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Leonardo da Vinci: The Secret Location of *The Last Supper*

In a 2017 study, Dario Monti put forward an intriguing hypothesis: for his world-famous fresco *The Last Supper* in Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Leonardo da Vinci may have taken inspiration from a monastery near Lake Como.[1] Although this bold idea appeared in the local media, it did not attract much attention due to a lack of sufficient evidence. In this study, I have revisited and developed Monti's concept, and found enough strong evidence to assert that the original model for the setting of *The Last Supper* was the former refectory of the San Calocero monastery in Civate.

[1] Dario Monti: L'Ultima Cena, Leonardo e Civate, 2017 - viestoriche.net

The San Calocero Monastery

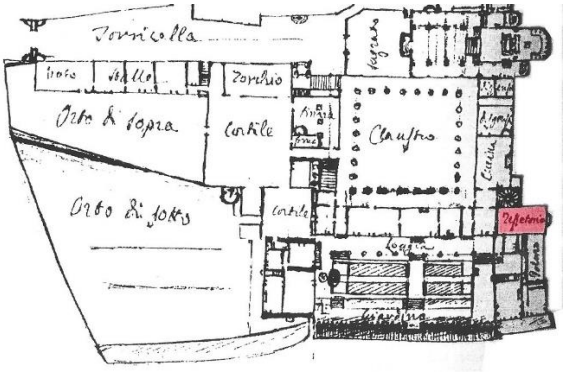
The monastery is located in Civate, along what was once a busy road. Based on Carlo Castagna's research[2], a drawing in the *Codex Atlanticus* shows that Leonardo was examining the possibility of linking Lake Como with the River Lambro, as part of his ambitious plan to enable navigation from Lake Como to Milan. (A red arrow marks the location of Civate.) This would have facilitated the transport of goods, especially iron, from Valtellina and Valsassina. These facts demonstrate Leonardo's presence in this part of Upper Brianza, giving him the opportunity to study the area directly.

[2] Carlo Castagna: Artisti civatesi alla corte visconteo sforzesca e l'abate commendatario Card. Ascanio Sforza Visconti

We do not know where Leonardo stayed during these travels, but it is likely that he was hosted by Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, brother of his principal patron, Ludovico Sforza, with whom Leonardo was known to have a good relationship. Since 1484, San Calocero had been under Ascanio's authority, and he immediately undertook a renovation of the monastery buildings[3]. Although none of this directly proves that Leonardo visited the monastery, it is reasonable to assume that while traveling in the region on behalf of the Duke of Milan, he may have lodged with the duke's brother, in his monastery. Thus he could have become familiar with the panoramic hall of San Calocero, and it may have occurred to him to use it as the background for his fresco.

[3] Carlo Castagna: Artisti civatesi alla corte visconteo sforzesca e l'abate commendatario Card. Ascanio Sforza Visconti

The Refectory



One of Leonardo's masterpieces, *The Last Supper*, is located in the refectory of a Milanese monastery. From the perspective of the main conclusions of this study, it is not crucial whether the room depicted in the fresco was modeled on an actual refectory, but such a choice would hardly be surprising for Leonardo. A sacred meal, commemorated in art, set within a sacred dining hall, and painted in another sacred dining hall.

In San Calocero, the hall facing east, with two windows and a balcony, was certainly used as a refectory in the 18th century, as confirmed by a map from around 1720[4]. We lack written documents about the room's earlier function, but several arguments suggest that before 1484, when Ascanio Sforza took charge of the monastery, it could already have served as the Benedictine monks' refectory. In Benedictine tradition, the refectory was usually located opposite the church, on the southern side, which is indeed the case here. Furthermore, Benedictine refectories were typically oriented east–west, again corresponding to the hall's layout. On this basis, it is likely that when Ascanio renovated the monastery, the hall continued to serve as a dining space—its function still documented two centuries later. If so, then in the 1490s Leonardo may have been aware that the room had formerly been a refectory, making it an ideal setting for his fresco's background. I must emphasize that this remains a hypothesis, an intriguing suggestion rather than a necessary condition for identifying the hall as the model for *The Last Supper*. Yet there are further indirect indications that, for Leonardo, the room was indeed connected with dining—whether as Ascanio's banquet hall at the time of Leonardo's visit, or as a former monastic refectory. It is known that the floor of the refectory in Milan that houses the fresco was once lower than it is today, so that the monks, looking at the painting, would have had the impression that the scene of the Last Supper was unfolding above them, on an imagined upper floor. This effect was surely intentional on Leonardo's part, since the Bible repeatedly states that the Last Supper took place on the second floor of a house, where dining rooms were usually located in the Mediterranean world. In this respect too, the hall at San Calocero would have been ideal, since it is also situated on the upper floor.

In light of this, the following scenario is easy to imagine: during one of Leonardo's visits to the area, Cardinal Ascanio hosted him at the San Calocero monastery, perhaps with a lavish banquet in the newly renovated hall. Leonardo was struck by the fact that the hall, like in the biblical account, was located on an upper floor[5], and that it offered a splendid panoramic view. Whether he knew of its

[4] Dario Monti: L'Ultima Cena, Leonardo e Civate, 2017 - viestoriche.net

[5] Enrico Crispino: Leonardo ,Bp. 2010 – p. 87

earlier function as a refectory or not, these combined features could have convinced him that it was the perfect model for the background of his important new commission, *The Last Supper*.

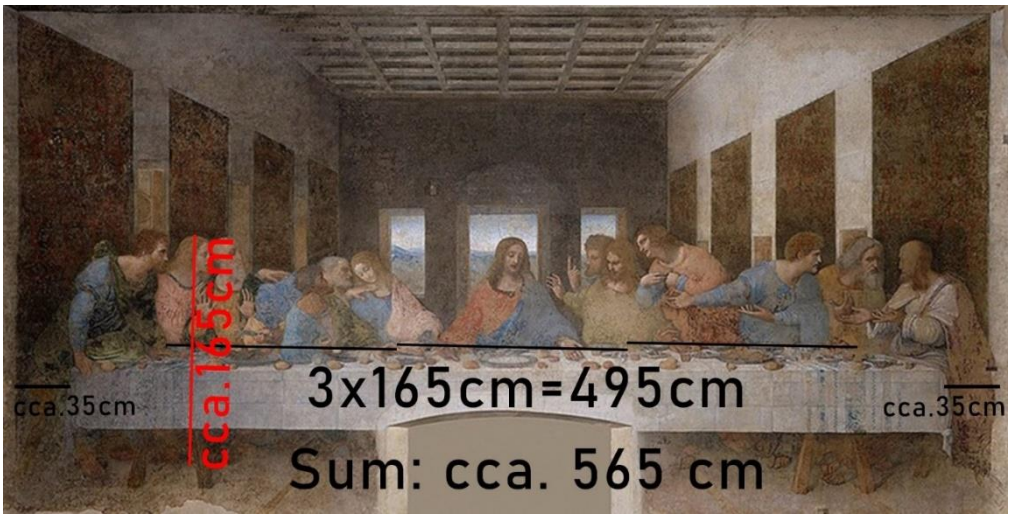
The Dimensions of the Hall

At first glance, the proportions of the hall are strikingly similar to those of the space depicted in Leonardo's fresco. The only noticeable difference lies in the wall surfaces beside the windows, which are the result of modern alterations – heating pipes now run behind them.

The width of the hall is 570 cm. By simple calculation, a very similar result, about 565 cm, can be obtained if we estimate the same dimension from Leonardo's painting. The average height of a 15th-century man, standing in a slightly bent posture like the apostles, would have been about 165 cm. The length of the table is three times this, 495 cm, leaving only a narrow space of about 35 cm between the table and the wall. At the edges of the painting, the apostles Bartholomew and Simon are practically squeezed into that space. Thus, the estimated width of the hall on the fresco is: $3 \times 165 + 2 \times 35 = 565$ cm!

But why did the table have to be "pressed" into such a tight composition? If Leonardo had made his sketch in a dining hall, seeking inspiration there and experimenting on site, it seems natural that he would have used the actual dining tables present. It is easy to imagine that, in a bold move, he simply

turned a traditionally lengthwise-placed table crosswise, and it really did fit only so narrowly. Leonardo may have been captivated by the backlighting, by the perspective, and was not disturbed by the sense of cramped space. If this was not the case, then only some very weighty symbolic meaning could justify leaving so little space at the ends of the table – which I consider less likely.



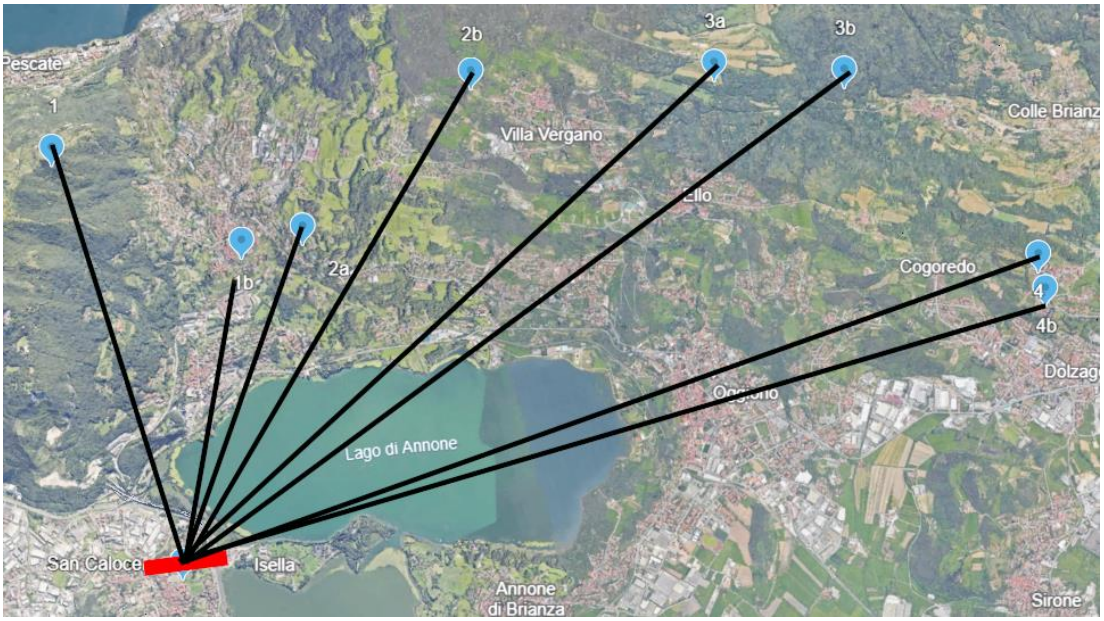
The View

In the painting, we see two windows on the sides and, in the center, a balcony door wider than the windows. Although its bottom is not visible, behind the figure of Christ it clearly continues downward. The same arrangement can be observed at San Calocero. From the balcony, one could enjoy an almost 120-degree panoramic view of the valley from the 922-meter-high Monte Barro (Vetta) to the south, if trees and buildings did not partially obstruct it. The most convincing piece of evidence is the panorama itself: it strongly suggests that Leonardo could only have sketched the landscapes for his fresco here.

To demonstrate this, we will examine each landscape in details. From the eastern and southeastern panorama visible from San Calocero's balcony, about 90 degrees of view appear in the fresco. For clarity, the four distinct landscape sections in the painting have been labeled from left to right, one through four. The sightlines marked on Google Earth are approximate, intended only as guides. Since trees now block much of the view from the balcony, the photographs were taken from different points around the monastery; in the case of section 2, the photo shows the perspective a few meters above the monastery. These small shifts, however, do not significantly affect the visibility of the distant mountains.

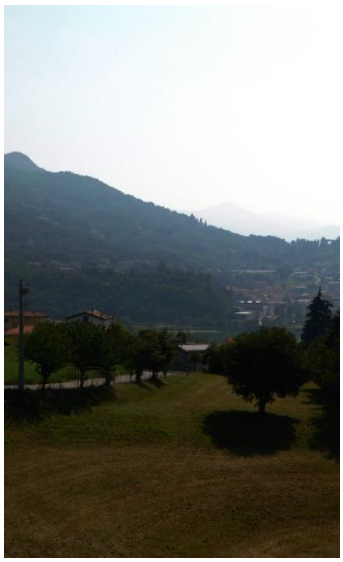
1. 2. 3. 4.


1
2
3
4

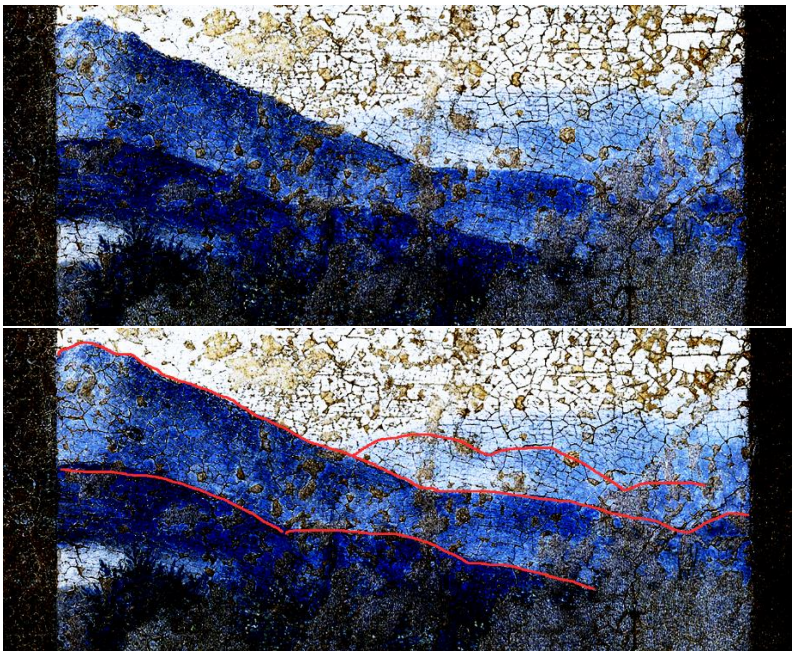

1
1b
2a
2b
3a
3b
4
4b
Villa Vergano
Cogoredo
Colle Brianz
Dolzag
Lago di Annone
San Caloce
Isella
Annone
di Brianza
Sirone

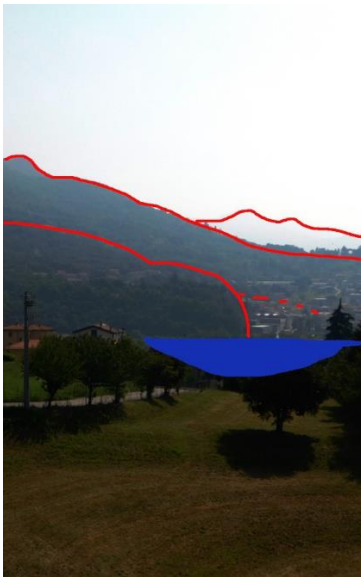
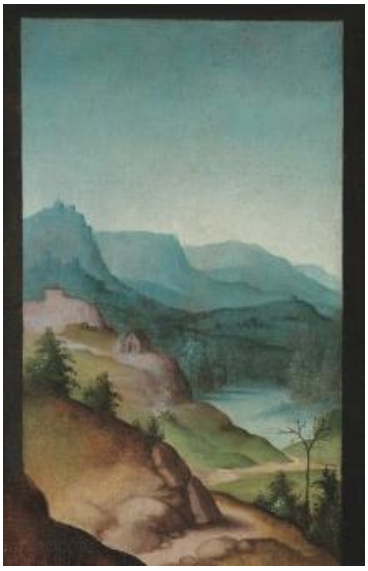
1. The Left Window

It is well known that Leonardo depicted distant mountains with lighter, fainter tones, to convey their remoteness. Photographs taken in hazy weather confirm this visual effect. Although the lower third of the fresco has been lost, the surviving upper part is enough to confirm the match beyond doubt.



Within the pale blue background, three curved outlines of distant smaller peaks can be discerned by adjusting contrast – the highest at 45°47'56"N 9°29'37"E – exactly matching the real landscape.



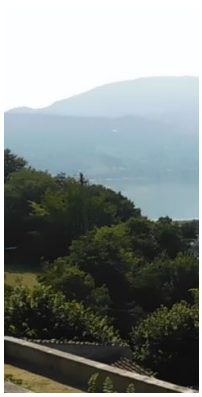




Every distinctive element of the fresco corresponds to what is seen in photographs, except for the section marked by a dotted line. In the painting, a gentle hill slope continues, while in reality it ends abruptly at 45°49'25"N 9°21'31"E. This may indicate human intervention in the landscape. Indeed, the image below shows evidence of quarrying near Lake Annone, where accessible stone was extracted in later centuries, leaving scars still visible today.

Since the original lower part of the fresco shows only a tree crown, it is useful to consult copies. Though less precise in detail than the original, they usually preserve the main features. In Gian Pietro's copy (1515–1520, Royal Academy of Arts, London), beneath the elongated hill, to the right of the nearest slope, a body of water appears. Presumably Leonardo's original fresco also depicted the reflection of this lake, once again matching the real landscape.

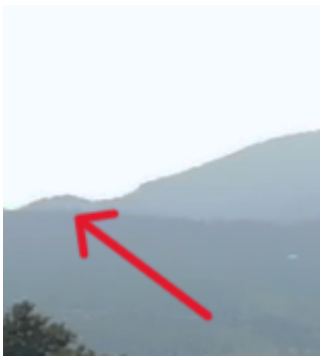
2. Left Side of the Balcony Door

On the upper left side of the fresco, just left of Christ, a rounded “bump” rises into a gently sloping hill. Beneath this, traces of pale color survive, likely representing water, which is clearly visible in the copy mentioned above. Although trees now obscure this view, photographs taken from other points around the monastery, as well as Google Earth imagery from above, confirm that the fresco once faithfully reproduced the panorama seen from San Calocero’s balcony.




The hill with the “bump” still exists at 45°48'26"N 9°22'47"E, but in reality it is smaller than Leonardo painted it. It is possible, however, that in the 15th century the profile of the hill looked different. As seen in the pictures below, today the terrain at that point has terraced slopes and leveled areas, evidence of later modifications.



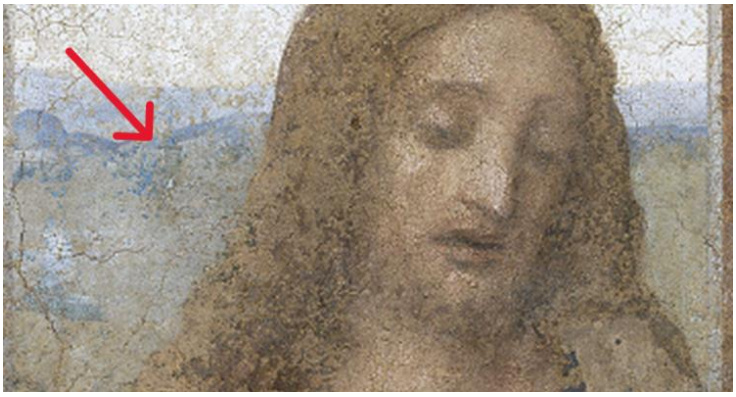
3 & 4. Right Side of the Balcony Door and Right Window

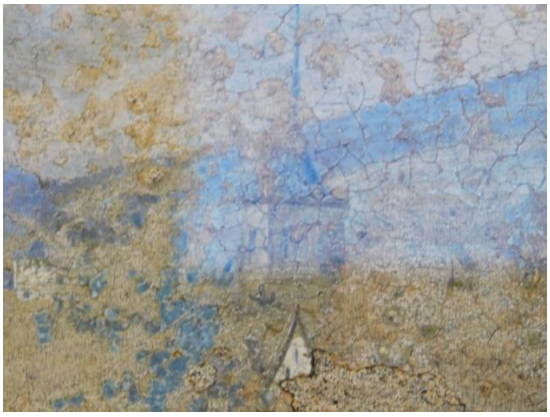
The landscapes in these two narrow sections are less distinctive, but it is clear that the previously higher hills and mountains gradually flatten out completely. This corresponds exactly to the real view.

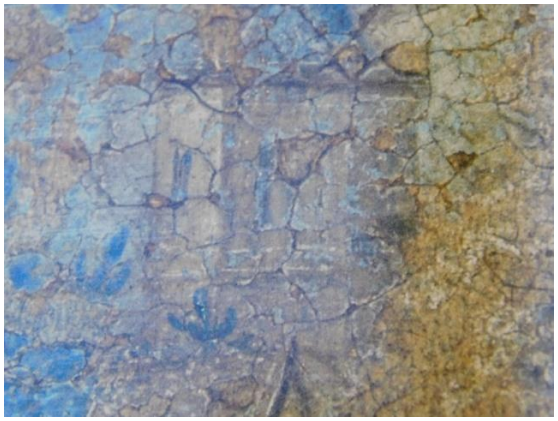
Finally, it is important to note one detail: throughout our analysis we have set aside the faintest, most distant, nearly horizontal band – marked in red – that runs across all four sections of the landscape. Since every other element in the fresco matches the real panorama with striking precision, I am convinced that this faint strip was Leonardo's invention. He may have felt that by adding a subtle, featureless band of pale terrain, he could deepen the spatial effect. Without it, especially behind Christ, the scene might have seemed somewhat "flat," too two-dimensional.

The Church Tower

To the left of Jesus, in the background, we can see a church tower. Curiously, its size is much larger than it would realistically appear from such a distance, since it stands on the far side of the lake.

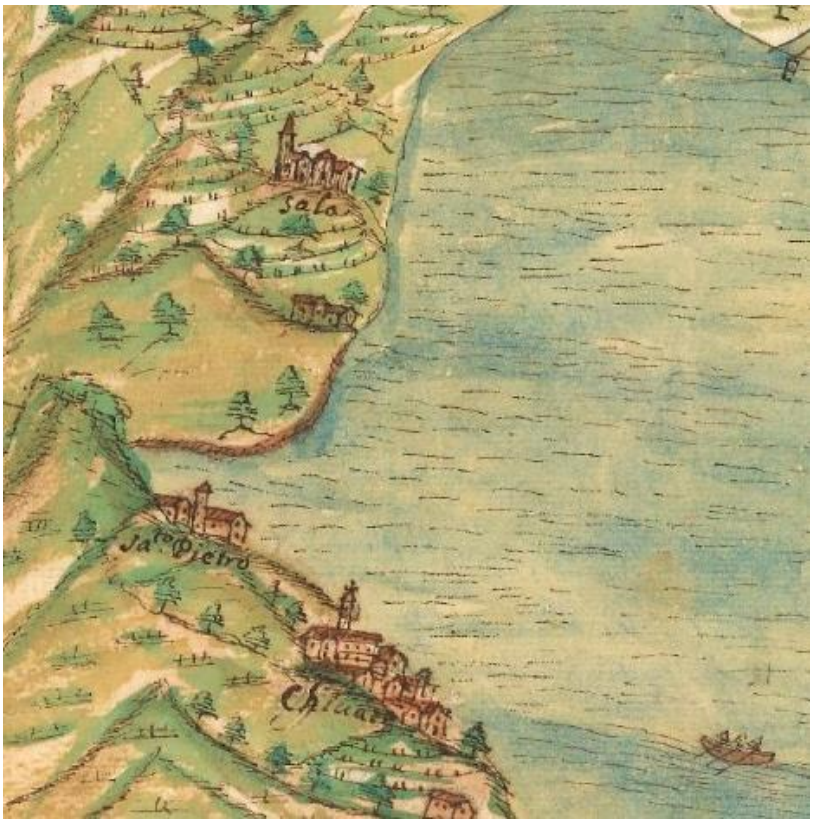






In Gian Pietro's copy—though with somewhat distorted proportions—the same church tower is visible, and even the church building itself is shown.

The origin of this depiction cannot be determined with certainty. It is possible that such a building did indeed exist on the opposite shore of the lake, and that Leonardo exaggerated its size to make it more visible. In that case, based on the location in the painting and a map from 1656, it could have been the tower of the church at Sala, though no evidence confirms this theory.



It is also possible that this was a symbolic representation, with the church serving as a reference to the connection between Christ and the Church. Another possibility is that Leonardo depicted the church of the San Calocero monastery itself, discreetly embedding a reference to the site into the fresco. Such hidden allusions were not foreign to Leonardo; he used similar devices in other paintings—for example, in *Lady with an Ermine*. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, while the depiction could resemble several local churches, old photographs and engravings confirm that it also closely matches San Calocero. Until the turn of the century, the monastery's tower still stood, resembling the one we see in Leonardo's fresco. The copy of the fresco further reveals that the church building attached to the tower corresponds to old representations of San Calocero as well.

Close to the *Mona Lisa*

In another study of mine, I argue that based on the background, Leonardo likely painted the *Mona Lisa*—and almost certainly the *Nude Mona Lisa*—in Rocchetta de Airuno, or at least prepared the sketches there[6]. Strikingly, this location is only eight kilometers from the San Calocero monastery. Contrary to popular belief, Leonardo painted the *Mona Lisa* in the mid-to-late 1490s, during his first Milanese period—the same era in which he painted *The Last Supper*. In both works he achieved mastery, and one can observe notable similarities between the two paintings in the treatment of architecture and landscape: Leonardo did not alter the essential character of real architectural elements, but he adjusted them with some flexibility. The *Nude Mona Lisa*, the Louvre's *Mona Lisa*, Raphael's drawing, and the real location together reveal, for instance, that Leonardo casually shifted the columns framing the figure in his various renderings. In the case of *The Last Supper*, he adjusted the proportions of the windows and balcony door to fit the desired composition. (In reality, the windows are about 93 cm wide, and the balcony door about 120 cm, whereas in the painting the difference is slightly greater.) For both the *Nude Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*, it holds true that Leonardo did not wish to change the fundamental features of the landscape background—only occasionally, and for compositional reasons.

Conclusion

Documents show that Leonardo likely visited Civate while studying a possible waterway, and it is here that the San Calocero monastery is located. At the time, Ascanio Sforza, brother of Leonardo's main patron Ludovico Sforza, was the overseer of the monastery. The proportions of San Calocero's former refectory, the placement and approximate size of its windows and balcony doors, and its width correspond to the estimated dimensions of the room depicted in the painting. From the refectory, the view matches so precisely with the landscape details in *The Last Supper* that it can hardly be coincidence. The landscape's features are represented in the fresco exactly as they appear from the monastery. The peculiar depiction of the church tower raises the possibility that Leonardo portrayed San Calocero's own church in the Milan fresco. It is also remarkable that the site lies only eight kilometers from Rocchetta de Airuno, whose parapet, columns, and panorama, I propose, served as the background for the *Nude Mona Lisa* and partly for the *Mona Lisa*. The long-suspected idea, shared by many, that Leonardo's rocks, mountains, and lakes should be sought in the picturesque landscapes around Lecco in Lombardy, I believe, has now been confirmed.

[6] Gabor Spielmann: The Nude Mona Lisa and the Precise Identification of the Loggia Serving as the Setting for the Mona Lisa's Background -Rocchetta di Airuno – academia.edu