

LEONARDO'S *ANNUNCIATION HORTUS CONCLUSUS* AND
ITS REFLEXIVE INTENT

I would like to preface my discussion by recalling the meeting's introduction by President Tymieniecka and the divertimenti of strings that followed.¹ It would seem that her discussion of gardens and the "three vectors of our human being," in addition to the performance of Mozart's composition for string quartet, refer in my presentation to Leonardo da Vinci's concepts of *diligenza*, *imaginativa* and *memoria* in painting. These concepts were core principles in Leonardo's painting of the *Annunciation* garden, or *hortus conclusus*. One may consider that diligence, *diligenza*, refers to the first vector, or to that of organizing the garden into a set of rationally configured plots. Imagination, *imaginativa*, would be a second vector of poetic impulse, the expression of the life of the garden's varied flora and aesthetically arranged objects. These vectors contribute to the third vector, that of creating a *memoria*, or memory system, which contributes to nostalgia. Syncopations of the divertimenti express mathematical diligence and poetic improvisation, which refer to nostalgic feelings of similar order and poetry. Gardens and divertimenti, first divided by our imposed dimensions, and secondly as poetic expressions of their and our being, also engage us along the third vector of our nostalgia. Certain combinations of mathematical diligence and poetic intuition define such creations as ineluctable proofs of the marriage between measure and imagination, science and art, institution and culture, mind and body, rule and desire, Psyche and Eros. As typical binary referents, these terms are loaded with nostalgic connotations. Previous emotional interests tend to govern directions that these binary vectors will take. Artist/scientists, such as landscape architects, musicians, painters, sculptors, ballet dancers, public speakers, and the like, reaffirm these innate vectors of our human being. These individuals interpret and express the order of the first vector and the creativity of the second vector in order to form the third vector, the nostalgia for exceptional examples that combine the two vectors.

To be more specific, the present paper proposes an interpretation of these vectors as Leonardo da Vinci's requirements for the composition of his *Annunciation hortus conclusus*. I propose that the referents of the first and second vectors, in this case, were chosen for their abilities to refer, in the

painting, to the individual looking at the painting. These vectors therefore create a memory system that appeals to the nostalgic sense of having been capable of being part of the painting. These references, or bracketed aspects of the painting, include the perspective grid upon which the *hortus conclusus* is set, and the traditional placements of Gabriel, the Madonna, and flora. In this way the compositional elements, or referents, set up a one-to-one relationship between the viewer and painting. The perspective illusion of space and the expressive realism of its composition are meant to offer a scale model of the actual life-size event of the *Annunciation*. Leonardo intended that the viewer have the feeling of once being in the painting's garden. Hence, the vectors of diligent technique and imaginative naturalism would serve the third vector: the feeling of a divine presence in the form of a painting. Today the term "nostalgia" identifies this kind of feeling for having been in that garden. Husserl referred to this kind of finding as a reference to the *Lebenswelt* (lived world). He recognized the three parts or vectors as *unselbständig* (non-independent) Hegelian "moments."² Leonardo became famous for his unique ability to link such moments in a single painting.

To begin discussing these *moments*, I would like to start with his concept of creation, re-making or invention. In his surviving notebooks, he rarely mentions the word *creare* – to create. To express a similar idea, he preferred the more highly regarded term, *invenzione*, to denote a completely original conception. I will argue that he intended to make his paintings into completely original inventions. While this interpretation would not surprise most anyone familiar with Leonardo's works, there has been no discussion of a specific proof of Leonardo's actual intention to make paintings his inventions. The reason for this approach to his inventions is to point out the extent to which such works were meant to refer back to themselves more than to anything else. The more unique the work of art, the more reflexive its relation to an individual's projected vision of him/herself in the painting. In this manner, painting can be an invention of the self, a re-creation our human being. This could be what Leonardo intended, even if he recognized that the painted illusion would naturally be limited by the scope of possible interpretations.

The inventive example to be discussed here is his first known completely autograph painting, the *Annunciation* of 1472. It is believed that he painted this work without assistance from anyone, as it may have been the "masterpiece" required for him, at twenty years of age, to graduate from apprentice to master.³ Of particular interest is the composition's *hortus conclusus*, the sacred enclosure in which Gabriel delivers his message to the

Madonna. For Leonardo this could be no ordinary garden, but an environment of vibrant, rich and highly detailed scenery. Most textures and colors are represented, from over thirty distinct species of plants, to various kinds of garments, to carved marble and several other kinds of stone masonry, architectural features, the endless landscape in the distance, various kinds of trees, etc. In this sense, the *Annunciation* not only re-presents a narrative, it also shows off the complete repertoire of the artist's skills. It is also the diagrammatic visualization of a highly sophisticated memory system.⁴ Tendencies in Leonardo's writings suggest that he had developed methods for making paintings such as the *Annunciation* into more than mere paintings, but the inventions capable of being sophisticated memory systems. It will not be possible to use such writings as proof of his intentions for the *Annunciation*, since the majority of them were written over twenty years after the painting. Instead, these writings could refer to Leonardo's intentions for paintings in general. But the fact that these writings are in agreement with techniques used in the *Annunciation* suggests a consistent pattern of approach in both early painting and later writing.

In what follows, four short case studies about this inventive approach will be discussed with regard to the reflexive quality of a painting. These are: I) the *Annunciation's hortus conclusus* and perspective field; II) cause and effect; III) the non-paradox of human vision; and IV) the painter's creation of what nature has yet to create. These approaches begin with Leonardo's garden and end with his support of the individual's ability to make something new in nature. From the general viewpoint of the garden, to the viewpoint of the reflexive value of a painted illusion, there appear to be tendencies with respect to his intent to invent an illusion containing the self.

For example, such an inventive methodology may be outlined in the diagram of Figure 1. This illustrates portions of Leonardo's discussions on how to portray the nose. The proportional use of all four approaches to the nose will make the invention noted at the illustration's center. Along one axis, he tends to refer to an artist's unique, unteachable talent, as opposed to his/her taught, repeatable skills. On the opposite axis, he often considered *imaginativa* (imagination) opposite to *ragione* (reason). Four kinds of effects inside the circle are subject to the various causes around the circle's periphery. The main point of this diagram is to compare the naturally linked abilities with the abilities that require extra training. Concentration especially on these latter abilities would produce the central aim of an invention. By developing such techniques in proper proportion on the picture plane, one's invention could work as a kind of memory system.

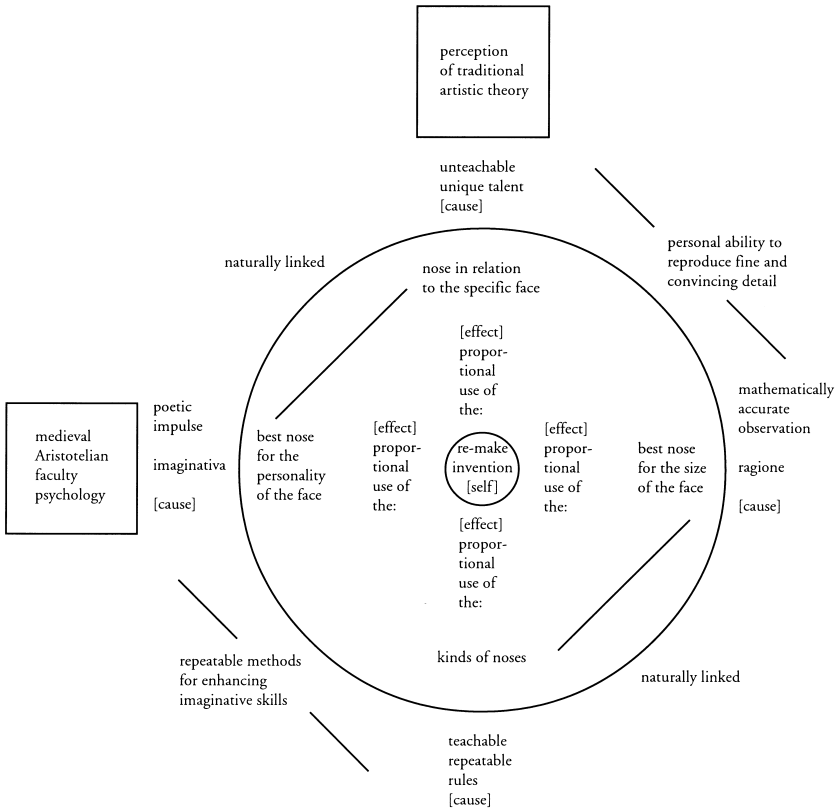


Fig. 1. Tendencies in Leonardo's writings and drawings about proportional method.

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Though Leonardo's first activities in Verrocchio's studio remain a mystery, we have the earliest evidence of him as an artist in 1472: a record of his dues paid to the Compagnia di San Luca in Florence. This date also approximates the one given the *Annunciation*, the first painting attributed to Leonardo as the primary artist. Remarkably, several highly finished drawings relative to this work survive, suggesting the possible life-long importance of such studies, and the painting, to Leonardo. One written piece of evidence suggests, according to David Alan Brown, that this could have been Leonardo's first demonstration of a "masterpiece" after apprenticeship and close to his twentieth birthday. The Florentine confraternity ledger lists him, like

Verrocchio and Pollaiuolo, as a *dipintore*, as opposed to his fellow studio assistants, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Perugino, who are listed as *dipintori* (cf. note 3).

For the late *quattrocento* Florentine painter, *relievo* was more important than *disegno* in the conversion of three-dimensional reality to two-dimensional illusion. This kind of illusion would therefore have its own kind of three-dimensionality. The optical effects of *relievo* were meant to cause a reflexive relationship between the viewer and the work of art. Thus the painted illusion became more than a medieval icon, it was physical proof of the world depicted therein. By expanding the illusion field, perspective tools fragmented and complicated the painted forms. Rather than simplify the viewer's approach to the two-dimensional object, perspective method gave the viewer an opportunity to look inside, to its multiple aspects of view. The two-dimensional *relievo* described, directed, framed, built and diagrammed the plane field. Adding three-dimensional illusions to this pictorial surface during the Renaissance involved tools of perspective developed by the architect, sculptor and painter Filippo Brunelleschi. Thereby the viewer could see into the picture plane. Such perspective was intended to keep the viewer, and the most important objects in the picture, normally within a few meters of the picture plane which divided internal and external worlds. These internal and external worlds therefore could mirror one another at a specific moment, in a specific place. The internal world of – say – the Madonna and Child with Saints could equal an external world of the same group at a specific time and place. Renaissance viewers could identify with these “vanishing points” of view.

The perspective field's landscape contains interactions between these diagrams and the less structural content. For Leonardo, these interactions between contents at similar and differing scale levels, normally refer to the artist and spectator, as these two are at opposite ends of the perspective double pyramid. In this referential manner, a specific artist communicates directly through the surface rhetoric to a specific spectator. Looking at the surface of Leonardo's work in this way, as a rhetorical landscape of technical and creative material, one explores the structure underlying its composition. Such an examination of the surface explores his artistic methodology.

Part of this methodology consists of a unification of two concepts essential to his artwork: the creative instinct and diagrammatic reasoning. These concepts remain central to an understanding of the work of “artist-engineers” such as Leonardo, Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Taccola, and Francesco di Giorgio. For those individuals, inventive instinct requires the use of one's *immaginativa*, whereas diagrammatic reasoning requires the use of one's *ingegno*, or unique talent. The former interest concerns *grazia* and *fantasia*,