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Résumé de l'article

Dans le Codex Atlanticus, écrit entre 1483 et 1518, Léonard de Vinci déclare qu'il était emprisoné au moment où il représentait un Enfant Jésus. Cette étonnante affirmation fait vraisemblablement référence aux études préparatoires pour la *Madone au chat*, la plus importante série d'esquisses de ses années de jeunesse.

Même si d'autres artistes ont représenté un chat dans des scènes de Sainte Famille, Léonard de Vinci a été le seul à mettre le petit animal si près du « coeur » des personnages, prenant ainsi une liberté iconographique qui a pu être jugé sévèrement par les autorités ecclésiastiques. Dans l'univers de la sorcellerie du XV$^{e}$ siècle le chat était associé au diable et dans des gravures italiennes et allemandes de la Renaissance il était le symbole de la sorcellerie même.

La datation des dessins pour la *Madone au chat* est fondée sur une note autographe, dans laquelle Léonard de Vinci affirme que vers la fin de 1478 il travaillait à deux représentations de la Vierge Marie. La figure de la Vierge avec une fleur de la *Madone Benois* (Leningrad), possiblement l'une de ces peintures, à été considérée comme une version simplifiée de la *Madone au chat*.

Les esquisses les plus élaborées de cette oeuvre controversée se trouvent au British Museum de Londres. Par leur exécution spontanée et fugueuse elles se détachent de la précision et de la netteté traditionnelles du travail des ateliers du XV$^{e}$ siècle. Par là ces esquisses annoncent la transition entre la première renaissance et le XVI$^{e}$ siècle. Ces dessins constituent en outre un bon exemple des distances que Léonard de Vinci prenait envers la tradition iconographique; enfin, ils témoignent de la lutte de l'artiste en faveur de la liberté de création.

# *Leonardo da Vinci's Unorthodox Iconography: The* Madonna with the Cat

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans le Codex Atlanticus, écrit entre 1483 et 1518, Léonard de Vinci déclare qu'il était emprisoné au moment où il représentait un Enfant Jésus. Cette étonnante affirmation fait vraisemblablement référence aux études préparatoires pour la *Madone au chat*, la plus importante série d'esquisses de ses années de jeunesse.

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The drawings for a *Madonna with the Cat* constitute the most extensive series of studies in Leonardo's early career. None of his other projects was pursued so thoroughly, to be abandoned—whether for personal reasons or as a result of public pressure—so completely. According to Richter, "such subjects would have been considered strange and irreverent by the Church authorities and have brought him in collision with the Inquisition."[1] A similar opinion has been expressed in a more specific study on Leonardo's Christian iconography: the artist apparently treated all religious commissions in an extremely subjective way, disregarding established Christian iconography and traditional patterns to the point of unorthodoxy—as exemplified in his studies for the *Madonna with the Cat*.[2]

What, it might be asked, is offensive about portraying an animal that had been depicted in religious paintings both before Leonardo and in his own time, and would be after it? In an example from the Trecento—a fresco of the Last Supper executed by a pupil of Pietro Lorenzetti in the Lower Church of S. Francesco—a cat and a dog are placed in the foreground of the kitchen scene to the left of the Last Supper.[3] This genre scene is divided both architecturally and symbolically from the sacred scene, and takes place behind the back of Judas.

1 Jean Paul Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci, Compiled and Edited from the Original Manuscripts* (London, 1970), II, 342, footnote to no. 1364, C.A. 252 a.

2 Hans Ost, *Leonardo-Studien* (Berlin, 1975), 81.

3 Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New York, 1974), 87, fig. 103.

In Domenico Ghirlandaio's depiction of the Last Supper in the Convent of S. Marco in Florence (a more elaborate version of the Last Supper of 1480 in the refectory of the Church of Ognissanti in Florence), a cat is added to the foreground, crouching prominently at some distance behind Judas. A long table isolates the cat and Judas from the rest of the group.[4] Since the peacock in the window frame above Christ can be understood to symbolize eternal life, it is tempting to see the cat below Judas not only as a domestic pet but also as a symbol of evil. This suspicion is substantiated by a twelfth-century relief on the pulpit in Volterra showing a Last Supper.[5] Here Judas receives the holy food while, at his feet, a dragon-like devil with cat's ears and the tail of a serpent fills the foreground.

The first engravings of the Last Supper after Leonardo's depiction of the scene added a cat, a dog, or even a rat,[6] probably to give it a more decorative and genre-like appeal, a diversion from Leonardo's powerful solemnity. Since Judas, in Leonardo's composition, is integrated into the group, a symbolic reading of the small animal in the foreground is, in this case, not imperative. The Master of the Sforza Book of Hours, to whom these engravings are attributed, frequently included a spaniel in his works, which was one of his characteristic motifs.[7]

The interest which Leonardo devoted to the study of the cat in his early life is equalled by his fascination with other animals, such as the horse, in his mature years. In the early years of Leonardo's career the cat had no rival other than the legendary unicorn, found on the verso of one of the sheets of studies for the *Madonna with the Cat*.[8] To judge from the eight sheets of studies for the cat—drawn either in various poses by itself or in interaction with the Christ Child—this animal was more than a decorative detail for the artist, while at the same time less symbolic than its predecessors in religious art. Its depiction offered Leonardo a purely artistic challenge, an element of unlimited sculptural possibilities in dynamic rhythm—the closest in threefold proportional size relationship to child and mother, and the most compact in the unfolding of curvilinear elements. The more intimately integrated the cat became in the arms of the child and his mother in the course of these often rapidly and passionately drawn studies, the more narrow-minded church officials could have considered its proximity offensive on grounds of its ambiguous iconographical record.

It is difficult to find a key to the meaning of the cat motif in the depictions of the Madonna and Child, partly because the cat is not frequently included in this theme in the Quattrocento. It is therefore advisable to survey the visual and textual material that has survived in order to set forth some of the parameters of the problem.

Two suggestions have been put forward that could have made the close connection of this animal with the Madonna quite acceptable: an ancient legend told of a cat giving birth at the time of the Nativity. Leonardo relieved the cat "of its purely accessory function and literally wove it into the emotional interplay of the holy figures."[9] The question remains, however, whether this legend was as widely known as the then-current superstitions connecting the cat with the devil and with witchcraft (see below).

Another theory suggests that the cat could have been intended as a tame weasel.[10] The fact that Leonardo clearly differentiated between cats and weasels is evident in the portrait of a *Lady with an Ermine* (Cecilia Gallerani) of ca. 1483 to 1485, now in the Czartorski Museum in Krakow.[11] Comparison between the animal held by the Milanese lady and the studies of the child playing with a cat show two animals of very different proportions, coat, and personality.[12] To suggest that Leonardo studied the common cat to later convert it into a more exotic weasel or ermine is highly unlikely, given that he depicted a very accurately developed cat with relatively long paws (distinct from the sleek ermine with short paws in the Krakow painting) in the final versions of the *Madonna with the Cat*. These studies were taken from life, showing, "as nothing else in his work, a direct and happy approach to life; and they show his matchless quickness of vision."[13]

In antiquity, weasels rather than cats were valued and domesticated for their ability to kill snakes and mice.[14] Particularly in the Renaissance, the ermine, the winter white variation of the weasel, was frequently depicted as a symbol of purity and moderation, for example in prints

4 Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (Greenwich, Conn., 1972), I, 172.
5 Schiller, *Iconography*, II, fig. 93.
6 Arthur M. Hind, *Early Italian Engravings* (New York, 1938-48; reprint Nendeln, 1970), IV, figs. 616, 618, and 619.
7 Hind, *Engravings*, V, 88, no. 9.
8 A. E. Popham, *The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci* (London, 1973), 103-105.
9 Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* (Cambridge, 1981), 54.
10 Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci* (New York, 1982), 31.
11 Ludwig Goldscheider, *Leonardo da Vinci* (London, 1959), 154, fig. 22.
12 Popham, *Drawings*, 9-14.
13 Clark, *Leonardo*, 31.
14 Goldscheider, *Leonardo*, 154.

showing the Triumph of Chastity from Petrarch's *Triumphs*, which were popular in Florence in the fifteenth century.[15] In these depictions, ladies carry a banner decorated with the figure of an ermine in front of the triumphal chariot, which is drawn by unicorns.

In a small drawing of ca. 1494, in which he depicts a man beating a passive and submissive ermine, Leonardo illustrates his belief in the allegory of the ermine as a symbol of purity and demonstrates his ability to differentiate between the shape and proportions of a weasel and of a cat.[16] The theory that the creature in the arms of the Madonna is a weasel may therefore be disregarded; this animal was only rarely depicted as a symbol of the virginity of Mary.[17]

In Leonardo's scientific studies, something of the magical quality of the cat's eye is apparent,[18] showing that even he, one of the most enlightened men of his time, was not entirely free from belief in popular superstitions—although he would certainly have scorned the belief that a cat, being able to see in the dark, is therefore in touch with the evil forces of darkness.[19]

Since Egyptian times the cat has been associated with mother goddess worship, connected with fertility. Perhaps in reaction to this fact, the cat is not mentioned in biblical writings. Since late antiquity, initiation into the occult was connected with ceremonies that involved kissing the anus of a cat, of which the early Christians were accused. Rumours of similar obscenities were connected with the Cathari, Waldensians, and Templars in the Middle Ages, associating the black cat, in particular, with heresy and devil-worship.[20]

Antonio Guaineri of Pavia (1410-40) wrote a medical treatise with the purpose of convincing his readers that women called *strigae* could not, contrary to popular beliefs, change into cats. In 1424, a woman called Finicella was accused of slaying children and assuming the shape of a cat; her punishment was death by fire and her execution took place in Rome.[21] In 1468, Ambrose de'Vignate, a professor of law at the universities of Padova, Bologna, and Turin, wrote a treatise on witches, referring to their transformation into cats and other animals.[22]

Around 1470, a certain Jordanes de Bergamo, a Master of Theology, wrote a treatise called *Questio de Strigis*, in which he tried to explain how the devil can create illusions: "He cannot change witches into cats, but he frequently assumes the form of a cat and enters houses and strangles children."[23] In 1480, in the diocese of Breschia, a woman called Maria "la Medica" was put on trial for having offered the devil the blood of children and animals, specifically of cats.[24]

Leonardo made biting remarks about the stupidity and cruelty of humanity.[25] He saw necromancy as a despicable and vain aberration of the mind; he believed in a natural law that would put to shame people involved in witchcraft.[26] An extensive discussion of this topic is found in a passage of a manuscript, now in the Royal Library, Windsor, written between 1489 and 1516:

> Of all human opinions that is to be reputed the most foolish which deals with the belief in Necromancy . . . and there are books full, declaring that enchantments and spirits can work and speak with tongues and without organic instruments—without which it is impossible to speak—and can carry the heaviest weights and raise storms and rain; and that men can be turned into cats and wolves and other beasts, although indeed it is those who affirm these things who first become beasts.[27]

In spite of his knowledge of witchcraft, there are no depictions of witches in Leonardo's art. His monstrous caricatures of both men and women were part of his fascination with natural phenomena, and have been seen as scientific studies of deformities and mental illnesses rather than as an expression of the artist's humour or a fascination with the demonic or occult.[28]

Visual evidence for a sinister cat-symbolism can be found in a Florentine print of ca. 1460, *Combat between Women and Devils*; the composition is probably based on a lost engraving by the German Master of the Banderoles (Fig. 20).[29] Though the theme is apparently derived from the battle of the

15 Hind, *Engravings*, I, 32-34.

16 Popham, *Drawings*, 119, no. 109 a.

17 Engelbert Kirschbaum, *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie* (Freiburg, 1972), IV, 527.

18 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 98: "If at night your eye is placed between the light and the eye of a cat, it will see the eye look like fire."

19 Herbert Friedman, *A Bestiary for St. Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art* (Washington, 1980), 162.

20 Jeffrey B. Russel, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972), 160-96. The same author makes numerous references to cats as familiars of witches in *A History of Witchcraft* (London, 1980), 90-100, 144-207.

21 Henry Charles Lee, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft* (New York, 1957), III, 1070-71.

22 Russel, *Witchcraft*, 237 and 349; Joseph Hansen, *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozess im Mittelalter* (Aalen, 1964), 462.

23 Lee, *History of Witchcraft*, I, 301.

24 Russel, *Witchcraft*, 260.

25 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 245, no. 1178-82; 302: "Of the Cruelty of Man."

26 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 85, no. 796; Leonardo uses the masculine form *negromante e incantatore*, rather than a feminine word for witch.

27 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 251, no. 1213.

28 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 260; Kenneth Clark, *The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle* (London, 1968), I, Appendix B, XLII.

29 Hind, *Engravings*, I, 64, no. 6; II, A.II.6.

Seven Virtues against Seven Vices, there are only three devils who take a beating from seven women. The devil in the background, hanged and chained, has distinctly feline features, his human body covered with fur-like specks.

A more explicit and Germanic connection between the cat and witchcraft can be found in the *chiaroscuro* woodcut *The Witches' Sabbath*, dated 1510, by Hans Baldung Grien.[30] Here three young witches, accompanied by an old woman and a child, perform an obscure and obscene ritual, while the cat, taking up the right foreground, is either vomiting or spitting fire.[31]

In Dürer's engraving *Adam and Eve*, or *Fall of Man*, dated 1504, the space between the feet of the first human beings is taken up by a large cat, sleeping on the ground, while a mouse approaches it from the left. Behind the tree with the serpent is an elk, a rabbit, and, further in the distance, an ox. These animals have been interpreted as the four temperaments, the sinful imbalances resulting from the Fall. The cat and mouse suggest predator and victim, a possible allusion to an element of the relationship between man and woman.[32]

The engraving *Child with Three Cats*,[33] attributed to Giulio Campagnola (ca. 1482-1515), shows that the theme of child and cat could be treated merely as a genre scene. Perhaps there is an intended reference to the Three Ages of Man, more specifically to Childhood, on account of the playfulness of both child and cat.[34]

Some of Leonardo's younger contemporaries and followers continued to explore the theme of the *Madonna with the Cat* by assimilating his pyramidal and dynamic composition but without allowing the cat a central place of importance; here the animal is kept safely peripheral, no closer to the Madonna than her foot. Even Michelangelo is connected with showing a cat in the context of a family group—hardly a Holy Family, because of the inclusion of three children, but probably a depiction of the ancestors of Christ (Fig. 21).[35] In the left foreground, below the woman sitting on the ground, a cat is creeping up to the crib in which a child is sleeping.

Giulio Romano painted his *Madonna della Gatta* (Naples, Museo Nazionale), ca. 1523, as a variation of the Holy Family called *La Perla* (Madrid, Prado). In the painting in Naples, the cat is the only creature that establishes eye contact with the observer, while all the others, including the dog in the middleground, turn away from the cat or ignore it. The "malevolently staring" cat appears to be so intensely focused on the beholder that it does not notice the birds in the hallway where St. Joseph is emerging.[36] In spite of the domestic bliss portrayed, it is possible to see at least a remnant of animal symbolism in this composition. A similarly uncanny cat can be found in Lorenzo Lotto's *Annunciation* (Pinacoteca Recanati), painted ca. 1527, and called "one of the most profound and intense inventions of all Italian painting."[37] While the Virgin is looking toward the beholder in frightened immediacy, a large dark cat is leaping away from the angel, adding to the atmosphere of emotional alarm.

In Federico Barocci's *Madonna del Gatto* (London, National Gallery), painted ca. 1573-74, the infant St. John is playing with the cat by teasingly holding up a goldfinch. The Virgin directs the Christ Child's attention to this scene by pointing to the agitated cat. The symbolic meaning—though "transformed here into a *pittura di genere* of great richness and significance"[38] and made delightfully amusing and harmless—is based on the confrontation between good and evil: the saint safely holds the bird, an image of the human soul and of Christ's salvation, while its enemy is watchful to catch and kill it.[39] The Virgin's foot is slightly raised, which in this context is perhaps no coincidence: she is symbolically ready to intervene and put the aggressor in its place.

No other artist, in depicting the *Madonna with the Cat*, made the same iconographical mistake Leonardo made, which was to bring the cat into the arms of Christ. No artist was equally dedicated to the complete comprehension of that animal, both in its playful interaction with human beings and in its potential violence. The cat was seen as a symbol of joyful serenity on the one hand and of destructiveness on the other, both of which, for Leonardo, reflected cosmic realities and could be observed in all the elements.[40] If Leonardo had

30 Walter L. Strauss, *Chiaroscuro—The Clair-Obscure Woodcuts by the German and Netherlandish Masters of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London, 1972), 64, no. 32.

31 Gert von der Osten, *Hans Baldung-Grien: Gemälde und Dokumente* (Berlin, 1983), 180; *Musée du Louvre: Inventaire Général des Dessins des Écoles du Nord: Écoles Allemande et Suisse* (Paris, 1936), I, no. 35.

32 Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1945), 85.

33 Hind, *Engravings*, I, 202; VI-VII, no. 15.

34 Samuel C. Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life* (New Haven, 1962), 148-62.

35 James Byam Shaw, *Old Master Drawings from Christ Church* (Oxford, 1972), 37-38, no. 47 recto.

36 Frederick Hartt, *Giulio Romano* (New Haven, 1958), I, 54; II, fig. 91.

37 Flavio Caroli, *Lorenzo Lotto* (Florence, 1975), 216.

38 Harald Olsen, *Federico Barocci* (Copenhagen, 1962), 61, no. 26.

39 Friedman, *Bestiary*, 220.

40 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 219-20, no. 1113 B: Leonardo defines "force" as a spiritual power and invisible energy in all things (Auguste Marinoni, "Leonardo as Writer," in *Leonardo's Legacy, an International Symposium* [Berkeley, 1969], 59).

any intention of creating new iconographical content at all, it could only have been in showing Christ's embrace of an animal that represented the powers of both good and evil.

The final version of the drawings of the *Madonna with the Cat* was apparently intended for a privately or publicly commissioned altarpiece, since Leonardo added an arched frame to the composition, similar to the one in the *Madonna Benois* in Leningrad.[41] The dating for the drawings of the *Madonna with the Cat* had been connected with a written note by the artist's hand on a drawing, now in the Uffizi, with two profiles and studies of machinery; the sheet is torn so that the name of the month is only partially preserved: ". . . . bre 1478 Inchominciai le 2 Vergini Marie."[42] Leonardo began the "Virgin Marys," therefore, sometime between September and December 1478.[43] Thus, the 26-year-old artist was involved with two different Madonna compositions at the same time. An easy conclusion would be to connect the written record with two existent Madonna paintings that can be attributed to the early Leonardo, the *Madonna Benois* in Leningrad and the *Madonna with the Carnation* in Munich (Fig. 22).[44] On the basis of the preserved drawings from Leonardo's early career, however, the studies for a Madonna with a cat show far greater artistic scope and depth than the drawings for a Madonna with a flower, a motif that can be found in both Madonna paintings that are preserved. The drawings related to these paintings look like simplified versions of the Madonna with a cat; only one drawing can actually be connected with the *Madonna Benois*, while the other, in its asymmetrical movement, is too advanced for the Munich Madonna.[45] It is therefore likely that one of the "Virgin Marys" mentioned by Leonardo in 1478 was, in fact, the *Madonna with the Cat*.[46]

The drawings of this theme are of crucial importance in understanding the artistic intentions and development of the young Leonardo. Though the cat had to be abandoned, these studies mark his breakthrough from Quattrocento to High Renaissance art at this early stage, anticipating, specifically, studies for the *Virgin and Child with St. Anne* done about 20 years later (Fig. 23).[47]

The cat was eventually replaced by a lamb, which, though not quite as versatile and flexible, was at least iconographically more traditional:

> What is remarkable in these instances is the way in which certain motifs which have a clear symbolic significance in the finished version grow out of entirely different forms—the lamb of the St. Anne composition which, we know, signifies the Passion of Christ was formerly a cat and even a Unicorn. . . . There is perhaps nothing more astounding in Leonardo's *oeuvre* than this divorce between motif and meaning. . . . Only a conception of art so utterly personal and almost solipsistic as Leonardo's could have brought about this most significant break with the past. For ultimately it is the act of creation that matters to him.[48]

The artist broke with tradition not only in his iconography but also in his style of drawing. In Verrocchio's workshop, from which Leonardo came, delicacy of execution was one of the definitions of artistic craftsmanship. Leonardo proved this ability in astounding ways, both in his skill with the brush (the angel in Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ* [Uffizi] of ca. 1470) and in his silverpoint, chalk, and pen drawings of drapery studies of those early years.[49] There is a precision and carefully deliberated rhythm in these studies that show an exceptional degree of artistic patience. In the studies for the *Madonna with the Cat*, however, Leonardo's drawing style becomes almost violently untidy, betraying the speed with which they were executed. Already in his early Florentine years, Leonardo demonstrated a new polarity of artistic creation: near-calligraphic craftsmanship on the one hand and the "terribilità" of artistic inspiration on the other. Thus, the dualism of serene stillness and tempestuous vehemence that characterizes his art is not only the result of the subject matter but is also discovered in the scope of technical possibilities of his stylus, pen, and brush in his media. It is here that we find his first struggle to express the flux of time experienced in spontaneous movement. The artist enters into the complexity of possible arrangements in the search for a satisfying composition that would contain all these possibilities by studying a cat, a child playing with it, and a mother holding them both.

By proposing this theme as a religious work of art, Leonardo threatened the notion of solemnity traditionally considered appropriate for the

41 Popham, *Drawings*, figs. 9 A and B.
42 Richter, *Leonardo*, I, 379, no. 663; Popham, *Drawings*, 125, no. 127.
43 Popham, *Drawings*, 13, fig. 127.
44 Goldscheider, *Leonardo*, 166, fig. 63.
45 Popham, *Drawings*, 103-104; *The Legacy of Leonardo: Italian Renaissance Painting from Leningrad* (Washington: National Gallery, 1979), 6-19.
46 Woldemar v. Seidlitz, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Vienna, 1935), 39-40.
47 Ernst Gombrich, "Leonardo's Method for Working Out Compositions," *Norm and Form, Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London, 1966), 61.
48 Gombrich, *Norm and Form*, 61-62.
49 Popham, *Drawings*, 102-103, figs. 8-16.

depiction of the Madonna. The dynamic tension resulting from the child's playful struggle with the cat allowed him to lend the theme a new degree of immediacy and spontaneity. Meanwhile Leonardo set for himself the almost impossible goal of recapturing at the same time the traditional ideal of a unified and geometrically balanced composition that would give his figures iconic validity. The resulting tension between internal sculptural movement and external pyramidal unity became one of the greatest challenges in his art.

In his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo set down "rules on the composition of narrative painting," admonishing artists not to separate parts of a work with sharp lines, not to aim at "finished, beautiful and agreeable arrangement of limbs," but rather to concentrate on movement:

> Therefore, painter, compose the parts of your figures arbitrarily, then attend first to the movements representative of the mental attitudes of the creatures composing your narrative painting, rather than to the beauty and goodness of the parts of their bodies. Because you must understand that if such an unfinished composition turns out to be consistent with your invention, it will satisfy all the more when afterward it is adorned with the perfection appropriate to all its parts.[50]

With these words, Leonardo broke with the workshop tradition of controlled and neatly executed preparatory drawing to open the way for a freedom of inner vision that he compared to poetic inspiration.[51]

Renaissance masters, when preparing a painting, generally began with informal sketches, then blocked out the composition, studying the parts and finally producing a full-size cartoon. The drawings for the *Madonna with the Cat*, dated between 1478 and ca. 1480, are the first visual documents of Leonardo's working procedure.[52]

The drawing in Bayonne (Musée Bonnat) appears to be the earliest of the series, as far as the treatment of the whole group is concerned (Fig. 24).[53] The movement suggested by the position of the Virgin's legs introduces a dynamic and asymmetrical element: her right leg is extended while the left leg is placed on a higher level. This position results in a diagonal pull of the folds of the drapery from the knees to the feet. While the child is placed within the triangular unity of the Madonna's upper body, the cat is pulled into the centre from the outside, its legs rather stiffly resisting this manipulation. In an additional study of the Child with the cat on a somewhat larger scale on the same sheet above, the cat resembles a small lamb except for the long erect catlike tail. Further to the left is another study of the Child with cat, showing the animal more successfully pulled into the infant's arms.

The drawings in the British Museum (no. 99 recto and verso) explore a variety of positions of cat and Child (Figs. 25 and 26). The execution is splendidly spontaneous and betrays great speed in the attempt to record the ongoing and unfolding movements of both subjects. In the upper right section of no. 99 verso, continuous movement, indicated with almost indecipherably heavy ink lines, is reminiscent of the stains on walls mentioned by Leonardo in his *Treatise on Painting*, which "although completely lacking in the perfection of any part, yet did not lack perfection in their movements and other actions."[54] Below and to the left of this depiction of energy is another study of the Child, sitting by himself, his arms extended and curved to allow the inner space that, in other versions, was taken up by the cat. This child bears close resemblance to the Christ Child in the *Benois Madonna*, where the Mother presents her Son with a sprig of jasmine, a symbol of divine love. The suggestion that Leonardo considered omitting the cat, "probably because of its unruly behavior,"[55] remains a point of speculation.

The drawing in the Uffizi is the closest to the *Benois Madonna*. It also resembles a drawing in the Louvre showing the Madonna and Child with a bowl of fruit (Fig. 27).[56] These three compositions share an inner monumentality and concentration on simplified sculptural form, especially in the depiction of the relatively large and heavy infant. In the Uffizi drawing, he is placed on a round table; his mother holds his left leg to prevent him from losing his balance in his attempt to get a firmer hold on the escaping cat. In its large curvilinear rhythms and its concentration on the half-figure of the Madonna, this composition appears to be the most finished of the studies of the *Madonna with the Cat*.[57]

A more hastily drawn—but also more fully united—three-figure group showing only the half-figure of the Madonna is the pen drawing in the British Museum (98 recto) of the *Maiden with*

50 Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, Codex Urbinas Latinus 1270, ed. A. P. McMahon (Princeton, 1956), 108, no. 261.

51 Gombrich, *Norm and Form*, 60; Leonardo, *Treatise*, 109.

52 Marilyn Aronberg, "A New Facet of Leonardo's Working Procedure," *Art Bulletin*, XXXIII (1951), 236.

53 Popham, *Drawings*, no. 14.

54 Leonardo, *Treatise*, 109, no. 261.

55 *Legacy of Leonardo*, 13-19.

56 Popham, *Drawings*, nos. 10 and 24.

57 A. E. Popham and Philip Pouncey, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (London, 1950), I, 59.

*the Unicorn* (Fig. 28).[58] The mother is seen from the front, her serenity and mature beauty anticipating Raphael's Madonna paintings. The cat is so intimately and snugly encircled by the double embrace of the child and mother that it becomes the centre of the composition and the focus of attention. Below this harmonious study are other sketches of great spontaneity but less final arrangement, focusing on the child and the cat, both in various positions. In one instance, the child even attempts to ride the cat while turning to the standing mother on the left, who reaches a clumsy hand toward the child's mouth. This figure, like the larger profile of a beautiful youth on the right, may have been intended for a different context.

The drawing formerly in the collection of Mrs. A. H. Pollen in London[59] resumes the diagonal whole-figure composition of the drawing in Bayonne, retaining the charming delicacy of the mother but giving the fully united triad an even more precariously balanced thrust to the left. By adding wash to the pen drawing, Leonardo achieves the effect of deep relief suggestive of a statuette.

Leonardo's most remarkable solution of a full-figure composition of a Madonna and Child with a cat can be found in the drawing in the British Museum (no. 97 recto) executed in pen and ink and brown wash over a sketch with the stylus (Fig. 29).[60] The comparison with no. 97 verso indicates the transformation from late Quattrocento art into the art of the High Renaissance (Fig. 30). In the undoubtedly earlier composition (no. 97 verso), the Virgin still shows features of Verrocchio's workshop tradition. Here, Child and cat play an equally vital part in the triangular composition. While the Virgin's contemplative serenity and frontality are preserved, dynamic pen strokes disturb the harmony of the drapery crossing her knees and legs. With these terse and heavy strokes and the playful struggle between Child and cat, Leonardo upset the meditative lyricism of late Quattrocento Madonna painting. An arched window in the right upper corner, echoing the curved format of the composition, brings this drawing into close proximity with the *Benois Madonna*.

All these details have changed in the final version on the recto. The group, compressed into a somewhat lower arch, fills the format entirely. The extra space between the two human heads is filled with a sketch for a different position of the Virgin's head, anticipating the Burlington House cartoon of the *Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (London, National Gallery), done about 20 years later, in which the heads of the two women are placed at similar height and appear to belong to the same body. Apparently Leonardo kept the early drawings and received inspiration from them in his later years.[61]

With the austerity and sculptural monumentality of this drawing, Leonardo has arrived at the final solution of the full-figure composition of the *Madonna with the Cat*. The heavy shading and use of wash suggest a three-dimensional group set into a niche. The composition combines the diagonal tension—initiated in the position of the legs and the pull of the drapery and culminating in the cat held compactly towards the left—with the frontality and pyramidal harmony of an iconic image. The passionate intensity with which the artist researched the theme, pursuing individual studies after nature and arranging them in various positions, suggests a commission that must have been of considerable importance to him.[62]

It is therefore possible that the theme of the *Madonna with the Cat* lured Leonardo away from the first official commission he received from the city of Florence in January 1478: to submit an altar painting of an Enthroned Madonna with Saints for the Chapel of St. Bernard in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. In March of that year, he received a considerable sum, indicating that the work was in progress and that he enjoyed respect as an artist.[63] By the fall of that year, however, he began "the two Virgin Marys" mentioned above—apparently smaller private commissions—without having completed the official altar painting, which he never did submit.[64]

The studies for the *Madonna with the Cat* may have occupied Leonardo until 1481, the year he began the *Adoration of the Magi* (Uffizi), also left unfinished.[65] A list of works in the Codex Atlanticus, probably written by Leonardo after his arrival in Milan, refers to "a Madonna, finished, [and] another almost, which is in profile."[66]

Since five different iconographical themes for Madonna compositions have been connected with Leonardo in these early years, it is not clear which one he kept in his possession at that time; the *Madonna Litta* in the Hermitage, Leningrad, is closest to a depiction in profile, but is not entirely

58 Popham and Pouncey, *Italian Drawings*, no. 98, fig. 40.
59 Popham, *Drawings*, no. 8 B.
60 Popham and Pouncey, *Italian Drawings*, no. 97 recto, fig. 46.
61 Aronberg, "A New Facet of Leonardo's Working Procedure," 235.
62 Alfred Scharf, *Filippino Lippi* (Vienna, 1935), 28; W. R. Valentiner, "Leonardo as Verrocchio's Coworker," *Art Bulletin*, XII, 87.
63 Kemp, *Leonardo*, 53; Valentiner, "Leonardo as Verrocchio's Coworker," 49.
64 Valentiner, "Leonardo as Verrocchio's Coworker," 47.
65 Kemp, *Leonardo*, 54.
66 Richter, *Leonardo*, I, 387, no. 680; Clark, *Leonardo*, 33.

authentic.[67] In a letter written in about 1482 to his new patron Ludovico Sforza of Milan, Leonardo made reference to his skills in military and civil engineering as well as in sculpture and painting: his ability to "carry out sculpture in marble, bronze, or clay" reflects not only the decade of affiliation with the Verrocchio workshop but also his own working method of building small sculptural models for many of his compositions for paintings.[68] As early as 1478 (as exemplified by the *Benois Madonna* and the most mature studies for the *Madonna with the Cat*), Leonardo was deepening the space between the figures in relationship to their niche-like architectural setting; developing a strong *chiaroscuro*, he surpassed the art of his contemporaries.

Two drawings at Windsor, perhaps done after 1500, are further studies of the cat. No. 12564, probably a studio copy and therefore difficult to date,[69] combines the theme of the *Madonna dell'Umilità*—the Madonna sitting on the ground—with the theme of the *Madonna with the Cat* (Fig. 31). The Virgin holds the Child in her arms, while to the left another child embraces a cat. These two motifs could have been meant to be independent of each other, just as are the two additional studies on the bottom of the sheet, of a child playing with a cat and of the two children embracing each other. However, the Virgin above is shown supporting her left elbow on a low stool on which the second child, embracing the cat, is seated. The boy's raised knee overlaps the elbow of the Virgin, uniting the two groups. If Leonardo actually intended to combine the two children, one with his mother and one with his cat, the child embracing the cat would have to be St. John—a theme that would have been extremely unusual.

Judging by its dry and timid execution, the drawing is apparently a workshop copy. It is possible that one of Leonardo's pupils, confused by a seemingly triangular composition formed by both groups, could have misunderstood the master's random studies of the Child with the cat and falsely connected the two upper sketches.

Leonardo first explored the theme of the Virgin sitting on the ground in 1478.[70] This sheet belongs to the years 1478-80, when he was absorbed with the subject of the Madonna with the cat. If he did, in fact, encounter harassment on account of that theme, he would have been unlikely to return to it in later years. The inclusion of St. John with a cat in a Madonna composition would further complicate the iconographical context.

Leonardo's most magnificent cat studies can be found in the Windsor drawing no. 12363 (Fig. 32).[71] Here, in more than 20 studies, he demonstrates the cat in positions ranging from peaceful resting to attack. One of the animals shown is actually a dragon, and is set at an angle to the studies of the cats. This drawing is a companion sheet to no. 12331; it shows one cat and thirteen studies of horses, including five studies for St. George and the Dragon. Both sheets were apparently part of a planned treatise on the movement of animals; the cat and the horse were the animals the artist studied most thoroughly. While from 1478 to about 1480 the cat was connected with a Madonna composition, the horse first entered Leonardo's repertoire in 1481 with the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi.

It is possible that the two Windsor drawings mentioned above can be connected with a manuscript written by Leonardo in about 1508. The Windsor drawings have been variously dated—as early as 1480, and as late as ca. 1514-15.[72] These drawings, technically more advanced and versatile than the animal studies from his early Florentine career, exemplify a new sculptural awareness; the potential or actual violence of the animals, for example, is explored with greater power and passion than in his previous work. It is therefore possible to see these studies as summaries of years of intensive investigation and observation of these species, making it likely that these two sheets originate from Leonardo's late career.

It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that Leonardo placed a dragon next to the fighting cats (Windsor drawing no. 12363), whose swirling and curling bodies and tails suggest the convoluted form of the dragon. In fact, Leonardo's written directions for the creation of a dragon advised that it should have the eyes of a cat.[73]

It seems that in the *Madonna with the Cat*, as in all major religious works, Leonardo demonstrated an entirely subjective approach to Christian iconography.[74] Only his treatment of the *Annunciation* in the Uffizi, one of the earliest paintings attributed to him, shows a "surprisingly orthodox and traditional" approach to iconography, though his depiction of the flowers was fanciful and did "not represent a logically constructed iconography, based on botany, to symbolize the event."[75]

67 Goldscheider, *Leonardo*, 167, fig. 67.
68 Goldscheider, *Leonardo*, 33; Valentiner, "Leonardo as Verrocchio's Coworker," 48.
69 Clark, *Drawings at Windsor*, 107.
70 Clark, *Drawings at Windsor*, no. 12564.
71 Clark, *Drawings at Windsor*, 49, no. 12363.
72 Clark, *Drawings at Windsor*, 29-30.
73 Richter, *Leonardo*, I, 342, no. 585.
74 Ost, *Leonardo-Studien*, 81.
75 Paul J. Cardile, "Observations on the Iconography of Leonardo da Vinci's Uffizi Annunciation," *Studies in Iconography*, VII-VIII (1981-82), 189 and 194.

In the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Leonardo did not depict the Immaculate Conception—as the original commission in 1483 had stipulated—but focused, rather, on the small John the Baptist, who as a patron saint of Florence would have had little relevance for the Milanese contract. Neither the Louvre version nor the version in the National Gallery in London is directly related to the original commission that called for angels and two prophets accompanying the Virgin and Child.[76] Moreover, it is possible that the two versions exemplify certain changes that Leonardo was required to make because he had introduced unorthodox and untraditional details, such as the angel's pointing finger.[77] The *Virgin with St. Anne* is, from an iconographical point of view, a new creation, and the different versions of the same theme are iconographically different from each other. This is proof of Leonardo's method of using figures and details without consideration of established conventions—a phenomenon that had no precedents in Christian art.[78]

It has been observed that Leonardo's treatment of Christian iconography becomes increasingly secondary to scientific research, especially after 1500. It is even more abstractly treated in his later life, when he was captivated by visions of the deluge.[79] For Leonardo, motifs and themes from traditional iconography were only the "raw material" for his experiments and inventions, rather than conventions to which he would submit. Apparently, the artist did not feel committed to a reverence for history and tradition, but rather saw himself singled out by destiny to challenge established patterns to the point of becoming a nonconformist if not an unbeliever.[80] Leonardo's notebooks, written over a period of about 30 years (from ca. 1489-1519), are "strikingly devoid of speculations about hagiography or hagiologic inferences."[81]

Vasari, in the 1568 edition of the *Life of Leonardo da Vinci*, felt compelled to emphasize how Leonardo, "seeing himself near death . . . desired to occupy himself with the truths of the Catholic faith and the holy Christian religion."[82] In Leonardo's testament, written in the spring of 1519, he commended his soul "to our Lord, Almighty God, and to the Glorious Virgin Mary, and to our lord Saint Michael, to all the blessed Angels and Saints male and female in Paradise."[83] This profuse confession, dictated by the customs of the time, is in strange contradiction to mysterious comments made by Leonardo in the context of a "letter" about a trip to Armenia and a new prophet. There has been specculation that Leonardo could have had secret leanings towards Islam.[84]

There are only a few isolated statements in Leonardo's extensive writings expressive of genuine devotion and piety: an example is a short prayer of obedience and love, written ca. 1490-93.[85] In another passage, he considers the fact that there might, after all, be a few saints on earth, virtuous people who deserve to be commemorated in art, but that ignorant people would misunderstand those images by treating them as magical.[86] In Leonardo's bestiary, the elephant is a symbol of virtues "rarely found in man; that is, Honesty, Prudence, Justice, and the Observation of Religion."[87] His "prophecies" against idolatry, abuses of the Church, and human corruption express deep pessimism and sarcasm. Here, he speaks like an iconoclast, unmasking the medieval tradition of religious art and the veneration of sacred images. For him, the depicted saints are not embodiments or representatives of spiritual realities but empty forms that are dumb and blind to the people who pray to them.[88] A criticism of the veneration of the Virgin Mary brings Leonardo close to the spirit of the Reformation as he draws attention to the discrepancy between Christian faith and church rituals.[89]

In the First Part of the Book on Painting (Codex Vaticanus 1270), however, Leonardo has no hesitation about defending the superiority and power of painting sacred images. He uses the evidence of image-worship in this *paragone* as an important proof that painting "remains peerless in its nobil-

76 Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (College Art Association of America, 1957), 73-79.

77 Ost, *Leonardo-Studien*, 83-85; Andre Chastel, "Gesture in Painting: Problems in Semiology," *Renaissance and Reformation*, XXII (1986), 19.

78 Ost, *Leonardo-Studien*, 85-86.

79 Ost, *Leonardo-Studien*, 136; Josef Gantner, *Leonardo's Visionen von der Sintflut und vom Untergang der Welt* (Bern, 1958).

80 Ost, *Leonardo-Studien*, 139; K. R. Eissler, *Leonardo da Vinci: Psychoanalytic Notes on the Enigma* (New York, 1961), 13-15 and 34.

81 Eissler, *Leonardo*, 41; Richter, *Leonardo*, I, 12.

82 Giorgio Vasari, *Life of Leonardo da Vinci, Painter and Sculptor of Florence* (1568), quoted in Goldscheider, *Leonardo*, 22.

83 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 389, no. 1566; only a copy of the original document has been preserved.

84 Richter, *Leonardo*, 319: "The Division of the Book: Sermon and Conversation to the faith . . . the Finding of the Prophet. His prophecy . . . How the new prophet showed that this destruction had happened as he foretold." See Richter's footnotes 19-40. Leonardo's notes are collected in the Codex Atlanticus which was written between 1483 and 1518.

85 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 237, no. 1132.

86 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 341, no. 1358.

87 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 269, no. 1245.

88 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 295, no. 1295.

89 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 293, no. 1293.

ity; alone it does honour to its author, remaining unique and precious." He stresses the uniqueness of a painting as opposed to the casting of sculpture or the printing of books. "Pictures representing deity" are traditionally treated with so much reverence that at their unveiling people "throw themselves to the ground, worshipping and praying to Him whose image is represented for the recovery of their health and for their eternal salvation as if the Deity were present in person." Disregarding his own prophetic insights about the potential abuse of sacred images, he dares to come to the following conclusion:

> It would seem, therefore, that the Deity loves such a painting and loves those who adore and revere it and prefers to be worshipped in this rather than in another form of imitation, and bestows grace and deliverance through it according to the beliefs of those who assemble in such a spot.[90]

It is hardly advisable to read these words as a theological statement, nor do they necessarily reflect Leonardo's personal conviction. He writes, rather, as a philosopher who is carrying out an argument using the evidence of social practices. There is no doubt that, though a rationalist and scientist, he experienced the unique "magic" that his paintings, especially those of the Madonna and other female figures, exerted on his contemporaries. For Leonardo, the difference between sacred and secular art was a matter not of substance but of detail: certain attributes could be changed to relate to the painting on different levels. He records an incident where one of his clients "wished to remove the symbols of divinity" in a painting of a female saint so that this connoisseur could "love" the depicted woman on a purely secular level.[91]

Isabella d'Este, in a letter in 1501, expressed the opinion that either a painting for her studio or a painting of the Madonna would be equally welcome, as long as it showed Leonardo's "pious and sweet" style.[92] The artist himself regarded his art as sublime: he can create beauty as well as monstrosities; through his art he can be god and creator of all things.[93]

These lofty affirmations do not reflect the struggle Leonardo experienced in his early career when he suffered criticism of his religious art. He did not specifically comment on the Inquisition, but a statement in his ominous "prophecies" can be read as a reference to the abuse of power in the Church: "metal and fire"—chains and burnings—were the principal instruments used by the ecclesiastical institution of his time to combat unorthodoxy.[94] Arrogance and cruelty, officially sanctioned by the Church, must have contributed to the artist's loss of faith both in society and in established religion. One of the most disturbing statements Leonardo made in his written notes comes from the Codex Atlanticus: "When I made a Christ Child you put me in prison; now if I represent Him grown up, you will treat me worse."[95] Though these words were written sometime between 1483 and 1518, probably in Milan in his mature years, the event described may refer to an extremely unpleasant incident in Leonardo's early career in Florence. His statement, which expresses the frustration and exasperation of an artist who has been misunderstood and deeply hurt, proclaims his innocence by connecting his work with the established religious art of his time. Since the representation of the Christ Child was far from offensive, it could only have been the object—or animal—that the Holy Infant held that caused censorship. Already in the middle of the fifteenth century all the depictions of decorative and genre-like animals in religious art had been condemned as "unnecessary and vain curiosities" by the archbishop S. Antonio of Florence, since they did not contribute to religious devotion.[96] Before Leonardo, these condemned decorative animals had only been peripheral, while he made one of them the centre of his composition. The drawings for the *Madonna with the Cat* point to a struggle for artistic freedom—one that Leonardo won at a high price.

90 Richter, *Leonardo*, I, 36, no. 8.

91 Richter, *Leonardo*, I, 64, no. 28, as part of the "Discussion between the Poet and the Painter, and what is the Difference between Poetry and Painting."

92 Goldscheider, *Leonardo*, 37, Documents, no. x: Letter of Isabella d'Este, 27 March 1501, to Fra Pietro da Novellara, Concerning a Madonna Painting and a Portrait.

93 Richter, *Leonardo*, I, 54, no. 19.

94 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 308, no. 1310.

95 Richter, *Leonardo*, II, 342, no. 1364: "Quãdo io feci Domeniddio putto, voi mi mettisti in prigione, ora s'io lo fo grãde, vio mi farete peggio." See Carlo Pedretti, *Commentary, the Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci, Compiled and Edited from the Original Manuscripts* (Oxford, 1977), II, 312: Pedretti suggests the possibility that Leonardo might have used a notorious homosexual youth as a model for the "Domeniddio putto." In contrast to Pedretti, the author of this article follows Richter's view, and explores an alternative interpretation to Pedretti's approach.

96 S. Antonio, *Summa Theologica*, III, viii, 4, as quoted in Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford, 1985), 43 and 156. Creighton Gilbert, "The Archbishop on the Painters of Florence, 1450," *Art Bulletin*, XLI (1959), 76.

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FIGURE 20. Florentine, about 1460, *Combat between Women and Devils*, engraving, formerly Constantinople, Museum of Painting and Sculpture (Photo: reproduced from Arthur M. Hind, *Early Italian Engravings* [New York, 1938], 1, pl. 91).

FIGURE 21. Michelangelo, *A Family Group*, red chalk and some black chalk, Oxford, Christ Church, no. 62 recto (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 22. Leonardo da Vinci (?), *Madonna with the Carnation*, panel, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, no. 7779 (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 23. Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies for the Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, pen and ink and wash over black chalk, London, British Museum, no. 108 (Photo:

FIGURE 24. Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies for a Madonna and Child with a Cat*, pen and ink, Bayonne, Musée Bonnat, no. 152 (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 27. Leonardo da Vinci, *Study of a Madonna and Child with a Cat*, pen and ink and wash, Florence, Uffizi, no. 421 (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 25. Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of a Child with a Cat*, pen and ink, London, British Museum, no. 99 recto (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 26. Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of Children and Cats*, pen and ink over a sketch with the stylus, London, British Museum, no. 99 verso (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 28. Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of the Madonna and Child with a Cat and Studies of the Child*, pen and ink over black chalk or charcoal, London British Museum, no. 98 recto (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 29. Leonardo da Vinci, *Study for a Madonna and Child with a Cat*, pen and ink and wash over a sketch with the stylus, London, British Museum, no. 97 recto (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 30. Leonardo da Vinci, *Study for a Madonna and Child with a Cat*, pen and ink over a sketch with the stylus, London, British Museum, no. 97 verso (Photo: Museum).

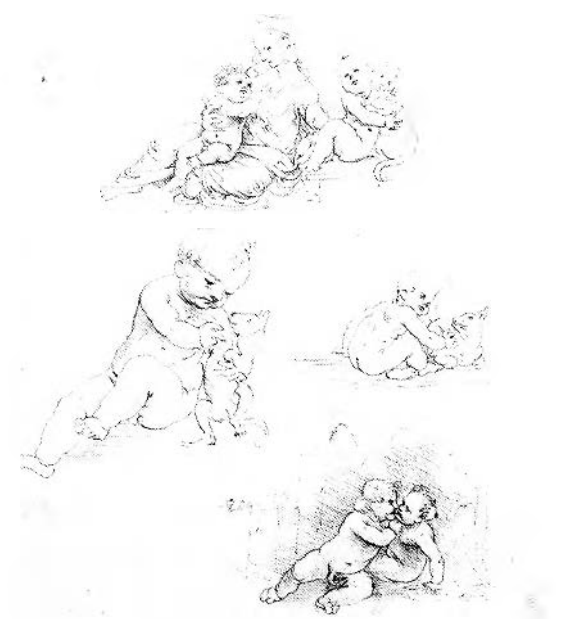

FIGURE 31. Leonardo da Vinci, *Study of the Virgin Seated on the Ground with the Christ Child, to her Right, on a Ledge, a Child (St. John?) with his Arms Around a Cat; Below Studies of a Child with a Cat*, pen and two inks, over red chalk, Windsor Castle, no. 12564 (Photo: Museum).

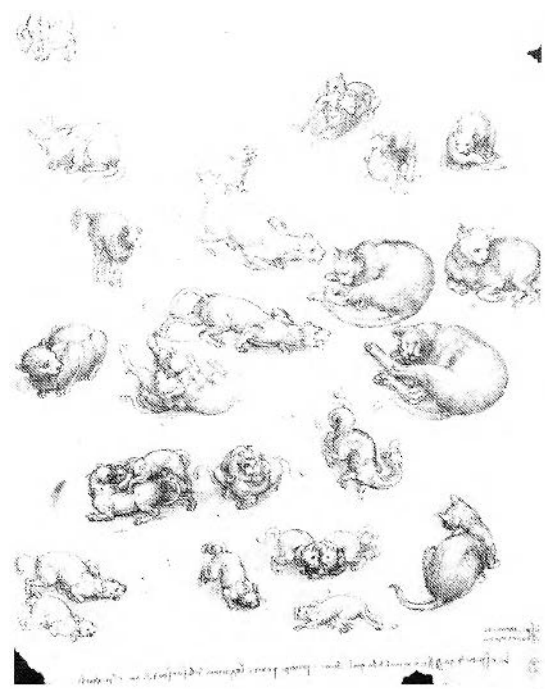

FIGURE 32. Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of Cats*, pen and ink with touches of wash, over black chalk, Windsor Castle, no. 12363 (Photo: Museum).