

Landscape Appreciation of Leonardo Da Vinci's Artwork

Ruochen Gao^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Architecture, Chang'an University, Xi'an, Shannxi Province, China*
a. 2020904402@chd.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Nowadays, people pay more and more attention to landscape beauty, and the comfort and beauty of the living environment are considered important. Urban construction is gradually transforming into an environmentally friendly society. In order to promote the transformation of contemporary landscape design from mechanical design to humanized and natural design, this paper studies three works created in the Renaissance period under the guidance of humanistic thoughts, and analyzes the landscape expression in these works. The author adopts the method of case analysis. *The Virgin of the Rocks*, *The Annunciation*, and *The Adoration of the Magi* are selected. Through observation and analysis of the painting background, the expression of content and characteristics of each work, appreciating landscape reflected in Leonardo da Vinci's artwork during Renaissance. The study aims to summarize the common characteristic and explore the reference significance for the present art landscape and promote the healthy development of urban construction. Renaissance gardens inspire contemporary landscape architects to pay attention to human feelings and primitive nature in their designs.

Keywords: Leonardo, landscape, Renaissance

1. Introduction

The Renaissance first arose in Italian, then expanded to Western European countries, and reached its peak in the 16th century, bringing a period of scientific and artistic revolution. People gradually changed their pessimistic and hopeless attitude toward real life and began to pursue the joy of secular life and affirmed human value and dignity [1]. Humanism advocates that the purpose of life is the pursuit of happiness in real life, advocates individual liberation, and opposes ignorant and superstitious theological thought [2]. Therefore, the reason why the Renaissance is different from the previous period is that people began to realize that human beings can control their own world and coexist harmoniously with nature. Artists gradually looked at the world from a new angle, in order to understand nature from a nearly scientific point of view. Artists have studied the effect of light one after another, put forward the technique of contrast between light and dark in the process of painting theory and practice, created the linear perspective method and put forward the principle of air perspective [3]. At the same time, Oil, a new medium of material, appeared in oil painting. It replaced the previous temporary medium. Before that, eggs were widely used in painting throughout the Middle Ages. Although for a period of time, egg temporary painting and oil painting were practiced simultaneously.

The concept of landscape, as a new kind of reality in the world, emerged in the Renaissance era in Europe, and according to the changes in the western worldviews in these centuries, has gained various aspects and meanings. The concept of landscape as a natural aesthetic point of view appeared in the European Renaissance. The transformation of the western world outlook and Descartes' distinction between the subject world and object world are the first steps in the formation of the modernization of the landscape concept [4]. Before the Renaissance, human discovery and attention to nature were based on traditional myths. After the Renaissance, Westerners began to discover the beauty and pleasure of nature itself and enjoy nature. Since then, the achievements of modern science have been born on the basis of the development of modern art. The landscape becomes part of the aesthetic perception and expression of personality. The concept of the landscape consists of three major parts, which are integrated into a complex relation: one site (land), one view, and one image [5]. The liberation of the mind during the Renaissance made a painting to be more diverse and began to cover many subjects, rather than just aristocratic portraits and religious subjects. The improvement of painting materials made the colors more real and more complete. The technique of perspective and chiaroscuro made the landscape appear more three-dimensional on the plan. It allows people to have more references for the research of garden construction and landscape style at that time, and the reference value and credibility of the data are also high. Therefore, under many conditions, landscape paintings appear more frequently in the field of art, and many paintings depict landscapes in a more realistic and detailed way.

The author looks up and draws on the work of many scholars about their research on these paintings, and summarizes the key information for landscape research. Then the objective interpretation of the three paintings is formed. The purpose is to elaborate on the landscape elements and characteristics reflected in the paintings, and summarize the style of classical gardens in the Italian Renaissance period and the main forms of expression of gardens in the Renaissance period.

2. Introduction of Leonardo Da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci has been described as the man who awoke too early in the darkness, while all the others were still asleep [6]. He greatly awakened his contemporaries through his paintings. Leonardo was a painter, sculptor, architect, scientist, mathematician, poet, inventor, astronomer, geologist, historian, and cartographer [7]. In all his activities, he showed fertile imagination, far above the horizons of his times. Therefore, he became a representative of the ideal scientist and artist in the Italian Renaissance.

Leonardo da Vinci was born on the 15th of April, 1452, in the country village of Vinci. Da Vinci was studious and good at thinking from an early age [7]. He liked painting and playing with clay, and often went to the street to sketch [6]. In 1466, when Da Vinci was 14 years old, he entered the painting workshop in Verrocchio, Florence, and studied painting. Da Vinci's earliest extant work, *The Notice of Conception* was a work he completed independently without the guidance of a teacher. In 1477, Da Vinci ended his apprenticeship. In 1480, he set up his own workshop in his residence. Meanwhile, his father got him to work at the court. During this time, he created *The Pilgrimage of the Three Magi* and other works. Leonardo's career was at its most successful when he left Florence in 1482 for Milan, where he worked as a military engineer, architect, painter, sculptor and court musician. Two of the most famous paintings are *The Virgin of the Rocks* and *The Last Supper*. In 1500, Leonardo returned to Florence to continue his scientific work and produced less art, drawing only sketches of the Virgin, Jesus and John the Baptist. For example, *The Mother and Child with Saint Anna and Saint John*. In 1503 he was commissioned to paint a mural called *The Battle of Angali*. In the same year, from the point of view of improving the status of people, he began to create *Mona Lisa*, which directly depicts secular figures [7].

3. Analysis of the Works

3.1. The Virgin of the Rocks

The Virgin of the Rocks, now in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, is an altarpiece painted by Leonardo for the Church of San Francisco in Milan. In the background are the grottoes, the sunlight comes in, and the flowers accompany them.

The plot of the painting was taken from the story of Jesus' Baptism in Chapter 3 of the Bible. The Virgin in the picture is exactly like a common kind mother (see Figure 1). On her right was Little John, the Baptist, and on her left is a childhood Jesus with an angel. John and Jesus were playing. With her right arm around Little John and her left hand over Little Jesus' head. Cave legend is the place where God created the world, mysterious and solemn. Emotionally, the artist took the Virgin as the center, and endowed the picture with gravitas and the appeal of a blessed mother's love, instead of expressing the suffering and hardships of life. The Virgin demonstrates the great power of motherhood on earth. It shows a kind of human beauty, which is also the content of humanistic thought at that time.



Figure 1: The Virgin of the Rocks [8].

This painting shows Leonardo's new ideas in the content. The cave has a special environment and mysterious atmosphere. The figure in the dark rock against the background's soft, gentle and pure. The rocks have strangely shaped, with flowers and plants peeping through the crevices of the rocks. Irises, anemones, violets and some ferns can be identified.

On the analysis of its artistic characteristics, the author believes that it can be divided into the following three aspects. Firstly, Da Vinci used a triangular composition in this painting, which is similar to a pyramid. The four characters are unified as subjects in this stable structure, but they are not completely symmetrical. The whole painting has the characteristics of classical beauty. Secondly, the audience should pay attention to the background of the painting, because Da Vinci was also an excellent landscape painter [9]. In 15th-century Italian frescoes, figures are usually placed in front of the landscape, but Leonardo Da Vinci first placed the figure in the middle of the landscape, so that the figure and the dark cave into a whole [10]. Thirdly, this painting has a wonderful color. The darkness of the cave allowed Da Vinci to use his best, the law of light and shade. The whole painting is based on tan, the deep blue of the virgin's body is contrasted with the purple, gold and silver gray of the angel's cloak; Jesus' and John's skin contrasted with John's golden curls. The whole tone is full of warmth. In terms of subject matter, *The Virgin of the Rocks* belongs to the traditional religious subject matter, but in terms of technique, Leonardo used the technique of perspective and realistic portrayal, which has a very high level.

Da Vinci's achievements in both art and science are represented in it. The pictures of rocks and flowers testify to Da Vinci's profound knowledge of geology and botany. Much precise scientific knowledge, such as the light reflected in the rocks and the structure of the human body, is vividly combined into a warm and harmonious whole by the artist. Through his artistic creation, he brought heaven to the earth and made man and nature become one. That is the significance of *The Virgin of the Rocks*.

3.2. The Annunciation

The Annunciation, one of Leonardo's early works, which is now in the Uffizi Museum in Florence, describes the story of Mary being touched by the Holy Spirit in The New Testament gospel of Luke Chapter One, Verse One. The angel Gabriel was sent by God to tell the virgin Mary that she had found favor with God and was going to conceive. Maria told the angel that she was not married. The angel said unto him, the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and therefore thy son shall be the son of God.

The first thing that Leonardo would narrate is the story effectively and decorously. It means that he tells the story clearly that everyone knows and understands what the subject is, and he can tell what is happening, so he needed to approach his subject matter with decorum and aptness.



Figure 2: The Annunciation [11].

This painting uses a banner composition, which can broaden the field of vision and show the beauty of the courtyard (see Figure 2). In a symmetrical form, two images of an angel kneeling on the lawn to convey God's message and Mary reading in the courtyard are drawn, with the flower bed between the angel and the Virgin Mary being separated. Forming a layer perspective into the distance, and the depth of field is very far away, reaching the distant sea and mountains as if shrouded in a misty fog. Leonardo da Vinci created a unique painting method to express distant shadows. The painting method is called the "fog perspective method" which has a hazy artistic conception. Exquisitely carved tables, as well as stone structures on the walls of buildings, all calculate the distance ratio with accurate figures, helping the picture to reach the far-away depth of field space.

Then, increasingly Leonardo da Vinci had to be true to nature. This is something that had developed or was starting to develop in the renaissance [12]. In *Annunciation*, people can see that there is a host of natural detail in the flowers and the grass on which the angle meals the landscape background and the figures who appear naturalistic. As can be seen in the composition, there is a distance between the angel who has just arrived and the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary greeted the angel and answered him. Leonardo thinks about how the different characters relate to each other. Using perspective, obviously, he makes them seem real by painting them as though they are three-dimensional by modeling their forms, and thinking about how the drapery falls. For example, the way

he depicted the drapery on the Virgin's lap, it falls in a nutritious way, such that people can see 3-dimensional legs beneath. What people see is not only similar to the Virgin Mary on the grass in medieval paintings, but more importantly, people can see the important interpretation of the paradise or Venus Garden landscape in ancient literature during the Renaissance [13]. This is also important information that this painting conveys to modern researchers.

3.3. Adoration of the Magi



Figure 3: Adoration of the Magi [14].

Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned to paint a large altarpiece for the Augustinian monastery at SAN Donato, the Court of the Magi in early 1481. This painting marks the mature stage of Da Vinci's artistic style. It is now one of the most famous paintings in the Galleria degli Uffizi, but it is actually a sketch (see Figure 3).

The painting is based on the biblical story of the Magi who came to worship at the birth of Jesus. The subject is one of the most common themes in Renaissance painting. But in the treatment of crowds, new forms had emerged. Particularly, Leonardo did not simply list the characters from a narrative point of view but innovated with sharply contrasting compositions and images. The Virgin and Child and the three Magi form a triangular composition, a stable composition. The masses around the ring column left and right, form a vortex. The remains of buildings and galloping horses are shown in precise perspective in the background. All these elements are in contrast. The dilapidated stone building in the painting is covered with bushes, and the root of the central tree meanders on the ground. The shape of the stone house obviously belongs to the Florentine style, and its pillar and arch structure is similar to the elders' residence in San Minato del Monte. The crowds are not on a moving road but in a whirlpool. There were more than sixty figures of people and animals, and they were all around the mother and child. Rather than pandering to the brightness and clarity of 15th-century painting, the crowd of onlookers was dark in tone. It adopted an implicit approach that surpassed the work of its contemporaries.

Leonardo's unfinished masterpiece offers a deeper insight into his way of thinking, his way of working, his handling of Christian symbols and traditional Florentine imagery, and his understanding of the movement of the vortex.

Although this painting was unfinished, it shows that Leonardo da Vinci's artistic discourse was far beyond that of his peers and heralded the advent of the Renaissance style.

4. Conclusion

In the classical gardens of the Renaissance in Italy, there is a strong contrast between the artificial artistic rational landscape and the symbolic natural landscape, and the original natural interest displayed by the progressive landscape end point guided by the axis. Scientific observation and humanistic aesthetics encourage people's interest in nature, especially their love for natural landscapes. In the process of Da Vinci's creation, he made a deeper exploration of landscape painting, and in practice, he paid more attention to the observation of natural scenery and recorded it in detail. He imitated in his art all these things created by nature to decorate the world. This is of significance to the research of the history of landscape architecture and the design of modern landscape architecture. On one hand, it helps readers to understand the characteristics of the Italian Renaissance landscape. And on the other hand, it provides a new reference angle for the appreciation and design of the contemporary landscape.

On this basis, the author suggests that in the design process of the modern landscape, designers should respect the original characteristics of nature, take the basic needs of humans as the starting point, and transform the natural foundation to create an ecological environment in line with the symbiosis between human and nature. Meanwhile, as a medium, the landscape should adopt ecological and green design principles to overcome the inherent traditional thinking in landscape design that does not meet the needs of modern people. Serve the natural environment and human psychology, and create a harmonious and cohesive health system for the environment and the people living in it.

References

- [1] Sterpetti, Antonio V. (2016) *Anatomy and Physiology By Leonardo: The Hidden Revolution*. *Surgery* 159.3: 675-687.
- [2] Yaqian Yan. (2014) *The Influence of Western Painting Art on Landscape Design: Interpersonal Application*. 16-20
- [3] Wenchao Zhang. (2019) *The Design Language and Artistic Innovation Spirit in Leonardo da Vinci's Paintings*. *Art Tasting*, 2.
- [4] A Alehashemi, S Mansouri - Bagh-e Nazar, (2018) *Landscape; a Shifting Concept; The Evolution of the Concept of Landscape from Renaissance*. 34-41
- [5] Keele, Kenneth D. (1964) *Leonardo da Vinci's Influence on Renaissance Anatomy*. *Medical History* 8.4: 360-370.
- [6] Jose, Antony Merlin. (2001) *Anatomy and Leonardo da Vinci*. *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 74.3: 185.
- [7] Tingguang Zhu, Guogan Qi, Chunnian Zhang, and Keyao Ma. (1983) *Biography of Famous Foreign Historians in Ancient Times, Part II*, 377-384
- [8] https://baike.baidu.com/pic/%E5%B2%A9%E9%97%B4%E5%9C%A3%E6%AF%8D/1497449/1/b64543a98226cffe1e17738d57515d90f603738dbcc9?fr=lemma&fromModule=lemma_top-image&ct=single#aid=1&pic=b64543a98226cffe1e17738d57515d90f603738dbcc9
- [9] Carbon, Claus-Christian, and Vera M. Hesslinger. (2015) *On the Nature of the Background Behind Mona Lisa*. *Leonardo* 48.2: 183-184.
- [10] Emison, Patricia. (1993) *Leonardo's Landscape in the 'Virgin of the Rocks.'* *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 56,: 116-18.
- [11] <https://www.laihuihua.com/pics/pic-610.html>
- [12] Melnikov, V. A., and D. A. Ilyamova. (1473) *Leonardo da Vinci's Hidden Images. the Arno Valley Landscape. Mystic Silence 540 Years Long*. *Российский гуманитарный журнал* 2.3 (2013): 216-227
- [13] Yifan Liu. (2009) *Classical Art and European Classical Landscape*. 6-10
- [14] https://baike.baidu.com/pic/%E4%B8%89%E5%8D%9A%E5%A3%AB%E6%9C%9D%E5%9C%A3/19271172/1/7af40ad162d9f2d3b18428f0aeecc8a136327cc1c?fr=lemma&fromModule=lemma_top-image&ct=single#aid=1&pic=7af40ad162d9f2d3b18428f0aeecc8a136327cc1c