Achademia Leonardi Vinci

Publisher: FeDOA Press - Centro di Ateneo per le Biblioteche dell'Università di Napoli Federico II - Registered in Italy. Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: http://www.serena.unina.it/index.php/achademia

Leonardo's Figure of the Thoughtful Commentator in the *Adoration of the Magi:* Origin and Interpretation

Ianthi Assimakopoulou

How to cite: Assimakopoulou I. (2024). Leonardo's Figure of the Thoughtful Commentator in the *Adoration of the Magi*: Origin and Interpretation. *Achademia Leonardi Vinci*, 4(4), 14-36.
https://doi.org/10.6093/2785-4337/11414

Fig. 1 - Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi*, ca. 1482, oil on wood, 244 cm × 240 cm. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (© Gabinetto Fotografico Gallerie degli Uffizi – su concessione del Ministero della Cultura)

Leonardo's Figure of the Thoughtful Commentator in the *Adoration of the Magi:* Origin and Interpretation

Ianthi Assimakopoulou

Imita quando puoi li greci
(As much as you can, imitate the Greeks)
Codex Urb. Lat. 1270, f. 168r

Introduction

Leonardo da Vinci's *Adoration of the Magi* (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, inv. 1890 n. 1594) is a highly complex composition, aspects of which are not yet fully explored (Fig. 1). Such are the cases of the two figures flanking the principal scene: the youth at the far right of the panel, making a gesture of invitation to the viewer, and the figure of the middle-aged man at the left. I suggest that the younger figure is reminiscent of the youth in Leonardo's drawing of *A Seated Youth and a Child with a Lamb* (Royal Collection Trust, inv. RCIN 912540), which is known to be after a famous ancient chalcedony *intaglio* in the Medici Collection (now lost). This article focuses mainly on the origins of the elder character and it briefly discusses the preparatory drawings *Studies of Six Figures Including an Old Man Leaning on a Stick* (British Museum, inv. 1886.0609.42) and *Studies for the Adoration of the Magi* (Beaux Arts de Paris, inv. 424), both of which offer insights into the process by which the master articulates the pose of the older figure and brings it into a final form that conveys message and meaning. Furthermore, Leonardo's 'pensive man' will be also related to figures executed by artists namely Donatello, Raphael, Giovanni Francesco Rustici and Giorgio Vasari, while its source of inspiration will be traced back to Roman sarcophagi and ultimately to Attic grave stelae.

The Adoration of the Magi

In March 1481 Leonardo, already the owner of an atelier – albeit a small one – was commissioned by the monks of the Augustinian

The British Museum
1886.0609.42. 2018

monastery of San Donato a Scopeto to paint the major work of his first Florentine period, the *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1464/1469-1481/1483). This was a large-scale panel (244 × 240 cm) meant to be placed on the high altar of their Romanesque church located a short distance outside the Porta Romana, on the outskirts of Florence. Leonardo was to complete it within twenty-four or, at most, thirty months.[1]

The story of the three kings of the Orient was particularly popular in Florence, where the *Compagnia de' Magi,* a lay confraternity favoured by the Medici, staged an impressive costume parade on the Feast of the Epiphany, the 6th of January. Today, as in the Renaissance, the pageant re-enacts the kings' journey through the city.[2] For the fifteenth-century Florentine citizens that day was furthermore important because the Epiphany commemorates Christ's Baptism in the river Jordan by Saint John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence.

According to André Chastel, Leonardo instilled in the *Adoration of the Magi* a dramatic character which took its final shape in the last stages of the panel's execution, whereas Edoardo Villata argues convincingly that

[1] Bambach, Carmen, "Documented Chronology of Leonardo's Life and Work." In *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 22 January - 30 March 2003), Carmen Bambach (ed.), New York /New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 229. In preparation for a siege in 1529, the Florentine government, following its scorched-earth policy, decided that San Donato a Scopeto and other buildings on the south bank of the Arno should be razed to the ground. Since Leonardo's panel was largely unfinished, Vasari documents that the painting was in the home of Amerigo Benci, opposite the Loggia de' Peruzzi. See Bambach, Carmen, "Designing Public Works: The Sculptor-Architect at San Lorenzo." In *Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman & Designer* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13 November 2017-12 February 2018), Carmen Bambach (ed.), New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017, p. 129. Wallace, William E., "Leonardo da Vinci's "Adoration of the Magi": Encountering the 'Epiphany'." In: *Encountering the Renaissance celebrating Gary M. Radke and 50 years of the Syracuse University Graduate Program in Renaissance Art*, Molly Bourne and Victor Coonin (ed.), Ramsey (New Jersey): The WAPACC organization, 2016, p. 51. Chastel, André, *Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique, études sur la Renaissance et l'humanisme platonicien*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959, 242. Vasari, Giorgio, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Gaston du C. De Vere (trans), New York / London / Toronto: Knopf, Everyman's library, 1906, repr. 1996, vol. I, p. 631. Natali, Antonio, "Il tempio ricostruito." In *Leonardo da Vinci, Studio per l'Adorazione dei Magi*, Filippo Camerota, Antonio Natali and Maurizio Seracini (ed.), Roma: Argos, 2006, p. 9. Villata, Edoardo, *1478, a Year in Leonardo da Vinci's Career*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021, p.12. My special thanks go to Professor Edoardo Villata for reading my paper and offering stimulating remarks. I am also most grateful to Professor Francis Ames Lewis and Professor Claire Farago for their constructive critique. I am also grateful to Professor Chrysa Damianaki for her careful reading of my paper and her valuable suggestions.

[2] We have no information about the origins of the *Compagnia de' Magi*, yet it must have already existed in 1390, in which year a Festa de' Magi was held and recorded. See Hatfield, Rab, "The Compagnia de' Magi.", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 33 (1970), pp. 107-108. Fiorani, Francesca, "Why did Leonardo not finish the Adoration of the Magi?" In *Illuminating Leonardo: a Festschrift for Carlo Pedretti Celebrating his 70 years of Scholarship (1944-2014)*, Constance Moffatt and Sara Taglialagamba (ed.), Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2016, p. 138. Kemp, Martin, *Leonardo da Vinci, The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 44. Interestingly, portraits of members of the Medici family appear in depictions of the *Adoration of the Magi*: these are the cases of Benozo Gozzolli's fresco in the Medici chapel of the Palazzo Medici and Sandro Botticelli's painting now in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Fra Angelico had also painted on the wall of the Cell 39 of the San Marco convent a fresco with the *Adoration of the Magi* (1441-1442) intended for Cosimo de' Medici. A tondo with the same subject, also by Fra Angelico, decorated the Camera terrena (ground floor) of Lorenzo de' Medici in the Medici Palace: see Chastel, 1959, p. 245.

Leonardo reworked the *Adoration* around 1503-1506, more than twenty years after he had abandoned it.[3] Yet, the painter's intentions are already present in the attitudes and gestures of the figures illustrated in the preparatory drawings.[4] The whole composition develops around the Virgin, who, holding the infant Christ in her lap, sits on a rock beneath a laurel tree, probably an allusion to the Tree of Jesse, which in the Gospel of Matthew connects Jesus to the House of King David.[5] The dramatic effect is heightened by the impressive interplay of light and shadow, which imparts a three-dimensionality to the depiction of form.

Leonardo visualizes the story of the *Adoration* clearly by concentrating on three narrative scenes. In the foreground, the arrival of the Magi and their large retinue unfolds. Witnessing the divine incarnation with fear, amazement and joy, they approach the Child to venerate Him and to offer their gifts. The composition is dominated by the pyramid formed by the Virgin, the kneeling Magi and their entourage, set within a quasi-semicircle. The space at the back is divided into two parallel scenes: on the right a dramatic clash of men and rearing horses, on the left a half-ruined building. This powerful and balanced composition highlights the attitudes of the bodies and the expressions of the faces by employing an extraordinary *repertoire* of gestures and poses.[6]

At the sides of the painting, as already noted, two outstanding figures flank the principal scene. On the left, a middle-aged man immersed in his thoughts, developed out of early designs for Joseph (Fig. 2),[7] and on the

[3] Villata, Edoardo, "L' Adorazione dei Magi di Leonardo: riflettografie e riflessioni." *Raccolta Vinciana*, 32 (2007), p.27. The conservator of the Florentine Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Roberto Bellucci, demonstrated through technical analysis and stylistic observations, that although Leonardo abandoned the panel when he left for Milan in 1482, he worked on it again later, in about 1500, on his return to Florence. This point was highlighted in Damianaki, Chrysa, "Leonardo da Vinci, un tema per gli storici dell' arte, Lecce, Università del Salento, 21-22 November 2019." *Leonardo da Vinci Society Newsletter,* 47 (2020), p. 8. Damianaki writes: "Bellucci demonstrated through technical and stylistic observations that although Leonardo abandoned the panel when he left for Milan in 1482, he worked on it again later, in about 1500 on his return to Florence. This is proved by the circular scientific drawings visible in the upper right part of the panel which are directly related to the studies of the energy of the movement of bodies in Codex Madrid I (c. 148*r*), completed in about 1499".

[4] Chastel, 1959, p. 430. There are two preparatory studies of the composition, one is in the Département des Arts Graphiques at the Louvre, the other in the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi. See Natali, 2006, p. 10.

[5] Isbouts Jean-Pierre and Brown Christopher H., *Young Leonardo: The Evolution of a Revolutionary Artist, 1472-1499*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017, p. 48. In the book of Isaiah, the 'shoot that grows from Jesse's root' symbolizes the one who will come to save mankind. It seems that Leonardo discussed difficult concepts of scripture with a theologian from the monastery of San Donato a Scoperto. See Natali, 2006, p. 20, 24. Interestingly, the tree, under which the Virgin sits, seems to be placed at the golden section, which, along with abstract perfections such as the square and the circle, lies at the root of Renaissance aesthetics. See Clark, Kenneth, *Leonardo*, London / New York: Penguin Books, 1939; repr. 1993, p. 130.

[6] Chastel, 1959, p. 242. Natali, 2006, pp. 14-16. Delieuvin, Vincent, "Liberté, La licence dans la règle." In *Leonardo da Vinci* (Paris, Musée du Louvre, 24 October 2019-24 February 2020), Louis Frank, Vincent Delieuvin et al. (ed.), Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2019a, pp. 116-120.

[7] Kemp, 2007, p. 54. Notably, the thoughtful figure on the left handside recalls the same figure in the *Nativity* scenes of Byzantine art. As is known, the art collections of Piero de' Medici and Lorenzo il Magnifico included Byzantine icons. See respectively: Müntz, Eugène, *Les collections des Mèdicis au XVe siècle*, Paris-London: Librairie de l'art, 1888, p. 26, "19 tavolette alla Ghreca"; *Il Libro d'inventario dei beni di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, Marco Spallanzani and Giovanna Gaeta Bertelà (ed.), Firenze: Associazione 'Amici del Bargello', 1992; also, Fusco, Laurie and

Fig. 2 - Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi* (detail), ca. 1482. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (© Gabinetto Fotografico Gallerie degli Uffizi – su concessione del Ministero della Cultura)

right, a youth with outstretched right hand inviting the viewer to come and share the feelings of those present at the biblical event (Fig. 3).[8] The contradictive attitudes of these two key-figures could be taken as "symbols of the active and passive elements in Leonardo's character".[9]

They take the form on the one hand, of a man with features expressing vigour and thoughtfulness, and on the other, of an elegant

Corti, Gino, *Lorenzo de' Medici, Collector of Antiquarian*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 379. I would like to thank prof. Damianaki for drawing my attention to this issue.

[8] Figures displaying an inviting gesture to the viewer date back to the *sacre rappresentazioni*, the sacred dramas staged since the time of Brunelleschi in Florence which were primarily theatrical performances meant to contribute to people's moral and religious education. See Baxandall, Michael, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford (Oxfordshire) / New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 70-71. These didactic dramas represented scenes from the Old and New Testaments, from pious legends and from the lives of the saints, and their origin may be traced back to the Byzantine liturgical dramas (for example, the tragedy *Christus Patiens* attributed to St. Gregory the Great Nazianzus). See also, Damianaki, Chrysa, "Movements and Gestures in Donatello's Narrative Reliefs." Unpublished MA thesis, University of London, A.A 1983. A copy may be seen in the library of The Warburg Institute, University of London, while some parts of it have been published as follows: Damianaki, Chrysa, "Gesture, expression and theatre. Three narrative reliefs by Donatello." In *Studi sul Rinascimento italiano / Italian Renaissance Studies. In Memoria di Giovanni Aquilecchia* (International Colloquium: 'Renaissance Learning and Letters: In Memoriam Giovanni Aquilecchia London, The Warburg Institute), Angelo Romano and Paolo Procaccioli (ed.), Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 2005, pp. 83-126 and Damianaki, Chrysa, "Speech and Movement: Donatello in San Lorenzo, Florence." *Kronos*, 13 (2009), pp. 41-48.

[9] Clark, Kenneth, "Leonardo and the Antique." In *Leonardo's Legacy; an International Symposium*, Charles Donald O'Malley (ed.), Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 4-6.

and graceful youth.[10] These two contrary figure-types aside, the *Adoration* anticipates themes which Leonardo will develop in later works. The figure of the youth shown in the middle ground, pointing upwards with his hand, and the dramatic scene of the equestrian figures in the background, are such examples.[11]

It seems, however, that only a few forms fit Leonardo's inner vision, so as to be included repeatedly in his compositions, confirming Aristotle's concept that form is found in the artist's soul.[12] The painter was apparently greatly indebted to ideas promoted by Alberti, such as the recommendation of variety (*varietá*), a principle of ordering through clear contrasts, in things depicted. Accordingly, in the *Adoration* old, young, servants, kings, horses, ruins, a rocky landscape are all mixed together.[13] In the background in particular, the excitement of servants and horses acquires a vivacity that turns into a sort of bestial madness (as Leonardo was later to call war), while the stable with the meek ox and ass has been displaced to the extreme right.[14]

Returning to the characters appearing at the sides of the *Adoration* we note that they might well derive from ideal types reminiscent of classical art. The young man on the right could be related to the drawing *A Seated Youth and a Child with a Lamb* or *Young Man in Profile,* kept at Windsor Castle (Royal Collection Trust, inv. RCIN 912540) and dated 1503-1506 (Fig. 4). Kenneth Clark

Fig. 3 - Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi* (detail), ca. 1482. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (© Gabinetto Fotografico Gallerie degli Uffizi – su concessione del Ministero della Cultura)

[10] Clark, 1993, p. 121.

[11] Ibid., p. 78.

[12] Ibid., p. 79. "[...] απὸ τέχνης δὲ γίγνεται ὅσων τὸ εἶδος ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ", "Things are generated artificially whose form is contained in the soul" see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7. 1032b, 1. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0052%3Abook%3D7 <14 December 2024>.

[13] Alberti values *copia* and *varietá* "as far as ingegno allows" by which he means diligent practice of nature's gifts subordinate to the demands of decorum. Varietà is a principle of ordering through clear contrasts. See Farago, Claire, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone, A Critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the Codex Urbinas*, Leiden/ New York: Brill, 1992, p. 370. Bambach, 2003, p. 320. Alberti, Leon Battista, *Il nuovo De pictura di Leon Battista Alberti, The new De pictura of Leon Battista Alberti*, Rocco Sinisgalli (ed.), Roma: Ed. Kappa, 2006, §40, p. 202; Alberti, Leon Battista, *On Painting and On Sculpture. The Latin Texts of 'De pictura' and 'De statua'*, Cecil Grayson (ed. and trans), London: Phaidon, 1972, §40, pp. 78-79. Wallace, 2016, p. 52. It was customary in Renaissance art to have all kinds of contrapositions for which see Manca, Joseph, "The Unseeing Scholar in Leonardo da Vinci's 'Adoration of the Magi'.", *Notes in the History of Art*, 35, 1-2 (2015-2016), p. 128. Villata, 2021, p. 37.

[14] Kemp, 2007, p. 51. Clark, 1993, p. 200.

Fig. 4 - Leonardo, *A seated youth, and a child with a lamb*, ca. 1503-06. Windsor, Royal Collection Trust, inv. RCIN 12540 (Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023)

acknowledges that the figure in the drawing may be the most direct of Leonardo's references to an antique work of art.[15] The youth is shown sitting and facing right, his right leg fully extended, his left tucked under his right thigh. This curious pose was known to Renaissance artists, as it was carved on a chalcedony *intaglio* described as *Diomedes and the Palladium,* which was part of Lorenzo de' Medici's famous collection of antiquities. As Lorenzo states in his *Ricordi*, he acquired the gem in September 1471, when he was elected ambassador to Rome for the coronation of Pope Sixtus IV. From the Caput Mundi he brought back two ancient marble heads, gifted to him by the pope, and in addition took away the Tazza Farnese along with many other cameos and coins, among them the chalcedony *Diomedes and the Palladium*.[16] The gem was admired even before it came into the possession of the Medici, Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455) having already characterized it as "cosa maravgl[i]osa a vederlo". Lorenzo's son Piero *lo Sfortunato* (1472-1503) valued it so much that it was among the precious objects he took with him when he fled into exile in 1494. The traces of the gem were eventually lost, but copies after it were executed by Renaissance artists, the most famous being on one of the eight marble medallions in the courtyard of the palazzo Medici Riccardi.[17] Leonardo could have based the youth in Windsor drawing on the tondo in the Medici courtyard (ca. 1457-1465) and would undoubtedly have known that it derived from the famous gem. We cannot rule out the possibility that Leonardo might even have seen the chalcedony gem after it entered the Medici Collection, since

[15] Clark, 1969, pp. 5, 28. The young man on the right of the *Adoration* was thought to be a self-portrait of Leonardo. Also, Clark, 1993, p. 76.

[16] The former owner of the *Tazza Farnese* and the *Diomedes and the Palladium* gem was the deceased Pope Paul II (1464-71), the best collector of his generation, and this occasion marked a high point in Lorenzo's acquisitions. See Fusco and Corti, 2006, pp. 6-9. Clark, 1969, pp. 28, 32.

[17] Polak, Bettina, H., "A Leonardo Drawing and the Medici Diomedes Gem." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 14 (1951), pp. 303-304. The *Diomedes and the Palladium* gem reappears in 1537 in the list of precious objects inherited by Margherita d'Austria upon the death of her husband, Duke Alessandro de' Medici. Through her second marriage to Ottavio Farnese the gem entered the Farnese collection and in 1734 was transferred to the royal collections in Naples. It is unknown when the gem left the collections. See Gennaioli, Riccardo, "Bottega di Cristiano Dehn, Diomede e il Palladio." In *Pregio e bellezza, Cammei e intagli dei Medici* (Firenze, Museo degli Argenti, 15 March - 27 June 2010), Riccardo Gennaioli (ed.), Livorno: Sillabe, 2010, p. 99, scheda 15.

he was connected through Verrocchio to Lorenzo and, moreover, might have worked as a sculptor in the Giardino di San Marco (1480-1482).[18] It is not surprising therefore that Leonardo gave to the young man at the right edge of the *Adoration* features reminiscent of those of the youth in Windsor drawing, such as the prominent roundness of the head, the curly hair with the tuft on the forehead, the distinctive nose and the hand outstretched as if beckoning.[19]

On the other hand, the imposing man at the left, enveloped in long garments falling in heavy folds which accentuate his volume, stands on the border of the painting as if observing in a detached manner the scene unfolding in front of him. With bowed head, down-turned mouth and the left hand on his chin, while the right supports the elbow of the raised arm, he appears to act as Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-1472) beholder inside the pictorial space.[20] Is he a learned scholar, a visionary prophet, a neo-Aristotelian philosopher, or an *alter ego* of the thoughtful artist meditating on the phenomenon of the invisible made visible through divine incarnation?

Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571), the creator of the celebrated group *Perseus and Medusa* in the Piazza della Signoria of Florence, in his *Trattato della Architettura* reports that when he was employed by François I (1494-1547): "… the King, being enamoured to an extraordinary degree of Leonardo's great talents, took such pleasure in hearing him talk that he would only on a few days of the year deprive himself of his company... I cannot resist repeating the words which I heard the King say about him, in the presence of the Cardinal of Ferrara, the Cardinal of Lorraine and the King of Navarre; he said that he did not believe that a man had ever been born who knew as much as Leonardo, not only in the spheres of painting, sculpture, and architecture, but that he was also a very great philosopher."[21]

Leonardo may therefore have endowed the pensive character in the *Adoration* with some traits of his own multifaceted personality. Innumerable observations and remarks fill the thousands of pages of his notebooks, showing that he was a keen observer of people and events, and a deeply-lined and original thinker.[22] Despite his urbanity and courteous manners, he always remained aloof, and his inner reserve raised barriers between himself and the others. He recorded issues impacting on himself or his professional image, without showing the slightest emotion. Even his description of the damage to the *Battle of*

[18] Marani, Pietro, *Leonardo. Una carriera di pittore*, Milano: F. Motta, 1999, pp. 106-116 as mentioned by Villata, 2007, p. 12.
[19] https://www.rct.uk/collection/912540/a-seated-youth-and-a-child-with-a-lamb <14 December 2024>.
[20] Alberti, 1972, 82-83. Kemp, 2007, p. 54, as mentioned by Manca, 2015-2016, pp. 128, 133, n. 3.
[21] "[…] il re Francesco essendo innamorato gagliardissimamente di quelle sue gran virtù, pigliava tanto piacere a sentirlo ragionare che poche giornate dell'anno si spiccava da lui: qual furno causa di non li dar facultà di poter mettere in opera quei sua mirabili studi fatti con tanta disciplina. Io non voglio mancare di ridire le parole che io sentii dire al Re di lui, le quali disse a me, presente il cardinal di Ferrara e il cardinal di Loreno e il re di Navarra; disse che non credeva mai che altro uomo fusse nato al mondo che sapessi tanto quanto Lionardo, non tanto di scultura, pittura e architettura, quanto che egli era grandissimo filosofo." See Cellini, Benvenuto, *Opere di Benvenuto Cellini*, Giuseppe Guido Ferrero (ed.), Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese UTET, 1971, p. 819 as mentioned by Kemp, 2007, p. 347.
[22] Wittkower, Rudolf, *Born under Saturn: the Character and Conduct of Artists: a Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*, New York: New York Review Books, 2007, p. 75.

Anghiari cartoon sounds more like a record of a meteorological phenomenon and shows no outward sign of personal disappointment. He notes: "On 6 June 1505 at the stroke of the thirteenth hour, I began painting in the palace; and at the moment of laying the brush down the weather deteriorated […]. The cartoon became unstuck; the water was spilled and the vessel which carried it was broken; and suddenly the weather became worse and great quantities of rain poured down until evening seemed like night."[23] At this point Leonardo's work was probably not irremediably lost, but it is still remarkable that not a word of personal reaction to the damage of his work is given in the account.[24] Though personal emotions were strictly excluded, Leonardo introduced in the *Adoration* a new conception of 'pittura di storia', focused on expressions of "moti dell'animo", the motions of the soul. The Epiphany of the divine is therefore manifested through the feelings it arouses in the witnesses: surprise, emotion, fear, even disbelief, made visible through gestures and facial expressions.[25] Consequently, Leonardo's advice to the young painter is to concentrate on rendering the movements appropriate to the mental state of the figures making up his *historia* and not to feel constrained by faithful imitation of external forms. In order to show the figures' emotions, he does not furthermore hesitate to exaggerate the dynamism of their poses or even to distort their anatomy.[26]

Poses, expressions and gestures are for Leonardo an eloquent visual language conveying message and meaning.[27] Accordingly, his thoughtful commentator in the *Adoration of the Magi* evidently expresses introspection, detachment and profound melancholy (Fig. 2). After all, by the end of the fifteenth century melancholy became for Renaissance humanists a cultural ideal connected with the *vita speculativa*.[28] Without denying that Saturn's typical temperament would generate grave problems, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) maintained that people of genius partake of the melancholic mood and so do artists, poets, philosophers, and generally persons inclined to contemplation.[29] From this

[23] Madrid II, 1r as mentioned by Kemp, 2007, p. 230.

[24] See Barsanti, Roberta [et alia], *La Sala Grande di Palazzo Vecchio e la Battaglia di Anghiari di Leonardo da Vinci. Dalla configurazione architettonica all'apparato decorativo*, Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2019, particularly the final essay Bellucci, Roberto and Frosinini, Cecilia, "Leonardo, dalla Sala del Papa alla Sala Grande. Tempi, materiali e imprevisti." in *La Sala Grande di Palazzo Vecchio e la Battaglia di Anghiari di Leonardo da Vinci. Dalla configurazione architettonica all'apparato decorativo*, Roberta Barsanti, Gianluca Belli, Emanuela Ferretti e Cecilia Frosinini (ed.), Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2019, pp. 283-296.

[25] Frosinini, Cecilia, "L'Adorazione dei Magi e i luoghi di Leonardo," In *Il restauro dell'Adorazione dei Magi di Leonardo: la riscoperta di un capolavoro*, Marco Ciatti e Cellilia Forsinini (ed), Firenze: Edifir, 2017, p. 36.

[26] Delieuvin, 2019, "Liberté", p. 92.

[27] Neumann, Gerhard, *Gesten und Gebärden in der griechischen Kunst*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1965, pp. 145-150. Margariti, Katia, "Gesturing Emotions: Mourning and Affection on Classical Attic Funerary Reliefs." *Babesch*, 94 (2019), p. 77. Clark, 1993, p. 132.

[28] Lennep, Jacques van, *Alchimie: contribution à l'histoire de l'art alchimique* (Bruxelles, Passage 44, 19 December 1984-10 March 1985), Bruxelles: Crédit communal de Belgique, 1984, p. 302. Klibansky, Raymond, Panofsky, Erwin and Saxl, Fritz, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1979, pp. 350-351.

[29] In his *Autobiography* Cellini refers to his melancholic nature, "Essendo io per natura malinconico". See Cellini, Benvenuto, *Vita di Benvenuto Cellini, orefice e scultore fiorentino, scritta da lui medessimo…*, Francesco Tassi (ed.), Firenze: G. Piatti, 1829, vol.1, p. 111. The German polymath Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535),

viewpoint, Ficino and his humanist friends saw in melancholy the highest rank of intellectual life.[30]

The Iconography of Greek and Roman Sources

The iconography of Leonardo's figure of 'philosopher', who holds his chin with his left hand, while the right supports the elbow of the raised arm, seems to have its roots in classical Attic grave stelae with representations of figures expressing grief and mourning for the loss of loved ones. The mourning males are often elderly and bearded, their face belying emotion, while young men are more frequently represented grieving for their own premature death. On these reliefs, dating to the fourth century BC, the sense of painful bereavement is usually expressed by touching the face, head, and neck or supporting the head with one hand. Half of these figures are shown with their other arm crossed over their torso and the hand supporting the elbow of the arm raised to the face. These gestures have been interpreted as "indicating contemplation of death".[31]

A case in point is the famous "Ilissos stele" dating around 340 BC (Fig. 5), on which the bereaved old father, wrapped in a long robe and leaning upon a long staff stands gazing at his dead son. He touches his bearded chin with the right hand, while keeping the left arm crossed, in an attitude suggestive of deep sorrow.[32] The same restrained pathos can be seen in the figure of Demokleides, a hoplite killed in the naval battle of Corinth in 394 BC. He is represented sitting on the bow of a ship, with his right hand on his cheek. The accompanying epigram urges the beholder not to lose courage: "I am the

Fig. 5 - *The grave 'stele of the Ilissos river'*, ca. 340 BC, Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 869.9 (© Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development)

in his treatise *De occulta philosophia* distinguished three grades of melancholy: *melancholia imaginative*, *rationalis* and *mentalis*. The first category concerned particularly the artists and this explains the title *Melencolia I* that Dürer gave to his engraving. See Lennep, 1984, pp. 302-303; Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, 1979, p. 351.

[30] Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, 1979, p. 348.

[31] Squire, Michael, "Embodying the Dead on Classical Attic Grave-Stelai." *Art History*, 41.3 (2018), pp. 535; Margariti, 2019, pp. 66-67; see also Himmelmann-Wildschütz, Nikolaus, *Studien zum Ilissos-Relief*, Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1956.

[32] Margariti, 2019, pp. 67-68.

Fig. 6 - Mattei sarcophagus with Muses inspiring Authors (right short side), 3rd or 4th century AD. Rome, Museo Nazionale alle Terme (Museo Nazionale Romano) (© Su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Museo Nazionale Romano)

tomb of a shipwrecked [man], but you continue your journey".[33] Ultimately, the iconography of Attic grave reliefs representing figures expressing grief and mourning may be traced back to the late Classical period, echoing the celebrated marble relief of the *Pensive* or *Mourning Athena* produced by an Attic workshop *circa* 460 BC. The goddess of wisdom is depicted wearing a peplos and leaning on a spear.[34] Her raised left hand almost touches her face, while her bowed head gazes towards a low commemorative stele on her left side.[35]

Remarkably, the iconography of classical mourning figures, which Leonardo could not have known, was disseminated, – endowed with new meaning, energy, and vigour – to a select number of Roman sarcophagi carrying representations of the Muses, inspirational divinities associated with other feminine symbols, such as the Hours, the Nymphs and the Graces. The Muses, the nine daughters of Zeus and the Titaness Mnemosyne, preside over the liberal arts, led by Apollo (*Musagetes*) and sometimes by Athena. Through the Muses, mortals receive divine inspiration and their creative process is attested by ancient Greek authors, who name the nine, each with a specific function. Thus, Calliope presides over epic poetry, Clio history, Euterpe lyric poetry, Terpsichore choral dancing, Erato love poetry, Melpomene tragedy, Urania

[33] *Stele of Demokleides*, Athens, National Archaeological Museum, Attic relief gravestone, 1st quarter of 4th century BC. See, Papaioannou, Kostas [et alia], *L'Art grec. L'art et la civilisation de Grèce ancienne. Les sites archéologiques de la Grèce et de la Grande Grèce*, Paris: L. Mazenod, 1972, p. 158. On the Iconography of meditative figures see also Franzoni, Claudio, *Tirannia dello sguardo. Corpo, gesto, espressione dell'arte greca*, Torino: Einaudi, 2006, especially chapter 5 related to 'Eroi tristi'. About the meaning of the gesture expressing waiting and mourning see Steinberg Leo, "Body and Symbol in the Medici Chapel." In *Michelangelo's Sculpture*, Sheila Schwartz (ed.), Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 96-128, esp. 114.

[34] Stewart, Andrew, "The Persian and Carthaginian Invasions of 480 B.C.E. and the Beginning of the Classical Style: Part 1, the Stratigraphy, Chronology, and Significance of the Acropolis Deposits." *American Journal of Archaeology*, 112.3 (2008), p. 405.

[35] Sears, Matthew, "Mother Canada and Mourning Athena: From Classical Athens to Vimy Ridge", *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 25.3 (2018), p. 44. From the first half of the fifth century BC, the Athenians commemorated those who fell in battle by listing them by name on a marble stone. Thus, Athena's pensive downward gaze was interpreted as a lament over the Athenian war dead. The relief has also been considered to be a votive offering of a victorious athlete to the patron goddess of the city of Athens or even a boundary marker for a palaestra. See Dörig, José, "Die hohe Klassik, 450-400 v. Chr." In *Die griechische Kunst*, John Boardman et al. (ed.), München: Hirmer Verlag, 1984, pp. 130. The relief was brought to light in excavations on the Acropolis of Athens in 1888. See Stewart, 2008, p. 405.

astronomy, Thalia comedy and Polyhymnia sacred music.[36]

The most conspicuous Quattrocento monument that incorporated a Muse sarcophagus was the tomb of Bishop Balthero Spinelli (1465), at Santa Maria del Priorato in Rome. The re-used third-century AD relief showing Athena and the Muses caught the interest of artists and collectors. By this time, two other sarcophagi on display in Roman churches and easily accessed, began also to attract attention: the Giustiniani sarcophagus of the Muses from the second century AD,[37] now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and the Mattei sarcophagus with Muses inspiring authors, of the third or fourth century AD, now in the Museo Nazionale alle Terme (Museo Nazionale Romano). On the right short end of the later sarcophagus (Fig. 6), Urania, holding with her left hand her attribute a celestial globe, and Polyhymnia flank an elderly man who holds with both hands a crooked staff, probably made from a branch of cypress, a tree that rarely yields a straight staff.

Interestingly, one of the letters attributed to Hippocrates refers to a festival – organized by the Asklepiads in the island of Kos – called the *Lifting of the Staff* (*Ἀνάληψις ράβδου*). The celebration was connected with Asklepios' attribute, a staff often represented roughly trimmed with a snake coiled around it. The festivities included an annual pilgrimage to

Fig. 7 - Mattei sarcophagus with Muses inspiring Authors (left short side), 3rd or 4th century AD. Rome, Museo Nazionale alle Terme (Museo Nazionale Romano) (© Su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Museo Nazionale Romano)

a cypress grove not far from the city of Kos, which was dedicated to Apollo Kyparissios and where the first temple of Asklepios was built. The relation between the world of tombs and the cypress, the dark tall tree with its everlasting greenery, symbol of the indestructibility of life, has remained unchanged to this day.[38]

The crooked staff, probably of cypress, carried by the elderly male figure on the Mattei sarcophagus, may characterize him as a 'son of Asklepios', that is, a physician. He is shown addressing Polyhymnia, standing with crossed

[36] The Muses, originally water spirits, were associated with other feminine symbols such as the Hours, the Nymphs and the Graces. See Morford, Mark and Lenardon, Robert, *Classical Mythology*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 130-131.

[37] The 'Giustiniani' sarcophagus of the Muses was in Santa Maria Maggiore during the Quattrocento. See Bober, Phyllis and Rubinstein, Ruth, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources*, London: Harvey Miller, 2010, pp. 86-87, no 38.

[38] A description of Asklepios' staff, "dei medici baculum", as an unworked branch of tree is to be found in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*: see Kerényi, Carl, *Asklepios: Archetypal Image of the Physician's Existence*, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1959, pp. 52-54, 118, n. 11.

Fig. 8 - Niobids sarcophagus (right short side). Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, inv. 10437 (Foto © Governatorato SCV – Direzione dei Musei)

legs on his left, probably entreating her to secure his fame earned through mastery of his special knowledge. The Muse listens to him thoughtfully, having adopted the pose of the mourning figures on classical Attic grave stelae, with her right hand on her chin and the left arm crossed below the raised right one.[39]

Of particular interest with respect to the *Adoration* is the left short end of the Mattei sarcophagus (Fig. 7). There, an imposing bearded man stands deep in thought between Clio, Muse of History, and Calliope, Muse of Heroic Poetry. One end of his garment is folded over his left shoulder and arm, while the other is swathed around his body. His right hand is raised to his jaw, while his left forearm crosses over his torso. Shown in a light contrapposto, with his weight resting on his right engaged leg, while the flexed left leg indicates readiness to move, the grave elder with his dignified attitude and the scroll in his left hand is recognized as a personage deserving reverence and respect.[40] The figure might actually reflect a statue of Asklepios (Palazzo Pitti, OdA 1911 no. 669), representing the god deep in thought with his left hand holding a scroll under his chin, in a position often used by artists to depict philosophers and poets. This statuary type appears also on an ivory panel which entered the Gaddi Collection in about 1500.[41]

The iconography of the meditative figure appears also on a number of Endymion sarcophagi, since the young shepherd's eternal

[39] The figure of Polyhymnia, both on the Giustiniani sarcophagus and in the Roman relief incorporated in the Spinelli tomb, retains the same meditative pose. The 'Mattei' sarcophagus of the Muses was in San Paolo fuori le mura. See Bober and Rubinstein, 2010, p. 86, no 37 iii.

[40] Bober and Rubinstein, 2010, p. 86, no 37 ii. Christian, Kathleen W., "The Multiplicity of the Muses: thee Reception of Antique Images of the Muses in Italy, 1400-1600." In *The Muses and their Afterlife in Post-Classical Europe*, Kathleen W. Christian, Clare E. L. Guest and Claudia Wedepohl (ed.), London: The Warburg Institute, Warburg Institute Colloquia 26, 2014, p. 108.

[41] The colossal statue of Asklepios is an excellent copy from the Antonine period, reproducing one of the masterpieces by the sculptor Nikeratos, who was active between the late third and early second century BC, and made the original work for the Temple of Concord at the west end of the Forum in Rome, at the foot of the Capitoline Hill. See Kerényi, 1959, p. 66-67 and Holtzmann, Bernanrd "Asklepios." In *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)*, 2,1 (1984), pp. 863-866, 889, no 382, 388. See also https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/%2Fworks_asclepius <14 December 2024>. The ivory panel (National Museums Liverpool, M10044) is part of a Late Antique diptych (AD 400-430), known as the 'Gaddi Diptych'. See https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/artifact/asclepius-hygieia-diptych <14 December 2024>. The family's humanistic interests are testified in Poliziano's writings. See Cummings, Anthony M., "The Company of the Cazzuola and the Early Madrigal." *Musica Disciplina*, 50 (1996), p. 209, n. 11.

Fig. 9 - Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of Six Figures including an Old Man Leaning on a Stick, and a Head in Profile*, 1480-81. London, The British Museum, 1886.0609.42. 2018 (© Foto The Trustees of the British Museum)

sleep served as a metaphor for death and was an appropriate subject for funerary scenes.[42] Another example of the ancient meditative type can be seen on the right short side of the Niobids sarcophagus (Fig. 8) now in the Musei Vaticani (inv. 10437). There, a young, bearded man, possibly a wayfarer, wearing boots and a tunic tied at the waist, stands in a grieving pose, leaning on a long staff in front of the mourning Niobe.[43]

[42] Thus, at the right end of the Endymion sarcophagus at the Palazzo Doria-Pamphili, this melancholic type assumes the role of a fellow shepherd in a grieving pose. Following the aforementioned pattern, his right hand is brought up to his cheek and the left is crossed over his chest, supporting the elbow of the raised hand. Significantly, the young shepherd leans on a long staff, as seen in the case of the old father on the *Ilissos stele*, but also the spear held by the pensive figure of the goddess of wisdom from the Acropolis. See Bober and Rubinstein, 2010, pp. 73-74, no. 26. Robert, Carl, *Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs, 3,1: Einzelmythen: Actaeon – Hercules*, Berlin: G. Grote, 1897, pp. 93-94, no. 77b. Figures in traditional mourning poses also appear on Etruscan funerary urns, such as that in Siena showing the daughter of Agamemnon Electra, accompanied by her servant and mourning at her father's grave, a scene from the myth of Orestes. See McCann, Anna M., *Roman Sarcophagi in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York: The Museum, 1978, pp. 57-58.

[43] Robert, Carl, *Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs, 3.3: Einzelmythen: Niobiden – Triptolemos, Ungedeutet*, Berlin: G. Grote, 1919, p. 382, no. 315. Newby, Zahra, *Greek Myths in Roman Art and Culture, Imagery, Values and Identity in Italy, 50 BC-AD 250*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 300. The figure might illustrate the epigram of Theodoridas of Syracuse (3rd century BC): "Stand near, stranger, and weep when you look on the infinite mourning of Niobe, the daughter of Tantalus, who held not her tongue under lock and key; whose brood of twelve children is laid low now on earth, these by the arrows of Phoebus, and those by the arrows of Artemis. Now, her form compounded of stone and flesh, she has become a rock, and high-built Sipylus

Fig. 10 - Donatello, *Bearded Prophet*, for east side of Campanile, *ca*. 1418-1420. Florence, Museo dell' Opera del Duomo (© Su concessione dell'Opera di S. Maria del Fiore di Firenze/Foto A. Quattrone)

The Sublimation of the Ancient Meditative Type

Returning to the panel now at the Uffizi, we note that a number of preparatory drawings demonstrate the process Leonardo followed in order to shape the final forms. Suggestive of this process is the *Study of six figures for the Adoration of the Magi* (British Museum, inv. 1886,0609.42), in which he explores ways of depicting the thoughtful character at the far left of the panel. In the centre of the sheet his imposing solid figure (Fig. 9), with his hand raised to his bearded chin, has adopted a meditative attitude recalling the mental state of Oedipus striving to solve the riddle asked by the Sphinx. He wears a heavy gown falling over his body with a multiplicity of folds, inspired by the work of his master Verrocchio (1435-1488).[44]

It is generally thought that in articulating this figure, Leonardo was inspired by Donatello's life-size statue the *Bearded Prophet*, sculpted around 1420, which was commissioned for one of the niches on the east face of the Campanile of Santa Maria del Fiore, fifty feet above the ground (Fig. 10). The elderly prophet's face, with deeply-furrowed brow, is turned downwards gazing at the street beneath. He rests the right arm upon the left, so as to bring his right hand to his bearded chin, while in his left hand he holds a vellum scroll, an attribute of prophets. He wears a long mantle whose drapery falls

groans. A guileful plague to mortals is the tongue, whose unbridled madness often gives birth to calamity". For Theodoridas' epigrams see also http://www.attalus.org/poetry/theodoridas.html <14 December 2024>.

[44] Leonardo entered Verrocchio's workshop around 1464-1466 and at the age of 20 enrolled in the *Compagnia di San Luca*, a guild of painters associated with the *Arte dei Medici e Speziali*. See Villata, 2021, p. 13. Verrocchio was a typical craftsman of the Florentine Renaissance, ready to undertake any work which demanded skill in the handling of materials, from the setting of a precious stone to the casting of the sphere of gilded copper which still surmounts the Duomo. See Clark, 1993, p. 43. Radke, Gary M., "Leonardo, Student of Sculpture." In *Leonardo da Vinci and the Art of Sculpture* (Atlanta, Georgia, High Museum of Art, 6 October 2009-21 February 2010 and Los Angeles, California, 23 March - 20 June 2010), Gary M. Radke and Martin Kemp (ed.), New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009, p. 17.

heavily to his feet. His weight rests on the left leg and the right foot is shown as though in movement.[45] So powerful is the realism of the figure that we may imagine Donatello addressing it angrily (as to his famous *Il Zuccone*), shouting: "Speak, speak, plague take you, speak".[46] The *Bearded Prophet* is an extremely expressive figure and may have classical roots, not in the sense that it faithfully imitates a Roman model, but that it could not have been conceived without thorough study of poses and gestures of figures on Roman sarcophagi and a good knowledge of free-standing ancient statues.

Actually, Donatello and Brunelleschi were among the first Florentine artists of the early Quattrocento, who travelled to Rome in order to study ancient sculpture at close hand, as we learn from the *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi* of Antonio Manetti (1423-1497). They had originally agreed to devote themselves to strictly sculptural matters, but in the end they sketched all the buildings in Rome and in most of the surrounding countryside.[47] During his long stay in Rome, Donatello might well have studied the aforementioned Muse sarcophagus (or some other sarcophagus with similar iconography) and been particularly attracted to the pensive old man placed between Calliope and Clio. We may therefore speculate that Donatello, when modelling his *Bearded Prophet,* could have drawn inspiration from such a figure. Interestingly, he used again the expressive Greek motif which found its way to the Roman sarcophagi in his *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1455-1460). This bronze relief (or test piece) is connected with the ill-fated commission for the bronze doors of the Siena Cathedral, on which he worked in 1458-1459.[48] It depicts the dead Christ, supported by the Virgin Mary and encircled by other mourners including Saint John the Evangelist. The latter, withdrawn at the far-right edge of the relief, expresses his grief in a quiet reserved manner. He is represented standing in profile, his bowed head in his raised left hand, but his tear-stained face fully revealed.

[45] Radke, 2009, p. 30. The carving of the figures must have been preceded by the making of full-scale clay or gesso models. See Pope-Hennessy, John, *Donatello Sculptor*, New York / London: Abbeville Press, 1993, p. 57.

[46] Vasari, 1996, vol. I, p. 367, as mentioned by Galli, Aldo, "Almost like Living People, and no longer Figures of Stone." In *The Springtime of the Renaissance: Sculpture and the Arts in Florence 1400-60* (Paris, Musée du Louvre, 26 September 2013-6 January 2014), Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi (ed.), Florence: Mandragora, 2013, p. 90.

[47] They earned their living as goldsmiths and were so skillful in this craft that they were given more commissions than they could handle. Thus, they had the means to pay for excavations in different areas and for a long time. People used to call them 'treasure-hunters', for they thought that they were spending their money and excavating in the hope of finding treasures. In fact, in order to excavate they had to hire porters and other labourers at great expense. No one else did such work, nor was there anyone who understood why they were doing what they were doing. Incidentally, during those excavations Donatello and Brunelleschi found objects of silver or even gold, carved stones, chalcedonies, carnelians and cameos. See Manetti, Antonio, "Brunelleschi and Donatello Discover Ancient Roman Treasures." In *Images of Quattrocento Florence: Selected Writings in Literature, History, and Art*, Stefano Ugo Baldassarri and Arielle Saiber (ed.), New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 195-199.

[48] It has been suggested that the relief might have been cast for the cathedral authorities anxious to see a sample of the extensive project. See Pope-Hennessy, 1993, p. 192. Also, Janson, Horst W., *The Sculpture of Donatello*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, pp. 206-207. https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16285/lamentation-over-the-dead-christ-relief-donatello/ <14 December 2024>.

Approaches to and Perception of the Meditative Figure

Leonardo probably did not know Donatello's trial panel for Siena's Cathedral, although the possibility cannot be excluded, but he was certainly familiar with the sculptor's powerful *Bearded Prophet*. In fact, he had a good knowledge of the Florentine artistic tradition headed by Giotto and continued by Ghiberti and Donatello.[49] It was formerly thought that Leonardo was uninterested in ancient sculpture, but that view has changed as more and more of his thoroughly reworked motifs have been traced to their original sources. Artists of genius, such as Leonardo, transformed ancient figures and motifs in Greek or Roman works, assimilating them into their own pictorial dialect.[50] The master therefore studied and derived poses, compositions, and details from his meticulous observation of ancient coins, gems, sarcophagi, and figural sculpture.[51] After all, his adoption and adaptation of ancient models was consistent with the cultural trend prevailing among artists of his day, which was to demonstrate a manifold interest in Greek and Roman culture and to become familiar with classical myths, literature and philosophy.[52]

Thus, it would be no surprise if Leonardo had studied the Mattei sarcophagus *in situ,* probably during an early undocumented trip to Rome in the late 1470s. Recent criticism suggests that he travelled more frequently and more extensively than was formerly supposed.[53] It cannot be ruled out either that some drawing or print depicting the elderly man on the Mattei sarcophagus was known to Leonardo and used by him for representing not only the powerful pensive figure at the centre of his *Studies of Six Figures Including an Old Man Leaning on a Stick* (British Museum, inv. 1886,0609.42), but also the figure in the *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 9). Interestingly, on the left side of the same sheet Leonardo drew a similar but less impressive figure that emulates the meditative gesture of the central one. There, the man bows his head and brings his left hand up to his chin, while the right arm crosses over his torso, supporting the elbow of the raised left arm. An additional detail provides a clue to his origin: the long staff upon which he leans. In another preparatory drawing, *Studies for the Adoration of the Magi*

[49] Villata, 2021, p. 9.

[50] Kemp, 2007, p. 264.

[51] Radke, 2009, p. 22.

[52] Freedman, Luba, "Titian and the Classical Heritage." In *The Cambridge Companion to Titian,* Patricia Meilman (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 183-184.

[53] Clark, 1969, p. 12. For the hypothesis of an early trip to Rome in the late 1470s, see also Natali, Antonio, *Leonardo, Il giardino di delizie*, Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2002, p.110. On Leonardo's short Roman sojourn between January and February 1503 (when hired as an architect and military engineer by Cesare Borgia), and his study of the Villa Adriana at Tivoli (Codex Atlanticus, f. 618*v*), see Marani, Pietro, "The 'Hammer Lecture' (1994): 'Tivoli, Hadrian and Antinoüs. New Evidence of Leonardo's Relation to the Antique." *Achademia Leonardi Vinci*, 8 (1995), pp. 207-225; Cinque, Giusepppina, "S' el ve piacerà darò modo de notarlo". L'interesse di Leonardo per Villa Adriana." In *Leonardo e L'Antico. Convegno di studi: Una Sintesi Introduttiva*, Andrea Bruciati (ed.), Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2021, pp. 33-36. On the early impact of classical architecture (Villa Adriana) on Leonardo's architectural drawings of the period 1487-1490 made for the Milanese Cathedral, see Frommel, Sabine and Apollonio, Fabrizio I. [*et alii*], "L'Osservazione dell'Antico. Possibili interpretazioni del progetto di Leonardo per il Tiburio del Duomo di Milano." In *Leonardo e L'Antico. Convegno di studi: Una Sintesi Introduttiva*, Andrea Bruciati (ed.), Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2021, pp. 80-81.

(Beaux Arts de Paris, inv. 424), the pensive figure is depicted nude and leaning on a staff, at the lower left of the sheet and again at the lower centre.[54] Actually, we have come across such a figure in the mourning father on the *Ilissos stele* (Fig. 5). The aforementioned examples on Roman sarcophagi demonstrate furthermore a wide dissemination of the pensive and melancholic type, who through the gesture of placing his hand to the head reveals his contemplative state of mind.

We find this figure immersed in thought, again in a religious context, in the *Preaching of Saint John the Baptist to a Pharisee and a Levite* by Giovan Francesco Rustici (1474-1554). In December 1506 the Arte di Calimala, the Guild of Merchants in Foreign Cloth, had commissioned from Rustici a group of three life-size bronze figures to crown the north door of the Florentine Baptistery. Significantly, Vasari mentions that while Giovanni Francesco was modelling this group in clay, he had at his side Leonardo da Vinci, who possibly intervened in the models before they were cast in 1509 by Bernardino Antonio da Milano.[55] Taking into consideration that no sculpture so far has been securely attributed to Leonardo, Rustici's *Preaching of Saint John the Baptist* (Fig. 11) may at least reflect da Vinci's approach to sculpture in the early 1500s.

Rustici's sculptural group focuses on the moment when the Baptist, raising his hand to point upwards, replies to the Pharisee, who had previously asked him "What do you say of yourself?", using the words of Isaiah's old

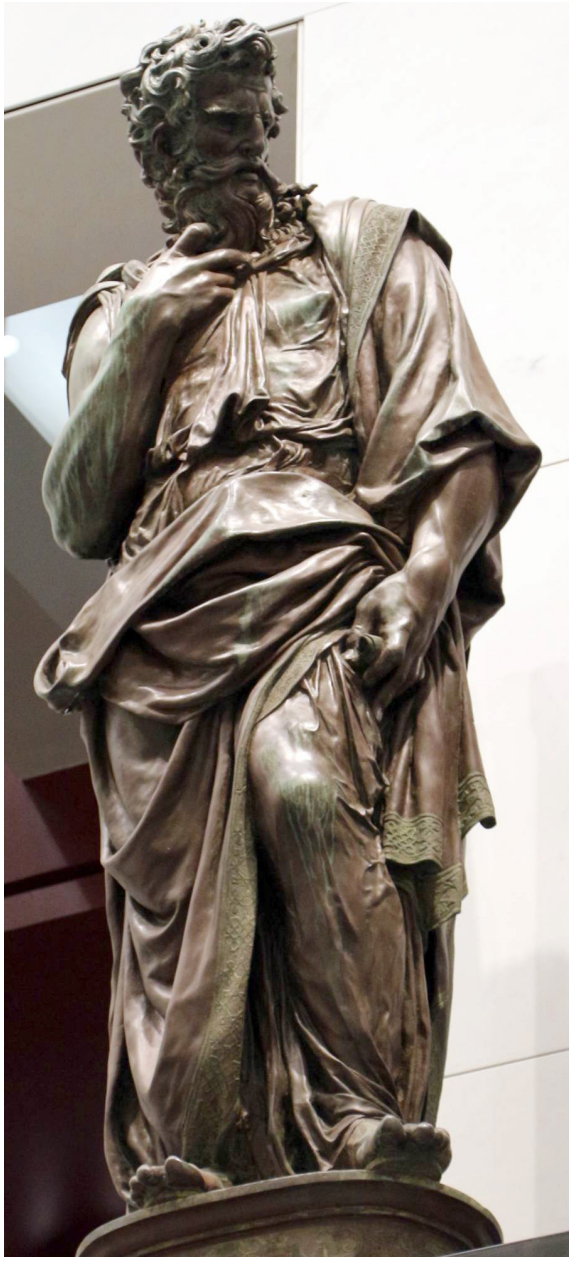

Fig. 11 - Giovanni Francesco Rustici, *Preaching of St John the Baptist: the Pharisee*, 1506-11. Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo (© Su concessione dell'Opera di S. Maria del Fiore di Firenze/ Foto A. Quattrone)

[54] Viatte, Françoise, "Leonardo da Vinci, Studies for the Adoration of the Magi (recto and verso)." In *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 22 January - 30 March 2003), Carmen Bambach (ed.), New York /New Haven / London: Yale University Press, pp. 329-330. Bambach, Carmen, "Leonardo da Vinci, Six Figures and the Profile of an Old Man Facing to the Right (recto), Allegory with Fortune (verso)." In *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 22 January-30 March 2003), Carmen Bambach (ed.), New York /New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 331-332. Delieuvin, 2019, "Liberté", pp. 116-117.

[55] Vasari, 1996, vol. I, p. 640.

prophesy, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord".[56] The *Pharisee* on the left expresses his perplexity at the enigmatic response by touching his bearded chin with his right hand, while turning toward the Baptist his curly head, which is rendered as Leonardo preferred, neither in full profile nor in full frontality, but in a daring in-between position.[57] The *Pharisee*, furthermore, in type and figure is profoundly Leonardesque, recalling the contemplative attitude of the impressive pensive figure in the Uffizi *Adoration*.[58]

Rustici's figure of the *Pharisee* did not mark the end of the 'life' of Leonardo's *figura pensierosa*. We come across it again in the figure of Saint Paul in Raphael's famous *Santa Cecilia altarpiece* (ca. 1515-1516).[59] It is acknowledged that Leonardo and Raphael had a fertile relationship in Rome during the years 1513-1516.[60] Raphael was deeply drawn to Leonardo's innovative work, and he had not only absorbed the essential principles of it, but he had also adopted characters encompassed in the master's paintings. The parallels between Leonardo's pensive figure and Raphael's Saint Paul are indeed so numerous that the younger artist might have intentionally referenced the older. Accordingly, Raphael's monumental figure of Saint Paul, draped in red and green garments, introduces the narrative scene to the observer by means of his pose and gesture: with his

[56] Mozzati, Tommaso, "Giovanni Francesco Rustici (1475-1554), Predica del Battista." In *I grandi bronzi del battistero Giovanfrancesco Rustici e Leonardo*, Tommaso Mozzati, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi and Philippe Sénéchal (ed.), Firenze: Giunti, 2010, p. 258; The utterances made by the three figures are carved in Hebrew on the oval bases of the statues. See Sénécal, Philippe, "Giovan Francesco Rustici, with and without Leonardo." In *Leonardo da Vinci and the Art of Sculpture* (Atlanta, Georgia, High Museum of Art, 6 October 2009-21 February 2010 and Los Angeles, California, 23 March-20 June 2010), Gary M. Radke and Martin Kemp (ed.), New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009, p. 168.

[57] Fiorani, 2016, p. 141.

[58] Sénéchal, 2019, p. 163. Clark, 1993, pp. 206-207. Attributed to Giovan Francesco Rustici is a drawing depicting three figures, the right one connected to the *Pharisee* in the *Preaching of Saint John the Baptist to a Pharisee and a Levite* (Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, inv. 226F). Interestingly, the pose of the pensive man in this drawing is also reminiscent of the figure standing with crossed legs in a grieving pose on the Niobids Sarcophagus, now in the Musei Vaticani (inv. 10437). Giorgio Vasari, aware of the expressiveness of the classicizing meditating figure as reworked by Leonardo, introduces it in two of his early compositions: at the far left edge of the *Deposition from the Cross* (ca. 1540) for the church of the Camaldoli monks Santi Donato e Ilariano at their monastery outside Florence, and in *The Wedding of Esther and Ahasuerus* (1548) for the refectory of the Badia di SS Flora e Lucilla in Arezzo, now in the Museo Statale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna, Arezzo. See Mozzati, 2010, pp. 266, 270-272. Fornasari, Liletta, "Giorgio Vasari ad Arezzo." In *Giorgio Vasari, disegnatore e pittore; 'istudio, diligenza et amorevole fatica* (Arezzo, Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 3 September - 11 December 2011), Alessandro Cecchi, Alessandra Baroni and Liletta Fornasari (ed.), Milano: Skira, 2011, pp. 27.

[59] Scalini, Mario, "V.2 Raphael." In *Raphael*, 1520-1483 (Rome, Scuderie del Quirinale, 5 Marzo-2 Giugno 2020), Milan: Skira, 2020, p. 251. Mozzati, 2010, p. 266. The painting was commissioned by a visionary woman, Elena dall'Olio (1472-1550), for the chapel owned by her family in the church of San Giovanni in Monte, in Bologna. The chapel was dedicated to Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music and musicians, who during her lifetime was reputed to be able to play any musical instrument and was accredited with inventing the organ, which she consecrated to the service of God. See Ferguson, George W., *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, repr. 1989, p. 112.

[60] Kleinbub, Christian K., "Leonardo, Raphael, and the Theory of Painting." In *Leonardo in Dialogue*, Francesca Borgo, Rodolfo Maffeis and Alessandro Nova (ed.), Venice: Marsilio, 2019, pp. 297; For quotations and specific elements borrowed by Raphael from Leonardo's work, see Culotta, Alexis, *Tracing the visual language of Raphael's circle to 1527*, Leiden / Boston: Brill 2020, p. 26-27.

Fig. 12 - Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of water, and a seated old man*, *ca.* 1515. Windsor, Royal Collection Trust, inv. RCIN 912579 (Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023)

bowed head and his left hand on the chin, he observes sceptically the musical instruments arrayed on the ground,[61] while holding his attributes, the scroll of his Epistles and a long thin sword, hinting at his beheading.[62] At the centre of the picture stands Santa Cecilia wearing a golden robe. Having attained the state of ecstasy that enables her to hear singing Angels in the cloud, she lowers the now unnecessary portable organ from which some pipes are ready to fall out. As earthly music gives way to heavenly, the enchanted listeners are overwhelmed by the mystical experience. The work is obviously indebted to Leonardo

[61] According to Mossakowski, Raphael's altarpiece was based on evangelical and patristic sources, and also on Pythagorean-Neoplatonic ones, which overlap, permeate and combine into one whole in this work: see Mossakowski, Stanislaw, "Raphael's St. Cecilia. An Iconographical Study." *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 31 (1968), pp. 5, 14. Many theorists of the Renaissance were touched by the predominant Platonic view of their time that the visual arts were a sort of frozen music. Leonardo goes further and claims that painting is superior to music as it is frozen and can be apprehended immediately and contemplated indefinitely. See Clark, 1993, p. 128. Henry, Tom and Joannides, Paul, "Major Religious Compositions." In *Late Raphael* (Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 12 Giugno-16 Settembre 2012 and Paris, Musée du Louvre, 11 October-4 January 2013), Tom Henry and Paul Joannides (ed.), Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2012, pp. 103-106.

[62] Ferguson, 1989, p. 138.

not only for the handling of tone and colour,[63] but mainly for the figure of Saint Paul. Meanwhile, Leonardo's pensive character, following in the steps of his aging creator, grew old and tired, as represented in the drawing at Windsor *Studies of Water, and a Seated Old Man* (Royal Collection Trust, inv. RCIN 912579) datable to 1515 (Fig. 12). On this sheet, Leonardo depicts a contemplative, old, and bearded man, a type he had often drawn, seated in profile to the right, his head in his left hand but his face fully revealed. His legs are crossed and his right-hand rests on a stick. The *moti corporali* (motions of the body) reveal indeed the *atti* and *moti mentali* (attitudes and motion of the mind). Kenneth Clark suggests that the features of curly beard, the large deep-set eyes and the down-turned mouth of the old man may recall the Leonardo's likeness; or that they may betray the master's melancholy after having deeply felt his failure to bring a work to an end, although he undoubtedly continued to believe that "men of lofty genius accomplish the most when they seek out inventions with the mind. Then the hands may execute the brilliant images conceived in the brain".[64]

Interestingly, at the right of the same Windsor sheet there are studies of swirling water –the most obsessive interest of Leonardo– accompanied with the following lines:

> Observe the motion of the surface of water, which resembles that of hair, which has two motions, one of which depends on the weight of the hair, the other by the direction of the curls; thus the water forms turning eddies, one of which follows the impetus of the main course, while the other follows that of incidence and reflection.[65]

The movement of water is not therefore perceived by Leonardo as only the forward pull of the river, but as a dialectic that unfolds between the river's flow and the spiralling movement of the vortex. A similar process, as Aby Warburg remarked – using the term *Bilderfahrzeuge* for the migration of images, forms and ideas to other spaces and times –, follow lines of continuity linking antiquity to the Renaissance. Closely related to the metaphor of *Bilderfahrzeuge* is his key concept of the *Nachleben der Antike.*[66]

An eloquent example of an emigrating

[63] Meyer zur Capellen, Jürg, *Raphael: a Critical Catalogue of his Paintings, ca. 1508-1520*, vol. II, Landshut: Arcos Verlag, 2005, pp. 103-106.

[64] Clark, 1993, pp. 237-238; For the reference to the *moti corporali*, *atti* and *moti mentali* in Leonardo's *Studies of Male Nude Figures; a Virgin and Child; a Hygrometer*: see Viatte, Françoise, "Leonardo da Vinci, Studies of Male Nude Figures; a Virgin and Child; a Hygrometer (recto), Six Studies of Nude or Draped Men (verso)." In *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 22 January - 30 March 2003), Carmen Bambach (ed.), New York /New Haven / London: Yale University Press, p. 327. Also, Vasari, 1996, vol. I, p. 632.

[65] Interpreting these lines, Ernst Gombrich notes that Leonardo saw that the two movements of water could cancel each other out, resulting in a standing wave: see Gombrich, Ernst, "The form of Movement in Water and Air." In *Leonardo's Legacy; An International Symposium*, Charles Donald O'Malley (ed), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 186-187, n. 40. Clark, 1993 p. 238. Marusic Ivan and Broomhall Susan, "Leonardo da Vinci and Fluid Mechanics." *Annual Review of Fluid Mechanics*, 53 (2021), pp. 8-9. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-fluid-022620-122816

[66] The survival of antiquity ('das *Nachleben der Antike*') is a central concept of the Warburgian school of art history. It refers to the survival (the continuity or transformation) of images and motifs, as opposed to their renascence after extinction. The term entails a complex set of operations in which forgetting, transformation, involuntary memory, and unexpected rediscovery work in unison. The idea of tradition is not therefore perceived as a con-

image is, as shown above, the gesture displayed by meditative figures of placing the one hand on the head while the other arm, often crossed over the torso, supports the raised hand. Besides the iconography, the motif conveys multiple meanings and messages since hand and mind, evoking praxis and logos (action and reason), co-operate in seeking to articulate answers to vital questions, such as the meaning of life, the inevitability of disease and death, the miracle of therapy, the wonders of Nature, the magical power of art to make visible the invisible. It is, therefore, no accident that the pensive figure has been used since classical times to express contemplation on major and extraordinary events.

Conclusion

Due to their tenacity, but also their inherent flexibility, ancient inventions managed to survive (*Nachleben*), to be adapted and included in Renaissance compositions.[67] This process is also demonstrated by the survival of the iconography of the contemplative figures seen in classical Attic grave reliefs. On these stelae the mourning figures are shown sitting or standing with one hand raised to the head, chin or cheek, a gesture that was to become a recognized expression of contemplation on death. This motif passed down to the Renaissance through Roman sarcophagi, its meaning extended and enriched to cover meditation on major and extraordinary events. Such an image, charged with multiple meanings and probably re-worked by Donatello, might have fired Leonardo's imagination. Moreover, we cannot rule out the possibility that on an early trip to Rome in the late 1470s, Leonardo could have studied the Mattei sarcophagus, or another sarcophagus with similar iconography.[68] The artist, who easily manipulated forms within his mind, could have modelled the *pensieroso* type and introduced him in the major work of his first Florentine period, the *Adoration of the Magi,* today at the Galleria degli Uffizi.

Leonardo also developed the concept of the science of painting, consisting of principles in the theoretician's mind from which the execution of the work proceeds. The painting is therefore the offspring of intellectual reflection ("la pittura è mentale") and not

tinuous river but as a drama that unfolds between the river's flow and its whirling eddies: see Bing, Gertrud, "A. M. Warburg." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 28 (1965), pp. 301-302, 310. Also, Didi-Huberman, George, "Artistic survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the exorcism of impure time." *Common Knowledge*, 9 (2003), pp. 273-276. for the metaphor *Bilderfahrzeuge* coined by Warburg which could be translated 'image vehicles', see Krispinsson, Charlotta, "Aby Warburg's Legacy and the Concept of Image Vehicles. "Bilderfahrzeuge": On the Migration of Images, Forms and Ideas. London 13-14 March 2015." *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, 84.4 (2015), pp. 244-247. DOI: 10.1080/00233609.2015.1055798 For the project 'Bildfahrzeuge' see https://bilderfahrzeuge.hypotheses.org/project <14 December 2024>. For an insight into Warburg's ideas on Leonardo's artistic development, see Warburg, Aby, *Three Lectures on Leonardo*, 1899, London: Warburg Institute, 2019 which were delivered before large audiences in Hamburg with great success. How Warburg intertwines his interpretation of Leonardo with a broader representation of the Renaissance, see Carannante Salvatore, *Warburg, Leonardo, il Rinascimento*, Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2023. See also Claudia Cieri Via, "Grisaille: Aby Warburg's Thoughts on Leonardo da Vinci." In *Pathographies of Modernity with Aby Warburg and Beyond: An Astral Map of Warburgian Constellations*, Daniela Padularosa (ed.), Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024, pp. 23-46.

[67] Gombrich, Ernst, *Gombrich on the Renaissance, Norm and Form*, vol. I, Oxford: Phaidon, 2003, p. 122.

[68] Natali, 2002, p. 110.

of manual dexterity.[69] Though based on scientific principles, the *Adoration* is not a cold demonstration of intellectual analysis. Having acknowledged, along with cruelty and ugliness, the beauty and poetry of human existence and the wonders of nature, Leonardo perfectly represents the wide variety of emotions and states of mind, which are made visible through a highly significant rhetoric of movements, poses and gestures. The pensive figure, with the heavy gown falling over his body with a multiplicity of folds could express introspection, melancholy, and profound awareness of the tragic reality of human existence. His meditative attitude, recalling the mental state of a problem-solving character, encourages the viewer to consider the various levels of meaning of the biblical scene unfolding in front of him. Leonardo might therefore have placed the thoughtful commentator on the border of his *Adoration* as a sage witness to the universality of his art and the power of his artistic invention, which, by capturing the movement and dynamism of life, may reflect not only whatever is in the universe by essence, presence or imagination,[70] but also a divine incarnation that only a creative mind transcending, under the spell of inspiration, the normal space-time consciousness may grasp.

[69] The painter has ten varied discourses to guide his works to their end: these are light, darkness, colour, body, figure, position, remoteness, nearness, motion and rest. See Farago, 1992, p. 247, 261, 380.

[70] Leonardo claimed that "whatever is in the universe by essence, presence or imagination, the painter has first in his mind and then in his hands"; "et, in effetto, ciò che ne l'universo per essential, presential o imagination, essol'ha prima nella mente e poi nelle mani". See Kleinbub, 2019, p. 290, n. 8.