

Part Two: The Character of Leonardo's Art

Alexander Nagel's *Leonardo's Sfumato* opens with a quote in French by Paul Valery. Translated it states, "The particular case of Leonardo da Vinci proposes one of the many remarkable coincidences for us to return to our practice of spirit and to alarm our attention to the medium of ideas which were transmitted to us". Leo Steinberg also shares this outlook on the study of Leonardo's art. Like Nagel, Steinberg advocates an exhaustive study and attention over each detail. Additionally, Nagel and Steinberg share an understanding for the importance of the relationship between art and ambiguity.

For Steinberg, ambiguity denotes more than the multiple meanings and moments condensed in Leonardo's picture. Ambiguity affects the entire mural, determining and over-determining everything about it, from the structure of space down to the individual painterly mark. Ambiguity also asks the key question: is all of this ambiguity a feature of the object and meticulously planned and plotted by the artist, or is it a property of interpretation itself and happenstance through the analysis of critics? Steinberg suggests in his essay *Critique of Formalism* that when critics approach unfamiliar art practices "they hold their criteria and taste in reserve. Since they were formed upon yesterday's art, he does not assume that they are ready-made for today. While he seeks to comprehend the objectives behind the new art produced, nothing is a priori excluded or judged irrelevant"¹. Steinberg advocates the idea where the process in understanding art is key and it is through the study of the ambiguous that one gains the greatest reward.

Nagel's article titled *Leonardo's Sfumato* searches to investigate the reasons behind the accomplishments of Leonardo da Vinci. The term sfumato "points to an

¹ Steinberg, *Critique of Formalism*.

indeterminacy in the relation between the actual properties of objects and the visual aspects they present to the eye”². Such indeterminacy describes the ambiguity within the technique of painting and “the visual qualities produced by it, both the blending of tones, or colors in gradations of imperceptible minuteness” and the effects of softness and delicacy this produces”³. This essay by Alexander Nagel inspects the practical and theoretical bases of sfumato and analyzes its consequences. Sfumato primarily consists of the effect of shadows on the perception of objects. Leonardo stated that “shadow is the means by which bodies and their forms are displayed”⁴. Subsequently, the use of shadow became a vital tool for visual perception. Leonardo said, “When you transfer to your work shadows which you discern with difficult and whose edges you cannot distinguish, so that you perceive them confusedly, you must not make them definite or clear lest your work look wooden as a result”⁵. Leonardo’s study on shadows demonstrates his understanding for the method of painting with ambiguity and less clarity. When drawing a figure in sfumato, Leonardo would describe it as “neither part of the body nor part of the air surrounding that body”⁶. It is this ambiguous method of drawing and lack of definition, says Nagel, Leonardo would eventually strive to perfect and master.

Madonna of the Carnation is one of the most popular paintings composed by Leonardo da Vinci in 1478 in Florence, Italy and displays his study of sfumato. One of Leonardo’s earliest paintings, the *Madonna of the Carnation* reveals the artist’s painterly and compositional skill. The holy figures interact with one another in an emotionally

² Nagel, *Leonardo’s Sfumato*, part 1.

³ Nagel, *Leonardo’s Sfumato*, part 1.

⁴ Windsor 1970, *The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*

⁵ Gombrich, “Blurred Images,” p. 175.

⁶ Richter 492 ca.1492.

evocative and harmonious manner. The Madonna, depicted in contemporary dress, shares a flower with her son. Both this and the small crucifix in the child's hand refers to the beginning and end of the life of Christ, the flower representing the baby's birth and the crucifix depicting the ultimate death of Christ on the cross. One of the most distinctive features from this painting is evidence of Leonardo's study of shadow and sfumato. The shadows are such that it appears that the painting's light source shines from above the viewer's shoulder, as if from heaven. Both mother and child are furnished with halos, a religious symbol of purity and holiness. The Virgin has a rounded, glowing face, typical of much of Leonardo's earlier work. Her expression exemplifies part of what set Leonardo's work apart from that of his contemporaries; she looks winsome and fresh and is without the inelegance of other artists' Madonnas from the time.

Leonardo's *Portrait of a Musician* is an oil on wood painting composed in 1490 in Milan, Italy. This painting would be the only portrait Leonardo would do of a man. The painting displays a man positioned in a three-quarter stance holding onto a partition sheet. The background is left in shadow, as the musician seems to stare out past the audience's field of vision. Leonardo's use of shadow, once again, is clearly utilized. With the shadows on the background and back of the model, it is clear that the musician is staring towards an unknown source of light. The face is painted with great detail with the artist's obvious understanding of the bone structure beneath the flesh. The shadows help intensify the grooves and complexion of the musician's face. Conversely, the tunic, red hat, and hair remain dull and placid. Here, the use of sfumato causes the viewer's primary focus to be placed on the face of the subject.

A 1485 painting by Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine* displayed its subject as Cecilia Gallerani, the mistress of the Duke of Milan. Much like *Portrait of a Musician*, the background remains darkened by shadow, evidence of Leonardo's study of the ambiguity of light and shadow. Leonardo composed his paintings using geometric proportions, and mathematical principles discovered by the ancient Greeks; this was typical of Renaissance painters. Particularly interesting about the design of this painting is the lack of straight lines. It is composed almost entirely of curves, which carries the eye from the woman's head, down to the right, across the ermine and then back up the other sleeve. The curving, spiraling body of the ermine repeats the movement of the woman, who twists in space as her head and body seem to move in different directions. The elegant curve of her hand corresponds perfectly with the movement of the animal, the bent wrist echoing the raised, right paw of the ermine. The only almost straight lines to be seen are the band on her head and the square-cut neckline on her dress. In this painting, human and animal are locked in a symbiotic relationship of interlocked motion, which results in a compositional rhythm that breathes life into both forms. The presence of the ermine offers several interpretations of significance. Ermines have an association with aristocracy and could very well represent a high social status. They are also used as a symbol of chastity and purity. The *Lady with an Ermine* is a captivating image of exquisite elegance and reveals the artistic genius of Leonardo's artwork.

It is evident in Leonardo's artwork to witness the treatment of sfumato and application of ambiguous lines and shapes. His accomplished study of such forms of art launched Leonardo to be a highly esteemed philosopher and artist. Leonardo da Vinci's ingenuity and brilliance promotes his work to be some of the most critiqued and

appreciated forms of art not only during his time but is maintained today. While his genius continues to be a source of much debate and study, what the world can uniformly agree with is that Leonardo's work will never fully be understood and appreciated. Perhaps that is the predominant reason why Leonardo's artistry continues to amaze both critics and students alike.