Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks
SmartHistory

There are two versions of Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*. The one illustrated on this page (in Paris) is Leonardo's original *Virgin of the Rocks* (c. 1483-86) in the Louvre. The other is in London and is the subject of the video above. These two paintings are a good place to start to define the qualities of the new style of the High Renaissance. Leonardo painted both in Milan, where he had moved from Florence.

Normally when we have seen Mary and Christ (in, for example, paintings by Lippi and Giotto), Mary has been enthroned as the queen of heaven. Here, in contrast, we see Mary seated on the ground. This type of representation of Mary is referred to as the Madonna of Humility. Mary has her right arm around the Infant Saint John the Baptist who is making a gesture of prayer to the Christ child. The Christ child in turn blesses St. John. Mary's left hand hovers protectively over the head of her son while an angel looks out and points to St. John. The figures are all located in a
fabulous and mystical landscape with rivers that seem to lead nowhere and bizarre rock formations. In the foreground we see carefully observed and precisely rendered plants and flowers.

We immediately notice Mary's ideal beauty and the graceful way in which she moves, features typical of the High Renaissance.

This is the first time that an Italian Renaissance artist has completely abandoned halos. We saw how Fra Filippo Lippi reduced the halo to a narrow ring around Mary's head. Clearly the unreal, symbolic nature of the halo was antithetical to the realism of the Renaissance. It was, in a way, a necessary holdover from the Middle Ages: how else to indicate a figure's divinity?

But Leonardo found another way to indicate divinity -- by giving the figures ideal beauty and grace. After all, we would never mistake this group of figures for an ordinary picnic, the way the Lippi's painting of the Madonna and Child with Angels almost looks like a family portrait. We are clearly looking at a mystical vision of Mary, Christ, John the Baptist and an angel in heaven.

The Unified Composition

If we look closely we can see that Leonardo grouped the figures together within a geometric shape of a pyramid (I say pyramid instead of triangle because Leonardo is very concerned with creating an illusion of space -- and a pyramid is three dimensional). He also has the figures gesturing to each other and looking at each other. Both of these innovations serve to unify the composition. This is an important difference from paintings of the Early Renaissance where the figures often looked separate from each other. Sometimes this is referred to as a unified composition.

Another way to think about this is to go back to our discussion of Leonardo's angel in his teacher's painting. There, we talked about the more complex pose of the body of Leonardo's angel. Remember this is the High Renaissance, and
things that artists were just learning how to do in the Early Renaissance (like contrapposto) are now easy for the artists of the High Renaissance.

As a result, they can do more with the body -- make it more complex, more elegant and more graceful. Similarly, the compositions of the paintings of the High Renaissance are more complex and sophisticated than the compositions of the Early Renaissance. Figures interact more, groups of figures are united into pyramidal compositions.