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Milanese escape game: “The Great Work of the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance”

Xavier d’Hérouville ^{1*} & Aurore Caulier ^{2*}

Ten years of research and investigation around a small panel composed of two horizontal boards assembled with a sharp joint and a carefully planed reverse, painted at the end of the 15th / beginning of the 16th century, have not yet made it possible to identify the author of this “Temptation” treated in the alchemical mode of the “Great Work”. Register whose anthropogonic science is of such depth that it only seems to be able to be linked to a small intellectual elite of initiates from certain academies founded at the dawn of the Italian Renaissance. It was in fact only in Italy, in the neoplatonic Florence of Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and Cristoforo Landino, that a similar syncretism flourished at this time in which the Christian doctrine of Salvation, Greek philosophy of Nature, deep symbolism of the Hellenistic and Gnostic Mysteries, practice of magic and theurgic therapy... Before spreading throughout the peninsula, then spreading by capillary action in France and finally in a large part of Europe. Independently of this “esoteric grammar” which makes this “plate” an authentic manifesto resembling a sacred book, we have focused in this present study on the purely iconographic analysis of the central element – although topographically decentered – of this representation, namely this helmet inspired by the “barbute” of Venetian origin. Our conclusions make this piece of armor an additional element of proof that can reinforce the intimate conviction of a Leonardian composition of this small panel. This last hypothesis is relying on the structural link established between this iconographic element and another work of the Milanese master known today under the name of the “Lady with an Ermine”. This connection allows us to propose as a model for this Leonardian portrait a completely different figure Milanese than that commonly accepted. In fine, two birds with one (philosophical) stone, what appeared until then as the “Great Work” of an anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance comes to be familiar with a very Leonardian authorship, and which more is sheds new and completely original light on the identification of the model of his Milanese masterpiece, the “Lady with an Ermine”, an allegorical representation in which the mental strength and beauty that the In mythology we lent to Amazons.

“ The Great Work of Leonardo ” ³ is a small wooden panel which - to parody a famous advertisement from the 1970s - is in the style of a Boschian "Temptation of Saint Anthony"... But it does not really have all the characteristics of a "Temptation of Saint Anthony" Boschian! As proof, the two horizontal boards assembled with a sharp joint and with a carefully planed reverse side which compose it are not made of oak wood of Baltic origin contrary to the systematic Flemish usage of the time ⁴ One hypothesis would explain the use of non-Baltic wood, in this case French, for the making of this panel: In the 15th century, the southern Netherlands were under the

domination of the Dukes of Burgundy. In this context, it seems that many artists traveled between the different regions of the duchy. It is therefore possible that the author of this creation is an “expatriate” Flemish... Or conversely that it is a “foreign” artist - French or having stayed/transited in France - trained in Flanders; he would have painted a Flemish-style painting on a panel made in France found before leaving or along the way! According to Pascale Fraiture, this last supposition would also *explain the small discrepancies noted regarding the making of the support, in particular the absence of barbs and unpainted edges on the face of the panel, as well as the absence of thinning*

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³ <https://hal.science/hal-03966781/document>

⁴ L’usage systématique flamand de l’époque était du bois de chêne, qualifié de “ bois d’Olland ”, importé d’une île de la mer baltique dénommée “ Öland ”

of the edges of the panel on the reverse, almost always present on Flemish panels⁵.

The iconographic “motif” which particularly attracted, not to say monopolized, our attention in the context of our present study, is the central element of this representation. It is this helmet, which is directly inspired by a piece of armor that is neither Flemish nor French, but... Italian, since it is a Venetian “barbute” of the late 15th/early 16th century. Central element, not because of its topographical location, off-center on the right, but because it instantly attracts the eye due to its dimensions which make it the most massive and imposing structure in this setting (Fig.1).



Figure 1 | Example of Venetian “barbute” and its free interpretation in *the Great Work* of the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance

Let us note in passing that this same iconographic “motif” was subsequently taken up more or less faithfully, not to say skillfully, by a few perfectly identified and known “followers” such as the French painter Henri Bles, alias Herri Met de Bles and the painter Flemish Pieter Huys (Fig.2 et 3).



Figure 2 | “Barbute” by the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance and later cover by French painter Henri Bles, alias Herri Met de Bles

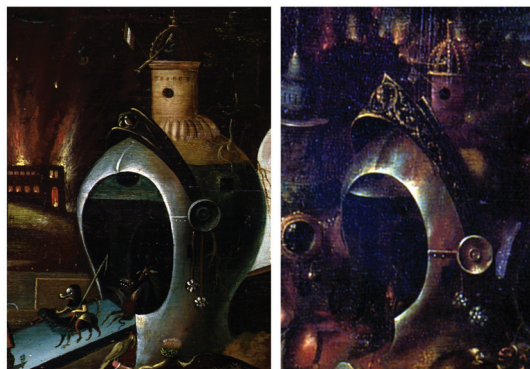


Figure 3 | “Barbute” by the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance and later recovery formerly reattributed to the Flemish painter Pieter Huys

But before playing the game of seven differences, it seems essential to us to decipher the symbolism of this central element around which the entire staging of this painting revolves. In other words, it is up to us to immerse ourselves in the “esoteric grammar” which makes this “board” an authentic manifesto resembling a sacred book (Fig.4).



Figure 4 | *The Great Work* of the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance

The helmet as it fits into this allegorical representation of the alchemical “Great Work” is here the symbol of the womb, of the matrix of which it presents all the physical and metaphysical characteristics... It is “the Athanor”, the philosophers’ oven (Fig.5), that is to say the receptacle of all the transmutations carried out by the philosopher’s stone. We can also observe that the protagonists defend this oven *unguibus and rostro*, beak and claws, against external attacks: The followers are thus armed with a sword and protect themselves with a shield. The alchemical “Great Work” is a constant internal struggle aimed at cultivating virtues and combating vices, weapons in hand and pieces of armor screwed to the

⁵ Pascale Fraiture et Georges Lambert, Rapport d’analyse dendrochronologique, peinture sur panneau, *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, production flamande de la fin du XVe ou du début du XVIe siècle, cote P352, IRPA/KIK, Bruxelles (Belg.), 2007

body; it requires a warrior soul to repel our “daimons”. This is indeed the deep meaning of this “Temptation” in the alchemical mode of the “Great Work”.

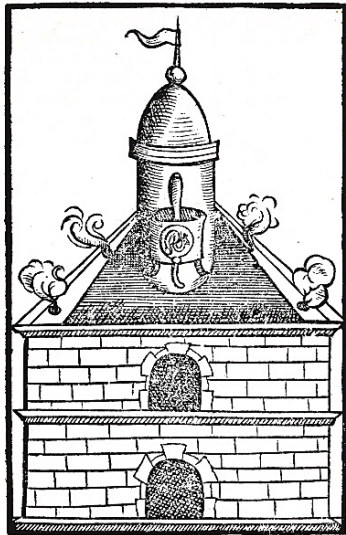


Figure 5 | “The Athanor”, oven of philosophers

After this small esoteric digression, nevertheless essential to understanding the rest of this study, let us return to the comparative iconographic analysis of this helmet and the later versions - somewhat distorted - that it inspired to the “followers” of the master anonymous from the Italian Renaissance. In addition to the visor, which is more ornamental than functional, to which we will return later, in the game of seven differences, the prize undoubtedly goes to the contours of the front part of the helmet which frames the part left free of the warrior's face... or the warrior from elsewhere; because if there is a mythological effigy that countless ancient and modern representations have shown us helmeted, it is indeed the warrior and victorious figure of the goddess “Athena nikè” (Fig.6).

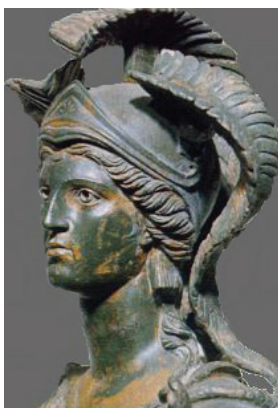


Figure 6 | Athena Nike, goddess of war and victory

In this regard, the Italian Renaissance counted among its emblematic figures such an “amazon” who remained for posterity “the Lioness of Romagna”⁶ : Caterina Sforza, own niece of the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Maria Sforza, known as “Il Moro” (Fig.7).



Figure 7 | Caterina Sforza played on screen by Gina McKee⁷

Caterina Sforza was born in 1463 in Milan, to the love of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Count of Pavia and future Duke of Milan, and his mistress Countess Lucrezia Landriani. Caterina Sforza was raised by her paternal grandmother Bianca Maria Visconti in the lively and refined court of the great poets and writers of the Italian Renaissance. The latter, as well as her father, passed on to him their passion for war and hunting (Fig.8) and taught him the art of governing.



Figure 8 | Women hunting rabbits with ferrets in the Psalter of Queen Mary

If there is therefore a female warrior figure who marked the Italian Renaissance and inscribed her name with a raised fist in letters of blood and gold in the legend of her multiple conspiracies, it is indeed that of Caterina Sforza, “ the Lioness of Romagna”. Caterina Sforza, who fought in armor, sword in hand, the armies of the all-powerful and formidable Borgia family! Posterity was not mistaken and her heroine character is still portrayed today through the series of a comic strip⁸ and that of one of the most famous historical action video games - open world adventure and infiltration⁹. Caterina Sforza, “the Lioness of Romagna”, was thus one of the most romantic and adventurous female

⁶ <https://hal.science/hal-04066899/document>

⁷ *The Borgias*, television series created by Neil Jordan

⁸ Jean-Pierre Pécau, Gabriele Parma et Dimitri Fogolin, *Les Reines de sang - Catherine Sforza, la lionne de Lombardie*, Delcourt editions

⁹ *Assassin's Creed II, Assassin's Creed : Renaissance, Assassin's Creed : Brotherhood*, developed and edited by Ubisoft

characters of the Italian Renaissance. Described by her contemporaries as a sophisticated, beautiful and witty woman (Fig.8).

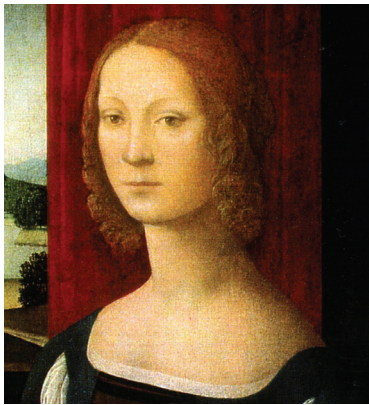


Figure 8 | Portrait of Caterina Sforza by Lorenzo di Credi

They also gave him a temperament that was, to say the least, independent and determined: A velvet-gloved hand that never feared crossing swords with men, as powerful and formidable as the Borgias were! In addition to the fact that she rubbed shoulders with ease with the greatest geniuses of art and culture of her time, she also unabashedly broke many conventions and dusted off many principles, to the point of flirting with alchemy. At the turn of the 15th century, Caterina Sforza wrote more than four hundred recipes for beauty and good health – tinged with alchemical formulas – in a manuscript entitled *Experimenti*. Existing in a 16th century transcription produced by Lucantonio Cuppano (1507-1557)¹⁰, the manuscript includes instructions for making lip colors, lotions, and hair dyes (with a clear preference for a blonde or red shade), prescriptions for treating conditions ranging from fever and headaches to epilepsy and infertility and recipes to improve libido and “restore” virginity... Further still, he gives instructions for producing the philosopher's stone and the quintessence: the elixir supposed to protect and cure all diseases and what's more, ensure eternal youth... For example, this “talc water” recipe is supposed to achieve several of these objectives at the same time: *Talc is the star of the earth and has shiny scales; it is found on the island of Cyprus and its color is similar to that of citrine; in a mass it appears green, and dissolved in air it appears crystalline; and it has the following virtues, not to mention others not noted in this book, which will be the alchemist's desire to discover: First, to make women beautiful, and to remove all spots or marks from the face, so that a woman of sixty will appear to be twenty years old. Also... mixed with white wine, its powder will cure the one who is poisoned and whoever drinks the powder in white wine will be protected that day from poison and any disease or plague. Also... this water transforms silver into gold, and makes fake jewelry perfect and fine.* Multifaceted recipes like this, informed

by alchemical practice, abounded in modern scientific culture. They circulated in manuscript and print, among men and women, by word of mouth and through epistolary, commercial and courtly networks. Favoring direct experience, observation and application to study or theoretical explanation, the recipes contained in Caterina Sforza's *Experimenti* reflect the empirical and heterogeneous character of modern science. Like the printed books of secrets that would explode in popularity in the early 15th century (described in William Eamon's *Science and the Secrets of Nature*), Caterina Sforza's manuscript blurs the lines between alchemy and medicine, practical and obscure, home and court. Her quest for the secrets of the “Great Work” is not only recorded in the manuscript she bequeathed to her son (the condottiere Giovanni bande Bande Nere, father of Cosimo I de' Medici), she also mentions it in letters to his apothecary, his agents, members of his family and other alchemy enthusiasts throughout Italy. Caterina Sforza's activity places her at the origins of a Medici interest in alchemy and experimentation which extended until the 17th century, while positioning her in the broader panorama of modern women's scientific activity.

And it is with this new digression, historical this time, that our “Milanese escape game” takes us with great strides towards the exit door... Because the singular contours of the front part of the helmet which frames the part left free of the face of... or of the warrior for that matter, central figure of the “Great Work” of the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance, adapts to the millimeter to the contours of the no less singular headdress of the portrait of “The Lady with an Ermine” by Leonardo da Vinci! (Fig.9 et 10)

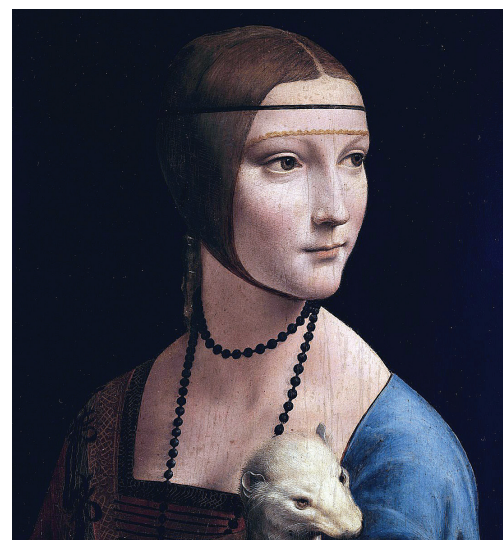


Figure 9 | Lady with an Ermine by Leonardo da Vinci

And when we evoke the singular contours of the front part of this helmet, it is both intrinsically, with regard to the standard

¹⁰ *Experimenti de la Ex[cellentissima] S[ignora] Caterina da Furlj Matre de lo inllux[trissimo] S[ignor] Giovanni de Medici*, in Caterina Sforza, ed. Pier Desiderio Pasolini, v. 3, 617-618 (Rome : Loescher, 1893). Cuppano's transcription from the 16th century is preserved in private archives.

of the Venetian “barbute” from which it is inspired (Fig.1), and relatively - to the small game of seven differences - having regard to the versions made by the “followers” of the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance: Indeed, neither one, nor the other, of the helmets of Henri Bles, alias Herri Met de Bles and of Pieter Huys were clearly designed to adapt and adjust to the millimeter to the contours of the face of Leonardo da Vinci's “Lady with an Ermine”. So it is with the “followers” who inevitably end up losing the “Ariane’s thread” – in this case we could say the “Athena’s thread” – of the master(s) from whom they were inspired. At the risk of seeing the very essence of their original works lost over time, thus relegating their primary meaning and the accompanying subtle message to the mists of time.

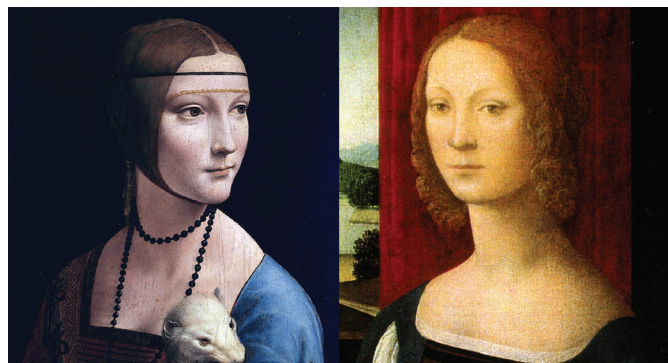


Figure 11 | *Lady with an Ermine* by Leonardo da Vinci and the *portrait of Caterina Sforza* by Lorenzo di Credi

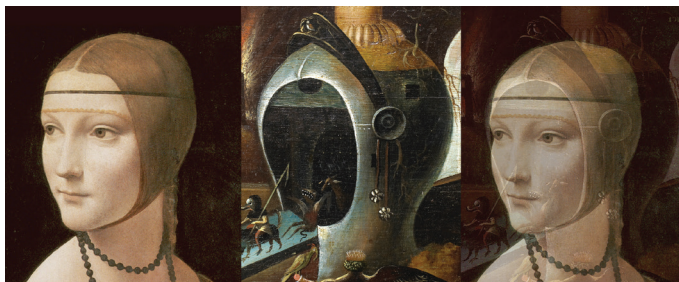


Figure 10 | Superposition and transparency of the helmet from the Great Work of the anonymous Italian Renaissance master and the face of the *Lady with an Ermine* by Leonardo da Vinci (from left to right)

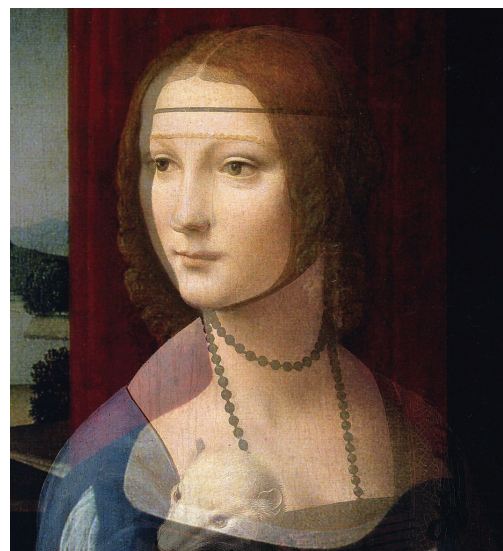


Figure 12 | Superposition and transparency of the *portrait of Caterina Sforza* by Lorenzo di Credi and the *Lady with an Ermine* by Leonardo da Vinci

“Lady with an ermine”, of which naturalists agree that the mustelid in question contained – not to say “controlled” – by an iron fist is in reality an albino ferret, an ancient example of a pet ferret, whose visibility of the dress was particularly prized for rabbit hunting¹¹. And it is now, with the requalification of this iconographic element resembling an attribute, the last key to the exit door of our “escape game in the Milanese”, that our helmet from the “Great Work” of the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance definitely takes, literally and figuratively, a human figure: that of Caterina Sforza, the “Lioness of Romagna”... Caterina Sforza, all both incarnation of Diana the huntress and warrior and victorious Athena nikè, but also master of experimentation, and of alchemy in particular, the knowledge of which she shared with some other disciples of the Italian Renaissance. Beyond the remarkable apparent similarity of her face with that of the portrait of the “Lady with an Ermine” by Leonardo da Vinci (Fig.11, 12 and 20), it is incontestably her psychological portrait and her personality - not to say his soul - which shine through the “Great Work” of the anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance.

Ultimately, two birds with one stone, what appeared until now as the “Great Work” of an anonymous master of the Italian Renaissance comes closer to a recognition of entirely Leonardian paternity, and what is more, sheds light on a new and completely original day the identification of the model of his Milanese masterpiece, the “Lady with an Ermine”, an allegorical representation in which shines through the mental strength and beauty that was attributed to the Amazon mythology. It is to Caterina Sforza, high priestess of experimentation and alchemy, that the anonymous master - although now partially unmasked - of the Italian Renaissance comes to pay homage through this “Temptation” treated in the alchemical mode of the “Great Work”.

¹¹ <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Furet>

Just for fun, in order to immortalize the photo of the victorious exit of our “Milanese escape game”, let us turn our attention one last time to two “motives” which cannot escape our sagacity in this hunt for details that seem treasure hunt.

First of all, the iron hand of the “Lady with an Ermine”, aka Caterina Sforza, as drawn by Leonardo da Vinci has remarkable similarities with that sketched for his draft of “Saint Jerome”. (Fig.13 et 14).



Figure 13 | *Saint Jerome* by Leonardo da Vinci

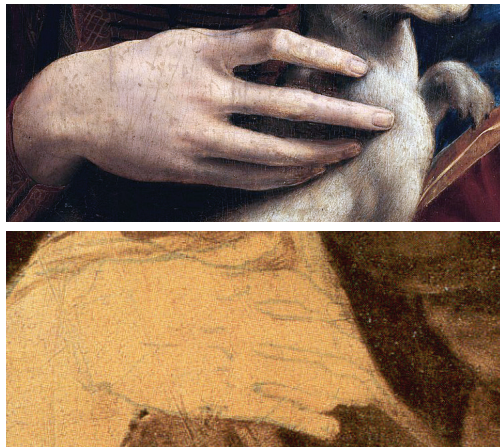


Figure 14 | Hands of the *Lady with an Ermine* and *Saint Jerome* by Leonardo da Vinci

Until now, no one seems to have questioned the improbable real posture of the “Saint Jerome” outlined by Leonardo da Vinci. It is clear that if he has one knee, in this case the left, on the ground... Then his ipsilateral arm and forearm raised

forward are as if in suspension above the void east and his left hand seems to contain, not to say “control”, a totally invisible element... A simple virtual diagonal translation of the lion lying in front of him, could however change the situation and would thus shed new, more coherent light on this sketch by Leonardo da Vinci (Fig.15)

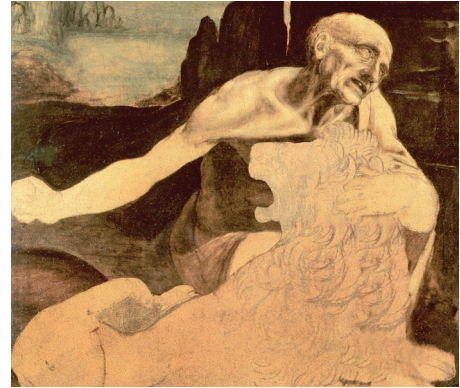


Figure 15 | *Saint Jerome* by Leonardo da Vinci : virtual diagonal translation

And, this time again, from a (philosopher's?) stone - which Saint Jerome holds at arm's length in his right hand - two blows: The iconographic connection between the “Lady with the Ermine”, alias Caterina Sforza, and the “Saint Jerome” by Leonardo da Vinci is even more striking (Fig.16)

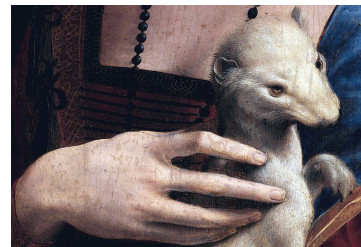


Figure 16 | Animal “mastery” with an iron fist of the *Lady with the Ermine* and *Saint Jerome* by Leonardo da Vinci

Daniel Arrasse himself ¹² affirmed that *certain images persist in the work of Leonardo da Vinci and receive different names depending on the context in which they are used. More than images, they are potential configurations*

¹² Daniel Arrasse, *Léonard de Vinci*, Hazan editions, 2011

of images which transform and are therefore never really identical! Leonardo da Vinci thus uses certain “motifs” independently of the theme for which they were invented. He thus often seems to work, as if for themselves, on “motives” and adapt them to the specific projects that he must face more than he makes them depend on these projects. “Genealogical tree”, “transversal unit”, this practice leads to an abundant circulation of “patterns”, complete or partial, from drawings to drawings and from works to works, which ensures coherence to all of Leonardo’s production. In other cases, it’s a partial configuration that comes back almost seeming like an attribute of the character it corresponds to. And Daniel Arasse concludes that this rhythm of creation and the labyrinth that the associations of ideas and images interweave between the “patterns”, the condensations which emerge there to disappear and resurface in a displaced form prohibit a linear approach to his evolution as a painter... This is the reason why we chose this title which is, to say the least, offbeat, if not a bit provocative, “Milanese escape game” regarding the analytical study of a small painted panel, because it very quickly revealed itself to be an interlacing of Leonardian “motifs” of which we needed, if we could not untangle all the threads, at least to try to follow the thread ... of Ariadne, door after door, each named “motive” being the key to a new passage. We are thereby intimately convinced - like Daniel Arasse - of the existence of a non-linear, but nevertheless quasi-phylogenetic transversal unity of the work of Leonardo da Vinci through the “circulation” of these “ patterns” – complete or partial – from drawing to drawing and from work to work. The rhythm of his creation which by association of ideas and images, like “dolci vinci” forms an Ariadne’s thread which leads us into the labyrinth of his pictorial work where the “motifs” condense then disappear before to resurface more ultre in a displaced (different), transformed/metamorphosed form... Perhaps as if Leonardo da Vinci had in fact wanted to give unity to all of his pictorial work with the desire to ultimately show the “unfolding” of a single fresco, exactly like what he would have liked to be able to do with all of his treatises which he planned to bring together and link into a single encyclopedia of the universal knowledge of his century?

But, what really is this “motif” of the iron fist controlling a predatory carnivore “circulating” between Caterina Sfoza in the guise of the “Lady with an Ermine” and Leonardo’s “Saint Jerome” da Vinci? The lion is the symbol of Force, both in its physical and moral sense. We thus find it symbolically associated with the organ of the heart and philosophically speaking with “the opening of the heart”. Such is perhaps the reading of arcana no. 'she controls between her legs.



Figure 17 | Arcana n°XI of the Tarot: Strength

Whether for Caterina Sforza, “the Lioness of Romagna” - of which we will not fail to remind here the etymological root of the family name is “forza”, the Force - through the exercise of alchemy, like for Saint Jerome through that of acesis, self-mastery, by the path of the “Great Work” for the Amazon or by that of “Enlightenment” for the anchorite, passes through the acquisition of Moral force that only “the opening of the heart” makes possible. And what more can we say, to put an end to this “motif”, of the predestined first name of the one we present as being the author of this “plate” of the “Great Work”: Leonardo, alias ardent lion?

And finally, we come to this second and last “motif”: the visor, more ornamental than functional, of this helmet with the “Athamor” function and central element of the “Great Work” (Fig.18).



Figure 17 | Ornamental visor of the “Great Work” helmet

The upper part of this ornamental visor is escutcheoned and allows us to see a new “pattern” with a “signature” value (Fig.18), which is moreover, this time again, with a double “signature” value.



Figure 18 | “Motif” de la partie haute écussonnée de la visière du casque du “Grand Œuvre”

It represents a diurnal raptor called “Nibbio bianco” or “White Elanion”, better known as “White-tail kite” or “White Milan” (Fig.19). This is positioned in the center of a two-strand braided crown whose interweaving extends along the branches of the visor, so that here we can clearly speak of “dolci vinci”¹³, of lakes of love or interlacing, following the Milanese fashion of the Italian Renaissance.



Figure 19 | Nibbio bianco or White elanion white, also called “Wite Milan”

We therefore have here on the one hand the “signature” of the Milanese origins of Caterina Sforza, emblazoned on the visor of what we have the intimate conviction to be her own helmet for all the good reasons developed previously in this study, nothing surprising therefore in this certification... But also that of the “dolci vinci”, Milanese ties of Leonardo da Vinci, the official document recording his burial thus designating him as being *Lionard de Vincy Milanese nobleman, first painter and engineer and architect of the King, state mechanic and former painting director of the Duke of Milan...* And what more can I say, to finish with this last “motif” and at the same time close the circle of this study, of this childhood memory - which 'undoubtedly inscribed in the same register as that of Barbara's Black Eagle - reported by Leonardo da Vinci in one of his notebooks: *Questo scriver si distincttamente DEL NIBBIO par che sia mio destino, perche nella mia prima ricordatione della mia infantia e mi pareva che essendo io in culla, che UN NIBBIO venissi a me e mi aprissi la bocca colla sua coda e molte volte mi percuotessi con tal coda dentro alle labbra*¹⁴.



Figure 20 | Superposition and transparency of “Leonardo’s Great Work” and Caterina Sforza in the guise of the Lady with an Ermine by Leonardo da Vinci

*The esoteric science that this painting reveals is of such depth that one can wonder where and how a Middle Ages could have acquired it. What universities or academies taught such anthropogony? It was only in Italy, in the neoplatonic Florence of Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and Christoforo Landino, that a similar syncretism flourished where the Christian doctrine of Salvation, Greek philosophy of Nature, and the profound symbolism of the Hellenistic Mysteries were mixed. and Gnostics, practice of magic and theurgical therapy*¹⁵.

And this is how this “escape game” ends which took us “circulating” from “motif” to “motif” in the mysteries of the “dolce vinci” staged by the master of the Italian Renaissance.

¹³ “ che me legasse con si dolce vinci ” (Dante Alighieri, Le Paradis, chant XIV). La branche de cette visière ornée de “ dolce vinci ”, entrelacs peints en tons clairs sur fond sombre, bordés de part et d'autre d'un trait du même ton clair clair n'est pas sans rappeler l'auréole à valeur de visière d'une autre œuvre de l'atelier milanais de Léonard de Vinci connue sous le nom de “ Madone de Laroque ” (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Madone_de_Laroque)

¹⁴ Leonardo da Vinci, Codex atlanticus, folio 66v

¹⁵ Wilhelm Fraenger, *Le Royaume millénaire de Jérôme Bosch*, Denoël éditions, 1947