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AN ARTISTIC AND PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH OF LEONARDO DA VINCI'S PAINTINGS

Case studies

Keywords

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Abstract

The starting point of the present paper is the work 'The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne', made by Leonardo da Vinci. The paper is based both on an artistic and psychoanalytic approach which opens new ways of interpretation due to the research of Sigmund Freud - 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood'. Freud claims that Leonardo had found the lost image of his mother in his works 'The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne' and 'Mona Lisa', thus justifying the artist's direct attachment to these creations.

Along with specific interpretations of the creative process, the psychoanalytic approach intends to explain and enrich the content of ideas of the present paper regarding one of the most valuable creations of Leonardo and also an artistic testament created towards the end of his life. Freud's psychoanalytic approach brings specific interpretative content for the mentioned work of art. It is different from the artistic method, not contradicting various artistic studies, but complementing them in a harmonious way.

1. Introduction

The present research underlines the artistic and psychoanalytic features that have paved the way towards new interpretation horizons for the work *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* made by Leonardo da Vinci between 1502-1516. He made himself remarked as a genius of the Renaissance spirit in Italy, his research and work were oriented to many fields, such as architecture, anatomy and science, his masterpieces continue to be studied even nowadays.

From his vast creation, we will focus our present study on one of the most important of his paintings – *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* – exhibited in The Museum of Louvre in Paris, being recently presented during an event suggestively called *Sainte Anne, l'ultime chef-d'œuvre de Léonard de Vinci* (29 March – 25 June 2012) [*Saint Anne, the last masterpiece of Leonardo da Vinci*], organized by the curator Vincent Delieuvin in order to celebrate the recent restoration (Oddos, 2012) of the work. The exhibition reunites the well-known painting and other varied studies of portraits, landscapes and compositional sketches connected to that project, marking the changes that took place as far as the pictorial ensemble is concerned, and also the *spiritual evolution* (Oddos, 2012) of the artist. It is also well-known the fact that the painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* has fascinated in time numberless artists who have taken over and interpreted the specific features of Leonardo's work. Making a step forward in time and reaching the beginning of the 20th century, one of them was the artist Max Ernst with the work *Le Baiser* (1927), which is a resumption of Renaissance painting in a surrealist manner, being inspired (Oddos, 2012) by the ideas promoted by Freud in his study - *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*.

Coming back to the well-known creation of Leonardo, the artistic context in which it appeared, connected to the predominantly secular tendency of Renaissance religious painting, had as effect, unlike the specificity of medieval creations, the coming closer of art to real models (Gr nberg, 1967, p. 6) of the surrounding world, offering a great liberty of expression to the artists, a liberty not known by the predecessors. Moreover, the religious art of that period would mark an important feature regarding the connection (Gr nberg, 1967, p. 6) established between characters and nature, thus underlining one of the major differences compared to the art of Middle Ages (Panduru, 2005, p. 187). In this respect, being deeply marked by the stylistic specificity of Middle Ages, both nature and the beauty of the body (Gr nberg, 1967, p. 6) did not represent essentially defining elements of artistic creation, it is only

later, in Renaissance that they would be transformed in essential features that would mark the important ideological change of the periods that followed. Representing an essential moment for the evolution of figurative art and especially of that having a religious character, the Renaissance brought forward again the harmony and beauty of the body. In this respect, regarding the works of the Renaissance having a religious character, their resemblance with the secular portraits consisted on the one side in placing characters inside a landscape, while on the other side, in the usage of the linear perspective which is specific to the Renaissance and which replaced the reverse perspective, specific to medieval art.

Another feature of this moment was connected to the humanization of the Biblical topics until they were transformed into creations which are similar to genre scenes (Gr nberg, 1967, p. 7), this being one of the essential features of Renaissance art, regarding the concepts of beauty and grace (Tatarkiewicz, 1978, p. 206). In this way, the artists of the period would create the image of the *Madonas*, starting from the study of real personage whose physical beauty suggested the spiritual side of the character.

The well-known work *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* already offers the image of the degree of secularization that the art of the Renaissance has known as a result of the old attempts in this respect of the Romanesque and the Gothic. Reminding us of the serene attitude of the statues of saints from the magnificent gothic cathedrals, respectively *L'Ange au sourire* – The Cathedral of Reims (1230) and *La vierge dorée* – The Cathedral of Amiens (1288), the face of Saint Ana and that of the Virgin describe the same sensation of proximity of the viewer and the same soul candour, while the smiles already foretell the serene image of *Mona Lisa*. Furthermore, the physiognomies of the three mentioned women are very similar which leads us to think that they are hypostases of the same model, just like it is the case of Ginevra de' Benci, Cecilia Gallerani or Lucrezia Crivelli, contributing to the creation of an "ideal" feminine face which is representative for the creation of Leonardo.

2. The artistic approach of the work *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* by Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo gave a final form to the painting after numerous sketches and detailed studies for each fragment of the ensemble, meant to clarify and catch the scene having a religious character in the most representative manner. Compared to other works from previous periods which still preserved various Byzantine reminiscence, the Renaissance

artist chose the humanization of characters, this process being started in the early works of Cimabue, Duccio or Giotto who marked the beginning of the phenomenon of "desacralization" (Quenot, 1993, p. 52) of western art. Finding his inspiration in the paintings of the predecessors, Leonardo proposed an original formula of placing characters in the overall ensemble of the painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, this formula is based, broadly, on the pyramidal framing also met in the work *Sant' Anna Metterza* (1425) of Masaccio and Masolino.

Though the painting of Italian master did not have a canonical base, being inspired by the apocryphal Gospels (Maclean, 2003, p. 51), the artistic representations of the topic *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* or the so-called "humanissima trinitas" (Schapiro, 1992, p. 219) (in Italian *Sant'Anna Metterza*) were frequently met in the Western iconography, being finally accepted (Maclean, 2003, p. 52) also by the Catholic Church.

From a compositional point of view, Renaissance painting has two diagonals, one of them is ascendant and highlighted by the line which imaginary unites the right knee of Saint Anne and her portrait and another one which is descendant and which underlines the face of the above-mentioned character, then that of the Virgin, of the Child and the lamb placed in the lower part of the composition. This framing does not offer the viewer the idea of ascent or transcendent, but that of pressure, the feminine characters look towards the right, inferior side of the painting, the gestures of the mother thus putting in light the descendant diagonal.

The regards of the characters intertwine almost in the middle of the composition, thus underlining the diagonal from the right side of the pyramid. The chain of characters marks the relationship that exists among them, the women are smiling and looking at the Infant Jesus, the Virgin tenderly directs her attention towards the child who seems to visually response to his mother's calls.

The masterhood of the artist's suggested by the visual sensations that he succeeds to transmit, increasing the confusion of the viewer. At the level of placing the characters in the composition, Leonardo paints Saint Anne holding the Virgin Mary on her knees, creating the illusion that the two characters form a common body by representing different steps of their movement (Zöllner, 2003, p. 65). In this way, the bodies of the characters are interwoven in a complex manner (Gaillard, 1993, p. 456), the Virgin supports (Melniciuc Puic, 2010, p. 18) the Child Jesus in a position which reminds us, broadly, by the Byzantine iconography.

From a symbolic point of view, we can interpret the image as a celebration of maternity and of the

future drama that the Virgin will feel once Her own child is sacrificed, She seems to be pulling Him (Zöllner, 2003, p. 65) from the lamb. The emblematic presence of this symbolic animal suggests Christ's Passion (Oddos, 2012), steering up an enormous inner tension, transmitted by the succession of embraces. The position of the hands of the Virgin is broadly repeated by the Child who, in His turn, no longer shows tenderness to the lamb, but he rather seems to abuse (Gaillard, 1993, p. 452), thus reminding us of the meaning of the animal and in the same time by the veterotestamentary writings („He was afflicted, but He was submissive and did not open His mouth; as a lamb for stabbing He was brought and as a sheep without voice before the ones that clip it, this is how He did not open His mouth" Isaia, 53, 7). The double presence of Jesus, as a human being and as a lamb, suggests His human and divine nature, the animal represented in the painting is the image of kindness and sacrifice, aspects which cause the mystical-religious field to intertwine with the Messianic destiny, capable to underline sacrifice and death (Gaillard, 1993, p. 464) which were foretold for Him.

Together with the double presence of Jesus that may be considered a special element of this paper, the artist has succeeded in giving the painting an obvious air of originality by placing the characters in a specific way, by catching their human nature made obvious by the lack of halo and by placing the characters in a real landscape naturalistic represented, without using the golden background. As far as this one is concerned, some authors find a possible connection between the specific scenery of the work and Mary's quality as a Virgin, interpreting this relation in terms of a religious symbolism (Zöllner, 2003, p. 66).

3. The psychoanalytical approach of the work *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* by Leonardo da Vinci

Being the proof of a complex modality of representation, the painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* has in time stired the interest of art critics and that of a famous doctor, a pioneer in the field of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud.

Both for the well-known *Mona Lisa*, and for *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, Freud presented new horizons of the psychoanalytical interpretation of this, everything is collected in a special study in the volume *Psychoanalysis and Art*. The psychoanalyst started his scientific endeavour from Leonardo's creation, he later appealed to his biography. In this respect, the investigation of the psychoanalytic approach of *Mona Lisa* and of the painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* that was referred to by Freud imposed the presentation of a few details referring to the first years in the artist's life and to his close

connection to his mother. In this respect, we underline the fact that the internationally-known Austrian psychoanalyst launched the hypothesis that Leonardo da Vinci would have found in the model of *Mona Lisa* the smile (Ha deu, 1993, p. 3) of his mother, this moment influenced the future creation of the artist. In this works, the feminine figures present the same smile later called by the critics *leonardian* (Ha deu, 1993, p. 3). It is probable that the smile that was in the memory of the artist could have suggested, in the portraits of women who are smiling and tender, his feelings for his mother (Vezzosi, 1997, p. 134).

In order to understand the way in which Freud presented the features of the characters, connected to the events in the life of the artist, we my firstly refer to the first years of childhood of the Italian master. Leonardo, the illegitimate son of Piero and Caterina, lived up to the age of five only with his mother who in the meantime had played the role of both parents. Freud supposed that, in this period, the artist had been overwhelmed by his mother's affection that would have been exclusively directed towards the child by passionate kisses on his mouth (Freud, 1996, p. 137). In the absence of the father, Leonardo thus witnessed a double substitution: first of all by taking over the role of father by his mother, then by the father figure's substitution by the child, again by his mother. After this stage, Leonardo was adopted by his father and by his wife, donna Albiera who could not have children. The drama of Catherine, the biological mother of Leonardo, had thus been doubled, she had to give up (Freud, 1996, p. 149), step by step, both to his man and then to her child. Furthermore, the memory of Catherine would continue to live in time, just like Freud claimed, the artist preserved her memory faithfully in time by the discharge of his love for his mother (Freud, 1996, p. 126).

Freud's research - "*Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*" - is based on the event told by Leonardo himself, in which he, as a child in the cradle, would have been touched on his lips several times by a bird's tail whose image is always in his memory.

This story gave rise, in time, to numerous speculations and symbolic interpretations, some of them being maintained at the expense of the inaccurate translation (Zamfirescu, 1996, pp. 68-69) of the term which referred to the bird in the memory of the artist. In Italian, the word "nibio" means hawk (Zamfirescu, 1996, p. 68), but the incorrect translation in German mentioned it as an eagle, thus giving way to numerous interpretations and connections between the respective bird and the Egyptian mythology, respectively the goddess Mut that was frequently associated with the image of the eagle, both in the figurative representation and in that using hieroglyphs (Te Velde, 2007, p. 242). On this short fragment, Freud mentioned that

this memory could not have been preserved by the artist from the time he was a baby, but it could have been a later evocation of his childhood (Freud, 1996, p. 100).

Both Freud and Jung discovered the eagle in the crinkles of the Virgin's blue cloth, thus suggesting the connection between the symbolic connotations of the painting having a religious topic and the artist's childhood. Though Freud's research was based, mainly, on the erroneous translation of a word, though, this interpretation has opened the door for new horizons of knowledge, the eagle being considered, in general, a frightening bird (Gaillard, 1993, p. 457), while the hawk is even more than that.

Another hypothesis linked to this topic was launched by the sexologist Havelock Ellis who claimed that it is possible that in the memory of the artist, it was not the eagle (Freud, 1996, p. 100), but rather a large-sized bird, taking into account the fact that this image should have been connected to the child's perception on reality. In the later story of Leonardo, it is possible to have been automatically made the association of the bird from one's memory and the eagle, taking into account the fact that the artist had had good knowledge on birds which he had studied extremely attentively. Another interpretation discovered by Freud consists in the possibility of noticing the arrival of the mentioned bird, his mother might have found this symbolic connotation (Freud, 1996, p. 100), that she later told the child about - he was an infant at that time, in his memory, this image would become so powerfully imprinted that he would come to confuse it with his own lived experience and that he would remember directly, not through the means of his mother's stories.

Freud's conclusions regarding the evolution and the artistic personality of Leonardo are obviously linked to his childhood, both the one lived near his biological mother - Catherine, and that near his adoptive mother - donna Albiera. Furthermore, the psychoanalyst mentioned the artist's sexuality which was influenced by his mother's excessive tenderness (Freud, 1996, p. 183) reflected in *sexual repression* which determined the sublimation of libido in the desire for knowledge (Freud, 1996, p. 184).

Another perspective on the psychoanalytical interpretation of the repeated ideal of beauty, often confused with characters from the creation of the master such as *Mona Lisa*, *Saint Anne* or *the Virgin*, is identified by Carl Gustav Jung. According to his analysis, there are some *blocked images* (Minulescu, 1997, p. 73) in the patient's unconscious translated by psychoanalysts as the creation of *unconscious figures* (Minulescu, 2001, p. 75), the translation of their meaning also means the cure (Minulescu, 2001, p. 75) of the patient. By connecting this theory and practice with the long

time spent by Leonardo creating this painting which was finally left unfinished, we assume that this work was not for the painter solely an artistic process, but a psychological one of self-healing.

As far as the works *Mona Lisa* and *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, Freud underlined that Leonardo would have found the lost image of the mother, thus justifying the direct attachment of the artist towards these works. Moreover, by using as argument the above-mentioned theory of Jung, we believe that the previous inner blockage of the artist consists in the mere image of his mother. The trauma of separating the child from his biological mother is possible did not heal by replacing her with his adoptive mother. This is why the prolonged process of painting's achievement was possible after a long struggle of the artist against his own anguishes, trying to re-establish a lost connection which in psychoanalytical terms would be the equivalent of his healing.

These statements stay at the level of suppositions, at least until the moment they can be proved, but, despite all these, they express their connotative value which by no means should be ignored, but, on the contrary, be taken into account, their role being that of explaining and enriching Leonardo's artistic work.

We can thus suppose that *Saint Anne* could actually be a representation of his biological mother, Catherine, while *the Virgin* who tenderly heads towards the Wholy Child is an identification of the adoptive mother, donna Albiera who symbolically made a similar gesture by adopting the child Leonardo. Noticing the image of the real past's events, the action of the three characters in the painting actually reflect the moment of substitution of the biological mother with the adoptive one, while the child Leonardo, according to Freud's words, had the chance to have two mothers, both having the same smile of maternal joy (Freud, 1996, p. 148).

Moreover, in Jung's creation there are some specific features mentioned, without directly referring to Leonardo's work, characteristics which help us to understand the position of the artist in his childhood and the way in which the separation from his father and then from his mother affected him from emotional and subconscious points of view during his entire life. According to Jung, the two parents have a very well-defined role, each of them bringing one's contribution (Minulescu, 1997, pp. 70-71) to the development of the child. During the first part of Leonardo's childhood, major changes took place, the child at that time felt the need of a father and of his protective role, creating a security confort (Jung, 1996, p. 80) while the mother, both the biological and the adoptive ones also had an especially important role in his life and formation, by offering him the maternal love and security.

Jung evokes the importance of the contrasexual archetypes *Anima* and *Animus* (Minulescu, 2001, p. 52). The psychologist claimed that the so-called *anima complex* is the figure which compensates the masculine conscience (Jung, 1996, p. 89) or, to put it differently, the feminine side of a man (Minulescu, 1997, pp. 67-68), while the *animus complex* (Jung, 1996, p. 93) is exactly the opposite of *anima*. In Leonardo's evolution, it is possible that this complex has played an essential role in the shaping of his personality, the relationship (Jung, 1996, p. 132) with the opposite sex parent being considered essential in the formation of *anima*. According to recent studies, there is another archetype besides these two, that is the one of androgyny (Minulescu, 1997, pp. 73-74).

Referring to the above-mentioned things and also to the creation of the great Italian master, we can notice an unusual resemblance regarding the portrait of *Saint Anne* in the work that we have discussed and the one of *Saint John the Baptist*, the work was created between 1513-1516. These are only a few of the androgynous figures created by Leonardo, which together with that of *Mona Lisa* and that of John the Apostle, represented in the well-known work *The Last Supper*, constituted the controverted side of the creation of the Renaissance artist. Other difficult issues of the work of Leonardo were analyzed by Silvano Vinceti who debated the mysteries and the identity of the models of Leonardo in creations such as *Mona Lisa* or *Saint John the Baptist*. This suggests the fact that behind the supposed feminine characters was in fact the figure of Leonardo's apprentice called *Salai* (Vinceti, 2011, p. 74) who was his model and he posed for the realization of many portraits, this aspects motivates in a way the permanent oscillation of the artist between femininity and masculinity, thus enriching the mystery of his creations.

4. Conclusions

These theories had the role to present, explain and enrich the ideatic content of the work *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* who is, probably, one of the most complex paintings of the Renaissance artist and in the same time, a type of artistic will that the artist created towards the end of his life. Despite the multiple scientific research undergone in the past years over the works of Leonardo, these continue to raise various questions and numerous problems connected to the ideas, models and the symbolic meaning of some of the most enigmatic images from the history of art. Therefore, the psychoanalytical approach of Freud is another type of interpretation, different from the artistic one which does contradict artistic research, but completes them in a harmonious way, thus reminding us of the creative endeavour of

Leonardo, marked by a continuous artistic-scientific oscillation.

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