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Introduction

In May 2024, following an article in The Guardian, news broke worldwide that an Italian geologist and art historian, Ann Pizzorusso, had successfully identified the mountains that form the backdrop of the Mona Lisa and the bridge that can be seen there.¹ Without specifying the exact location, she placed the mountains in the area around Lecco and identified the bridge in the painting as the Azzone Visconti Bridge in Lecco, which is still in use today. This study aims not only to clarify and correct these statements, but also to set itself the bold goal of determining which part of which building in the Lecco area, which part of which floor stone still standing today, the model could have been sitting on, and where Leonardo da Vinci could have painted him. Having identified the location, with this knowledge and by interpreting a piece of information hitherto overlooked by Mona Lisa research, I will attempt to identify the person of the lady in the painting(s) and to understand the creative motivations behind Leonardo's various versions of the Mona Lisa.

While I will of course take into account and use the results of the research to date, and cite them where necessary, given the extensive literature on the subject and the often non-consensual professional positions, rather than evaluating these theories in detail and comparing them with each other, I will outline my own ideas and their logic.

Leonardo around Lake Como and in the Adda river valley

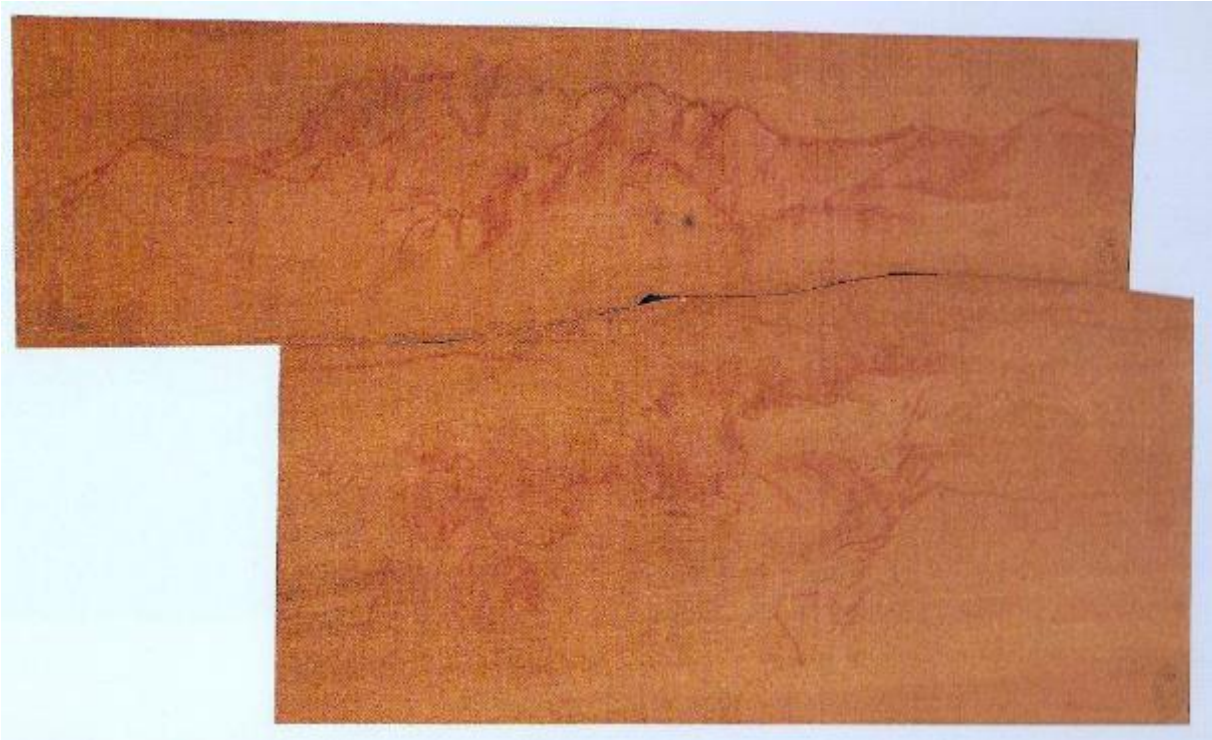
Leonardo has been documented to have visited the Lake Como area near Lecco on several occasions, and the Adda river valley was also studied in detail to study the regulation of waterways. After leaving Florence and being employed by Ludovico Sforza, he explored the Lombardy canals in 1490, and in 1492 he also visited the Lake Como area, e.g. Como and Bellagio.² It is also very likely that he was already familiar with the area around Brianza in the 1490s.³ Later in 1507 he studied the Adda river, as he did in 1510. In 1511, he moved to the villa of Melzi in Vaprio d'Adda and made drawings of the landscape of the area until 1513.

In addition, due to a lack of sources, knowledge of exactly when, why and on whose behalf Leonardo might have been in the Adda and Lecco area is very sketchy, but it is easily conceivable that he did so on several occasions in his first Milanese period (1482-1499) in addition to those previously dated. My hypothesis is that Leonardo's drawings RL12413 and RL 12414 were made in the same building as the Mona Lisa, so Leonardo could have been there. The building we are looking for is the Rocchetta di Airuno, whose loggia offers the same view as Leonardo's drawing - picture 1.

¹ Dalya Alberge: The Guardian: Mystery of where Mona Lisa was painted has been solved, geologist claims 11 May 2024 www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/may/11/where-mona-lisa-was-painted-mystery-solved-geologist-claims

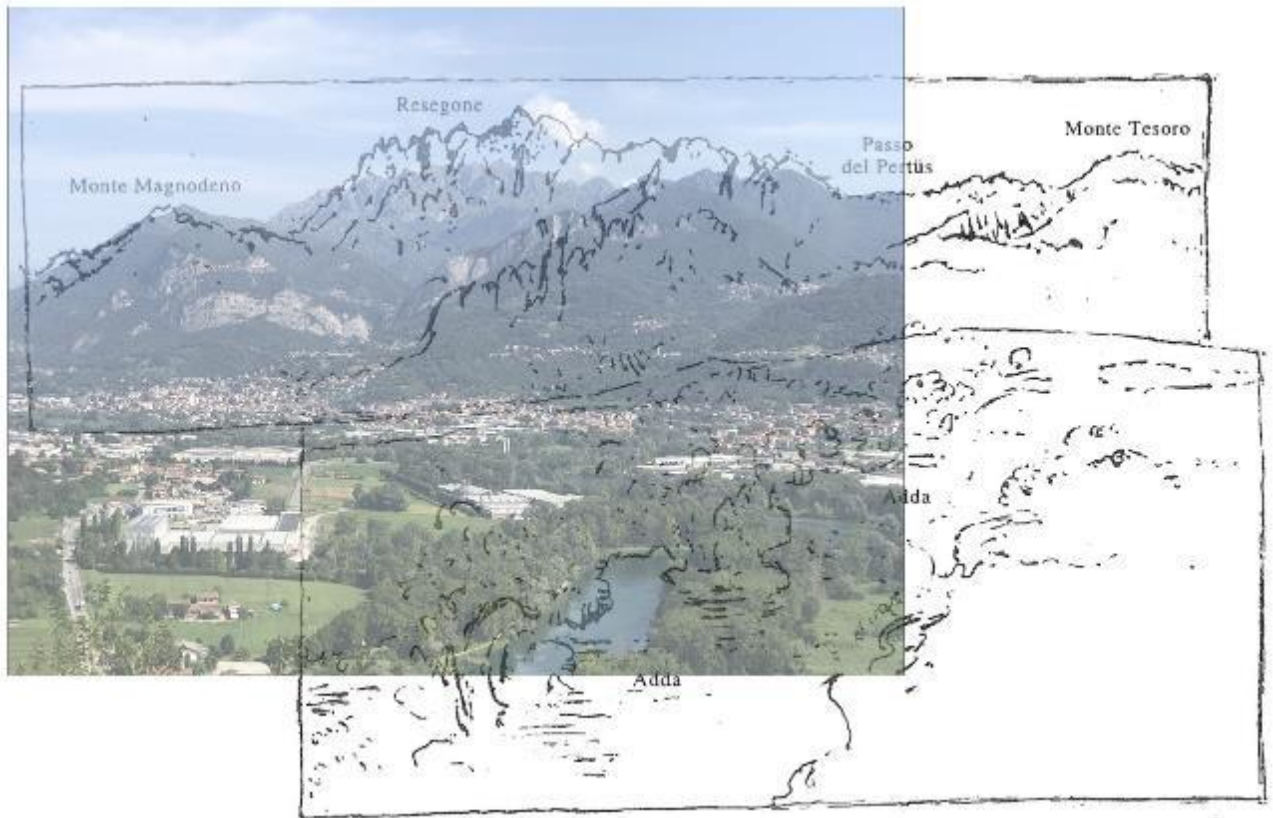
² <https://brunelleschi.imss.fi.it/itineraries/itinerary/ChronologyLeonardo.html>

³ Fondazione Lombardia per l'Ambiente : LEONARDO E I PAESAGGI DI LOMBARDIA - Vie d'acqua e vie di - 69.page



1.picture

This coincidence is already discussed in a 2019 study⁴, but its significance is not explained there. For ease of interpretation, I present below a juxtaposition of the graphic in that work, identifying the mountains and the Adda river in Leonardo's drawing, and the landscape itself. The correspondence is undeniable. The mountains, at different distances from the viewpoint, are positioned in the same way in relation to each other, as is the river Adda meandering below. Both the angle and the height coincide with the from the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno (only the representation of the height of the Resegone is slightly inaccurate) - picture 3



2nd picture

⁴ ANGELO RECALCATI: 'And This May Be Seen' Leonardo da Vinci and the Alps -169.p.



Picture 3.

The naked Mona Lisa



So before we talk more about the building itself, the Rocchetta di Airuno, it is worth noting that Leonardo visited it and the stunning panorama from there was, I assume, the backdrop for his "Nude Mona Lisa", which, if true, will also prove that the other versions of the Mona Lisa were painted in

the former fortress⁵ . The charcoal drawing of the Nude Mona Lisa, or "Mona Vanna", at the Condé Museum, most recently came to media attention in 2017 with the discovery that it is likely to be the work of Leonardo, in whole or in part, based on investigations by the Louvre. This proves what art historians have long assumed: the Mona Lisa was painted, or at least participated in the painting of them, by Leonardo in various ways, several times. I will write more about this later.

However, in addition to the charcoal drawing of Mona Vanna in the Condé museum, there are also paintings of a nude Mona Lisa with a background, which are similar to each other. Since Leonardo himself painted the Nude Mona Lisa⁶ , it is reasonable to assume that the one that is closest to the original is the one attributed to one of Leonardo's pupils, some say Salai. This is confirmed by the fact that it is the one that most closely resembles Leonardo's charcoal drawing. This is significant because, apart from the lack of clothes, the most obvious difference between the Mona Lisa and the Nude Mona Lisa is the landscape in the background. While the background of the Mona Lisa is complex, 'pieced together' from a number of detailed elements in an almost fairy-tale-like manner, the background of the Nude Mona Lisa appears real. The truly extraordinary discovery, however, is that it bears a very strong resemblance to the landscape seen from the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno. The resemblance is even more convincing when the approximate position of the model is reconstructed on the spot.



4th picture

⁵ Walter Isaacson: Leonardo Da Vinci, Helikon, 2018 - p596

⁶ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/experts-think-nude-mona-lisa-could-have-been-drawn-leonardo-da-vinci-180971644/>

The composition is revealing at first glance. To the left, below the shoulder, is the steep slope of a rocky mountain, while to the right of the neck is the slope of a more gentle mountain. Also of note is the presence of a body of water at the neck of the left slope - Lake Garlate.



5.picture

In the case of the landscape on the right of the shoulder, all the characteristic elements correspond to the real landscape and are almost exactly depicted.



Picture 6.

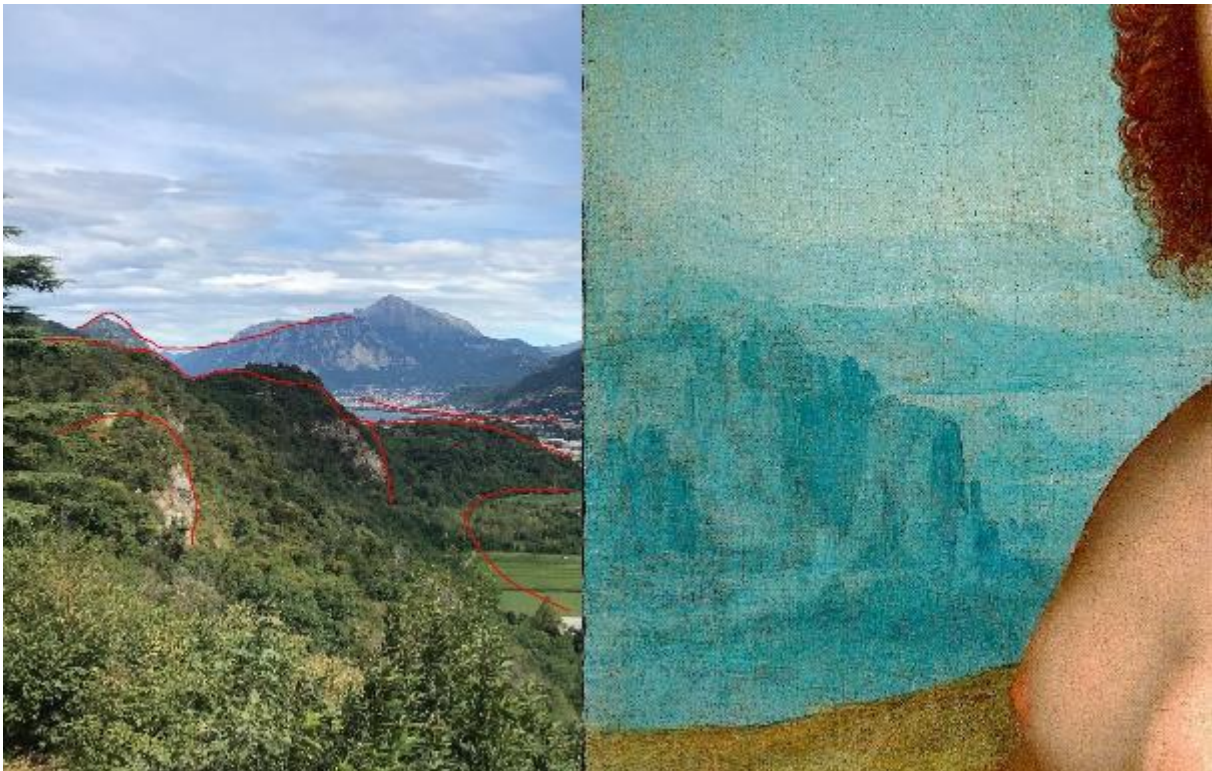
At the bottom of the steep foot of the mountain, there is a flat oval-shaped - now inhabited - basin, the location of which can be clearly seen on Google Earth (45°48'43 "N 9°25'42 "E) - image 7



Picture 7.

Both the rock formations and the silhouette of the distant mountain - which is fainter because it is further away - match. There are only minor differences between the reality and the painting, except one: to the right of the summit, a new rise begins further away in reality - although its shape, angle of repose and break are again exactly the same. This slight modification was perhaps also made by Leonardo to avoid breaking his composition, in which the mountains on either side of the Mona Lisa are seen in a V-shape.

The similarity is also evident in the landscape on the other side of the woman - picture 8. The only difference is that Leonardo did not depict the distant Mount Grignetta, because the block of land next to the head would presumably have disturbed the composition.



Picture 8.

Further argument that it is indeed the Rocchetta di Airuno is provided by the sharp outline and contrasting yellowish curve against the bluish background between the railing and the distant bluish landscape - Fig. 9. From the loggia, looking north-west towards the female form, there was once a castle wall - photo 10 - whose traces are still clearly visible today - photo 11.



9.picture



10.picture



11. picture

It is not difficult to imagine, from this view, the then certainly more elegant walls that curved around the terraced elevation. This also answers the question of why we get the impression in the painting that beyond the wall there is a depth separating the landscape from the distance - as there is in reality.



Picture 12.

The loggia

This loggia, located in Rocchetta di Airuno, consists of a longer north-western part and a shorter north-eastern part perpendicular to it. Entering the loggia, the panorama almost gives you the scene, the archway in front of which Leonardo could have painted his mysterious subject. This is the penultimate arch of the north-western part, seen from the entrance. - Picture 13. The arch to the left of this one is obstructed by the terrain itself. The arch to the right of this one is not only 20 cm narrower - ca. 180 cm instead of ca. 205 cm - but the buttress also narrows the view. It cannot be a coincidence that the loggia widens out opposite the arch, and a stone table has found a place there.

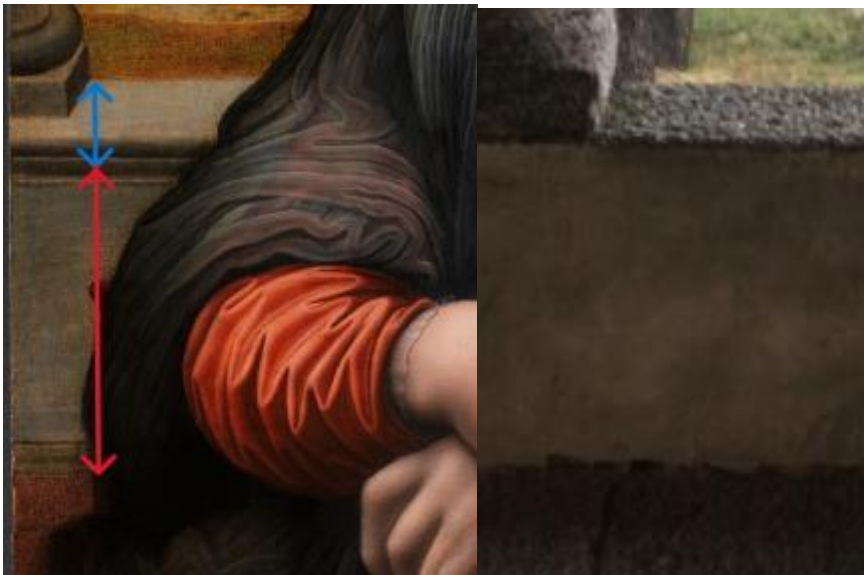




Picture 13.

The parapet

Almost all paintings show the top of the parapet, but the Prado Mona Lisa is the one with the most exposed ground. Comparing this with field measurements (approx. 34 cm thick, approx. 57 cm high) and photographs, it is clear that the proportions of the parapet in Rochetta are very similar to the proportions of the parapet in the painting.





Picture 14.

Unfortunately, the date of the construction of the loggia is not known, but the Missaglia Convento della Misericordia, only about 10 km from Rocchetta, is known to have been built at the end of the 15th century, and the stylistic similarity is clear.



15.picture

Columns

The columns in Rocchetta are the same Tuscan-style columns used during the Renaissance that you can see in the paintings. There are, however, subtle differences that need to be explained. The most striking is that the columns in the paintings are much closer together than in reality (except for the Nude Mona Lisa). However, this fact does not disprove that the Mona Lisa paintings were done in the Rocchetta, because if the distance between the columns was intended to represent reality, Leonardo (or his pupils) would have placed them equidistant in the different paintings. But this is far from being the case.



Picture 16.

In reality, the columns are about 205 cm apart, and if you follow the composition of the painting and sit the model in the middle, and show her exactly from the front, the best part of the panorama is simply not visible.



Picture 17.

For Leonardo, the symmetry of the columns framing the vertical frame and the parapet framing the horizontal frame was obviously more important than spoiling the composition for the sake of realism. Leonardo paid little attention to the bases of the columns, painting them at most slightly less robust than the real thing. Although their style is the same in all the paintings, their proportions and elaboration vary - Fig. 18 - and it is telling that they are barely visible in the Louvre Mona Lisa, considered the most sophisticated. More on the reason for this later.



Picture 18.

The Nude Mona Lisa stands out in two ways, however, and that is that the columns follow reality. On the one hand, only one column "fits" in the picture, as it actually did, and on the other hand, the base of that one is also strangely hanging down from the top of the parapet, as we can see today on the spot.



19.picture

It should also be mentioned that above the pedestals of the Rocchetta columns, the decorative elements that are still present on the columns in the painting are now missing. According to Davide Maria Vertemara, these were often made of terracotta in the 15th and 16th centuries and, although they could not have been durable, their marks can still be seen on each column.⁷ - image 20. I have not been able to find out when these repairs were made, but the postcard from the early 1940s

⁷ Davide Maria Vertemara: MONNA LISA LANDSCAPE FROM ROCCHETTA OF AIRUNO

shows what appear to be deeper gouges in the columns, which could have been repaired in the 1940s at the earliest.



Picture 20.



Picture 21.

Perspectives

Looking at the versions of the Mona Lisa, it is striking that they often differ in perspective. The model is sometimes closer to the parapet, sometimes further away from it, which is depicted from a lower or higher angle. It is reasonable to assume that Leonardo was experimenting in his own way, seeking the perfect angle and distance for his painting. Here it is worth mentioning Raphael's drawing of Leonardo's painting, which differs from the other versions of the Mona Lisa in that it shows the woman from the lowest perspective and does not show her sitting in an armchair - instead she is resting her arms on a long, straight panel. In principle, of course, it is possible that Raphael drew the picture from memory, after the fact, and was merely mistaken about the differences, but this explanation seems plausible. After all, the drawing is very rich in detail, and even from the accurate, subtle depiction of the hands alone, it is hard to believe that Raphael would have been so poor an observer as to forget that Mona Lisa was sitting on a chair, while accurately recalling the details. It is therefore reasonable to assume that there was a painting by Leonardo in which Mona Lisa was not

sitting on a chair and was seen from a lower perspective. Knowing the loggia, it is not difficult to find a place where Mona Lisa could have been painted from such a perspective, leaning on a table top. Reconstructed on the spot, this assumption seems correct.



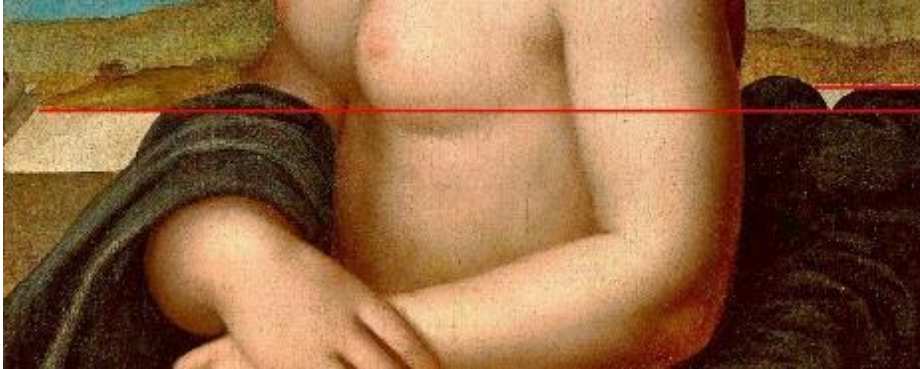
Picture 22.



Picture 23.

It is also worth examining separately how Leonardo experimented with correcting and perceiving perspective while maintaining a symmetrical composition. This was necessary because, although he

depicted the loggia from the centre, from the front, it is known from the location that he had to sit slightly to the left of the lady because of the panorama. This difference is indicated by the fact that the lines of the parapet in the Nude Mona Lisa do not coincide, while in the Louvre version the top of the parapet to the right of the model is slightly narrower and rises at an angle of about 8 degrees.



Picture 24.

Background of the Mona Lisa in the Louvre and Prado

First of all, it is worth clarifying that the two paintings mentioned in the title were painted at the same time, as the corrections on the Louvre Mona Lisa were made at the same time on the Prado Mona Lisa,⁸ i.e. it is highly likely that while Leonardo was working on - and correcting - his own, his student who was copying him was also correcting the Prado Mona Lisa. On this basis, one would not expect any significant formal differences in the background depictions, so for the sake of simplicity, I will not distinguish between the two paintings in this respect.

Having identified with absolute certainty the background of the Nude Mona Lisa as the view from the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno, the question arises: are the Mona Lisa backgrounds of the Louvre and the Prado merely the product of Leonardo's imagination or of nature? I suppose the correct answer is that they are both. Leonardo admired the works of nature, but he used them in the way

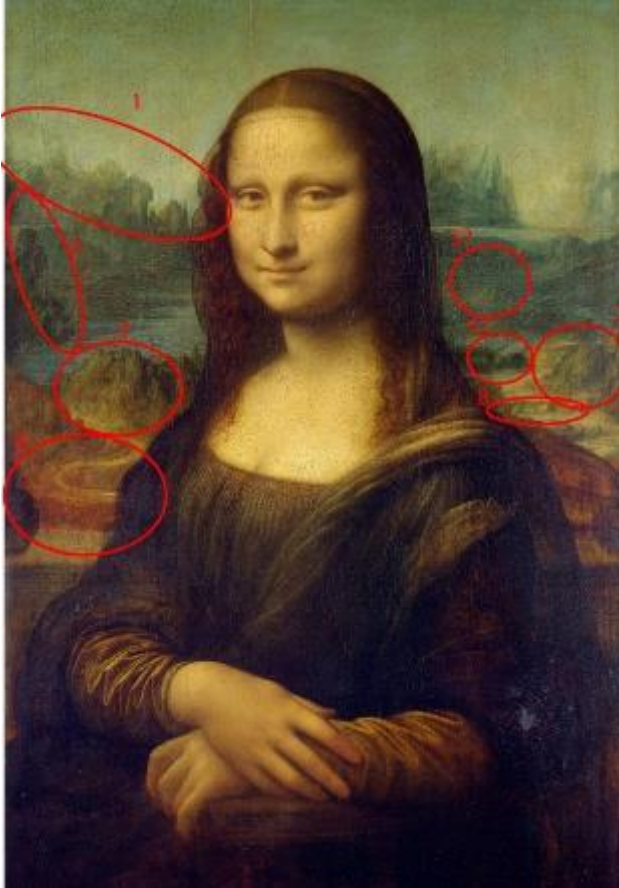
⁸ Museo Nacional del Prado YT: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJxXdUZF0HA> - 6m30s, 9m43s

that suited him best, using his own creative powers.⁹ This will be relevant later, when we decipher the meaning of the painting.

So Leonardo did not want to capture the magnificent rock formations he saw around Rocchetta di Airuno exactly where they were, but as his own artistic creation, making a sort of "selection" of them, sometimes slightly modifying them, and then placing them in a single composition. Leonardo was clearly bold in his use of artistic freedom, retaining only the particular, individual character of the forms. He used the tools of art to mould the already fabulous rock formations into a unified fairy-tale world and placed them on his masterpiece as a fitting backdrop for a suggestive smile. Without going into an exhaustive art historical analysis, his message can be briefly summarised as that timeless beauty can only be created by nature with the help of creative man. Perhaps this was Leonardo's artistic credo, and why he worked on this work so much, why so many versions were created, why he explored angles and distances to such an extent.

If all this is true, then the characteristic rock formations borrowed from nature should be recognisable in the painting. What might they be? Rocks, mountains, with enough character and spectacle to stand out in a landscape already rich in natural scenery, and thus capture Leonardo's attention and imagination when he spent time around Lake Como. I have been able to identify eight of them with a high degree of probability, but I am sure that those who know the area well will be able to find a few more.

⁹ Walter Isaacson: Leonardo Da Vinci, Helikon, 2018 - p.321



Picture 25.

1. Mount Resegone from the Lecco area (GPS 45.846300872546806, 9.39284372103953)

The mountains towering over Lecco, about 10 km from Rochetta, are impossible to miss, and were certainly so in Leonardo's day. Slightly 'squashed', but almost flawless, the characteristic shapes are drawn one after the other. The only difference is that the peak marked with a blue arrow is for some reason higher in the painting than in reality.



2. Grignetta (rock formations in the hills above Lecco)

It is questionable how high Leonardo reached during his travels in the area, but he probably saw stone formations like this in many places.



3. Mountains behind Santuario di S. Martino (GPS 45.843468389588914, 9.344388949915821)

8 km from Rochetta, a church dating from the Early Middle Ages is set against a dramatic backdrop of mountains. We don't know for sure if Leonardo visited the site, but the mountains certainly did not escape his attention as he walked around the area.



4. south of Capiate, the once possibly marshy part (GPS 45.7729673949836, 9.425959737527927)

This landscape appears to be the closest to Rochetta, and therefore represents the river and its smaller branches meandering towards Capiate, less than 1km away, along the Adda River. The landscape, meandering across the plain and perhaps a little marshy, takes on a yellowish autumnal colour - photo 26.





Picture 26.

The fact that the river flowed in a less regular course five hundred years ago than it does today is confirmed by a drawing by Leonardo. In the upper left corner you can see the Rocchetta, and below it the meandering bed of the Adda, which in the painting, marked here with a red arrow, seems to be slightly spread out.



Picture 27.

5. from Monte Regismondo to Monte Coltignone (GPS 45.88024312095478, 9.388434294482805)



6. Duplaszikla - Pizzetto (GPS 45.86937253693898, 9.383110813474904)



These two huge boulders towering over Lecco already appear in Leonardo's painting Annunciation, painted in the 1470s.



Picture 28.

Tre corni (GPS 45.678333118546355, 9.461594823605314)

The Rocchetta di Airuno is a natural landmark located about 8 km from the Rocchetta di Airuno, in a bend of the Adda river.



Roman Bridge (GPS 45.802482091993646, 9.413453585353997)



The former Roman bridge, about 4 km from Rocchetta di Airuno, which was visible from the loggia. This new bridge, built alongside the former bridge, can be seen from the fortress (Rocchetta di Airuno is indicated by a red arrow) - photo 29.



Picture 29.

In the Guardian article, Ann Pizzorusso wrongly identified the bridge with the Azzone Visconti Bridge, built in the 14th century. In his study, Davide Maria Vertemara discusses the bridge in exhaustive detail, and concludes that the Azzone Visconti Bridge looked different from the painting at the time, in contrast to the Roman bridge, which, although no longer in use, was still standing, at least in large

parts, according to maps of the time.¹⁰ A photograph from 1945 even shows where the piers are¹¹-
photo 30.



30.picture

The chronology of the different versions

Of the voluminous number of Mona Lisa portraits, we focus below on the five that are thought to be closely related to Leonardo and help us understand his creative process. We will try to reconstruct how and why the differences between the versions may have arisen.

¹⁰ Davide Maria Vertemara: MONNA LISA LANDSCAPE FROM ROCCHETTA OF AIRUNO

¹¹ Aldeghi G., Riva L.: Il ponte romano sull'Adda a Olginate.



1. Naked Mona Lisa

We might suspect the identity of a wealthy client's mistress behind the lady's identity, as nude or semi-nude portraits of a specific woman were usually commissioned in such cases. Since we know Leonardo's charcoal drawing of the lady, we know that she must have been painted. It must either be this painting or a copy by one of her pupils - many attribute it to Salai - because, unlike the other known nude Mona Lisa, this background accurately depicts the real-life scene from the Rocchetta di Airuno. Also, the fact that we only see a detail of one column reflects reality, as in reality the columns are much further apart than in the other paintings. Another very realistic detail is that the column 'hangs out' from the parapet ledge. No great care has been taken with the elaboration of this cornice, which may indeed reflect its former appearance. The perspective that Leonardo has painted the woman slightly off to one side is suggested by the lines of the cornice. The lady, however, is painted in a slightly idealised way, as in the charcoal drawing. On the whole, then, Leonardo, in keeping with this type of commission, has perhaps embellished the lady a little, but without much concern for the surroundings, has painted them in a rather realistic and even somewhat simplistic way.

It is not known whether he was commissioned by Lodovico Sforza at the same time or a little later to produce another painting of the lady in a dress. Nor is it possible that Leonardo himself suggested that he be commissioned to do another painting, which Lodovico was happy to accept. It is possible that Leonardo, who was always experimenting, was so inspired by the panorama of Rocchetta, the extraordinary rock formations and the beauty of the female body that he conceived an idea celebrating the artist's capturing of natural and human beauty. He wanted to create a masterpiece that would surpass even the beauty created by reality. The conditions were right: a young, beautiful woman as model, a loggia with a stunning view as location, and the unique rock formations that are everywhere in the Lecco area as setting.

2. Raffaello's drawing

Around 1504, Raphael visited Leonardo's workshop in Florence, where he was able to see what was probably an early version of the Mona Lisa, which was still in the Rocchetta and was kept by Leonardo. From the drawing, all we know about this work is that the columns, as in all his later works, frame the picture from two sides, but the perspective is different - the model is also much further away from the parapet. It is also likely that an early version of the painting is that the model here is leaning on a table top rather than the armrest of a chair - Leonardo later abandoned these attempts and returned to depicting the chair and a smaller distance from the parapet. The slightly sideways head was later retained, but the lady's hairstyle is different, and she does not yet have the textile draped over her shoulders as in later paintings. Together, these suggest an early experiment. The background of the painting was probably not finished and Raphael only marked it with a few lines - as he did later in his own similar painting.

3. Mona Lisa of Isleworth

This painting is a transition between the previous and the Louvre Mona Lisa. There is much controversy about its authenticity, but there is one detail in the painting that proves to me that it is original: the rounded edge of the cornice, traces of which can still be seen on the site. The Nude Mona Lisa omits this detail, while the Louvre Mona Lisa has 'added' a non-existent stucco decoration. The Isleworth Mona Lisa is therefore a kind of transition in this respect too. The landscape at the bottom left is the same as the landscape in the later *verzo*, but the mountain behind it is different

from it and from reality. Leonardo had thus already begun to use the arbitrary shaping of the existing landscape elements, but was perhaps dissatisfied with them, because the part above is hardly his work. (Perhaps someone later came into possession of the picture unfinished and therefore painted over the empty part.) Another difference is that the lady's face appears thinner here, which makes it resemble Raphael's drawing. Her hair is now hanging over her shoulders, and there is also the slung textile on her shoulders, which will be discussed later.

4.5. Louvre Mona Lisa and Prado Mona Lisa

Leonardo's last version was certainly the Mona Lisa in the Louvre. It is unanimously considered by the profession to be the best version. From the most recent research, we know that the Prado version was made at exactly the same time, and that one of Leonardo's pupils copied the Master while he was working on it. So we see what Leonardo came up with at the end of the perfecting process: the distance between the columns is unrealistic, but he placed them close enough to just be visible. The woman's face is slightly fuller than before. He placed great emphasis on the landscape, and created it himself from the natural scenery around Lecco to his own taste. To create a lateral perspective for the viewer, he slightly modified the right side of the parapet, but more subtly than he did for the Nude Mona Lisa.

We can see, then, that Leonardo experimented with almost everything in his characteristic way. With the columns, the cornice, the distances, the angles, the face, the cloth, the background. A precise knowledge of the loggia helps us to understand them, and we can summarise them in this way, by looking at the degree of correspondence with reality and by putting them in chronological order:

Columns: real distance - imaginary distance - distance between the two

Parapet: Real, but simplified - Real - Real, but decorated with stucco

Parapet perspective: there is, but simplified - None - There is

Landscape: real - Real but slightly modified (unfinished) - Real elements but completely new layout

Face: Idealised beauty - More real - Idealised beauty, but more mysterious

Dress: not off the shoulder - Off the shoulder

Hair: Contemporary hairstyle - Behind the shoulder - Hair with logo on the shoulder

Several conclusions can be drawn from these changes: 1. The real features of the lady may have been the closest to those of the face in the Mona Lisa at Isleworth and in Raphael's drawing; 2. Leonardo gradually matured the concept of arranging the natural landscape freely, using real elements, but with his own creativity and imagination. 3. He finally chose the golden mean in both perspective and columns. 4. The flesh and blood beauty of the model was gradually transformed into the "eternal beauty" that the artist wanted to show, a kind of man-made goddess.

How conscious Leonardo must have been of the latter is revealed in a BBC documentary. Both the hair and the dress slung over the shoulders of the last version of the Louvre Mona Lisa, which Leonardo must have considered finished, suggest that Leonardo ultimately intended to portray her as a kind of goddess.¹² The same was true of the Mona Lisa at Isleworth, so the concept was already

¹² BBC: Secrets of the Mona Lisa - 50m24s <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kknh1y6dV7A>

in his mind when he painted it, but he could not have found the model's face 'godlike' enough, so he changed it slightly later. It is also mentioned in the documentary that the examination of the pigments revealed that the colour of Mona Lisa's dress coat was once called Leonato, after the colour of the lion's fur. This was possibly a deliberate but 'hidden' reference to Leonardo himself.¹³ Such hidden pictorial references can be found in several portraits of Leonardo. In the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, the antique name of the ermine is Galé, while in the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, the Italian name of the camouflaged tree is Ginepro.¹⁴ In the case of the Mona Lisa, it was clearly not the name of the model that was the point, and probably not even the intention to reveal it, because the aim was to capture a general beauty rather than a specific person. That is why the jewellery that is typical of portraits, which helps to identify her, is not to be seen on her.¹⁵ Leonardo could feel the painting as his own. For him, it was the visual embodiment of his aforementioned creed, and that is why he could hide his name in it. But there is other evidence to support this idea. On the Prado Mona Lisa, the new dress is a different colour - a shade of red, the reason for which has not yet been discovered. Since we know that this work was made under the supervision of Leonardo by one of his pupils, it is possible that the new dress was made in a different colour on the Master's instructions, since the colour Leonato was used to indicate the Master himself.

Whether these assumptions are true or not, the message of the painting is clear: Leonardo's artistic genius makes the beauty of nature and man more beautiful, and makes it eternal by capturing it in painting. He not only rivals, but conquers nature and the gods. No wonder Leonardo made so many versions of the painting, and held on to them so tightly throughout his later life.

Who was the woman in the Mona Lisa?

As more and more researchers are assuming, Lisa del Giocondo certainly did not. The painting must have been painted during one of Leonardo's periods in Milan because of the location of the Rocchetta di Airuno. The second period can be ruled out, as Raphael saw a version around 1504, before Leonardo's second period in Milan. This leaves the period between 1482 and 1499. The same period is supported by the fact that the examination of the Prado Mona Lisa, which was painted at the same time as the Louvre Mona Lisa, revealed a foundation technique on the painting that was typical of Leonardo's first period in Milan.¹⁶ From this period, only the 1490s can be considered, given the refined, mature technique of the painting. What we can be certain of is that it is of a lady of distinction, and probably linked to Lombardy, or even specifically to the regions around Lecco.

During the Renaissance, it was quite rare to see a portrait of a specific and distinguished woman in the nude. In such cases, the painting was usually commissioned by an influential person, often depicting a mistress, and was later placed in a private room away from prying eyes. This perhaps implied a certain trust between the commissioner and the artist. If this is the case, then, while it is certainly possible that there were many mistresses of noble families in the Lecco area, given Leonardo's reputation as a very famous artist and the exceptional care and variety of versions he produced of the Mona Lisa after the Nude Mona Lisa, the simplest explanation seems the most likely. That is, then and there the favourite mistress of the most influential and important man, his main client, Lodovico Sforza, could be in the picture. On an exclusion basis, Lucrezia Crivelli is the best candidate for this. Although many people suspected her of being behind the female figure in the

¹³ BBC: Secrets of the Mona Lisa - 53m01s <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kknh1y6dV7A>

¹⁴ Walter Isaacson: Leonardo Da Vinci, Helikon, 2018 - p. 324.

¹⁵ Donald Sasoon: the Mona Lisa story, Saxum, 2007 - p.108.

¹⁶ Museo Nacional del Prado YT: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJxXdUZF0HA> - 8m05s

painting 'La Belle Ferronnière', the Louvre Museum said in 2015 that it was not known who she was.¹⁷ There is greater agreement about the other famous mistress of Lodovico Sforza, Cecilia Galerani, who is depicted in the painting "Lady with Ermine", so her identity can be ruled out.

There is not much source material on Lucrezia Crivelli, but it is known that after Cecilia, especially between 1494 and 1498, she was Lodovico Sforza's first, favourite, and devoted mistress, and that she had a legitimate and later a highborn child. The Crivelli family of Lombardy received, as is well known, a considerable donation of property from Lodovico Sforza.¹⁸ Lucrezia Crivelli acquired several important estates in the Lake Como area. Although there are no sources about the Rocchetta di Airuno's landholdings at that time, and therefore it is not possible to be certain, it cannot be excluded that Lucrezia received the fortress or its surroundings in the area under the control of Lodovico Sforza as one of these donations.

When Antonio de Beatis visits Leonard in 1517 and asks who is in the painting, which was most likely the Mona Lisa as we know her today, he is told that she is the mistress of Giuliano de' Medici. It has since turned out that this is highly unlikely¹⁹, so the old master must have been fibbing. Perhaps he didn't want others to know who was sitting for him because, for him, the painting was not a portrait of a woman but his artistic creed, to which he seemed to have a special affinity. So when the unexpected question was asked by Beatis, or by the cardinal present with him, Leonardo did as most people would do: he instinctively told a lie with a kernel of truth. He replaced the mistress of the Duke of Sforza with the mistress of another noble, a Duke of Medici. Why did Giuliano de' Medici come to mind? Perhaps because the news of the prince's death was still fresh in 1517 - he died in 1516 - and because a dead man cannot expose a lie.

These are, of course, only assumptions, which are logical but do not prove anything. There is, however, one source that has so far been ignored by Mona Lisa research. On the back of folio 456 of Leonardo's Codex Atlanticus there is an epigram from the late 1490s attributed to Tebaldeo, a famous poet of the time.²⁰ This poem praises Leonardo da Vinci's painting of Lucrezia Crivelli. In the past, the portrait of Lucrezia was associated with the painting of 'la Belle Ferronnière', which is probably why no one noticed that the epigram's content was perfectly suited to the Mona Lisa, and only the Mona Lisa. I have managed to find an English translation of the work, written in Latin, while I wrote the Hungarian translation, mainly with a view to making it more readable.

How well the master's art answers to nature. Da Vinci might have shown the / soul here, as he has rendered the rest. He did not, so that his picture might be the / greater likeness; for the soul of the original is possessed by Il Moro, her lover. / This lady's name is Lucrezia, to whom the gods gave all things with lavish hand. / Beauty of form was given her: Leonardo painted her, Il Moro loved her - one the / greatest of painters, the other of princes. / By this likeness the painter injured Nature and the goddesses on high. Nature / lamented that the hand of man could attain so much, the goddesses that immortality / should be bestowed on so fair a form, which ought to have perished / For Il Moro's sake Leonardo did the injury, and Il Moro will protect him. Men / and gods alike fear to injure Il Moro.

¹⁷ Musée de Louvre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myOhv7v0mws> - 37m38s

¹⁸ Felice Calvi: Castello Visconteo-Sforzesco, 1894 - p. 74.

¹⁹ Guardian: The myth of the Mona Lisa, 2002

²⁰ Chrysa Damianaki: Il ritratto della Belle Ferronnière di Leonardo da Vinci e l'epigramma di Antonio Tebaldeo, 2019 Università del Salento -59.o.

The master is responsible to nature

The soul speaks while the work is being made

But it's not a reflection of you

For it is the Moor's alone

Lucretia, that's her name

Whom the gods have measured with a generous hand

Leonardo is the one who painted him,

And whom the Moor loved very much

One of them is the greatest painter,

The other is also the first for the prince

Nature and the goddesses too

they wondered: what art can do

How can a human hand do that?

Nature complained profusely

Immortality would be granted to these forms,

said the goddesses - not nature!

For the sake of the Moor this injury was done

caused by Leonardo's work

But the Moor protects him, because

Man, God fearing together for the Moor

<Ut> bene respondet natur<a>e ars docta, dedisset

Vincius, ut tribuit cetera, sic animam.

Noluit, ut similis magis haec foret; altera sic est.

Possidet illius Maurus amans animam.

Huius quam cernis nomen Lucretia, Divi

omnia cui larga contribuere manu.

Rara huic forma data est. Pinxit Leonardus, amavit

Maurus; Pictorum primus Hic (ille ducum).

Naturam et superas hac laesit imagine Divas

pictor. Tantum hominis posse manum haec doluit.

Illae longa dari tam magnae tempora formae,

quae spacio fuerat deperitura brevi.

Van laesit Mauri causa. Defendet et ipsum

Maurus, Maurum homines laedere diique timent.

The most emphatic element of the epigram is the idea which was also Leonardo's well-known fundamental principle and creed, and which we can also read about in his already mentioned treatises. The true artist creates human and natural beauty that surpasses the creative power of nature and the goddesses, and thereby grants them immortality. The most striking similarity between the Mona Lisa and the epigram is therefore precisely the fact that natural and human beauty are presented in equal measure, but in distinct but distinct ways. The same can be observed in the painting. In contrast to Leonardo's other portraits, not only are the natural landscape and the human figure equally pronounced and elaborated, but even the space they occupy in the painting is roughly the same - just as the poem is equally concerned with the envious, offended nature and the goddesses.

"By this likeness the painter injured **Nature and the goddesses** on high. **Nature** / lamented that the hand of man could attain so much, the **goddesses** that immortality / should be bestowed on so fair a form, which ought to have perished."

We do not know if Leonardo spoke to the poet about this, but if not, he understood the painter. This is also in line with our earlier observation that the lady's hair and dress are not indicative of an ordinary portrait, but of the presence of higher, divine spheres in the painting, as is the disembodied arrangement of the strange formations of nature. Such an emphasis on the depiction of nature

alongside the model is not found in any other portrait of a woman by Leonardo, and therefore Tebaldeo's lines cannot refer to any other Leonardo painting but the Mona Lisa. It could be argued that the word nature does not refer to the background, but only to the female beauty created by nature, as in other lyrical works. In these, however, another representative of the higher spheres is never present, as here the term goddess. In juxtaposing the painting and the poem, there is no doubt that nature envies the landscape and the goddess envies the woman, which is why the poem does not use the term god or gods, but goddesses.

Unless we consider the very unlikely case that there was a portrait of Lucrezia Crivelli by Leonardo, lost without any record, and with the same subject, it is likely that the Mona Lisa is in fact Mona Lucrezia! She is the one who was the most adored mistress of Leonardo's main client at the time the work was created. She is therefore the easiest person to imagine that the woman-loving Duke of Milan commissioned Leonardo to paint her topless. The lines of Tebaldeo's epigram mentioning Lucrezia only fit this one portrait of Leonardo. And finally, it is perhaps no coincidence that the elderly Leonardo was talking about a prince's mistress when the identity of the lady in the painting was questioned.

When looking for the date of the Mona Lisa, it is sometimes thought that Leonardo worked on the Mona Lisa for many years or decades. It is therefore theoretically possible that the Louvre Mona Lisa was completed in France rather than in Rochetta. However, this is contradicted by the epigram, which could only have been written on the finished painting in the late 1490s. It is also contradicted by the fact that the Prado Mona Lisa was painted in parallel by one of his pupils, which is hardly conceivable for many years. Leonardo's experimentation with the existing elements of the loggia, with its perspective adapted to the panorama, also makes it reasonable that versions of the Mona Lisa - sketches of them - were painted in the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno between 1494 and 1499. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that Leonardo might have made minor changes to the painting years later, since it is known that he was very close to the Master, but the foregoing suggests that these could only have been minor nuances.

As for the question of dating the painting by style, art historians are also divided, which in itself shows how uncertain it is to date it. Since I am admittedly not an expert, I can only rely on the fact that Leonardo's portraits were in their infancy in the 1490s and that Leonardo's career reached its zenith in 1495²¹ - exactly the time when he began painting his other masterpiece, The Last Supper. It is therefore at least as likely that he was able to paint the Mona Lisa at this time.

Summary

What do we know for sure?

1. In the background of the Nude Mona Lisa, the panorama from the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno is clearly visible. This is confirmed by the proportions of the parapet and the peculiar column projecting towards the back of the Nude Mona Lisa.

²¹ Walter Isaacson: Leonardo Da Vinci, Helikon, 2018 - p. 383.



2. The strange rock formations in the background of the Louvre Mona Lisa are all located in the immediate vicinity of the Rocchetta di Airuno - about 1 to 10 km away - and are very likely to be precisely identifiable. This confirms The Guardian's May 2024 hypothesis about the rocks around Lecco.²² It is unlikely that so many matches can be found in any other area at the same time. Some examples:

Mount Resegone (GPS 45.846300872546806, 9.39284372103953)



Tre corni (GPS 45.678333118546355, 9.461594823605314)



From Monte Regismondo to Monte Coltignone (GPS 45.88024312095478, 9.388434294482805)

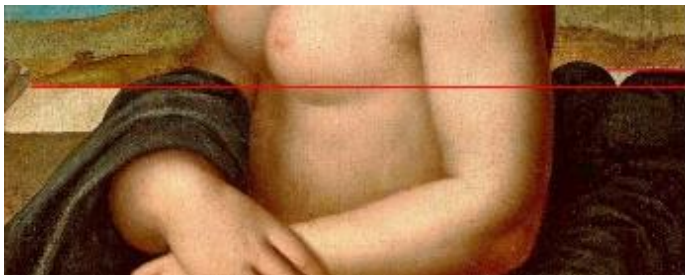


²² Dalya Alberge: The Guardian: Mystery of where Mona Lisa was painted has been solved, geologist claims 11 May 2024 www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/may/11/where-mona-lisa-was-painted-mystery-solved-geologist-claims

3. According to the Condé Museum's research, the charcoal drawing of the Nude Mona Lisa was most likely done by Leonardo for an oil painting, and it is almost certain that Leonardo painted this version. It is likely that the Master's painting was copied by one of his pupils - this is the Nude Mona Lisa we have examined.²³ (The copy is almost exactly the same as Prado Mona Lisa, which was also copied by a pupil while Leonardo was working on it.)²⁴
4. The Mona Lisa was painted at the same time as the topless version.²⁵ This is confirmed by the fact that the same person is sitting on the same chair in front of the same proportioned parapet, and in both cases the rock formations around Rocchetta di Airuno are in the background.

The only way the Louvre painting of Lisa del Giocondo could be possible is if Leonardo had made a drawing of the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno in the 1490s, with its parapet, columns and the exact landscape visible from the loggia, and then used it to "sit" the cloth merchant's wife in front of him in Florence five or ten years later. At first, moreover, half-naked, which is difficult to justify, and then in another painting in the role of a 'goddess'.

But there are other reasons why this does not seem viable. Why would Leonardo have tried to fiddle with the perspective of parapets in his paintings afterwards? Looking towards the panorama from the loggia, the parapet can be seen from the side. In his quest for symmetry, Leonardo seems to have 'cheated' this perspective in the case of the columns, but in the Mona Lisa and the Nude Mona Lisa, on the right side, the sloping lines of the parapet clearly show his desire for perspective. This can only be justified by the conditions of the location - there, too, one has to look slightly to the right towards the landscape - and the experimentation in the Rochetta di Airuno, but not by the idea-like application of an old drawing.



²³ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/experts-think-nude-mona-lisa-could-have-been-drawn-leonardo-da-vinci-180971644/>

²⁴ Museo Nacional del Prado YT: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJxXdUZF0HA> - 6m30s, 9m43s

²⁵ Walter Isaacson: Leonardo Da Vinci, Helikon, 2018 - p596



All these contradictions can be easily resolved if we accept that the painting was painted before 1499. Moreover, the Prado Museum's paint analysis points in this direction.²⁶ It is not sacrilegious to assume this, if only because previous research to the contrary is contradictory and thus very weak. In the absence of a professional consensus on the Mona Lisa, and especially in the light of new information on its location, this new idea, which at the moment seems revolutionary but which offers a complete and logical explanation, could be given a chance to gain ground. On this basis, we can make further assumptions about Leonardo's motivation and the identity of the lady in the painting. Raffaello's drawing of Leonardo's painting from 1504 suggests that the Mona Lisa was painted only during the painter's first period in Milan, between 1482 and 1499, or, to be more precise, in the 1490s. From this period, it is most likely, by way of exclusion, that Lucrezia Crivelli, the first mistress of Lodovico Sforza, was the lady depicted in the painting, and thus the period in question can be narrowed down to between 1494 and 1499 (recent research suggests that Crivelli is no longer the person depicted in the painting of the 'Fair Ferryman's wife'.²⁷) The possible link between Lucrezia Crivelli and the Mona Lisa seems to be confirmed by Tebaldeo's epigram.

²⁶ Museo Nacional del Prado YT: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJxXdUZF0HA> - 8m05s

²⁷ Musée de Louvre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myOhv7v0mws> - 37m38s

Finally, in the light of the above, I have attempted to better explore Leonardo's creative motivations and to reconstruct his creative process through an analysis of the major versions of the Mona Lisa that can be associated with Leonardo.