

# *Humanism Embodied in Da Vinci's Works*

Gan Lin

*Department of College English Studies, Dianchi College, Kunming, Yunnan, China*

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**Abstract:** Renaissance arts which ranged from the 14th to the 17th century, represented a revival of classical learning, humanism, and artistic innovation in European countries. It pays attention to humanism, anatomy, and naturalism. Among the artists in Renaissance period, Da Vinci paid special attention to the human side of his creative characters, which can be reflected from the theme, the integration of science and arts as well as unity of reason and emotion. The humanism embodied in his works had demonstrated the essence and charm of humanist thought and exerted profound influence on later generation.

## 1. Background

The Renaissance was an ideological and cultural movement in Europe from the 14th to the 17th century, and its core ideology was humanism. Humanism advocated humanity, opposed divinity, holding that the purpose of life was to pursue happiness in real life. It also advocated the liberation of personality, and opposed the ignorant and superstitious theological thoughts. By imitating the ideas of ancient Greece and Rome, Renaissance artists furthered to value the naturalism and strived for the classical culture improvement and the study of ancient Greek and Roman literature, art, and philosophy as a way to elevate personal cultivation and aesthetic abilities.

Among the artists, Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519), whose full name is Leonardo di serpiero da Vinci, was one of the three masters of the Italian Renaissance along with Raphael and Michelangelo, and was also the most perfect representative of the entire European Renaissance.<sup>[1]</sup> Leonardo da Vinci was a profound thinker, erudite and versatile painter, fabulist, sculptor, inventor, philosopher, musician, physician, biologist, geographer, architectural engineer and military engineer. It is for his comprehensive knowledge that he created many masterpieces well-known all around the world. Humanism is frequently appeared in Leonardo da Vinci's works, especially "The Last Supper", "The Virgin of the Rocks" as well as "Mona Lisa" which are the representatives of his creation. Humanism is fully reflected in his work in terms of creation background and theme, integration of science and art, The Unity of Emotion and Reason as well as profound impact on later generation.

## 2. Humanism reflected in the Creation Background and Theme

"The Virgin of the Rocks" is one of the masterpiece of da Vinci. This painting was created between 1483 and 1485 and is a sign of the maturity of da Vinci's painting art. The theme of "The Virgin of the Rocks" is taken from the Bible story, specifically depicting the scene where the Virgin Mary and her child encounter John the Baptist by the Jordan River. This theme is common in traditional religious art, but da Vinci's work is unique. The picture adopts a pyramid-like triangular

composition, with the Virgin Mary in the center of the frame. This layout not only provides a visual sense of balance and stability but also implies the religious theological concept of the “Trinity”. The Virgin Mary is in the middle, with her right hand supporting John the Baptist and her left hand gently touching the Son of God, Jesus. Jesus and John are presented as children, a bold attempt unprecedented at that time. The angel is behind Jesus, and the four characters imply their mutual relationships through different movements and gestures, such as protection, indication, and blessing. Da Vinci skillfully used light and shadow effects to enhance the three-dimensional feeling of the picture. The characters in the picture are illuminated by the light falling from the upper left, and their outlines naturally emerge from the dark and damp cave. This contrast of light and shadow makes the characters more vivid and three-dimensional.

It is noticeable that he broke through religious constraints and focused on humanity. Most of his works build humanized religious images. In Leonardo da Vinci’s religious-themed paintings, he broke through the traditional religious mythological preaching and depicted sacred figures with more humanity and secular emotions. For example, in his series of “Madonna” paintings, the Madonna is no longer just a dull religious symbol but is endowed with the radiance of motherhood and the emotions of an ordinary person, showcasing the greatness and sanctity of motherly love. This way of depiction makes religious images closer to humanity, reflecting humanism’s concern and respect for people. Although the specific color description may vary due to different versions or exhibition conditions, overall, the color application of his painting showed delighted atmosphere. “The Virgin of the Rocks” is relatively harmonious and unified, which not only conforms to the solemnity of religious themes but also does not lose the warmth of secular life. “The Virgin of the Rocks” vividly showed Family Love: Da Vinci was not limited by the constraints of religious themes in this painting but expressed this theme with a secular life sentiment. He transformed the so-called sacred meeting of Jesus and John into a scene of two innocent children playing by the water, making the picture filled with an atmosphere of family love. The appeal of maternal Love is the distinctive feature of him. The image of the Virgin Mary is endowed with the appeal of solemn, gentle, and divinely protected maternal love. Her gesture of supporting John with one hand and comforting Jesus with the other reflects the great maternal power in the world.

### 3. Pursuing the Integration of Science and Art

Leonardo da Vinci was enthusiastic about artistic creation and theoretical research, studying how to use lines and three-dimensional modeling to express various problems. Emphasizing on reason and free will, he opposed medieval religious bondage and feudal hierarchies, emphasized the importance of the individual and free will, and advocated individual liberation and self-realization. In order to create a real and touching artistic image, He extensively studied optics, mathematics, geology, biology and other disciplines related to painting, also studied natural science.

#### 3.1 The Application of Brushstrokes

Leonardo da Vinci conducted in-depth studies of anatomy, and this scientific spirit is also reflected in his paintings. Through fine brushstrokes and realistic images, he depicts the structure of the human body, making the figures more vivid and real. This integration of science and art not only improves the technical level of painting but also reflects humanism’s pursuit of knowledge and science. Da Vinci used smoky brushstrokes to depict the shadows around the corners of the eyes and the corners of the mouth of the characters in this painting, making the facial contours more soft and vivid. This painting method not only enhances the three-dimensionality of the picture but also leaves more imagination space for the audience. When dealing with his paintings, Da Vinci scientifically used techniques such as realism and perspective, achieving a new balance between

realistic representation and artistic processing.

### 3.2 The Application of Perspective:

Leonardo da Vinci widely used perspective in his paintings to enhance the spatial and three-dimensional sense of the picture. This technical innovation not only makes his works more visually influential but also reflects humanism's advocacy of rationality and science<sup>[3]</sup>. Unlike the holy light commonly used in traditional religious paintings, "The Last Supper" adopts natural light to illuminate the scene. This way of light handling makes the scene more real and vivid and further emphasizes the secularity and humanity of the figures in the painting. The application of natural light is Leonardo da Vinci's unique interpretation of the humanist spirit in visual art. The emotional expressions of the figures in the painting are extremely rich and true. The sadness of Jesus, the fear and shame of Judas, the shock and anger of the other disciples, etc., were vividly depicted by Leonardo da Vinci. This true expression of emotions reflects humanism's concern and respect for human emotions. As one of the representative works of the Renaissance, the display of the humanist spirit in "The Last Supper" has significant historical significance. It not only promoted the innovation and development of artistic styles but also profoundly influenced the ideological concepts and cultural atmosphere of the society at that time. Through this work, people began to pay more attention to human nature, "The Last Supper" is one of the great art masterpieces of the Renaissance period, created by Leonardo da Vinci, in which perspective is an important part of its artistic achievement. Specifically, this painting employs parallel perspective, also known as "single-point perspective". In parallel perspective, all vertical lines that are perpendicular to the picture plane disappear into the same vanishing point, which is usually located either slightly to the left or right of the center of the picture.<sup>[2]</sup> In "The Last Supper," this vanishing point helps to create a sense of depth, allowing viewers to feel the extension of space. In addition, Da Vinci employed the most traditional one-dimensional arrangement of composition, arranging the figures in the painting in a certain order, which not only emphasized the theme of the painting but also enhanced the stability and rhythm of the composition. By using parallel perspective, Da Vinci successfully concentrated the central focus on Jesus' bright forehead, making Jesus the central figure dominating the whole scene. Jesus extends his arms and lowers his eyes, his gestures and expressions are filled with spiritual call to action, guiding viewers to introspection and contemplation. In "The Last Supper", Da Vinci skillfully used parallel perspective to construct the spatial relationships in the painting. He adjusted the positions and postures of the figures in the painting, so that the vertical lines (such as the standing postures of the figures, the background buildings, etc.) all showed a tendency to converge at the vanishing point (i.e. the point of convergence), thereby creating a deep sense of space in the viewer's eyes. At the same time, Da Vinci also used advanced light and shadow techniques to enhance the three-dimensional and layered effect of the painting. He skillfully handled the light and shadows, making the figures and background of the painting look vivid and realistic, as if viewers could actually be present in the tense dinner scene<sup>[5]</sup>. Generally speaking, Humanism in Leonardo da Vinci's works reflected in various aspects such as realistic portrayal, presentation of character personalities, application of natural light, and true expression of emotions. These characteristics together constitute the unique artistic charm and profound historical value of this work.

### 4. The Unity of Emotion and Reason

Realistic emotion and reason is another painting style that can fully reflect Leonardo's humanism.

## 4.1 Emotional Expression

Leonardo da Vinci's works are filled with rich emotional expressions. Whether it is the kindness of the Madonna, the smile of the Mona Lisa, or the tense atmosphere in "The Last Supper," they all demonstrate the painter's profound understanding and perception of human nature. "The Last Supper" is based on the story in the Bible, but Leonardo da Vinci did not sanctify the characters but adopted a realistic approach for the portrayal. All the figures in the painting, including Jesus, are lifelike and no different from ordinary people. This way of expression broke the sacred aura of the characters in previous religious paintings and was closer to real life. On the other hand, he exquisitely presented the personalities of each character. Leonardo da Vinci elaborately depicted the different reactions of the twelve disciples after hearing Jesus say, "One of you will betray me." The expressions and actions of each disciple are distinctive, showing their different characters and emotions. This in-depth portrayal of character personalities reflects humanism's emphasis on individual differences and the complexity of human nature. This emotional expression makes his works more infectious and resonant.

## 4.2 Rational Thinking

At the same time, Leonardo da Vinci's works also reflect the power of rational thinking. Through fine composition and meticulous brushstrokes, he shows the character and emotional state of the figures, allowing the audience to think and reflect while enjoying the works. This unity of rationality and emotion is also one of the important characteristics of humanist thought. In the "Mona Lisa", Mona Lisa's face is plump and there is a hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. This smile is interpreted as the embodiment of satisfaction and happiness in real life. This kind of image shaping abandoned the sacredness and rigidity in medieval religious paintings and turned to focus on individual emotions and happiness in real life, reflecting the core concept of humanism's concern for humanity. The aesthetic concept of female beauty "Mona Lisa" is not only a portrait but also represents people's aesthetic concept and pursuit of female beauty during the Renaissance. Mona Lisa in the painting shows the elegance, tranquility and noble ideological quality of women, which is a new understanding and praise of female beauty under the humanist thought. The pursuit of personality liberation The smile, eyes and posture of Mona Lisa in the painting all reveal a unique charm of personality. The display of this kind of personality charm is a vivid portrayal of the liberation of personality and free expression advocated by humanism.

## 5. The Impact on Later Generations

Leonardo da Vinci's artistic innovation and ideological revolution had a profound impact on later generations. His paintings not only promoted the development of the art of painting but also influenced the development of other art forms such as sculpture and architecture. Just as British historian Donald Sassoon stated in his book "Becoming Mona Lisa" published in 2001, Jonathan Nelson, who teaches art history at Syracuse University in Florence, notes that he was also the first artist to give women realistic bodies "with anatomically identifiable muscle. He pointed out that unlike Raphael and Michelangelo, he was never the servant of popes. He put man at the centre of creation. By seeking soft and feminine characteristics in his painting works, Da Vinci revolutionized Madonna and Child compositions, and altered the portrayal of narrative subjects and the way portraits were composed. Jonathan Nelson, who teaches art history at Syracuse University in Florence, notes that he was also the first artist to give women realistic bodies "with anatomically identifiable muscles".<sup>[4]</sup>

Through his works, humanist thought was widely disseminated and popularized. People began to

pay more attention to human values, dignity, and emotional needs, promoting social progress and development.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Leonardo da Vinci's paintings made important contributions to the development of humanist thought. Through humanized religious images, the integration of science and art, the unity of emotion and reason, and the impact on later generations, he demonstrated the essence and charm of humanist thought. His works also showed affirmation of human nature: Humanists praise the beauty of human nature, oppose the authority of God and asceticism, advocate happiness in the world, and affirm the dignity and value of human beings and embody humanism in their works, highlighting the human side of the gods. By including these elements in his works, he celebrated human achievement, realism, and individual expression, marking a shift toward secular subjects and human-centered narratives, including human potential, beauty, and intellect. Leonardo da Vinci showed profound perspective on the human side of the characters in his paintings. As an outstanding representative of the Renaissance, he made significant contributions to the development of humanist thought through his paintings.

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