

Hello, my name is Sarai David and over this past semester I have been researching Leonardo da Vinci's two versions of the Virgin of the Rocks paintings. Today I will be talking about how Leonardo changed from his traditional painting style to one that created a more cohesive look in his second painting for the final altarpiece.

Leonardo was born in Vinci, Italy in 1452. As a young boy he moved to Florence with his father to train as a painter under Andrea del Verrocchio. He then left Florence in 1482 to move to Milan where he worked under the Duke of Milan, in his court. In 1483 Leonardo signed a contract with Giovanni and Evangelista de Predis to create the *Virgin of the Rocks* painting for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception. The first version was completed around 1486 but due to a legal dispute the final payment was delayed, and the painting was not turned over. It is believed that during this legal dispute a second version was started. Leonardo would work on the second version until 1499 when the French army invaded Milan. Leonardo fled the invasion and left the painting behind. In 1506, Leonardo returned to Milan in an attempt to finish the painting but was unable to do so and returned, finally, in 1508 to finish, thus ending a nearly 25-year period that Leonardo worked on these two paintings.

So these are the two paintings I will be talking about today. I will be primarily focusing on the one on the right. As you can see, the subject matter is very similar with a group of four figures in the center of the panels surrounded by rocky terrain. Mary is in the center of the painting with St. John the Baptist to the viewer's left. St. John the Baptist is staring towards the baby Jesus who is then seated next to an angel. We don't know the identity of the angel for certain, but we do know that it is an angel because the wings are more visible in the painting on the right. Despite the similarities in composition, the stylistic differences, like the shading, color pallet, and subtle changes to composition result in two distinct paintings.

This version was painted between 1483-86 and has been in France since 1627. It was considered stylistically superior by many art historians for decades because the style of this painting matches Leonardo's style more closely than the second version. While both paintings have Leonardo's characteristic use of nature, this version has a haziness, or *sfumato*, that is often present in Leonardo's other paintings. The warmth of the individuals adds to the realism of this painting, but this may be caused by the yellow tint of the aged varnish that has not been cleaned off. Despite the varnish, the people have a warmth that is missing in the second version.

This painting is the second version that was created. It has been in the National Gallery in London since 1880. It is notably brighter thanks in part to the recent cleaning which revealed the vibrant colors that were used when Leonardo initially created this painting. The figures are paler than the previous painting and the shadows, or *chiaroscuro*, are more dramatic. The haziness of the previous painting is not present, which also helps create sharper shadows. This version of the painting contains iconography that is not present the first version, like the halos around Mary and St. John the Baptist and Jesus's heads, as well as St. John the Baptist's staff. These details inform the viewer to whom they are praying to. This painting, along with the two side panels, on the next slide, were part of a larger sculptural altarpiece.

These are the two side panels of the altarpiece. Notice how the style of these two paintings compliments the style of the second painting but would have been jarring next to the first version.

So, here's how the panels would have been laid out in the altarpiece. Traditional altarpieces are often diptychs or triptychs where the altarpiece could have been closed to saving the interior for special days of worship. The two side panels where the angels are would have folded in to cover the portrait of Mary and the infants with the angel. If you look at how the panels look it is clear that they would not have covered the entire center panel, indicating that they were never meant to close the first place. The National Gallery also laid out the three panels in this manner during the recent exhibition on the *Virgin of the Rocks* painting.

This is the under drawing of the National Gallery's version of the painting. Under drawings show art historians the details that artists put lots of time into prior to applying layers of paint on a canvas or a panel. In this case we can see that Leonardo put a lot of details the shading of St. John the Baptist, Jesus, and the angel sitting next to Jesus. Now part of Leonardo's legacy comes down from Giorgio Vasari who was one of the first art historians, one of the first people that records lives of artists in his book *Lives of the Artists* that was published in 1550. We don't always know if Vasari is telling the truth about events or if he's making up stories to entertain his patrons. There is a story about Leonardo painting *The Last Supper* that shed some light on his methods, particularly when we look at this under drawing. As the story goes, Leonardo was unable to complete the face of Jesus in the *Last Supper* painting because he was worried that he wouldn't be able to capture the divinity of a figure like Jesus Christ. He didn't feel like he could do justice, as an earthly man, to someone of divine nature like Jesus. We know that Leonardo did complete the painting. Jesus does have a face, but it shows that he put a lot of detail into these figures that were so important to him and so many people like Leonardo during this time who are devout Christians. That doesn't explain why Mary's face would be so pale because she was an important part of the story, but it does help explain the shading and the other characters.

So the three panels in London that we've looked at were part of a larger sculpted altarpiece as I've mentioned. Unfortunately, this altarpiece no longer survives. Parts of the altar were sold in 1576, about 70 years after the second painting was completed. However, the contracts for the commission for this altarpiece survive. The contracts describe a large sculpted altarpiece with 16 items specifically listed for gilding and painting by Leonardo and the de Predis brothers. According to contract the entire altarpiece was going to be made of three sections. The top of the altarpiece was going to be a sculpture of Mary and Jesus surrounded by rocks and mountains with God above the mother and her child. The bottom of the altarpiece featured a predella. Now a predella is a horizontal base of an altarpiece that is typically decorated with narrative scenes. These narrative scenes can either be painted on or sculpted in relief style where parts of the wood or the marble or materials in general are cut away to leave behind figures and images to tell a story. The *Virgin of the Rocks* and the two smaller paintings were displayed between these two sculpted parts. Giacomo del Maino had the contract for the

sculptural elements of this altarpiece and his contract predates Leonardo and the de Predis brothers' contract by about three years. This means the sculptural elements should have been completed before Leonardo begin painting the *Virgin of the Rocks*. It's my belief that Leonardo changed his typical painting style from realistic and soft to match the sculptural elements of the rest of the altarpiece. This also means that the presence of the rocks and the painting something researchers have debated for many years would not have been Leonardo's decision to include, but that of the confraternity.

Giacomo del Maino was contracted by the confraternity to create the sculptural elements of this altarpiece. Now this altarpiece, as mentioned before, doesn't survive but the other altarpieces that he created throughout his lifetime do, as do their contracts. The National Gallery has determined by comparing the contracts for the Immaculate Conception altarpiece to the other contracts, that we can use the altarpieces that do exist to try and recreate the one that we've lost. This image here is one of those altarpieces and I believe it does a good job of representing what the top of the missing altarpiece would have looked like. In the center of the pictured altarpiece we have a statue of the Virgin Mary, whereas the altarpiece that's lost that likely would have been where Mary and Jesus would have been. God is still overhead in the alcove with the circle surrounding him that's been gilded. There are also angels and seraphim surrounding her. On either side of the center part there are narrative scenes which are also mentioned in the contract that survived for the Immaculate Conception's altarpiece. Separating the narrative scenes are decorated pilasters, and we can't see the predella here but there likely would have been one as well. The entire altarpiece is gilded, even the narrative reliefs on the sides. The only things that are not gilded are the faces and hands, and the seraphim's that are painted in cinnabar.

As I mentioned earlier, Leonardo's figures in his second painting are quite different from the ones in his first. Now there's a painting technique called grisaille that was used during the Renaissance that Leonardo may have been inspired by. Grisaille is a style of painting where the subject is painted in grey tones to mimic sculpture. The exterior of the *Portinari Altarpiece* by Hugo van der Goes features two figures that are painted in grisaille, seen here. In the lower righthand corner of this slide is an image of the interior of the *Portinari Altarpiece*, in case anyone was curious. The altarpiece is believed to have travel to Florence shortly after it was completed in 1478. Now if the painting did travel there, and was exhibited between 1478 and 1482, Leonardo would have been in Florence to see the altarpiece. The altarpiece was incredibly influential for its use of nature, but if Leonardo visited on a day that it wasn't open, he would have seen grisaille figures on the back. This isn't to say that this was the first time that grisaille had ever been used in painting, but with how influential this altarpiece was on Italian artists, it's entirely possible that Leonardo drew influence from this altered piece that was used, as needed, in his future paintings. It is important to note that Leonardo's figures are not completed in the traditional grisaille style. His figures are not painted in only grey tones; they

have color to them. However, I don't believe his intention was to make his figures look solely like stone in the first place.

Instead, the central four figures were meant to be real people within a painting, but their composition still needed to compliment the rest of the altarpiece to create a cohesive design. When we lower the brightness of the three panels, like I've done here, we can begin to imagine what the paintings would have looked like in a low light setting like the chapel. The stone-like skin of the figures in the center panel stand out against the darker colors and the more muted tones of the outer panels, and they begin to draw the attention of the viewer for worship or for contemplation.

It is unknown if art historians will ever be able to tell if the National Gallery's *Virgin of the Rocks* figures were meant to mimic the sculpted elements of the rest of the altarpiece. However, we do know that Leonardo was a skilled painter who thought about the minute details of the world around him. He could have looked at the first version of the painting and realized he help could make a more cohesive altarpiece, and then used the second version as an opportunity to do so. This version has a long history of being thought of as lesser, simply because it is not the traditional style of Leonardo, but that is not the case. While the second version is in not the style we have come to know and love, that does not diminish the skill it took to create it. Thank you.