

ICONOGRAFÍA DE MANOS EN LA PINTURA RENACENTISTA

ICONOGRAPHY OF HANDS IN RENAISSANCE PAINTING

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RESUMEN

El estilo de pintura renacentista refleja todo tipo de principios, enfoques y comprensión del diseño plástico como un carácter estándar de las características históricas, políticas, religiosas, culturales y económicas de esa época. Al deshacerse de un tipo de perspectiva estricta y puramente centrada en la iglesia, los artistas del Renacimiento prácticamente comienzan a mirar la naturaleza, la ciencia, la literatura, la filosofía y, obviamente, la anatomía humana en un conjunto de mentes diferente. Una descripción razonable, equilibrada, científica y lógica de la vida humana lleva a los pintores a centrarse más en las partes del cuerpo humano. Aparte de los rostros de las figuras, las manos se convierten en partes esenciales del cuerpo para sujetar un espejo al universo interior de las figuras. Se incluyeron dentro del programa iconográfico tal que reflejaban las emociones y contemplaciones de la figura, y la conexión entre figuras y objetos. En este estudio, un examen a través de varias pinturas renacentistas arrojará luz sobre cómo los pintores como Giotto, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Francesca y más utilizaron la representación de las manos como un aparato y como un lenguaje de sus propósitos creativos. Así, se manifestará una iconografía de manos en la pintura renacentista.

Palabras clave: Renacimiento-pintura-anatomía humana-manos-lenguaje.

ABSTRACT

Renaissance style of painting reflects all types of plastic design principles, approaches and understanding as a standard character of historical, political, religious, cultural, and economic features of that era. Disposing of unadulterated strict and church focused kind of perspective, Renaissance artists practically start to look on nature, science, literature, philosophy, and obviously human anatomy in a different set of minds. Reasonable, balanced, scientific and logical portrayal of human life leads painters to focus closer on pieces of the human body. Aside from the faces of the figures, hands become essential body parts to hold a mirror to the interior universe of the figures. They were included within the iconographic program such mirrored the emotions and contemplations of the figure, and the connection among figures and objects. In this study, an examination through various Renaissance paintings will shed light on how the painters like Giotto, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Francesca, and more utilized the portrayal of hands as an apparatus and as a language of their creative purposes. Thusly, an iconography of hands in Renaissance painting will be manifested.

Keywords: Renaissance-painting-human anatomy-hands-language.

INTRODUCTION: RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance period, which emerged within the Italian city of Florence in the 15th century and spread to the entire of Europe in the 16th century, meaning “rebirth”; is that the time of economic and commercial vitality manifested itself; clergy and church authority have relatively been diminished; the facility of the bourgeois class was gradually and clearly felt; Greek and Roman cultures and hence traditions of antiquity began to be center of attention again; the human mind and rationality began to serve science. The Renaissance also does not hesitate to reinterpret the irrational sources of antiquity in a rational approach by making the individual authenticity one among its main concerns, and by keeping a knowledge-centered reality in the foreground. In this period, qualities like symmetry, harmony, proportion, measure, order, integrity, perspective and geometry gained importance in artistic forms. Renaissance represents a multicolored structure of the mind. Unlike the soul-body separation created at the time of Middle Ages and located its roots in Plato whose basic philosophy has been revolved round the concept that moving faraway from physical realities within the world would offer grasping the truth, Renaissance sees human beings with their soul and body since the mindset is human-centered. Within this framework, it is heading for human beings as it is for the world itself. In the philosophy of Middle Ages’ soul-body separation, the soul is immortal and prisoned in this worldly body. The soul moves from this world to the other world by getting obviate its mortal body since this world may be a temporary one, and therefore the temporary one is hierarchically lower than the permanent one. However, in the Renaissance approach human anatomy became more important than ever. Actually therein period “Portrayals of the body prompted artists to become knowledgeable about anatomy and the inter-relationships between the various parts of the human body” (Lazzeri et al., 2014: 474). Therefore, the Renaissance manifested the strong bond between science and art. Along side Leonardo Da Vinci, who asserted that in order to show a part of a body in painting, there is requirement for a scientific approach towards body parts and their movement; in his work *On Painting*, Alberti also defends the importance of the parts and movements of the body so as to grasp what the figure tries to inform. He says, “The body is said to live when it has certain voluntary movements. It is said to be dead when the members no longer can carry on the functions of life, that is, movement and feeling. Therefore the painter, wishing to express life in things, will make every part in motion—but in motion he will keep loveliness and grace” (Alberti, 1970: 25).

Renaissance painting, which is predicated on the Renaissance mentality, while describing the human being, not only concerned together with its physical characteristics, but also tried to hold a mirror to his inner world. Therefore, the physical body and therefore the parts of this body, which were obsessively studied during this period, were included in the iconographic program in a way that reflects the inner world, feelings and thoughts of the figure. In this study, what the hands mean specifically for the Renaissance and the way Renaissance sees the hands are going to be briefly explained with various examples. By doing this, an iconography of hands within the Renaissance will be manifested.

HANDS IN RENAISSANCE PAINTING

Undoubtedly, from a historical point of view, the utilization of hands in painting to make a particular meaning was not the primary time in Renaissance. Although having some functional or magical purposes instead of artistic one, some hand paintings at the wall of La Fuente del Salin Cave in Spain which matches back to 22,400 BC shows that even the foremost primitive citizenry reflected that body organ in their so-called art works. As another example, in some pictures in Ancient Egypt, it had been seen that hands were used to show social classification. In Renaissance painting, the hands are at least as important as the faces of the figures, because the most visible part of an individual is typically the hands. That is why “representation of the position of the hands became a decorative element that was almost as important as the face” (Lazzeri et al., 2019, p. 526). Consistent with the position of the hands, many works being done by masters including Raphael, El Greco, Bronzino etc. are divided into some categories like hands on chest, hands on flank, hands pointing to the sky or the



FIGURE 1. Massaccio. The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden. 1425. Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence (Before and after restoration)

world, hands holding a person or object etc. and then discussed whether hands in those works have had some religious, occult or very secret meanings. However, it seems likely that such assertions include some speculations and there is not any written proof or trustworthy sources. It makes those assertions not more than speculations. Some scholars have recently focused on not only the position or message of the hands but whether it can be argued from some Renaissance works that figures in the paintings have hand deformities and whether this is an indicator that hand deformities were some common diseases as an issue for medical observing. A methodical approach towards some Italian Renaissance painters like Betto, Ghirlandaio, Uccello, Botticelli, Francesca etc. has mentioned a matter that “hand has been depicted with unusual representations or real deformities involving the fifth finger” (Lazzeri et al., 2014, p. 474).¹ For instance, in Lippi’s *Magrini Altarpiece* (1482) all figures have

some deformed hands and fingers intimately. Weisz and Albury argue that especially some aristocratic figures in 15th century paintings were portrayed with deformities at hand or fingers² with a speculative reason of depicting “aristocratic elegance and refinement” (Weisz et al., 2017, p. 1940).

In this study, usage of hands in medical or occult context haven’t be discussed. Rather the research has been done on a more realistic idea that the position and posture of the hands, the connection between the hand and the owner of the hand, or the relationship of the figure represented by the hand with the opposite figure or figures in the painting, have given the hands an important function in the visual scheme of Renaissance painters so as to carry a number of emotional states and expressions.

In the fresco entitled *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (1425), belonging to Massaccio from Florence school, Eve and Adam’s expulsion from heaven for eating the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden is depicted. Both are devastated by this punishment. While the narrow door on the left emphasizes the impossibility of returning to heaven again, Eve’s hands show awareness of her crime, together with her head desperately up and slightly opening her mouth. She is trying to hide her sexual organs and nudity with her hands. The very fact that Adam covers his face with both hands refers to his regret and embarrassment.

Piero della Francesca’s *The Polyptych of Misericordia* (1444-1464) may be a rich example of the use of hands in various ways. Right in the center is Mary with halo and with raising arms as showing her protective approach. There are also gospel scenes on the right and left

¹ For further readings, see Hijmans, W., & Dequeker, J. (2004). “Camptodactyly in a painting by Dirk Bouts (c. 1410-1475)”. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 97, (11), 549–551; Johnson H. A. (2005). “The Renaissance fifth finger.” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 98, (2), 87; Frasc C. (2005). “Finger deformities in Renaissance art”. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 98, (7), 337.

² From medical point of view, those deformities have been named as *clinodactyly* or *camptodactyly* meaning, “a fixed flexion of the proximal interphalangeal joint and hyperextension of the metacarpophalangeal and distal interphalangeal joints (Weisz et al., 2017, p. 1940). For further reading, see Goldfarb, C. A. (2009). “Congenital hand differences”. *The Journal of Hand Surgery*, 34, (7), 1351–1356; Foucher, G., Loréa, P., Khouri, R. K., Medina, J., & Pivato, G. (2006). “Camptodactyly as a spectrum of congenital deficiencies: a treatment algorithm based on clinical examination”. *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, 117, (6), 1897–1905; Bukvic, N., & Elling, J. W. (2015). “Genetics in the art and art in genetics”. *Gene*, 555, (1), 14–22; Weisz G.M., Albury, W. R, Matucci-Cerinic M. & Lazzeri D. (2016) “‘Epidemic’ of hand deformities in the French Renaissance paintings of Jean and François Clouet”. *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine*, 109, (9), 633–635.

of the crucifix scene in the upper part. That is, when the panel of altar comes together, the gospel scene is made. Here is Mary on the right side of the cross, and the angel who gives the great news on the left. Mary puts one hand on her chest reflecting her expression of gratitude. The angel who gives the gospel also points to the heavens with her hand, that is, it is God who gives the command. On the right side of the cross on the upper part is St. John, whom Jesus loved considerably, and Mary is also on the left side. The dominance of the expression in Mary is shown by her raising hands towards Jesus, therefore the hands became the symbol of tragedy, confusion and pain.



FIGURE 2. Francesca. The Polyptych of Misericordia. 1444-1464. Museo Comunale, Sansepolcro



FIGURE 2A. Francesca. The Polyptych of Misericordia. Detail



FIGURE 3. Messina. *Virgin Annunciate*. 1473. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

In Antonello da Messina's painting of the *Virgin Annunciate* (1473), it is shown that the young Mary, who features a very thin halo on her head and the holy book ahead of her, clasped her hands and given the position of praying and that she is in gratitude in her belief and in God.



FIGURE 4. Carpaccio. *Saint George and Dragon*. 1502. Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice



FIGURE 4A. Carpaccio. *Saint George and Dragon*. Detail

Another work in which the hands symbolize the sensation of gratitude in a similar way is the work of *Saint George and Dragon* (1502) by Carpaccio from the Venice school. Saint George is depicted within the legends of the king rescuing his daughter while fighting with a dragon that has haunted the Libyan city of Silene. In this work, the king's daughter watching the fight on the far right by bonding her hands together in front of her body symbolizes gratitude and being obliged for the kindness of Saint George.

In the fresco called *Saint Francis Renounces His Earthly Father* (1297-1299) belonging to Giotto of the forerunner of the Renaissance, Francesco's disengagement from the fabric world and devoting himself to the spiritual life were given both by his nudity and his rejection of his father by placing his believers and church architecture on the rear. Behind his father are the notables of Assisi and the palace representing the material world. There is a hand symbolizing God at the highest part of the composition that is divided into two. This is God's hand. Francesco also points to the heavenly hand with his left hand, saying that his father is now God in the sky. In this fresco, the hand symbolizes not only a sense but also a being, the existence of God. At the same time, the fact that Francesco's hand and God's hand are facing each other emphasizes the strong bond between them.



FIGURE 5. Giotto. *Saint Francis Renounces His Earthly Father*. 1297-1299. Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, Assisi

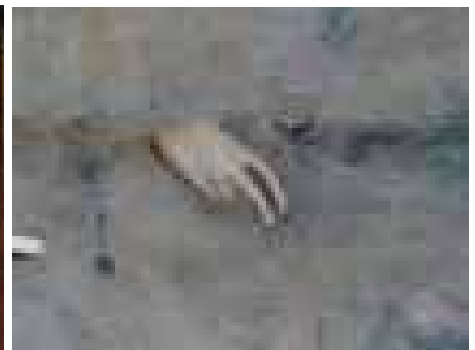


FIGURE 5A. Giotto. *Saint Francis Renounces His Earthly Father*. Detail



FIGURE 6. Giotto. *Joachim's Sacrificial Offering*. 1304-1306. Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel, Padua



FIGURE 6A. Giotto. *Joachim's Sacrificial Offering*. Detail

Also, hands were used extensively in the fresco of Giotto's sacrificial scene called *Joachim's Sacrificial Offering* (1304-1306). The praying position of the shepherd on the left is shown by bringing his hands together in front of him, and the angel raises her hand as if to show that she accepted the sacrifice of Jacob and accepted his request. As mentioned in the previous picture, the hand in the sky symbolizes the hand of God, the ontological existence of God.



FIGURE 7. Botticelli. *Adoration of Magi*. 1475. Uffizi Museum, Florence



FIGURE 7A. Botticelli. *Adoration of Magi*. Detail

In Botticelli's tempera called *Adoration of the Magi* (1475) in which perspective and the depth are clearly felt, one of the prophetic kings bowed in front of Mary as an indication of prostration and as a sign of gratitude he extended his hand to Mary.



FIGURE 8. Botticelli. *Saint Augustinus*. 1480. Ognissanti Church, Florence

Again in Botticelli's fresco named *Saint Augustinus* (1480), Augustine was portrayed as a scientist rather than a priest, and the moment he saw Saint Jerome's vision was depicted. Due to the vision Augustine saw while holding a paper and ink box in one hand to warn Saint Jerome, he put his right hand over his heart. This hand gesture symbolizes the humility felt.

In *The Birth of Venus* (1484-1486), which is perhaps the best known work of Botticelli, Venus was given the pose of "pudica", one among the classic poses of Western art. It comes from the word "pudendus" which suggests "shame" in Latin and means the standing naked figure covering intimate places with the hands. Therefore, the use of hands in the figure appears as a symbol of shame in this work. An identical pose is found in Eve in Massacio's *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* as it has been mentioned before. In the works of Raffaello from Roma school, where Jesus as a child and Mary are general depicted together, the bonding and love of the two figures to each other is symbolized and strengthened by hands in addition to glances.

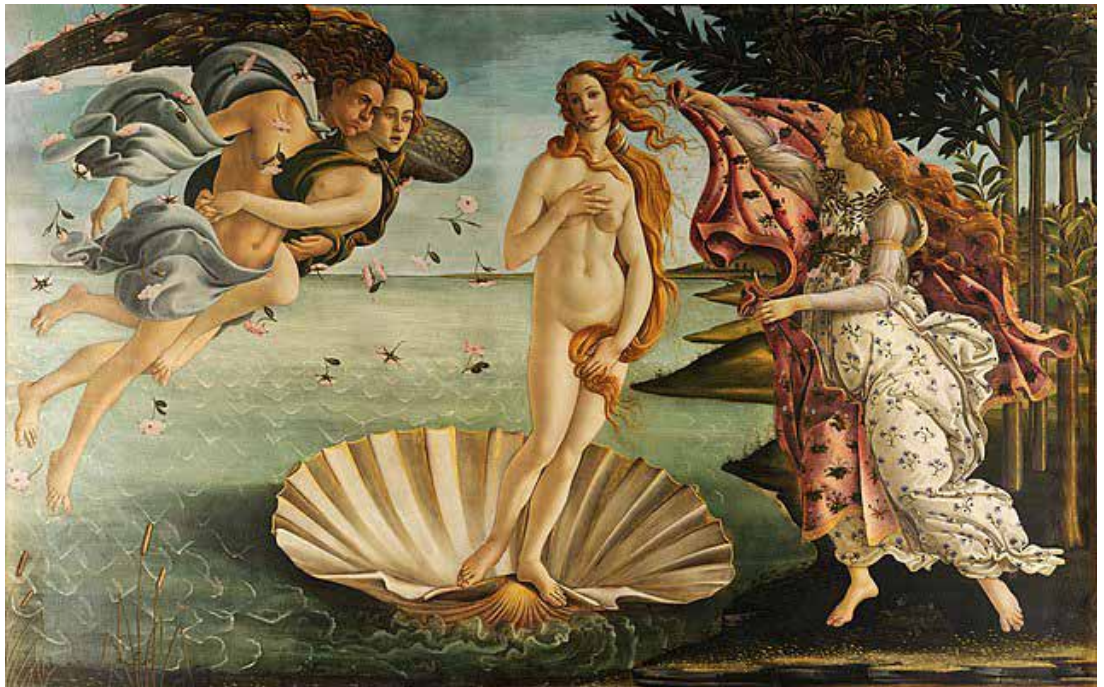


FIGURE 9. Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus*. 1484-1486. Uffizi Museum, Florence



FIGURE 10. Raphael. *The School of Athens*. 1509-1511. Apostolic Palace, Vatican City



FIGURE 10A. Raphael. *The School of Athens*. Detail

In Raphael's fresco called *The School of Athens* (1509-1511), hands were used as a tool for visualizing philosophical perspective and approach at the time of ancient Greece represented by Plato and Aristotle. Plato on the left from the two figures in the very center of the fresco shows the world of forms (ideas) with his right hand raised towards the sky -since according to him, things in the world are shaped and formed according to these pure forms in the world of ideas and the whole source of knowledge is those ideal forms. Aristotle on the right shows this world, the nature with his right hand -because according to him the ideas are the essence of things; the world of ideas and the world of senses are together, and the source of knowledge comes from the observation of nature, that is, the earth.

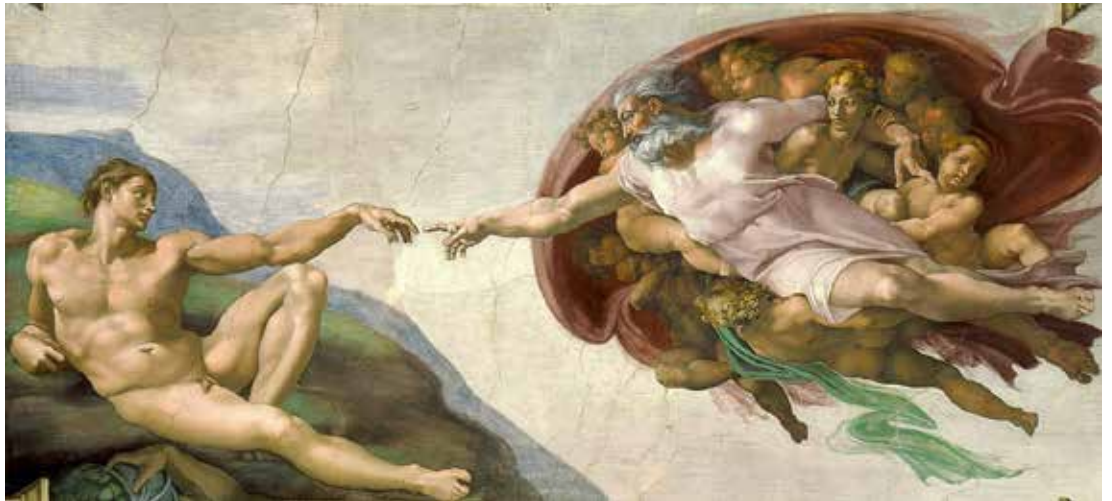


FIGURE 11. Michelangelo. *Creation of Adam*. 1512. Sistine Chapel, Vatican City



FIGURE 11 A. Michelangelo. *Creation of Adam*. Detail

In the fresco of *Creation of Adam* (1512), which Michelangelo (1475-1564) made on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, God's giving life to Adam was realized through hands. Hand symbolism has a crucial place in the works of Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519).



FIGURE 12. Da Vinci. *The Last Supper*. 1495-1498. Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan

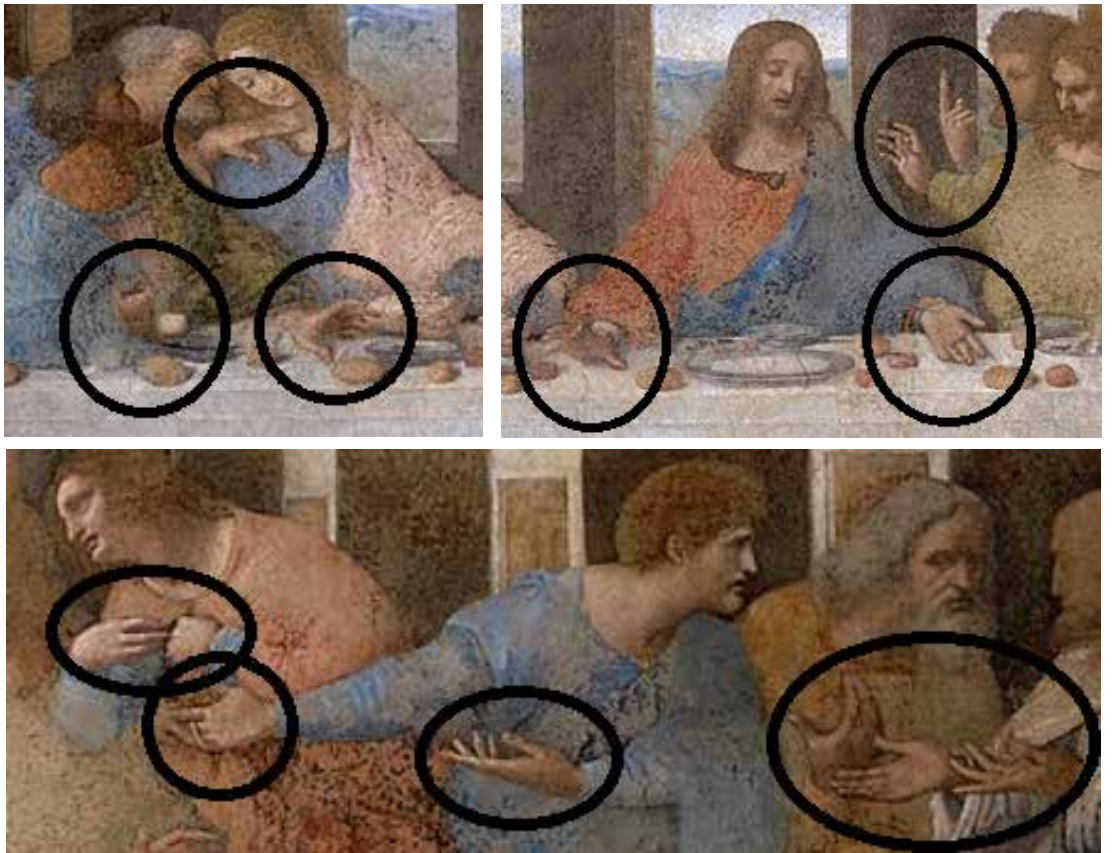


FIGURE 12A. Da Vinci. *The Last Supper*. Detail

In his fresco on the wall of Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, *The Last Supper* (1495-1498)³, Jesus announces at dining table that one among the apostles would betray him before his arrest. The confusion, hesitation, and mobility were given indirectly through the hands of other apostles, except Judas, the person who would betray him. While Judas had a purse in his right hand as symbolizing the money he would receive as the price of betrayal, his left hand moved towards the bread on which Jesus would lie, and this again symbolizes his betrayal. In the work, one hand of Jesus shows the bread and the other the wine. This movement of hands points to the Eucharist ritual. It has been asserted that Da Vinci's interest in hands has been revealed in *Mona Lisa* (1503), too.

³ Figures, from left to right: Bartholomew, James the Less, Andrew, Judas Iscariot, Peter, John, Jesus Christ, Thomas, James, Philip, Matthew, Thaddeus, Simon.



FIGURE 13. Da Vinci. *Mona Lisa*. 1503-1506. Louvre Museum, Paris



FIGURE 14. Da Vinci. *Lady with an Ermine*. 1489-1491. Czartoryski Museum, Krakow

The right hand has just touched the left hand or is about to touch it and this situation symbolizes the temporality of the moment.

In the painting of *The Lady with an Ermine* (1489-1491), the background is dark, and the woman caresses the animal named ermine on her lap. The hands are very striking here. They become a sign of compassion and mercy.



Figure 15. Titian. *The Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple*. 1534-1538. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice



FIGURE 15A. Titian. *The Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple*. Detail

In Titian's painting entitled *The Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple* (1534-1538), at her young age Mary's presentation at the temple for educational purposes is depicted, while the hands pointing to the sacredness in the body of Mary inside the halo draw attention.



FIGURE 16. Titian. Anunciation. 1535. Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice



FIGURE 16A. Titian. Anunciation. Detail

Again, in his work titled *Anunciation* (1535), the darkness dominating the place as general points out the importance of the sacred light and the angel flying from the left side shows the holy light with her right hand and by her hands she tells that she has brought good news from God. Furthermore, the very fact that Mary has both hands on her chest symbolizes her submission to God's grace.



FIGURE 17. Titian. Penitent Magdalene. 1565. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg



FIGURE 17A. Titian. Penitent Magdalene. Detail

In one among Titian's most vital works, *Penitent Magdalene* (1565), Magdalene who lived a sinful life for a while, and after getting to know Jesus, retreated, did not eat, did not dress, did not cut her hair, as a symbol of her regret and repentance, places her right hand between her breasts in the painting. While the tears of the eyes and the tears combined with the condition of the hands indicate the presence of human pain, there is a passionate belief in her gaze. Also putting the hands in this way on the chest and the cloudy, twilight air in the background complement each other and reflect the deep suffering of Magdalena due to her previous sins. The retreat of repentance of Magdalena also symbolizes a devotion to the Orthodox faith. A connection is established with Magdalena's hands by underlining the temporality of life which is illustrated by image of *vanitas* symbolized generally through skulls, pale flowers, rotten fruits and extinguished candles etc. and the necessity of repentance during this temporary life.



FIGURE 18. Da Vinci. *The Virgin of the Rocks*. 1483-1486. Museum, Paris



FIGURE 18A. Da Vinci. *The Virgin of the Rocks*. Detail



FIGURE 18B. Da Vinci. *The Virgin of the Rocks*. With deleted hands

Turning back to Da Vinci, his painting called *The Virgin of the Rocks* (1483-1486) is a complete symphony of hands. Therefore, it is important to make an iconographic analysis of this picture in this study, too. Rocks appearing in the background symbolize the strength of the church. In this painting, the figures are placed in a triangle. Right in the middle, Mary's left hand is on the head of the baby Jesus, and her right hand is on the shoulder of the baby John the Baptist. It is like caressing the head of Jesus while protecting John. The hands here are a sign of compassion and mercy and emphasize the protecting and guarding nature of Mary. Baby Jesus, on the right, raises his hands towards the baby John the Baptist and blesses him. The hands of the baby John the Baptist on the left are bonded in front of his body and express his gratitude for Jesus. Here too, hands symbolize a feeling of gratitude and appreciation. The angel also points to John the Baptist and shows him Jesus. The soft affectionate expression on Mary's face is completed in the compassion she establishes with baby John the Baptist and baby Jesus through her hands. In fact, when a circle is drawn in the context of the hands in this picture, the hands here also guide how the viewer will look at the picture.

If the hands in this painting are taken out for a moment and checked out again, it can be easily understood what proportion the emotional and expressive power of the painting stray, and the way how much the communication and relationship between the figures weakens. Therefore, this example proves that the hands are a very important tool used as a bearer of iconographic aiming to strengthen emotional expression in Renaissance painting and to show the emotional dimension of the figures and the relationships between them.

CONCLUSION

In this study, an iconography of hands has been scrutinized through various works of Renaissance painters from Giotto as a proto-Renaissance artist to Da Vinci as one of the foremost well-known artists of the High Renaissance. In accordance with the Renaissance thought, it has been put an accentuation that quite possibly the most obvious and striking pieces of the body after the face is the hands. Hence, the position and posture of the hands, the relationship of the hands with other parts of the body shows the spirit and emotional universe of the figure, its feelings and thoughts, the connection of the figure with other figures, and the emotional and religious bond established with other figures and that is the reason they were utilized by Renaissance painters as a solid method for articulation. It has

acquired an emblematic significance through visual structures. In Renaissance, the hands sometimes express the notice of the guilt of the figure in the work of art and the sensation of shame, and in some cases significant sentiments like misfortune, shock and pain. Now and then the connecting hands of the figures show the adoration and connection between them. While in certain works of art they represent the vibe of appreciation and modesty of the figure, in different ones a given life or God. Hands are additionally utilized as an indication of selling out, much the same as Judah's hands in *The Last Supper*. Abstract philosophical thoughts are now and again firmly addressed outwardly with only one hand motion. In certain works of art, the hands represent contrition as in Titian's painting of *Penitent Magdalene*.

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