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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
Department of Art History & Archaeology

**INVENTING THE SCULPTOR**  
**LEONARDO DA VINCI AND THE PERSISTENCE OF MYTH**

by  
Emily Jean Hanson

A thesis presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts

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“Few of the notorious graveyards for art-historical credibility can match that of the modern attribution of previously unrecorded works to one of the giants of the High Renaissance. And nowhere are the risks more pronounced than in attempts to assign existing pieces of sculpture to Leonardo.”<sup>1</sup>

At least since Vasari published his *Lives*, scholars of the Italian Renaissance and its artists have had to come to terms with gaps between reputation and accomplishment in the life of Leonardo da Vinci. Now centuries later, one must confront the artist’s hagiographic legend with his extant body of work.

Leonardo is undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in the history of art. However, he could be one of the best examples of the persistence of myth in our understanding of art histories. Contrary to popular belief, he may be more important for the persona he cultivated than the body of work he left behind.

The artist considered himself a sculptor without having completed a single sculptural work. In calling himself a sculptor, cultivating and manipulating key patronage, and occasionally producing intriguing plans for sculptural works, he succeeded in convincing his contemporaries and following generations that he was one of the most important sculptors of his time. Art historians have labored to reconcile Leonardo’s reputation and the paucity of his completed works. Even Martin Kemp, a conscientious and respected Leonardo scholar, despite establishing the difficulty of assigning sculpture to the artist, still attempts to attribute the terracotta *Christo fanciullo* to the artist [FIG. 1], primarily on stylistic grounds. While it is indeed probably as close to Leonardo’s authorship as we will find, he still misses the point: most will accept the sculpture because we assume Leonardo to have been a

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<sup>1</sup> Kemp, perhaps foolishly, relies upon Vasari and Lomazzo as his primary sources for the existence of the *Cristo giovanotto*, here referred to as *Christo fanciullo*. Kemp quotes what Lomazzo teasingly wrote, “I have also a little terracotta head of Christ when he was a boy [*fanciullo*], sculpted by Leonardo Vinci’s own hand, in which one sees the simplicity and purity of the boy, together with a certain something which shows wisdom, intellect and majesty. He has an air which may be the tenderness of youth but which seems also old and wise.” Writing nearly a century after it was purportedly created, we could consider such a declaration an early example of someone seeking to cash in on Leonardo’s sizeable reputation. See Martin Kemp, “Christo fanciullo” in *An Overview of Leonardo’s Career and Projects Until c.1500*, vol. 2 of *Leonardo da Vinci: Selected Scholarship*. Edited by Claire J. Farago. 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 303, 305.



sculptor, rather than on the basis of secure evidence. It seems irresponsible to call Leonardo a sculptor when he is the author of so many “missing” or contested works, yet his reputation – tinged by hagiography – has consistently substituted for the lack of evidence. When we finally forego attempts to explain or attribute examples of his supposed sculptural work, we instead gain a fuller understanding of what made Leonardo not only one of the most important artists in history, but one of the most successful self-promoters in the history of art.

This project ultimately aims to gain a better understanding of not only the nature of one of the most prominent figures in the history of art, but of the source of a possibly unwarranted reputation. How can a Renaissance artist be considered a respected sculptor without having completed a single work? More importantly, how can such an artist inspire scholars to treat him as a major figure in the history of Renaissance sculpture? Faced with the undeniable lack of evidence for his sculptural work, scores of scholars have allowed Leonardo’s mythic status to substitute for a sculptural oeuvre.

What is the basis for Leonardo's reputation? Leonardo trained in the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, arguably the most important sculptor of the time. He not only witnessed a *maestro* at work on many important sculptural commissions, but he probably had a hand in their creation. A workshop with Verrocchio's large output and various labor-intensive projects would have employed many assistants. It is from this point in Leonardo’s career that scholars begin to use his later stature as an artist-genius to assign works to him, fabricating for him an imaginary oeuvre purely on the basis of an imagined reputation. However, only two-dimensional works survive from Leonardo’s somewhat atypical apprenticeship with Verrocchio.<sup>2</sup> Most scholars are willing to overlook the dearth of juvenile works in the

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<sup>2</sup> Born in 1452, Leonardo entered Verrocchio’s workshop around 1469 after he had just come into Florence with his father. An apprenticeship beginning at seventeen years old is rather late compared to typical Renaissance practice. Documentation describes him as “Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci

career of Leonardo. Yet, such a concession allows one to believe that he did not pass through the typical formation period expected of artists. In an effort to explain this largely undocumented period, many scholars have attributed works from within Leonardo's artistic circle or from Verrocchio himself to the supposed genius.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of Leonardo's training leads to larger questions relating to collective artistic practice. The idea of individual authorship did not play a part of the collective nature of Renaissance workshop practice. Though Leonardo would become a famous artist, there is no contemporary evidence of him as author or co-author of any work produced in Verrocchio's workshop. By 1550, when Vasari published the first edition of his *Lives of the Most Eminent Architects, Painters, and Sculptors*, the legend of Leonardo had already grown to such an extent that the pupil came to supplant the master. A famous tale related by Vasari recounts how Verrocchio gave up painting when he saw his pupil's mastery.<sup>4</sup> This legend illustrates Vasari's prominent *topos* of the pupil surpassing his master, a sentiment to which Leonardo himself was partial, having once written: "He is a wretched pupil who does not surpass his master."<sup>5</sup> It does not, however, account for contemporary workshop practice, including the manner in which a master like Verrocchio utilized the talents of his many assistants. A more pragmatic interpretation leaves little room for the

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dipintore" by 1472 and dates him still within Verrocchio's *bottega* in 1476. See Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 43.

<sup>3</sup> This pattern of attribution extends to Leonardo's teacher, Verrocchio (1435-1488), and his fellow pupils, like Giovanfrancesco Rustici (1474-1554).

<sup>4</sup> Vasari's passage reads as follows: "...Lionardo lavorò un Angelo [della tavola dove San Giovanni battezzava Cristo] che teneva alcune vesti; e benché fosse giovanetto, lo condusse di tal maniera che molto meglio de le figure d'Andrea stava l'Angelo di Lionardo: il che fu cagione ch'Andrea mai più non volle toccar colori, sdegnatosi che un fanciullo ne sapesse più di lui." See Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' Più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architettori nelle Redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, Vol. IV Translated by Paola Barocchi (Florence: Sansoni, 1966), 19. He emphasizes Verrocchio's great indignation that his pupil should surpass him in skill, stating that Verrocchio never wanted to touch colors [paint] again.

<sup>5</sup> From the Codex Forster III, 66b. See Anna Maria Brizio, *Scritti Scelti di Leonardo da Vinci* (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1966), 98.

legend of Leonardo's ascending genius.<sup>6</sup> Every work we attribute to Leonardo detracts from what contemporaries would have regarded as products of Verrocchio's practice. The growth of one reputation results in the diminishing of another.

Once he concluded his time in Verrocchio's workshop, Leonardo sought opportunities elsewhere. In an audacious personal letter to the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, Leonardo boasted of many skills he could offer this potential patron. Art scarcely figured in this list, although he cleverly offered to create a monumental bronze equestrian statue in memory of the duke's late father. The letter helped secure his employment, from which he attained a level of freedom and financial support known to few artists in his time. By securing an illustrious patron and commencing the ambitious monument, Leonardo effectively generated interest. The interest lent increased freedom and stature to the artist. In turn these permitted him to abandon the commission and seek opportunity elsewhere without any consequence. Although Leonardo never fulfilled his promise, he incurred no harm to his growing reputation.

When the commission never came to fruition Leonardo sought opportunities elsewhere. Despite the incomplete equestrian monument, Leonardo had created public expectation. He later sought to pursue the colossal equestrian monument through another patron, but ultimately never cast this sculpture; no models remain from this second attempt.<sup>7</sup> Many contemporaries and most scholars nonetheless credit him with imagining such an impressive project, especially given that he left enough evidence for us to wish its completion. With great remorse Leonardo wrote of the incomplete monument.<sup>8</sup> Though commonly excused for lack of funding or

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<sup>6</sup> Clark first makes this point, though I would take it a step further than the "core of truth in Vasari's story" to add that the supposed indignation of Verrocchio is the elaborated result of the myth of Leonardo's inherent talent. See Clark, *Leonardo*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Discussed more fully later, the Trivulzio monument is largely a revision of Leonardo's original plans, illustrating his desire to realize his vision.

<sup>8</sup> Leonardo recorded the following address to Ludovico in his notebooks: "Signore. conoscendo. io lamente. di Vostra. ecciellentia. essere. ochupa(*ta in grandi cure io non ardisco*) il ricordare. avosstra

poor timing, it is likely that his single-cast bronze would not have been technically possible. Nevertheless, Leonardo's expression of remorse releases him from the responsibility of completing the monument; many of his biographers allow his intentions to substitute for the work of art. Despite failure, his growing reputation remained intact. So we must add the ambitious yet unfulfilled plans for a colossal equestrian bronze to his scant sculptural oeuvre. His sculptural oeuvre now expands to include some unaccounted-for juvenile works and possible contributions to a figure group by his peer from Verrocchio's workshop, Giovanfrancesco Rustici.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the time Leonardo spent in the foreign court of Milan marks the moment of his career in which he began to cultivate the reputation of a sculptor.

An analysis of Leonardo's legacy would be incomplete without an understanding of the scholarship it has inspired. Such an enigmatic artist inspired a broad range of responses. As A. Richard Turner aptly characterized Leonardo scholarship: "There is a 1550 Leonardo, an 1800 one, an 1850 one, and so on. Each is a different character based on the needs of the given time that produced him, and each has ties to the Leonardo that went before."<sup>10</sup> To continue Turner's insightful chronology: there is now a twenty-first century Leonardo; our conception of Leonardo has evolved with time. Prey to the enticingly grand legacy of the artist,

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signjoria. lemje. || pichole || ellarei. messe insilentio. Ma io non vorrei chel mjo. taciere. fussi. chausa. difare. isdegnjare vostra Signjoria essendo che la mja vita ai nostri servjti. mi tjene. continvamente parato. avbidire. ...(*tia e di raro. o m*) del caualllo non diro niente perche cognjosco. i tempi et scrissi già a vostra Signjoria chomjo restai avere el salario. di 2. anni del presente e con due. maesstri. i quali. continovo. stettono. a mjo. salario espese di modo che alfine mj trovai. avanzato ditto opera. circha a 15 lire." See Luca Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie riguardanti la vita e le opere di Leonardo da Vinci, in ordine cronologico* (Milan: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1919), 41-2. In English, this translates to: "Lord, knowing your Excellency to be occupied, I take great care to not dare to lament and remind your Lordship of my small, silenced work. But I would not want my silence to be due to your Lordship being indignant that my obedient life keeps me safe and continually serves me. ... (Yours and rare...) of the horse I will not say anything because I know the time and already wrote to your Lordship as I stayed to have a salary of 2 years for this and two teachers, who without cease lend themselves to my salary and expenses so that at last I find advancing in such a way operates at about 15 lire." (My translation)

<sup>9</sup> In fact, scholars in very recent years have built entire exhibitions upon the assumption of Leonardo's hand in Rustici's commission for the Baptistery of Florence, *John the Baptist Preaching to Pharisee and Levite*, executed from 1506 to 1511. With little documentary evidence for their collaboration, Rustici has long suffered a lack of attention due to his proximity to such a stellar artist.

<sup>10</sup> A. Richard Turner, *Inventing Leonardo* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 5, 6.

most scholars have been reluctant to question Leonardo's contemporary reputation or the exact breadth of his talents. Now driven by the demands of museography, we are far more willing to accept attributions to the artist than we are to disprove them. Yet we must query Leonardo's reputation to examine the evidence of his claim to sculpture. Is it possible to even consider him a sculptor?

Epistolary documentation and the various appellations by which Leonardo is referred to in contemporary records offer a wealth of underexplored information on the artist's reputation. There is much to be gained from examining the manner in which contemporaries addressed and wrote about Leonardo. The critical period for this study is the time spent in the court of Milan. An initial survey of these sources indicates a change in address or appellation depending upon location and year. Sometimes he is referred to as *Leonardo da Vinci dipintore*, *Leonardo scultore*, or merely as *Lionardo di ser Piero da Vinci*. He was contemporaneously known by many names, including, simply, *Leonardo da Vinci*.<sup>11</sup> As years passed and the tale of the Sforza monument reached beyond Milan, Leonardo was increasingly referred to as a sculptor, though less so in Florence. Considering the documents of this important period can lead to a better understanding of both his self-conscious presentation and his corresponding reputation. If we cannot now call him a sculptor, what does it mean that he was considered one in his own lifetime?

As an artist well aware of the significance of reputation, Leonardo carefully cultivated his own. I will also consider his contribution to the *paragone* debate, the presentation of his "biography" in Vasari's two editions of the *Lives*, and his

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<sup>11</sup> Note that the spelling of his name as either *Leonardo* or *Lionardo* is less important than how else he is named. We now often forget that the name by which the artist is ubiquitously known, Leonardo da Vinci, nominates his origins in the Tuscan hamlet, reflecting his humble origins as an artist, more a craftsman than a gentleman. Leonardo's name alone sets him apart from other artists like his master, Andrea del Verrocchio, whose name references his connection to his teacher Francesco di Luca Verrocchio, whose name he adopted (replacing his given name of Andrea di Cione) in an effort to establish his professional lineage. Leonardo's competitor, Michelangelo Buonarroti, even claimed noble origins to the Countess Matilda of Canossa.

consideration in early art historical writings.<sup>12</sup> Leonardo left some theoretical writings on the art of painting, the *Trattato della Pittura*. Full of wide-ranging comments on the nature of painting, opinions on technique, and more scientifically minded observations on the art of painting, it presents a clear argument for the superiority of painting over the other arts with a particular invective against sculpture. Such a position contradicts Leonardo's supposed reputation as a sculptor. Discussed more fully later, this curious position clarifies Leonardo's ambition and his pose as a sculptor.

Without explicitly outlining the growing notion of competition and individual success, Vasari's *Lives* can be read as an early record of a changing age in which the most eminent architects, painters, and sculptors began to consciously compete for legendary status. The artist-genius model certainly applies to his representation of Leonardo; his biography becomes even more laudatory in the second edition. It is to Vasari that Leonardo's mythic stature perhaps owes the most. Vasari's biography represents the most lasting conception of the artist, lasting far beyond the Cinquecento as the original account that others upheld.

Art historian John Pope-Hennessy wrote, "There is a tendency for art historians, especially in youth, to construct from authenticated works an ideal image of an artist, and to free it of all those works which seem not to conform."<sup>13</sup> Though not confined to his youth, the myth of Leonardo "sculptor" presents a parallel problem: scholars often tend to begin with an image of the artist-genius to which they add works that seem to conform to that ideal. Therefore, in considering the positions of the earliest Leonardo scholarship following Vasari, I seek to evaluate

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<sup>12</sup> The *paragone* debate, a lively intellectual proposition in Renaissance artistic circles, provided a forum for competing artists to champion the superiority of their own practices. Defending poetry, architecture, sculpture, and painting, the writers argued for the supremacy of one art over the others. Leonardo's writing clearly hoped to denigrate such figures as Michelangelo, an exemplary sculptor, by calling sculpture a lesser art.

<sup>13</sup> John Pope-Hennessy, *The Study and Criticism of Italian Sculpture* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 22.

Leonardo's early reputation. That growing reputation ultimately fueled the luminary figure he has become, despite a true poverty of completed work, in any medium. In fact, Leonardo's plans for his intended monument may not have been realizable. Most scholars have been willing to accept its unfinished state, the *non finito*, as a result of anything but Leonardo's inability to cast it. Whether or not the artist was able to complete the project, the unfinished plan is early evidence of the shifting artistic values. This study abandons previous explanations of the *non finito* and instead explores Leonardo's reputation, unhindered by the failed monument, for he was praised for the innovation of his plan, *ingegno*, instead of for its execution, *mano*.

## THE MISSING EARLY YEARS

The early years in Leonardo's life are, not unexpectedly, among the most problematic. While there are enough missing or non-existent records to keep historians busy filling voids, there is, fortunately, some certainty in elements of his biography. We know he was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1452, in the small town of Vinci, just west of Florence in the Tuscan countryside. He was the illegitimate son of notary Ser Piero di Antonio and Caterina, a local peasant woman [TABLE I].<sup>14</sup> After the birth of Leonardo, Caterina probably married someone else, evidenced by the fact that her son became the ward of his paternal relations. His illegitimacy was conspicuous in a society increasingly aware of the social standing of artists. In spite of some cases of erroneous or mistaken nominations of his father and paternal relations, in which the authors confuse Leonardo's relatives, it is clear that even his earliest biographers knew that he was born illegitimate.<sup>15</sup> Despite his illegitimacy and lack of formal education, his subsequent achievements caused contemporaries to overlook an inferior formation. While his education and upbringing are not surprising given his origins in Vinci, his fame is remarkable. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that an awareness of social disadvantage contributed to Leonardo's ambition. But what do we really know about his formation and consequent positioning in one of the most powerful courts in Europe?<sup>16</sup> We must first examine his time in Andrea del Verrocchio's workshop.

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<sup>14</sup> In 1457, Leonardo's grandfather, Antonio da Vinci, recorded the inhabitants of his household in his *Portata*. Naming the *bocche*, or members of his household whom he fed, he includes Leonardo last: "Lionardo figliuolo di detto Ser Piero non legiptimo, nato di lui et della Chateri[n]a, al presente donna d'Achattabrigga di Piero del Vaccha da Vinci, d'anni 5." (Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie*, 2).

<sup>15</sup> In The Anonimo Gaddiano's 1540 biography of the artist he begins, "A Florentine citizen who, although he was the illegitimate son of Ser Piero da Vinci, was born of good blood on his mother's side. He was so unusual and many-sided that nature seemed to have produced a miracle in him, not only in the beauty of his person, but in the many gifts with which she endowed him and which he fully mastered." See Anonimo Gaddiano, *Leonardo da Vinci*, Translated by Kate T. Steinitz and Ebria Feinblatt in *Biography and Early Art Criticism of Leonardo da Vinci*, vol. 1 of *Leonardo da Vinci: Selected Scholarship*. Edited by Claire J. Farago. 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 73.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory Lubkin's study of the Sforza rule of Milan carefully defines this particular princely court and contextualizes it within the Italian states and the powers of Western Europe. He writes, "The duchy of Milan was one of Renaissance Italy's five major powers and the peninsula's wealthiest



Verrocchio ran the most important artistic workshop in Florence.<sup>17</sup> In the tradition of Florentine *botteghe*, he offered his patrons works of art in a variety of media. Though a fine painter, Verrocchio truly excelled at cast bronze sculpture. While Donatello dominated recent artistic history, Verrocchio's bronzes earned him a deserved reputation for aesthetic and technical masterpieces. Nevertheless, given that art historians of later eras tended to privilege painting over bronze work, Verrocchio never received the accolades reserved for Botticelli, Fra Filippo Lippi, or Verrocchio's pupil, Leonardo.

Most of what we know of Andrea del Verrocchio has been colored by his biography in Vasari's *Lives*, though we can now paint a fuller picture of his contributions based on his works themselves and relevant documents. Vasari calls him a goldsmith, master of perspective, sculptor, woodcarver, painter, and musician. Despite the impressive appellations, which are perhaps even too generous, Vasari is unforgiving of Verrocchio's painting.<sup>18</sup> Calling his manner "crude", he clearly wrote his biography with Verrocchio's most famous pupil in mind.<sup>19</sup> He does, however, acknowledge that Verrocchio was "a most excellent sculptor."<sup>20</sup> Vasari places the artist in Rome during a time when many impressive works of ancient art were being

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princely state. It was also located in a strategic position, at the crossroads for economic, cultural, and political activity originating on both sides of the Alps. The capital city itself was one of the largest in Christendom, with a distinguished history. Francesco Sforza, who assumed the ducal throne in 1450, was Jakob Burckhardt's premier example of social mobility in Renaissance Italy." Gregory Lubkin, *A Renaissance Court* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Verrocchio was born in 1435 and lived until 1488, when he died while working on the Colleoni monument in Venice.

<sup>18</sup> I call his appellations generous because there is little evidence of Verrocchio's talents as a musician, and he worked in wood very little.

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Sculptors, Painters, and Architects*, ed. Julia Conway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 232. Henceforth, I will primarily refer to this Oxford edition of Vasari, turning to the original Italian when specific words or phrasing become important, or when the biographies of the artists change between Vasari's two editions, 1550 and 1568, respectively. In Italian, calling his manner of painting, "dura e crudetta", Vasari ushered in a new critical reception of Verrocchio between his two editions. Though in his second edition he now calls him a painter and architect, as well as a sculptor, he makes clear that Verrocchio was an inferior painter. See Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' Più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architettori nelle Redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, Vol. III Translated by Paola Barocchi (Florence: Sansoni, 1966), 533.

<sup>20</sup> Vasari, Oxford, 241.

discovered and celebrated. He recounts a tale of Verrocchio's presence at the moving of the statue of Marcus Aurelius [FIG. 2] to the church of San Giovanni in Laterano. Vasari credits Verrocchio's eventual devotion to sculpture to moments such as these.<sup>21</sup> Though factually wrong, the story links the great ancient equestrian monument to Verrocchio's own equestrian monument of Bartolomeo Colleoni [FIG. 3]. Yet, Vasari does not make Verrocchio's connection to the great masterpieces of antiquity as explicit as he does in other biographies, reserving the illustrious, direct visual links for his biography of Leonardo.

That Leonardo entered the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio is indisputable, but the exact date is unknown. Leonardo's father moved from Vinci to Florence sometime in 1469, likely bringing the seventeen-year-old with him. From June to November 1472, there are records of Leonardo's payments of dues to the painters' Company of St. Luke, so he would have likely been a member of Verrocchio's studio since at least June of 1472, if not sooner.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, records in 1476 irrefutably document Leonardo's presence in the workshop.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of whether he began his apprenticeship with Verrocchio at seventeen or twenty years old, he would have been a decade older than most apprentices. Many have interpreted Leonardo's unconventional workshop training as evidence for being an artistic prodigy. Yet such an argument undermines the importance of his training with Verrocchio.

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<sup>21</sup> Vasari, Oxford, 233.

<sup>22</sup> In the Archivio dell'Accademia di Belle Arti records Leonardo is inscribed into the Compagnia de' Pittori, "Lionardo di Ser Piero da Vinci dipintore, de' dare per tutto giugno 1472 sol. sei per la gratia fatta d'ogni suo debito avessi choll'arte per insino a di primo di luglio 1472, chome in questo, a carte 2.....soldi 6..." so it continues to list all of his dues for the year of 1472. See Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> On April 8th and June 7th Leonardo is accused of sodomy, in which the records reference his presence in Verrocchio's studio. The courts accuse Jacopo Saltarelli of sodomy, listing Leonardo (in both Latin and the vernacular) as someone suspected of illicit relations with Saltarelli. In April the accuser lists, among others, "Lionardo di Ser Piero da Vinci, sta con Andrea de Verrocchio", and finishes his list with, "Questi anno avuto a soddomitare decto Jacopo: et così vi fo fede." The June document, recorded entirely in Latin, nominates Leonardo, now listed first in the same list of accused, as "Leonardo Ser Pieri de vincio, manet cum Andrea del Verrocchio." See Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie*, 4, 5.

Vasari wrote a well-known tale of Verrocchio and Leonardo's collaboration in painting.<sup>24</sup> It is related primarily to emphasize Leonardo's mastery of painting, the triumph emphasizing the pupil's natural skill in that medium. However, this project is most interested in the pupil's sculptural apprenticeship. Verrocchio is far more important in this study for the knowledge of sculpture he imparted to his student. At the time of Leonardo's apprenticeship, his master's most important commission was the figure group of *Christ and Saint Thomas*, created for Donatello's marble niche [FIG. 4]. Verrocchio's work was widely celebrated for its virtuostic skill. Commissioned after May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1466, it was unveiled in 1483.<sup>25</sup> Leonardo certainly witnessed work on the group; he perhaps even assisted in the casting. But most importantly, he would have witnessed Andrea del Verrocchio at his best.

This sculptural group not only illustrates a feat of bronze casting, it is furthermore an insightful interpretation of the biblical tale, which is made all the more impressive when one considers the highly technical and often non-artistic nature of casting bronze. Not only are the figures carefully and sensitively rendered, they literally expand from the confines of their niche. In his ingenious design, Verrocchio conceives a dynamic pair that is enlivened by the viewer's movement. From afar the figure of Saint Thomas is positioned largely outside of the marble niche, conspicuously opposed to the figure of Christ who is contained within the niche. As the viewer approaches, the right foot of Saint Thomas makes an even more dramatic sweep to his right, drawing the viewer into the scene [FIG. 5]. Such a movement creates a tangible link to the viewer, making clear the incredulity of his

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<sup>24</sup> Vasari wrote, "...Leonardo worked on an angel holding some garments, and although he was a young boy, he completed the angel in such a way that Leonardo's angel was much better than the figures by Andrea. This was the reason why Andrea would never touch colors again, angered that a young boy understood them better than he did." (Vasari, Oxford, 287). See note 4 for the Italian account of the tale. In Italian Vasari used both the terms "giovannotto" and "fanciullo", which add emphasis to the youth of the artist and the consternation Verrocchio would have felt faced with the natural skill of his pupil.

<sup>25</sup> *Italian Renaissance Sculpture in the Time of Donatello: An Exhibition to Commemorate the 600th Anniversary of Donatello's Birth and the 100th Anniversary of the Detroit Institute of Arts* (Detroit, MI: Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1985), 205.

and our reaction to the resurrection of Christ. In comparison to Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Saints* [FIG. 6] of about sixty years prior, Verrocchio's figures perform a narrative, engaging the viewer in a kind of dynamism that will become characteristic of Cinquecento sculpture. The early Quattrocento *Saints* reflect the predominant preoccupation with antique models in material, style, and pose, whereas *Saint Thomas and Christ* represents a bridge to the art of the following century. Leonardo would have recognized this modernity, and desired to make equally important innovations in his art.

Sometime between 1479 and 1481, Verrocchio was commissioned to create an equestrian monument in honor of the Bergamese *condottiere*, Bartolomeo Colleoni.<sup>26</sup> This commission marks what was probably Verrocchio's most important, and final, commission. Opportunely, Leonardo witnessed the commission from its inception to the realization of the model. Colleoni was a celebrated military commander, most famous for his service under Gattamelata, celebrated in Donatello's bronze equestrian monument [FIG. 7]. Colleoni served Venice against the Visconti and under Francesco Sforza in defense of Sforza rule of Milan. In his bequest to Venice, Colleoni stipulated an equestrian statue be dedicated to him and erected in Piazza San Marco. Though ultimately placed in the Piazza of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, next

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Butterfield's monographic study of Andrea del Verrocchio offers a comprehensive summary of what we do know of the Colleoni project. Upon his death, Bartolomeo Colleoni left instructions to the Venetian republic that an equestrian monument should be erected in Piazza San Marco in his memory. Shifting the parameters of the commission (primarily the location changed to Piazza Santi Giovanni e Paolo), the Venetian government did offer a competition for the monument. Documents confirm that Verrocchio won the competition, proving that his was one of the three models sent between 1481 and 1483. A few other documents attest to Verrocchio's permanent presence in Venice by 1486 and the cost of the monument reaching 1,500 ducats. See Andrew Butterfield, *The Sculptures of Andrea del Verrocchio* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 158-83. See also Dario Covi, *Andrea del Verrocchio: Life and Work* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2005) for a more detailed study of Verrocchio's work on *Colleoni*. In their notes following their translation of Vasari, Julia Conaway and Peter Bondanella remark that the monument was commissioned in 1479. See the second note to p. 237 in Vasari, Oxford, 549. There is no cited document for this hypothesis, but Virginia Bush asserts that by 1481 in Florence Verrocchio had completed the model for the monument. She adds that Leonardo probably had a hand in its creation. See Virginia Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument and Cinquecento Sculpture", in *An Overview of Leonardo's Career and Projects Until c.1500*, vol. 2 of *Leonardo da Vinci: Selected Scholarship*. Edited by Claire J. Farago. 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 417.

to the eponymous church, it is still one of the most important monuments in Renaissance Venice.

Though relatively little is known of the details surrounding this commission, we can assume such a large bronze horse would have required many assistants in Florence, as well as in Venice for its casting. Leonardo could have been a participant in the designing of the bronze horse, as he was in Florence around the time when Verrocchio was working on the model.<sup>27</sup> Verrocchio presumably spent significant time in Venice, including when he shipped the model from Florence to Venice.<sup>28</sup> He later died in Venice, with the monument nearly completed. Leonardo certainly did not see the horse in its casting stage, since he was already in Milan. It is, however, possible that the final casting of the *Colleoni* in 1490 (overseen by Alessandro Leopardi) happened coevally with Leonardo's own work on the Sforza monument. Regardless of slight chronological discrepancies, Verrocchio's final artistic endeavor would certainly have made an impression on his observant apprentice.

Vasari gave considerable attention to the *Colleoni* monument, but did so largely to recount of a disagreement between Verrocchio and his Venetian patrons. Vasari wrote that some powerful Venetians decided that Vellano da Padova should make the figure of Colleoni; incensed, Verrocchio supposedly destroyed his model and stormed back to Florence. The Signoria of Venice allegedly wrote that if he should return they would have him beheaded, to which Verrocchio replied that should he suffer beheading they did not have it in their power to reattach heads, especially not the head of his horse. He presumably won over the Signoria, for he then returned to Venice at twice his pay and repaired the model to be cast. It is during the casting that he became ill and died, though Vasari assures us that the

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<sup>27</sup> Leonardo's drawing of the hanged Bernardo di Bandino Baroncelli, Giuliano de' Medici's murderer, is dated from December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1479, which definitively places him in Florence at this time, as do some artistic commissions around the city.

<sup>28</sup> *Italian Ren. Sculpture in the Time of Donatello*, 205. We know that the model for Colleoni existed in Florence by 1481; it is likely that Verrocchio would have traveled with the model to present it to the *operai* in Venice. See also Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 417.

monument was mostly finished.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to know what truth lies in such a tale. Vasari could indeed once again be reading the personality of an artist from his work; both the visages of Colleoni and his steed show indications of Verrocchio's characteristic style, in which Bartolomeo Colleoni's expression can certainly be read as one of proud defiance. Despite Vasari's bent for embellishment, the tale helps emphasize the importance of this particular monument; this was the most important and visible public commission in Venice. Furthermore, Vasari created a marked contrast between the *Lives* of Verrocchio and his pupil, emphasizing Verrocchio's disagreement with his patron and Leonardo's ideal relationship with Ludovico Sforza.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Vasari, Oxford, 237, 238.

<sup>30</sup> This particular passage in Vasari will be discussed more fully beginning on page 30.

## THE ISSUE OF ATTRIBUTION

Many art historians have sought to attribute sculptural work to Leonardo. An all too common refrain is: "Who else but Leonardo could have created a work of such quality?" However, there are no incontrovertible works by his hand. Thus assigning "essential qualities" to his supposed sculptural style becomes a fallacious task.<sup>31</sup>

Most attributions rely upon Leonardo's connection to Verrocchio, either in their similarity to Verrocchio's style, or conversely and illogically, their divergence from the master. We must remember that Verrocchio headed a successful and influential workshop in Florence, second perhaps only to Antonio Pollaiuolo, who, however, generally worked on a smaller scale (at least in Florence). Verrocchio would have likely influenced the style of many sculptors. Some works that have been attributed to either Verrocchio or Leonardo, or both, are the *Dama col mazzolino* [FIG. 8], a bronze bas-relief frieze [FIG. 9], and a marble bas-relief of *Santa Cecilia*, now in Toledo, Ohio [FIG. 10], among others. Most of these attributions to Leonardo are questionable; all rely upon notions of a hypothetical sculptural style.<sup>32</sup> In order to make an attribution, a scholar must formulate an idea of individual style. Yet these elements are inherently subject to challenge when they don't have a secure basis in uncontested autograph works. It is in comparison with works by Verrocchio that Leonardo attributions almost always begin, for we rely upon known works by the master to help construct an idea of the pupil's style. But, since Leonardo

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Kemp sought these "essential qualities" when working to attribute the *Christo fanciullo* to Leonardo. He writes, "I will not be undertaking a review of possible attributions of surviving pieces of sculpture to Leonardo, though I will suggest at the end that there is one existing terracotta bust which embodies the essential qualities we should expect in a Leonardo sculpture." See Kemp, "Christo fanciullo", 237. He continues to equate Leonardo's scientific explorations of space and volume and his two-dimensional works to an idea of these essential qualities in proposed sculptural works by Leonardo, but I find this kind of analysis, while thoughtful and carefully articulated, to be problematic. There are no universally acknowledged examples of Leonardo's sculpture to which these ideas of "essential qualities" can conform, let alone be compared to, therefore there are significant limits to this kind of study.

<sup>32</sup> The attributions remain tentative, and the *Santa Cecilia*, especially, has also been attributed to Desiderio da Settignano and Donatello, though now is almost universally accepted as a nineteenth century work, first proposed by John Pope-Hennessy.

ultimately became the more famous artist, it is often assumed that his work would have surpassed that of his master. After all, Vasari tells us so.

Leonardo attributions, in particular, demand an understanding of collective workshop practice.<sup>33</sup> Yet almost all the tentative attributions of sculpture to Leonardo are objects from his formative period in Verrocchio's workshop. Co-authorship, now so frustrating to absolutists seeking firm attributions to single artists, was common in the Renaissance. Generally, workshops relied on collaboration, and the notion of the "isolated genius" arises later, largely with the figure of Michelangelo. Leonardo also helped stimulate the nascent phenomenon of the independent artist genius.<sup>34</sup>

One must recognize that Leonardo probably shared similar interests with Verrocchio, and was inspired by the master's example. In 1472, when Leonardo was certainly in his master's workshop, Verrocchio finished a funerary monument in San Lorenzo, commissioned in memory of Piero and Giovanni de' Medici [FIG. 11]. The naturalistic decoration of the tomb has prompted many art historians to make an attribution to Leonardo, based upon his rural upbringing and supposed interests in nature. It seems only faintly possible that Leonardo would have prompted the addition of these vegetative and animal forms on Verrocchio's tomb. On the other hand, perhaps he was a nature specialist executing details dictated by his master.

It was established tradition to employ specialists in a particular genre or technique and Leonardo possibly is an early example. This argument is fundamental

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Renaissance *botteghe* and artistic collaboration, see John T. Paoletti and Wendy Stedman Sheard, *Collaboration in Italian Renaissance Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

<sup>34</sup> Charles Seymour writes, "The firm establishment of the single artist and of the single 'hand' appears to coincide with the triumph of humanistic adulation of individual masters of Antiquity." With the growing Renaissance admiration for the masters of Antiquity comes a new respect for the single authorship of great Renaissance masters. Such a shift creates an environment of competition, previously less important in collective workshop practice, that now is embodied by the singular achievements of Michelangelo, carving the *David* alone, or Leonardo's aspirations for the Sforza monument, which put him alone at the forefront of cast bronze sculpture. Charles Seymour, *Sculpture in Italy: 1400-1500* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 12.



to David Alan Brown, who argues that Leonardo, in executing these natural forms for Verrocchio, helped his master to best Pollaiuolo, his major competitor. Nonetheless, the great attention given the naturalistic elements in Verrocchio's works further illustrates the prejudices of scholarship.<sup>35</sup> Instead of crediting Leonardo with these elements, it seems more likely that Verrocchio was responsible for the interest in natural and zoomorphic forms. But since Vasari praised Leonardo's remarkable observation of nature, art historians tend to find traces throughout the work of Verrocchio. Thus, even Verrocchio's greatest works are compromised by the reputation of his celebrated pupil.

Though still in the minority, some art historians have credited Verrocchio with influencing his famous pupil. An interest in physiognomy, for example, is named as one of the greatest legacies Verrocchio gave to his pupil.<sup>36</sup> The interest is evident throughout Leonardo's work, from distinctive bas-reliefs to his final work on Bartolomeo Colleoni's expressive visage. Charles Avery, for example, credits Verrocchio's "sophisticated composition of the *Putto with a Dolphin* [FIG. 12], the spiritual grandeur and pent-up emotion of *Christ and St Thomas* [FIG. 4] and the monumental and aggressive power of the *Colleoni* [FIG. 3]..." with influencing Leonardo.<sup>37</sup> Despite the clear influence Verrocchio had on his student, Vasari was responsible for the preference of Leonardo's works over those of his own master. When scholars try to attribute excellent works by other artists to Leonardo, the myth of his genius tends to eclipse the accomplishments of others.

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<sup>35</sup> David Alan Brown, "The Apprentice", in *An Overview of Leonardo's Career and Projects Until c.1500*, vol. 2 of *Leonardo da Vinci: Selected Scholarship*. Edited by Claire J. Farago. 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 349, 350.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Avery, *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 137. More recent scholars have also worked to isolate Verrocchio's strengths, with inevitable comparisons to the qualities we often assign to Leonardo. See Dario Covi, *Andrea del Verrocchio: Life and Work* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2005), for more in-depth studies of Verrocchio's work. Various exhibitions have also recently begun to explore the extent of both Verrocchio's accomplishments and his influence, most notably, Loretta Dolcini, ed., *Verrocchio's Christ and Saint Thomas: A Masterpiece of Sculpture from Renaissance Florence* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992) and Gigetta Dall' Regoli, ed., *Verrocchio, Lorenzo di Credi, Francesco di Simone Ferrucci* (Milan: Five Continents, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> Avery, *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture*, 143.

Leonardo could not have even considered casting the Sforza monument had he not learned from Verrocchio's important example. Especially when considering Leonardo's contribution to sculpture, we must account for his artistic formation, leaving behind the assumption of his natural talents. Leonardo's initial understanding of casting came from Verrocchio's workshop, including working with half molds in the indirect lost-wax casting method, which was standard practice at the time. In fact, his early drawings "reflect his conviction that a form can be completely described in two half-figures".<sup>38</sup> But as he confronted the problem of casting, his sketches and notes reveal contradictions of theory, between his two-dimensional and three-dimensional understanding of form. He later became aware that two halves could not completely describe bodily forms. From this point on we can see how he would have struggled to cast an enormous figure, one that he envisioned as dynamic as his master's *Christ and Saint Thomas*. In order to overcome the challenges of casting the colossal monument in one piece, Leonardo's notes reveal an exploration of various forms of casting. Martin Kemp makes an intriguing connection between Leonardo's conception of casting forms in a mold and his scientific observations of fish in water. Leonardo's understanding of space was that of matching positive to negative forms, which informed his concurrent studies.<sup>39</sup> Leonardo's description of how to describe form from different angles is in the same passage as the *paragone*, and, as Kemp points out, it is the most perceptive Renaissance description of the procedure of looking at forms from various views. Though he ultimately did not cast

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Kemp, "The Space of the Sculptor..." *An Overview of Leonardo's Career and Projects Until c.1500*, vol. 2 of *Leonardo da Vinci: Selected Scholarship*. Edited by Claire J. Farago. 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 237-62. Kemp's work is very helpful for the understanding of how Leonardo probably approached the problem of casting the Sforza horse. Kemp writes, "The positive sense of the concave mould was developed by Leonardo into an intellectual concept of the reciprocal shapes of abutting surfaces: 'Se le parti di 2 superfittie insieme si tochano, tanto sia la parte dell'una che sara tocha dal altra quanto quella dell'altra che tocha dal una, over tanto quella della prima che tocha dalla 2 a quanto quella 2 a che tocha la prima.'" (240) Taking from Leonardo's notes on a sheet in the Institut de France (Ms. M, 67r), Leonardo reasons that the two half-figures should suffice to describe three-dimensional forms.

<sup>39</sup> Kemp, "The Space of the Sculptor", 239.

the horse, he was at least beginning to conceive of the process in an innovative way, approaching the level of skill necessary to meet the demands of its enormous size. However, he would never have reached this point without the benefit of his time in Verrocchio's workshop.

Leonardo's reputation also diminished the oeuvre of his fellow apprentice in Verrocchio's workshop, Giovanfrancesco Rustici. By 1504 Rustici is listed as one of the preeminent sculptors in Pomponius Gauricus's *De Sculptura*. Many comparisons of style have been made between Rustici and Leonardo. Rustici is most famous for his figure group, *John the Baptist Preaching to a Levite and a Pharisee* [FIG. 13]. The three-figure group stands above the eastern portal of the Baptistery of San Giovanni, with the patron saint of Florence as its central figure. The impressive group is, unsurprisingly, sometimes credited to the hand of Leonardo. Vasari first wrote that it is only with Leonardo's advice that Rustici could have executed such a pleasing group, especially in bronze.<sup>40</sup> Art historians too readily accept Vasari.

Rustici would only have been eight years old, far too young for the two of them to have had serious artistic interaction before Leonardo's departure for Milan. However, the situation is different twenty years later, following Leonardo's return to Florence. Leonardo is imagined as "carico di libri, di gloria, di serene ambizioni e di olimpico distacco" upon his return.<sup>41</sup> By 1504, Rustici was also an important figure in Florence. Artistic interaction – even collaboration – was now more likely. The two possibly met in via Martelli upon Leonardo's return to Florence from Milan in

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<sup>40</sup> Vasari writes at the end of his *Life of Leonardo*, "He proved himself in sculpture with the three bronze figures over the north door of San Giovanni which were executed by Giovan Francesco Rustici but finished with Leonardo's advice; they are the most beautiful casts both for their design and for their perfection that have yet been seen in the modern age." Vasari, Oxford, 298.

<sup>41</sup> Tommaso Mozzi, *Giovanfrancesco Rustici: Le compagnie del paiuolo e della cazzuola; arte, letteratura, festa nell'età della maniera* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 2008), 44. In English, "full of books, glory, serene ambitions and olympic detachment."

1500.<sup>42</sup> We know for certain that Rustici lived in via Martelli for a time, and some believe that Leonardo was either a guest of Piero Martelli or that he rented space from Rustici.<sup>43</sup> Such a connection has helped inspire Leonardo's presumed influence on Rustici. In any case, it is possible that Rustici interacted with or at least observed Leonardo as he worked on his famous plans for the *Battle of Anghiari* [FIG. 14].

In the biographical tradition, Leonardo has always dominated Rustici, his seeming epigone. Recently, scholars have attempted to find artistic substance to the supposed relationship.<sup>44</sup> Leonardo's earliest biographers noted the connection between the two artists, with Leonardo consistently dominating the pair. Some scholars attribute a growing maturity and new force in Rustici's work after 1500 to the influence of Leonardo.<sup>45</sup> While Leonardo probably did not actually have a hand in the execution of Rustici's Baptistery group, Rustici was indeed looking to the older artist at the time of the *Battle of Anghiari*, as evidenced by a number of small terracotta equestrian groups [FIGS. 15 – 18].

These are mostly attributed to Rustici, but sometimes to both him and Leonardo. In the *Battle of Anghiari*, Leonardo focused on the importance of pose. Leonardo's and Michelangelo's cartoons were immediately copied, serving as

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<sup>42</sup> Tommaso Mozzati, an important Rustici scholar, writes, "Sappiamo con certezza che lo scultore [Rustici] visse per qualche tempo nella via de' Martelli, contemporaneamente a Leonardo, ospite a sua volta di Piero Martelli: la notizia infatti è riportata dall'Anonimo Magliabechiano, e accettata, almeno in parte, dal Vasari." Mozzati, *Giovanfrancesco Rustici*, 70-1. Pietro Marani corroborates: "Sappiamo che il 22 marzo del 1508 (meno probabile che fosse il 22 marzo del 1509, se Leonardo avesse usato lo stile 'ab incarnationem'), Leonardo era ancora a Firenze e abitava nelle stesse case dei Martelli in cui aveva lo studio anche il Rustici (Codice Arundel, f. 1 recto: 'Cominciato in Firenze in casa di Pietro di Braccio Martelli addi 22 marzo 1508')." See Pietro C. Marani, "'Non volle Giovanfrancesco...altri attorno che Lionardo da Vinci': Considerazioni su Rustici e Leonardo" in *I Grandi Bronzi del Battistero: Giovanfrancesco Rustici e Leonardo*, curated by Tommaso Mozzati, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, and Philippe Sénéchal (Florence: Giunti, 2010), 88.

<sup>43</sup> In the Codex Arundel, recorded on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1508, Leonardo began a new section, writing: "cominciato in Firenze in casa di Piero di braccio Martelli." (Codex Arundel 1r)

<sup>44</sup> Most recently there have been two exhibitions regarding Leonardo's reputation as a sculptor, centering on attributions often related to work previously attributed to Rustici. Curated by Gary Radke, *Leonardo and the Art of Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) was exhibited in Atlanta at the High Museum of Art and in L.A. at the J. Paul Getty Museum. Curated by Tommaso Mozzati, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, and Philippe Sénéchal, *I Grandi Bronzi del Battistero: Giovanfrancesco Rustici e Leonardo* (Florence: Giunti, 2010) was exhibited in Florence at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello.

<sup>45</sup> Giovanni Mariacher, *La scultura del Cinquecento* (Turin: UTET, 1987), 71.

exemplary designs to contemporary and subsequent artists. The visual similarities between the *Battle* cartoon and the terracottas by Rustici are compelling, but why would one think that Leonardo would have made them? For what purpose? It seems curious that he would have turned to small-scale terracottas to help execute a large-scale fresco. It is much more likely that the terracottas are Rustici's work. Indeed, Rustici's terracotta works in Villa Salviati [FIGS. 19, 20] also recall forms derived from the *Battle* cartoon, providing further evidence for the influence of the great drawing. These figures perfectly illustrate Leonardo's influence on three-dimensional works by his admirers.

Leonardo very likely could have influenced Rustici's subject matter, gesture, and more, but Rustici did his own work. While Leonardo was in Milan, Rustici had become a successful artist, turning out compelling sculpture in various media. He undoubtedly looked to venerable models: Verrocchio for bronze sculpture, Donatello and Michelangelo for marble sculpture. In fact, Rustici looked to Michelangelo with clear admiration; he even corresponded with the artist.<sup>46</sup> Yet, no scholar tries to attribute work by Rustici to the more famous Michelangelo, as they do with Leonardo. This illustrates the problem of attribution to an artist without a body of sculptural work. Where the evidence for Michelangelo's style is clear, the same cannot be said for Leonardo, to whom so many of these works are attributed.<sup>47</sup> Rustici executed his own commissions, but he undoubtedly looked to Leonardo for

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<sup>46</sup> In a letter from February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1533, Rustici wrote to Michelangelo, reassuring him of a prior promise, giving a sense of history and depth to their friendship. For a detailed discussion of Rustici's admiration for Michelangelo, see Ilaria Ciseri, "'L'affezione singulare ch'è intra noi sempre stata': Rustici e Michelangelo" in *I Grandi Bronzi del Battistero: Giovanfrancesco Rustici e Leonardo*, curated by Tommaso Mozzi, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, and Philippe Sénéchal (Florence: Giunti, 2010), 133-51.

<sup>47</sup> Rustici, nevertheless, would also have been looking at Leonardo's famous *Virgin and St. Anne* cartoon, which Vasari described as so extraordinary it solicited wonderment among the population. "Finally he did a cartoon showing Our Lady and Saint Anne with the figure of Christ, which not only amazed all the artisans but, once completed and set up in a room, brought men, women, young and old to see it for two days as if they were going to a solemn festival in order to gaze upon the marvels of Leonardo which stupefied the entire populace." (Vasari, Oxford, 293) Rustici, an interested party, would have at least seen and probably have known these two masterworks of drawing. While one can, and some already have, attribute particular gestures and poses from Rustici's work to passages in Leonardo's drawings, what is more important is Rustici's growing reputation as master draftsman and sculptor.

the artist's exemplary draftsmanship. Though he was not Leonardo's student in sculpture, Rustici may have also consciously followed in Leonardo's footsteps, seeking patronage in France. Nine years after Leonardo's death, Rustici left Florence for the court of Francis I, ostensibly due to the changing political climate in his hometown.<sup>48</sup> Leonardo had paved the way.

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<sup>48</sup> Avery, *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture*, 195. Rustici was apparently offered 1200 livres tournois in a year, more than what Leonardo had been paid before him. Yet scholars have continued to emphasize Leonardo's own remarkable time at the French court. See Avery, *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture*, 156.

## THE SFORZA MONUMENT

By focusing on what little we know of Leonardo's formative years, scholars have missed what is far more important to the understanding of Leonardo's reputation as a sculptor. In the nearly two decades he spent in Milan in service to Ludovico Sforza, he sought to produce what would have been the most important work in his sculptural oeuvre, as well as for the development of Renaissance sculpture. Though he never finished it, Leonardo's toils with the equestrian monument established his claim as sculptor.

The Sforza family, having displaced Visconti control of Milan, had occupied the duchy for about thirty years before Leonardo's arrival. In fact, their family name itself was quite new; it was only when Ludovico's grandfather, Muzio Attendolo, adopted the name Sforza that they established an imposing dynasty [TABLE 2]. Nonetheless, the connection was initially just etymological, for the name Sforza derives from the verb *sforzare*, meaning to compel or force. Attendolo's illegitimate son, Francesco I, became the first Sforza duke, adding military accomplishments to the family's reputation, including quelling an attempt to establish an Ambrosian republic. As a family of usurpers, by both name and deed, it became increasingly important to establish a legacy beyond the spoils of conflict.

Life in the Sforza court, however, was not entirely safe, especially for members of the ruling family. Young assassins murdered Ludovico's older brother, Galeazzo Maria, the rightful heir after his father, Francesco I, who was considered an admired leader, had ruled with "prudence and cool wisdom."<sup>49</sup> Galeazzo Maria reigned for ten years over what is considered, by many accounts, a brilliant and vibrant Milan. Still, outside of Milan Galeazzo had been seen as a tyrannical ruler. News of his death spread wide; though his internal reign had been peaceful, some feared war would result. After his assassination in 1476, his eldest son and intended

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<sup>49</sup> Lubkin, *A Renaissance Court*, 246.

heir, Gian Galeazzo, then seven years old, was considered too young to rule. Galeazzo's wife, Bona of Savoy ruled as regent in the stead of their young son. Ludovico and another brother, Sforza Maria, fought Bona for almost five years before they eventually gained control of Milan. Unfortunately, Sforza Maria died shortly after of mysterious circumstances, which many understandably linked to fraternal foul play. Thereafter Ludovico ruled with relatively peaceful autonomy. His position was further secured with the death of Gian Galeazzo in 1494 just as he had reached an age that represented a threat to Ludovico's rule. Despite "the shadow of illegitimacy" that hung over his usurped position of power, Ludovico maintained his position as ruler of Milan for twenty years.<sup>50</sup> Not immune to the machinations of his many enemies, he was ultimately deposed by the invasion of the French army in 1494.<sup>51</sup> The Sforza court flourished under Ludovico's rule; he engaged in an active courtly and civic life and became an active patron of the arts, sciences, and letters.

Having worked on various independent commissions in Florence, Leonardo was seeking a change in circumstances. He had painted several pictures of the Virgin and Child and had begun to work on the *Adoration of the Shepherds*. It is unclear if a specific event or a more general sentiment prompted a desire to seek opportunities outside of Florence, though he would have seen Verrocchio and other artists leave Florence for impressive commissions elsewhere. Jotted in one of his notebooks, Leonardo transcribed the following passage from Dante's *Inferno*:

Lying in a featherbed will not bring you fame, nor  
staying beneath the quilt, and he who uses up his  
life without achieving fame leaves no more vestige  
of himself on earth than smoke in the air or foam  
upon the water.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Jane Black, *Absolutism in Renaissance Milan: Plenitude of Power under the Visconti and the Sforza 1329-1535* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 84.

<sup>51</sup> Grand Marshal Gian Giacomo Trivulzio led the French army. It is ironic that Trivulzio, who was once a close associate of Duke Galeazzo, would ultimately be the intended patron of Leonardo's second attempt at casting the great equestrian monument.

<sup>52</sup> This passage was noted by biographer, Charles Nicholl in *Leonardo da Vinci: Flights of the Mind* (New York: Viking Press, 2004), 184, coming from Windsor fol. 12349v. In Italian it reads:



Regardless of its date, which is difficult to determine with certainty, this quotation reflects a drive for fame, perhaps explaining the impetus to leave his hometown for a foreign court.

Before departing Florence, Leonardo wrote Ludovico Sforza, then de facto ruler, a remarkable letter:

Most illustrious Lord, having by now sufficiently considered the experience of those men who claim to be skilled inventors of machines of war, and having realized that the said machines in no way differ from those commonly employed, I shall endeavor, without prejudice to anyone else, to reveal my secrets to Your Excellency, for whom I offer to execute, at your convenience, all the items briefly noted below.

I have a model of very strong but light bridges, extremely easy to carry, by means of which you will be able to pursue or if necessary flee an enemy; I have others, which are sturdy and will resist fire as well as attack and are easy to lay down and take up. I also know ways to burn and destroy those of the enemy.

During a siege, I know how to dry up the water of the moats and how to construct an infinite number of bridges, covered ways, scaling ladders, and other machines for this type of enterprise.

If by reason of the height of the banks or the strength of the place and its position, it is impossible when besieging a place, to avail oneself of the plan of bombardment, I have methods for destroying every redoubt or other fortress, even if it were founded upon solid rock.

I have various kinds of cannons; most convenient and easy to carry; and with these I can fling small stones almost resembling a storm; and with the smoke of these cause great terror with the enemy, to his great detriment and confusion.

I know how to use paths and secret underground tunnels, dug without noise and following tortuous routes, to reach a given place, even if it means passing below a moat or a river.

I will make covered vehicles, safe and unassailable, which will penetrate enemy ranks with their artillery and destroy the most powerful troops; the infantry may follow them without meeting

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“...Seggendo in piuma  
In fama non si vien, ne sotto coltre,  
Sanza la qual chi sua vita consuma  
Cotal vestigio in terra di se lascia  
Qual fummo in aere ed in acqua la schiuma.”

obstacles or suffering damage.

In case of need, I will make large bombards, mortars, and fire-throwing engines, of beautiful and practical design, which will be different from those presently in use.

Where bombardment would fail, I can make catapults, mangonels, *trabocchi*, or other unusual machines of marvelous efficiency, not in common use. In short, whatever the situation, I can invent an infinite variety of machines for both attack and defense.

And if battle is to be joined at sea, I have many very efficient machines for both attack and defense and vessels that will resist even the heaviest cannon fire, fumes and gun-powder. In peacetime, I think I can give perfect satisfaction and be the equal of any man in architecture, in the design of buildings public and private, or to conduct water from one place to another.

I can carry out sculpture in marble, bronze, and clay; and in painting can do any kind of work as well as any man, whoever he be.

Moreover, the bronze horse could be made that will be to the immortal glory and eternal honor of the lord your father of blessed memory and of the illustrious house of Sforza.

And if any of the items mentioned above appears to anyone impossible or impractical, I am ready to give a demonstration in your park or in any other place that should please Your Excellency – to whom I recommend myself in all humility, etc.<sup>53</sup>

This kind of address, from an artist to a patron in which the artist offers a long list of marketable skills in lieu of a proposal for a single project, could have been perceived as a misstep. Furthermore, his claim to be able to cast a monumental bronze horse may be no closer to viability than his other claims about feats of military engineering. Since we know the letter only from Leonardo's own notebooks, it is not certain whether he actually sent such a letter to Ludovico. Alternatively, many believe he was sent to the Milanese court to entertain with his superior musicianship, taking with him a silver lyre.<sup>54</sup> His musical prowess may not have been exaggerated, but he certainly would not have been invited purely to serve that purpose, though his early

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<sup>53</sup> The letter is transcribed in Leonardo's notebooks, Codex Atlanticus folio 391r. While much debate surrounds Leonardo's departure for Milan, this letter at the very least demonstrates how Leonardo saw his marketable skills for a powerful patron. The letter is reproduced in Italian in Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie*, 8, 9, in which he dates it to around 1482.

<sup>54</sup> Vasari, Oxford, 289. Lomazzo and Anonimo Gaddiano repeat this tale. Paolo Giovio also emphasizes Leonardo's musical abilities.

biographers certainly seemed to think so. And while he was not invited simply as a court musician, he was also not invited only as a sculptor. It seems improbable that Leonardo would have gained enough of a reputation as a sculptor at this time to warrant an invitation from Ludovico to come expressly with the intention of pursuing the monument. More likely, Leonardo was the initiator of contact with his patron and this letter recorded in his notebooks is a copy or draft for an unprompted letter that convinced his potential patron of his value in the court.<sup>55</sup> Since he departed shortly after, it is clear that he was either invited or welcomed into the Sforza court principally as a military engineer. His military engineering would have appealed first to the demands of the duke's rule. Engineering was far more lucrative than any of the arts. Leonardo makes no mention of his musical talents; the arts, in fact, are mentioned only at the end of his long list of talents. Even then, he recommends himself primarily as capable of carrying out a monument, which was envisioned above all to communicate military achievement.

There are clear parallels between the kinds of musical innovation expected of the invited court musicians and the innovation expected of Leonardo, in his new position at the court. Expected to further military technology, engineer solutions to problems in the duchy, and cast an unthinkably large horse, the duke appreciated the innovation of his developing polymath artist. Leonardo welcomed this opportunity to utilize such innovation as a means to establish both a reputation for his influential patron and for himself as an artist-genius.

If Leonardo was particularly keen to execute an equestrian monument, he found no better audience than Ludovico. Such a dynastic monument was not

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<sup>55</sup> Not one to miss any kind of lexical puns, of which he was quite fond, he certainly would have noted the Sforza's chosen name. The initial notebook pages exhibiting Leonardo's thoughts for an equestrian monument are marked by a few clever lines assimilating his patron's name into various patterns or etymological devices. In the Codex Madrid II, on folio 141r, above the first paragraph are the words: *morire, moralità, amaro: O moro, io moro se con tua mortalità non mi amari tanto il vivere m'è amaro*. Ludovico was called Il Moro for the darkness of his complexion, relating him to the Moors. *Il Moro* became a mnemonic device, much like Ludovico's family's adopted surname, and was employed or referred to in many of the works he commissioned.

possible in Florence until well into the age of the Medici Grand Duchy, when Giambologna executed an equestrian monument of Cosimo I, (1587 – 1594). Rather, sculpted representations of figures like Judith and David were meant to stand for the city itself, as these were more acceptably republican. In Milan, Leonardo was given scope for a more ambitious undertaking.

The idea of an equestrian monument to be erected in honor of Francesco I Sforza was first proposed by his older son, Galeazzo Maria in 1473. A life-size equestrian group, commemorating the establishment of Sforza rule in Milan, was to be placed somewhere in the Castello Sforzesco.<sup>56</sup> Virginia Bush suggests that Galeazzo Maria envisioned a rival to the equestrian statues of Erasmo da Narni in Padua and Borso d'Este in Ferrara, but was unable to find a master capable of casting it. Appropriating the incomplete plans of his brother, Ludovico looked to find someone capable of completing the equestrian monument. He received a drawing from Pollaiuolo [FIG. 21], who, as Bush reminds us, had only worked in small scale up to this point and might not have had the ability to cast such a large freestanding figure.<sup>57</sup> Pollaiuolo never advanced the project beyond this drawing. Leonardo probably knew of Pollaiuolo's involvement, as the artist was Verrocchio's principal rival in Florence. Thus, it is likely that Leonardo was fully cognizant of a project for an equestrian monument before he even wrote the letter.

Leonardo's letter, however, can really only be described as hubris. Leonardo not only offered his skill to his potential patron, but he claimed an ability to cast *the bronze horse*. Though he had observed and even participated in large-scale bronze casting in Verrocchio's workshop, he had not undertaken any comparable work himself.<sup>58</sup> He was, in fact, so confident that he subsequently offered himself as *the expert* to be consulted regarding the casting of bronze doors for the Duomo of

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<sup>56</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 407.

<sup>57</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 408, 409.

<sup>58</sup> John Pope-Hennessy, *An Introduction to Italian Sculpture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 56.

Piacenza. He warned them “not to employ a mere bell founder, cannon maker, or the like, but to give the work to Leonardo the Florentine, who was making the equestrian statue of Duke Francesco.”<sup>59</sup> What self-congratulatory praise he uses to emphasize the progress and eventual brilliance of an as-yet-unfinished work of art!

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<sup>59</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 419. Bush interprets the text as a draft for a letter Leonardo wanted someone to send on his behalf. Found in the Codex Atlanticus (fol. 323 r. and 323 v.), the letter begins: “(Venerabili) Magnifici Fabbricieri! (*parendo a me fare in parte*) intendendo io vostre magnificenze (*volere*) avere preso partito di fare certe imagine opere di bronzo delle quali io vi darò alcuno ricordo.” Then it finishes: “Non c’è uomo che vaglia – e credetelo a me salvo (*quel*) Leonardo Fiorentino che fa il cavallo del duca Francesco di bronzo, che non ne bisogna fare stima perche à che fare il tempo di sua vita, e dubito che, per l’essere sì grande opera, che non la finirà mai. Ècci uno il quale il Signore per fare questa sua opera, a tratto di Firenze che è degno maestro, ma à tanta tanta faccenda nolla finirà mai.” (Beltrami, 55-6) Beltrami dates the letter to sometime between 1490 and 1498, which places it at a time when Leonardo was probably recognizing the impossibility of casting the monument for Ludovico Sforza, seemingly placing the blame on his patron rather than his own technical inabilities. In this letter, written in the voice of a third party on the artist’s behalf, he asserts his reputation as a great bronze caster. Ironically, given his record, he acknowledges that the great horse, though unfinished, should not make anyone doubt that he is a worthy master. A curious piece of writing, it does show the marks of a draft, though we are not sure that a final version of such a letter was ever sent. Since he was never engaged by the Piacenza *fabbricieri*, we can suppose he either never had the letter sent or he did and was simply not employed for the project.

## IL MORO & THE MONUMENT

By all accounts Ludovico Sforza was as ambitious as Leonardo. Though participants in two different social and political spheres, they were born in the same year. The two made a fitting pair, as both were interested in the ideas of conspicuous consumption, self-promotion, and crafting the reputation of both artists and patrons. Leonardo's recent biographer, Charles Nicholl, aptly characterizes the reputation of these new rulers: "To Romantic historians like Jules Michelet, the Sforza were 'heroes of patience and cunning who built themselves up from nothing', but to their contemporaries these *soi-disant* dukes were 'uncouth soldiers'. This was to the advantage of the now itinerant artist Leonardo da Vinci, since the *arriviste* was always a hungry patron."<sup>60</sup> Leonardo seemed to know just what to promise in an effort to win over a potential patron. He would likely have witnessed the ostentatious state visit to Florence made by Gian Galeazzo and Ludovico Sforza in 1471. Most telling in Leonardo's long list of offered skills is the mention of the equestrian monument. It appears a conscious effort to procure a grand commission and enhance his reputation with a position at court.

As was the case for many illegitimate rulers, Ludovico used art to communicate wealth, dynastic honor, and power. The prospect of a grand monument would certainly have appealed to Ludovico, especially one on such a large scale, and therefore unique. The details of the commission appear to have been left up to the artist. The following passage imagines the kind of trusting relationship Leonardo had with his patron:

It is said that the prior of the church entreated Leonardo with tiresome persistence to complete the work [the *Last Supper*], since it seemed strange to him to see how Leonardo sometime passed half a day at a time lost in thought, and he would have preferred Leonardo, just like the labourers hoeing in the garden, never to have laid down his brush. And as if this was not enough, he complained to the duke and

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<sup>60</sup> Nicholl, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 186. It seems fitting to note that such a view may also reflect Michelet's own rise from modest circumstances to becoming a renowned historian.

made such a disturbance that the duke was forced to send for Leonardo and to question him skilfully about his work, showing with great civility that he was doing so because of the prior's insistence. Leonardo, who knew that the prince possessed a sharp and discerning intellect, was willing to discuss his work at length with the duke (something he had never done with the prior); he talked to him extensively about art and persuaded him that the greatest geniuses sometimes accomplish more when they work less, since they are searching for inventions in their minds, and forming those perfect ideas which their hands then express and reproduce from what they previously conceived with their intellect. And he added that he still had two heads to complete: that of Christ, for which he was unwilling to seek a model on earth and unable to presume that his imagination could conceive of the beauty and celestial grace required of divinity incarnate. The head of Judas, which caused him much thought, was also missing, for he did not believe himself capable of imagining a form to depict the face of a man who, after receiving so many favours, could have possessed a mind so wicked that he could have resolved to betray his Lord and the Creator of the World. None the less, he would search for a model for this second face, but if in the end he could not find anything better, there was always the head of the prior, who was so insistent and indiscreet. This moved the duke to laughter, and the duke declared that Leonardo was quite right. And so, the poor confused prior returned to press on with the work in the garden and left Leonardo in peace. He skilfully completed the head of Judas, who seemed the very image of treachery and in humanity. That of Christ remained, as was said, unfinished.<sup>61</sup>

The well-known tale, first recounted by Vasari, asserts that Ludovico respected Leonardo's artistic authority. Although an anecdote of doubtful veracity, it serves to illustrate what Vasari imagined to be the dynamic between Ludovico Sforza and his court artist, as well as Ludovico's growing respect for artistic genius. First, Leonardo is left entirely to his own devices. Free from a micromanaging patron, Leonardo was able to toil and labor as much or as little as he pleased. Such a desirable position was unusual for an artist, though not unheard of.<sup>62</sup> Leonardo's artistic freedom caused evident distress in the prior, who was more accustomed to artists laboring like gardeners, dictated by diligence rather than by the whims of inspiration. Second, Vasari portrays Ludovico as an informed and amenable patron. He respected

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<sup>61</sup> Vasari, Oxford, 290-1.

<sup>62</sup> Andrea Mantegna, for example, lived a very comfortable life as court artist to the Gonzaga family in Mantua.

Leonardo for his creative genius.<sup>63</sup> Vasari's charming anecdote indicates that, at least by 1550, Leonardo's reputation was recognized by a patron who had the foresight to make unusual allowances for his artist. Shifting from a previous age where *mano* was the marker of achievement, Leonardo now exemplifies the virtue *ingegno*, in which the innovation of the idea was as important as, or perhaps more important than, the completed work.

Not to be outdone by any of his peers, Leonardo set about creating a monument unique in the modern world, one to rival antiquity. It is difficult to recapture the awe, or the even the mockery, his vision must have inspired. The medium itself guaranteed prestige – given the expense and technical difficulties involved with casting bronze. Benvenuto Cellini, the talented goldsmith and sculptor, wrote about the technique of bronze casting for colossi:

To begin with, then, I divided the model, which was to be translated from three cubits to forty, into forty small parts, each of these parts again I divided into twenty-four parts. But as I knew that this method alone would not suffice to arrive at the requisite size, I devised another method, a method entirely my own, never invented by anyone before, and the outcome of my own great researches. As I am always generously inclined, I will impart it to such as have good work at heart.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> In Italian, Vasari wrote, "Lionardo, conoscendo l'ingegno di quel principe esser acuto e discreto, volse (quel che non avea mai fatto con quel priore) discorre col Duca largamente sopra di questo: gli ragionò assai de l'arte, e lo fece capace che l'ingegni elevati, talor che manco lavorano, più adoperano, cercando con la mente l'invenzioni e formandosi quelle perfette idee che poi esprimono e ritraggono le mani da quelle già concepute ne l'intelletto." Having completely added this tale to the second version of his *Vite*, Vasari used very telling language to describe the growing reputation of his subject. By placing Leonardo and Ludovico as equals he elevates the artist to not only an intellectual, but also a noble figure. Leonardo further privileges this new definition of the Renaissance artist by illustrating to the duke the conceptual complexity involved in the creation of his art, explaining his slow progress on the decoration. Vasari, Sansoni, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Benvenuto Cellini, *The Treatises of Benvenuto Cellini on Goldsmithing and Sculpture*, translated by C. R. Ashbee (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), 141. Cellini began writing this in 1558, more than sixty years after Leonardo had ceased his work on casting the Sforza horse. Discussed in more detail later, Cellini here writes in a much more authoritative manner than Leonardo did in his notes on casting. Though Cellini was writing with an immediate audience in mind, Leonardo probably had intentions to eventually publish a treatise on his casting technique, along with the many other treatises he intended to write and never finished. And while the process, at least in Leonardo's time, was still quite mysterious, Cellini wrote with clarity and confidence. He was far more experienced in casting bronze. Perhaps capturing some of the general attitude toward bronze casting in Leonardo's time, a modern bronze caster, Paul Cavanaugh writes: "The fear and respect given the ancient craftsmen was based on their 'Earth Mother's' work when they accelerated and perfected the 'growth' of an ore by transplanting it in a sort of 'artificial womb,' the furnace. There is a deep magic in bronze, which is not explained by its practicality, by the fact that the molten metal pours more easily than copper and is harder when it cools, or that its color moves mysteriously from red gold to deep green azure as time handles it. ...Because it is not a precious metal, it does not prompt greed before



Cellini strikes an authoritative tone, yet still one with traces of subtly boastful humility. He acknowledges the complexity of the endeavor and, unlike Leonardo, records his tested process for future sculptors to learn from. Despite his detailed treatise on bronze casting, written less than a century after Leonardo's work on the horse, an aura of mystery surrounds the process.<sup>65</sup> What begins as a plaster model covered in wax then undergoes an extensive process of transformation, largely unseen, to finally be reborn as a figure of rough bronze awaiting chasing and polishing. It is the combination of the single-cast method and the colossal scale that make Leonardo's project a visionary one. These stubbornly ambitious features ensured a large reputation for the project, illustrating the growing conception of *difficoltà*.<sup>66</sup> But more than the difficulties and material, it was the equestrian's colossal size that truly set it apart from all ancient and modern precedents.

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admiration. It prompts love, and it has inspired myth." See Paul K. Cavanaugh, "Practical Considerations and Problems of Bronze Casting" in *Small Bronze Sculpture from the Ancient World* (Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1990), 146. Cavanaugh is a bronze caster at the Paul King Foundry in Johnston, Rhode Island.

<sup>65</sup> See Michael Cole, *Ambitious Form: Giambologna, Ammanati, and Danti in Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) for a worthwhile exploration of the attitude toward bronze casting in the second half of the Cinquecento, which largely focused on small-scale work. Yet when sculptors did work on a larger scale it still did not even approach the scale Leonardo intended for his monument.

<sup>66</sup> Yet Alberti, claims an *historia* is the true artistic challenge, privileging painting over sculpture because it lends itself more easily to it. He wrote, "Literary men, who are full of information about many subjects, will be of great assistance in preparing the composition of a 'historia', and the great virtue of this consists primarily in its invention. Indeed, invention is such that even by itself and without pictorial representation it can give pleasure." See Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, translated by Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), 95.

## LEONARDO'S VISION

It is not clear exactly when the decision was made to cast the horse at larger than life-size scale, but as soon as Leonardo embraced the idea, he was reluctant to abandon it. Leonardo certainly looked to examples of other equestrian monuments. Although he had not yet seen the statue of *Marcus Aurelius* in Rome, he certainly would have known of it as *the* ancient exemplar of the bronze equestrian monument. We have already established Leonardo's familiarity with Verrocchio's *Colleoni* [FIG. 3], and he certainly knew the *Regisole*, the Roman equestrian monument in Pavia [FIG. 22]. He spent some time there during his service to Ludovico, pursuing wide-ranging projects and collaborating with scholars like Luca Pacioli at the Università di Pavia. In addition, Leonardo would also have known Donatello's *Gattamelata* [FIG. 7]. Though it was not the first equestrian monument since antiquity, it was the first bronze equestrian monument dedicated to a general.<sup>67</sup> With the examples by Donatello and Verrocchio in mind, Leonardo set about creating an even more ambitious monument, intended to surpass those earlier examples. His was of a colossal size. The intent to cast the Sforza monument in a single piece further aligned Leonardo's horse with the antique. The great *Marcus Aurelius* [FIG. 2] represented the closest comparison to Leonardo's vision.

While his various drawings are difficult to date, it is clear that the composition goes through many transformations. One can, nonetheless, confidently arrange the drawings into phases. In the first phase, Leonardo explored poses probably impossible at colossal and perhaps even at life-size scale. Pollaiuolo had envisioned a rearing horse trampling a fallen adversary [FIG. 21]. Leonardo, too, first considered a rearing horse. A drawing in Windsor Castle shows some of his earliest

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<sup>67</sup> H. W. Janson, "The Revival of Antiquity in Early Renaissance Sculpture" in Sarah Blake McHam, ed., *Looking at Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 52.

ideas [FIG. 23].<sup>68</sup> The compositions changed continuously as Leonardo sought the perfect pose for his statue.

The Windsor sheet particularly illustrates the artist grappling with the demands of pose and scale. While the intended size of the sculpture is not evident in these drawings, the evolution of the design shows his struggle to find a pose that could be cast in a single piece. He turned to issues of scale when he designed the casting mechanisms. The frenetic lines and slight translations of pose on this sheet further emphasize a quickly evolving vision. Between the three main versions on the page the proportion of horse to rider varies slightly, but the man is always exaggerated in size compared to the horse. Much like the ancient *Marcus Aurelius*, the large rider asserts virility and power, which, in Leonardo's version, is nonetheless complemented by the dynamic horse. Therefore his intended statue was as much a monument to the artist's virtuosic skill as it was to the victorious military general.

The pose, size, and technical skill needed to execute the Sforza monument set this commission apart from all precedents. After executing many drawings of rearing horses, Leonardo's design evolved into one in which he removed the fallen adversary and focused exclusively on the horse and rider. By excluding the fallen foe he lost the physical support he needed to balance the weight of a rearing composition. The aforementioned drawing in the collections of the Royal Library indicates this important moment of transition. Beginning with the largest drawing at the middle right of the page [FIG. 24, NO. 1], he drew a rearing horse with the rider's right arm raised above his head.<sup>69</sup> The horse rears over a fallen foe, looking down at him with great attention. Leonardo's realization of the difficulty of casting such a pose becomes increasingly evident in the course of his revised drawings. In his second

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<sup>68</sup> It should be noted that Pollaiuolo had planned on creating a life-size equestrian monument and, moreover, had heretofore only created relatively small-scale bronzes.

<sup>69</sup> The proposed order of these drawings is my own, based on my observations of his working method on other sheets and his evolving design on this sheet.

design [FIG. 24, NO. 2] he adjusted the weight of the rider forward, allowing only his right arm to extend backwards instead of the weight of his entire upper body. The horse now gazes directly ahead, abandoning its previous concentration on its trampled victim. Though these first two drawings differ in scale, the second design explores a horse in a less dramatic rearing pose, without his front right knee and forearm bent at as sharp of an angle.<sup>70</sup> The left leg, previously mirroring the bend and height of the right leg, now is visibly lowered, though it is difficult to tell what lines describe the leg and which the foe. The hastiness of this small second sketch tells us he did not dwell on it.

While the artist certainly did not toil extensively over this particular sheet, he must have at least paused for rumination, given that he changed his design significantly – even on this single sheet. At the top of the page he drew the horse close to the scale of his first drawing [FIG. 24, NO. 3], but now he has not only eliminated the fallen adversary, he has conceived the horse in what can be described as a dignified trot. The front left and back right legs are raised simultaneously as much of the horse's weight rests on its midsection and front right leg with a locked elbow and knee.<sup>71</sup> Now, having drastically changed his previous design, the horse more closely resembles the best-known precedents: the *Colleoni* and *Gattamelata* monuments; it has become more conventional. Leonardo faintly indicates a rider before sketching a fourth pose [FIG. 24, NO. 4]. In nearly the same posture of the third, this horse raises his two bent legs slightly higher. Instead of a clearly vertical line as before, the horse's front right leg and barrel lean forward just enough to indicate motion beyond the movement of the two bent legs. The left rear leg also bends forward slightly, with the rest of the horse's barrel. The crest of the horse's

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<sup>70</sup> In equine anatomy, the term *elbow* is used to describe where the horse's leg meets the barrel of its body and the term *forearm* describes the area between the elbow and the knee. The term *knee* refers to the joint midway through his leg, just as in human anatomy.

<sup>71</sup> A detailed study of this pose is carried out on a sheet in the Royal Library, 12293r [FIG. 27].

neck extends forward as the horse's muzzle is now pulled more tightly into his chest, further emphasizing forward motion. The pose is reminiscent of Verrocchio's *Colleoni*, especially in the pulling in of the muzzle. The rider is also more exaggerated: he actively arches his upper back forward, pointing a sword before him. Again, Leonardo likely sketched this as quickly as the third version in an effort to explore another translation of pose.

Before completing his sketches on the sheet, Leonardo drew one last figure group [FIG. 24, NO. 5]. The most finished sketch on the page, this fifth design represents his newest and most complete vision for the Sforza monument. Having dispensed with the rearing pose, fallen enemy, and foolish notion that he could cast the support needed for a rearing horse, he has now conceived a realizable design. Consciously avoiding direct quotation from previous models, the combined elements of forward motion, active rider, and small supports beneath the horse's legs make this a unique design. The horses of the third and fourth designs could even be almost direct translations, perhaps from memory, of *Gattamelata* [FIG. 7] and *Colleoni* [FIG. 3], respectively. Departing from the models, in his fifth design Leonardo now conceived a far more dynamic, forward-facing rider whose body turns to his right as his right arm reaches back with a sword, perhaps directing his cavalry.<sup>72</sup> Having abandoned the rearing pose, he designed the horse with a raised leg, which he pursued in further detailed studies [FIGS. 25, 26, 27]. Leonardo's rider also sits much further back on the horse's barrel. Light lines indicate that he originally drew the left forearm reaching forward with his sword as in the third and fourth versions. Compared to Donatello's static general and Verrocchio's slightly more active general composition, Leonardo's general turns and in doing so indicates continuing motion

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<sup>72</sup> There is, of course, a possibility that the fourth and fifth drawings on the sheets could be transposed. Regardless, they both represent the final composition reached on this sheet, only differing in finish and attention given the rider.

through the curve of his spine. The artist's intention to show movement in many planes, as he does here, predates the dynamism of Cinquecento sculpture.<sup>73</sup>

Though some of his other drawings of rearing horses include a rider wearing a helmet [FIG. 40], much like Verrocchio's *Colleoni* [FIG. 3], Leonardo doesn't give any indications of dress or armor on the Windsor sheet [FIG. 23]. In the fourth and, especially, the fifth drawing [FIG. 28], a cloak flutters from the rider's right shoulder over his left forearm. The cape-like accoutrement imbues the figure with a far more imperial sense than any of his previous designs. He makes another visual link to antiquity by now including two small supports below the horse's raised legs: a vase underneath his foreleg and a tortoise underneath the rear leg. While we do not know if the support elements were included in the clay model, it seems that he at least considered them for a time. Significantly, the supports made both a visual and technical connection to the past. In another drawing, possibly predating this one, Leonardo was likely looking at Donatello's classicizing work [FIG. 29].<sup>74</sup> The profile of this horse echoes that of *Gattamelata* [FIG. 7], but some faint lines indicate where Leonardo departed from the model. The legs and barrel of the horse are arranged as Donatello conceived them. Leonardo then turns the horse's head towards the viewer, invigorating the composition. He indicates three positions for the sword, making it difficult to discern which was the final intention. The faintest lines show the rider's right arm holding a sword in a nearly vertical position. One of the other two positions shows the sword tilted forward, mimicking Donatello. A third, perhaps final sketch, shows a sword held more vertically, with little indication of the

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<sup>73</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 409.

<sup>74</sup> This drawing is often associated with Leonardo's plans for the Trivulzio monument. Though it is very difficult to date the drawings in such a way to associate them with one project rather than the other, the inclusion of a tomb suggests the drawing's connection to the Trivulzio monument. From the Windsor Collection (RL 12356r), the experts agree that size of the rider and horse connect it to notes for the Trivulzio monument, and that it differs from what was agreed to be the final Sforza plans. For more on the drawings, see Carlo Pedretti, *Leonardo da Vinci: Drawings of Horses and Other Animals from the Royal Library at Windsor Castle* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984).

placement of the hand. This rendering, sketched hastily, almost gives the object a scepter-like form. Though he used militaristic elements less obviously than his predecessors, here the rider is shown wearing the military garb befitting a general.

Above all, these drawings illustrate Leonardo allowing pose and style to dictate symbolism. The evolution from impossible pose to one more reasonable and traditional indicates his growing awareness of the technical demands of the project. Yet, the artist still valued innovation, therefore he explored more feasible forms while deliberately seeking to preserve the unique character of his design. Without the obvious symbolism of a fallen adversary, he turned to portraying the rider in a dynamic and imperial manner, including the disparity of scale between horse and rider. Ultimately, the colossal size set Leonardo's monument apart from his predecessors. In pursuing that singular vision Leonardo established his reputation as a sculptor.

There are no records relating to the intended destination of Leonardo's monument. Previous equestrian monuments were designed for specific locales, and their significance partly depended on those specific sites. Leonardo's design, however, was not made for a specific site.<sup>75</sup> The model stood in the center of the large courtyard of the Corte Vecchia, now known as Castello Sforzesco, but this appears to have been an expedient placement, despite the symbolic connections to the fortress architecture of the Corte Vecchia [FIG. 30]. The statue, without a clearly intended setting, would have primarily been read in relation to the size of the viewer [FIG. 31], much like the *Dioscuri* of Monte Cavallo in Rome [FIG. 32]. Leonardo would have not only known of these colossal sculptures, he would have also understood it was their great size that impressed a political message upon the viewers. Leonardo's model, placed in the large open courtyard of the Corte Vecchia, would have made a clear visual connection to the Sforza family by nature of its

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<sup>75</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 418.

location. However, since the monument itself was not to be placed at the crest of a hill, at the entrance of any structure, or in relation to any other monuments, it was to be read almost entirely in terms of size. Clearly he was aware of the importance of context of viewing a monument, but the colossal size of the horse made the clearest connection to the power of the Sforza family.



## CASTING A COLOSSUS

Extensive notes on the casting process reveal that Leonardo clearly had technical experience; however, the colossal scale of the Sforza monument tested the limits of that knowledge. Leonardo made many designs related to the casting, but it is likely that he had little or no experience in casting bronze beyond the initial stages. His desire to solve the problem and his devotion to casting the monument is nonetheless evident in his many pages of notes.<sup>76</sup> Leonardo did not have the advantage of later treatises on bronze casting, such as Vannoccio Biringuccio's *Pirotechnia* or Cellini's *Trattato della Scultura*.<sup>77</sup> He had learned by observing Verrocchio. A close comparison of Leonardo's sketch of the proportions of a horse [FIG. 33] reveals its similarity to his master's [FIGS. 34]. Most scholars believe he would have been working in the lost wax method, the principal technique for casting bronze at the time. Some drawings provide important evidence of Leonardo's visualized progress through the casting process. First, the artist must build an armature of iron, upon which he then molds a clay model, the core of the eventual cast [FIG. 35]. However, most of Leonardo's drawings and notes prove that there are points in the complicated process that he probably never resolved.

It appears that Leonardo followed the traditional method of lost wax rather than the more time-consuming and difficult "indirect lost wax process". Given that he defiantly intended a single cast of enormous proportions, he necessarily resorted to the technique he knew best.<sup>78</sup> But as he adhered to Verrocchio's preferred method, he simultaneously set himself apart from him and other bronze masters, like

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<sup>76</sup> Sheets 141r through 157v of the Madrid Codex II show a sustained pursuit of casting the monument, while other sheets relating to the monument are scattered.

<sup>77</sup> *Pirotechnia* was published in 1540, after both Leonardo and Biringuccio's deaths. Cellini began work on his autobiography, including the *Trattato*, in 1558 as Vasari was working on revising his first version of the *Lives*. Interestingly, Cellini also left Florence to serve Francis I as court artist, just as Leonardo had done only a generation before him.

<sup>78</sup> Massimo Leoni, "Casting Technique in Verrocchio's Workshop When the Christ and St. Thomas Was Made" in Loretta Dolcini, ed., *Verrocchio's Christ and Saint Thomas: A Masterpiece of Sculpture from Renaissance Florence* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 83-98.

Donatello, by planning to cast the monument himself. Donatello relied upon master bell founders to cast the *Gattamelata*.<sup>79</sup> With time and technological advances, largely in response to military demands, artists like Verrocchio were starting to cast more sophisticated bronzes, albeit with the aid of many assistants. Leonardo, by contrast, pursued his project with a singular vision and did not even reach the stage in which he would have required assistants. Had he reached the later stages of casting, he could not have advanced without assistance.

It is unclear how much progress Leonardo made. Various accounts record a terracotta model at the Corte Vecchia, presumably on the scale of his intended bronze.<sup>80</sup> Given the fragile material of the model, it seems unlikely that he would have left it outdoors for an extended period. One wonders, then, if the famous model was even the final one Leonardo planned to use in the casting. Did he give up on casting the horse entirely? Does its display prove the impossibility of the project?

Leonardo's notes help elucidate his intended casting process, but they also impart a sense of experimentation and doubt as he worked through his plans. Even on the earliest of the relevant pages in his notebooks he wrote, "If I could not make... If I..."<sup>81</sup>, clearly expressing doubts at the outset. He did not dwell on those doubts for long, however, for he launched into a description of the casting process, ending with: "Then, heat the form and cast your brass or copper with tin, and it will be perfect."<sup>82</sup> Despite his confidence, he later described the trial and experimentation involved in the complicated process. He often sounds very unsure of how best to proceed. For example, when discussing the type of wood to fuel the furnace he wrote: "Try out whichever wood is best for alloying: willow, alder, or

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<sup>79</sup> Leoni, "Casting Technique in Verrocchio's Workshop", 87.

<sup>80</sup> Discussed at length later, the accounts of the model all praise its great size; therefore one can presume that the model was indeed as large as he intended the final cast bronze.

<sup>81</sup> Madrid Codex II, fol. 141r.

<sup>82</sup> Madrid Codex II, fol. 141r.

spruce."<sup>83</sup> He described the preparation of the mold, stating: "Experiment to see if soaking the form with resin and oil makes it impervious to humidity, and if it receives the bronze."<sup>84</sup> Describing his plan for channeling the molten bronze, he wrote:

I have a good many doubts about the bronze entering the mold from several furnaces. There is the possibility that the bronze, entering with greater vehemence and quantity in one place than in the other, could reach different levels in those places. That is, if the bronze pours in great quantity on the back and little on the head, it may happen that the bronze of the back, by transverse and lengthy ways, will flow on to the head. And in this case, there would be grave doubts concerning the perfection of the casting. Wherefore, to remove the doubt, I shall build a channel that has two spouts at one of the ends... and a spout... at a distance of 2 braccia at the other. I am sure that they will unite on the third... but I do not know if the melts will stick together.<sup>85</sup>

Despite such confidence, his writings reveal the challenges of casting the monument. For example, his initial intention to cast the horse upside down required too large of a pit; therefore, he resorted to casting it on its side. On December 20th, 1493 he wrote, "I have decided to cast the horse without its tail and on its side."<sup>86</sup> Virginia Bush notes that, "In the lying down position the horse's tail was to be cast separately, but the tail shown ...suggests that Leonardo even hoped to be able to make the bronze flow into the intricate, narrow spaces in the tail in the same cast with the rest of the horse."<sup>87</sup> That particular intention illustrates his desire to cast the horse in a single piece, despite the mounting complications. His ambitious explorations of the techniques demanded by his vision have almost unanimously been hailed as innovations, prescient of the accomplishments of casting that come later in the Cinquecento and achieved in the parallel equestrian monument to Louis XIV of

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<sup>83</sup> Madrid Codex II, fol. 143v.

<sup>84</sup> Madrid Codex II, fol. 145r.

<sup>85</sup> Madrid Codex II, fol. 146r.

<sup>86</sup> The English translation comes from Martin Kemp, "Leonardo's Drawings for 'Il Cavallo del Duca Francesco di Bronzo': The Program of Research" in Diane Cohl Ahl, ed., *Leonardo da Vinci's Sforza Monument Horse: The Art and the Engineering*. (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1995), 75. The original Italian comes from the Madrid Codex II, fol. 151v.

<sup>87</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 420.

France [FIGS. 36, 37]. However, it is unlikely he even began digging the enormous pit for the complicated furnace necessitated by the equine behemoth.<sup>88</sup> Virginia Bush, one of the most knowledgeable about the project, reminds us that there is no evidence that Leonardo ever finished preparing the furnace pit, or that he even began. All that remains are various drawings and notes detailing his proposed method [FIG. 38]. There is also no evidence that his casting pit would have been able to support a successful casting. Fortunately for Leonardo's reputation, his "lengthy investigations had delayed the casting until other factors intervened and prevented its completion."<sup>89</sup> Yet, despite an aborted project, we credit him as an innovative designer.

Yet, at times, Leonardo did not seem overly concerned with the manifold challenges, largely because he was confident in finding solutions to the problems he encountered. Almost in defense of his experimental process, he wrote: "The forms of statuary require great labor because the model, in particular, demands great study and ability from its creator."<sup>90</sup> Writing in Italian, "*studio e 'ngiegnio*", Leonardo privileged both the vision of the artist and the model itself as evidence of his masterful design.

The colossal size of the monument set it apart, but also made it impossible to execute. Even Ludovico expressed doubts. In July of 1489 he wrote a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici, explaining his concern that Leonardo could not execute the monument and asked for someone more experienced to assist in the casting.<sup>91</sup> In a

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<sup>88</sup> Peter G. Rush has devoted much effort to creating hypothetical reconstructions of casting molds, iron framework, and furnaces. Working with what Leonardo recorded in his drawings and notes, Rush completed the plans for him, illustrating his visions of the process, as he believed Leonardo to have been working. While valuable, these renderings simply illustrate our willingness to finish what Leonardo has left incomplete, without regard to the authenticity of such reconstructions. See Rush in W. Chandler Kirwin, "The Bubble Reputation: In the Cannon's and the Horse's Mouth (or the Tale of Three Horses)" in Diane Cohl Ahl, *Leonardo da Vinci's Sforza Monument Horse: The Art and the Engineering*. (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1995), 100-3.

<sup>89</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 420.

<sup>90</sup> Madrid Codex II, fol. 146v.

<sup>91</sup> Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie*, 25.

letter dated from the 8th of August, Lorenzo responded that there was no one else as qualified.<sup>92</sup> Lorenzo's response can be read in two possible ways: it either reflects his confidence in Leonardo's skill and belief that no one but he could do this, or it reflects a belief that *no one* could cast such a monument.

Witnesses recorded the model as an enormous pacing horse and rider [FIG. 39].<sup>93</sup> Though the model was the final version of a long design process, it may not necessarily be what Leonardo ultimately intended. The three-dimensional terracotta model was impressive, but was no guarantee of a successful cast. Yet, Leonardo completed the critical piece that was enough to satisfy patrons and astonish his contemporaries. In fact, he created a model that may not have represented his ultimate vision or even have been realizable in this form. In the end the model sufficed, both for its practical purpose and to foster Leonardo's reputation as a sculptor.

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<sup>92</sup> Laurie Smith Fusco and Gino Corti, "Lorenzo de' Medici on the Sforza Monument", *Achademia Leonardo da Vinci* 10 (1997): 35.

<sup>93</sup> The model was 12 braccia (about 21 feet or 720 cm), 3 times life size, 27 times the bulk of a living horse. Pacioli corroborates (horse measured 12 braccia from the ground to the nape of the neck. Also said that the bronze for it was 200,000 libbre of 12 oncie each (about 65,360 kg or 71.5 tons) See Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 416. Since this drawing shows the designs for transporting the model to the furnace, we can assume the posture of horse reflects a more final version of its pose.

## CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS

Though only a terracotta, the immense size of the model made a lasting impression on contemporary viewers. Leonardo's reputation grew as a sculptor. He certainly understood the sheer power of size. In 1504, Pomponio Guarico published his *De Sculptura*, in which he defined sculpture three times normal size as *colossi* and intended for gods. In her excellent study of the growing trend of colossal sculpture in the Cinquecento, Virginia Bush asserts that it was not until well into the Cinquecento that the term *colossal* was commonly used to describe contemporary sculpture.<sup>94</sup> Leonardo's horse helped define the new ideal. As perhaps the first true colossus of the Renaissance, his horse arguably had an influence on the reception of Michelangelo's *David*, which was immediately described as a *colossus*. Although Leonardo's monument was never completed, its renown spread far and wide. The idea, *concetto*, had displaced the realization, *mano*.

Almost immediately, witnesses described the model in terms of its size. Writers called it a colossus in Italian and Latin, describing it, for example, as a "triumph of the equestrian".<sup>95</sup> Paolo Giovio's brief biography of Leonardo

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<sup>94</sup> See Virginia Bush, *The Colossal Sculpture of the Cinquecento*. Outstanding Dissertations in the Fine Arts. (New York: Garland, 1976), XXII-XXV.

<sup>95</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 425. Virginia Bush included an invaluable list of contemporary Milanese accounts of the Sforza monument model, shown here with my own emphasis placed on the italicized words.

Baldassare Taccone, writing in 1493, wrote:

Vedi che in corte fa far di metallo  
per memoria dil padre un gran colosso  
i credo fermamente e senza fallo  
che gretia e Roma mai vide el *più grosso*.

Francisco Tantio, also writing in 1493, wrote:

Cognosciamo o illustrissimo principe te  
no esser mancho amatore della tua patria  
capo d'Insubri che del proprio Patre lo  
quale honori con *la magna e perpetua opera  
del gran colosso*.

Giovanni Tolentino, writing between 1492-94 wrote:

Inclita pax Latii fueram, tum fulgar in armis,  
Et mea Scipiadum gloria major erat.  
Hunc mihi, magne nepos, et tu, Lodovice,  
*[colossum]*

Ponitis, ut vivat nomen in astra meum.

After 1493, Lancino Corte, calling it the "triumph of the equestrian", wrote:  
Quisquis *colosson principis* vides, asta.

emphasized the artist's link to the masters of antiquity, famous for their *colossi*. Such a connection would have also been reinforced by Giovio's Latin dialogues, echoing the format and rhetoric of Pliny, whose writings were highly valued in the Renaissance. Despite the short format of Giovio's *Vite*, he gave significant attention to the horse: "For Lodovico Sforza he also made a clay model of a colossal horse to be cast in bronze, on which was to be seated the figure of the famous condottiere Francesco, Ludovico's father. The vehement life-like action of this horse as if panting is amazing, not less so the sculptor's skill and his consummate knowledge of nature."<sup>96</sup> Published in 1527, his biographical sketches were widely known and circulated, especially in Florence.<sup>97</sup> Significantly, in Giovio and other contemporary accounts, the fact that the sculpture was never realized is unimportant. Leonardo created nothing but a model, but his biographers were quite willing to "finish" it for him. Unanimous among contemporary accounts is the admiration for the colossal size of the horse. Leonardo had helped to establish the prestige of the colossus.

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Franciscus, auctor sfortiae sacer gentis,  
Ille ille bello est maximus, toga major.

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Opposita regione loci nec fana nec arcus  
Ipse triumphalis iam designatus equestris  
Excepturus heri fulgentia signa colossi.

<sup>96</sup> Paolo Giovio, *The Life of Leonardo*. Translated by Jean Paul Richter in *Biography and Early Art Criticism of Leonardo Da Vinci*, vol. 2 of *Leonardo da Vinci: Selected Scholarship*. Edited by Claire J. Farago. 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 70. Giovio also notably describe Leonardo's naturalism with admiration, though such remarks could be more reflective of what he believed to be characteristic of the artist's style.

<sup>97</sup> Closely tied to the Medici, Giovio spent his final years in Florence and was buried in the Medici family's Basilica of San Lorenzo at his death in 1552. In 1560 Francesco da Sangallo was commissioned to create a marble funerary monument to Paolo Giovio, which was finished and installed in a niche in 1574, where it still stands today. Also close to the Medici, Giorgio Vasari certainly would have known Giovio's dialogues and the writer himself, if not only by reputation. I find it significant that Francesco da Sangallo worked on this prominent monument to Giovio for the last eight years of the period between the two editions of Vasari's *Vite*.

## THE FALL OF THE HORSE

Due to circumstances of patronage, problems of execution, and/or issues of distraction, Leonardo never completed the monument. On the 18th of October, 1499, Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, in command of the French army, deposed Ludovico and gained control of Milan. In April of 1500, Ludovico was taken to France where he died in prison in 1508. Though he had previously led the Italians to victory against the French, Ludovico exhausted his resources in a significantly weakened state.<sup>98</sup> In 1494, Leonardo noted the reduction of funds, now diverted to more pressing military efforts.<sup>99</sup> He could not have been ignorant of the horse's uncertain future, especially if he anticipated his patron's eventual fall. Bronze allocated for the horse was conspicuously redirected for military purposes. Well aware that military endeavors take precedence over art, Leonardo wrote to Il Moro: "Of the horse I will say nothing because I know the times."<sup>100</sup> Yet, Leonardo did mention the horse. Despite his acquiescence, he was disappointed. At this point the model was ready to cast, though he was probably still trying to prepare the pit and design the complicated casting structure.

Subsequently, Leonardo became increasingly sensitive about the incomplete endeavor. In a letter to the *fabbricieri* of Piacenza, Leonardo reveals his self-conscious desire to maintain his reputation by placing himself above the workers in the Piacenza *fabbrica*: "I miseri studiosi... con che speranze è possono aspettare premio di lor virtù!"<sup>101</sup> Virginia Bush points to this telling exclamation at the end of his letter as indicative of his attitude toward the presumption of mere craftsmen vying for a commission that Leonardo himself coveted.<sup>102</sup> Bush astutely observes that in the

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<sup>98</sup> As the Milanese-Venetian league, the Italians defeated the French at Fornovo on July 6, 1495.

<sup>99</sup> Ludovico was quite obviously low on funds by the summer of 1495. Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 418, 419.

<sup>100</sup> Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie*, 41, 42.

<sup>101</sup> Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie*, 56.

<sup>102</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 419.



final version of the letter Leonardo did not mention the equestrian monument, perhaps to avoid reminding his reminders of its unfinished state.<sup>103</sup> Though he was not commissioned for the Piacenza project he was not deterred.

In an attempt to finally realize this vision, Leonardo eventually found a patron in Ludovico Sforza's greatest rival, Gian Giacomo Trivulzio. Trivulzio commissioned Leonardo to create an equestrian funerary monument. After a few years in Florence, the artist returned to Milan in 1506. He had secured the commission largely because of the renown he enjoyed for the unfinished Sforza monument. There is no doubt that Leonardo was as pleased with the opportunity to finally realize his great project as Trivulzio was to have a grand monument.

Dated sometime between 1504 and 1507, a document in the Archivio Notarile of Milan recorded the expenses related to the *monumento funerario del Maresciallo G. G. Trivulzio*, noting the expenditure of 3,046 ducats to date, with an expected total nearing 4,000 ducats.<sup>104</sup> With the notarial confirmation that this was a funerary monument, scholars have generally agreed that the drawing from the collections of the Royal Library [FIG. 40] is related to the Trivulzio commission. Whereas Leonardo had previously given less attention to the pedestal of his Sforza monument, for Trivulzio he now made sketches incorporating both the equestrian group and the sepulcher below. Beginning with the top and largest drawing, also the largest, Leonardo indicated his focus had now returned to the rearing horse [FIG. 41, NO. 1].<sup>105</sup> Resembling some of his initial drawings for the Sforza horse, he then developed

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<sup>103</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 419.

<sup>104</sup> Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie*, 107. The document also records that the marble arch of the sepulcher was to reach around 8 braccia from the ground. This quick notation indicates that, when compared with the drawings of marble base, the horse for the Trivulzio monument was not to be cast at the same colossal scale as he planned to do for Ludovico Sforza. Leonardo's designs for Trivulzio show the marble sepulcher and the horse at nearly a 1:1 scale, with the horse only slightly taller than the base in some versions. If he had planned to cast a colossal horse the horse would have been represented at about a 1.5:1 scale compared to the marble base at 8 braccia high. See note 85 for Pacioli's account of the height of Leonardo's model for the Sforza horse.

<sup>105</sup> As with the earlier sheet discussed at length, I propose this order based upon observations of his drawing method in other sheets and observations of the evolution of the drawings on this particular sheet.

the idea in a second drawing [FIG. 4I, NO. 2]. Leonardo returned to the figure of a fallen adversary.<sup>106</sup> After this hasty sketch, Leonardo drew a more detailed design, containing both the rearing horse and the fallen adversary [FIG. 4I, NO. 3]. Two last minor sketches on the sheet show a detail of the tomb decoration in a version of the sepulcher in a more pyramidal composition, and a detail of a decorative figure from the tomb [FIG. 4I, NOS. 4, 5].

Leonardo abandoned his previous colossal intentions, and instead focused his ambition on the dynamic, rearing horse [FIG. 42]. Though this commission did not even progress as far as the previous horse, Leonardo's designs nonetheless were influential. While these two equestrian monuments have often been valued as great achievements that could have been, they are far more important as records of Leonardo's remarkable ambition. After one patron was overthrown, Leonardo easily adapted both his allegiances and his designs to a new grandiose vision. Yet, both remain in the realm of the *concetto*, eclipsing the Renaissance emphasis upon the *mano*. A new aesthetic had been born.

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<sup>106</sup> Ironically enough, the adversary could easily represent Ludovico Sforza, to whom Leonardo owed almost twenty years of comfortable employment.

## LEONARDO'S GROWING REPUTATION

Since Leonardo now had not one, but two famously incomplete monuments behind him, one would expect his reputation to have been tarnished considerably. After all, this had been a society in which artists were craftsmen and achievements took form in tangible objects, not lofty unrealized plans. On the contrary, Leonardo was *still* admired as a painter, architect, engineer, and now, as a sculptor.

Indicating a major shift in thinking, importance was placed on Leonardo's mere efforts to construct the monument. As the *concetto* was displacing the *mano*, many of his contemporaries and most biographers thereafter were completely willing to credit Leonardo with extraordinary achievement, even though his sculptural endeavors were incomplete and/or nonexistent. His detractors, on the other hand, came to the logical conclusion that the Sforza monument was doomed from the start. The Anonimo Gaddiano wrote, "Again in Milan he likewise made a horse of immense grandeur, bearing upon it the Duke Francesco Sforza, a most beautiful work which was to be cast in bronze, a feat universally judged impossible, especially since he said he desired to cast it all in one piece; this work was never realized."<sup>107</sup> More briefly, Antonio Billi wrote, "He made a horse of immeasurable greatness in clay with Duke Francesco Sforza on it in order to cast it in bronze, but all judged it impossible since he wished to cast it in one piece."<sup>108</sup> Billi's critical response to the monument is significant given that it comprises three full lines of a biography that of just twenty-eight lines. These early critics, however, proved to be the minority.

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<sup>107</sup> The Anonimo Gaddiano, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 75.

<sup>108</sup> Antonio Billi, *Leonardo da Vinci*, edited by Fabio Benedettucci, in *Biography and Early Art Criticism of Leonardo da Vinci*, vol. 1 of *Leonardo da Vinci: Selected Scholarship*. Edited by Claire J. Farago. 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 68, 69. It was originally published in 1518. I have noted my own English translation. In Italian: "Fece di terra un cavallo di imisurata grandezza, suvi il duca Francesco Sforza per gittarlo di bronzo, ma di tutti fu giudicato impossibile perché voleva gittarlo di uno pezo."

In 1546 Sabba da Castiglione wrote a detailed biography of Leonardo, from which Vasari later plagiarized whole passages.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps the first to address the negative critical attention regarding the Sforza monument, Sabba wrote:

While he was engaged on this work [the *Last Supper*] Leonardo proposed to the duke that he should make a huge equestrian statue in bronze as a memorial to his father; then he started and carried the work forward on such a scale that it was impossible to finish it. There have even been some to say (men's opinions are so various and, often enough, so envious and spiteful) that Leonardo *had no intention of finishing it when he started*. This was because it was so large that it proved an insoluble problem to cast it in one piece; and one can realize why, the outcome being what it was, many came to the conclusion they did, seeing that so many of his works remained unfinished. The truth, however, is surely that Leonardo's profound and discerning mind was so ambitious that this was itself an impediment; and the reason he failed was because he endeavored to add excellence to excellence and perfection to perfection. As our Petrarch has said, *the desire outran the performance*. In fact, those who saw the great clay model that Leonardo made considered that they had never seen a finer or more magnificent piece of work.<sup>110</sup>

Though still mystified by the colossal size, Sabba recognized Leonardo's brilliant ambition. Sabba was perplexed by the ambition but did not yet perceive it as self-promotion.

Equally important in the evaluation of Leonardo's designs was the praise of his great naturalism. Initially it was the size that impressed; then as critics noted the monument's unrealized state, remarks about the horse's striking naturalism shifted the basis for the monument's acclaim. Written in 1527, Paolo Giovio's brief biography emphasized the equal importance of technical skill and naturalism: "The vehement life-like action of this horse as if painting is amazing, not less so the

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<sup>109</sup> An interesting figure in both Renaissance history and for the purposes of this project, Sabba da Castiglione is a self-fashioned artist-courtier. For a detailed look at Sabba, see Ranieri Moore Cavaceppi, "Fra Sabba da Castiglione: The Self-Fashioning of a Renaissance Knight Hospitaller." (PhD dissertation, Brown University, 2011).

<sup>110</sup> Sabba da Castiglione, *Life of Leonardo da Vinci: Florentine Painter and Sculptor · 1452-1519*, published in 1546, reprinted in *Biography and Early Art Criticism of Leonardo da Vinci*, vol. 1 of *Leonardo da Vinci: Selected Scholarship*. Edited by Claire J. Farago. 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 86, 87. Addressing Leonardo's critics, Sabba could be referring to the artists' contemporaries in Milan, who could have been jealous of the foreign artist's powerful position in the Sforza court. Vasari wrote almost an identical reprimand to the critics of Leonardo's innovative *concetto*. The emphasis added is my own. The line from Petrarch comes from his *Triumph of Love* (ii. 7-9).

sculptor's skill and his consummate knowledge of nature."<sup>111</sup> Here, quite evidently, the naturalism of his paintings is grafted onto the reception of his great horse.

Sabba da Castiglione was the first to write of the destruction of the clay model: "It was preserved until the French came to Milan under King Louis and smashed it to pieces. Also lost is a little wax model which was held to be perfect, together with a reference book which Leonardo composed on the anatomy of horses."<sup>112</sup> The destruction of Leonardo's model represents a pivotal, early shift in Leonardo's reputation. By 1546, the horse had already taken on legendary status, with few or no eyewitnesses remaining to attest to the model's impressive, though brief, existence.<sup>113</sup> Leonardo, now dead twenty-seven years, was assimilated into the artistic mythologies of the recent past. Leonardo's colossal horse helped inspire a trend toward colossal sculpture. Almost fifty years after the project was abandoned, Leonardo's biographers emphasized his equestrian monument. Despite never finding the patronage he desired in Florence nor completing his monumental work in Milan, Leonardo's reputation was on the rise. It was ultimately in France that Leonardo found the kind of patronage he desired, and it was in France that he chose to spend his final years.

The French, according to Leonardo's early biographers, were responsible for the destruction of Leonardo's model for the Sforza horse. Vasari wrote: "...Those who saw the large model that Leonardo fashioned in clay thought that they had never seen anything more beautiful or superb, and it lasted until the French, who smashed it to pieces, came to Milan with King Louis of France."<sup>114</sup> It is possible that Italian biographers, with a largely Florentine bias, embraced an explanation that

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<sup>111</sup> Paolo Giovio, *Life of Leonardo*, 70. Giovio's use of "vehement" is curious, but telling of the contemporary reaction to this imposing horse. In the original Latin he used the word "vehementer".

<sup>112</sup> Sabba, *Life of Leonardo*, 87.

<sup>113</sup> Sabba da Castiglione's biography of Leonardo was first published in 1546.

<sup>114</sup> Vasari, Oxford, 291, 292.

placed blame on the French for the great monument's arrested production and ultimate destruction. Though a native Florentine, Leonardo sought patronage outside of Florence in foreign courts. Not the Florentine republic, but Ludovico Sforza of Milan and Francis I, King of France, were his two most important patrons. Instead of acknowledging the dearth of Leonardo's finished work or admitting their own slow acceptance of the artist's innovative ambition, his biographers instead shrewdly demonized the French. The biographical tradition insisted upon celebrating the artist-genius as a product of his native Florence.

Around the time of the supposed destruction of the model, Ercole d'Este wrote to Trivulzio, requesting use of "la forma di terra" – that is, the model – for his own equestrian monument.<sup>115</sup> Pietro Aretino wrote to Vasari that an anonymous sculptor planned to cast a horse that would surpass Leonardo's.<sup>116</sup> However, he could have meant his words satirically, making a jest about the infamously unfinished project. Clearly the reputation of Leonardo's model long outlasted its physical remains.

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<sup>115</sup> Bush, "Leonardo's Sforza Monument", 421. He wrote this letter on September 19th, 1501.

<sup>116</sup> The letter from Pietro Aretino to Vasari is dated 7 June 1536, found in Pietro Aretino, *The Letters of Pietro Aretino*. Translated by Thomas Caldecot Chubb (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967).

## **THE PARAGONE**

Already famous for his horse, Leonardo was equally authoritative when it came to contemporary debates regarding the *paragone*. In his *Trattato della Pittura*, Leonardo sketched what would become an influential text about the comparison of the arts of sculpture and painting.<sup>117</sup> This is one of the more curious things Leonardo ever wrote. Despite the many years he spent trying to cast a remarkable sculpture, Leonardo now denigrates sculpture as "a most mechanical exercise," writing:

The sculptor in creating his work does so by the strength of his arm by which he consumes the marble, or other obdurate material in which his subject is enclosed: and this is done by most mechanical exercise, often accompanied by great sweat which mixes with the marble dust and forms a kind of mud daubed all over his face. The marble dust flours him all over so that he looks like a baker; his back is covered with a snowstorm of chips, and his house is made filthy by the flakes and dust of stone.<sup>118</sup>

Granted, Leonardo is writing about marble sculpture in which he distinguishes between the rudimentary mechanics of marble carving and the intellectual pursuit of casting. Quite clearly opposing the *mano* and the *concetto*, Leonardo favored the labors of the mind over those of the body. Not lost on his biographers or commentators on the *paragone*, the comparison to Michelangelo was obvious. Without naming his greatest rival, Leonardo made explicit reference to Michelangelo. By insulting the physicality of carving marble, he privileged his own material and approach as more intellectual, and therefore the more commendable pursuit.

It is also possible that Leonardo belittled sculpture in an effort to shape the critical reception of his own failed works. Had he emphasized sculpture as the more laudable art, he would have undercut his own status as an artist. In fact, he never

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<sup>117</sup> Kenneth Clark asserts that some version of the *Trattato*, though certainly not in its complete form, circulated in the time between Vasari's two editions of the *Lives*. He believes that this rudimentary version of the more formal collection of Leonardo's notes was first compiled then and circulated in several parts from the sixteenth century until Jean Paul Richter reassembled them and published them as *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci* in 1883. See Jean Paul Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

<sup>118</sup> Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 136.

mentions bronze casting. Instead, he describes himself as both an accomplished painter, for whom there is an extant body of work, and a practicing sculptor. Of course, as a painter, he was capable of the sculptural arts, too, but it is clearly a secondary activity for him. He wrote,

As practicing myself the art of sculpture no less than that of painting, and doing both the one and the other in the same degree, it seems to me that without suspicion of unfairness I may venture to give opinion as to which of the two is the more intellectual, and of the greater difficulty and perfection.<sup>119</sup>

In such a statement he asserts his reputation as an artist skilled in more than one medium. On the other hand, as Charles Seymour hypothesized, Leonardo's expressed preference for painting could stem from his own disappointment over the incomplete monuments.<sup>120</sup> As such, Leonardo found a clever way to turn a disappointing failure to his advantage. By writing the *Trattato*, he astutely avoided as the stigma of a failed sculptor; rather, he asserted his position as an intellectual artist, accomplished in both painting and sculpture.

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<sup>119</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, edited and translated by Edward McCurdy (Garden City, N.Y: Garden City Publishing, 1941), 854.

<sup>120</sup> Seymour, *Sculpture in Italy*, 8.



## **DESIRE OUTRAN PERFORMANCE**

Leonardo da Vinci was undeniably ambitious. For about fifty years he pursued a wider range of intellectual interests than any artist before him. Insatiably curious, he illustrated the delicate forms of a human fetus with the same attention he gave to designing a prototype for a flying machine. His interests knew no limits. Leonardo exploited impeccable draftsmanship better than any of his predecessors. His captivating drawings, enticing project proposals, and keen self-presentation made him a desirable artist and a model for subsequent artists. Yet, Leonardo's ambition outran performance.

Scholars tirelessly attempting to attribute sculpture to Leonardo miss the larger point: Leonardo, without having completed any major sculptural works, is still considered a celebrated sculptor. This is astonishing! By Quattrocento standards, which valued finished work and regarded artists as craftsmen, Leonardo should have been considered a failure. Yet, instead, he represents a new idea of the artist, one who was valued for his innovation and vision above all else.

Taking what he learned in Verrocchio's workshop, Leonardo left Florence for Milan in an audacious move that would have a lasting effect on his reputation as a sculptor. Much of the recent scholarship focuses on Leonardo's supposed sculpture or his important time in Milan. Yet, when we consider his Milan period we learn more about the artist as "sculptor" and his lasting effect on the development of Renaissance art. Through him we gain a better understanding of the power of reputation, growing notion of competition, and changing status of the artist.

Leonardo clearly recognized the power of reputation, and he carefully cultivated his own. By calling himself a sculptor, offering his skills to important potential patrons, and recording knowledge of painting and sculpture in the *paragone* debate, he demonstrated a keen awareness of how to shape contemporary perception. Though he trained with one of the best artists in Florence, Leonardo

sought to establish an independent career, laying the groundwork for the artist-genius of the Cinquecento. He demonstrates a fierce competitiveness in seeking key patronage, contributing to the *paragone*, and directly contending with Michelangelo in the Sala del Cinquecento.

Above all, Leonardo helped redefine the artistic values of the Renaissance. Leonardo astutely found a patron as ambitious as himself. By proposing, designing, and pursuing an innovative, singular vision for the Sforza monument, Leonardo generated public interest far in excess of his actual accomplishment. His remarkable drawings, careful self-presentation, and polymathic pursuits convinced his audience of his numerous abilities. When the horse was left unfinished, most contemporaries had now relinquished prior expectations regarding finish. The *concetto* substituted for a finished project, which reflects a major shift in Renaissance thinking. Just thirty years after his death, his champions already far outweighed his critics, and the story of the horse evolved into a veritable legend of Leonardo's accomplishment. Vasari's *Life of Leonardo*, among other early biographies, canonized the artist and his exceptional talents. Hardly questioned even in the present day, our mythic conception of the artist has prevented us from asking the obvious question: Given the resources necessary for its completion, could Leonardo have realized his vision for the Sforza monument? Considering what we know of his intentions, his progress on the project, and his lack of experience in the actual casting of bronze, it is clear that Leonardo would not have been able to realize the colossal single-cast bronze for which he became famous.

When one abandons the idea of Leonardo the sculptor – most of which attributions are tentative at best – one is left only with his plans, contemporary responses to those plans, and five centuries of scholars attempting to recreate what could have been. In the end, what could have been is far less important than what never was. What could have been the greatest sculptural monument of the

Renaissance has purely been the creation of prevailing scholarship. Leonardo gave us just enough for us to imaginatively finish the project for him. The myth of his accomplishment lends itself to a narrative we have been all too keen to accept. After all, we tend to want to discuss art that actually exists, but Leonardo is one of the few artists for whom we always have been willing to make an exception.