

LEONARDO,  
PSYCHOANALYSIS,  
& ART HISTORY

A  
CRITICAL STUDY OF  
PSYCHOBIOGRAPHICAL  
APPROACHES TO  
LEONARDO DA VINCI

BRADLEY I. COLLINS



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THE  
EVIDENCE  
FOR  
FREUD'S  
RECONSTRUCTION

**F**reud's psychoanalytic assumptions would have led him to many of the same conclusions about Leonardo even if he had only known that the artist was homosexual, that he was sexually inactive, and that he became increasingly preoccupied with scientific questions. Leonardo's homosexuality would have presupposed a strong unconscious attachment to a seductive mother and a father who was distant or absent during infancy. Sexual inactivity combined with great creative achievement would have suggested the sublimation of much of Leonardo's libidinal endowment. And finally, his consuming and obsessive scientific curiosity would most likely have had its origins in an infancy with highly exciting sexual researches.

So the particulars of Leonardo's life as revealed in his notebooks, his art, and the observations of contemporaries could only reinforce interpretations to which Freud was already predisposed. Freud, nevertheless, placed great weight on one detail—the entry in Leonardo's notebooks that contains the memory of his childhood (figure 4). This remark—the only entry that refers to the artist's early years—reads as follows in Freud's translation (or, more precisely, Alan Tyson's English translation of Freud's German translation of Leonardo's Italian): "It seems that I was always destined to be so deeply concerned with vultures; for I recall as one of my very earliest memories that while I was in my cradle a vulture came down to me, and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail

against my lips” (82). This brief reminiscence becomes a treasure trove for Freud and a model of the ways in which a single psychic artifact can condense multiple meanings. Freud finds evidence in the entry for no less than five psychobiographical suppositions: that Leonardo was left alone with Caterina, that Caterina acted in an aggressively seductive manner, that Leonardo harbored certain homosexual wishes, that, as a little boy, he thought his mother had a penis, and that his interest in flight grew out of his infantile sexual investigations.

Freud begins by establishing that the event recounted never actually occurred. People rarely preserve such an early memory, and its fantastic nature argues against its veracity. The memory, then, is a fantasy, one that Leonardo may have invented in order to glorify his lifelong interest in birds. Yet this does not disqualify the memory/fantasy as a point of entry into Leonardo’s childhood. The fantasy masks actual incidents and desires that one can understand after their disguises have been stripped away.

Freud first focuses on the most prominent object in the fantasy, the vulture’s tail. He suggests that it symbolizes a penis. Tails, in both word and image, often have phallic connotations. And Freud, taking an example from Leonardo’s own language, cites the Italian use of *coda* as a slang term for the male genital. Moreover, this phallic tail strikes Leonardo many times inside his mouth. The fantasy represents, therefore, a wish—consistent with Leonardo’s homosexuality—to fellate a man. But why should this wish become associated with his infancy? Leonardo, one recalls, places himself in his cradle. Freud explains that the desire to suck a penis has an infantile precedent in the desire to suck the mother’s nipple. The vulture fantasy contains not only an allusion to fellatio but also to suckling, “the first source of pleasure in our life” (87).

Yet many questions remain. Why, for instance, is this symbol of Leonardo’s nursing mother a vulture? The perpetually inquisitive Leonardo, Freud surmises, would have discovered, in a book on natural history or in the doctrines of the Fathers of the Church, the ancient Egyptian use of the vulture as a symbol for *mother* and for the mother goddess Mut. Leonardo would also have found the legends surrounding the mythical bird particularly curious. The Egyptians believed that only female vultures existed, hence their suitability as symbols of motherhood. The birds reproduced by stopping in midflight, opening their vaginas, and becoming impregnated, not by male vultures, but by the wind. This startling example

of an immaterially generated pregnancy appealed to the Church Fathers, who frequently cited the fable as a precedent for the Virgin Birth.

Why would the vulture legend and its utilization by the Church have had so much importance for Leonardo? According to Freud, Leonardo was himself a “vulture-child” (90). He too seemed to have been born without a father. What is more, the association of the vulture with the Virgin transformed the shameful circumstances of Leonardo’s birth into something sacred. The husbandless Caterina becomes, by analogy, the Mother of God, and Leonardo becomes Christ. So Leonardo unconsciously employed his knowledge of the Egyptian legend to construct a “memory” that commemorated and ennobled his fatherless infancy. Leonardo would only have seized on the vulture, as opposed to one of the many other types of birds he studied, if he had in fact been left alone with Caterina. This choice of species becomes, then, a very valuable piece of evidence.

Given the crucial role of Leonardo’s fatherless infancy in Freud’s reconstruction—without it his account of Leonardo’s sexuality, his scientific researches, his treatment of his paintings, and much else falls apart—we might ask how much of this assumption depends on the presence of the vulture in Leonardo’s memory. Freud acknowledges that the 1457 tax record indicates nothing definite about the date of Leonardo’s entry into his father’s household. It could have occurred within years or days after Leonardo’s birth. But aside from the vulture memory, Freud has several reasons for placing Leonardo with Caterina for the first three to five years of his life. This dating conforms to psychoanalytic theories about the genesis of homosexuality and to Freud’s understanding of both the intensity and the antiauthoritarianism of Leonardo’s scientific activity. Freud did not think that Ser Piero would have welcomed an illegitimate son while expecting his new wife to bear children of her own. Only after at least three childless years would Ser Piero have grudgingly accepted Leonardo. And finally, Leonardo’s abandonment of some of his works suggests, though far from conclusively, that he was abandoned himself as a child. So the vulture constitutes only a single element, albeit a very important one, in the complex foundation of Freud’s reconstruction.

After solving the puzzle of the bird’s identity, Freud confronts its paradoxical anatomy. How does a mother symbol acquire a phallic tail? Freud points to the sexual notions of little boys who cannot imagine anyone without a penis. The vulture wields a phallic tail because this corresponds

to Leonardo's infantile ideas about his mother's genitals. Freud also cites a parallel to Leonardo's phallic vulture that seems too good to be true. Surprisingly, the ancient Egyptians endowed their vulture-headed mother goddess with a penis as well. Freud does not, however, believe that Leonardo ever came across an image of the hermaphroditic Mut. Instead, the striking coincidence represents one of the similarities, which Freud loved to identify, between primitive or ancient beliefs and those of children.

Freud next examines Leonardo's passivity in relation to the vulture. If the tail represents a nipple as well as a penis, why doesn't Leonardo approach the bird and grab its tail, in the manner of a baby reaching for the breast? Why, instead, does the vulture open Leonardo's mouth for him and strike him vigorously between the lips? The vulture's aggressiveness reenacts Caterina's excessively affectionate behavior. In particular, the tail's strenuous excitation of Leonardo's mouth corresponds to Caterina's overly eroticized nursing and her habit of pressing "innumerable passionate kisses" on her son (107). If Leonardo adopts a passive stance, then this illustrates the connection between his mother's seductiveness and his inability to pursue women as sexual objects. Leonardo, according to Freud, discloses in the vulture fantasy that "it was through this erotic relation with my mother that I became a homosexual" (106).

Finally, Freud finds proof in the vulture fantasy that Leonardo conducted infantile sexual researches and that these formed the basis of his later scientific pursuits. Leonardo hints at this connection himself by saying that the vulture incident — an event occurring in his infancy — "destined" him to be "so deeply concerned with vultures" and, by implication, with the flight of birds in general. Freud translates this statement into a declaration that Leonardo's infantile curiosity about his mother's genitals "destined" him to be "so deeply concerned" with natural phenomena in his adult life. More specifically, Leonardo, by linking his interest in flight with his earliest years, lends support to Freud's contention that the wish to fly derived from infantile fantasies.

Having thoroughly pried open the vulture memory's secrets, Freud turns to Leonardo's paintings. Leonardo's art must in some way "bear witness" to his intensely erotic years alone with Caterina. Yet Freud recognizes that using Leonardo's art as evidence for a psychoanalytic reconstruction poses some problems. An artist's experience undergoes a "profound transformation" before it emerges in art. One cannot, therefore, possess any "certainty" about

discovering representations of actual memories or events. This is “especially so” with Leonardo. Freud might also have added that Leonardo’s memory of Caterina — “the strongest impression of his childhood” — would already have undergone many transformations in the artist’s own mind before suffering the vagaries of the creative process (107).

The *Mona Lisa*’s ambiguous evidential status epitomizes these difficulties. Does the painting explain Leonardo’s life, or does his life, as understood by Freud, explain the painting? Although Freud tends mostly toward the latter argument, he does make claims for the former. He states that “only a man who had had Leonardo’s childhood experiences” could have produced the *Mona Lisa* (136). What can we see in the portrait that supports Freud’s reconstruction of Leonardo’s infancy? Freud did not try to make a strong case for the evidential value of the *Mona Lisa*, but if he had, it probably would have proceeded along the following lines. He would have pointed out that there is something very strange about the *Mona Lisa* smile. As its famously enigmatic quality cannot be explained by the conventions of portraiture, it must have had a personal significance for Leonardo. Moreover, the smile so fascinated Leonardo that he used it in all of his subsequent works. To whom does this smile belong? Only the smile of his nursing mother could have had such a lingering impact. The mother is the most beloved and potent figure in any man’s psyche, and Caterina must be the person whom Leonardo unconsciously depicted. Freud would also have drawn attention to the smile’s double character. Only a mother who had treated her infant son in an aggressively seductive manner would have inspired an image that promised “unbounded tenderness and at the same time sinister menace” (115).

Even if we grant all of this, we are still a long way from finding the particulars of Freud’s reconstruction in the portrait. Where is the evidence that Leonardo’s father abandoned him or that he was taken from his mother or that he was homosexual? The most Freud can say is that the painting proves that Leonardo once perceived, or wished to perceive, his mother as especially seductive. This is an unavoidable aspect of the oedipus complex. Indeed, Freud emphasizes the *Mona Lisa*’s universal and timeless allure. The smile produces “the most powerful and confusing effect on whoever looks at it” (107), not just on bastard, homosexual sons reared by unwed mothers.

*The Virgin and St. Anne* comes closer to providing solid evidential support for Freud's thesis. Freud can identify three distinctly unusual elements in the painting: the subject is rare, St. Anne looks as if she is nearly the same age as her daughter, and the figures of the Virgin and St. Anne are unexpectedly fused in Leonardo's composition. If these were all the result of highly personal choices on Leonardo's part, why did he make them? Freud's reconstruction makes each of these unusual elements more understandable. The painting indicates that the artist went out of his way to depict two mothers of a similar age who are related in some fashion. Now, as Freud allows, Leonardo might have been attracted to the scene because of his attachment to both his stepmother Donna Albiera and his grandmother Monna Lucia. But this attachment would not account for the similarity in the ages of the two figures. Furthermore, the love of the grandmother would probably not constitute a strong enough motivating force. Only Freud's assumption — that Leonardo spent his first years with Caterina — explains the work. Conversely, if Leonardo had entered his father's household shortly after his birth, he would not have experienced two young mothers and would not have wanted to re-create them in his art.

That Freud considered *The Virgin and St. Anne* an evidential gold mine, with nearly the same importance as the precious vulture memory, is confirmed by a remark in which he links them: "It suddenly dawns on us that only Leonardo could have painted it, just as only he could have created the phantasy of the vulture" (112). Freud also felt that *The Virgin and St. Anne* strengthened his interpretation of the *Mona Lisa*. If the Leonardesque smile appears on two such prominently maternal figures, then the *Mona Lisa* must represent a mother as well.

Freud's discussions of other works are consistent with his reconstruction without demonstrating anything very conclusive in themselves. Although the early heads of laughing women and children correspond to Leonardo's two object choices — his mother and beautiful boys — these two types of sculpture could just as well have been made by someone with quite a different infancy from Leonardo's. Similarly, the androgynous figures in *St. John the Baptist* and *Bacchus* — those "youths of feminine delicacy" (117) — cannot be made to prove more than Leonardo's homosexuality, which is not in dispute. Freud suggests that they beam with the supreme satisfaction of someone who has fulfilled his oedipal desires. But even if

we accept this interpretation, it only indicates once again that Leonardo harbored a universal wish.

Freud does not explain why he focuses only on a small number of Leonardo's works. He might have said that he limited himself to those that were especially enigmatic and therefore psychobiographically relevant. The unenigmatic busts of women and children aside, this reply would still be unsatisfactory. Surely there are aspects of *The Adoration of the Magi* or *The Last Supper*, not to mention many other paintings and drawings, that are markedly unusual and psychoanalytically revealing. If a psychobiographer wants to treat Leonardo's art as evidence for his reconstruction, it would seem that he must do more than simply select those few works that illustrate his points.

Leonardo's artworks are not indispensable to Freud's reconstruction. They do not, and probably could not, say anything about the issue of sublimation. Freud had other reasons, besides the content of Leonardo's paintings, for believing that Leonardo's infancy was fatherless and that he developed a fixation on his mother. Yet Leonardo's art, especially *The Virgin and St. Anne*, fortifies and expands Freud's understanding of Leonardo's psyche. Moreover, Freud's reconstruction would have suffered considerably if he had found nothing in Leonardo's work to reinforce his views. To the question already posed — Does the art explain the life, or does the life explain the art? — the answer, of course, is that one need not choose between the two possibilities. The art and the life explain each other.

In addition to the vulture fantasy and Leonardo's artworks, Freud discovers support for his reconstruction in four different notebook entries. Freud regards each of these entries as obsessional in nature. They conceal strong affect beneath an excessive concern with trifling details. Once these details have been deciphered, they variously establish Leonardo's "ideal" homosexuality, his repressed love for his mother, and his ambivalence toward his father (80).

Freud first discusses two entries that record expenses incurred by Leonardo's pupils. One consists of the minutely itemized cost of a cloak, including the price of buttons and trimming, for Andrea Salaino, better known as Salai. The other, more lengthy entry carefully recounts the behavior of Jacomo, gives the precise amount of money stolen on one occasion, and lists the cost of half a dozen articles of clothing bought for him over the course of a year. (Freud did not know that Salai and



Jacomo were actually one person, Gian Giacomo Caprotti di Oreno.) Freud had several reasons for regarding these entries as peculiar. The sums so scrupulously accounted for are all small. This would not be unusual if Leonardo habitually recorded every expense, but the notebooks show no sign of any consistent accounting of Leonardo's finances. They do not even mention large expenditures.

Why, then, would Leonardo take such trouble to note these particular expenses? These entries express in compromised, obsessional form Leonardo's erotic attachment to his young pupils. Although internal opposition to these desires displaces them onto monetary concerns, the intensity of his sexual impulses emerges in the compulsiveness of the notations. Freud's interpretation follows from his view of Leonardo's homosexuality as "ideal" or inactive (80). Freud takes a middle path between those who would deny Leonardo's homosexuality altogether and those who would suggest that the artist had sexual relations with his pupils. Although Leonardo possesses homosexual desires, they are inhibited by repression and the draining of his libido into sublimated activities. Presumably, if he had felt no homosexual urges or had completely repressed them, he would not have made such strange entries. Conversely, if he had been unabashed about his homosexuality, he might have left in his notebooks a more frank confession of his longings for his students and models.

Freud, however, bases his belief in Leonardo's homosexuality on more than these two entries. On the negative side, he points to the lack of any reports of Leonardo's heterosexuality. There is no record of Leonardo's ever having "embraced a woman in passion" (71). Nor did the artist even hazard an intellectual relationship with a woman like Michelangelo's friendship with Vittoria Colonna. As positive evidence, Freud cites the charges of sodomy brought against Leonardo in Florence and his practice of surrounding himself with pretty but talentless pupils. Finally, Freud mentions Francesco Melzi, Leonardo's last pupil, who traveled with the artist as his companion, stayed with him until his death, and was named in his will. That Leonardo was acquitted of the sodomy charges only confirms Freud's middle view. Interestingly, Freud sometimes sees his relatively prudish speculations about Leonardo as boldly challenging scholars who regard imputations of homosexuality "as a baseless insult to the great man" (73). Yet at other times he refers to assumptions about Leonardo's homosexuality as safely backed by "tradition" (87) and "historical probability" (98).

Freud is encouraged in his view that the two entries conceal strong affect by a third notation, in which Leonardo deals with a much more obviously emotional occurrence in the same obsessional manner. In this entry he itemizes the various expenses — from bell ringing to candles — of the funeral of a certain “Caterina.” Although scholars contest the identity of this Caterina, Freud agrees with the novelist Merezhkovsky that she is none other than the artist’s mother. From two other brief mentions of Caterina in the notebooks, Freud assumes that she visited her son in Milan in 1493, fell ill shortly afterward, and died. But Leonardo, instead of recording his grief, only makes a meticulous computation of funeral expenses. Once again, “erotically coloured feelings” become displaced onto a compulsive concern with lists and sums. Leonardo cannot enter a “worthier memorial” in his notebooks because the repression of his powerful sexual fixation on his mother prevents the irruption of any sort of passionate feeling about her (105).

The three entries, like the busts of children and laughing women, constitute evidence that Leonardo’s sexual objects were young males — those “likenesses of his own boyish beauty” (106) — and his mother. But Freud, by equating the entries about Leonardo’s pupils with the notations about his mother’s funeral, raises some questions. In Freud’s scheme, Leonardo represses his erotic desire for his mother more completely than his homosexuality. In fact, his love for boys functions, in part, as a symptom of his fixation on his mother. He pursues males, if only emotionally, so that he can remain unconsciously faithful to the most important female in his life — his mother. So one would expect obsessional expressions of his homosexual impulses to differ in quality and degree from those concerning his mother.

The fourth entry, which also involves a parent’s demise, tersely reports the exact moment of Ser Piero’s death and the number of his surviving offspring. In addition to displaying the now familiar obsessional traits — meticulousness, concern with numbers, and lack of affect — Leonardo also repeats the hour of his father’s death twice in the same sentence. Freud points out that what makes the entry obsessional is not so much repetition per se but what is repeated. Leonardo might have, in the rhetorical fashion of poets and orators, repeated key words — his father’s name or an expression of sorrow. Instead, he twice invokes an insignificant detail — the hour of death.

This displacement of emotion convinces Freud that “here was something to be concealed and suppressed” (120). He goes on to discuss Leonardo’s unconscious rebellion against and imitation of Ser Piero. But Freud never

actually specifies what lies hidden behind the entry's obsessional distractions. Is that "something" Leonardo's secret delight in his father's death? Is it the fear that his father, by dying, has abandoned him once again? Freud never says. Although Freud clearly designates the first three notebook entries as distorted expressions of erotic desire, the precise unconscious content of the fourth remains ambiguous.

Freud readily admits the speculative nature of his enterprise. He laments that even fellow psychoanalysts will dismiss his study of Leonardo as merely a "psycho-analytic novel," and he is "far from over-estimating" the work himself (134). However, he lays the blame for the uncertainty of his conclusions not on psychoanalysis but on problems with the historical material. These problems involve difficulties — inherent in any psychobiography of an artist — of essentially three kinds. Information about the most formative period in the artist's life, his infancy, is extremely elusive. Reports about his adulthood are incomplete and unreliable. And artworks are often autobiographically opaque. They rarely offer more than indirect access to the artist's past experience and inner world.

Freud further acknowledges that psychobiography would remain limited even if historical material were always plentiful and accurate. He confesses that psychoanalysis cannot, for example, explain why Leonardo was so predisposed to the repression and sublimation of his libido. Someone else subjected to similar circumstances might have repressed the libido that Leonardo sublimated and would have developed severe neurotic symptoms instead of a lust for knowledge. Only biological, not psychoanalytic, research might discover the unknown organic factors that determine "the tendency to repression and the capacity for sublimation." This fact has unfortunate consequences for the psychoanalytic understanding of artists. As artistic talent is "intimately connected" with sublimation, the psychobiographer can never fully illuminate the very abilities that distinguish his subject (136).

Finally, Freud concedes that a psychobiography may suffer from its author's personal bias. Freud first raises this issue in connection with conventional biographers. They oppose psychobiography, or "pathography," as Freud calls it, because they idealize their subjects.<sup>1</sup> They choose their heroes for emotional reasons and then go on to portray them as flawless figures. They endow them with all the qualities of perfection that a child worships in an "infantile model" such as his father. These authors "sacrifice truth to an illusion" (130). After directing this charge against conventional biographers,

Freud then applies it to himself. He too has “succumbed to the attraction” of a “great and mysterious man.” He suggests that the trait he so admires in Leonardo, and identifies with, is his “capacity for sublimation.” He sees in Leonardo “powerful instinctual passions which can nevertheless only express themselves in so remarkably subdued a manner” (134). Admiration, however, is not the only attitude one might feel toward an “infantile model.” Although Freud does not mention it, the psychobiographer’s unavoidable emotional investment in a subject would inevitably involve hostility as well as affection.<sup>2</sup>

Freud in *Leonardo* presented a commendably forthright and expansive accounting of psychobiography’s shortcomings. Twenty-six years later, in a letter to Arnold Zweig, he condemned biography even more harshly: “Whoever turns biographer commits himself to lies, to concealment, to hypocrisy, to embellishments, and even to dissembling his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had.”<sup>3</sup> Among his self-criticisms in *Leonardo*, however, there is a surprising omission. Freud does not discuss the substantial differences between reconstruction in an actual analysis and that in a psychobiography. The psychobiographer must rely on available historical material. But historical documentation, no matter how abundant, invariably leaves out a wealth of crucial information. It excludes important private events and the emotional reactions to these events. This omission especially applies to childhood occurrences. For an example one need look no further than Freud’s own case study of the “Wolf-Man,” a patient he treated shortly after finishing *Leonardo*. One event in the Wolf-Man’s infancy — sex play initiated by his older sister — had very significant consequences.<sup>4</sup> How would a psychobiographer have discovered this? It is hard to imagine any document — even a detailed diary or memoir — that would reveal such an incident in the life of a pre-Freudian figure. The fact that a psychobiographer cannot obtain the subject’s intimate memories and associations — cannot put the subject on the couch, so to speak — may have seemed so apparent as not to merit any comment. Yet the obviousness of the psychobiographer’s disadvantages makes them no less problematic.

One of these disadvantages — the exclusive reliance on historical material — often makes psychobiographers concentrate on external, documentable events at the expense of the subject’s internal, but nondocumentable, experience. Freud, for example, clings to a literal conception of Ser Piero’s absence in his reconstruction of Leonardo’s life. Leonardo and

Ser Piero must be *physically* separated during the artist's first three to five years. This is the kind of assumption that tax or baptismal records might prove or disprove. But Freud does not even entertain the possibility that the infant Leonardo, though living with his father, may simply have *experienced* him as an absent figure.

Lastly, Freud's arguments occasionally seem circular. The *Mona Lisa* recalls Leonardo's mother because the Gioconda smile reappears on the maternal faces in *The Virgin and St. Anne*. Yet *The Virgin and St. Anne* represents Leonardo's two mothers because the figures flash the *Mona Lisa*'s maternal smile. On another issue, Freud identifies the "Caterina" of the notebooks as Leonardo's mother not because of any "proof" but because the assumption possesses "inner probability" and is in "harmony" with his other claims about Leonardo (105). So a pathographic reconstruction depends as much on the psychoanalytic "harmony" of the evidence as on its basis in provable fact. One cannot, therefore, judge the validity of a "psycho-analytic novel" such as Freud's *Leonardo* with conventional, nonpsychoanalytic criteria. Determining just what the correct criteria for evaluating a psychobiography should be lies outside the scope of this study.<sup>5</sup> But the question will inevitably enter into our discussions of the validity of psychobiographical interpretations of Leonardo's art.

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So the particulars of Leonardo's life as revealed in his notebooks, his art, and the observations of contemporaries could only reinforce interpretations to which Freud was already predisposed. Freud, nevertheless, placed great weight on one detail—the entry in Leonardo's notebooks that contains the memory of his childhood (figure 4). This remark—the only entry that refers to the artist's early years—reads as follows in Freud's translation (or, more precisely, Alan Tyson's English translation of Freud's German translation of Leonardo's Italian): “It seems that I was always destined to be so deeply concerned with vultures; for I recall as one of my very earliest memories that while I was in my cradle a vulture came down to me, and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail

development into a great artist and investigator. Or putting it another way, many illegitimate sons have lived alone with seductive mothers without going on to equal Leonardo's achievements. This does not mean, however, that Freud cannot say anything about Leonardo's genius. In fact, he clearly asserts that Leonardo's extraordinary accomplishments required the sublimation of unusually large amounts of libido. More specifically, he claims that artistic talent involves the sublimation of infantile scopophilia. But he can neither explain why Leonardo sublimated so much of his libido nor why that sublimation led to his supreme artistic abilities. Again, many men sublimate libido without becoming geniuses of Leonardo's stature.

Nor can psychobiography shed much light on the quality of Leonardo's work. It cannot add anything new to conventional explanations of why Leonardo's paintings should be considered Renaissance masterpieces. Freud makes even less of an effort to address this subject than he does the mystery of Leonardo's genius. Yet he is not completely silent either. He makes an implicit argument that the *Mona Lisa's* enduring fame depends on its capacity to draw on a primal subject—the seductive mother of one's infancy. The portrait's evocation of a fond mother's thrilling smile has attracted thousands of admirers over the centuries, even if they have been unaware of the true source of their pleasure and curiosity. Like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the *Mona Lisa* earns its timeless status by tapping into the spectator's central unconscious conflicts and desires. But Freud, though he carefully describes the “unchanging smile, on long, curved lips” (107), cannot reveal the pictorial mechanisms that create the portrait's powerful effects. He can pinpoint what the *Mona Lisa* expresses, but not how it makes this impression.

Freud has much more to say about the unconscious meanings of Leonardo's subject matter. He establishes a “psychoiconography,” so to speak, for the figures depicted in various works.<sup>2</sup> The busts of laughing women represent Caterina; the busts of boys, himself. The *Mona Lisa* signifies Caterina once again. *St. Anne in The Virgin and St. Anne* symbolizes both Caterina and Monna Lucia. The *Virgin* alludes to Donna Albiera, and the Christ Child, to Leonardo. Finally, *Bacchus* and *St. John the Baptist* both depict an adolescent Leonardo who has fulfilled his oedipal wishes. Freud, however, does not set out to make these psychoiconographical interpretations. They emerge as he puts together his reconstruction of

Leonardo's life. All of the psychoiconographical assertions, except those regarding the busts of women and boys, grow out of attempts to explain putatively "strange" aspects of Leonardo's work.<sup>3</sup>

One could argue that Freud's solutions to the riddles posed by Leonardo's work constitute his greatest art historical contribution. Conventional scholars cannot fully explain the Leonardesque smile, the choice of an unusual subject such as that depicted in *The Virgin and St. Anne*, the youthfulness of St. Anne, and the "fused" arrangement of St. Anne and her daughter. But Freud, using the new science of psychoanalysis, reveals the secret motive behind each of these enigmas. This argument raises questions that will concern us as we consider the critiques of Freud's *Leonardo*. To what extent are these elements really "enigmatic"? Are there alternative explanations? Can psychoanalytic explanations coexist with art historical ones?

First we should look at why Freud took such pains to assert that certain of Leonardo's works were, in fact, "enigmatic." A painting or sculpture need not necessarily appear strange in order to have psychobiographical significance. Freud found the busts of women and boys important not because they were peculiar but because Leonardo had chosen those two subjects. An artist who freely chooses among alternatives has revealed the self to some extent. But "puzzling" elements more directly expose the artist's character. They represent instances in which unconscious needs have superseded artistic standards. Freud treats the enigmatic aspects of Leonardo's works as if they were visual equivalents of slips of the tongue.

What exactly is enigmatic in Leonardo's art, and how does one establish the enigmatic status of the work? A painting that looks unusual to a psychoanalyst may not seem so to an art historian. In the case of the *Mona Lisa*, Freud first defers to a string of critics and scholars who have variously described the portrait as a "riddle," "mysterious," "an insoluble and enthralling enigma," et cetera (108, 108n2). In this way Freud makes it clear that his own response is neither unique nor merely the result of his ignorance of the conventions of Renaissance portraiture. Yet he still has not specifically identified the source of the *Mona Lisa*'s mystery. Why are all of these observers, himself included, so puzzled by the painting? It emerges from his discussion that no one can easily recognize the expression on Lisa del Giocondo's face. Her smile escapes categorization. It is not simply a "happy" smile, or a "flirtatious" smile, or a "haughty" smile. Moreover, her smile seems to combine two contradictory and unexpected emotions, "the



promise of unbounded tenderness and at the same time sinister menace” (115). Finally, Freud contrasts St. Anne’s and Mary’s smiles in *The Virgin and St. Anne* with Lisa del Giocondo’s. The former smiles display a normal expression of “quiet blissfulness,” in contrast to the latter’s “uncanny and mysterious character” (112).

Freud, however, is very unclear about the *Mona Lisa*’s artistic mysteries. Indeed, one could argue that for Freud, the portrait poses no artistic riddles whatsoever. Freud quite emphatically insists that Leonardo did not invent the smile. In Freud’s view Leonardo faithfully reproduced Lisa del Giocondo’s actual expression. If one takes this literal conception of portraiture to its logical conclusion, then Lisa del Giocondo, not the painting, presented the enigma. Leonardo’s unconscious played no part in creating a smile that was already on the sitter’s face. Leonardo’s unconscious needs only manifested themselves in his odd behavior — fussing over the painting for years, keeping it with him until his death — and in his repeated use of the smile in subsequent works.

Yet if Leonardo merely recorded what he saw, how can Freud claim that only someone with Leonardo’s childhood could have painted the *Mona Lisa*? It would seem that any portrait painter with sufficient technical skill could have captured Lisa del Giocondo’s distinctive smile. Although Freud does not address this apparent contradiction, he might have offered the following replies. Leonardo would have chosen to, or agreed to, paint Lisa del Giocondo’s portrait only if he had had an unconscious fixation on Caterina. Only Leonardo would have settled on Lisa del Giocondo’s smiling expression, as opposed to other more customary attitudes, as the one to depict in her portrait. And only Leonardo would have taken such care to render Lisa del Giocondo’s smile so exactly and expressively.

Surprisingly, Freud weakens his own art historical claims by clinging to literal-minded ideas about portraiture. If he had regarded Leonardo as a creator, not just a copyist, he could have argued that the enigmatic quality of the *Mona Lisa* was the direct result of Leonardo’s unconscious desire to reproduce Caterina’s smile. Further, he could have asserted that only the strength of Leonardo’s fixation on his mother permitted him to break so dramatically with the conventions of portraiture. Instead, Freud’s account of the genesis of the *Mona Lisa* involves the cumbersome and implausible discovery of a real-world duplicate of Caterina whose features Leonardo records with photographic accuracy.

Why doesn't Freud examine more precisely the role of Leonardo's unconscious in the creation of the *Mona Lisa*? This is not Freud's primary concern. What is important from the psychobiographical point of view is establishing the emotional significance of the portrait for Leonardo. Freud can do this without exploring the picture's construction. Other issues, such as Leonardo's inhibitions in relation to the painting, his refusal to deliver it to the Giocondo family, and his continued attachment to Lisa del Giocondo's smile, suffice to prove that the *Mona Lisa* represented a psychologically meaningful image. So Freud does not need to get overly involved with tricky art historical questions about the extent to which Leonardo distorted or transformed Lisa del Giocondo's actual expression.

The enigmatic status of *The Virgin and St. Anne* depends less than the *Mona Lisa*'s on the subjective responses of the observers. Instead of an ambiguous facial expression, Freud can cite relatively objective factors, such as the rarity of the subject matter, the novel arrangement of the figures, and the youthfulness of St. Anne. Freud first quotes the art historian Muther, who observes that among the small number of artists who treated the subject, only a few placed the Virgin on St. Anne's lap. Even when an artist such as Jakob Cornelisz did so, he reduced the scale of the Virgin in relation to her mother. So by painting the Virgin and the Christ Child with St. Anne, posing the Virgin on her mother's knee, and maintaining a uniform scale for all the figures, Leonardo had already made three unusual decisions.

Freud then points to St. Anne's "peculiar" youthfulness. Instead of the elderly appearance appropriate to a grandmother, she displays the features of "a young woman of unfaded beauty" (113). In contrast to his discussion of the *Mona Lisa*'s enigmas, Freud does not present a host of scholarly and critical reactions to this "striking" aspect of *The Virgin and St. Anne*. In fact, he only mentions the opinions of two art historians. Freud once again invokes Muther, whose views contradict Woldemar von Seidlitz's denial of any similarity between the apparent ages of the Virgin and her mother. Freud, however, rejects Muther's suggestion that Leonardo turned St. Anne into a "radiant beauty" (113) because the artist could not bring himself to depict the graceless lines and wrinkles of old age.

Freud next draws attention to the strangely "fused" arrangement of St. Anne and her daughter. The complicated placement of an adult figure on the lap of another, flowing drapery, and the *contrapposto* twistings of the torsos combine to create a confusing mass of folds, limbs, and heads.

According to Freud, "it is hard to say where Anne ends and where Mary begins." However, Freud cites no other scholars to corroborate his views. This is especially surprising since the "melt[ing]" of the Virgin into St. Anne is the one enigma in Leonardo's work that Freud most clearly and explicitly characterizes as an artistic lapse (114n1). He calls the grouping of the figures "not entirely unconstrained" (112). The Virgin and her mother overlap "like badly condensed dream-figures." Finally, the composition "appears to a critic's eye as a fault, as a defect" (114n1). Freud, however, does not name any critics who hold this opinion.

Freud regards the figures in the London cartoon of *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist* (figure 5) as even more "badly condensed." The heads rest at the same level, and the Virgin's seated pose more closely resembles her mother's. It is as if Leonardo had made two drawings of a figure in slightly different positions and then superimposed one image over the other. Freud quotes "critics" who, putting the matter more bluntly, remark that "it seems 'as if two heads were growing from a single body'" (114-115, n1). But Freud once again fails to name the critics in question.

Freud's view of the Burlington House cartoon leads him to date it before the Louvre picture. As the cartoon represents an even less transformed expression of Leonardo's unconscious desire to commemorate his "two mothers" (113), it must precede the painting. In Freud's scheme, Leonardo himself recognizes the oddness of the fusion of St. Anne and the Virgin and then takes steps in his painting to make them more distinct. Freud supports his dating by invoking the judgment of unnamed "authorities." He also mentions two scholars, Anton Springer and Adolf Rosenberg, who disagree with him. Rosenberg, in fact, not only regards the cartoon as later but also as a "more successful version of the same theme" (115n1). Yet Freud airs this opposing opinion only to dismiss it abruptly.

Freud in this case ventures further than usual into a specifically art historical question, by explaining the logic and sequence of Leonardo's adjustment of the cartoon's composition. Leonardo, according to Freud, would first have attempted to correct the impression that a single figure had sprouted two heads. The artist accomplished this by making the Virgin bend down, thereby separating the heads. He then justified this change in her pose by situating the Christ Child on the ground. The Virgin must now lean over to embrace her son. As the Christ Child has moved into St. John's place in the composition, Leonardo replaces him with the lamb.

Freud also tentatively accepts Oskar Pfister's discovery of the strangest of all of the enigmas of *The Virgin and St. Anne*.<sup>4</sup> Pfister, after reading Freud's *Leonardo*, found an outline of a vulture in the folds of the Virgin's drapery. Although Freud expresses doubts about this "unconscious picture-puzzle" (115n1), he quotes Pfister at length in material added to a footnote in 1919 and includes an illustration that shades the area circumscribed by the vulture outline. The vulture extends laterally across the Virgin's body. A gathering of folds at her hip forms the vulture's head, and a section of mantle draped over her left arm approximates its tail. Pfister points out that this "tail" seems to touch the Christ Child's mouth. So Leonardo not only inscribed his private mother symbol into a painting about mothers but also inserted an allusion to the central event of his childhood memory.

Freud's discussion of *The Virgin and St. Anne* exposes some of the limits of psychobiographical interpretations of art and raises several questions. First, Freud presents an inconsistent and somewhat misleading picture of the artist's control over and awareness of his own work. Freud suggests that Leonardo changed the London cartoon's composition because he recognized its strangeness. But why, then, wouldn't Leonardo have noticed the other enigmatic features of *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist*? If, for example, St. Anne's youthfulness was such a "striking" peculiarity, wouldn't Leonardo have had to explain and justify it to himself? And wouldn't Leonardo have realized that the arrangement of the two figures in the Louvre picture was still confusingly condensed?

Freud might have argued that Leonardo's unconscious needs blinded him to all but the most extremely enigmatic aspects of the London cartoon and the Louvre painting. But Freud does not provide a sufficiently nuanced and complex sense of how Leonardo's unconscious desires interacted with his conscious artistic intentions and standards. Freud remarks that "what appears to a critic's eye as a fault, as a defect in [*The Virgin and St. Anne's*] composition, is vindicated in the eyes of analysis by reference to its secret meaning" (114n1). To say this, however, is to forget that artists are critics, and sometimes very harsh ones, of their own work. Leonardo may not have known the "secret meaning" of *The Virgin and St. Anne*, but he would have had reasons for his pictorial decisions, even if those reasons were only rationalizations of unconscious choices. By ignoring Leonardo's sense of the public meaning, so to speak, of his painting, Freud leaves a distorted picture of the artistic process. He makes it seem as if the

work of a sophisticated Renaissance artist would have emerged, not out of careful, self-conscious planning, but from a spontaneous outpouring of the unconscious.

Second, Freud demonstrates that the psychobiographer inevitably involves himself in interdisciplinary difficulties when he designates an artwork as enigmatic. As art historians are the ultimate judges of the enigmatic status of a painting or sculpture, a psychobiographer without art historical training will always remain at a loss. Sometimes this does not create serious problems. The psychobiographer can rely on a consensus among scholars, as in the case of the *Mona Lisa*, about the enigmatic aspects of a work. More often than not, however, art historians disagree, especially in regard to the question of a lapse in quality. The psychobiographer will then have to go beyond his area of expertise to make a determination. Freud, for example, acknowledges that one scholar, Adolf Rosenberg, far from regarding the London cartoon's composition as even more "badly condensed" than the Louvre picture's, felt, in fact, that it was more successful. Freud sides with the "authorities" who believe that the cartoon was preliminary to the improved painting, but he does not go into the art historical arguments in any depth. He bases his decision on his own sense of the composition's infelicities. Few art historians, however, will accept a claim such as this from a psychobiographer without at least a thorough and informed discussion of the relevant literature.

Why is the enigmatic status of artworks so important? A painting or sculpture need not be enigmatic to have psychobiographical significance. Even if *The Virgin and St. Anne* had been thoroughly unremarkable in subject matter and format, Freud could still have made his psychobiographical points about the two mothers, the youthfulness of St. Anne, the fused composition, et cetera. The only crucial requirement would have been that Leonardo had made these choices, conventional or not, by himself. But if a psychobiographer can convincingly designate a work as enigmatic, this strengthens the psychoanalytic argument. Strange and flawed works suggest that the artist's normal competency and standards have been overcome by particularly powerful unconscious forces. Moreover, the psychobiographical explanation of enigmatic works constitutes the psychobiographer's most dramatic contribution to art history. The analyst can claim to have found solutions to art historical problems that the nonpsychoanalytic scholar would never have discovered.

Freud's guarded acceptance of Pfister's discovery indicates that he believes the unconscious can determine a painting's inner workings to an extraordinary extent. Pfister, after all, did not merely assert that Leonardo had painted some phallic trees or breastlike clouds. He claimed that Leonardo had *unconsciously* inscribed a complicated and specific shape into the very center of a composition. This assumes that completely divergent unconscious organizing principles can coexist with the highest levels of conscious artistic mastery. It is akin to insisting that a great poet unconsciously made the first letters of each verse of a sonnet spell a certain word.

Freud's discussion of *St. John the Baptist* and *Bacchus* returns him to the realm of the enigmatic smile. Once again he explores the question, not of a strange subject or a technical lapse, but of a face expressing an indeterminate emotion. What makes these faces so inexhaustively tantalizing is that a smile always signals an inner liveliness. So the spectator knows that some sort of emotional activity must be taking place. But the viewer can neither pin down what has prompted Mona Lisa's, or St. John the Baptist's, or Bacchus's smile, nor precisely identify what kind of happiness the smile represents. This time, however, Freud enlists only one scholar — the reliable Muther — to verify that St. John's smile is "mysterious." Except for a hint that Leonardo intended these smiles to be "mystical," Freud makes no attempt to explain Leonardo's conscious understanding of the expressions. Instead, he cracks the code of the "secret" smile by arguing that Leonardo has projected onto the features of these adolescent boys the smile that he might have shown after an oedipal triumph (117).

In two instances Freud mentions art historical alternatives to his psychobiographical explanations. In regard to the Leonardesque smile, he suggests a possible precedent in archaic Greek sculpture and in Verrocchio's works. And in the case of St. Anne's youthfulness, he cites Muther's theory that Leonardo could not force himself to depict the ugliness of old age. But in neither instance does Freud imply that the art historical and the psychobiographical solutions might be compatible with each other. He ascribes the view that the *Mona Lisa* may have derived from either "the peculiar fixed smile found in archaic Greek sculptures" or "something similar in the figures of Leonardo's teacher Verrocchio" not to himself but to "the connoisseur of art" (107n2). He rejects Muther's idea by asking rhetorically, "Can we be satisfied with this explanation?" (113). Freud, moreover, denies his "connoisseur" any intellectual tolerance. This hypothetical art lover —

instead of adding the psychoanalytic interpretation to the art historical one—must, in Freud's words, "have some misgivings in accepting the arguments" in Freud's analysis of the *Mona Lisa* (107n2).

Freud never explicitly states that one must choose between psychobiographical and art historical explanations. Indeed, it is hard to imagine someone so sensitive to the overdetermined nature of psychological phenomena taking such a rigid stance toward works of art. Yet Freud often slights the art historical context of the supposed enigmas in Leonardo's paintings, and he sometimes gives the impression that he thinks he has solved art historical problems in exclusively psychobiographical terms. These positions set an unfortunate tone for subsequent debates about his study. Art historians could all too easily turn Freud into a straw man who reduced art to the expression of unconscious sexual desires. His occasional cocksureness also provoked them into replacing limited psychoanalytic interpretations with narrow art historical ones. Freud could have prevented many of these reactions if he had clearly laid out a theory of cultural, as opposed to strictly psychological, overdetermination in his *Leonardo*.

Despite the relatively modest extent of Freud's remarks about Leonardo's oeuvre, he initiates a surprising variety of psychoanalytic approaches to art. In fact, his art historical contributions fall into at least five categories. First, he constructs a psychoiconography. He uncovers the unconscious significance of various figures in Leonardo's work. Second, he provides psychoanalytic interpretations of expressiveness. He identifies the unconscious source of the expressions on the faces of *Mona Lisa*, *St. Anne in The Virgin and St. Anne*, *St. John the Baptist*, and *Bacchus*.<sup>5</sup> Third, he examines spectators' responses and suggests that a viewer's attraction to a painting such as the *Mona Lisa* may largely derive from unconscious factors. Fourth, he offers a psychoanalytic explanation of formal problems such as the meaning and evolution of *The Virgin and St. Anne's* composition. And fifth, he sheds light on the work inhibitions that affected the creation and ultimate deterioration of *The Last Supper* and *The Battle of Anghiari*.

Nearly all of Freud's art historical observations depend on his psychobiographical reconstruction of Leonardo's life. Thus a successful attack on the latter essentially invalidates the former. But how vulnerable is Freud's reconstruction? Even without disputing the validity of psychoanalytic theory, the reconstruction lends itself to several types of criticism. Scholars may discover evidence that points to a different type of infancy than the one

Freud postulated. Psychoanalysts themselves may challenge Freud's notions about such issues as the genesis of homosexuality and narcissism. And art historians may reinterpret the artworks Freud cites in support of his reconstruction. We must remember, however, that art historical scholarship by itself can rarely disprove psychoanalytic interpretations of art. It may weaken Freud's arguments by showing that certain works were less enigmatic than Freud claimed, but art historical research cannot address questions regarding the unconscious motivations behind Leonardo's artistic choices.

Instead of contradicting Freud's explanations, art historians can widen and supplement them. Between Leonardo's unconscious and a finished canvas or cartoon fell much more than Freud suggests. Freud remarks that Leonardo "bestowed [the Leonardesque smile] on the *free* creations of his phantasy" (109; emphasis mine). But how free were these creations from concerns about patronage or from social, religious, and artistic constraints? Even so original an artist as Leonardo would not have allowed himself to indulge his fantasies to the extent that Freud implies. Art historians can show what else besides Leonardo's unconscious desires shaped the most distinctive aspects of his art.

It may seem unfair to hold Freud's art historical remarks to too high a standard. After all, Freud made disclaimers, however ambiguous, about his ability to explicate "the great man's achievements" (130). He also relegated many of his comments about Leonardo's paintings to footnotes. What is more, in his later essay on Michelangelo's *Moses*, he admitted to having something of a tin eye when he said that "the subject matter of a work of art attracts me more strongly than its formal and technical properties, which, after all, the artist principally values."<sup>6</sup> It was Leonardo's character that Freud primarily sought to understand, not his pictures.<sup>7</sup>

Yet more than twenty years after *Leonardo's* publication, Freud boasted in a letter to the actress Yvette Guilbert and her husband, Max Schiller, that he had made *The Virgin and St. Anne* "intelligible" by reference to the artist's "peculiar childhood story":

The idea that an artist's achievements are conditioned internally by childhood impressions, destiny, suppressions and disappointments has yielded much enlightenment to us and that is why we set great store by it. I once ventured to approach one of the very greatest, an artist of whom unfortunately all too little is known, Leonardo da Vinci. I was able at



least to make it probable that his St. Anne, which you can visit every day in the Louvre, would not be intelligible without the peculiar childhood story of Leonardo. Nor, possibly, would other works.<sup>8</sup>

So Freud ultimately “set great store” by his psychobiographical approach to art, an approach that he aptly defines as “the idea that an artist’s achievements are conditioned internally by childhood impressions, destiny, suppressions and disappointments.” It is only proper, then, to examine how much “enlightenment” this idea has actually provided.