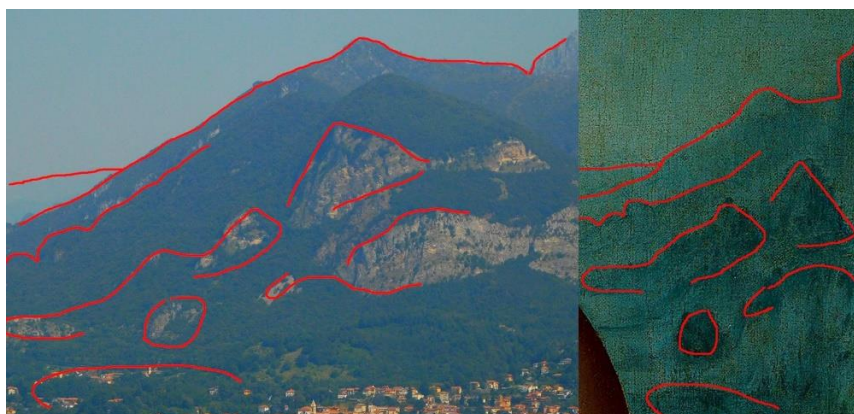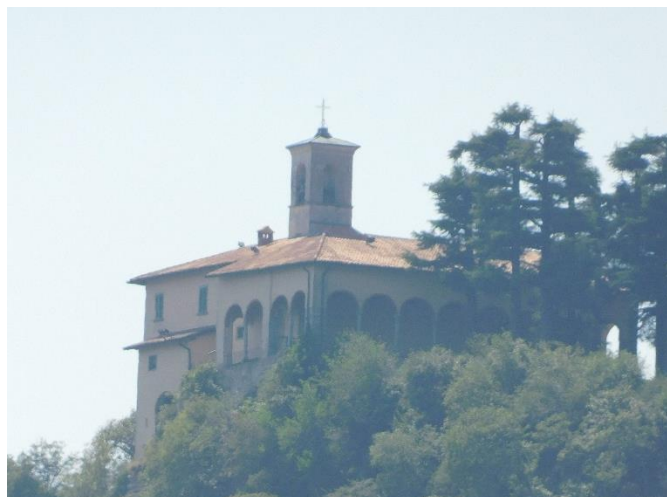# The Nude Mona Lisa and the Precise Identification of the Loggia Serving as the Setting for the Mona Lisa's Background – Rocchetta di Airuno

Introduction

In May 2024, following an article in *The Guardian*, news spread worldwide that an Italian geologist and art historian, Ann Pizzorusso, had successfully identified the mountains that provided the model for the background of the *Mona Lisa*, along with the bridge depicted there[1]. Without a precise definition, she located the mountains in the Lecco area and identified the

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[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

bridge on the painting as the Azzone Visconti Bridge in Lecco, which is still in use today.

This study not only aims to refine and correct these claims but also sets itself the bold goal of determining in the Lecco region which building, which part of it, and even on which still-existing stone floor the model might have sat, and where Leonardo da Vinci may have painted her. After identifying the location, with this knowledge—and by interpreting information previously overlooked in Mona Lisa research—I will attempt to identify the lady seen in the painting(s) and to understand Leonardo's creative motivations behind the various versions of the *Mona Lisa*.

While of course I take existing research results into account, using and citing them where necessary, given the extensive literature on the subject and the often non-consensual nature of professional viewpoints, instead of providing detailed evaluations and comparisons of these theories, I will outline my own conception and follow its internal logic.

Leonardo around Lake Como and the Adda Valley

Leonardo is known to have visited the area around Lake Como, near Lecco, several times, and he studied the Adda Valley in detail due to his investigations into the regulation of waterways. After leaving Florence and entering the service of Ludovico Sforza, in 1490 he examined the Lombard canals, and in 1492 he also traveled in the Lake Como area, for example to Como and Bellagio[2]. It is very likely that already in the 1490s he was well familiar with the Brianza region[3]. Later, in 1507, he studied the flow of the Adda, as again in 1510. In 1511 he moved to the Villa Melzi in Vaprio d'Adda, where until 1513 he produced drawings of the surrounding landscapes.

Beyond these, due to a lack of sources, our knowledge of when, why, and at whose commission Leonardo may have stayed in the Adda Valley and near Lecco is quite fragmentary, but it is easy to imagine that during his first Milanese period (1482–1499), in addition to the dates mentioned above, this may have occurred on several further occasions. I assume that Leonardo's drawings RL12413 and RL12414 may have been created in the same building where the *Mona Lisa* was painted—meaning that Leonardo demonstrably visited it. The building in question is the Rocchetta di Airuno, from the loggia of which the very same view opens up as we see in Leonardo's drawing. – *Figure 1*
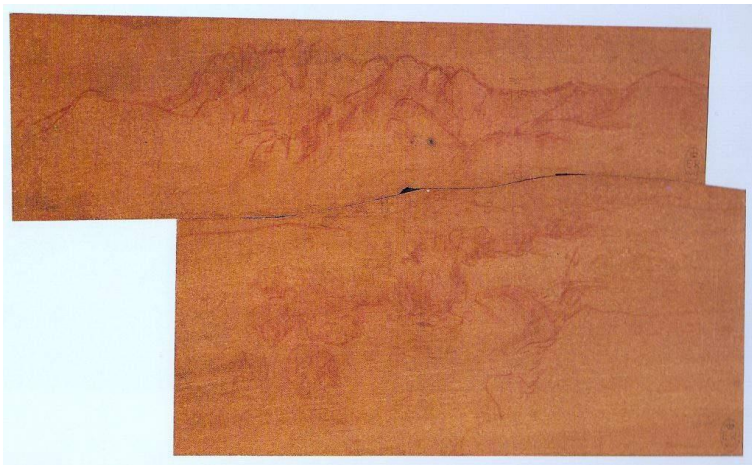
Figure 1

This coincidence was already mentioned in a 2019 study[4], though its significance was not elaborated there. For clarity, below I superimpose the graphic from that study—which identifies the mountains and the Adda River in Leonardo's drawing—onto the actual landscape. – *Figure 2*. The match is undeniable. The mountains at various distances from the vantage point align in relation to each other exactly as in Leonardo's sketch, just as does the winding Adda River below. Both the angle and the

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

elevation correspond to the view from the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno. (Only the height of the Resegone is rendered with some inaccuracy.) – *Figure 3*
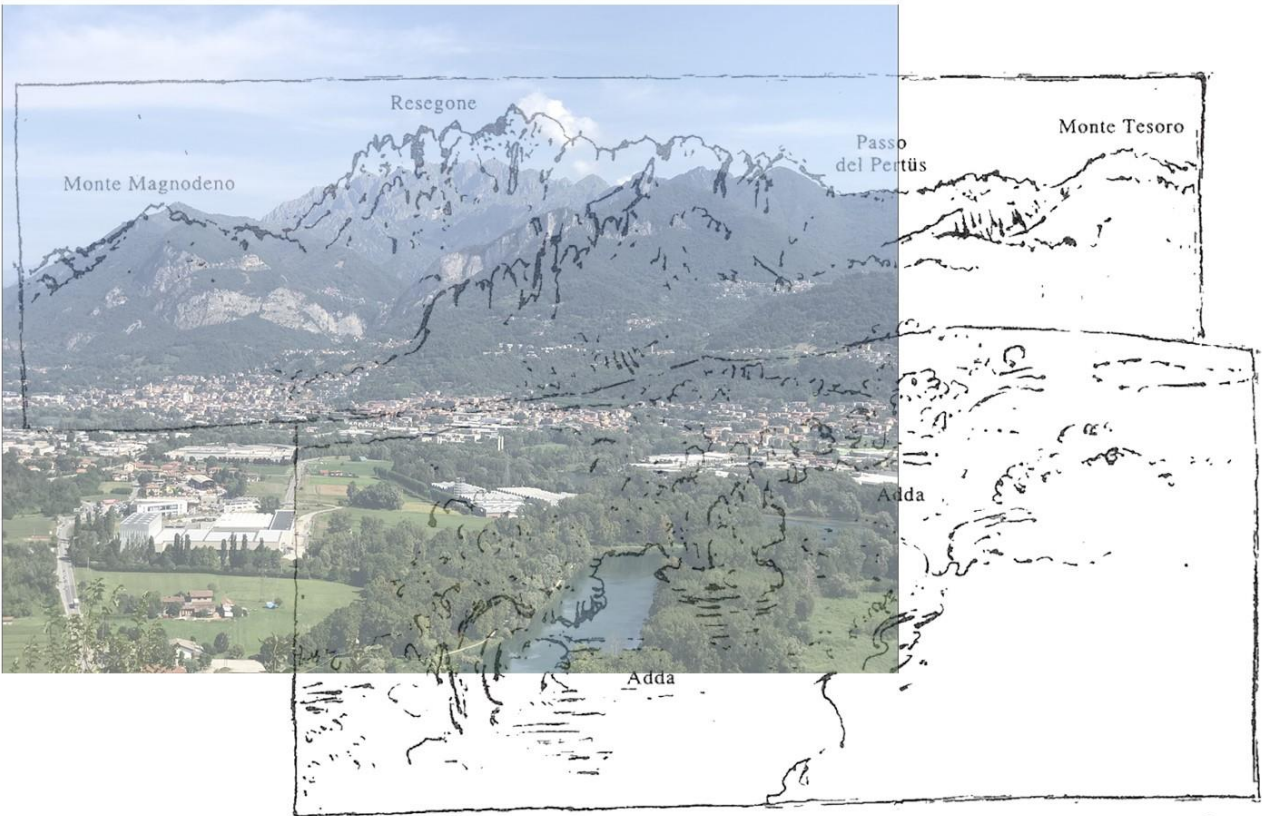

Figure 2

Figure 3

The Nude Mona Lisa

Before discussing the building itself—the Rocchetta di Airuno—in more detail, we can already establish that Leonardo was there, and the breathtaking panorama that opens from it, in my view, also served as the background for the work known as the *"Nude Mona Lisa"*. If this is so, it would also prove that the other versions of the *Mona Lisa* were likewise created in the former fortress[5].

The *Nude Mona Lisa* or *Mona Vanna* charcoal drawing, kept in the Condé Museum, last came into media attention in 2017, when the Louvre's examinations suggested that it is, at least in part, likely the work of Leonardo himself. This further supports what art historians have long assumed: that Leonardo painted the *Mona Lisa* multiple times, in different ways—or at the very least, participated in their creation. I will return to this subject in more detail later.

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

Alongside the *Mona Vanna* charcoal drawing in the Condé Museum, there are also painted versions of the *Nude Mona Lisa* that feature backgrounds, and these resemble one another. Since Leonardo himself also painted the *Nude Mona Lisa*[6], it is reasonable to assume that the version attributed to one of his pupils—some suggest Salai—is the closest to the original. This is reinforced by the fact that this version most closely resembles Leonardo's charcoal drawing.

This is significant because the most obvious difference between the *Mona Lisa* and the *Nude Mona Lisa*, aside from the absence of clothing, lies in the landscapes of the background. While the background of the *Mona Lisa* is complex, constructed almost dreamlike from numerous, richly detailed elements, the background of the *Nude Mona Lisa* appears realistic. The truly remarkable discovery, however, is that it shows a striking similarity to the landscape visible from the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno. The resemblance becomes even more convincing when we reconstruct on site the model's approximate original position. – *Figure 4*
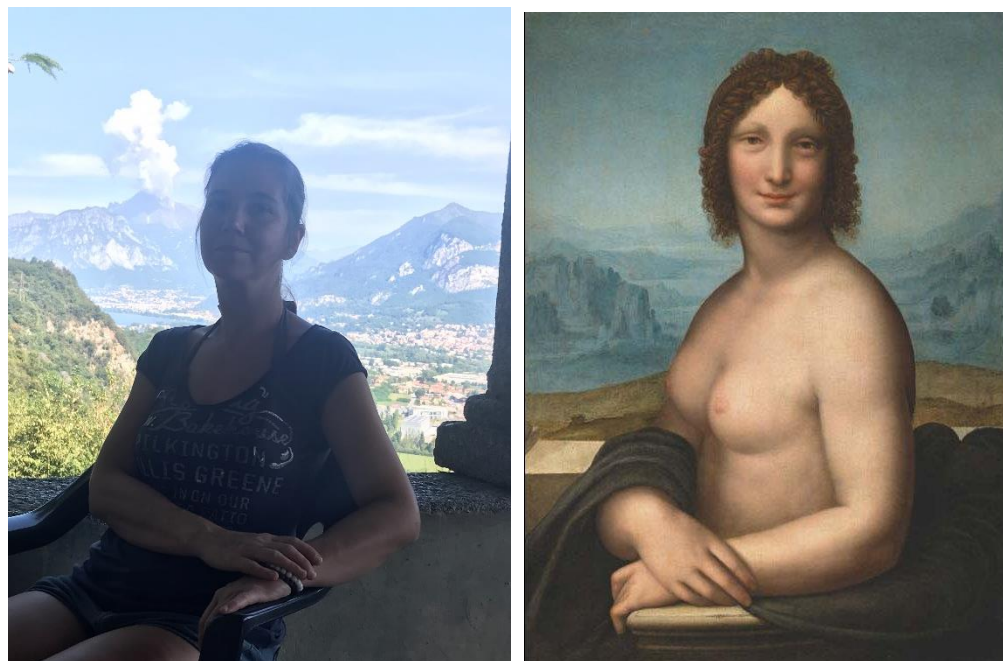
Figure 4

The composition is revealing even at first glance. On the left, beneath the shoulder, we see the steep slope of a rocky mountain, while to the right of the neck rises a gentler slope. Another important detail is the presence, at neck level on the left-hand slope, of a body of water—the Lake Garlate. – *Figure 5*

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

Figure 5

The Landscape on the Right Side

In the landscape visible to the right of the shoulder, every characteristic element can be matched to the real landscape, and they are rendered with near-perfect accuracy. – *Figure 6*. A detailed description is provided in *Figure 7*.
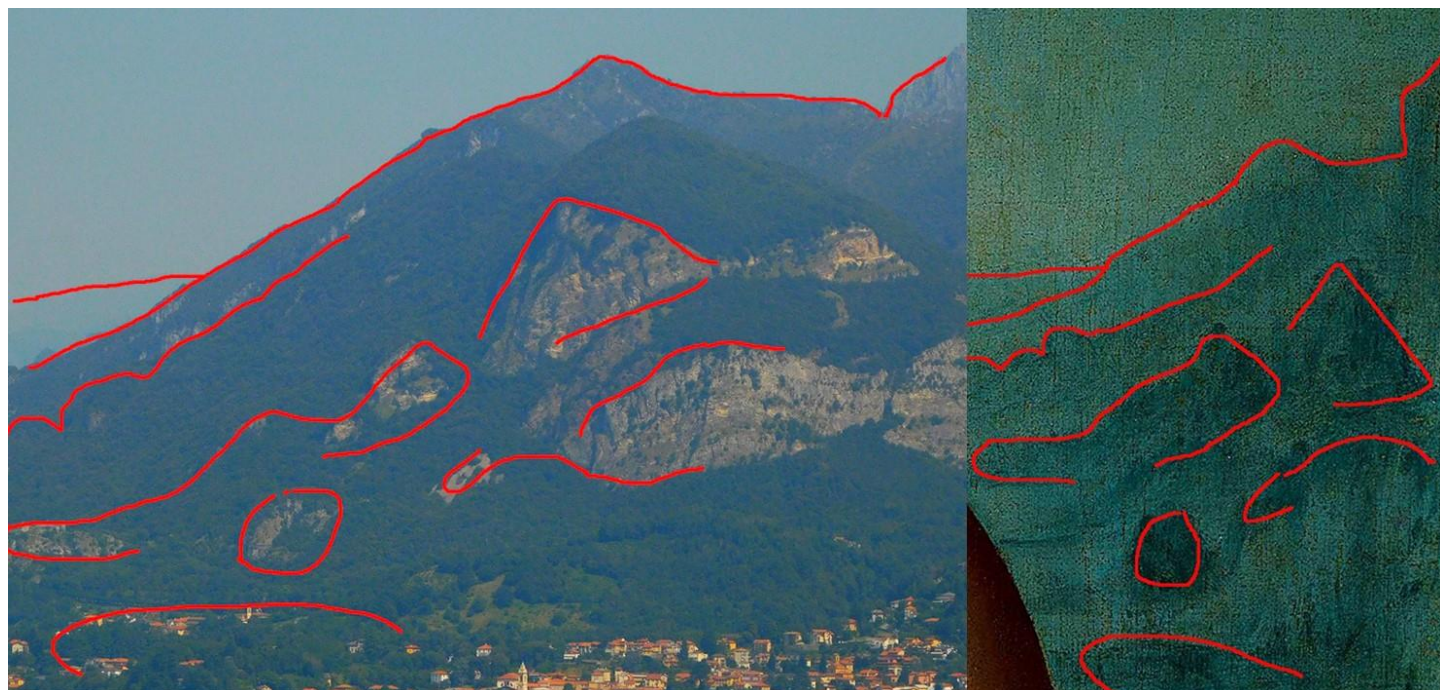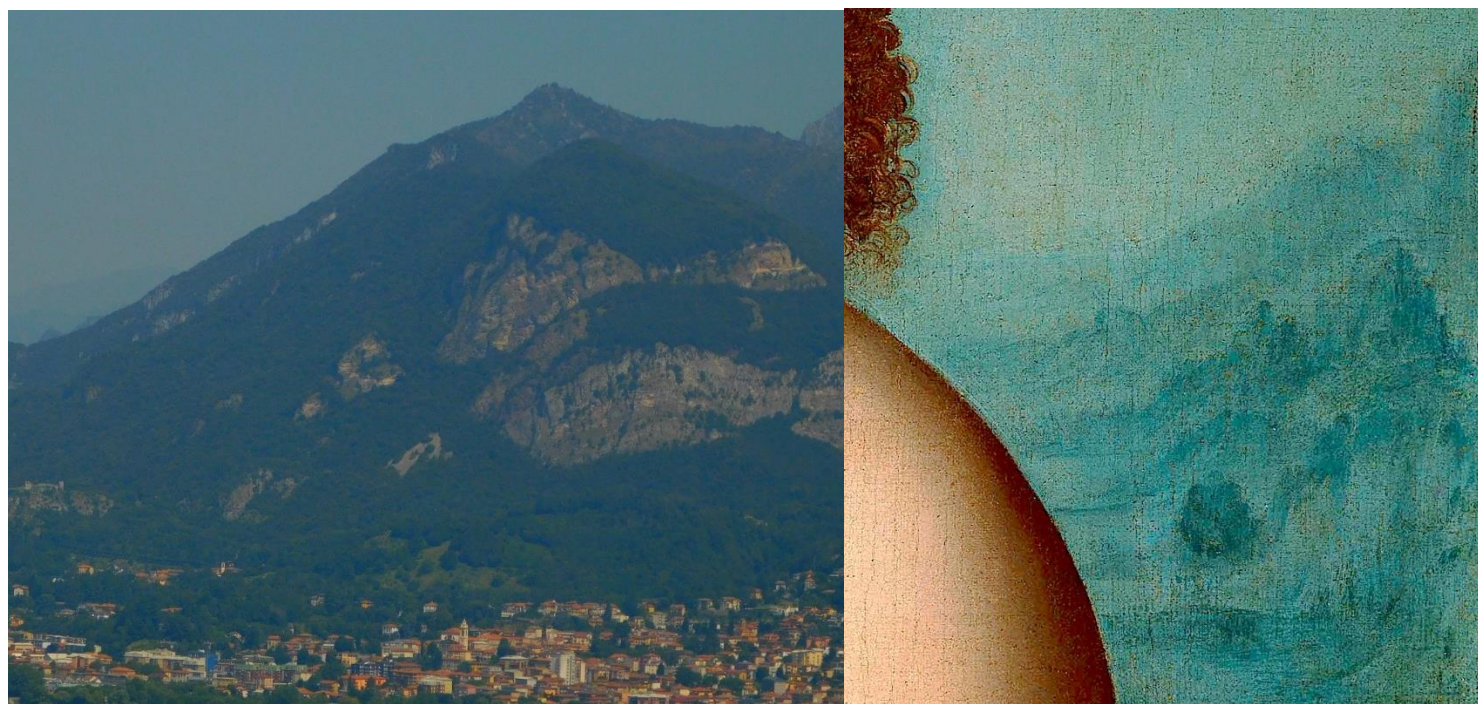
Figure 6
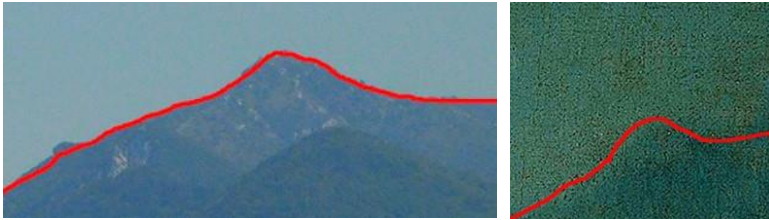
(The rising silhouette, the shape of the peak, then the gradual softening of the slope)

(The more distant peak visible to the right of the summit. Leonardo may have shifted these closer together in order to preserve the V-shaped composition.)

(The "bumps" of the nearer hillside and the faint silhouette of the distant mountain)

(The rocky parts on the steeper slopes of the hillside)

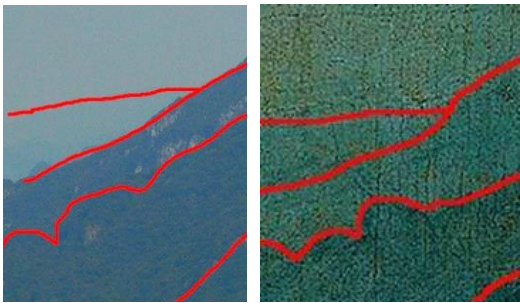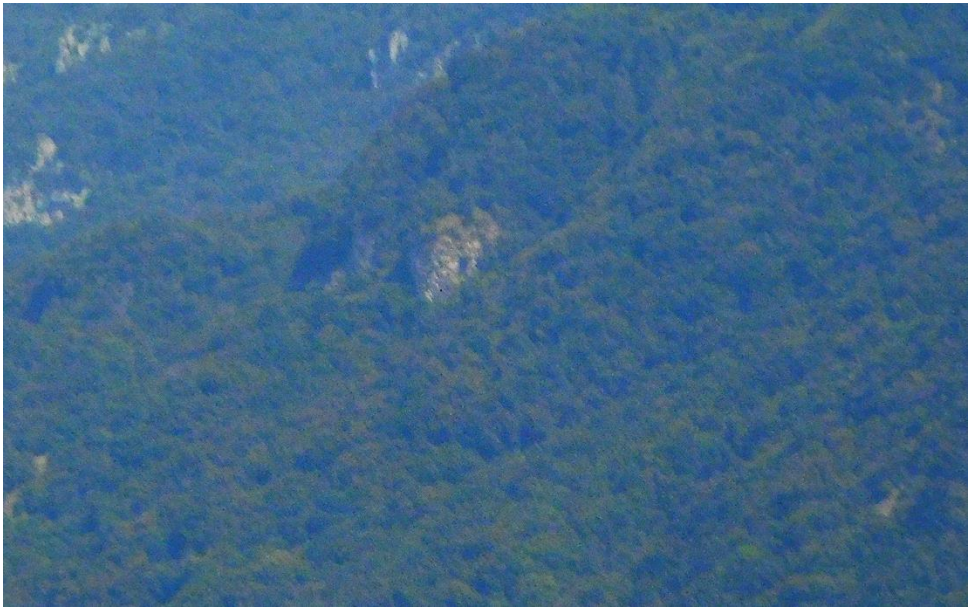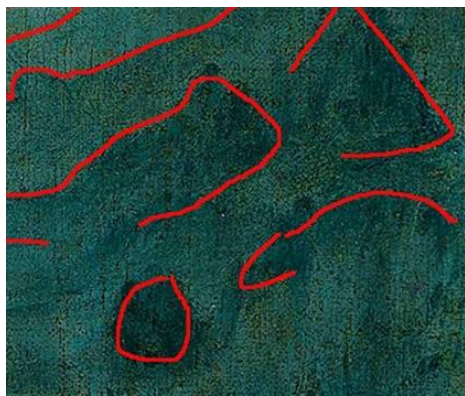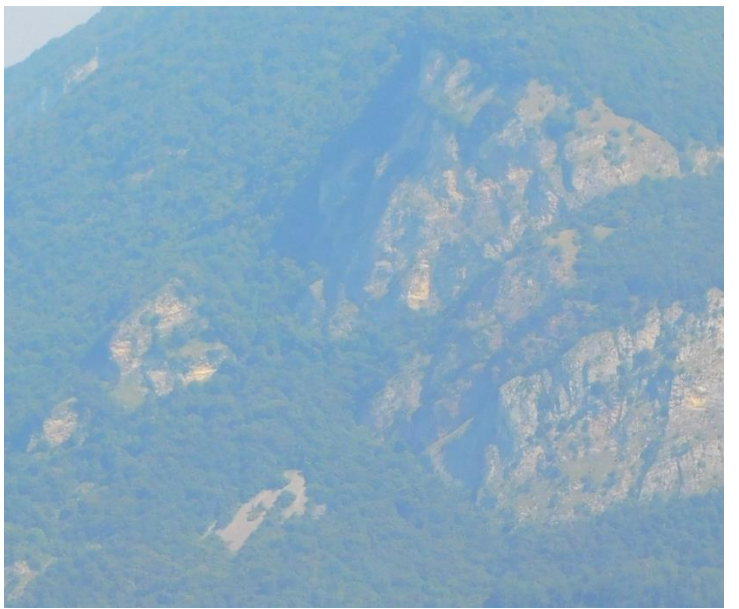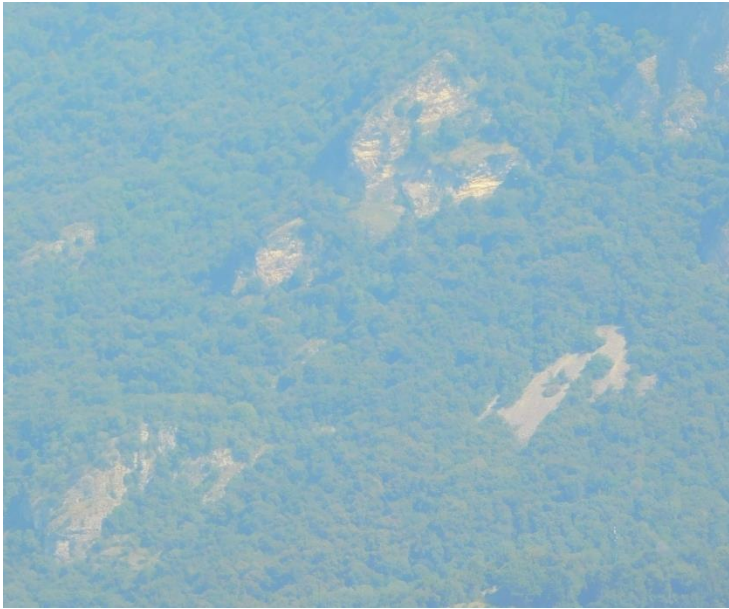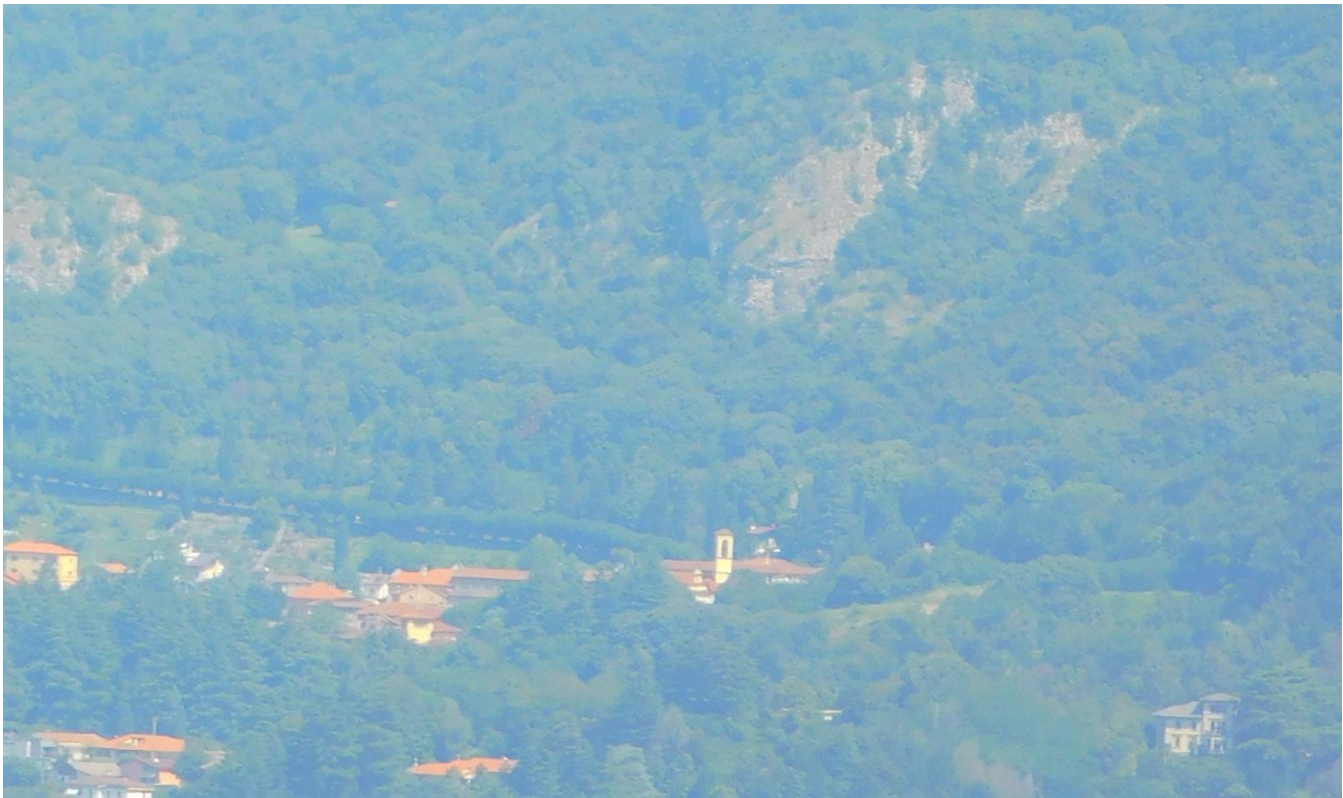(At the very base of the steep slope, a flat, basin-like oval area—today inhabited—GPS 45°48'43"N 9°25'42"E)

Figure 7

The Landscape on the Left Side

On the woman's left side, too, the similarity of the landscape is evident. Although here, because of the rocky outcrops overgrown with trees, a completely precise identification is more difficult, and Leonardo may have treated the elements of the landscape more freely, the overall impression of hills, mountains at varying distances, and the water surface shows a high degree of agreement. The distant Grignetta mountain is not shown by Leonardo, likely because the mass rising next to the head would have disrupted the V-shaped composition. – *Figure 8*

Figure 8

The Yellowish Background

Another argument supporting the Rocchetta di Airuno as the location is the sharply contoured, yellowish-colored arch, contrasting with the bluish background, visible between the balustrade and the distant blue-toned landscape. – *Figure 9*. Looking northwestward from the loggia—that is, in the direction of the female figure—there once stretched a castle wall, situated lower down – *Figure 10* – whose line is still clearly discernible today. – *Figure 11*

Figure 9
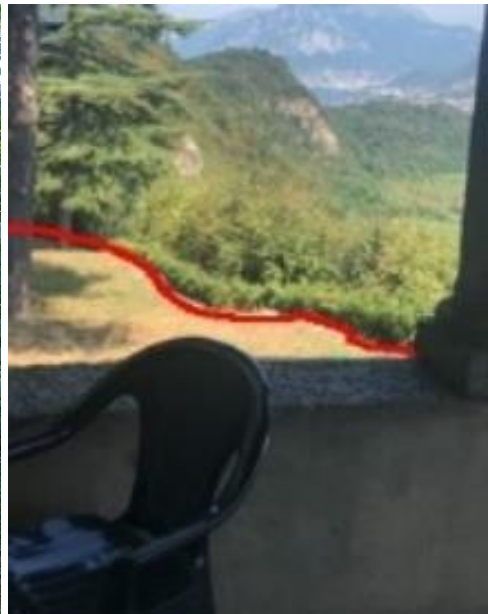
Figure 10   *Figure 11*

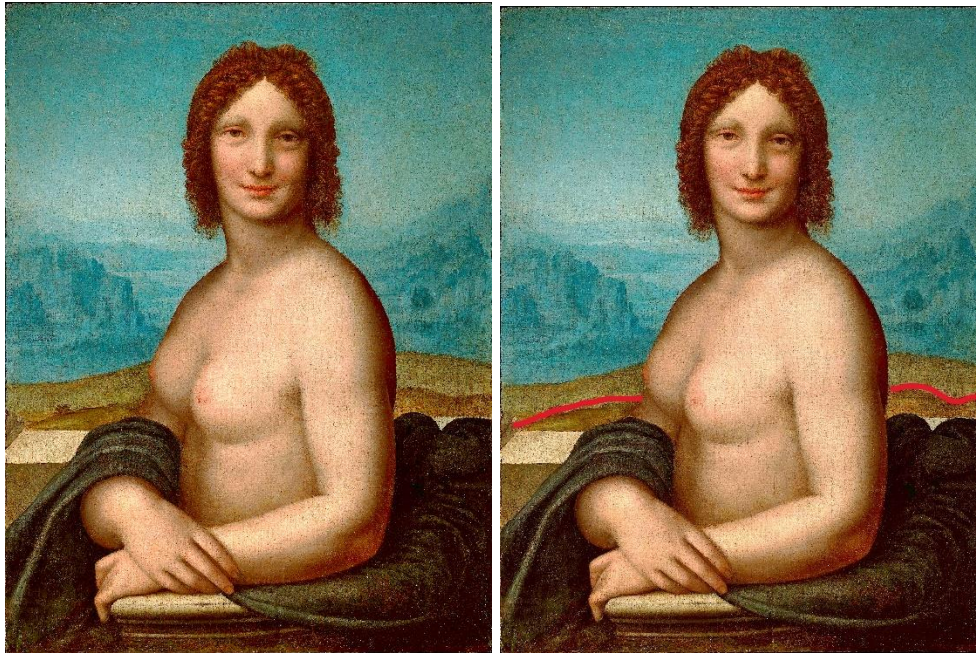From this it is not difficult to imagine the then more intact walls, curving around the terraced height. – *Figure 12*. This also answers why, in the painting, we have the impression that beyond the wall there is a depth separating us from the distant landscape—for this is indeed the case in reality.

Figure 12

The Loggia

The mentioned loggia at the Rocchetta di Airuno consists of a longer north-western part and a shorter north-eastern part set at right angles. Entering the loggia, the panorama itself almost naturally suggests the location—the very arch—before which Leonardo may have painted his mysterious sitter. This is the second-to-last arch of the north-western section, when viewed from the entrance. – *Figure 13*. The arch to the left of this one is blocked by the terrain, which obstructs the view. The arch to the right is not only about 20 cm narrower (ca. 180 cm instead of ca. 205 cm), but the buttress there also limits the panorama. It is surely no coincidence that precisely opposite the arch in question, the loggia widens and even accommodates a stone table.

Figure 13

The Parapet

The top of the parapet is visible in almost every painting, but it is most clearly discernible in the Prado *Mona Lisa*, where even the ground can be made out. Comparing this with on-site measurements (ca. 34 cm thick, ca. 57 cm high) and photographs, one can state that the proportions of the parapet at the Rocchetta are very similar to those of the parapet depicted in the painting. – *Figure 14*
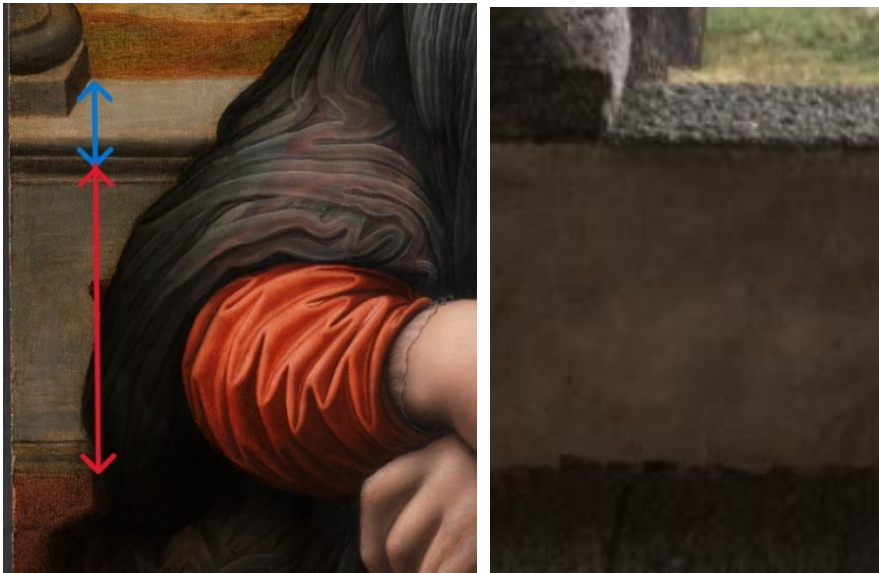
Figure 14

Unfortunately, sources are silent regarding the date of the loggia's construction, but the Convento della Misericordia at Missaglia, located only about 10 km from the Rocchetta, is known to have been built in the late 15th century, and the stylistic resemblance is clear. – *Figure 15*

Figure 15

The Columns

The columns at the Rocchetta are Tuscan-style columns, of the type widely used during the Renaissance, the same style as those seen in the paintings. However, there are also small differences that require explanation. The most conspicuous is that in the paintings the columns appear much closer together than in reality (except in the *Nude Mona Lisa*). Yet this fact does not disprove that the *Mona Lisa* paintings were made at the Rocchetta, because if Leonardo (or his pupils) had intended to represent the real distances between the columns, then the columns in the different paintings would appear at equal intervals. But this is by no means the case. – *Figure 16*

Figure 16

In reality, the columns are about 205 cm apart, and if the model were placed in the center according to the composition of the painting, depicted frontally, then the most beautiful part of the panorama would simply not be visible. – *Figure 17*

Figure 17

For Leonardo, the symmetry of the columns framing the painting vertically and the parapet framing it horizontally was clearly more important than spoiling the composition in favor of literal accuracy. Leonardo devoted little attention to the bases of the columns, at most rendering them slightly less massive than they actually are. While their style is consistent across all the paintings, their proportions and degree of detail vary – *Figure 18* – and it is telling that in the Louvre *Mona Lisa*, considered the most accomplished, the columns are hardly visible at all. I will discuss the reason for this later.

Figure 18

The *Nude Mona Lisa*, however, stands out in two respects by following reality: first, only a single column "fits" into the picture, just as in reality; second, the base of that one column strangely "hangs over" the top of the parapet, something we can still verify at the site today. – *Figure 19*

Figure 19

It should also be noted that above the bases of the Rocchetta's columns, the decorative elements that are still visible on the painted columns are now missing. According to Davide Maria Vertemara, these were often made of terracotta in the 15th–16th centuries, and while therefore not durable, their traces are still visible on every column today.[7] – *Figure 20*. I have not been able to establish exactly when these repairs were made, but on a postcard from the early 1940s, the columns still seem to show deeper grooves, suggesting that the repairs cannot have been done before the 1940s. – *Figure 21*

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

Figure 20

Figure 21

Perspectives

When examining the different versions of the *Mona Lisa*, it is striking that they often differ in terms of perspective. At times the model is closer to the parapet, at other times further away; sometimes the parapet is shown from a lower angle, sometimes from a higher one. We can rightly assume that Leonardo, true to his nature, was experimenting—searching for the perfect angle and distance for his painting.

Here it is worth turning to Raphael's drawing, which he made after Leonardo's painting, and which differs from the other *Mona Lisa* versions in two ways: first, the woman is shown here from the lowest perspective; second, she is not seated in an armchair—instead, she rests her arms on a long, straight surface. In principle, of course, it is possible that Raphael drew the work from memory afterwards and simply erred in these differences, but this explanation seems implausible. The drawing is highly detailed, and considering only the precise and delicate rendering of the hands, it is hard to believe that Raphael would have been such a poor observer as to recall the details so exactly while forgetting that Mona Lisa sat on a chair. We may therefore reasonably assume that there once existed a version by Leonardo in which Mona Lisa was not seated on a chair, and was seen from a lower perspective. Knowing the loggia, it is not difficult to find the place where, from such a perspective, Mona Lisa could have been painted resting on a tabletop. – *Figure 22*. Reconstructing this at the site makes the assumption appear quite justified. – *Figure 23*

Figure 22

Figure 23

It is also worth examining how Leonardo experimented with correcting and conveying perspective while still preserving a symmetrical composition. This was necessary because, although he represented the loggia frontally and symmetrically, knowledge of the site makes clear that, due to the panorama, he had to sit slightly to the left of the lady. This discrepancy is signaled by the fact that in the *Nude Mona Lisa*, the lines of the parapet do not align, 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. – *Figure 24*
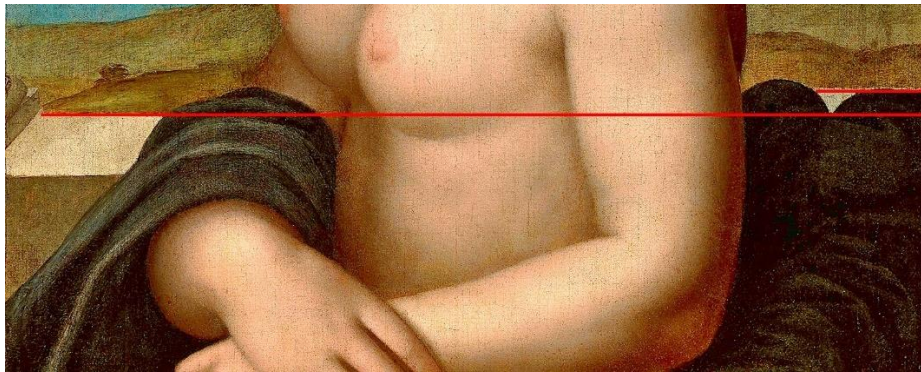

Figure 24

The Backgrounds of the Louvre and Prado Mona Lisa

First, it is important to clarify that the two paintings mentioned in the title were created simultaneously, since the corrections visible on the Louvre *Mona Lisa* were carried out in parallel on the Prado *Mona Lisa*[8]. This means that while Leonardo was working on—and correcting—his own version, his pupil copying him was likewise adjusting the Prado version. On this basis, we should not expect any major formal differences in the rendering of the background, and for the sake of simplicity, I will not distinguish between the two paintings from this perspective in what follows.

Having been able to identify with certainty the background of the *Nude Mona Lisa* as the view opening from the loggia of the Rocchetta di Airuno, the question arises whether the backgrounds of the Louvre and Prado *Mona Lisa* paintings are solely the products of Leonardo's imagination, or of nature itself. My assumption is that the correct answer is: both. Leonardo admired the creations of nature but used them through his own creative power[9], in the way that suited him best. This will be significant later, in interpreting the meaning of the painting.

Thus, Leonardo did not wish to reproduce exactly the marvelous rock formations he had seen around the Rocchetta di Airuno in the precise locations where they stood. Rather, as an artistic creation, he assembled a kind of "selection" of them, sometimes modifying them slightly, then arranging them into a unified composition. Leonardo evidently made bold use of artistic freedom, retaining only the peculiar, distinctive character of the forms. Already dreamlike in themselves, these rock formations he transformed through art into a unified fairy-tale world, which he placed as the fitting backdrop to the enigmatic smile in his masterpiece. Without embarking on an exhaustive art historical analysis, the message could be briefly summarized as follows: enduring beauty can only be created by nature with the help of the human creator. Perhaps this was Leonardo's artistic credo—and why he labored so long over this work, why so many versions were born, and why he sought the right angles and distances to such an extent.

If all this is true, then the distinctive rock formations borrowed from nature must be recognizable in the painting. What could these be? Rocks and mountains so characteristic and striking that they would stand out in a region already rich in dramatic natural scenery—and thus capture Leonardo's attention and imagination during his time in the Lake Como area. I have been able to identify eight such formations with a high degree of probability, though no doubt those who know the region well will find a few more. – *Figure 25* (Formations 5 and 6 are not clearly visible in the Louvre *Mona Lisa*).

[8] Museo Nacional del Prado YT: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJxXdUZF0HA - 6m30s, 9m43s
[9] Walter Isaacson: Leonardo Da Vinci, Helikon, 2018 - p.321
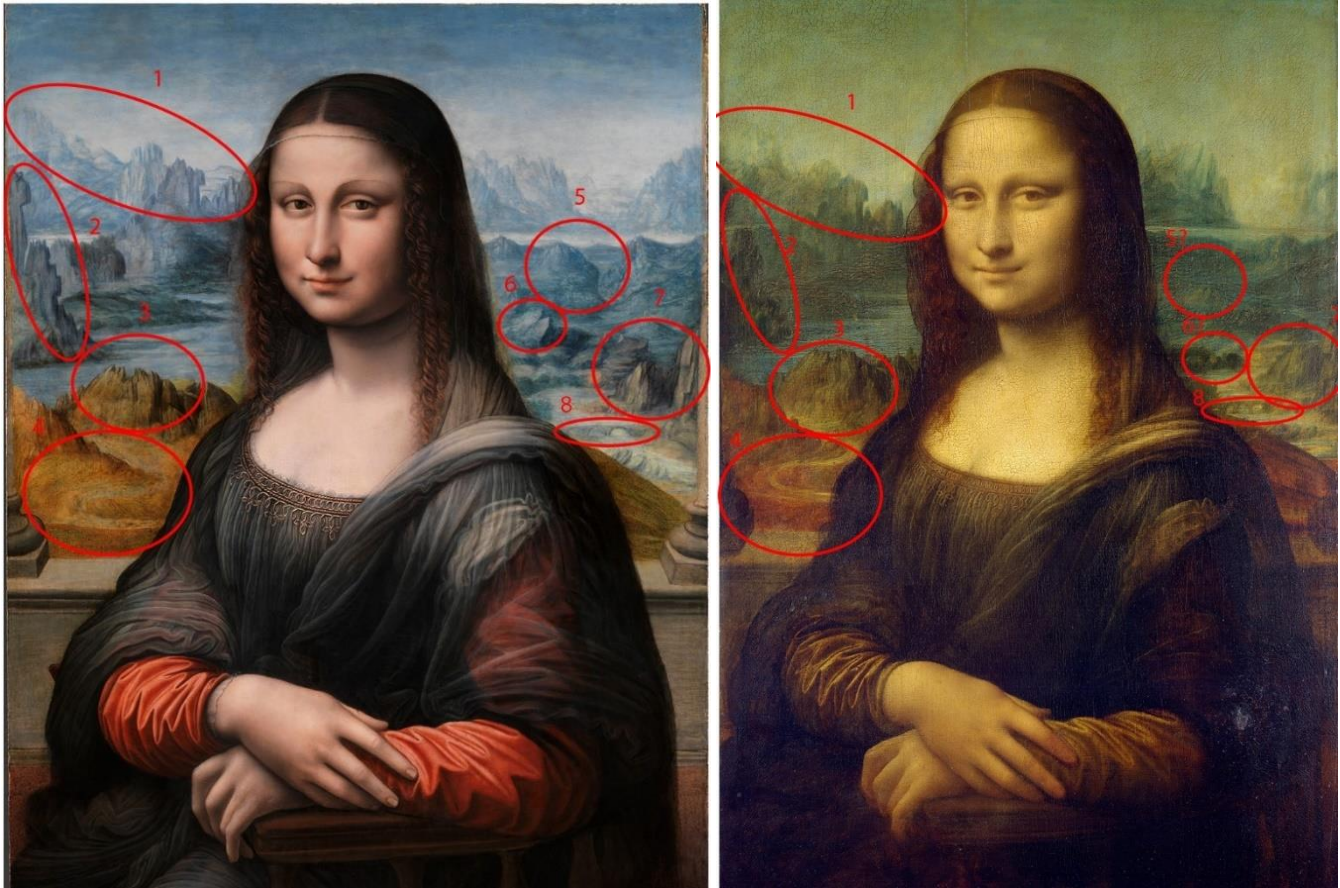
Figure 25

1. Mount Resegone near Lecco (GPS 45.846300872546806, 9.39284372103953)
About 10 km from the Rocchetta, the mountains towering above Lecco are impossible to overlook, and certainly this was also the case in Leonardo's time. Compressed somewhat in the painting, the characteristic forms appear almost flawlessly in succession. The only difference is that the peak indicated with the blue arrow is noticeably higher in the painting than in reality. (Perhaps here too, as mentioned earlier, the reason lies in compositional considerations.)
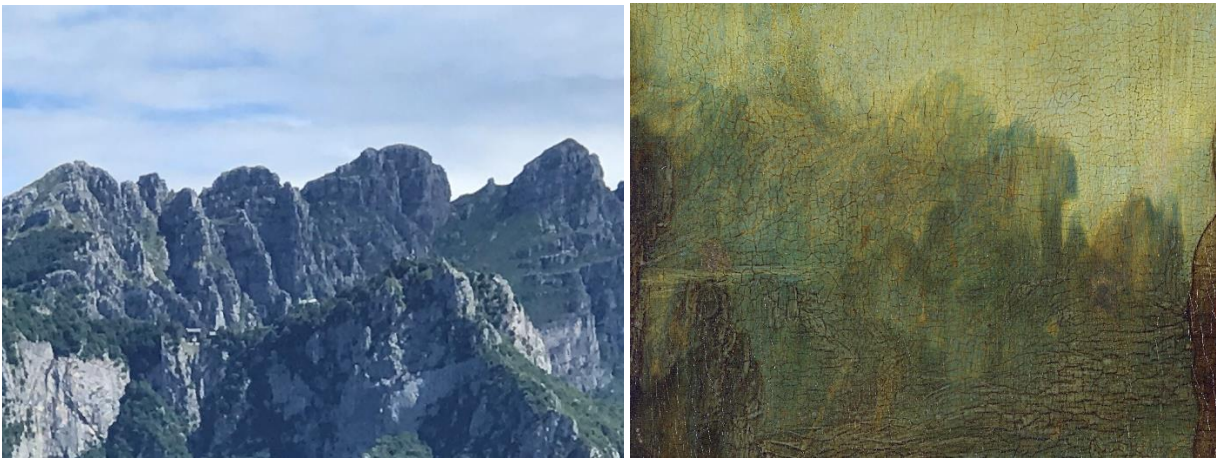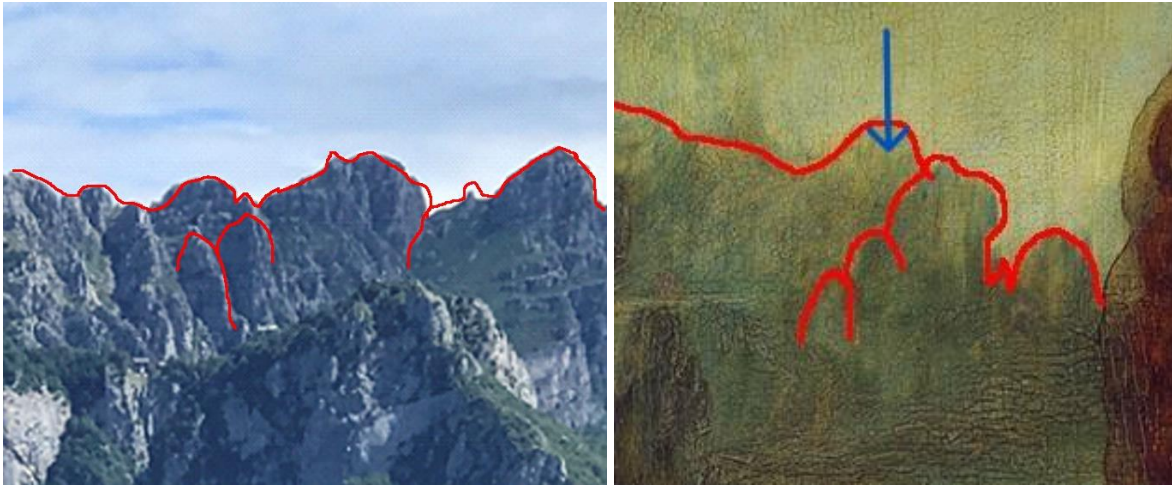
2. Grignetta (rock formations of the mountains above Lecco)

It is uncertain how high Leonardo ascended during his travels in the region, but he likely encountered similar rocky formations in many places.

3. The mountains behind the Santuario di S. Martino (GPS 45.843468389588914, 9.344388949915821)
8 km from the Rocchetta, these mountains form the dramatic backdrop of a church that has stood there since the early Middle Ages. We cannot know for certain whether Leonardo ever visited the site, but while in the area the mountains surely could not have escaped his attention.

4. South of Capiate, once perhaps a marshy area (GPS 45.7729673949836, 9.425959737527927)
This landscape is clearly the closest to the Rocchetta, and based on this, the river meandering beside the Adda toward Capiate, only about 1 km away, as well as its smaller branching arms, appear to be represented. The lowland, meandering, perhaps somewhat marshy terrain takes on an autumnal, yellowish hue. – *Figure 26*

Figure 26

That the river 500 years ago flowed in a less regulated channel than today is supported by one of Leonardo's drawings. In the upper left corner the Rocchetta can be seen, and below it the winding course of the Adda, which in the section marked with a red arrow indeed appears to fan out slightly, just as in the painting. – *Figure 27*

Figure 27

5. From Monte Regismondo, the view of Monte Coltignone (GPS 45.88024312095478, 9.388434294482805)

6. The Double Rock – Pizzetto (GPS 45.86937253693898, 9.383110813474904)

These two massive rocks rising above Lecco already appear in Leonardo's *Annunciation* painted in the 1470s. – *Figure 28*

Figure 28

7. Tre Corni (GPS 45.678333118546355, 9.461594823605314)

About 8 km from the Rocchetta di Airuno, this natural landmark stands at a bend of the Adda River.

8. The Roman Bridge (GPS 45.802482091993646, 9.413453585353997)

About 4 km from the Rocchetta di Airuno, the former Roman bridge would have been visible to the naked eye from the loggia. Today the Diga di Olginate stands beside it. – *Figure 29*
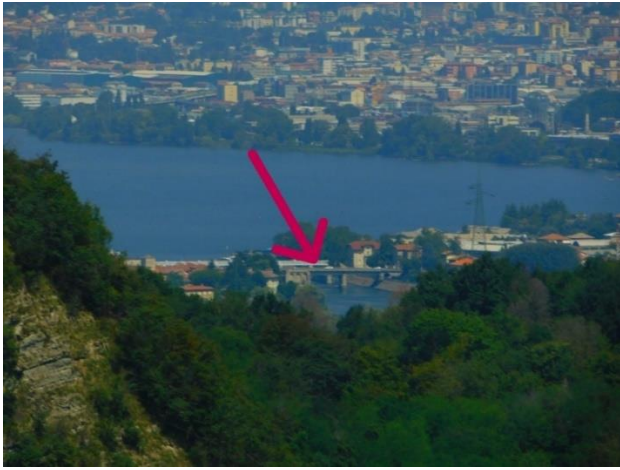
Figure 29   *Figure 30*

 In her article in *The Guardian*, Ann Pizzorusso mistakenly identified the bridge as the Azzone Visconti bridge built in the 14th century. Davide Maria Vertemara, in his study, discusses the matter in exhaustive detail and establishes that the Azzone Visconti bridge looked different at the time than what appears in the painting. In contrast, the Roman bridge, although no longer in use, was still at least partly standing according to contemporary maps10. Even in a 1945 photograph, the positions of its piers are clearly visible. 11 – *Figure 30*

The Chronology of the Different Versions

From the vast number of Mona Lisa portraits, we shall here deal only with the five that can be most plausibly linked directly to Leonardo and that help in understanding his creative process. We will attempt to reconstruct how and why the differences between the individual versions developed

[10] Davide Maria Vertemara: MONNA LISA LANDSCAPE FROM ROCCHETTA OF AIRUNO
[11] Aldeghi G., Riva L.: Il ponte romano sull'Adda a Olginate.
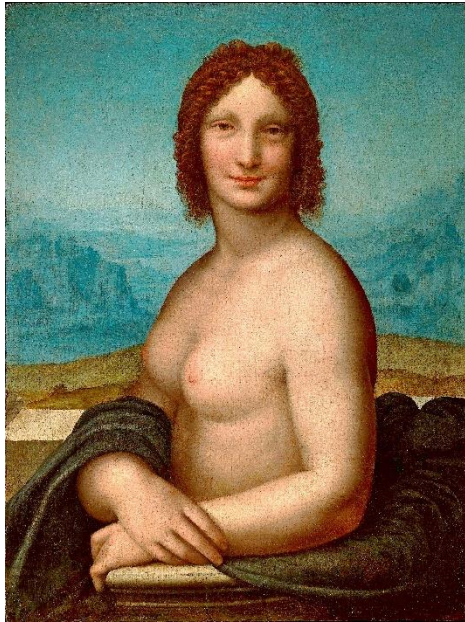
1. The Nude Mona Lisa

The lady's identity may be suspected to be that of a wealthy patron's lover, since nude or semi-nude portraits tied to a specific woman were generally commissioned under such circumstances. Because we know Leonardo's charcoal drawing of the lady, it follows with certainty that a painting must also have existed. This painting is either the original, or a copy by one of his pupils—many attribute it to Salai—because, unlike the other known Nude Mona Lisas, in this one the background precisely depicts the real view from the Rocchetta di Airuno. Another detail reflecting reality is that only a portion of one column is visible: in reality, the columns are much farther apart than in other versions. Likewise, it is strikingly accurate that the column "juts out" from the parapet's cornice. The cornice itself is rendered without much elaboration, which may indeed reflect its original appearance. Leonardo conveys the perspective of painting the woman from a slight angle by using the lines of the cornice – *figure 24*. The lady, however, appears to be painted with some degree of idealization, just as in the charcoal drawing. In sum, therefore, in accordance with the conventions of such commissions, Leonardo may have somewhat beautified the woman, while paying little attention to the environment, which he painted rather realistically—even simplified. We cannot know whether at the same time, or shortly afterwards, he received a commission from Ludovico Sforza to produce another painting of the lady clothed. Nor can it be ruled out that Leonardo himself suggested a second commission, which Ludovico gladly accepted. It is conceivable that Leonardo, the eternal experimenter, was so inspired during painting by the Rocchetta panorama, the peculiar rock formations, and the beauty of the female body that he conceived a new artistic ambition: to create a work that celebrated the artist's capacity to immortalize both natural and human beauty. He wanted to produce a masterpiece that would surpass even the beauty of nature itself. The conditions were present: a young and beautiful woman as model, a loggia with a breathtaking view as setting, and in the surrounding environment, the striking rock formations so characteristic of the Lecco region.

2. Raphael's Drawing

Around 1504, Raphael visited Leonardo's workshop in Florence and there saw one of the *Mona Lisa*'s versions, most likely an early one, painted at the Rocchetta and kept by Leonardo himself. From Raphael's drawing we learn that in this painting, as in all later versions, the columns frame the composition on both sides. However, the perspective differs—the model is placed at a greater distance from the parapet. The fact that the sitter here rests her arm on a tabletop rather than on a chair armrest, as she does in later versions, also suggests this was an early experiment, later abandoned by Leonardo when he returned to the motif of the chair and the closer parapet. The slight turning of the head remained in subsequent versions, but the lady's hairstyle differs, and the textile draped across her shoulder in later paintings is absent. Together these details reveal an early trial work. The background was probably never completed, and Raphael indicated it only with a few lines—as he did later in one of his own paintings.

3. The Isleworth Mona Lisa

This painting represents a transition between Raphael's drawing and the Louvre *Mona Lisa*. Its authenticity is much debated, yet one detail convinces me of its originality: the rounded edge of the parapet, traces of which can still be seen today at the site. The Nude *Mona Lisa* omits this feature, while the Louvre *Mona Lisa* "adds" a non-existent stucco decoration to it. The Isleworth *Mona Lisa* thus represents a kind of middle stage. At the lower left, the landscape coincides with the later version, but the mountain behind it differs both from the Louvre version and from reality. Leonardo had by this stage begun to modify existing landscape elements freely, though perhaps he was not yet satisfied with them, since the upper portion of the picture can hardly be his work. (The painting may have passed unfinished into someone's possession, who later had the empty area filled in.) Another difference lies in the woman's face, which appears thinner here, closer to Raphael's drawing. Her hair now falls over her shoulder, and the draped textile also appears on her shoulder, a detail of later significance.

4–5. The Louvre Mona Lisa and the Prado Mona Lisa

Leonardo's final version was surely the Louvre *Mona Lisa*. This is unanimously regarded by scholarship as the finest version. Recent research shows that the Prado version was created simultaneously, copied by one of Leonardo's pupils while the master was at work. Here we see the result of Leonardo's long process of refinement: the distance between the columns is not realistic, yet he placed them close enough together so that they are barely visible. He painted the woman's face somewhat fuller than in earlier versions. He gave great emphasis to the landscape, constructing from the natural formations of the Lecco area a scene composed according to his own aesthetic taste. To reinforce the viewer's perception of a slightly oblique perspective, he modified the right edge of the parapet, but in a more sophisticated manner than in the Nude *Mona Lisa*.

Thus we see Leonardo experimenting with virtually every element: the columns, the parapet, distances, angles, the face, clothing, and background. Knowledge of the precise loggia helps us understand these choices, which can be summarized by comparing the degree of fidelity to reality, arranged chronologically:

- **Columns**: Real distance – Imagined distance – Intermediate distance
- **Parapet**: Real but simplified – Real – Real, but decorated with stucco
- **Parapet perspective**: Present but simplified – Absent – Present
- **Landscape**: Real – Real but slightly modified (unfinished) – Real elements, freely re-arranged
- **Face**: Idealized beauty – More realistic – Idealized yet more mysterious
- **Clothing**: None draped over the shoulder – Draped over the shoulder
- **Hair**: Contemporary hairstyle – Behind the shoulder – Falling onto the shoulder

From these changes, several conclusions follow:

1. The woman's real features may have been closest to those in the Isleworth *Mona Lisa* and Raphael's drawing.
2. Leonardo gradually developed the concept of arranging natural scenery from real elements, but freely, according to his imagination.
3. In both perspective and column placement he ultimately chose a golden mean.
4. The model's living beauty was gradually transformed into the "eternal beauty" Leonardo intended to depict—a kind of man-made goddess.

The degree to which this last idea was deliberate on Leonardo's part is revealed in a BBC documentary. In the Louvre *Mona Lisa*, the version Leonardo surely considered complete, both the hair and the draped garment on the shoulder indicate that Leonardo ultimately intended to portray the woman as a kind of goddess12. The same was already true of the Isleworth

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

Mona Lisa, suggesting that this conception had matured in him during its painting, though he may have felt the model's face insufficiently "divine" and therefore altered it in the later version. The same documentary also reported that pigment analysis revealed that the original color of Mona Lisa's sleeve was called *Leonato*, named for the tawny shade of a lion's pelt. This may have been a deliberate but hidden self-reference by Leonardo[13]. Such visual puns appear in other portraits of his: in the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, the antique name of the ermine conceals "Galé," while in the *Ginevra de' Benci* portrait the tree shown is the *ginepro* (juniper)[14]. In the case of the *Mona Lisa*, it was evidently not the model's name that mattered—indeed he probably wished to conceal it—because his goal was to depict a universal beauty, not an identifiable individual. This is also why the lady wears no jewelry, which in portraits usually aided recognition[15]. For Leonardo, the painting was wholly his own: a visual embodiment of his artistic credo, in which he even concealed his name. Another piece of evidence supports this idea: in the Prado *Mona Lisa*, the sleeve is a different, reddish color, a fact not yet explained. Since we know this copy was painted under Leonardo's supervision, it is plausible that the master instructed his pupil to alter the sleeve's color, since the Leonato shade denoted himself.

Whether these hypotheses are true or not, the painting's message remains clear: Leonardo's artistic genius makes nature and human beauty even more beautiful, and immortalizes them on canvas. He not only rivals nature and the gods, but surpasses them. It is no wonder that he created so many versions of the painting and remained so attached to them throughout his later life.

Who was the woman depicted in the Mona Lisa?

As more and more researchers now assume, she was certainly not Lisa del Giocondo. Because of the Rocchetta di Airuno landscape, the painting must have been created during one of Leonardo's Milanese periods. The second period can be ruled out, since Raphael saw a version of the painting around 1504, that is, before Leonardo's second Milanese period. That leaves the years between 1482 and 1499. This timeframe is further supported by the fact that the Prado Mona Lisa – painted contemporaneously with the Louvre version – was found to have a ground-layer technique characteristic of Leonardo's first Milanese period[16]. Within this span, only the 1490s can be considered, given the painting's refined, mature technique. What is certain is that the portrait depicts a lady of high standing, most likely connected to Lombardy, perhaps even specifically to the Lecco region.

It was quite rare during the Renaissance for a portrait of a specific noblewoman to be shown half-nude. Such paintings were usually commissioned by an influential man, often depicting his mistress, and then placed in a private chamber away from prying eyes. This would also have implied a degree of trust between patron and artist. If that was the case here, then although many mistresses of noblemen from the Lecco region could be candidates, the most straightforward explanation seems the most likely: given Leonardo's renown, the extraordinary care he devoted to the painting, and the multiple versions he produced after the "Nude Mona Lisa," the sitter was probably the favorite mistress of the most powerful man of the time and place – Leonardo's foremost patron, Ludovico Sforza. By process of elimination, Lucrezia Crivelli is the strongest candidate.

Many have suspected her to be the woman behind *La Belle Ferronnière*, but in 2015 the Louvre Museum stated that the sitter's identity in that painting remains unknown.[17] There is more agreement about the identity of Ludovico Sforza's other famous mistress, Cecilia Gallerani, depicted in *The Lady with an Ermine*, so she can be excluded.

Not much documentation survives about Lucrezia Crivelli, but it is known that after Cecilia, especially between 1494 and 1498, she was Ludovico's principal, publicly acknowledged mistress, from whom he had a legitimate child who later rose to high rank. The Lombard Crivelli family understandably received substantial land grants from Ludovico[18]. Lucrezia herself acquired several estates in the Lake Como region. Although no records survive concerning the ownership of Rocchetta di

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[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
[17] Musée de Louvre: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myOhv7v0mws - 37m38s
[18] Felice Calvi: Castello Visconteo-Sforzesco, 1894 - p. 74.

Airuno at the time, it is not impossible that the fortress or its surroundings passed to Lucrezia as part of such a grant within Ludovico's domains.

When in 1517 Antonio de Beatis visited Leonardo and asked who the woman in the painting was – almost certainly the work we now call the *Mona Lisa* – the old master replied that it was the mistress of Giuliano de' Medici. This has since been shown to be very unlikely[19], suggesting that Leonardo was being evasive. Perhaps he did not want others to know who had posed for him, because for him the painting was not a portrait of a woman but rather the embodiment of his artistic creed, to which he felt a deeply personal connection. So when the unexpected question came from Beatis or the accompanying cardinal, Leonardo did what most people would do in such a situation: he instinctively told a lie containing a kernel of truth. He swapped the Sforza duke's mistress for that of a Medici prince. Why Giuliano de' Medici in particular? Perhaps because the news of Giuliano's death in 1516 was still fresh in 1517, and because a dead man cannot expose a lie.

These are, of course, only hypotheses – logical ones, but still unproven. Yet there is also a source that Mona Lisa research has so far overlooked. On the verso of folio 456 in Leonardo's *Codex Atlanticus* survives an epigram from the late 1490s, attributed to Tebaldeo, a renowned poet of the time[20]. This poem praises Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Lucrezia Crivelli. Scholars previously associated the poem with *La Belle Ferronnière*, which is why no one noticed that its content matches perfectly – and only – with the *Mona Lisa*.

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 II 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, II 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 II Moro's sake Leonardo did the injury, and II Moro will protect him. Men / and gods alike fear to injure II Moro.

<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

piktor. 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

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[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 Universita del Salento -p. 59.

Maurus, Maurum homines laedere diique timent.

The most prominent element of the epigram is a thought that was also Leonardo's well-known principle and artistic creed, which is clearly evident in his treatises as well. The true artist creates human and natural beauty that surpasses the creative power of both nature and the goddesses, thereby granting them immortality. The most striking correspondence between the *Mona Lisa* and the epigram, therefore, is precisely that both natural and human beauty appear separately but with equal emphasis. The same is observable in the painting. Unlike Leonardo's other portraits, here not only are the natural landscape and the human figure equally emphasized and meticulously rendered, but their proportion in the composition is also roughly equal—just as in the poem, where equal space is devoted to 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 cannot know whether Leonardo discussed this with the poet, but even if he did not, the poet clearly understood the painter. This also aligns with our earlier observation that the lady's hairstyle and clothing suggest not an ordinary portrait, but the presence of a higher, divine sphere, just like the stylized arrangement of natural formations. No other female portrait by Leonardo emphasizes nature alongside the model in this way; therefore, Tebaldeo's lines could not apply to any other Leonardo painting, only the *Mona Lisa*.

An argument against this could be that "nature" in the poem refers only to the woman's beauty, as in other lyrical works. However, in those cases there is never a second representative of a higher sphere, as here with the goddesses. Placing the painting and poem side by side, it is clear that nature represents the landscape, and the goddesses represent the woman— hence the use of the plural "goddesses," not "god" or "gods," in the poem.

Unless we accept the highly improbable scenario that a lost Lucrezia Crivelli portrait of similar theme once existed without record, it is likely that the *Mona Lisa* is in fact "Mona Lucrezia"! She was the favorite lover of Leonardo's principal patron at the time of the painting's creation. This makes it easy to imagine that the Milanese prince, a known admirer of women, commissioned her half-nude portrait from Leonardo. Tebaldeo's epigram referring to Lucrezia fits only this one Leonardo portrait. Finally, it is perhaps not coincidental that an elderly Leonardo referred to a prince's lover when asked about the identity of the lady in the painting.

When discussing the dating of the *Mona Lisa*, some suggest that Leonardo may have worked on it for many years or even decades, leaving open the possibility that the Louvre *Mona Lisa* was completed not at the Rocchetta but in France. However, this contradicts the epigram, which could only have been written about a finished painting in the late 1490s. It also conflicts with the fact that the Prado *Mona Lisa* was painted in parallel by a pupil with Leonardo, which is unlikely to have taken many years. Leonardo's experimentation with the existing loggia elements and the perspective aligned to the panorama makes it clear that the *Mona Lisa* versions—and their sketches—were created at the Rocchetta di Airuno loggia between 1494 and 1499. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility that, because the painting remained close to the Master, Leonardo may have made minor modifications years later, but based on the above, these could only have been subtle nuances.

Regarding dating the painting based on style, art historians are also divided, which already shows how uncertain such a method is. Since I admit I am not an expert, I can only rely on the fact that Leonardo's portraits matured in the 1490s, and in 1495 he reached the peak of his career21—precisely when he also began his other masterpiece, *The Last Supper*. Based on this, it is at least plausible that he was capable of painting the *Mona Lisa* at this time.

Connections with "The Last Supper" Fresco

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

Another one of my studies deals with the idea that, based on various features of the background, Leonardo's fresco *The Last Supper* was set at the San Calocero Monastery in Civate. It is remarkable that this location is only eight kilometers from the Rocchetta. Thus, not only were the two works created in a similar time period, but their stories are also very close in space. In both cases, Leonardo executed a masterful work, and similarities can also be observed between the two pieces regarding the depiction of architecture and landscape: Leonardo did not alter the fundamental characteristics of real architectural elements but handled them flexibly. For example, considering the *Nude Mona Lisa*, the Louvre *Mona Lisa*, Raphael's drawing, and the knowledge of the location, one can see how easily he "shifted" the columns framing the lady in his paintings. In the case of *The Last Supper*, he adjusted the size of the windows and balcony doors to fit the desired composition.

In both the *Nude Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*, the basic features of the landscape in the background were largely preserved—only rarely altered, and mainly for compositional reasons. However, one might wonder how a perfectionist artist like Leonardo did not depict every tiny detail of the landscape with absolute precision. He probably regarded nature as a kind of backdrop: he accepted it, used it, but did not overvalue it—except in the case of the Louvre *Mona Lisa*. This approach was also typical for copies of paintings at the time, where the precise reproduction of the landscape received the least attention. In this context, it is enough to observe Leonardo's previously presented drawing of Mount Resegone, which clearly shows that his aim was to sketch the main features of the landscape lightly, rather than to render them with exact accuracy.

Summary

What do we know for certain?

1. The background of the *Nude Mona Lisa* shows the distinctive panorama visible from the loggia of Rocchetta di Airuno. This is reinforced by the proportions of the parapet and by the peculiar backward-projecting column seen in the *Nude Mona Lisa*.

2. The unusual rock formations visible in the background of the Louvre *Mona Lisa* are all located in the immediate vicinity of Rocchetta di Airuno—approximately 1–10 km away—and can very likely be precisely identified. This supports *The Guardian*'s May 2024 conjecture regarding the rocks near Lecco[22]. It would be difficult to find such a concentration of matches elsewhere. Some examples include:

Mount Resegone (GPS 45.846300872546806, 9.39284372103953)

[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

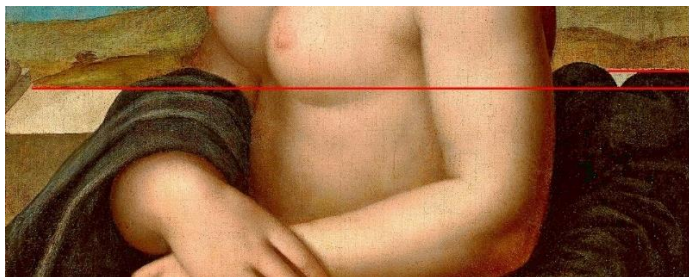Tre corni (GPS 45.678333118546355, 9.461594823605314)

Monte Regismondo to Monte Coltignone (GPS 45.88024312095478, 9.388434294482805)

3. According to research by the Condé Museum, it is highly probable that Leonardo made the charcoal drawing for the *Nude Mona Lisa* as a study for an oil painting, and it is almost certain that he also painted that version. It is likely that one of Leonardo's pupils copied the Master's painting—this is the *Nude Mona Lisa* that we examined[23]. (The copy is almost entirely accurate, as with the Prado *Mona Lisa*, which was also copied by a pupil while Leonardo worked.[24])

4. The *Mona Lisa* was created around the same time as the half-nude version.[25] This is supported by the fact that the same person sits in the same chair in front of a parapet of identical proportions in both paintings, with the rock formations near Rocchetta di Airuno in the background.

Based on this, it would only be possible for the Louvre painting to depict Lisa del Giocondo if Leonardo had made a drawing in the 1490s from the Rocchetta di Airuno loggia—with its parapet, columns, and the precise view from the loggia—and then, five to ten years later in Florence, used it to "seat" the merchant's wife in front of the scene. Initially half-nude, which is difficult to justify, and later in another painting in a "goddess-like" role.

There are further reasons why this seems unlikely. Why would Leonardo later have bothered adjusting the perspective of the parapet in his paintings? Looking toward the panorama from the loggia, the parapet is seen slightly from the side. Leonardo, aiming for symmetry, apparently "fudged" this perspective for the columns, but on the right side of the *Mona Lisa* and the *Nude Mona Lisa*, the slanting lines of the parapet clearly show an attempt at perspective. This can only be explained by the site's features—requiring a slightly rightward gaze toward the landscape—and experimentation at Rocchetta di Airuno, not by randomly applying 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 created before 1499. Moreover, Prado Museum pigment analysis also points in this direction26. Assuming this is not sacrilegious, since previous research results are contradictory and therefore weakly supported. With the current lack of professional consensus regarding the *Mona Lisa*, and especially in light of new location-based information, this new hypothesis—still seemingly revolutionary but fully logical—can gain traction.

Based on this, further assumptions can be made regarding Leonardo's motivation and the identity of the woman in the painting. Raphael's 1504 drawing of Leonardo's painting indicates that the *Mona Lisa* must have been created during Leonardo's first Milanese period (1482–1499), more precisely in the 1490s based on style. From this period, by exclusion, the most likely candidate for the woman in the paintings is Lodovico Sforza's first mistress, Lucrezia Crivelli, narrowing the timeframe to 1494–1499. (Recent research suggests that Crivelli probably no longer appears in the "Beautiful Blacksmith's Wife" painting.27) The possible connection between Lucrezia Crivelli and the *Mona Lisa* seems further supported by Tebaldeo's epigram.

Finally, with all this knowledge, I attempted to better uncover Leonardo's creative motivation and reconstruct the painter's creative process through analysis of the more significant versions of the *Mona Lisa* associated with Leonardo.

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