"Ogni Pittore Dipinge Sé"
Leonardo da Vinci and "Automimesis"¹

Frank Zöllner

You can run,
but you can’t hide.
Clint Eastwood

"Ogni pittore dipinge sé", "Every painter paints himself", is a Tuscan proverb which can be found for the first time in Italian literature between 1477 and 1479. Similar notions are known from antiquity, particularly from the discussion of personal style in rhetoric.² The proverb, however, does not seem to have existed in the Middle Ages.³

In the 15th century "Every painter paints himself" or "automimesis", as it has been labeled recently⁴, addresses two basic problems which I shall discuss in the

¹ This contribution was delivered as a 25 minute-lecture and I have not tried to modify or disguise the informality of the spoken argument. References and a brief summary of some points of the discussion can be found in the notes.
³ A revival of the arguments taken from antique rhetoric can be found in Angelo Poliziano, Opera omnia, Bale 1553, p. 113 (Epist. VIII).
following paper, firstly, the changing attitude towards the value of personal expression in artistic creation, and secondly the question of whether "automimesis" has to do with the use of types and stereotypes in 15th century painting.

In art historical writing the proverb "Every painter paints himself" refers to an artist who creates himself involuntarily in his work. At least from the middle of the 16th century onwards this proverb has been understood as a concept of artistic creation with implications that are almost entirely positive. Vasari in the life of Michelangelo⁵ and Baldinucci in the life of Caravaggio⁶ emphasize that artists have their own way and that even eccentric features of an artist's character which can be found in his works of art should be accepted. However, in the 15th century and particularly in the writings of Leonardo da Vinci "Every painter paints himself" had a different and not at all positive meaning.⁷ The notion of "automimesis" was understood by Leonardo as a major defect of contemporary painting and in 15th-century literature the Tuscan proverb meant some inevitable compulsion in the human character. As an example I could quote from a collection of Florentine droll stories, once attributed to Angelo Poliziano and written between 1477 and 1479:

"Cosimo said, that one would rather forget a hundred charities than one insult and that the offender never forgives and that every painter paints himself."⁸


⁷ The meaning of "Ogni pittore dipinge sé" between the 15th and the end of the 16th century changed significantly. In the examples quoted below and in other sources, e.g. in a poem by Matteo Franco (cf. L. Pulci/M. Franco, Il "Libro dei Sonetti", ed. G. Dolci, Milan 1933, p. 24), in a comedy by Giovan Maria Cecchi (cf. Giovanna Maria Cecchi, Commedie inedita, ed. G. Tortoli, Florence 1855, p. 167; Cecchi died in 1587) and Anton Francesco Doni, La seconda libreria, Venice 1551, c. 30v, it is simply said that the painter paints himself whereas in a later source we read that the good painter paints himself: "Ogni buon pittore dipinge sé" (cf. Orlando Pescetti, Proverbi italiani, Venice 1603, c. 283r).

⁸ Diceva Cosimo che si dimenticano prima cento benefici che una ingiuria, e che ingiuria non perdona mai, e che ogni dipintore dipinge sé. Quoted from S. Battaglia, Grande dizionario della lingua italiana, IV (1966), 512, No. 20; the attribution to Poliziano, doubted by Battaglia, is by A. Wesselski (ed.), Angelo Polizianos Tagebuch (1477–1479) mit vierhundert Schwänken und
In this instance the Tuscan proverb elucidates the general human inclination always to remember the bad and to forget the good. Moreover, bad habits are rooted so deeply that the offender by his evil and unchangeable nature is unable to forgive. The one who cannot avoid offending is unable to forgive. This inevitable human weakness is again demonstrated by the proverb that every painter paints himself.

In Italian literature of the 15th and early 16th centuries most references to “automimesis” illustrate the psychological commonplace that there are unchangeable and inevitable compulsions in man. A connection to any particular painting of those days seems not to have been intended and in only one instance a particular painter, Leonardo da Vinci, is accused of “automimesis” (see below). Thus generally the proverb “Every painter paints himself” was not at all personalized and therefore one could infer that in the 15th century “automimesis” was a literary topos which had a different association to the psychology of individual paintings than it had in later centuries. That is, “automimesis” in those days had fewer or different psychological implications than it has today.

In discussing “automimesis” it has been argued that in the 15th century a large number of painters involuntarily depicted themselves in their works. Particularly Fra Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli often repeated their own physiognomy in almost any face on their paintings because they simply could not avoid painting themselves.9 Our concept of physiological likeness may be different from corresponding concepts of the Renaissance beholder but the visual evidence seems to confirm that in fact both Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli painted themselves. Filippo in some of his paintings liked to produce square heads and his self-portraits which have been identified in his paintings are of a similar shape. Thus for instance in the “Coronation of the Virgin” (Fig. 1) square heads are common to some figures as well as to a bald-headed individual looking at the beholder from the lower left corner of the painting.10

Another example is Botticelli who in the “Adoration of the Magi” (Fig. 2) – if we agree with the current reading of this painting – depicted almost half a dozen faces very much like the young man to the right which is believed to be a

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Thus both Botticelli and Fra Filippo seem to have reproduced their own likeness involuntarily in other persons or figures they depicted. Taking into account our incomplete knowledge about artist's self-portraiture in Quattrocento painting one could have some doubts whether Fra Filippo and Botticelli really painted themselves physically. At this point I suggest that we should at least ask if “automimesis” involves yet more complex problems of 15th century painting as well. For instance, accusing Fra Filippo of constantly depicting himself is not entirely justified because there is a portrait bust on Filippo’s tomb in Spoleto that does not exactly confirm his having had a stout head (Fig. 3). Only the rather large ears are easily recognizable both in Fra Filippo’s supposed self-portraits and in the Spoleto monument. However, the bust was done in 1492, 13 years after Fra Filippo’s death when square heads might have become unfashionable, and the bust may just be the idealized type of a portrait. Similarly, it has been argued that Botticelli in the Uffizi “Adoration” idealized both his own self-portrait and other faces depicted in this picture, thus leading the 20th-century beholder to believe that the 15th-century painter had painted himself.

Relying only on the visual evidence it is almost impossible to decide whether Fra Filippo involuntarily painted himself or whether he frequently used the type of a square head, or if his esthetic ideal was a square head. At this point one

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12 In the discussion of this paper Prof. C. L. Frommel pointed out that Fra Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli might be inadequate examples for the analysis of “automimesis” because it still remains quite unclear if indeed self-portraits can be found in the paintings mentioned above. I agree with Prof. Frommel’s view on the uncertainty of self-portraiture in Fra Filippo and Botticelli and with his further suggestion that for “automimesis” one should discuss painters of which we have more reliable self-portraits in their paintings such as Pietro Perugino (Vatican, Sistine Chapel, “Delivery of the Keys”, c. 1490), Luca Signorelli (Orvieto, Duomo, “Anti-Christ”, c. 1500) or Raffael (Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura, “School of Athens”, c. 1509–1511). However, with my choice of examples I tried to get as close as possible to Leonardo’s point of view who had left Florence in 1482 and thus could not have known the “better” examples of Signorelli, Perugino and Raffael when he started to write about “automimesis” in 1490. In considering the problem of self-portraiture of Quattrocento artists one should remember that only with the second edition of Vasari’s “Lives” the identification of an individual artist’s likeness became as important as it is today and that earlier sources before Vasari only mention three artist’s self-portraits: Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi (both Florence, S. Croce) and Orcagna (Florence, Orsanmichele). For this problem see W. Prinz, Vasaris Sammlung von Kunstgebldnissen, Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz 12, 1966, Beihett; for a more critical view see C. Hope, Historical Portraits in the “Lives” and in the Frescoes of Giorgio Vasari, in: Giorgio Vasari. Tra decorazione ambientale e storiografia artistica (1981), ed. G. C. Garfagnini, Florence 1985, pp. 321–338; for a general view see E. Castelnuovo, Il significato del ritratto pittorico nella società, in: Storia d’Italia, V, 2, Turin 1973, pp. 1031–1094.

13 Cf. Hatfield (see note 11), pp. 81–83.
should accept that a combination of these explanations is possible and that an idealized understanding of physiognomical likeness existed for 15th-century painters. Therefore the facial features repeatedly occurring in the works of Fra Filippo and Botticelli need not have been accurate or lifelike representations of their master’s individual physiognomy. Rather, Fra Filippo’s square heads and Botticelli’s stereotype faces should remind us of the simple fact that painters used and still use favourite types. These types, of course, could have been automimetical reproductions of their master’s features but also they could have been handy workshop patterns or esthetic ideals used for various reasons.

Generally, the use of ideals, patterns and types in painting had to do with the requirements of a commission and, to a varying extent, with a painter’s particular skills and with his individual choice. The point I would like to make is that exactly this choice links the use of patterns with “automimesis”, or in other words: every painter paints himself also insofar as his own psychology forces his choice of a particular type. For example, Fra Filippo may have chosen a square type because his head was square or because, as Vasari would have put it, he had a square mind. However, Filippo’s personal choice of square types may also be the result of his training as a young artist when he had learnt to use this type.

Other examples may clarify this point. It has been said that Leonardo had favourite male types, either the boy with female features – which we will see later – or the old man with a slightly hooked nose (Fig. 4). Following the current theories about “automimesis” it could be argued that one of those types may have resembled Leonardo’s physiognomy. Yet for instance this version of the older type, also known from antique coins and used by his teacher Verrocchio, was

16 Vasari, _Le vite_, ed. Milanesi, II, 395, footnote (life of Donatello): In the first edition of the “Lifes” he criticizes medieval sculptors for always producing round figures because they had round minds (spiriti tondi).
more likely a manifestation of Leonardo's artistic training than a reflection of his mind. 

Leonardo's use of types is confirmed by other examples, for instance by the chubby faced child common to the earlier version of the "Virgin of the Rocks" (Fig. 5) and to the Burlington House Cartoon (Fig. 6). Similarly, Leonardo used a particular female type for the "Virgin of the Rocks" for "St Anne" (Fig. 7) and a drawing of the "Leda" (Fig. 8).19

A painter's choice which can be labeled with the Tuscan proverb "Every painter paints himself" is a phenomenon that we would call personal style.20 However, it was not my purpose to discuss here the notion of personal style nor the roots of Giovanni Morelli's method. Instead I would like to analyse a sermon by Gerolamo Savonarola (1497) where the connection between "automimesis" and the use of types in 15th-century art is confirmed:

"And one says that every painter paints himself. He does not indeed paint himself as man because he produces images of lions, horses, men and women which are not identical with himself, but he paints himself as painter, that is according to his concept (congetto). And although there are different fantasies and figures of the painters who are painting, they are nevertheless all [done] according to his concept."21


19 No. 12516 at The Royal Library, Windsor Castle. For other kinds of types, such as reversal of composition, see K. H. Velman, Studies on Leonardo da Vinci I. Linear Perspective and the Visual Dimensions of Science and Art, Munich 1986, pp. 350–354.

20 A serious discussion of "style" in the fine arts seems not to have started before the 16th century (cf. W. Sauerländer, From Susus to Style. Reflections on the Fate of a Notion, Art History 6, 1983, pp. 253–270). However, Filarete in the middle of the 15th c. was the first artist to use the word "lo stile" for a phenomenon we would call "style" today (Antonio Averlino Detto Il Filarete, Trattato di architettura, book 1, ed. Finoli/Grassi, I, pp. 27–28), and already Cennini must have meant a similar thing when he advised the artist to stay with "una maniera propria per te" (Cennino Cennini, Libro dell'arte, chap. 27). On the other hand, the "maniera" had something to do with the "propria-manu-stipulation" in artist's contracts obliging the artist to finish a particular commission with his own hands and in particular not to leave difficult parts to either pupils or to less skilled artists (cf. H. Glasser, Artist's Contracts of the Early Renaissance, Ann Arbor [1968], pp. 73–78). Furthermore, it can be assumed that personal style as a positive notion of individual creation was not common among Florentine artists of the first half of the 15th century (cf. M. Wärnke, Praxisfelder der Kunsttheorie, Idea 1, 1982, pp. 54–71). Only in literature and poetry the discussion of style was a fairly common phenomenon.

21 E' si dice che ogni dipintore dipinge se medesimo. Non dipinge già sè in quanto uomo, perché fa delle immagine di leoni, cavalli, uomini e donne che non sono sè, ma dipinge sè in quanto dipintore, idest secondo il suo concetto; e benchè siano diverse fantasie e figure de' dipintori che
Savonarola emphasizes that a painter does not paint himself physically but produces figures and fantasies according to his own personal "concetto". In this context the words "figure" and "fantasie" characterize the varied things in a painting whereas "concetto" refers to an unvariable phenomenon, to some innate quality of a painter's choice that never or at least hardly ever changes. The innate quality described by the word "concetto" must have been a compulsion because "concetto" indicates a feature in painting that an artist cannot avoid producing. At this point we should remember that in Renaissance poetry the proverb "Every painter paints himself" characterized something by all means inevitable and unchangeable in the human character. Thus the 15th-century beholder like Savonarola links two different levels of his experience: the inevitable features of the human character expressed in the proverb "Every painter paints himself" and the widespread, seemingly inevitable habit of contemporary painters to use types, patterns and ideals.

This connection between "automimesis" and the habit of 15th-century painter's to repeat particular types has been discussed also by Leonardo da Vinci. Moreover, in Leonardo's writings the psychological background of the Tuscan proverb that every painter paints himself becomes more urgent. Indeed, Leonardo stigmatizes "automimesis" as the worst fault of 15th-century artists and he seems to have had an almost neurotic fear of its evil impact on contemporary painting.

Leonardo's opinion about "automimesis" may be summarized briefly: "It is a common defect of Italian painters that one recognizes the expression and figure of the artist throughout the many figures painted by him." "This happens because it is our judgement which guides the hand in the creation of the outlines of figures until they prove satisfactory." Judgement, according to Leonardo, is part of our soul which rules both the formation and the movements of our body.
Because of its link to the soul "this judgement is so powerful that it moves the painter's arm and makes him copy himself, since it seems to that soul that this is the true way to construct a man, and whoever does not do so, commits an error." Furthermore, the painter's arm can be moved almost directly by the soul because the soul transmits its impulses by means of various bearers of transmission, such as the Common Sense, tendons, muscles, nerves and joints of the bones: "The joint of the bones obeys the nerve, and the nerve the muscle, and the muscle the tendon and the tendon the Common Sense. And the Common Sense is the seat of the soul [...]."

The physiological explanation of automimesis is easier to comprehend if one considers Leonardo's understanding of the intimate relationship between body and soul. The soul governs the body and determines its physical shape because the soul existed before the body.

Since the inevitable impact of the governing soul on every kind of physical action, painting included, was the underlying cause of "automimesis", Leonardo had to adjust this very impact of the governing soul. He saw the possibility of doing so because the soul resides within two other mental faculties, judgement and the Common Sense which are both open to adjustments for the following reason: Judgement is only in the beginning of man's life under the spell of the pre-existing soul. It resides in the Common Sense where all the senses meet and where it therefore receives sensations from the outer world. These sensations develops an appetite for a being very similar to himself or herself. This notion, as far as I am aware, derives from Dante's (Purg. XXIV, 52-60) discussion of scholastic and aristotelian ideas about the relationship between a lover and his beloved: Love is the principle of every "appetitus" but it is only brought into being by "similitudo" between lover and beloved (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* 1.2.26.1-4.; K. Voszler, *Die philosophischen Grundlagen zum "siúfen neuen Stil",* Heidelberg 1904; Schlosser, see note 3, pp. 71-72). Originally, this argument had a theological background but in connection with "automimesis" it seems to have become a common place. See for example Doni, *Seconda libreria*, c. 30v: "E si suol dire che ogni pittor dipinge se, & che ogni simile apetisce il suo simile [...]." Starting from this point, Leonardo argues that love or hate require a profound knowledge of the things loved or hated (Cod. Atl., fol. 226v-b); cf. J. P. Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, 2 vols., London-New York 1970. §§ 1172, 1202. For similar notions see the *Trattato* (ed. Ludwig, § 77) and C. Pedretti, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci. Commentary*, 2 vols., Oxford 1977, II, pp. 242-243.


26 la giuvntura delli ossi obbedisce al nervo, e 'l nervo al muscolo e 'l muscolo alla corda, e la corda al senso comune, e 'l senso comune è sedia dell'anima [...]. Leonardo, W. 19019r, quoted after Richter (see note 24), § 38.


29 Codex Atlanticus, fol. 90r; W. 19019r (Richter, see note 24, §§ 836, 838).
are transmitted through the senses and they establish experience. Experience is “the common mother of all the sciences and arts” and has as its daughters sound rules. Furthermore, sound rules based on experience grant a “free and sound understanding” and this sound understanding grants a good judgement. Thus in the beginning judgement is entirely determined by the soul but it can be trained and manipulated by rules deduced from experience. Therefore “automimesis”, dependent on both the soul and on judgement, can be avoided by acquiring experience, that is, by the study of nature. In other words: the study of nature adjusts the personal shortcomings of the soul’s judgement and thus helps the scientifically trained artist to avoid automimesis.

The issue of sound judgement and sound experience, achieved by the study of nature, holds the most important place in Leonardo’s art theory. He argues, that nothing can be worse than a work of art’s being superior to judgement. Judgement is the absolutely indispensable guideline for the artist and therefore judgement has to be superior to the work of art itself. Consequently, the artist withdraws his personality from the process of artistic creation in order to achieve a judgement independent from personal feelings. He should thus be able to obtain objective criteria for his art.

Leonardo’s extremely hostile rejection of “automimesis” and its physiological determination of artistic creation suggests that for him there was more at stake than just the scientific foundation of the fine arts. His almost neurotic attitude towards automimesis may tempt us to assume that Leonardo for personal as well as psychological reasons tried to avoid self-expression. And indeed, his psychological profile supports such an interpretation since Leonardo in his own writings praises solitude and self-control. This, of course, is a point close to 20th-century psychology and therefore arguable. However, in light of the more general point that Leonardo – for whatever reason – tried to avoid “automimesis” or self-expression, I would like to discuss some of his paintings in more detail.

The “Adoration of the Magi” (Fig. 9), begun in 1481 and left unfinished in 1482, has always been regarded as a revolutionary treatment of this subject. Nevertheless, it is in conflict with Leonardo’s precepts for narrative painting developed about 10 years later. In his art theory, as we have seen, Leonardo criticizes the repetition of types but in the “Adoration of the Magi” the use of two different types can clearly be distinguished. One is the old man with a beard,

30 Codex Atlanticus, fol. 221v–d (Richter, see note 24, § 18).
31 See also C. Luporini, La mente di Leonardo, Florence 1953, pp. 133–134; Kemp (see note 4); Batkin (see note 22), pp. 103–110.
33 Leonardo, Trattato, ed. Ludwig § 50 (ed. McMahon no. 74; Richter (see note 24), § 494; Ash. fol. 27v); Institut de France, Ms. H. III, fol. 119r.
strong eyebrows, a sharp nose, high cheek-bones and deeply embedded eyes. This elderly type forms a group of four around Mary, two of them being Magi, the one behind the Virgin probably Joseph. The other type, occurring more prominently in the middle of the picture around the tree, is a male youth with a face of female features.

More than ten years later, in the “Last Supper” (Fig. 10), Leonardo seems to have made a stronger effort to avoid stereotypes and to achieve the variety propagated in his art theory. Leonardo’s effort, confirmed by reports of his slow and diligent working procedure, becomes evident in the picture itself. The extraordinary movements of hands and arms, or as Kenneth Clark puts it, the “abundance and variety of gesture”, is almost excessive or at least irritating because it tells of the enormous amount of slow, unspontaneous labour involved in its creation. This almost frozen variety of gesture makes clear that variety was achieved by a strong effort.

Because of the bad condition of the fresco the variety of faces has almost disappeared and is therefore much more difficult to judge. However, a few preparatory drawings associated with the “Last Supper” have come down to us. There is for example a study from around 1495, probably a first idea for St Peter (Fig. 11), that reminds us of the elderly type from the “Adoration of the Magi”. Similarly, a preparatory drawing for St Philip (Fig. 12) shows a boy of almost female features who resembles the young types of the Adoration. Considering these few examples one is tempted to argue that there may be less variety in the expression of faces than we are taught to perceive.

For the 20th-century beholder the “Last Supper” constitutes a supreme example of variety in narrative painting and it is therefore hardly conceivable that Leonardo in this instance repeated his favourite types. However, variety need not have excluded stereotypes and stereotypes need not exclude variety. It all depends on our understanding of variety and individual likeness. But the one thing we can perceive in the “Last Supper” is Leonardo’s extraordinary striving for variety even if we cannot be certain of how much of this variety he finally achieved.

Between January 1497 and March 1499, when Leonardo stopped working on the “Last Supper”, at least one person expressed serious doubts as to whether Leonardo achieved any variety at all. This person, Gaspare Visconti, a poet at the Milanese Court, wrote a sonnet that has as its target Leonardo da Vinci, accusing him of “automimesis”:

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34 Cf. Matteo Bandello, Le novelle, parte 1, nov. 58, ed. Brognoligo, II (1928), pp. 283–288.
“Formerly there was a painter
who could draw nothing but a cypress tree,
According to what Horace tells us
where he teaches us to understand poetry.

There is one nowadays who has so fixed
in his conception the image of himself
that when he wishes to paint someone else
he often paints not the subject but himself.

And not only his face, which is beautifully fair
according to himself, but in his supreme art
he forms with his brush his manners and his customs.

Visconti’s relationships to artists like Bramante suggest that he had some understanding of the fine arts, however, his polemical accusation should not be taken only at face value. This kind of mockery, particularly if linked both with a contemporary proverb and antique rhetoric, represented most probably a rather exaggerated point of literary criticism. Nevertheless, Visconti’s polemic against Leonardo is very much to the heart of the problems discussed above. If we agree upon the main point that “automimesis” refers to something inevitable in painting, including both an artist’s reproduction of his own likeness and his use of types, then Visconti’s negative account of Leonardo’s artistic achievements makes more sense. Moreover, Visconti’s reference to Horace’s “Ars poetica” gives

36 Un depantor fu già che non sapea
desegnare altra cosa che un cupresso,
per quel che Orazio nei suoi versi ha messo
dove insegnar poetica intendea.

Un n’hanno questi tempi che in la idea
tien ferma si la effigie di se stesso,
che’altrui pinger volendo, accade spesso
che non colui ma se medesmo crea.

E non solo il suo volto, ch’e pur bello secondo lui, ma in l’arte sua suprema
gli acti e’ suoi modi forma col penello.

[...]
Gasparo Visconti, I canzonierì per Beatrice d’Este e per Bianca Maria Sforza, ed. P. Bongrani, Milan 1979, CLXVIII, pp. 117-118.
The date of this sonett can be established by the following facts: Beatrice d’Este died in January 1497, Visconti in March 1499, and since the sonett is part of the “Canzoniere” not for Beatrice d’Este but for Bianca Maria Sforza, it must have been composed between January 1497 and March 1499; cf. R. Renier, Gaspare Visconti, Archivio Storico Lombardo 13, 1886, pp. 509-562, 777-824. The first nine lines of the translation are taken from Kemp (see note 3).

37 Cf. Renier (see note 36), pp. 806-808.
another important clue to the kind of criticism intended. Horace argues that it
may be quite easy to draw a cypress tree, however, he goes on to ask, how much
more difficult it would be to paint “a sailor swimming from his wrecked vessel in
dispair”.

With this reference to Horace Visconti’s mockery aims at the problem of a
painter who is asked to paint situations not easily accessible, like a wrecked vessel
on the open sea, or unfamiliar emotions like the panic of a drowning sailor. If
Visconti’s criticism was indeed pointed at Leonardo’s “Last Supper” than it
translates something like this: “Leonardo, you tried hard to achieve variation and
to avoid expressing yourself, but in vain, it is still you that I perceive in your
painting, your way to paint will always be recognized.”

We cannot tell if Visconti was right or not because the “Last Supper” is a ruin.
However, one major point of his mockery could be accepted if we consider that
Leonardo tried to achieve more variety and that he tried to avoid automimesis in a
painting like the Last Supper. This point is the following: Visconti may well have
had first hand evidence of Leonardo’s strong efforts to avoid expressing himself
and to achieve as much variety as possible, and he may well have had at least some
reason to criticize Leonardo for not fully having achieved his aims.

A last picture, Rubens’s version of Leonardo’s “Battle of Anghiari” (Fig.
13), may help to illustrate this point. The central motive is the fight for the

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38 Horace, Ars poetica, I, 31.
39 In fact, to paint the “Last supper” requires to paint emotions not easily accessible and therefore
Visconti’s mockery has almost certainly as its target Leonardo’s “Last Supper” in Milan.
In the discussion Prof. M. Winner pointed out that Leonardo’s striving for variety and his
attempts to reveal emotions by depicting adequate movements in his paintings derives ultimately
from Leon Battista Alberti, Della pittura libri tre (ed. Janitschek, pp. 112, 120, 126). There are, in
fact, in Leonardo’s Trattato (ed. Ludwig §§ 113, 115, 376) some parallels to Alberti’s precepts for
painters.
the 2nd edition 1986, cat. no. 49, pp. 85–88); for further references see P. Joannides, Leonardo da
Vinci, Peter-Paul Rubens, Pierre-Nolasque Bergeret and the “Fight for the Standard”,
76–86; for a correct view on the Bergeret drawing see M. Lessing, Die Anghiari-Schlacht des
In the discussion Prof. J. Müller Hofstede pointed out that this drawing is not by Rubens but by
an unknown sixteenth century artist. Rubens only restored and reworked the drawing (cf. J.
Müller Hofstede, An Early Rubens Conversion of St. Paul. The Beginning of his Preoccupation
The fact that the drawing is by an artist of the sixteenth century confirms my point that the faces
of the warriors, reworked by Rubens, derive from Leonardo’s favourite type of an old man.
However, what I had labeled as Rubens’s supreme understanding of Leonardo should now more
correctly be credited to the accuracy of the anonymous 16th-century draftsman who actually did
banner, held by the horse-man on the left, defended by the one in the middle and under attack by the helmeted warrior to the right. Owing to the subject of this fight the battle is not really one warrior against another. The fierce expression of the slightly oversized faces of the fighters is more leonardesque than rubenesque, and in fact these faces are close to Leonardo’s old warrior with the hooked nose which he so often favoured during his career. I wonder if this type, lurking from Rubens’s version of the “Battle for the Standard”, illustrates Leonardo’s own battle against his use of types and against expressing himself. Just as in the gesture of the “Last Supper”, there is almost excessive variety and movement but in the facial expression we recognize the old type of 30 years earlier (Fig. 4). The variety and movement of the figures, achieved by the scientific study of nature, fights against Leonardo’s favourite type of an old man. Perhaps we can trust Rubens’s understanding of Leonardo and may be Visconti was right: despite all this variety and movement, Leonardo did not altogether avoid “automimesis”, Leonardo did not avoid expressing himself. But, and I may finish with this question, is there a more impressive way to express oneself than the desperate attempt not to do so?

Fig. 1. Filippo Lippi, Coronation of the Virgin, Florence, Uffizi
Fig. 2. Sandro Botticelli, Adoration of the Magi, Florence, Uffizi
Fig. 3. Anonymous artist, Bust of Filippo Lippi, Spoleto, Duomo

Fig. 4. Leonardo da Vinci, Old Warrior, London, British Museum, 1895–9–15–471
Fig. 5. Leonardo da Vinci, Virgin of the Rocks, Paris, Louvre
Fig. 6. Leonardo da Vinci, Burlington House Cartoon, London, National Gallery
Fig. 7. Leonardo da Vinci St Anne, Paris, Louvre
Fig. 8. Leonardo da Vinci, Drawing for “Leda”, Windsor Castle, 12516
Fig. 9. Leonardo da Vinci, Adoration of the Magi, Florence, Uffizi
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Fig. 10. Leonardo da Vinci, Last Supper, Milan, S. Maria della Grazie
Fig. 11. Leonardo da Vinci, Drawing for St Peter, Vienna, Albertina

Fig. 12. Leonardo da Vinci, Drawing for St Philip, Windsor Castle, 12551
Fig. 13. Anon. Artist/Rubens, Battle of Anghiari, Paris, Louvre