SATIRE AND MEDICINE IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE:
LEONARDO DA VINCI'S GROTESQUE DRAWINGS

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Dedicated to my husband, Jamie for being so loving and understanding, my parents, for providing me with unconditional love, support and my education, Dr. Butler, for being incredibly patient and kind, my AU cohort, and my in-house editors, T&T.
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ABSTRACT

Leonardo da Vinci’s so-called Grotesque drawings have resisted interpretation. Drawn as marginalia, full sheet sketches, and small doodles, comically distorted representations of both men and women make up this small canon, some more exaggerated than others. This thesis examines the relationships between the drawings, Florentine literary satire, and medical discourses in an effort to establish a productive lens for contextualizing these images. A literature review examines the current scholarship on the drawings and what needs to be further addressed. The similarities between the anti-academic, satirical poetry and literature of the Florentine Renaissance and the tropes seen in the Grotesque drawings comprise chapter two. An overview of relevant medical discourses, in particular those treating depictions of old age and the elderly is presented in chapter three.
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INTRODUCTION

Leonardo produced “grotesque” drawings in his notebooks, as finished works, and as marginalia in unrelated documents. These images take their roots in the observation of real people, the manipulation of ideal symmetry, and the medical and literary culture of the Florentine Renaissance. Given the fame and cult of genius that has surrounded Leonardo since his own lifetime, his thought processes and artistic practice have been deeply scrutinized. However, the grotesque drawings remain puzzling, due to the lack of anchoring evidence within Leonardo’s own writings that could contextualize them. While they can be understood as artistic and rhetorical exercises juxtaposing ideal beauty and ugliness, it is proposed here that the Florentine tradition of facetiae, or vernacular satirical anecdotes, jokes, and literary humor were inspirational for Leonardo’s designs of these burlesque heads and figures. In addition, contemporary medical and cultural Renaissance discourses on the body help contextualize the sketches and their depiction of non-normative faces and figures.

The Grotesque sketches are mainly rendered in pen and ink, silverpoint and red chalk on white paper; most were executed while Leonardo was court artist to Ludovico Sforza in Milan, from 1482 to 1499. Leonardo seemed to have drawn and written with whatever writing utensil was at hand, and on varying sizes of both treated and untreated paper\(^1\). Regarding where and when Leonardo’s various works of painting, writing and drawing were disseminated after his death, Martin Kemp writes, “they immediately were dispersed across Europe and amongst his students;”\(^2\) more than four fifths disappeared. Yet scholars such as Clark and Pedretti painstakingly reconstructed his notebooks and various collections, such as in Chatsworth and the Royal collection at Windsor, amassed the bulk of these works; they house most of the

\(^{1}\) Charles Rogers, in *A Century of Prints from Drawings*, printed in 1778, as cited in Clark and Pedretti’s

Grotesques. Other pieces of the total works of his notebooks are in the British Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France in Paris, the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, and the Biblioteca Reale in Turin. Twenty-five Grotesque drawings are in the collection of the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth House, Devonshire, England. Unfortunately, after Leonardo’s death, his student and heir, Melzi, took most of the Grotesque heads and cut them out of their original pieces of notebook paper in an apparent effort to form a cohesive collection. It would be invaluable to have the rest of the original sheets, with Leonardo’s jottings and thoughts at the time he quickly sketched the Grotesques, but except for a certain few, these are not extant.

Chapter one examines current scholarship on the question of relevant contexts for the Grotesques. This literature review compiles different, frequently competing, research findings and seeks to reconcile them. Theories regarding the relevance of physiognomy, humor, medicine, history, and Leonardo biography are reviewed and critiqued.

The second chapter addresses the possible influence of satirical literature and poetry on the production of the Grotesque sketches. The striking visual differences between the sketches and the idealized types venerated by popular authors such as Dante and Petrarch suggest that Leonardo’s depictions of non-normative faces and bodies may have roots in the vernacular literary culture of Burchiello, Castiglione, and Poggio. In this chapter, the visual history of

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6 Henceforth I will be referring to the drawings as the Grotesques.
humor is examined, as well as the Grotesque drawings themselves in comparison to the cultural markers of Renaissance humor.

Within the Grotesques, there are depictions of men and women of varying ages and statuses, which raises the question of how central Italian culture viewed non-normative, elderly people. The third chapter of this thesis will explore these issues, as well as the possible impact of the medical community on Leonardo’s conception of the Grotesques. Many of the Grotesques are juxtapositions of old and young bodies and faces, and the themes of aging and the elderly were relevant cultural topics in the period. It is valuable to consider discourses on aging from the perspective of a people constantly bombarded with disease, malnutrition, and who typically had a shorter life span.

The Grotesques hold a singular position in the oeuvre of a man recognized as a creator of ideal beauty in ink and paint. Scholars have differing views on these small, usually quickly drawn faces, heads and pendant figures. Some believe that they are idle doodles, while others think that they are a choice made to mentally and visually counteract the ideally beautiful sketches that Leonardo practiced in his effort to discover perfect proportion in faces and heads.7 Patricia Trutty-Coohill and Michael Kwakkelstein, for instance, have written about the potential rationale for the production of the Grotesques, with Trutty-Coohill focusing especially on the idea of Leonardo’s manipulation of symmetry to comic effect.8 While only a few of the images

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8 I owe an immense debt to the scholarship of Michael Kwakkelstein, who masterfully assessed scholarship on the Grotesque’s, including nods to comic literature and the influence of Galen. His book on Leonardo and physiognomy truly shaped my project.

may be considered planned, complex compositions, each head or figure does have elements in its visage that counteracts ideal proportion. Some are more non-normative and disfigured than others, and both men and women feature in this collection, though it is often difficult to distinguish the sexes apart solely based on facial features alone. There is no evidence that proves whether the Grotesques were meant for public or private viewership. The sketch-like doodles in some of his notebook marginalia suggest that they were only meant for Leonardo himself, while the finished quality of others, such as Study of Five Grotesque Heads, give the impression that they may have been shown at the Sforza court (Fig. 1).10

The Grotesques have very exaggerated features, suggesting imbecility, impoverished status, and general strangeness. This may be due to Leonardo using his knowledge of perfect symmetry and proportions to take some aspects of a face, such as the chin, nose or ratio of nose to upper lip, and distort them to their extreme. Instead of representing ideal beauty, he engendered infinite variations of distortion and ugliness by manipulating these ratios. Most are done to comic effect, and some take a serious, if not ideal face, and mirror it with another of lowly, indigent status. Patricia Trutty-Coohill writes, “Those who have studied the Grotesques find that in all their variety, there is repetitiveness about and among them. Some element is similar, some rhythm evoked, something imperceptible connects them.”11 The connection may be that Leonardo envisioned each to be the opposite of something more beautiful and perfect, and that they in fact are connected in their association with the ugly. The investigation of links

10 Kwakkelstein. Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice.

between comic literature, medical theory and culture and the Grotesque drawings will potentially help to solidify this connection.
CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Grotesques have proved difficult to contextualize. Several scholars, such as Martin Kemp and Kenneth Clark, have published monographs that point to questions surrounding the production of the drawings. Barolsky and Clayton include them in their work on comic Renaissance art and the comparison between Leonardo’s ideally beautiful and more grotesque drawings, respectively. Patricia Trutty-Coohill and Michael Kwakkelstein have written articles that deal with the Study of Five Grotesque Heads and that drawing’s place in the Grotesques with regard to artistic influences and physiognomy (Fig. 1). Katharine Park has written an informative book on the Florentine medical communities during the Renaissance, which details the history of the guilds of the doctors, apothecaries, and physicians with whom Leonardo would have come into regular contact in Florence.12 One can presume that his life in Milan would have involved similar contacts, although he was living at the Sforza court. As stated above, this project compiles and expands upon the existing scholarship on possible contexts for the production of the Grotesques.

Terminology

The term “grotesque” became part of European terminology after late fifteenth century excavations of Roman grottos uncovered murals from the first century after the advent of Christianity.13 In these cave murals, “human and animal figures are intertwined with foliage in ways that violated not only the laws of statics and gravity but common sense and plain

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observation as well.”  

From the Italian word for cave, *grotta*, grotesque came to mean more broadly the strange, the ugly, the distorted, the inversion of normalcy of reality, and the images and ideas that go along with these tropes and themes. Often the viewer is met with puzzlement or confusion upon seeing a grotesque form. In the Renaissance, *grottesco* referred to both the whimsical and fantastical, with a darker edge of “something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one.”  

As the cave excavations were completed in the late fifteenth century, Leonardo likely would have known the terminology behind the word “grotesque,” but the application of the term to his subset of sketches was posthumous. Geoffrey Harpham states that in order for an image or object to be classified as grotesque, it must inspire three reactions within a viewer – “laughter and astonishment are two; either disgust or horror is the third.”  

These are certainly the most typical reaction that a period or modern viewer has when viewing Leonardo’s Grotesques, and substantiates their subsequent nomenclature.

*General Overviews*

In his biography of Leonardo, Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists* (first edition published in 1550) highlighted his biography, artistic practices, and distinctive temperament. Vasari, who had credible sources, describes him as generally well loved, and perpetuates the idea of Leonardo as an artistic genius. Of most direct relevance to this study, he elaborates on Leonardo’s *aide memoire* for remembering faces, and hints at the existence of drawings that

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have been identified as the Grotesques; Vasari also has several anecdotes that show Leonardo’s fun-loving and witty personality, and his propensity for practical jokes.\textsuperscript{17}

Martin Kemp, a prominent Leonardo scholar, begins his 1981 monograph \textit{Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvelous Works of Nature and Man} by stating that it “intended to be a book about Leonardo as a whole” and endeavors to determine the contexts for the production of Leonardo’s artistic and scientific works.\textsuperscript{18} Kemp recognizes that the scholarship on Leonardo is vast and of varying degrees of verity and usefulness, and that “unified visions” of Leonardo are rare. With only a few pages on Leonardo’s early life, Kemp focuses on the influences of Alberti and Masaccio’s works, and his training with Verrocchio. He describes his love of depicting the differences in subject’s heads and faces, especially in older people, and goes on to relate Leonardo’s interest in physiognomy and measurement of figures, a precursor to his facial measurement systems. Kemp goes on to describe the circumstances under which Leonardo became the court artist for Ludovico Sforza’s court in Milan. This is important for this study, since it was in Milan that Leonardo likely executed most of his Grotesque drawings, yet Kemp details primarily the war machines Leonardo engineered for Sforza, and does not expand on his life at court. There is, however, a useful description of Milan’s contrast with Florence, and a suggestive nod to Renaissance contemporary literature, both Milanese and Florentine. Also relevant is the fact that Leonardo mainly developed his knowledge base through empirical experimentation and observations that were Aristotelian in nature, as Kemp states.

Kemp’s chapter entitled “Fantasia” begins by describing the Leonardo’s contribution to the cultural fantasy of the Sforza court, in plays, literature and astrology. He describes


\textsuperscript{18} Kemp states this in his preface.
Leonardo’s interest in *facetiae*, which he believes informed the Grotesques. Kemp writes that Leonardo owned a copy of Poggio’s jokes, and touches on Leonardo’s interest in the more elevated aspects of physiognomy. He describes the Grotesques as “exuding a profound feeling for in inner causes of external events,”¹⁹ and by stating that fantasia covers “the whole gamut of inventions, from inconsequential jests to great, if sometimes obscure significations,”²⁰ Kemp acknowledges Leonardo’s sense of humor and play. However, limited by the monograph format, he doesn’t delve more deeply into questions surrounding the production of the Grotesques.

Kemp’s slightly more informal and significantly shorter monograph entitled *Leonardo*, written in 2004, describes Leonardo’s general principles as stating, “all the apparent diversities of nature are symptoms of an inner unity, a unity dependent on something like a unified field theory that reaches out to explain the functioning of everything in the world.”²¹ Kemp’s first chapter deals with Leonardo’s commissions, his life as a painter in various courts and countries, and his general temperament. On the subject of philosophy and religion, Kemp expresses the same viewpoint as in his previous monograph, writing that Leonardo viewed most philosophy as “pseudo-knowledge,”²² and that “he accepted a supreme, ineffable power behind the design of nature, identifiable as God, but he was convinced that concrete knowledge could not reveal the nature of divinity itself.”²³ Regarding beauty and proportion, Kemp writes that Leonardo valued symmetry and proportion highly, and attempted to define perfect proportions of various different

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body parts and poses. Again, it is reasonable to speculate that the Grotesques are a mere lighthearted step away from the perfect heads and bodies that Leonardo also continuously drew. Kemp states that, with respect to human anatomy, Leonardo believed that form followed function, and believed as well in an Aristotelian and Galenic theory of the four humors, which he called the four universal conditions of man. Kemp uses this smaller monograph to construct a different, more personal view of Leonardo. Many scholars, including Kemp in his previous works, tend to focus only on Leonardo’s artistic production and eccentricities, and don’t offer such a well-rounded view of the artist.

Kenneth Clark’s 1988 monograph entitled *Leonardo da Vinci* purports to use cultural history to “penetrate the soul of a period in all its rational and irrational complexities.” Social history was crucial to his scholarship on Leonardo. He also viewed Freudian psychology as tentatively useful to Leonardo studies, but often found it too generalizing. Clark writes that his book is firstly concerned with “the development of Leonardo as an artist.” Taking Leonardo’s writings and personality into consideration to a greater degree than Kemp, he reviews Leonardo’s oeuvre chronologically. Sleuthing through drawings and correspondence on extant works, he tries to determine the contexts for their production. In the chapter devoted to the investigation of Leonardo’s notebooks, he notes the designs and poems that were created for the Milanese court masquerades (as did Kemp). This leads to a short discussion of fables, of which Leonardo both wrote original versions and commented upon classical precedents. Finally coming to the Grotesques, Clark describes the current climate’s view of them as “disgusting, or at best

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Somewhat inaccurately, Clark refers to the Grotesques as caricatures, and seems loath to discuss them at all, but concedes that they are “essential to his (Leonardo’s) genius, concentrating many elements of his spirit.” Continuing the assumption that Leonardo used a method of empirical observation to record faces, Clark sees the Grotesques as a realistic dichotomy between ideal and realistic, which transfers ultimately to the heroic. However, Clark devotes just three pages of his monograph to the Grotesques. No mention is made of production methods, just that Leonardo may have used a table to record faces, as described in Vasari.

**Humor**

Even in his frontispiece, Paul Barolsky, in *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* states that his 1978 book is the first of its kind. Through various time periods and areas within the Renaissance in Italy, he searches out humor in art and literature. He states that, while the history of scholarship surrounding comic literature is extensive, there is much less written on humor in art. He describes the book as an exploration of some of the witty and humorous trends in Italian Renaissance art and their relationship to the literature of the period. He reviews the different ways that play, jest and humor were part of life in an effort to counteract the more serious bend that much subsequent history has taken. Barolsky defines the terms of wit and humor as he uses them, but warns the reader that there is a certain difficulty in coming

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up with an over arching, universal definition. Cultures shift and change over time, and one period’s ideas of jest can be very different from another’s.

One important definition of humor derived from Galen’s theory of four bodily humors, stemming from the belief that the “comic vices of fools came out” when they became unbalanced. A more appropriate term was *ridicolosa* or *burlesque*, from the Latin world *burla*, or joke. There are also distinctions between satire, parody, and caricature, as well as the term “playfulness.” Barolsky distinguishes between wit and humor by writing, “Wit is more cerebral than humor, and is usually not funny. It reveals ingenuity and is based on incongruity, ambiguity, and unexpected effects.” Laughter at cruel or unpleasant topics and appearances was common in the Renaissance, and Barolsky believes that the deformed creatures in the Grotesques were intended to provoke laughter in the period viewer. Barolsky also mentions Leonardo’s joke-loving nature, as well as that of his contemporaries. He combines Leonardo’s taste for the grotesque with his sense of humor, which suggests that the grotesque and non-normative forms were comingled with humor at the time. The comic eating clubs of Renaissance Florence are also mentioned, such as the Company of the Cauldron and the Company of the Trowel, who indulged in “gastroaesthetics,” and composed, read, and acted out comedic plays and stories.

Patricia Trutty-Coohill, in a 1988 essay entitled “Bracketing Theory in Leonardo’s Five Grotesque Heads,” explores the production and the comedic nature of the Grotesques, focusing on *A Study of Five Grotesque Heads*, ca 1495. She states that the Grotesques are a grouping of

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types that comprise the antithesis to the idealized paintings and drawings that Leonardo also produced. She delves into the description of Leonardo’s system of remembering faces, and connects this to the Grotesques. Instead of merely brushing over the history of the face charts, she ascribes manipulation of the quadrants of the chart’s proportions to the finished Grotesques. Leonardo may have originally had a subset of drawings that consisted of laughing peasants, although few have survived, and the majority of his drawings are in varying states of preservation. Trutty-Coohill writes that Lillian Schwartz has used a computer technique to prove that the Grotesques share a similarly underlying structure, and that Leonardo may have simply manipulated the proportions of faces to create distortions to a comic effect. They both postulate that some Grotesques were drawn from observation and others were imagined.

Trutty-Coohill relates the findings and positions of scholars such as Clark, Pedretti, and Gombrich, who typically focus upon the oak-leaf crowned central figure of the Study of Five Grotesque Heads. She cites the scholarship of Gloria Vallese on the possible connection to the Galenic theory of the four bodily humors. Vallese had described the drawing as a “form of ‘auto-analysis’ in which Leonardo depicts melancholy and its four stages.”38 Regarding the drawing’s verso, which warns against trusting men, Trutty-Coohill rejects reading it as a connecting statement on the narration of the drawing, or as a stand-alone statement.39 Indeed, it is impossible to know whether or not Leonardo meant them to connect, so an attempt to join them would be scholarly conjecture, as Gombrich also points out. Trutty-Coohill notes that the Study of Five Grotesque Heads has been cut down from its original format, which had more content on the


right side. Therefore, it is possible that the figures within the extant piece are bystanders to action that is occurring to the right side, as the central character and the right-most woman seem to be orienting toward that point. While this is possible, it again is conjecture; Kemp counters with the assertion “the symmetrically curved distribution reinforces the sense that their group is distinct.”

Trutty-Coohill generally accepts this point, but also believes that the figures could be a “subgroup within a larger whole.” She views them as being part of a larger narrative, and not as simply illustrating madness or the physical effect of an excess of bodily humors.

In a section entitled “Leonardo’s Intent,” Trutty-Coohill attempts to deconstruct the evidence regarding this difficult question. Gombrich states that Leonardo “had a taste for robust satire.” An anecdote by Cinquecento art theoretician Gian Paolo Lomazzo suggests that Study of Five Grotesque Heads may be the result of a party that Leonardo hosted for a group of Milanese peasants, whom he observed for laughter and mannerisms. It is worth mentioning, as Trutty-Coohill states in her footnotes, that the first time that the Grotesques were interpreted in a physiognomic sense was in 1699, by Robert de Piles – nearly 200 years after their completions. Despite this historical distance, many scholars now view them as moralizing, following the period idea that physical beauty begat a beautiful soul, and deformity or a non-normative appearance mirrored a wicked personality. Given the dichotomy between the ideal and the non-ideal in Leonardo’s work, it is possible that the Grotesques functioned as commentary upon these ideas. Trutty-Coohill concludes her essay by stating that she views the Grotesques as a build-up

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of comic relief – each image funnier than the last, leading the laughter of the viewer to “grow and intensify to point where the reader could die laughing.”

Physiognomy and Non-Normative Bodies

Martin Clayton’s *Leonardo – The Divine and The Grotesque*, is an exhibition catalog that accompanied a 2002-2003 exhibition in Edinburgh and Buckingham Palace. The Royal Collection at Windsor contains the majority of the Grotesques, and the largest grouping of Leonardo’s drawings. In his introduction to the catalog, Clayton points out the contemporary view that physical beauty and ugliness reflected a person’s moral character and temperament. He synthesizes this sentiment by writing that “Beauty was therefore universally equated with harmony… a harmonious arrangement of the parts of the face, a body or a composition, conversely ugliness was the disharmony or inappropriateness of these parts.” Clayton recognizes that there is a general consensus among scholars that the Grotesques convey the relationship between appearances and personality, but he believes that they are too heterogeneous to subscribe to one simple, neat explanation, and that many of the current positions on the drawings can be traced back to mid 16th-century sentiments. Many of the copies and drawings associated with Leonardo are by his followers, a half or full generation after his death in 1519. There was more of a focus at that time on his heads, treatises, and only a few paintings. Given their humorous appearance, Clayton notes the Grotesques attracted more attention than some of his more scientifically accurate works on the body.

Clayton separates his book into chapters that deal with subsets of Leonardo’s drawings, with two pertaining to the ideal and the grotesque respectively. Within the chapter on the


Grotesques, Clayton reviews the scholarly and cultural positions regarding non-normative appearances, and the heads and figures. Clayton writes that they were “clearly meant to entertain, and the degree of elaboration of some of the drawings suggests that they were meant for an audience” and that “those works that might have ostensibly been made for viewers are sophisticated, rather than crude.” He does not believe the Grotesques are physiognomic studies, manipulations of reality, or studies on pathological deformity. Clayton concludes that there is no conclusive agenda or program for the production of the Grotesques. He rejects the scholarship of Trutty-Coohill and others who see the Grotesques as more than imaginative and supports this view with a strong point: “Each sheet must be taken on its own terms rather than forced into some overarching scheme.” It is true there isn’t enough evidence to pigeonhole the Grotesques, but it could nonetheless be added there is arguably sufficient historical material to assist in broadly contextualizing them.

Regarding Study of Five Grotesque Heads, Clayton rests firmly in the camp of scholars who believe that it is part of a narrative. He sees it as four gypsies tricking the older, more dignified central figure. This correlates to the distrust surrounding gypsies in Milan while Leonardo was living there, which led to their expulsion from the city in 1493. Open mouth laughter, as seen in the second figure, frequently contained connotations of “peasants, harlots, drunkards, the dishonest, and fools in general.” According to Clayton, the figure on the right, which he identifies as a woman, is distracting the central figure while another woman to the left picks his pocket. This drawing was copied after Leonardo’s death and widely disseminated in the

Low Countries. None of the copies show any further composition towards the right, which leads Clayton to believe that the trimming must have occurred earlier. Clayton also makes connections between the compositions of *Study of Five Grotesque Heads* and later works in Flanders and by Giorgione.

Michael Kwakkelstein’s 1991 essay entitled “Leonardo da Vinci’s Grotesque Heads and the Breaking of the Physiognomic Mold,” studies the concept of physiognomy and its relevance to the depictions of figures in the compilation of the Grotesques, and predates his 1994 book that expands upon the subject - *Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice*. Leonardo thought facial lines, folds, crow’s feet, and other wrinkles that were physical signifiers of emotion were “expressive of character.” Kwakkelstein endeavors to show that the Grotesques pertain more to physiognomic expressions than a moral stance toward their subjects. Within the field of physiognomy, there existed “no biological explanation for given psychological and physiological characteristics.” Kwakkelstein believes that Leonardo subscribed to the theory of the complexions, which effectively meant the Galenic theory of four humors. Leonardo wanted to draw the humors as they related to physical appearances, thereby humanizing them and giving them a physical form. It seems that Leonardo accepted physiognomy not as a science, but as a way to represent distinct temperaments. Referring back to

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51 Perhaps Melzi, the heir to Leonardo’s notebooks, trimmed it down when he cut apart the folios to consolidate different themes.


his title, Kwakkelstein writes that we can find Leonardo “repeatedly emphasizing the importance of variety in figure painting in order to break the physiognomic mold of stereotypes.”

Kwakkelstein also explores the question of Leonardo’s descriptions of the process and science behind his own drawings. They do seem to depict temperaments and moral qualities, but since Leonardo evidently didn’t subscribe to the more common themes behind the science of physiognomy, such as the more technical aspects of cranial measurements, the question arises of genre and audience. Kwakkelstein believes that the verso of Study of Five Grotesque Heads does relate to the drawing, unlike Trutty-Coohill and Gombrich. According to this view, Leonardo used his plan for the personalities shown within the characters in an artwork as direction for devising a model that displayed these real life characteristics. The frequent pairings of physical types that Leonardo drew, such as the heroic older man juxtaposed with a younger man could have been intended as “didactic illustrations of physiognomic types,” according to Kwakkelstein. He posits that the drawings were intended to be illustrations in a never-completed book on physiognomy by Leonardo, and that Study of Five Grotesque Heads could have served as a potential frontispiece. Scholar Eugene Müntz agrees, writing, “Quite wrongly, we gave the

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56 “And if any man though he may have wisdom or goodness…from other people…and worse if they are removed from him. O blessed and happy spirit, whence comest thou? Well I have known this man, much against my will. This one is a receptacle of villainy; he is a perfect heap of the utmost ingratitude combined with every vice. But of what use is it to fatigue myself with vain words? Nothing is to be found in him but every form of sin…And if there should be found among them any that possess any good, they will not be treated different from myself by other men; and in fine, I come to the conclusion that it is bad if they are hostile, and worse if they are friendly.” Cited from Jean Paul Richter, The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci, (London: Phaidon Press, 1970), 340


58 This will be further addressed in Chapter 3.
word ‘caricature’ to these studies. They are gigantic fragments of a treatise on physiognomy.”

Leonardo seems to have been creating drawings that display physiognomic traits, but in a way that added to his aesthetic vision for an artwork, and that aided his pursuit of mimesis.

In the introduction for her 2012 article entitled “Grotesque Bodies, Princely Delight: Dwarfs in Italian Renaissance Court Imagery,” Robin O’Bryan details her focus on the visual representations of non-normative bodies, namely those with dwarfism, and their reception in social history and culture. O’Bryan describes Giulio Romano’s Sala di Constantino fresco containing a dwarf as showing “the grotesque mixed with the beautiful,” as quoted by a nineteenth century viewer. The courts of Renaissance Italy, including those of Milan, Florence and Urbino had dwarves who acted as entertainers and clowns. Sometimes they were cherished members of the courts, who were mourned greatly when they died, but often, as was the case in the Sforza Court, they were treated with a noted lack of empathy. Isabella d’Este sent a dwarf to her daughter-in-law as a present, stating, “I have not found another with such wonderful deformity in the relation of her parts that would bring me as much satisfaction.” O’Bryan believes that artists exaggerated the dwarves’ physical attributes to comic and shocking effect, by showing them juxtaposed with normative physiques in the same compositions. Those surrounding the community of dwarves regarded them as “simultaneously repellant and yet attractive, and alternately as benign, potent, comical, and increasingly monstrous.” However,


contrary to the common and ancient beliefs in the virtues of corporeal beauty, in some courts, dwarves’ differences were seen as delightful.

Moving toward ideas of humor, O’Bryan cites precedents in connecting the grotesque and laughter in Cicero, Quintilian, and Castiglione. The culturally inherent sense of seeing the non-normative body as both shocking and amusing carried into art and is especially evident in Leonardo’s Grotesques. As Trutty-Coohill points out, they indeed may have been created with laughter in mind.

Art and Literature

In his essay on the nature of divinity, entitled “Fare una Cosa Morta Parer Viva: Michelangelo, Rosso, and the (Un) Divinity of Art,” Stephen J. Campbell only touches on certain aspects of Leonardo’s work, such as the ability to make a sacred figure appear to be divinely created. However, the essay is relevant here because it relates the ironic and satirical poetry of Francesco Berni and Michelangelo to art, particularly the works of Rosso Fiorentino. The issue of the artist’s “divine” persona taking on the characteristics of his “divine” work is explored; this can be related to Leonardo’s depictions of ideal figures that juxtapose dialectically with the Grotesques.63

Sanne Wellen’s 2003 PhD dissertation from the Johns Hopkins University, entitled “Andrea del Sarto ‘Pittore Senza Errori’- Between Biography, Florentine Society, and Literature,” offers invaluable scholarship regarding the positioning of an artist within his contemporary society and culture, with a specific focus on the influence of satirical literature. While her artistic subject is Andrea del Sarto and not Leonardo, her discussion of the various compagnie, or jovial social clubs within Florence shows a side of Florentine culture with which

Leonardo was surely familiar. The Compagnia del Paiuolo, or "Cauldron Club," and many of the other compagnie ceased to exist after the Republic of Florence became a duchy in 1530, but were active and prospering during Leonardo’s lifetime.\footnote{Sanne Wellen, "Andrea del Sarto "pittore senza errori": Between Biography, Florentine Society, and Literature." (Ph.D dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2003), 94.} Wellen describes the fantastical feasts that the clubs hosted, with each member trying to outdo the others in designs of gastronomic architecture that served as centerpieces at the dinners. Past and contemporary satirical and burlesque poems inspired much of the content of the parties, and in some groups, short plays were written and performed by members. Wellen writes that the groups gave a “perspective of the Florentine popular culture and recalcitrant, anti-pedantic movement of frivolousness and bizzarrie.”\footnote{Wellen, "Andrea del Sarto "pittore senza errori": Between Biography, Florentine Society, and Literature." 116.} Given the nonsensical, bizarre forms of many of the Grotesques, the literary culture that informed these clubs and groups could easily have been a source of inspiration for the drawings, as they made up a portion of comic relief in fifteenth and sixteenth century Florence.

\textit{Medical Discourses}

Katharine Park, a noted scholar of the history of science in the Renaissance, in her 1985 book entitled \textit{Doctors and Medicine in Early Renaissance Florence}, provides much valuable information regarding medical guilds in Florence. The guild of doctors, grocers, and apothecaries made up a good percentage of the persons with whom Leonardo would come into contact, given his interest in anatomy, physiology and his need to buy pigments, which were sold in apothecary shops. As Park explains, the candidates for the guild could choose between graduating from university with a medical degree, or taking the guild’s rigorous entrance examination.\footnote{Park, \textit{Doctors and Medicine in Early Renaissance Florence}, 22.} While there is no direct mention of artists or Leonardo within Park’s book, it is most useful in its
background on the common thoughts and practices surrounding medicine in the Florentine Renaissance. Medical issues were a part of everyday life in the uncertain time before modern medicine, and Park writes that there were fewer religious or social taboos regarding the body than one might think, and that the “city’s view on medicine was matter-of-fact.”

When dealing with the scholarship on Leonardo and the Grotesques, it is important to keep in mind the overarching question of production, context, and possible points of inspiration for their figural anomalies. This thesis endeavors to present, analyze, and synthesize the existing scholarship—with a particular focus on the impact of Florentine satirical literary and medical discourses on Leonardo’s conception of the Grotesques.

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67 Park, Doctors and Medicine in Early Renaissance Florence, 51.
CHAPTER 2

WIT, HUMOR, SATIRE, AND LEONARDO’S GROTESQUES

While the Grotesques may have roots in a dialectical juxtaposition of ideal beauty and ugliness, the Florentine tradition of *facetiae* (vernacular satirical anecdotes), jokes and literary humor could equally have inspired Leonardo when sketching these heads and figures. Biographers like Giorgio Vasari observe that many artists during the Florentine Renaissance had a strong sense of wit, satire and irony, manifest in both their art and everyday social lives. In bringing together the aesthetic exercise and humor, we might understand the juxtaposition of idealized and non-normative features and bodies in the Grotesques as mirroring the interrelated traditions of Latin and vernacular poetry in the Florentine Renaissance, and the differences between Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan styles in the works of Poggio, Burchiello and their counterparts.

While Leonardo evidently did not align himself with any one academic school of thought, he was certainly always invested in learning and intellectual endeavors, and, given his poor ability to read Latin, likely gravitated towards writings in vernacular Italian. He was clearly interested in the creation of images of ideal beauty, which represented a tenet of Dante and Petrarch, whose respective loves, Laura and Beatrice, were considered the emblematic female ideals. Given the non-idealized aspects of the Grotesques, where faces and bodies are contorted, and at times, unabashedly ugly, Leonardo’s drawings form a visual antithesis to the more classically beautiful figures in his work. Examining the scholarship on humorous authors and the Renaissance culture of satire, this chapter posits that the Grotesques as a group visualize tropes of humor, in contrast to the more idealized figures in Leonardo’s work. His own writings show an expert grasp of wit, sarcasm and a devilish sense of humor. The question of audience

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must also be addressed, as there is no evidence to prove whether the Grotesques were meant for public or private viewership.

Kemp states that Leonardo could “convey the visual fruits of imaginative invention more effectively than any poet”\textsuperscript{69} and that Leonardo wrote his own version of fables, satires and “humorous anecdotes, often of a ribald nature.”\textsuperscript{70} It is well known that Leonardo was a practical joker who often used his quick wit and imagination to trick and fool his friends. Following Vasari, Paul Barolsky writes that he “indulged in various pazzie (practical jokes), fastened scales to a lizard, dipped it in quicksilver so that it trembled when it moved, added eyes, a horn and a beard, and after taming it, showed it to his friends to terrify them.”\textsuperscript{71} Ernst Gombrich states that “inventors of portrait caricature were academic artists of high standing who developed the mock portrait to tease their friends,” and this certainly describes Leonardo.\textsuperscript{72} His notebooks contain more than a few examples of word play, the recording and the composing of jokes, and the visual analogue of literary laughter – his grotesque heads and caricatures.

There were several societies devoted to upholding traditions of satire and jest in Renaissance Florence. As noted above, The Compagnia del Paiuolo and Cazzuolo were groups that engaged in raucous dinner parties and played practical jokes upon one another that were based in sarcasm, satire and wit.\textsuperscript{73} Poggio Bracciolini wrote about his small club, the Bugalie, as

\textsuperscript{69} Kemp. Leonardo, 149.

\textsuperscript{70} Kemp. Leonardo 167.

\textsuperscript{71} Barolsky, Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art, 13.


\textsuperscript{73} Wellen, "Andrea del Sarto "pittore senza errori": Between Biography, Florentine Society, and Literature." 185.
“a kind of lie-factory, founded…to give us a laugh.” 74 Sanne Wellen describes Vasari’s disapproval of these clubs, as they led to improperly bawdy behavior. 75 The term “humor” did not hold our modern connotations in the Renaissance time period; instead, it referred to the four physical humors of blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy. When the four humors were out of balance, a man was thought to be mentally or bodily compromised, and this may have been the basis for the “comic vices of fools.” 76 Within Quattrocento society, laughter and humor were highly valued. Often, puns and witticisms from time periods so far in the past lose the humor attached to them as vernacular language changes over the generations. However, their contemporary relevance and interdisciplinary influences are important when examining humorous works within art and literature in an effort to contextualize the Grotesques.

Satirical literature has been understood in part as a mental respite from the hardships of the Quattrocento. 77 The vernacular, satirical poetry and literature that fall into the so-called alla burchia style shares many similarities with the anti-idealized aspects of the Grotesque drawings. In his article entitled “An Unknown Episode of Burchiello’s Reception in the Early Cinquecento,” Michelangelo Zaccarello describes the alla burchia style as containing “recognizable patterns such as hyperbolic or grotesque, especially misogynistic descriptions” that often “turned upside down the usual logical and or narrative structures and development of a


75 Wellen, "Andrea del Sarto "pittore senza errori": Between Biography, Florentine Society, and Literature." 96.

76 Barolsky, Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art, 6.

Burchiello is considered the comic king of anti-academic poetry, which was often seen as an undecipherable mix of words that had no discernable theme. These poems relied upon a specific readership who were familiar with the alla burchia style, and who had a common understanding of the parodic elements that targeted political, ecclesiastical, and mythological figures as well as academicians. All of these elements of anti-academic themes have mirroring aspects that are visible within the Grotesques, which can be seen as serving as the visual counterparts to such anti-establishment poetry. Leonardo lacked a formal humanist education and there is some evidence of anti-academic thought, but he remained interested in writings on various topics by both ancient and medieval authors.

Michael Kwakkelstein writes Leonardo had a particular affinity for the writings of the Roman orator Quintilian, who asserted that emotive effect was more impacted by the delivery of the subject than the content. Both Quintilian and Cicero called for the understanding of emotional restraint and decorum as the primary expression of a person’s moral virtue. This point correlates to Leonardo’s assertion that a figure’s “attitude and animated gestures and movement are more important than its beauty or excellence.” The idea of a person’s outward appearance reflecting their inner character was based on the teachings of Plato, which resulted in


81 Kwakkelstein. Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice, 81

82 Kwakkelstein. Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice, 21

83 Kwakkelstein. Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice, 81

84 Kwakkelstein. Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice, 29
the belief that a beautiful or ugly countenance could produce a positive or negative reaction, respectively, in a viewer. This was especially important in the choosing of facial types in religious art, as holy figures needed to inspire goodness and devotion within their viewers.\textsuperscript{85} Any negative deviation from socially accepted physical norms was seen as the reflection of an excessive nature within one’s soul.\textsuperscript{86} The revival of the Classical authors and literature during the Renaissance led to the elevated intellectual status of physiognomy, which Kwakkelstein states was theorized in relation to art from 1500.\textsuperscript{87}

There is also evidence of Leonardo’s strong alignment with some of the tenets of Alberti’s \textit{De Pictura}, which instructed the painter to conform to “decency, modesty, dignity and above all, beauty,” and the proper ways to depict extreme emotions such as sorrow, anger and happiness.\textsuperscript{88} Alberti always maintained that taking cues from nature was the best course for an artist attempting to represent the range of physical reactions to emotions. Despite these affinities, Leonardo seems to deviated from Alberti’s book with respect to the Grotesques. Writing about the \textit{paragone} between painting and poetry, Leonardo wrote that visual examples of the effects of emotion spoke more to the viewer than the literary equivalent, in his argument for painting’s supremacy.\textsuperscript{89} Lomazzo writes that Leonardo thought the most nuanced emotional effect of painting was the capacity to induce laughter, though Kwakkelstein points out that the Grotesques actually show a quite limited range of emotion, mainly tending towards buffoonish and

\textsuperscript{85} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 42.
\textsuperscript{86} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 44.
\textsuperscript{87} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 51.
\textsuperscript{88} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 62.
\textsuperscript{89} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 26.
indecorous mirth. Kwakkelstein also writes that the Grotesque drawings are typically regarded as idle doodles, not the results of an in-depth investigative study into bodies by Leonardo. However, prior to the inclusion of psychology into Leonardo scholarship, it was assumed that the figures in the sketches had been the subjects of Leonardo’s physiognomic investigations. Ernst Gombrich, although citing the perceptible underlying uniformities of the drawings, concluded that they should be studied psychologically, not with a physiognomic approach. Kwakkelstein argued that, while the Grotesques do show Leonardo’s personal interest in the depiction of expressive, non-normative figures and features, some of them show an orderly attempt to “establish the physical expression of emotions and character as a constituent part of the painter’s disegno.” While the study of ugly or exceptionally expressive physiques was more common in the Netherlands, there are a few Italian examples that pre-date Leonardo’s interest in this subject.

As the dating of the Grotesques suggests, Leonardo was living in the Sforza court in Milan during the time period that they were produced, from about 1482 onward. Leonardo had struggled in Florence, and likely relished the chance to go to Milan, where he was both appreciated and perhaps a better fit within their court. Clark states that according to Vasari, “He was sent by Lorenzo the Magnificent to present the Duke Ludivico il Moro with a silver lyre

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in the form of a horse’s head, on which he was an exquisite performer.” 96 By all accounts, he had a happy time at the Sforza court, and as Lorenzo made no effort to recall him to Florence, he stayed there in the capacity of court artist for two decades. 97 As the Grotesques are confined to the time period of his residence in Milan, they may have been, as Clark suggests, “a response to some craze or fashion, similar to that for riddles and trials of wit which also occupied him at that time.” 98

While it seems that Leonardo had no strong personal or political allegiance to Florence, he would have certainly been aware of the Florentine literary and poetic styles that were based in tradition and those that were contemporary to the time period. He was in Milan for twenty years, and his return trips to Florence were infrequent, but as a Florentine in the Quattrocento, one’s city tended to remain as a point of identity and person. Clayton states “it does not appear that Leonardo had any special interest in humorous art or the grotesque during his early years in Florence,” 99 but the literary and cultural traditions of his hometown may have continued to influence him as he endeavored to entertain the court. Leonardo would certainly have had access to the satirical writings of Boccaccio and Burchiello even while in Milan, and there is evidence that he owned a copy of Facetiae by Poggio. 100 Furthermore, anti-Petrarchan satire had become an established style by this time, and Leonardo even made a joke alluding to it – “If Petrarch had

96 Clark, Leonardo da Vinci, 82.

97 Clark states that Leonardo may have not wanted to stay in or return to Florence because of the “open workshops, hard sarcastic criticism, and those terrible practical jokes which figure so largely in contemporary lives of the Florentine artists.”(83) I find this to be contradictory to so much of the research I have done on Leonardo’s personality, and even by some of that by Clark himself that it is important to include as an example of the antithesis of what I am trying to prove in this paper.


100 Clayton, Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and Grotesque, 73.
loved the laurel so much it was because it is good with sausages and thrushes,” using a word play on Petrarch’s ideal lover, Laura.\(^\text{101}\)

As noted above, the visages and bodies of the Grotesques stand in visual opposition to the Renaissance Italian culturally normative ideal. This standard was partially based on interpretation of Petrarch’s limited descriptions of his beloved Laura. While there is scant imagery regarding her appearance in his writings, a constructed image of her as having “golden hair, a pale, beautiful face, dark eyebrows, and shining eyes” became canonical.\(^\text{102}\) It is clear that the grotesque faces within the compilation of humorous sketches deviate from this ideal, and may represent Leonardo’s desire to create a visual antithesis to the normative beauty ideals of the period.

Many of Leonardo’s Grotesque images take his own mathematical equations of symmetry and distort and manipulate them into the antithesis of beauty or grace. As Patricia Trutty-Coohill describes, as Leonardo went about his daily life, he had a habit of carrying a notebook and a silverpoint pen and quickly sketching the features of those who interested him. Should he not have the ability to immediately take down their likeliness, he had a type of mental chart that he both used and encouraged his student to memorize, so that they could see a memorable face in real life and recreate it within the studio or in their notebooks later. By dividing the face up into quadrants, the on-the-go artist could quickly jot down the features of the face that had captivated him.\(^\text{103}\) However, Leonardo said he wouldn’t elaborate on “monstrous” faces, as they required more effort than simply using the memory chart.\(^\text{104}\)

\(^{101}\) Barolsky, *Infinite Jest*, 51.


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As Trutty Coohill argues, the Grotesques’ exaggerated facial features may be due to Leonardo’s use of perfect symmetry and proportions as a basis for taking some aspects of a face, such as the chin, nose or ratio of nose to upper lip, and changing them to a more extreme end. Instead of making ideal beauty, he could create infinite variations of distortion and ugliness by manipulating these ratios. In related arguments, Gombrich argues they are “negative variations” on the heroic warrior type, while Clark writes that they could be made in opposition to Leonardo’s “constant preoccupation with ideal beauty.”

Patricia Trutty-Coohill writes that Lillian Schwartz has, via computer overlays and manipulations, shown that there is a continuous underlying proportional structure shared by many of the Grotesques, which shows that “a heroic head can be made grotesque simply by moving the features around.” Martin Clayton agrees that the drawings are “playful distortions” of the basic idealized facial structure.

One rare example of an extant pendant piece is described as a “bearded man in left profile, confronted by a Grotesque profile,” circa 1492-5, and categorized as 12555 in the Royal Collection at Windsor (Fig. 2). While Melzi may have cropped this sketch after Leonardo’s death, the page remains relatively intact. A proud example of Leonardo’s warrior type looks somewhat disdainfully down his nose towards the viewer’s left, with a prominent chin and distinctive beard. His features are somewhat exaggerated, but they cannot be considered grotesque, as they retain the dignity and composure with which Leonardo often imbued his older


108 Clark and Pedretti, The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle, 103.
men and warriors. Looking back at the bearded man, an exaggerated, peasant like face curiously, if somewhat blankly, looks back. The grotesque head seems to be quickly sketched in comparison to the noble head facing it, as Clayton puts it, “a simple visual joke that may have been an impromptu satire on double portraits of couples in facing profile.”

As the bearded head is so much more deliberately sketched, with subtle shading and cross-hatching, its ideal status as a fiercely confident, middle-aged man seems to precede the doodle on the left. While Leonardo drew out the left facing figure, perhaps he mentally conceived of the right’s grotesque opposite, as the larger, disdainful man has a broad, forehead, slightly hooked, aquiline nose, a short space between his nose and lip, and a jutting chin. His smaller, ostensibly shorter opposite seems to have the inverse of the right hand man’s features, with a pug nose, a extremely long upper lip, and a weak chin. While both are heavy lidded, the grotesque head seems to be so more because of unintelligence, instead of the world-weariness that the more dignified opposite has in his eyes.

Leonardo may also simply have came back to the sketch of the bearded man later on and seen the comic potential of mirroring two such unlikely types.

Importantly, the recto of this notebook sheet has a right facing, beardless sketch of the same warrior type, with numbers and calculations that may correspond to the proportions of the figure and his head, and also a handwritten note. Leonardo states, “When you make a figure, think well about what it is and what you want it to do, and see that the work is in keeping with the figure’s aim and character.”

It is clear that he thought out the mature man carefully, even meticulously creating a system of scale for his features, but the Grotesque face peering up at him doesn’t seem to have been quite as well thought out, except for its visual inversion of the features

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of the main character. While it is unclear whether or not this particular sketch had any correlation or relationship to popular literature at the time, the tradition of juxtaposing two different character types has been prevalent since the ancient invention of theatrical comedy and tragedy, usually to a comic effect.

While Leonardo was in Milan, he also painted and sketched portrait heads of lovely, pure young ladies, who could not be more opposed to the Grotesques, both in concept and appearance. One such example is described as “head and shoulders of a girl, profile to right, wearing a cap on the back of her head” and catalogued as 12505 in the Royal Collection at Windsor by Kenneth Clark and Carlo Pedretti (Fig. 3). The dating of this particular drawing is uncertain, but has been placed 1482-1495, as it is executed in the silverpoint medium; Leonardo seems to have stopped using silverpoint after 1495. This would place him in Milan, and Clark agrees that it may have been a study for some of the portraits that Leonardo did during his time there. It is hard to tell if this refined, virtuous looking lady conforms to the Petrarchan poetic ideal, especially without the aid of color to tell if she has the dark eyes and blonde hair that his Laura possessed, but her hairline is lower than the high plucked forehead that was seen as attractive and ideal. That said, this profile is quite idealized and Clark states that “admirers of Leonardo, who wish to make all his works emphatically Leonardoesque, should notice how objective his finest work could be.” Leonardo’s ability to make a personality ambiguous and generalized yet displayed

111 Clayton states that the mature head is often thought of as a “Semitic type,” (76) supposedly due to the hooked nose and jutting beard, and perhaps for Judas in The Last Supper, but doesn’t agree with this theory, and neither do I.

112 Clark and Pedretti, The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle, 88.

113 Cropper, “On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style,” 374
in a detailed sketch points towards his complete mastery of depicting faces. Within his *Treatise on Painting*, he advised the artist to “Look about for the good parts of many beautiful faces, parts considered beautiful by public preference, rather than your own preference.”¹¹⁵ Using the ideally lovely face that is universally recognized to be lovely, yet unrecognizable as being one specific person, is the exact opposite of his use of the generally “ugly” features of his Grotesques. It seems clear therefore that the un-idealized drawings serve as counterpoints to the beautiful, graceful faces of several of his sketches.

Perhaps in response to the ideally abstract loveliness of the young woman in 12505, Leonardo took the opposite approach when sketching out 12493, a copy of which is in the Windsor Collection, done by his student, Melzi (Fig. 4). The verso of the original sheet dates the sketch to 1492. Leonardo had written on the verso “seven lines on the dissection of the eye,” which does not give any clues as to his intentions when making the recto.¹¹⁶ This is one example in which, according to Clark and Pedretti, “The caricatures merge into Grotesques in which physical characteristics are exaggerated to the point of deformity.”¹¹⁷ Four figures face one another in pairs of male and female, and the bottom man is supposedly a caricature of Dante, juxtaposed perhaps by his Beatrice.¹¹⁸ This makes its own comment upon literature and the famous author, but it could just as easily have been Petrarch and Laura, or any other recognizable

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¹¹⁷ Clark and Pedretti, *The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, 83.

author with his wife or lover. With a truly hideous expression, the woman on the upper left peers out from hooded eyes at her toothless partner across the page. Her forehead and nose slope dramatically to meet a massively enlarged upper lip, which recedes again into a barely perceptible chin. The cording of the muscles and tendons in her neck add to the non-normative appearance. She appears to be on the brink of ceasing to be human, more toad-like than feminine. She brings to mind a description of an ugly woman from the Decameron, by Boccaccio-

Now the lady had a maid, that was none too young, and had a countenance the ugliest and most misshapen that ever was seen; for indeed she was flat-nosed, wry-mouthed, and thick-lipped, with huge, ill-set teeth, eyes that squinted and were ever bleared, and a complexion betwixt green and yellow, that shewed as if she had spent the summer not at Fiesole but at Sinigaglia: besides which she was hip-shot and somewhat halting on the right side. Her name was Ciuta, but, for that she was such a scurvy bitch to look on, she was called by all folk Ciutazza. And being thus misshapen of body, she was also not without her share of guile.\(^{119}\)

Yet the more typical features of femininity are retained, such as a hefty bosom, a dress and a headpiece, which make the contrast even more pronounced. This is an excellent example of Leonardo’s manipulations of features. The same nose, eyes, chin and forehead could denote beauty and purity, like 12505, or be utterly repulsive, as in the case of the women in 12493. His strict attention to detail was never overwhelmed by a face’s general appearance, and down to the last eyelash, both are epitomes of beauty and ugliness, respectively.

We know that Leonardo da Vinci was a keen practical joker, a student of anatomy and psychology, and that, while he was not a man of letters, he seems to have enjoyed reading and composing satire and burle. This quick mind and interest with the workings of the world and with the human condition led him to portray all types of figures and faces within his oeuvre and

in his own personal notebooks. The exact relationship of the Grotesque images to Leonardo’s Milanese period and the satirical *facetiae* of Florence merits further study, but we might begin with the understanding that the Grotesques in this context were designed as amusements for himself and court viewers, and as satires of the ideally beautiful profiles and paintings for which he was well known.
CHAPTER 3

FLORENTINE MEDICAL DISCOURSES AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE GROTESQUES

The medical community in Florence, Galen’s humoral theories, and the cultural discourses surrounding bodies point to contexts for the production of the Grotesques, in particular Study of Five Grotesque Heads from 1493 (Fig. 1). The term “humor” did not hold our modern connotations in their time period, instead referring medically to the four bodily humors from the works of second-century C.E Turkish scholar Galen. He used the theories of Aristotle, Plato and Hippocrates to formulate a theory of anatomy and bodily function that can help to contextualize some of the Grotesques as physical embodiments of the characteristics that the humors contained. Age and the different typologies that came with the different times of life and flux of the humors were also visual tropes in Renaissance art. For instance, the Old Man and Youth in Facing Profile of circa 1495 depicts an idealized youth juxtaposed with an old man, who embodies the period’s views on aged figures (Fig. 5).

During the Florentine Renaissance, there were arguably few major changes in the practices of medicine, surgery and healing when compared to the enormous advances made in art and literature.120 Medical discourses and discussions were far more common amongst the general culture than in modern society. Park writes that “the city’s view on medicine was matter of fact, and there were few religious or social taboos about bodies”121.

Apothecaries and physicians enjoyed a particularly close working relationship, with some physicians even residing in above-shop apartments. As nearly every profession and enterprise

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120 Lynn Thorndike, “Some Minor Medical Works of the Florentine Renaissance,” Isis 9, no 1, (February, 1927), 38.

121 Park, Doctors and Medicine in Early Renaissance Florence, 53.
was supervised by a guild, these guilds frequently overlapped both in business and society. Social and professional life merged with the intermarriage of guild members, friendships, and patronage of other guild’s members. Leonardo would have interacted with apothecaries for the purchase of artistic supplies, and it is reasonable to suppose that conversation and discussion within the shops at times involved physicians. Apothecaries themselves also had medical knowledge, by virtue of being in such close contact with the medical profession. David Gentilcore writes that as they administered the drugs that were prescribed by the doctors, they often felt as if they also had the ability to diagnose and intervene on occasion.\textsuperscript{122}

A member of the Florentine Artists guild, into which he was inducted in 1472, Leonardo would have had a business relationship with many apothecaries throughout the city, from whom pigments for paints were procured. As the apothecaries shared a guild with the doctors of Florence, and were a fairly social group, Leonardo may have had friendly interactions with doctors and physicians, some of who worked as “in-house” practitioners alongside apothecaries, who could easily fill prescriptions.

As a keen observer of nature, bodies, and personalities, Leonardo was constantly attuned to the presence of interesting and unusual people and subjects to sketch and paint. There are depictions of men and women of varying ages, shapes, statuses and appearances within the sketches, which raises the question of how the greater Florentine and central Italian culture viewed non-normative and elderly people. An examination of the cultural discourses of medical theories and aging is valuable for developing this point. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Galenic tradition of the four bodily humors remained the foundation for medical

\textsuperscript{122} David Gentilcore, \textit{Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy}. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 79.
understanding of the functions of the body. Indeed, the writings of Galen were established until the eighteenth century and the rise of scientific inquiry and the Enlightenment. Given the prevalence of scholars such as Gloria Vallese and Patricia Truty-Coohill to attribute the various appearances of some of the Grotesques to a personification of the four bodily humors, it is essential to examine the background of this aspect of the medical field.

Essential to Galen’s theories on the body was his belief in the four humors that comprised the internal body – black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm. In *On the Elements According to Hippocrates*, he “forged a link between the elements and humors by suggesting that the four elements enter the body in the form of food and drink, where they are transformed by the heat of digestion into the four humors.” The four humors, sometimes also referred to as causing a person to become sanguine, choleric, melancholic or phlegmatic, were a different mixture in every body, and every person had their own ideal balance. Should a person become over-active in any one humor, the most common treatment tended to be a change in diet, and if that was not effective, then Galen suggested using medication.

Each humor had its own effect upon the body if it became the primary humor out of balance, and tended to be referred to in terms of temperature and moisture in accordance with the


125 Galen was a physician and medical theorist, born in 129 C.E in Pergamum, in western Turkey. Borrowing from both Aristotelian and Platonic ideas on anatomy, physiology and psychology, he followed Hippocratic tradition, and above all believed in the importance of knowing and understanding the anatomy of the human body. As an anatomist and early practitioner of human and animal dissection, he developed a theory that the body functioned with three systems – the brain, the heart and the liver. Aristotle believed that the heart controlled the body, and this view prevailed for a long while. However, due to his dissections, Galen insisted that Plato was correct in thinking that the heart, brain and liver were all equally important in their functions within the body, and therefore considered Plato’s theory proven.

four Aristotelian physical principles – hot, cold, wet and dry. Nutton explains, “yellow bile was composed of the dry and hot, black bile of the dry and cold, phlegm of the wet and cold, and blood of the wet and hot.” Men were seen as being hotter and drier, while women were colder and moister. These differences were acknowledged, but Galen’s theories, as with many academic views from the same era, favor the male form and combination of humoral qualities as the ideal norm.

As noted above, any imbalance in one’s personal mix of humors resulted in a corporeal effect, a view that can be understood to have been influential to Leonardo’s Grotesques. Leonardo wrote, “Medicine is the remedying of the conflicting elements: sickness is the discord of the elements infused in a living body.” While these imbalances were not always readily seen facially, Patricia Trutty-Coohill gives strong evidence towards characteristics of the four humors being potentially attributed to the four grotesque figures in a Study of Five Grotesque Heads, or as it is sometimes titled, A Man Being Tricked by Gypsies (Fig. 1).

This drawing was created around 1495 in ink on white paper, and measures 10.3’ by 8.1.” The abbreviated nature of the right side of the work suggests that it was cropped from its original state. The composition consists of four heads and hits of torsos in a semi circle surrounding a centrally positioned male figure, which is shown in profile. This figure shows the most adept,

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130 Nutton, Ancient Medicine, 235.
finished technique, with the heads to the right and left also highly finished. The gender of these two flanking figures is difficult to positively identify. They have been referred to as gypsy or peasant women, but the distortion of their features gives them a decidedly masculine air. The four surrounding faces all have distinct, exaggerated expressions, from open-mouthed laughter, to a scowl that indicates displeasure or melancholy. The range of emotions shown have been read as illustrations of the four bodily humors, madness, and innate unintelligence by Patricia Trutty-Coohill and Martin Clayton. The central figure wears a crown of oak leaves. While the meaning of this attribute is unclear, it seems to highlight the figure’s relative dignity or heroism. Many of Leonardo’s figural sketches are facing profiles of an idealized young man and an older, “hero” type. His writings indicate that he believed in the combining of opposing figures that depicted the most opposite characteristics, putting “the ugly next to the beautiful, the big next to the small, the old to the young, the strong to the weak.” The central head bears a resemblance to the heroic type, and his steady gaze and stoic expression serve to highlight the comparatively exaggerated faces of the others. The figure on the left most side of the composition reaches a hand around the back of the oak-crowned man, in a gesture that Clayton believes is indicative of pickpocketing. None of the figures make eye contact with one another, and the tilted nature of the composition implies a high viewpoint. The features of the figures suggest that they are all of

132 Clark and Pedretti claim that these two figures are the only ones who are “strictly speaking, grotesque,” but they don’t give an extended explanation as to this statement. Clark and Pedretti, The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle, 84.


a similar age. The isolated nature of each head belies the interaction that occurs between the left most figure and the central man.

Trutty-Coohill states, “opinion is divided between those who interpret the drawing as a comic scene and those who read it as a psychological study, either in modern or quattrocento terms.”\textsuperscript{137} Gloria Vallese, a scholar cited in Trutty-Coohill’s article, explains that the four heads depict the consequences of the degenerative effects of the over production of each of the four humors. Going counter clockwise she believes they show “phlegmatic humor, melancholy (from black bile), melancholy in its choleric degeneration arising from red bile, and melancholy at its sanguine degeneration.”\textsuperscript{138} Trutty-Coohill complicates this reading by stating that when writing his book on anatomy, Leonardo never explicitly mentions the humors, but given the prevalence of the medical discourses within Florentine society, it does not negate the probability that knew them. Martin Clayton and Trutty-Coohill cite feminine qualities in the figures to the extreme right and left of the central man, although it is difficult to say with much certainty that these are facts, as their faces and bodies are both exaggerated and masculinized in appearance. Clayton also does not believe that the Grotesques in general show real people, a view it is difficult to support with complete conviction, given Leonardo’s explicit advice to his students to make sure to study all forms of the face and person, and Clayton’s own anecdote about Leonardo’s interest in observing peasants.\textsuperscript{139} Indeed, a majority of scholars have argued for the Grotesques, and especially \textit{Study of Five Grotesque Heads}, to be read as the reflection of Leonardo’s physiognomic studies.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{137} Trutty-Coohill, “Bracketing Theory in Leonardo’s Five Grotesque Heads,” 90.
\textsuperscript{138} Trutty-Coohill, “Bracketing Theory in Leonardo’s Five Grotesque Heads,” 91.
Physiognomic theory linked the outward physical appearance of an individual with their personal character and morality, and was established in Greece, in the third century B.C.E by the Peripatetic school.\textsuperscript{141} Galen found it important to medical studies, according to Hippocrates.\textsuperscript{142} Leonardo had books on the subject that were listed in the Codex Madrid and may have been planning on writing a book about physical attributes of emotions, but as twelve out of sixteen of the pertinent notebook manuscripts are now lost, it is impossible to positively confirm.\textsuperscript{143} Leonardo believed that the face could show limited insight into a person’s character, but dismissed some aspects of physiognomy as unscientific; he preferred to apply this term to those things proven through an experimental process, preferably by him.\textsuperscript{144} Nonetheless, it is reasonable to view the relationship between the body and soul as important to his belief system and artistic process, together with his views on mimesis and the proper portrayal of distinct personalities.\textsuperscript{145} Leonardo wrote, “The face shows some indication of the nature of men…their vices and complexions” and thought that bodily movements and gestures, especially those that were involuntary, showed a man’s character as well.\textsuperscript{146} An artist’s skill in depicting emotions was often seen as showing physiognomic traits, but in his advice to burgeoning artists, Leonardo warned against trusting the commonly dispersed handbooks on physiognomy, which he dismissed as not being tested and proven. He was adamant that the variety of faces and figures

\textsuperscript{140} Michael Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 33.

\textsuperscript{141} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 46.

\textsuperscript{142} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 44.

\textsuperscript{143} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 51.

\textsuperscript{144} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 51.

\textsuperscript{145} Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 57.

\textsuperscript{146} Leonardo, CU 109v, as cited in Kwakkelstein. \textit{Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice}, 58.
that were seen in every day life be mastered by the artist, as the repertoire of types would be necessary when imbuing a character within a painting with emotion and personality.\(^{147}\)

Several of Leonardo’s sketches display the same juxtaposition of young and old as seen in his “heroic” images. While they are not always done to comic effect, there is a certain fascination with the process of aging that appears in Leonardo’s works, both ideal and Grotesque. He wrote musings on old age in his notebooks, and included such aphorisms as “While I thought I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die.”\(^{148}\)

Leading up to, and during the Renaissance, the elderly were placed in a different subset of persons - those who were close to death. Conflicting scholarship shows that old age could make one seen as wise and respected, or derided as foolish.\(^{149}\) Where the humors were concerned, old age and extreme old age were melancholic and phlegmatic, and death occurred when “all that was left of the body’s heat and moisture was no longer capable of being transformed into fuel for maintaining a person’s life…he has exhausted almost all the warmth and hydration required for staying alive.”\(^{150}\)

Children and the elderly had an abundance of phlegm, which made them colder and moister, and those near death were cold and dry. As a person went through the stages of life, the

\(^{147}\) Kwakkelstein. Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice, 64.

\(^{148}\) Leonardo, CA 253 r. a, as cited in Kwakkelstein. Leonardo as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice.


\(^{149}\) Sears, The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations on the Life Cycle.


\(^{150}\) Skenazi, Aging Gracefully in the Renaissance: Stories of Later Life from Petrarch to Montaigne, 16.
qualities of their humors fluctuated. Vindicianus, writing in the fourth century A.D, states “phlegm with blood has dominion in boys to age 14, then red gall, again with some blood in youth to age 25. In the period lasting to the forty-second year, the greatest portion of blood dominates, together with black gall, and finally, phlegm rules until extreme old age, as it did in boys.”

Old age was a stage of life that had specific cultural sentiments and markers attached to it.

Due to the frequent attacks of the Plague, which tended to kill the weaker youths, older people made up a larger percentage of the Renaissance Florence population than might be expected, given average life spans. Once a person had made it past the physical trials of youth, unless one developed a fatal illness or infection, one could expect to live into old age. Shula Shahar writes that old age was believed to have “entailed a deterioration of both physical and mental capacities, as well as the development of negative traits of character.” This was seen as inevitable, especially in the old artist, who, much as Castiglione urged the old courtier, was encouraged to refrain from continuing to practice. Leonardo’s own advanced age may have prompted interest in these issues, visible, for instance, in Leonardo’s *Old Man and Youth in Facing Profile*, circa 1495.

Leonardo wrote several statements on aging, such as —“O Time, Consumer of all things! O envious age, thou destroyest all things and devoureast all thing with the hard teeth of the years little by little, in slow death.”


hardened, wizened older man can be seen in several of Leonardo’s sketches from his notebooks, and especially in *Old Man and Youth in Facing Profile*. In this sketch, a curly haired, aquiline profiled youth looks out towards the left side of the drawing, while a toothless, bald, hook nosed man looks back at the boy. This pairing can be seen as either an opposition of types, or a statement upon the iniquities of aging, or both. Either way, the antithesis of the types is evident, and as Clayton writes, the “warrior” type that Leonardo frequently drew is exaggerated to the point of creating a figure that inspires pity due to his age, instead of respect and fearsome admiration.\(^{156}\)

During the Renaissance, and especially in Florence, life was constantly in an uncertain state. Plague and death were constant reminders of the fragility of existence, and the art of the time can also show the medical and age discourses that were common amongst the population. Leonardo da Vinci, as a member of the artistic community and a man, would have had access to the Galenic medical theories and other knowledge that inform some of the choices he made in depicting non-normative people in his Grotesque sketches.

\(^{155}\) Wells, *Notebooks*, 259.

CONCLUSION

The Grotesques hold a unique position in the œuvre of a man universally recognized as a creator of ideal beauty in ink and paint. While only a few of them may be considered complex compositions, each head or figure does have something about its visage that counteracts Leonardo’s typical perfection. Given the contradictory viewpoints of scholars who focus on Leonardo, the variation in forms of the Grotesques, and the inability to pinpoint one single area that explains the reason behind their production, this thesis concludes that the Grotesques are largely a product of Leonardo’s imagination, and have only partial rooting in academic art theory. These enigmatic works show aspects of influence from the areas of Renaissance comic and satirical literature and Florentine and central Italian medical theory and discourses. This thesis has compiled research and scholarship from each of these disciplines in an effort to better contextualize the influences that Leonardo may have taken from literature and medical culture while creating these sketches. The issue of viewership and for whom the Grotesques were made is another area where there is no definitive explanation available. The varying levels of their finishing suggests that case by case, they were perhaps meant to be seen both by Leonardo and an audience, or by just Leonardo himself.
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ILLUSTRATIONS

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Figure 1: Leonardo da Vinci, *Study of Five Grotesque Heads*, 12495, circa 1495, pen and ink on paper, 26 x 20.5 cm, Windsor, England: Royal Collection.
Figure 2: Leonardo da Vinci, 12555, circa 1495, pen and ink on paper, 17.2 x 12.4 cm, Windsor, England: Royal Collection.
Figure 3: Leonardo da Vinci, 12505, circa 1495, pen and ink on paper, 32 x 20 cm, Windsor, England: Royal Collection.
Figure 4: Melzi, after Leonardo da Vinci, 12493, circa 1495, pen and ink on paper, 19.5 x 14.6 cm, Windsor, England: Royal Collection.
Figure 5: Leonardo da Vinci, *An Old Man and a Youth in Facing Profile*, circa 1495-1500, Red Chalk, 20.9 x15 cm. Florence, Italy: Uffizi Gallery.