In the literature on art, Freud's little book on Leonardo—_Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci_ (A Childhood Reminiscence of Leonardo da Vinci)—has been the prime example of divination of an artist's personality through psychoanalytic concepts. Whatever one may think of Freud's conclusions, an unprejudiced reader will recognize the hand of a master in his powerful theory which is expounded there with a beautiful simplicity and vigor. Ingenious in probing hitherto unnoticed avowals of the artist, the book also commands admiration for its noble image of Leonardo's mind and character. But most students of art who have written on Leonardo since this work appeared have ignored it, although they are concerned like Freud with the artist's psychology in accounting for singular features of his art. Only lately, Sir Kenneth Clark, in one of the best recent books on Leonardo, has paid homage to Freud in accepting as a deep insight Freud's explanation of the painting of St. Anne, the Virgin and Child; but he has not followed Freud in the more essential matter of characterizing the painter's personality. What has been lacking—after forty-five years—is an evaluation of Freud's book from the point of view of the history of art. The results of such a study are presented here not in order to criticize psychoanalytic theory, but rather to judge its application to a problem in which the data, it must be said, are extremely sparse.

*This article is the substance of a lecture given at the William Alanson White Institute, New York City, on January 12, 1955.


3 Sir Kenneth Clark, _Leonardo da Vinci_, 1940 (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1952), especially 4, 151, 169n. Marcel Brion, _Léonard de Vinci_ (Paris, 1952), 13, follows Freud's point on this picture without acknowledging Freud's authorship; where he does refer to him by name, as on p. 130, he misrepresents him seriously. He also speaks of the episode of the bird as capital for Leonardo's life (on 12, 216, 217) without citing Freud. Monsieur Brion attributes to psychoanalysis the view that Leonardo was deprived of maternal love and therefore developed various complexes (454).

In reading Leonardo’s notebooks, Freud was especially struck by the following passage which I quote from his own text: “This writing distinctly about the vulture seems to be my destiny, because among the first recollections of my infancy it seemed to me that as I lay in my cradle a vulture came to me and opened my mouth with its tail and struck me many times with its tail inside my lips.”

That memory of Leonardo’s interested no one who had previously written on the artist, although it is the only reference to his childhood in the immense mass of notes. From experience with patients, Freud had come to believe that such recollections do not concern real episodes but are adult fantasies which are referred back to childhood because of a related experience and owe their meaning to the latter. He observed that among his patients dreams or fantasies of this kind are sexual images; they pertain to a wish that is common in passive homosexuals who have transposed to the adult sexual sphere an experience of their infancy. The vulture’s phallic tail in the child’s mouth replaces the mother’s breast.

Why did Leonardo substitute a vulture for the mother? Here Freud’s great curiosity about philology, folklore and archaeology—studies which, like psychoanalysis, uncover and decipher a hidden past—came into play. He recalled that in Egyptian writing the hieroglyph for “mother” is a vulture and that the vulture-headed goddess Mut is sometimes represented with a phallus. The resemblance of “Mut” and “Mutter” is one that Freud could not regard as accidental.

The vulture, he supposed, was identified with the mother in Leonardo’s fantasy not only because the latter knew the equivalence of mother and vulture in Egyptian writing—Egyptian ideas were available to the Italians of the Renaissance through a Hellenistic author, Horapollo—but also because of the belief, held by the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans, that the vulture exists only in the female sex. This strange bird conceived through the wind, and was therefore cited by the Church fathers as a natural prototype of the Virgin birth. If a vulture could be fecundated by the wind, then Mary could conceive through the Holy Spirit. Although Freud knew no Renaissance text of this belief and referred to older writers like St. Augustine, the idea was current in Leonardo’s time. In a treatise by Pierio Valeriano, dedicated to Cosimo di Medici, the vulture is mentioned as a natural analogue of the Virgin Mary because of its marvellous fecundation by the wind.

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6 GW, VIII, 156ff.
7 Ioannis Pierii Valeriani Hieroglyphica, sive de sacrif Aegyptiorum diiarumque gentium litteris commentariorum libri LVIII (Cologne, 1631), lib. xviii, cap. 4, pp. 217, 218. The original edition dates from 1556.
Figure 1. The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John Baptist.

Burlington House, London.

(Reproduced by courtesy of the Royal Academy of Arts, London)
Figure 2. The Virgin and Child with St. Anne.

Louvre, Paris.

(Reproduced with the permission of Fratelli Alinari, Firenze)
Reading such an ancient text, Leonardo could associate the vulture with his mother because, as an illegitimate child brought up without the father, he knew her as a virgin parent. Freud assumes that in her abandonment and loneliness, she lavished upon the child all the love that would otherwise have gone to the father; her passionate kisses stimulated Leonardo to a precocious sexuality and fixation upon herself. He remained attached thereafter to the image of his mother and could only be attracted by boys like the one she had loved. On that infantile situation depended not only Leonardo's passive homosexuality, but also the course of his artistic career, with its strange inhibitions, and the outcome of his scientific bent. His normal infantile inquisitiveness, stimulated by the absence of the father, was unconstrained by parental authority, so that his instinct of investigation could later develop freely and venture beyond the boundaries of contemporary beliefs.

It should be said that Freud regards these early experiences as a necessary but not sufficient condition of Leonardo's growth. Why there took place a partial repression together with an unusually intense sublimation of the unrepressed libido (or sexual energy) in the artistic and scientific spheres—in accordance with Freud's theory of the convertibility of psychic forces—he admits he does not know. Biological make-up determines in some individuals a reaction of strong repression; in others, sublimation. The organic bases of character lie outside the domain of psychoanalytic research. "The artistic gift and the capacity for work, being intimately bound up with sublimation, we must admit that the essence of the artistic function also remains inaccessible to psychoanalysis."

When Leonardo was less than five years old, perhaps when he was three (Freud supposes) his father, who had married shortly after Leonardo's birth and had no children by this marriage, took the little boy to his home as an adopted son. The child thus enjoyed the affection of two mothers, the natural mother, Caterina, a peasant girl in the town of Vinci, and the stepmother, Albiera, the first wife of Piero da Vinci. Years later, in painting the group of Saint Anne with Mary and the infant Christ, Freud continues, Leonardo remembered his two mothers. In both versions—the cartoon in the Royal Academy in London (fig. 1) and the painting in the Louvre (fig. 2)—Mary looks only slightly younger than her mother, contrary to the apocryphal legend according to which Anne was childless and beyond the age of bearing when, through a divine miracle, Mary was born. This image of the two young mothers of equal grace and charm was explained by Freud as an invention of Leonardo's, which only an artist with his childhood experience could have devised. The appeal of the Mona Lisa had a similar origin in Leonardo's early life, as Walter Pater had
already divined. This smiling woman whose face, through Leonardo’s portrait, has haunted the Western world ever since, attracted the painter precisely because she touched his childhood memory; it was after portraying Mona Lisa that he painted Saint Anne with the Virgin and infant Christ, endowing the faces of the women with the same smile. The conception of the smiling woman is itself a re-animated memory of the tenderness of his devoted mother. In the account of Leonardo, written about thirty years after the artist’s death, Vasari describes as his first works some plaster sculptures of smiling women and of children. Leonardo’s art begins then with the kind of image that dominates his mature years—the smiling maternal woman and her child.

Not long after Freud’s first publication of his work on Leonardo, an analyst-disciple, Oskar Pfister, discerned in the painting at the Louvre the form of a vulture in the blue robe of Mary, enveloping her waist and the lower part of her body.\(^8\) The bird’s head, with its marked beak, appears at the left; on the other side, the robe is prolonged like a vulture’s tail, ending in the child’s mouth. This discovery was accepted by Freud as an unexpected confirmation of his decipherment of the infantile memory. “The key to all of Leonardo’s accomplishments and misfortunes lies hidden in the infantile fantasy about the vulture.”\(^9\)

In presenting the argument, I have not achieved the persuasiveness of Freud, whose reconstruction of the artist’s personality is a moving and coherent account of the psychological fortunes of a man of genius. I have omitted much of the theoretical matter on which Freud builds his interpretation. But I believe I have given the essential points of his speculation and theory, so far as they concern Leonardo’s art. Freud was aware that much of his book rested on uncertain assumptions about the artist’s life and that his method was risky; he was convinced, however, that with the available facts a better explanation would require the further development of psychoanalytic concepts.

II

Let us consider first the text about the vulture. It was objected in 1923 by Eric Maclagan, an English student of Renaissance art, that Freud, relying on a German translation, had misread Leonardo.\(^10\) The bird which the artist remembered as having inserted its tail in his

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mouth was not a vulture, but a kite—the Italian word is “nibbio.” A kite is also a rapacious bird, but no eater of carrion and looks quite different from the vulture. More important, it is not the bird represented by the Egyptians in the hieroglyph for “mother,” to which folklore attributes only a female sex; nor is it the bird which is cited by the Church fathers in connection with the Virgin Birth. Yet although the passage concerns a kite rather than a vulture, Freud’s question about the origin of Leonardo’s fantasy remains. I do not propose to investigate its psychoanalytic meaning—this would be beyond my power—but something can be learned about its manifest content by ordinary textual study.

Re-reading the passage, it is clear to us that Leonardo was reflecting on how he came to write about the kite. It occurs on the back of a sheet on which he has noted various observations on the flight of birds. In his writings on flight several birds are mentioned, but the kite is named more often than any other; it is for Leonardo the bird in which he can best observe the natural mechanisms of flight. The movements of the tail in particular offer some hints for the design of a flying machine.

“When the kite in descending turns itself right over and pierces the air head downwards, it is forced to bend the tail as far as it can in the opposite direction to that which it desires to follow; and then again bending the tail swiftly, according to the direction in which it wishes to turn, the change in the bird’s course corresponds to the turn of the tail, like the rudder of a ship which when turned turns the ship, but in the opposite direction.”

“Many are the times when the bird beats the corner of its tail in order to steer itself, and in this action the wings are used sometimes very little, sometimes not at all.”

“At the tail of the kite there is the stroke of the air which presses

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11 Maclagan observed, too, that the entry in Leonardo’s notes about the funeral of a Caterina did not concern Leonardo’s mother, as Freud had thought, but more probably a servant, considering the context and the small expenditure for the burial.
13 MacCurdy, 422, 423 (Codex Atlanticus, f. 66r).
14 Ibid., 489.  15 Ibid., 484; the next passage (485) mentions the kite’s tail.
with fury closing up the void which the movement of the bird leaves of itself, and this occurs at each side of the void so created."

On the same page, Leonardo writes: "We may say the same of the rudder placed behind the movement of the ship, imitated from the tails of birds; as to which experience teaches us how much more readily this small rudder is turning during the rapid movements of great ships than the whole ship itself." 16

Leonardo's idea that the kite's tail can serve as a model for a rudder, he owes to a classical author, Pliny, whom he quotes in other places. From a list of books that Leonardo jotted down in his papers, we know that he possessed the Natural History of Pliny, probably in the Italian translation.17

In his account of the kite ("milvus"), Pliny wrote: "It seems that this bird by the movements of its tail taught the art of steersmanship, nature demonstrating in the sky what was required in the deep." 18 This passage was quoted by the same Valeriano whom I have cited above on the vulture. In the chapter on the kite, in his book on emblems and symbols, we read: "The kite is the symbol of the art of steering," and, quoting Pliny: "the example of the kite taught men how to steer boats; the rudder is derived from the kite's tail." 19

According to Valeriano, the kite is an emblem for the pilot.20 Leonardo's choice of the kite as the bird of his destiny has apparently more to do with his scientific problem than Freud supposed. If in Leonardo's fantasy the kite beats its tail in the child's mouth, one may see there an allusion to the characteristic movement of the tail against the wind and the currents of air of which the breath is a counterpart.

Although hardly a complete explanation, this brings us a little closer to Leonardo's thought. Why, it will be asked, does he locate the episode in his childhood? Why the strange association of the kite with the infant's mouth?

Here again a philological approach is helpful. This fantasy about an incident of childhood as an omen of adult fortune or genius is no unique form, but an established literary pattern. Cicero, in his book On Divination, writes: "When Midas, the famous king of Phrygia, was a child, ants filled his mouth with grains of wheat as he slept."

16 Ibid., 469; note also the chapter heading: How the tail of the bird is used as a rudder (453). 17 Ibid., 1163.
18 Naturalis Historia, lib. X, cap. 12: "iam videntur artem gubernandi docuisse caudae flexibus, in caelo monstrante natura quod opus esset in profundo."
19 Hieroglyphica, lib. XVII, cap. 40, pp. 213, 214. 20 Ibid., 214. The same text of Pliny was quoted in 1499 by Polydore Vergil, De rerum inventoribus libri octo, (Basel, 1575), 229, cap. 15.
It was predicted that he would be a very wealthy man, and so it turned out.” In the next line, Cicero adds: “While Plato was an infant asleep in his cradle, bees settled on his lips and this was interpreted to mean he would have a rare sweetness of speech.”  

His future eloquence was foreseen in his infancy. These texts were copied by a Roman writer, Valerius Maximus, whose treatise on heroes and exemplary individuals was one of the most widely read books in Leonardo’s time.  

What is interesting in these examples is not simply the foretelling of a child’s future through a small animal, but the characteristic investment of the mouth with a symbol of that future. Pliny, for instance, writes that a “nightingale alighted on the mouth of the sleeping infant Stesichorus” who became a great lyric poet. According to Pausanias, “the young Pindar fell asleep in the mid-day heat. Bees flew over him and deposited wax on his lips, giving him the gift of song.” In all these classical legends, the omen is located in the mouth, the place of speech and more particularly of the breath or spirit. This common topos was adopted by the Christians for their own heroes. In the life of Saint Ambrose in the Golden Legend, by Jacobus Voragine (c. 1228/30–1298) a popular book during the Renaissance, we read: “While he lay asleep in his crib, a swarm of bees descended upon him, and the bees went into his mouth as into a hive, and then they flew away so high that the eye could not follow them. Then the child’s father, greatly frightened, exclaimed: ‘This child, if he lives, will surely be a man of great deeds.’”  

We have then a series of traditional tales, known in Leonardo’s time, which resemble his memory of the kite; they foretell a hero’s future from an episode of his infancy—a small creature, generally a bird or bee, alights upon the child’s mouth or enters it as an omen of future greatness.

In another place in the same work on flight—a note written on the cover—Leonardo resorts to the image of a bird to express his hopes for successful flight: “The great bird [that is, his flying machine] will take its first flight upon the back of the great swan, filling the whole world with amazement and filling all records with its fame and it will

21 De Divinatione, I, xxxvi, 78, translated by Falconer, Loeb Library, 309.
22 Moralium Exemplorum libri novem (Venice, 1546), 20, lib. I, cap. 6. The same stories are told by a Greek writer, Aelian, Variae Historiae, lib. XII, 45.
23 Pliny, op. cit., lib. X, 43.
24 Description of Greece, IX, 23, 2, translated by W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Library, IV, 268, 269. The same story is told about the infant Pindar by Philostratus (Imagines, lib. II, 12) and Aelian (Variae Historiae) lib. XII, 45.
bring eternal glory to the nest where it was born.” The “great swan” (ciceri) is a pun on the name of the mountain, Monte Ceceri, from which he hoped to launch the plane.

An Excursus on the fantasy of the bird in the child’s mouth

The connection of the bird with genius or inspiration is very old. Psychoanalysis explains it by the dependence of all creativeness on sexuality, both in its sublimated and actualized forms, and by the symbolic equivalence of flying and coitus in dream fantasy, folklore, and language. The bird in Semitic and Greek literature is the carrier of heavenly gifts, the mediating source of genius and greatness. Thus the child brought up by birds is destined for power; the ancient Oriental monarchs, Semiramis, Achaemenes, are nurslings of doves and eagles. These examples confirm the sense of Leonardo’s fantasy as an omen of future achievement, but they lack the specific element of the bird’s tail in the child’s mouth.

The mouth, as the region of speech, breath, and nourishment, is significant for poetic inspiration, wisdom, and prophecy. Inspiration is the introduction of a powerful external force, often identified with the father. Prophecy is, in a literal sense, “divination.” In the Bible, God touches the prophet’s mouth: “The Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words into thy mouth” (Jeremiah I, 9).

In Celtic and Scandinavian tradition, eating the flesh of a bird or other creature (snake, salmon) inspired poetry or gave wisdom and the gift of prophecy. A frequent theme in those literatures is the acquisition of poetic or mantic power by putting the crushed or burnt thumb into the mouth (Finn, Sigurd, Taliesin).

Another possible connection of Leonardo’s fantasy is with the image of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is often represented in the Middle Ages with the dove’s tail in God’s mouth. In Leonardo’s time occurs a variant based on the filioque of the Western doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit in which the wings of the descending bird reach from the lips of God the Father to those of Christ the Son. Leonardo’s fantasy could be interpreted accordingly as an analogous identification with the father.

The psychoanalyst, Dr. Ernest Jones, has published a text which offers some resemblance to Leonardo’s fantasy, but he has not connected the two documents. The poet Henry Vaughan, in a letter of 1694, told of “a young lad father and motherless, and soe very poor that he was forced to beg; butt

26 MacCurdy, 420, 421 and note.
27 For these and other examples, see Alfred Jeremias, Das alte Testament im Lichte des alten Orients (2nd ed. Leipzig, 1906), 411, 412.
28 Robert D. Scott, The Thumb of Knowledge in Legends of Finn, Sigurd and Taliesin (New York, 1930).
29 See Wolfgang Braunfels, Die heilige Dreifaltigkeit (Düsseldorf, 1934), fig. 37 (portable altar from Hildesheim); A. N. Didron, Christian Iconography, (London, 1886), II, fig. 144. The theme occurs in a relief by Verrochio, Leonardo’s teacher, in the Bargello Museum in Florence. 30 Didron, op. cit., II, fig. 143.
att last was taken up by a rich man, that kept a great stock of sheep upon the mountains not far from the place where I now dwell, who clothed him and sent him into the mountains to keep his sheep. There in summertime following the sheep and looking to their lambs, he fell into a deep sleep; In which he dreamt, that he saw a beautiful young man with a garland of green leafs upon his head, and an hawk upon his fist; with a quiver full of Arrows att his back, coming towards him (whistling several measures or tunes all the way) and att last lett the hawk fly att him, which (he dreamt) gott into his mouth and inward parts, and suddenly awaked in a great fear and consternation: but possessed with such a vein, or gift of poetrie, that he left the sheep and went about the Countrey, making songs upon all occasions, and came to be the most famous Bard in all the Countrey in his time.”

The story seems to combine pagan Celtic, Greek and Christian Renaissance elements. Vaughan tells it à propos the vein of inspired rhapsodic poetry called Awen by the later Welsh bards. It is a tale about inspiration, and in the discovery or awakening of the poetic gift of a poor shepherd is like the story of the herdsman Caedmon. The beautiful young man is evidently Apollo, the god of poetry, whose messenger to men is the hawk. According to the neo-Platonist, Porphyry (233–c. 304), an author read in the Renaissance, eating the heart of a hawk is the ingestion of the divine spirit and will give power of prophecy. Interesting for Freud’s account of Leonardo is the fact that the boy is homeless and without parents, and is finally adopted. The hawk entering his mouth and touching his inward parts suggests not only the Celtic legend of the poet eating a bird that gives inspiration, but also a Renaissance theme: God as a hawk which feeds on the soul and the heart.

All these parallels indicate the general field of ideas to which Leonardo’s fantasy belongs; they do not account for the more specific features of the kite and the tail in the infant’s mouth. Here the context of the notes on flight supplies, I think, the essential manifest meaning.

The psychoanalyst will ask: Though Freud was mistaken in reading “vulture” for “kite,” and his evidence from Egyptian and Christian folklore concerning the vulture is irrelevant, does not the fantasy about a kite inserting its tail in the infant’s mouth retain the homosexual meaning that Freud discerned and permit his inferences about Leonardo’s childhood?


32 De Abstinentia ab Esu Animalium, lib. II, 48.

33 Cf. the poem of Alonso de Ledesma, El Nebli de Amor Divino: The hawk of divine love / Which has the soul for its prey / Feeds on hearts. From Otho Vaenius, Amoris Divini Emblemata (Antwerp, 1615), quoted by Mario Praz, Studies in 17th Century Imagery (London, 1939), I, 128.
The careful reading of Freud's book will show that he built upon the unique, legendary characteristics of the vulture a positive account of Leonardo's infancy to fill the gaps in the documents; such details as the solitude and abandonment of the mother and her passionate love of the child and even the circumstances favorable to Leonardo's fruitful sublimation to science, are constructed in part from the equivalence of the vulture and the Virgin. From his theory of the infantile origins of homosexuality, Freud could infer only that Leonardo had a fixation upon his mother, but not the specific relationships and events on which his account of Leonardo's personality and art depend. One can plausibly imagine, contrary to Freud, that from the beginning this young Italian mother was no outcast from her family, and that in the absence of the child's father her brothers and her own father assumed in the child's feelings and thoughts the rôle of his father. We can imagine, too, that he might have been brought up by a mother hostile to the illegitimate child whose existence disgraced her. If Caterina was already married when the boy was adopted by his natural father, we can suppose that the birth of a half-brother changed the little Leonardo's situation in his home and made the return to his true father attractive. A recently discovered document indicates how far Freud was misled in his reconstruction. Antonio, the paternal grandfather of Leonardo, in recording the child's birth and baptism in the family diary, has named ten godparents, mostly neighbors whose presence at the ceremony strongly suggests that the child was born in the paternal home and accepted there from the beginning.34

All these possibilities were ignored by Freud because of his certitude about the vulture and its legend; this, together with the theorems of infantile sexual development and of the origins of homosexuality in the fixation upon an over-affectionate mother (Leonardo's inversion was known through a document recording his arrest at twenty-four on a charge of sodomy 35) compelled the inference that Freud presents in his book. That is why the vulture is so necessary to Freud and why the book is called: A Childhood Reminiscence of Leonardo da Vinci.

The kite is another story, and where Leonardo speaks of it as a parent, his comment is still less favorable to Freud's interpretation of the childhood memory. In a collection of fables about the passions in his Notebooks, one called "Envy" concerns the kite: "Of the kite we read that when it sees that its children are too fat, it pecks their

35 Luca Beltrami, Documenti e memorie riguardanti la vita e le opere di Leonardo da Vinci (Milan, 1919), 4, 5.
sides out of envy and keeps them without food."  

The kite here is not the model of the good mother who wishes to have her child her own forever; she is the opposite of the vulture which, according to a tradition (ignored by Leonardo) is the best of all mothers, protecting her young for a hundred and twenty days and scratching herself to give her blood to her young—an emblem of compassion like the pelican which symbolizes Christ's sacrifice.

Freud might have read the fable of Envy in the Notebooks; but the father of psychoanalysis dismissed this part of Leonardo's writings as "allegorical natural history, animal fables, jokes and prophecies, trivialities unworthy of so great a genius."

The fable of the kite is not an original work of Leonardo, but was probably excerpted from an older collection. A psychologist could infer from his interest in this bit of natural history that Leonardo did not forgive Caterina his illegitimacy and her willingness to abandon him to a step-mother.

If I have discussed at so great length what analysts call the manifest content of Leonardo's fantasy, it is because this aspect has not only been insufficiently considered by Freud, but even distorted in his reconstruction of the occasion and process of Leonardo's conscious thought. Building upon the unfortunate vulture, he has imagined Leonardo reading a church father and coming upon a reference to the vulture as a prototype of the Virgin birth; this, according to Freud, recalled to the artist his own mother and infancy; he could feel then his identity with the Christ child whom he had so often represented, and his own great destiny as a man of science, the first to fly.

III

Freud's account of the painting of Saint Anne, the Virgin and the infant Christ (fig. 2) raises questions of another order. Here he attacks one of the most elusive problems in the psychology of artists: how a new conception is born.

It is true that in Freud's explanation, the originality concerns a theme rather than the invention of a form; but a later analyst, we shall see, has drawn from Freud's work a corollary about the creation of a new form as well.

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36 MacCurdy, 1074; Richter, 261. The harshness of the hawk to its young is noted, after Cassiodorus, by the Welsh writer, Giraldus Cambrensis (Topography of Ireland, chap. VIII), who recommends it as a model for the training of human infants and children.


39 In another fable, The Ape and the Bird, Leonardo tells of an ape who in his uncontrollable affection for a fledgling bird, kissed it and "squeezed it until he killed it." It is a lesson, he wrote, "for those who, by not punishing their children, let them come to mischief" (MacCurdy, 1062, Richter, II, 278).

40 GW, VIII, 159.
The first requirement of such an attempt to account for a new image in art is that the investigator establish its priority. It would be futile to credit to the peculiarity of a single mind what was already a common possession of artists. At this point the psychoanalyst must rely on the discipline of the history of art, and to some extent on the neighboring cultural fields—the history of religion and social life—to which belong certain of the elements represented in Renaissance pictures.

The historians of these fields will tell us, if their investigations have touched upon them, to what extent a new image has been prepared by others or pertains to a common tendency of feeling and thought, and how far an artist has modified the inherited matter in realizing his personal conceptions.

But although Freud, in his ethnological papers, was deeply aware of the collective patterns in culture and referred them to some universal psychic process or mechanism, in writing on Leonardo he ignored the social and the historical where they are most pertinent to his task. Where he does allude to them, we are surprised by what he takes to be general conditions of Renaissance art. Thus he supposes that since the men of the Renaissance were aggressive, Leonardo's gentleness must be interpreted as an exceptional and therefore significant individual peculiarity. Freud sees it as an abreaction against an early sadistic impulse, or as a fixation upon the mother and his own infantile stage; and since all great artists paint some erotic pictures, the absence of such themes from Leonardo's work indicates to Freud the strength of his sexual repression. But those features of the culture of the time which bear more directly on the painting of Saint Anne, Freud disregards. He does not ask, for example, what was thought of Saint Anne during that period, or how common was her image. It is this side of Leonardo's work that I shall consider now.

In a sermon of 1539 Martin Luther said: "All the fuss about Saint Anne began when I was a boy of fifteen; before that she was unknown." The cult of Anne dates then, in Luther's memory, from his fifteenth year, which fell in 1498. Now the first picture by Leonardo of Saint Anne, the Virgin and Child—the cartoon in London (fig. 1)—is generally placed in 1498 or 1499. This may be regarded as a chance coincidence, one of the hundreds of striking synchronisms of unconnected events with which history is filled; but we learn from

41 Ibid., 134, 135, 204. 42 Ibid., 136.
43 Quoted by E. Schaumkell, Der Kultus der heiligen Anna am Ausgange des Mittelalters (Freiburg i. Br. and Leipzig, 1893), 12.
44 This is the opinion of Clark and Heydenreich, but H. Bodmer, Leonardo, des Meisters Gemälde und Zeichnungen (Klassiker der Kunst, Stuttgart and Berlin, 1931), 408, places it in 1500 in Florence.
the historians of the Church that the cult of Saint Anne, which had a long past, became widespread and reached its culmination in the years between 1485 and 1510. During that twenty-five-year period Anne was so fashionable a saint that a writer could say in 1506 that Anne was “overshadowing the fame and glory of her daughter.” More new pictures and sculptures, as well as lives and legends, of Anne seem to have been produced in those decades than in the preceding or following centuries. Numerous chapels and religious brotherhoods were founded in her name. The German emperor Maximilian was a member of a confraternity of Saint Anne and inscribed his standard to Anna Selbdritt on one side and to the Virgin on the other.

The growth of the cult of Saint Anne was undoubtedly connected with the interest in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, although other factors were present. Often debated since the twelfth century, the Immaculate Conception became a central controversial issue in the later fifteenth. Just as the Virgin Mary had conceived Christ without sin, so it was held that Mary was conceived immaculately by her mother Anne and had therefore not inherited the sin of Adam and Eve. Churchmen of great authority, like Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas, had opposed that doctrine because it implied that Mary had no need to be redeemed by Christ, though Christ came to save all mankind. In 1475 a Milanese Dominican, Vincenzo Bandelli, objected to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception that it assimilated Anne to Mary, making Anne a virgin in conceiving Mary—eius mater in concipiendo virgo fisset. Popular belief tended, in fact, to imagine Anne’s conception of Mary as a miraculous event without the intercourse or concupiscence which constituted original sin materialiter; the way was open to a series of supernatural conceptions of the ancestors of the Virgin, all free from original sin. Some theologians tried to save the theory by distinguishing between the act of conception and the moment of endowment of the embryo with a soul, when original sin was supposedly transmitted; it was at that latter moment that by special grace Mary was freed from original sin. The argument did not convince everyone and the controversy continued until 1854 when the Immaculate Conception of Mary by Saint Anne became officially a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church.

47 Schaumkell, op. cit., 16.
48 For this whole paragraph, see Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique, VII, 1120–1126.
For centuries the doctrine had been supported mainly by the Franciscan order. The Carmelites and Augustinians then took it over, but against the strong objections of the Dominicans who were powerful in the Church. During that time, the cult of Saint Anne, which had been restricted to a few localities, became more general. But it was not until 1481 that the feast of Anne (July 26) was made obligatory by Pope Sixtus IV, a former Franciscan.\(^49\) A few years before, in 1476, the same pope had granted an indulgence for the recitation of an office of the Immaculate Conception. And in 1477 and 1483, Sixtus issued bulls forbidding theologians to treat the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as heretical, although the other view was permitted. His chapel in the Vatican, the famous Sistine Chapel, was dedicated to the Immaculately Conceived Virgin.

In 1494, shortly before Leonardo drew his cartoon of Saint Anne, her cult received a new stimulus from a book, *Tractatus de Laudibus Sanctissimae Annae*, by a German abbot, John Tritenheim (Trithemius). This little work, written in praise of Anne, holding her up as a model of Christian womanhood and defending her cult and the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception against the doubting Dominicans, was printed in several editions and seems to have been widely read.

That same year, Pope Alexander VI issued an indulgence for those who recited a prayer to Anne and Mary which was printed on the indulgence ticket. A believer who recited that prayer, affirming the Immaculate Conception, before an image of Anne, Mary and the Christ Child—the so-called Anna Metterza or Anna Selbdritt—was relieved of 10,000 years of punishment in purgatory for mortal sins and 20,000 years for venial ones.\(^50\) The prayer was often printed on single sheets with a woodcut of Anna, Mary and the Child, which were pasted on doors and walls. Images of the three holy persons were produced in great numbers then; they often show Mary sitting on the lap of Anne with the Christ Child on Mary’s lap, an object of the tender attentions of the two women.\(^61\)

This type of image was hardly an invention of Leonardo, as Freud has supposed, nor was his cartoon or painting “almost the first” example as Ernst Kris has written.\(^52\) Far from originating in the unique constellation of Leonardo’s personality, the theme of Anna Metterza was traditional and had acquired a new vogue throughout

\(^{49}\) Kleinschmidt, *op. cit.*, 134.


\(^{52}\) *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York, 1952), 19.
Catholic Europe during his lifetime—a vogue which depended not only on theological doctrine, but on more earthly needs. A chapter of Trithemius' book is devoted to explaining and justifying the expansion of the cult of Saint Anne. In the critical state of contemporary Christendom, when the Western nations had been defeated by the Turkish fleets, when faith was in decline and society disintegrating, it was necessary, he believed, to strengthen the family and to promote a more intimate spiritual life through the cult of this maternal saint; the founding of numerous confraternities devoted to Anne helped to unite the members who came from different professions and walks of life.53 "Through Anne's patronage," he wrote, "we can escape all the ills of the tottering world." 54 She is more generous than Mary and grants to the faithful what her daughter refuses; she performs miracles, even raising the dead.

A modern student of her cult has pointed to the role of Anne as the protector of pregnant women and the patron of the family during a time when families were extraordinarily large, with as many as twenty children.55 According to the legend, Anne was a model of fertility, marrying three times. She is often represented as Anna Tri-nuba et Tripara, surrounded by the offspring of her three marriages. In a portrait of the Emperor Maximilian and his family, each figure was inscribed with a name from the family of Anne.56

Behind Leonardo's picture, then, was the widespread contemporary cult of Saint Anne and the new interest in the holy family. Anne, Mary and Christ were worshipped as a trinity, a "humanissima trinitas" more accessible than the "divinissima trinitas" of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. When the Pope Sixtus IV made the feast of Anne obligatory, he imposed in the same decree the feast of another family saint, Joseph, the foster-father of Christ and husband of Mary.

Is not Leonardo's painting unique, however, in showing Anne and Mary as women of nearly equal age—a feature that Freud explained by the artist's unconscious memory of his childhood under the care of two mothers? Contrary to Freud's belief, Anne and Mary had been represented together as young saints long before Leonardo. The originality of his conception lies elsewhere, as we shall soon see. Anne's youthfulness in certain images may be explained by the theological idealization of Anne as the double of her daughter Mary and by a general tendency in the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to picture female saints as beautiful, virginal figures. In popular accounts of Anne's miracles, in the Legends and exempla around 1500,
she appears to the faithful as a "beautiful" or "pretty" woman ("wunderbarlich gezieret hüpsch und schone"). It should be observed, too, that in Roman and in mediaeval Christian literature, the type of the old-young woman is not at all uncommon. Ideal female figures, especially personifications (Rome, Nature, the World, the Church, Philosophy and even Old Age), are pictured in visionary and poetic writings as old women who are rejuvenated and beautiful.

In the projection of the theological pattern of the Virgin upon Saint Anne, the latter acquired her daughter's virtues and powers. Trithemius described with feeling the perfect maternal tenderness and grace of Anne, which were the necessary source of the qualities of Mary. She had been chosen by God, already before the creation of the world, to be Mary's mother. Her own birth became a subject of extraordinary fantasy in the Middle Ages. In an old French poem she was said to have issued from her father Phanuel's thigh, which he touched with a knife after cutting an apple, thus causing it to conceive. In this strange medley of pagan and Jewish legend, Anne is born like Dionysus from a divine thigh ("Phanuel" comes from the Hebrew for "the face of God"), but is connected indirectly with the apple that occasioned original sin—Phanuel cut the apple from the tree of knowledge without eating it, just as Mary, born of a mother who was not virgin, remained untouched by original sin. By the thirteenth century, the simple people—naive, unintellectual worshippers, unconstrained by theology and science—had come to believe that Anne, too, conceived miraculously through the Holy Ghost. In the account of Mary's birth in the Golden Legend by Jacobus de Voragine, an angel tells Anne's husband, Joachim, that it often happens, when God has closed a womb, that he has done it in order to open it afterwards miraculously, so that it may be known that the child to be born is not an issue of lust; such were the miraculous births of Isaac and Joseph and Samson from old and barren mothers. Anne had been cursed by sterility and was childless after twenty years of marriage; her husband's offering was rejected in the temple because he had no offspring. The legend, which is based on very old apocryphal writings, goes on to relate how an angel appeared to Joachim and told

57 Schaumkell, op. cit., 46, 56.
58 Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (Bollingen Series, XXXVI, New York, 1953), 101–105.
61 For the older sources in the proto-evangile of James, the gospel of the pseudo-Matthew and the gospel of the Birth of Mary, see The Apocryphal New Testament, translated by M. R. James (Oxford, 1926), 39, 73, 79.
him to meet Anne at the Golden Gate, where an angel had bidden
Anne to go; they kissed on meeting, and at that instant, according to
popular belief, was conceived the child that the angel had promised.
In the paintings of this scene, an angel above the couple recalls the
Annunciation to Mary and the Incarnation of Christ. The Meeting
of Joachim and Anne illustrates the Immaculate Conception.62

In Leonardo’s time there were three common types of images of
Anna Metterza. Of one, the best known example is Masaccio’s fresco
in Santa Maria Novella in Florence (c. 1425); here the family trinity
forms a great pyramid, austere and powerful, with an old Anne en-
throned above and Mary at her feet, holding the child in her lap. In
the second type, already well established in the middle or third quar-
ter of the fourteenth century, Mary sits on her mother’s knee and
plays with the child on her own lap, often in affectionate embrace.
This is the basis of Leonardo’s picture. In a third variant, the child
is placed on Anne’s other knee or Anne holds Christ and Mary sepa-
rately in each arm. The odd conception of a mature woman sitting
like a child on another’s knee was not at all disturbing or unnatural
to mediaeval minds, which employed representation as a means of
symbolizing religious ideas and could express by this grouping of three
figures their essential character as a mystic family line. Common to
all the types was the hieratic note in the scale and rigidity of the
figures; Anne is the tallest and dominates the group. The relative
ages and the order of generations, corresponding to the order of
authority in the family, are symbolized by the varying size and level
of the figures.63

In the late fifteenth century, we observe a new tendency to loosen
the form and to envision this family group in a more human and natu-
ral way: Anne and Mary are of the same height and both play with
the child. In an engraving made before 1500, Dürer represents Anne
and Mary as equally tall, standing figures fondling the child in their
arms.64 In Cranach’s altarpiece from Torgau, in the Frankfurt Mu-
seum, completed in 1509—perhaps before Leonardo’s painting in the
Louvre—Anne and Mary sit on the same bench both playing with the
child. Here Anne has a young face, in some respects younger than
Mary’s.65

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62 Hirn, op. cit., 238.
63 For the types of Anna Metterza, see Kleinschmidt, op. cit., 217ff., with num-
erous illustrations, and L. H. Heydenreich, “La Sainte Anne de Léonard de Vinci,”
Gazette des Beaux-Arts (1933), 205ff.
64 Dürer, des Meisters Gemälde, Kupferstiche und Holzschnitte, Klassiker der
Kunst (Stuttgart, Leipzig, 1908), pl. 108.
65 Kleinschmidt, op. cit., 274, fig. 195; for the youthful Anne and Mary re-
peated on the wings of the same altarpiece, see Curt Glaser, Lukas Cranach (Leip-
But the two women had already been represented alike in Italian art over a hundred years before. In a work painted in 1367 by the Sienese Luca di Tomé, the Virgin holding the child sits on the knee of Anne who is simply an enlarged replica of her daughter. The whole is still subject to the hierarchical conception of the Middle Ages in the distinctions of size and level. By 1500, a common scale applies to everyone, in accord with the search for a natural, though idealized, human form in the art of the High Renaissance.

Yet Leonardo, the most advanced artist of his age, while removing all supernatural attributes like the haloes and humanizing the figures more completely, preserves the old iconic type of Anna Metterza, with its artificial symbolic structure, at a time when Northern art separates the two figures and places the child between them in a natural familial relationship. If he ventures to draw the heads of Anne and Mary on the same level in the London cartoon (fig. 1), he returns in later versions to the old conception, with Anne's head above Mary's. In the final painting in the Louvre (fig. 2), this difference of level is made to appear, however, as the natural result of a spontaneous movement of the Virgin who bends forward in playing with the child. The new equality of the women, their common humanity, is thus reconciled with their inequality as mother and daughter. By placing the child on the ground to the side, Leonardo overcomes also the static symmetry in the older relationships of child and mother, in which Mary is to Anne as Christ to Mary.

In Freud's reconstruction of the inner history of the Saint Anne painting, it was Leonardo's meeting with Mona Lisa that reawakened his unconscious memory of Caterina and inspired him to picture Anne and Mary as his two mothers, just as they had appeared to him in his childhood. This interpretation rests on a general schema that Freud had devised some years before to describe the process of poetic creation: an actual experience revives an old memory which is then elaborated as a wish fulfillment in artistic form. In applying this

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66 Kleinschmidt, op. cit., fig. 147. Cf. also fig. 146 for a 13th century German sculpture with youthful Anne and Mary.

67 See his article of 1908, "Der Dichter und das Phantasieren," GW, VII, 217, 221.
schema to the *Saint Anne*, Freud has forgotten the early date of the London cartoon. As he himself correctly maintained, in opposition to certain writers, the cartoon was done just before 1500 in Milan, and thus precedes by several years the portrait of Mona Lisa. Significant, too, for Leonardo's process is the fact that in the preparatory sketches he drew for different projects of a painting of *Anna Metterza*, the type of Saint Anne is not fixed. The dates of these drawings are still debated but, according to excellent judges, a drawing of his in the Louvre which shows Anne as an old woman, post-dates the London cartoon. Leonardo's vacillation between the young and the old Anne recalls the uncertainty of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception during this time. Supported and opposed by various groups, the doctrine won a momentary tolerance by the papacy, only to lose it in the following years.

The smiles of the women, which owe their charm to the infinite delicacy of Leonardo's art, are not so clear an evidence as Freud assumed of the painter's fixation upon his mother. He was aware of the weakness of his reasoning on this point and remarked in a note that "connoisseurs of art will think of the peculiar rigid smile of archaic Greek statues, e.g., those from Aegina, and will also perhaps discover something similar in the figures of Leonardo's teacher, Verrocchio, and will therefore not be inclined to follow my deductions." They will not only think of Verrocchio's smiling faces, they will remember, too, that Leonardo was brought to this master as a child by his father who was a friend of the artist and that the young student collaborated with his teacher and repeated certain of Verrocchio's themes. The plaster sculptures of smiling women and of children which Vasari mentions among Leonardo's first works have disappeared, but several such pieces by Verrocchio and his shop survive; it is possible that Vasari had these in mind when he wrote of the beginnings of Leonardo's art. Among Verrocchio's works are several smiling faces of a subtlety of expression approaching the later pictures of Leonardo. The face of Saint Anne in the Louvre reminds us of his master's bronze *David*, triumphant also, with smiling face and delicate modeling around the lips and chin. Leonardo's training as a sculptor in Verrocchio's shop, where nicety of modeling was in honor, perhaps suggested to him the new possibilities of refined, elusive play

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71 E.g., the Bargello Museum relief of the Virgin and Child, and an angel on the tomb of Forteguerri (1474) in the cathedral of Pistoia.
of light and shadow in the painting of his faces. Since the young Leonardo was already a member of the artist's guild while employed by Verrocchio and had collaborated with his master on important commissions, it has been conjectured that the older man was influenced by his more gifted pupil in the 1470s. There is no reason, however, to assume Verrocchio's indebtedness to the younger artist for the motif of the smile.

Not only the fact that the early Greek sculptors, searching for a more natural form, represented the smile as a fixed attribute of the face—a generalized first expression of the subjective and physiognomic (as the advanced leg in both Egyptian and archaic Greek statues was a generalized expression of the body's mobility)—but also the recurrence of the smile in Florentine art in the works of Donatello and Desiderio da Settignano, several decades before Leonardo, make it difficult to accept Freud's explanation of this widespread conventional motif in Leonardo's art by the peculiarity of his childhood. Only his personal rendering of the inherited smile, its singular qualities which depend on the artist's style in a broader sense and on his matured perception of the human face, may be referred to Leonardo's character. It would be a question then not simply of the smile as an element occasioned by a memory or experience, but of the expressive nuance which it owes to the pervasive tendency of the artist in treating all his feminine and youthful themes. He endows them with a mysterious passage of light and dark that he has described in his notes as the grace and softness of faces at dusk and in bad weather. By the indefiniteness and subtlety of the modelled forms, by light and shadow and other devices, he opens the way for the observer's revery.

This complex quality of the whole may well depend on structures of Leonardo's character disclosed by Freud. It may be, too, that the artist adopted and developed the existing theme of the smile with a special ardor because of the fixation upon his mother. But Freud's theory provides no bridge from the infantile experience and the mechanisms of psychic development to the style of Leonardo's art. In Freud's book the original elements of the work of art are simply representations of childhood memories and wishes; the style itself belongs to another—perhaps biological—domain of the individual, untouched by his concepts. An artist's impressions, and especially those of his childhood, must undergo, he thought, far-reaching changes before they could be embodied in a work of art; yet in writing of the smile, Freud does not hesitate to infer an exact accord of the painting

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73 I have proposed this explanation of the "archaic smile" in Art Bulletin, XIII, 1931, 485, 486.
and the infantile impression underneath all the modalities of the smile in different pictures. The smile of Mona Lisa, which attracts Leonardo because it recalls his mother, Freud describes as ambiguous, a duality of the reserved and sensual, the tender and menacing; his mother’s smile in the picture of Saint Anne, which Freud sees as “the same, without question, as La Gioconda’s,” has lost the “enigmatic and disquieting character . . . and expresses only intimacy and a tranquil felicity.”

Yet in rendering in Mona Lisa’s face the double sense of her smile, Leonardo remained faithful to the deeper content of his first memories, “for his mother’s excessive tenderness was fatal to him.” Finally, in his later pictures of the androgynous Saint John and Bacchus, the same smile conveys a secret of love, the consciousness of unavowable pleasures.

If Freud was mistaken in supposing that Leonardo invented the pictorial type of Anna Metterza, with Mary sitting on her mother’s knee and holding the Christ child, or that the smiling, youthful Anne was an idea of Leonardo’s arising from an unconscious early memory revived by the meeting with Mona Lisa, there are, however, truly original features in the painting. But these have been ignored by Freud, although they have psychological interest and perhaps require for their explanation the use of Freud’s concepts.

Exceptional in the images of the subject is the presence of Saint John the Baptist as the friend of the infant Christ (fig. 1). It is an apocryphal motif that Leonardo had already used in the painting of the Virgin of the Rocks. The two children, who were cousins, had often appeared together in Florentine art of an earlier generation and were to become a favored theme of Raphael. Like Anne a patron saint of Florence, John enjoyed a privileged place in Florentine art. His baptistery was the building to which the city was most attached and on which were spent the greatest resources of its art. Saint Anne was John’s great-aunt, and since his birth from an aged and barren mother, Elizabeth, was regarded as miraculous and somehow exempt from original sin—a parallel to Anne’s conception of Mary—his presence in the image of Anna Metterza affirmed both the familial and supernatural sense of the theme. In the London cartoon the pairing of the figures effects a correspondence of old and young, as if Anne were the mother of John. Her finger pointing upward, perhaps to indicate the divine origin of Christ, is also a traditional gesture of the Baptist proclaiming the greater one who is to come; it is repeated by Leonardo in a later image of Saint John.

77 Cf. R. Eisler, in Burlington Magazine, XC (1948), 239.
78 Hirn, op. cit., 215, 218.
79 Clark, op. cit., plate 66.
In the course of work on the *Saint Anne*, Leonardo replaced the figure of John by a lamb (fig. 2). Freud sees the change as an artistic necessity, the result of the painter's desire to repair a defect of form in the London cartoon. Even in the final picture in the Louvre, the two women "are fused with one another like badly condensed figures in a dream; it is sometimes difficult to say where Anne ends and Mary begins . . . . But what seems a fault of composition from the critic's point of view, is justified for the analyst by reference to its hidden sense. The two mothers of his childhood had to fuse for the artist into a single figure." In the London cartoon, "the two maternal figures are even more intimately fused, their outlines are still more uncertain, so that critics, far removed from any concern with interpretation, could say that 'both heads seem to grow from a single trunk'."

After having done the cartoon, Leonardo "felt the need to overcome this dream-like fusion of the two women which corresponded to his childhood memory and to separate the two heads from each other. This he accomplished by detaching Mary's head and upper body from her mother and by having her bend forward. To motivate this shift, the infant Christ had to be moved from his mother's lap to the ground; there was no room then for the little John, who was replaced by the lamb." ⁸⁰

It is remarkable that Freud, who is so attentive to details of expression as significant marks of the personality, should explain these striking changes in the family image as purely aesthetic decisions. To Leonardo's contemporaries, the new version appeared as a distinct religious conception. This we know from their comments on another picture of the maternal group in which the changes in question were already largely achieved.

Between the London cartoon and the painting in the Louvre, Leonardo undertook in 1501 an *Anna Metterza* for the altarpiece of the church of the Annunciation in Florence, a house of the Servites—a religious order related to the Franciscans and like them devoted to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Leonardo seems not to have carried out the painting, but he produced, beside some drawings that have survived, a cartoon which is known only through a description and a painted copy by Brescianino.⁸¹ When exhibited unfinished to the Florentine public, this cartoon attracted crowds of admiring visitors for two days.

The description, which is the main source of our knowledge of the cartoon, is part of a letter by a vice-general of the Carmelite order, Pietro da Novellara, addressed to Isabella d'Este, who had asked him

to obtain for her, while in Florence, a picture by Leonardo. He replied that Leonardo, a slow and unwilling artist, was unlikely to satisfy her request; but he went on to describe a work of Leonardo's that he had just seen: "a marvellous cartoon of the Christ child about a year old who, as if about to slip out of his mother's arm, grasps a lamb and seems to hold it fast. The mother, half-rising from Saint Anne's lap, is taking the child to draw it from the lamb—that sacrificial animal which signifies the passion of Christ is a lamb which has taken on the sins of the world—while Saint Anne, rising slightly from her seat, seems as if she would hold back her daughter so that she would not separate the child from the lamb; this would perhaps signify that the Church did not want to prevent the passion of Christ since mankind's fate depended upon it." 82

What the Carmelite (and no doubt other religious observers) interpreted as a theological idea, has for us today a more purely human aspect. We cannot help but see it as an image with deeper psychological meanings. What strikes us is not only the substitution of the lamb for John, but the resulting tension between the figures. In the first cartoon (fig. 1), a stable symmetry rules all the postures and movements; the two children are in a friendly rapport and correspond to the two women, who might be their respective mothers. The picture is a "sacred conversation" in an atmosphere of perfect harmony. In the lost Servite cartoon and in the Louvre painting which is built upon it,83 the lamb resists the Christ child who mounts it and hugs its sides with both legs. The child looks back to his mother; she restrains him, bending far forward in the effort to hold him; Anne, on whose lap the Virgin sits, looks on in smiling approval. I do not know of an earlier example of the Anna Metterza with this complex interplay of the figures or with the motif of the child and the lamb.84

In substituting a lamb for John, Leonardo has brought an ambiguity into both the theological and human meanings of the scene. The lamb is a symbol of Christ, the sacrificial host and redeemer, as the Carmelite explained; but it is also the symbol of John who foretells the coming of Christ. In mounting and hugging the lamb, the

82 For this letter, see John Shapley, "A Lost Cartoon for Leonardo's Madonna with Saint Anne," Art Bulletin, VII (1924), 98, 99, and Clark, op. cit., 108. There is also a contemporary poem by Girolamo Casio to the same effect; for the text and translation, see Shapley, op. cit., 100.

83 Among other changes, the painting reverses the positions of the figures in the cartoon, to judge by the description, the copy and a drawing for the head of Saint Anne (Popham, op. cit., plate 183).

84 In Raphael's adaptation of the Servite cartoon in his painting of the Holy Family (1505) in the Prado Museum, the Virgin helps the child to sit on the lamb, and Joseph, at the side, replaces Anne.
child expresses his "passion" both as the accepted self-sacrifice and as the love of the creature that stands for his cousin John.

Here, following Freud's analysis of Leonardo's personality, one may ask whether in this image of the fatherless Holy Family, Leonardo does not project (and conceal) a narcissistic and homosexual wish in replacing the figure of Christ's playmate John—an ascetic and the victim of an incestuous woman—by the lamb which stands for both John and himself.

The history of the formation of the *Saint Anne* is more complex, and though it may reenforce some of Freud's ideas, it does not support altogether his view of the genesis of the image. In a sketch in Venice, probably earlier than the Servite cartoon, the lamb is drawn at the feet of Anne and Mary who holds the child in her lap—he plays with the lamb's mouth or jaw. The lamb's position is like that of the unicorn at the feet of a seated young woman in a much older drawing by Leonardo—a mediaeval symbol of chastity. On the back of this drawing are several sketches for a composition of the Madonna with the child hugging a cat. It is evident that the elements which make up the original features of the *Saint Anne* in the Louvre—particularly the child with the lamb—had occupied Leonardo's thought for many years before the meeting with Mona Lisa and some of them independently of the theme of Saint Anne.

IV

A disciple of Freud, Dr. Ernst Kris, who brings to psychoanalysis a training and experience as an historian of art, has tried to complete Freud's interpretation by discerning in the hidden emotional grounds of the image the sources of the artistic invention as well. Where Freud saw a defect of composition, Kris assumes a new creative form. "Unity between the three figures was established not only by gestures; they seem to merge into each other since they are inscribed into a pyramidal configuration. By similar devices Leonardo created in several of his paintings compositions which exercised considerable influence on the development of the art of his time."

It is not clear whether Dr. Kris is summarizing Freud or drawing from the latter a new consequence for the explanation of Leonardo's style. He is himself aware of the great difficulties in relating "form and content"

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89 Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York, 1952), 19, 22.
through a theory of their common psychological roots, and he is sceptical of the vulture discovered in Mary's robe. But what seems here to be an advance in the psychoanalytic study of art—which has until now paid little attention to style—is a lapse in historical and aesthetic understanding. The pyramidal form as such is no invention of Leonardo's; what is distinctive in his formal composition lies elsewhere and is the result of a development in the course of his life rather than the outcome of work on a single theme like the Saint Anne.

The older Italian images of *Anna Metterza* show, since the fourteenth century, a compact pyramidal grouping. In these versions all the figures are submitted more or less to the axis of the pyramid; they form a static symmetrical whole, as in Masaccio's great painting; all face the observer, or each has a dominant plane distinct from that of the neighboring figure. Compared with the old types, the novelty of Leonardo's form, later carried further by Michelangelo and Raphael, lies rather in the fact that within the conventional pyramid of three or four figures, each has a complex asymmetry of contrasted forms in depth, often in a foreshortened S, and each person responds actively to another. In older art, a single limb may be moved without affecting the rest of the body; for Leonardo, the body is a self-adjusting system, with an easy flow and cohesion of forms, in which the movement of any part entails the response of all the others. From this comes the charm of a unity which comprises within a stable enclosing form so much play and lability of the parts. (This is not the sum of Leonardo's great originality as a painter; he contributed, besides, a new fullness and subtlety of modelling, a palpable atmosphere, a mysterious light and shadow which point to later art, and the infinitely extended landscape background as a lyrical revelation of mood in counterpoint to the figures.)

In the Louvre painting, the child, looking up at his mother, moves away from her to play with the lamb, at the same time constraining the little beast; Mary pulls the child back to her and in doing so, turns away from Anne; Anne, her lower body directed to the left, looks back to the child at the lower right. In this overlapping and interlocking of bodies, with the progression from the most stable figure of Anne to the most active and divided figure of Christ through Mary's mediating posture, every movement is counterposed to contrasting movements, whether of the figure itself or the neighboring bodies; but together they form a compact unit of a higher order, a family.

It was Leonardo who first developed the exemplary forms of such dynamically balanced composition. Composition here means something imaginative and ideal, one of those fundamental structures or modes of grouping that mark an epoch and become canonical, like an
architectural order or poetic form.\textsuperscript{90} 

Its stages can be followed in Leonardo's successive works. He does not possess it from the beginning of his career. It is rudimentary in the Virgin of the Rocks painted in 1483; it is not yet clearly developed in the first cartoon of Saint Anne; nor is it fully realized in the other drawings of this subject. But it appears with great force in a work which has nothing to do with the maternal theme; the Last Supper, painted in Milan in 1495 to 1497. In this composition, dominated by the central figure of Christ, the twelve apostles are broken up into four groups of three; in each group we see different reactions and inter-relations of three figures who are confronted by the same unspoken question posed by the disturbing words of Christ: One of you shall betray me. It is a work that combines a highly concentrated form—the central Christ, the symmetrical table and architecture in a converging perspective rhythm—with the extraordinarily varied movements of the enclosed figures aroused by the central force, each figure subject to his distinct emotion expressed in gesture and pose, yet clearly a member of a group of three with its own unity of contrasted reactions.

This distinction of character is a Renaissance achievement. It is not only a new approach to the theme of the Last Supper—in spirit more dramatic than liturgical or theological—but a far-reaching conception of collective behavior in which the individual is revealed.

Leonardo's study of the grouping of the apostles was a preparation for the Saint Anne. In the London cartoon, the gesture of Anne pointing upward is like the gesture of the first apostle at Christ's left in the Last Supper (although the meaning is different). In the Louvre painting, the overlapping of the bodies, the varied directions and levels of the heads within a group of three figures, recall the three apostles at Christ's right hand.

If one wishes to relate the new form to the psychological content of the Saint Anne, the connection will be found, I think, not so much in the process of fusing into a stable pyramid the two mothers who haunted Leonardo's memory since childhood, but rather in the opposite process of giving to the traditional closed group of child and parents an articulation of contrasts which could render the spontaneity and conflicting impulses of the individuals while retaining the family attachment. Whether smoothly harmonized or left in an unresolved state of tortuous involvement, these opposed movements within the idealized individual are a characteristic of High and Late Renaissance art; in the first case they form a classical canon in which

\textsuperscript{90} For an excellent account of Leonardo as a composer, see H. Wölflin, \textit{Die klassische Kunst, Eine Einführung in die italienische Renaissance} (7th ed., Munich, 1924), 20–43.
the body is stable, though active, and relaxed, though confined; in the other case, they anticipate the Mannerist style of the mid-sixteenth century, where the classical form appears strained or affected, the result of an effort that deforms and depresses the individual, who is an increasingly introverted or tragic figure.

In spite of Leonardo's refinement of drawing and search for graceful forms, I do not believe that the new classical ideal is perfectly realized in the Saint Anne. There remains an aspect of the rigid and artificial in the group, most evident in the abrupt pairing of Anne and Mary, with the sharp contrast of their profile and frontal forms. It may be explained, perhaps, by Leonardo's commitment to the traditional mediaeval type of Anna Metterza, in conflict with his own tendency towards variation, distinctness and movement. Throughout his life, he conceived his more iconic compositions around a dominant, isolated, central figure—as in the Adoration of the Magi, the Virgin of the Rocks, and the Last Supper—and therefore found in the Saint Anne, with its two mothers of equal weight, an especially refractory theme. He could not adopt the solution of Northern artists who placed the two women side by side, with a little Christ between them. It is this discrepancy between the inherited type and the mature goals of Leonardo's art that accounts in part for the suggestion of later Mannerist art in the Saint Anne.

V

In a general article that Freud wrote not long after his study of Leonardo, speaking of the significance of his researches for various fields, he remarked that "the intimate personality of the artist which lies hidden behind his work can be divined from this work with more or less accuracy." It is obvious that for this purpose all the available works of an artist must be considered. In interpreting Leonardo's art, Freud examines, however, mainly pictures that represent women. The Adoration of the Magi is mentioned as an example of his neurotic difficulty in finishing a picture, and the Last Supper as a painting executed with a characteristic slowness and destined to ruin by his experimentation with technique. The content of these great pictures is nowhere taken into account. We have the impression in reading Freud that Leonardo's fantasy as a painter was bounded by soft images of women and children and effeminate youths. Another side of Leonardo, evident in his virile images of men, is ignored. There we see him as an artist with a singular vision of force.

For the townhall of Florence, Leonardo painted in 1504–1505 a mural picture of the Battle of Anghiari, a Florentine victory over the
Pisans, which has come down to us only in descriptions, sketches and copies. Before the most important copy, done by Rubens, we are astonished by Leonardo's love of violence, his ferocious power in rendering the impact of savagely fighting figures. Only a part of the work is preserved in Rubens' copy—a struggle between opposed horsemen; few Renaissance artists have represented the terrible fury of hand-to-hand combat as vividly as Leonardo. Vasari noted before the original that "rage, hatred and revenge are no less visible in the men than in the horses."

From the beginning of his career, Leonardo was passionately interested in the horse. (For the Duke of Milan he made a silver lyre in the form of a horse's head, a reconciliation of the strong and the sweet.) The background of the early, unfinished painting of the Adoration of the Magi contains wonderful rearing horses, ridden and constrained by pagan, athletic figures of proud young men—a beautiful contrast to the venerable types in the foreground, humble and passive, adoring the infant Christ.

Important for this side of his art was the association with Verrocchio which I have mentioned before. Leonardo's versatility as artist and technician owes much, it has been surmised, to his early apprenticeship to Verrocchio; this master was sculptor, painter, goldsmith, architect and engineer, and at home in other crafts as well. The emulation of his teacher appears above all in Leonardo's tragic attempts to produce an equestrian statue in bronze. Verrocchio had created in the 1480s a grandiose bronze horseman, the famous Colleoni in Venice. It was a work carried out stubbornly; he had to fight the decision of the Venetians that he should make only the horse and another artist, the man. In the end Verrocchio did both. Twice in Milan Leonardo undertook to carry out gigantic equestrian monuments in bronze, one of Prince Trivulzio and the other of Duke Francesco Sforza. Only some drawings have survived; but from these we can judge Leonardo's passionate feeling for the heroic.

In his old age, Leonardo produced furious drawings of cataclysms, overwhelming forces unleashed upon mankind, a mountain falling upon a village, the world coming to an end with enormous turbulence—works of an impassioned, destructive imagination, employing a knowledge of science to express a titanic revulsion against humanity. Drawing them, he seems like the old, despairing Lear invoking the elements of the storm.

Freud has in fact remarked in Leonardo the traces of a converted sadistic impulse. He refers to his known vegetarianism and Vasari's

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92 Popham, op. cit., pl. 191–201. 93 Clark, op. cit., pl. 44.
engaging picture of the young genius walking through the marketplace of Florence, buying caged birds in order to release them, as evidences of a hidden childhood sadism. Of the abundant overt examples of his love of violence, Freud mentions only his drawing of hanged men and his interest in military engineering. But is Leonardo's kindness to animals so surely a sign of repressed sadistic feeling? The story of his freeing caged birds may be explained differently. In folklore and in folk custom, the release of a captive bird is believed to bring good luck. As late as the 1860's, people of all classes in Paris came to the market to buy birds and free them, a magic sacrifice that promised success, whether in love or business or examinations. The scientific bent of Leonardo and his intellectual independence did not free him from popular beliefs; his note-books record without criticism some odd superstitions. But the episode described by Vasari had possibly to do with his study of flight. One may note too that on a sheet covered with scientific observations about the atmosphere and body surfaces, he has drawn a bird sitting in a cage, with the inscription: "the thoughts turn towards hope." 

Leonardo's abstention from animal flesh may be regarded as a medical belief, sustained by philosophical conviction; it was inspired perhaps by ancient authors in vogue among the Florentine Neo-Platonists. He might have read in Porphyry's treatise De Abstinencia ab Esu Animalium (IV, 16) that the wisest of the Persian magi abstained from meat.

The aggressive feelings of Leonardo are better illustrated by the unconstrained fantasies of violence in both his writings and pictures and by his misanthropic taste for the ugly, the deformed and caricatural in the human face than by his vegetarianism and his release of captive birds. From the beginning of his career as an artist, Leonardo produced beside the tender images others of a violent and threatening character. Vasari records among his early works the painting of a hybrid monster, like a Medusa's head, compounded of the forms of insects and reptiles, and secretly designed to terrify his father.

A more complete psychoanalytic study of Leonardo would have to take into account two other pictures ignored by Freud. One is the Leda and the Swan (known only through copies and some original drawings) which contradicts Freud's statement that Leonardo betrays an extreme repression in his total avoidance of erotic subjects. 

100 Clark, op. cit., pl. 41; Heydenreich, op. cit., pl. 68; Popham, op. cit., pl. 208.
The other is the great unfinished Jerome in the Vatican, a powerful image of masculine ascetic feeling. It is not, like Botticelli’s Jerome, the scholarly saint in his study, but the tormented, penitent hermit in the wilderness, beating his bared breast with a stone, while the lion before him roars with pain from the thorn in his foot.

There is in Freud’s account an intimation of the masculine side of Leonardo, but he does not attempt to investigate it seriously. To explain why his art is so uneven and why he cannot finish his work, Freud points to the relations with his father. Since Leonardo identified with him at a certain age, he had to treat his own children—his paintings and sculptures—as his father had treated him, by abandoning his work. This analogy will convince few readers. However, Freud observes too that in identifying with his father, the young Leonardo strove to copy and excel him; he passed then through a period of intense creativeness which was renewed later when he enjoyed the support of a substitute father, his patron Sforza, the Duke of Milan. His great works were produced in those two periods of fatherly attachment. But since his sublimation to art, the argument continues, was unaccompanied by real sexual activity, which is the pattern of all creativeness, Leonardo could not sustain his work for long. In the late 1490’s and towards 1500, it deteriorates more and more.

At the age of fifty, through some obscure biological process, there takes place, according to Freud, a reactivation of the erotic energies. In Leonardo, this change coincided with his meeting with Mona Lisa whose personality, concentrated outwardly in her smile, revived the artist’s childhood memories. Through the re-erotizing of his imagination, he was again able to produce masterpieces. But since he was still sexually repressed, and had lost the support of both the Duke and his father (who died in 1504), the reawakening was short-lived. He turned to science, an interest compatible with sexual repression and depending on a sublimation that belongs to an earlier period of infancy than the sublimation to art.

102 Clark, op. cit., pl. 18.
106 For Freud’s account of Leonardo’s sublimation to science, there is a parallel in the life of Newton, a posthumous child whose mother married again when he was three; after that he was brought up by his maternal grandmother. For a survey and criticism of psychoanalytic ideas concerning sublimation, see H. B. Levey (Lee), “A Critique of the Theory of Sublimation,” Psychiatry, II, 1939.
More than once in his study of Leonardo, Freud has warned the reader that psychoanalysis does not pretend to explain genius or the grounds of excellence in art. But he believed, as he said elsewhere, that psychoanalysis "could reveal the factors which awaken genius and the sort of subject-matter it is fated to choose." He cannot assert this, however, without risking some judgments about the quality of single works of art, apart from the accepted estimations of the artist as a whole. For how can he speak otherwise of the early experiences as factors that facilitate or block the action of an organically rooted power? To construct his picture of Leonardo's spiritual fortunes, Freud, we have seen, must become a critic of art and commit himself to judgments about the better and worse in the painter's career, his good and bad periods, and he must venture, too, some opinions about the dates of works which professional historians were still unable to decide.

From all this the reader can judge the difficulties of a psychoanalytic approach to an artist, which seeks to explain the content of his art, his qualities of style, and the vicissitudes of his work, as well as to infer from the paintings the personality and early life of the artist. Nevertheless, Freud was able, thanks to his theory and method, and perhaps even more to his deep sympathy for the tragic and problematic in Leonardo, to pose altogether new and important questions about his personality, questions which were unsuspected by earlier writers and to which no better answers than Freud's have yet been given.

I believe this study of Freud's book points to weaknesses which will be found in other works by psychoanalysts in the cultural fields: the habit of building explanations of complex phenomena on a single datum and the too little attention given to history and the social situation in dealing with individuals and even with the origin of customs, beliefs, and institutions.

In appealing so often to history in this paper, I do not mean to oppose historical or sociological explanations to psychological ones. The former, too, are in part psychological; the terms used in describing social behavior sum up what we know of individuals, although historians make little use of Freud's psychology of the unconscious. But if all historical explanations depended on psychology, we could

107 Freud's foreword to Marie Bonaparte, Edgar Poe (Paris, 1933).
108 Freud's judgment of Leonardo's productivity and quality should be compared with that of Clark (op. cit., 107); speaking of the admiration of the Florentines for Leonardo's Servite cartoon of Anna Metterza, he says: "Such popular enthusiasm would hardly have been possible in Milan, and helps us to understand why the five years he spent in Florence were more productive than the preceding eighteen years spent in the north of Italy."
not correctly apply the psychological concepts, whether psychoanalytic or those of behavioral psychology or of the everyday common-sense understanding of human nature, unless we knew the state of the individual and his human environment—data that cannot be supplied without historical study. Where Freud has misinterpreted Leonardo, and he admits more than once in his book how speculative his attempt is, it was in part because he ignored or misread certain facts. His false conclusions do not imply that psychoanalytic theory is wrong; the book on Leonardo, a brilliant jeu d'esprit, is no real test of this theory, which here has been faultily applied. Just as a theory of physics would not be disproved by an experiment with incomplete or incorrectly recorded data, so Freud’s general account of psychological development and the unconscious processes is untouched by the possible misapplications to Leonardo. His principles may for other reasons turn out to be inadequate and then be replaced by better ones; these will be usable, even if incomplete, in a new psychological study of Leonardo. But to apply them fruitfully, the analyst will need a fuller knowledge of Leonardo’s life and art and of the culture of his time.

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Since this was written there has appeared the article by R. Richard Wohl and Harry Trosman, “A Retrospect of Freud’s Leonardo, an Assessment of a Psychoanalytic Classic,” Psychiatry, XVIII (1955), 27–39. The authors correct Freud’s mistranslation of the text concerning the kite, but are unaware of Maclagan’s article of 1923 (see note 10 above); they propose no fresh interpretation of the reminiscence, but criticize Freud’s theory of the genesis of homosexuality in the light of more recent psychoanalytic studies. Freud’s error about the vulture has also been noted by Ernest Jones in the second volume of his biography of Freud (New York, 1955), after a personal communication from James Strachey (348), but he does not evaluate the consequences of the correction for the book as a whole. It seems that Jung, too, had discovered the outlines of a vulture in the painting of Saint Anne (348). Finally, of great interest for the personal significance of Leonardo to Freud, whose combination of scientific and artistic gifts has often been noted, is the fact, reported by Jones, that the Leonardo book was Freud’s favorite among his own works.

I must mention also the book by Giuseppina Fumagalli, Eros di Leonardo (Milan, 1952), which I could not consult until now. The author wishes to demonstrate, against Freud, Leonardo’s sexual normality and the rich erotic content of his art. She observes, after “Havelock” (a confusion of Havelock Ellis and Maclagan?—Ellis, in reviewing Freud’s book in the Journal of Mental Science in 1910 did not catch the error), that the bird of Leonardo’s memory was no vulture. She argues at length that Leonardo was not homosexual, explaining the episode of 1476 by the customs of the time and by Leonardo’s universal curiosity and desire for all experience.