks* is probably the most detailed and accurate in the past several years. He tells us that "the story is embroidered with secondary symbolism in the painting: the foreground pool prefigures the baptism; the sword-shaped leaves of the iris represent the sword of sorrow (Luke 2:35) which was to pierce Mary's heart; the palm leaves are a Marian emblem and symbol of victory as in the *Adoration of the Magi*."<sup>73</sup> This is the main description of what viewers see when one looks at the *Virgin of the Rocks*, and more will be explained further in the thesis. The palm is located behind Mary on her right, our left; the pool in the foreground is directly below Mary and Jesus (see Figure 1.1). Knowing some of the symbolism is helpful, but an additional analysis of the identities of the figures is necessary to understanding the Gospel of James.

The painting represents Madonna and Child in the pyramidal style which was popular during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with Mary, Jesus and John forming the compositional pyramid. Kemp points out that "we are literally meant to *read* the story, as it weaves it's cat cradle of relationships within the pyramidal space of the group."<sup>74</sup> Uriel, if that is who the choric figure is in the right foreground, is the storyteller who brings our attention to John the Baptist first and foremost because of his index finger pointing across the pool. Then our eyes are drawn to Mary, who offers a warm embrace to John, whom she then introduces to Jesus, her newborn son. It is quite clear, however, that John knows exactly who Jesus is, for

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<sup>73</sup> Kemp, 75.

<sup>74</sup> Kemp, 75.

there is a sense of immediacy in John's dropping to one knee, for it seems Mary is still pulling the infant in for an embrace. John, who occupies the higher ground indicates his status of the one who prepares the way for Jesus' ministry, whose ministry would be sanctified by John's baptism of Jesus. Jesus, then, is on the slab of rock below John, offering a charismatic and loving acknowledgement of John's respect for his Lord. Then, the triangle is formed and the scene becomes slightly dizzying, very dynamic, and yet quite serene. There is suddenly the sound of rushing water, a suckling baby, the swish of a cloak, the dip of one's hand for a drink, and the gentle melody of water droplets from the great rock formations.

There is a brief moment in the narrative of the Gospel of James which the *Virgin of the Rocks* depicts. It is a moving scene but also somewhat manipulated by Leonardo. Below is my narrative of the story, paraphrased from the original apocryphal text.

The high priest sent out a message for all the widowers of Israel to come forth to the temple, and ordered that each of the men summoned were given a rod. Joseph, widowed with two sons, came running up with the crowd of men to seize the opportunity to meet the beautiful Mary, aged twelve. Mary had been in the temple of the Lord since she was three years old, "as a dove that is nurtured."<sup>75</sup> Each rod was inspected for a sign from the Lord, and Joseph received the last rod possible. Dismayed, Joseph's heart sank. Suddenly, "lo, a

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<sup>75</sup> Gospel of James, VIII 1.

dove came forth of the rod” Joseph was holding, and flew into his beard. The high priest found Joseph and handed custody of Mary over to him.

For six months they lived together and then suddenly, Joseph found Mary with child. Casting himself down on the ground and hiding his face in shame, Joseph questioned if it was he who caused her to be with child, or another man. She spoke, weeping bitterly, “I am pure and I know not a man.”<sup>76</sup> Joseph became afraid because he feared the Lord, but an angel of the Lord assured him in a dream that “that which is in her is of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>77</sup> Annas the scribe came to Joseph and found Mary great with child, prompting him to report this to the high priest. Annas spoke “the virgin whom he received out of the temple of the Lord, he hath defiled her, and married her by stealth,” which greatly upset the priest.<sup>78</sup> Mary and Joseph’s testimonies were then tested by sending them out into the wilderness after drinking bitter water. The priest, finding no sin in them—for they came back alive and well—was astounded.

Augustus then issued a census for all those in Bethlehem of Judaea, and Joseph did not know how to record Mary. He felt shame and sudden fear at this and saddled her on a donkey, following her with his two sons. As they drew near Bethlehem, three miles out, Joseph saw that Mary was pained. “Whither shall I take thee to hide thy shame? For the place is desert.” Joseph then found a cave which he brought her into, leaving his two sons behind to watch over her.

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<sup>76</sup> XIII, 3.

<sup>77</sup> XIV, 2.

<sup>78</sup> XV, 2.

Joseph left seeking a Hebrew midwife, and suddenly on the road, life appeared to stand still: the birds in the sky stopped moving, the fish ceased to swim, and people did not walk—it was as if the world was sighing for what was to come. A woman then came down out of the countryside and spoke to Joseph, asking about the woman in the cave. Joseph replied “she is not my wife, for I received her by lot, and “she hath conception by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>79</sup>

The midwife walked back with Joseph down the hill and into the cave, where a bright, over-hanging cloud suddenly overshadowed the cave. At that point the midwife exclaimed: “My soul is magnified this day, because mine eyes *have seen marvelous things: for salvation is born unto Israel.*”<sup>80</sup> A piercing light broke the darkness of the cave which no one’s eyes, not even Mary’s, could endure, until it gradually dimmed into the form of the *Bambino Gesu*, who was at once suckled by his mother, Mary.

From here, the narration requires some additional explanation before putting John the Baptist into the scene. The brief moment which the painting depicts is not, I argue, the family’s flight *from* Egypt, as Nicholl had argued earlier, but the beginning of the flight *to* Egypt. How do John and the angel Uriel

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<sup>79</sup> XIX, 1.

<sup>80</sup> XIX, 2. This is one source of inspiration for my title; the other is from Leonardo’s reference to “some marvelous thing” within the gloom of the cave he finds in 1481. Emphasis my own.

come into the scene?<sup>81</sup> The presence of John comes from the parallel story of Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, and her son John in a later part of the James narrative:

But Elizabeth when she heard that they sought for John, took him and went up into the hill-country, and looked about her where she should hide him: and there was no hiding-place. And Elizabeth groaned and said with a loud voice: 'O mountain of God, receive thou a mother with a child.' For Elizabeth was not able to go up. And immediately the mountain clave asunder and took her in. And there was a light shining always for them: for an angel of the Lord was with them, keeping watch over them.<sup>82</sup>

The present work agrees with Martin Kemp and Charles Nicholl's conclusions that John's presence was an innovation by Leonardo. The mountain which "clave asunder" could be a divine revelation for John so that he could find Jesus, but Kemp says that this would figure John too predominantly in the scene, rather than remain a tribute to the purity of Mary.<sup>83</sup> Mary's protection of Jesus takes place simultaneously with Elizabeth's protection of John, meaning that the pairs were separate. If we were to allow the interpretation of the mountain being "clave asunder" to lead John to Mary and Jesus, then the scene makes sense. The painter has dominion over his craft and the ability to create and recreate at his disposal. Leonardo also perhaps knew of the *Song of Songs* in which

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<sup>81</sup> It is difficult to place where in the apocrypha the idea that the angel is Uriel "light-bringer" in the painting, but some online sources confirm it. Furthermore, Gospel of James XXII, 3 says that an angel of the Lord was keeping watch over them.

<sup>82</sup> XXII, 3.

<sup>83</sup> See Kemp 75 and Nicholl 136.

Solomon sings to his *sponsa*, Latin for “bride,” “come, my dove, into the cleft of rock, into the secret places of the stone.”<sup>84</sup> This passage came to be interpreted in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a reference to the Virgin Mary rather than to Solomon’s bride, and this trend persisted into Leonardo’s 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>85</sup> This reference to the “cleft of rock” probably crystallized the scene in Leonardo’s mind, making his *fantasia* run wild across the canvas. The trio’s depiction in the *Virgin of the Rocks* is lucid, ethereal, and absolutely beautiful; Leonardo was able to innovate, too, in rendering a cave—a place of hell—holy. It appears, then, that Leonardo had historical and theological sources at his disposal for creating the scene. Knowing this informs viewers of the *Virgin of the Rocks* how divergent the painting was from the original commission discussed in chapter one, which was simply “the Madonna and Child surrounded by a troupe of angels and two prophets.”<sup>86</sup>

But there were other influences that may have informed Leonardo’s Codex Arundel cave text. Leonardo would have been familiar with Fra Filippo Lippi’s *Nativity* (Berlin, painted in the early 1460’s) and Andrea Mantegna’s *Adoration of the Magi* (painted in the early 1460’s) since both artists portrayed Mary in a similar cave setting, and may have used the same source. Whether or not Leonardo’s compelling narration of his own cave experience was fabricated, we

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<sup>84</sup> Robertson Jr., 92.

<sup>85</sup> Chapter three will deal with this. For the 12<sup>th</sup> century commentary of William Newburgh, see Robertson Jr.’s article.

<sup>86</sup> Nicholl, 198. I could not access the original commission paperwork but it can be found in Luca Beltrami’s *Documenti e memorie riguardanti la vita e le opera di Leonardo da Vinci*. Milan, documents 23-24.

cannot know, but it appears to have been written with great zeal. Towards the end of his narration of his encounter with this cave, Leonardo says that he wanted to see if “some marvelous thing” dwelled within. Perhaps it is mere coincidence, but the midwife in the Gospel of James who comes to witness the birth of Jesus in the cave exclaims that she has seen “marvelous things.”<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, this similarity may express Leonardo’s familiarity with the apocryphal text *prior* to having the experience, thus making it a “consciously literary piece,” as Nicholl says. Nicholl has argued other glosses for the cave text such as Ghigo Brunelleschi and Ser Domenico da Prato’s erotic poem *Geta e Birria* (written around 1476 in Florence) where, as Nicholl explains, “the protagonist plunges his member ‘into the measureless depths of hell,’” thus making this a reference to the ‘hell’ that is the female genitalia.<sup>88</sup> Leonardo owned a copy of the poem in 1504, but this seems too far detached from the 1480’s to have had any significance, unless it was recorded that he had it in 1504 but had possessed it all along.<sup>89</sup> I have argued that the cave text was the impetus which spurred Leonardo’s creative investigations; poetry, literature, apocryphal gospels, and the Vulgate Bible were all subsequent influences resulting from his cave encounter. Knowing of these influences, the discussion must now delve *in foraminibus petrae* to discover exactly what the “marvelous thing” was Leonardo wished to find in the cave.

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<sup>87</sup> Gospel of James, XIX, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Nicholl’s notes on page 522.

<sup>89</sup> Nicholl, 164-165 and his notes on the Codex Arundel text, found on 522.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### “IN FORAMINIBUS PETRAE”

“Come, my dove, into the cleft in the rocks, into the cavities of walls,  
reveal your countenance to me.”<sup>90</sup>

Historians have argued that Leonardo knew of the Vulgate Bible’s *Canticum 2: 13-14* (the *Song of Songs*).<sup>91</sup> Leonardo, they argue, knew of the scripture because there was a certain Marian metaphor popular with Immaculists of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and Leonardo demonstrated through the symbolism in the *Virgin of the Rocks* that he may have been acquainted with the source.<sup>92</sup> The verses read “Come, my dove, into the cleft in the rocks, in the cavities of walls, reveal your countenance to me.”<sup>93</sup> Leonardo’s inclusion of *aquilegia* (the *columba* flower) symbolizes the dove, which has been interpreted by historians as a reference to the Immaculate Conception of Mary.<sup>94</sup> The dove also represents the Immaculate Conception because the Holy Spirit is represented by

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<sup>90</sup> *Song of Songs 2:13-14.*

<sup>91</sup> Kemp, Robertson and Clark all argue this, but Emison also agrees with the influence of Leonardo’s cave experience, the *Song of Songs* and the Gospel of James.

<sup>92</sup> See Kemp, 75 or Robertson’s entire article, entitled *In Foraminibus Petrae*.

<sup>93</sup> *Song of Songs 2:13-14*, or see Kemp, 75.

<sup>94</sup> The Immaculate Conception refers to Mary’s inherent purity bestowed upon her by God, and the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary’s birth, not Jesus’. Jesus’ birth is referred to as the Virgin Birth or the Annunciation.

a dove. The dove represents the purity of Mary bestowed upon her by God at birth, which is why this painting's imagery glorifies Mary. The *Virgin of the Rocks* was, after all, a commemorative painting which was to adorn San Francesco Grande by 8 December 1483—the annual feast day which celebrates Mary's purity and inception by her mother Anne and father Joachim. But it is the reference to the “cleft of rocks” and “cavities of walls” that has interested Kemp, Robertson, Clark and myself, for it clearly demonstrates the inspirations we have already discussed. These verses from the *Song of Songs* also point towards the Gospel of James because John's retreat into the wilderness is in part due to Elizabeth's prayer to God to find a place of safety for her son.<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth cried “O mountain of God, receive thou a mother with a child...and immediately the mountain *clave asunder* and took her in.”<sup>96</sup> From my reading of the Gospel of James, it appears that—according to chapter XXVII, part 3—Elizabeth and her son John find a shelter under a mountain *apart* from Jesus and Mary, *after* both children are born and Herod proclaims the execution of male firstborns.<sup>97</sup> It seems that Leonardo manipulated the source material to place all three figures in the painting.

Robertson's article argues that it is in the Vulgate Bible's *Song of Songs* 2:13-14, that the *sponsa* in these verses may in fact be Mary rather than just

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<sup>95</sup> Gospel of James, XXII, 3.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> James, M.R. trans., *Gospel of James from Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1924.

Solomon's bride. Verses 13-14 read: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, that art in the cleft of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs."<sup>98</sup> Reading this, Leonardo's notes, and seeing the *Virgin of the Rocks* impresses viewers with the idea that we are witnessing this secret place in the wilderness where the spirit of God has come to rest. Knowing the narrative of the Gospel of James, too, crystallizes the notion that Leonardo was aware of both the apocryphal text and the Vulgate Bible's *Song of Songs*. Leonardo must have known of this scripture because he demonstrates this by painting *aquilegia*, or the columbine flower near Mary's head. Columbine comes from the Latin *columba*, meaning "dove." In the *Song of Songs*, a dove is mentioned, and the dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, a dove is mentioned in the passage where Joseph's rod sends forth a dove into his beard, and that Mary, like a dove, was brought up in the holy temple. The Holy Spirit, which is symbolized by the dove, is also mentioned by Joseph and the midwife in the James narrative. All of this evidence puts together a compelling portrait of what Leonardo envisioned was true beauty: nature as teacher of all things. Furthermore, it shows us that painters of the 15<sup>th</sup> century attempted to paint their own *conchetto* into their paintings. The hitherto unknown source of Leonardo's inspiration for the scene in the *Virgin of the Rocks* is becoming clearer.

In the matter of the encompassing cave, and its sepulchral feel, Leonardo is calling our attention to what a cave may signify symbolically. A deep, damp cave in the earth symbolizes the womb, and the earth from which the first man

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<sup>98</sup> I offer various translations because they illustrate my point nicely.

was created. I do not need to point out how appropriate, then, Mary's presence is in this cave. The scene here, I have argued, is from the Gospel of James immediately after the birth of Jesus and the retreat of John into the wilderness, and so the Immaculate Conception has been fructified in the birth of Jesus. Mary's womb, according to the narrative, brought forth a blinding ray of light to Joseph and the Hebrew midwife, and only subsided when Jesus went to Mary's breast. Leonardo's figures are suffused with light from an unknown source—perhaps the light from the mid-afternoon sun or even remnants of the light which protruded forth from Mary's womb. Maiorino argues that Leonardo's "rocks emerge from the water like solidified waves in the Louvre painting (the subject of this thesis)...they absorb light, crystallize moisture, and offer soft spots for the growth of plants that shed beauty on the birth of Christianity."<sup>99</sup> It is the reference to the "soft spots" for the growth of Christianity that is most poignant and relevant to the present discussion. Leonardo was, after all, painting for a very powerful, very rich, very devout group of patrons whose primary concern was that the finished painting represented the purity of Mary and the birth of Jesus—and therefore Christianity. Maiorino's description of the cave's Christian symbolism is very helpful to understanding why Leonardo ultimately chose it for his background, for it still satisfies the religious aspect of the painting's contract.

Maiorino also makes a case for Leonardo's pool in and lake in the foreground and background, respectively by arguing that "nature's archetypal source in the background of the painting became spiritual in the foreground," thus

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<sup>99</sup> Maiorino, 76.

strengthening Emison's argument that Leonardo was "boldly dispensing with the idea of the human figure as exemplar of natural perfection." The spiritual and physical are assimilated in the cave, which itself is made up of terrestrial and celestial matter. The iris flowers symbolizing the sorrow of Mary, the *columba* (*aquilegia*) symbolizing the Immaculate Conception and the dove, and the bodies of water all represent the divine in the painting, thus rendering this cave a space between heaven and earth. The cave has dirt, flora, and water, but it also is infused with the presence of the *bambino Gesu*, who is wholly God and wholly Man. The towering mountains, which Emison thinks connotes a sense of purity to Leonardo's mind since they are "untouched," may also symbolize the way up to heaven.<sup>100</sup> Here in the cave, the figure of John represents humanity's need for salvation,<sup>101</sup> while the figure of Mary represents the hazy space between John's humanity and Jesus's divinity; Mary is, as Maiorino points out, "standing on the edge of spirituality."<sup>102</sup>

Leonardo, who shows Mary's "outstretched arms" being used "to bind the sacred groups in physical and spiritual communion" in the *Virgin of the Rocks* symbolizes her bridging the gap between the human John and the divine Jesus.<sup>103</sup> The angel, who *may* be the angel Uriel, points across at John to symbolize John's future mission to pave the way for Jesus in the wilderness.

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<sup>100</sup> Emison, 117.

<sup>101</sup> Robertson Jr. quoting Kenneth Clark, 94.

<sup>102</sup> Maiorino, 84.

<sup>103</sup> Hills, 614.

The pool in the foreground may symbolize a baptismal font, or at least the Jordan in which Jesus is baptized. John is noticeably higher than Jesus, kneeling in a prayer position since it is he who pays obeisance to Jesus, thus fulfilling the moment in Matthew 3:15 when Jesus says “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus is in the position of humility to demonstrate this event, and acknowledges John with the symbol of *charite*, or “peace.” The *Virgin of the Rocks*, then, can also be seen as an allegory for the past, present, and future of Christianity, represented in Mary, John, and Jesus, respectively. Mary gives birth to Jesus while maintaining her purity, John is slightly older and is destined to pave the way for the ministry of Jesus, and Jesus is the redemptive savior of mankind, for all time. Thus did Leonardo create a symbolic and esoteric masterpiece, infused with personal experience and attention to the historical, apocryphal, and theological sources at his disposal.

In conclusion, Leonardo was motivated by a strange but fascinating encounter in 1481 that eventually led him to find inspiration in an apocryphal birth story of Jesus. We have observed the scholarship concerning the commissioning of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, the scene originally desired by the confraternity, the financial issues that plagued Leonardo, the personal, historical, and theological inspiration that contributed to a cave scene which “caused a sensation in Milan,” and the discourse around the symbolism and meaning of the cave and the painting’s holy figures.

## CONCLUSION:

### THE FATE OF THE *VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS*

During the years 1484-1486, Leonardo lived through an outbreak of Bubonic Plague in Milan. These were also the years during which he was working on the *Virgin of the Rocks*. One of the most intriguing notes Leonardo leaves us was recorded around 1485, right in the midst of his painting the *Virgin of the Rocks*: "Pleasure and Pain show themselves as twins, because the one is never without the other, as if they were stuck together," writes Leonardo.<sup>104</sup> T his comment accompanies an allegorical sketch which depicts a grotesquely drawn Siamese-twin: on the left is a young man (Pleasure) holding a reed, which Leonardo says "is useless and has no strength;" on the right is an old man (Pain) who holds caltrops in his hand, dropping them onto the mud which he is stepping in.<sup>105</sup> Youth is wasted on the young, which is indicated by the young man in the sketch stepping in a pool of gold as he wields a useless reed. Pleasure is fleeting and often has pain lurking within it. It is no surprise that these sentiments welled up inside Leonardo during the Bubonic Plague of 1485 and at a time when he was feeling like an outsider. Leonardo commented that people pressed

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<sup>104</sup> Nicholl, 210.

<sup>105</sup> Nicholl, 204-206, or found in the allegorical drawing by da Vinci found in Christ Church College, Oxford.

together like a herd of cattle, “spreading pestilence and death” in every street corner. Milan was a competitive city full of accomplished individuals who, unlike Leonardo “il Fiorentino,” had established reputations and degrees. We can certainly detect a hint of irritability and bitterness in Leonardo’s allegorical sketch of Pleasure and Pain. The *Virgin of the Rocks* is as much an artistic milestone as it is a personal one; the gaping *caverna* was a place of quietude, tranquility, and haunting beauty away from the Bubonic Plague for the painter to retreat into. The *Virgin of the Rocks*, then, can be understood in the terms which were laid out in the introduction. It is a deeply automimetic painting which Leonardo was attached to, for he files a dispute with Ludovico Sforza sometime around 1492 in an attempt to acquire the rest of the promised 800 lire, plus additional expenses. Zollner offers another compelling thought in saying that Leonardo’s “almost neurotic attitude towards ‘automimesis’ may tempt us to assume that Leonardo for personal as well as psychological reasons tried to avoid self-expression...his psychological profile supports such an interpretation since in his own writings, Leonardo praises solitude and self-control.”<sup>106</sup> An example of this can be found in Leonardo’s notebooks in which he admonishes the painter to become a “painter-philosopher” who should promulgate the belief that “while you are alone you are entirely your own; and if you have but one companion you are but half your own.”<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Leonardo warns his readers that “you will be thought crazy” for this belief. But it is this very dedication to nature that causes Leonardo

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<sup>106</sup> Zollner, 5.

<sup>107</sup> Nicholl, 47 quoting Leonardo’s notebooks found in Paris, BN 2038, 27v.

to repeat the reference of nature as *maestra* over and over again in his notebooks. Leonardo believes that “those who take for their standard anything but Nature, mistress of all masters, weary themselves in vain.”<sup>108</sup> This is the standard by which all men—and painters—are measured; one cannot simply quote the knowledge of others without a firm—scientific, Leonardo argues—understanding of nature. Leonardo never reneged on this belief. So what was the fate of the *Virgin of the Rocks* after 1492?

In 1492, Leonardo appealed to Ludovico to silence the never-ending dispute. By 1493, the *Virgin of the Rocks* was on its way to Germany into the hands of Emperor Maximilien as a wedding gift to accompany Ludovico’s niece, Bianca Maria. To be clear, the painting was *not* made for Ludovico. But since Ludovico was Leonardo’s host in Milan, it did not matter if he was the patron or not, for he decided to buy Leonardo’s painting.<sup>109</sup> Like Piero da Vinci (Leonardo’s father) twenty years before, Ludovico Sforza took advantage of Leonardo’s difficulties to fulfill a personal ambition. Leonardo’s father, as Vasari tells the story, took from his son a *rotello* painted with a fearsome beast’s countenance and sold it to Florentine merchants rather than deliver what was supposed to be a gift to one of their farm-hands in Vinci. So the fair *Virgin of the Rocks* remained in Germany until the 17<sup>th</sup> century when it was recorded to be in Fontainebleau, France. This explains why there are *two* versions of the painting

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<sup>108</sup> Nicholl, 55 quoting Leonardo’s notebooks found in Codex Arundel 392r/141r-b, R 660.

<sup>109</sup> It is never clear if it is *taken* from Leonardo by Ludovico purposely or without Leonardo knowing, nor is it clear if Ludovico actually *paid* Leonardo and his assistants any of the funds which the confraternity never gave them. What is clear is that the painting was taken.

today, as in 1506, Leonardo and his assistants were ordered to paint another. Leonardo does not want to do this, of course, so he appoints his assistants to execute the work, which is now in the National Gallery in London.<sup>110</sup> Nearly all of the Leonardian touches are absent: the fair face of the angel, the fidelity to geology and botany, the symmetry and composition of the figures and landscape, the hand gestures, and finally, there was originally no blatant religious symbolism in the form of halos. After the painting was finished, Leonardo moved on to other projects, but soon his attention was captivated by a visitor to the Corte Vecchia in the middle of the summer: July 16<sup>th</sup> to be exact.

Caterina, Leonardo's long-absent mother, came to visit him on 16<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1493, but died within two years of her staying there. He recorded her humble funerary expenses and took note, one may assume, that the *Virgin of the Rocks* dispute had been settled (for now) through the disappearance of the painting.<sup>111</sup> Caterina's death did not come easy to this solitudinous painter. In further study, it would be useful to construct an understanding of 15<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance family roles, discuss Leonardo's illegitimacy, and his connection with nature as *maestra* further to see if Leonardo had pent up feelings about his mother and if those feelings impacted this painting.

The *Virgin of the Rocks*, in further study, may be seen as an allegory of ideal motherhood through the figure of Mary, who may be seen as the

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<sup>110</sup> Gould's article explains this.

<sup>111</sup> Again, this would be the case if Leonardo was unaware of Ludovico's acquisition.

personification of nature and replacement of Caterina<sup>112</sup>, but it is enough for the present to discover “some marvelous thing” inside the cave along with Leonardo.

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<sup>112</sup> Remember Emison’s comment about the human figure as “natural perfection.” Rona Goffen and Margaret Miles both present evidence stipulating that people often replaced love of their own mothers with a love of Mary.

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