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## Leonardo's Ancient Inspiration

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## Leonardo's Ancient Inspiration

### Abstract

Investigating the hidden ancient inspiration in Leonardo de Vinci's 'Battle of Anghiari' and it's significance to the city of Florence. How and why Leonardo chose to incorporate Greco-Roman aesthetics into his art.

### Keywords

Leonardo de Vinci, Battle of Anghiari, Renaissance, Florence, art history

### Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Classical Archaeology and Art History | Painting

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# Leonardo's Ancient Inspiration

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# Gettysburg COLLEGE

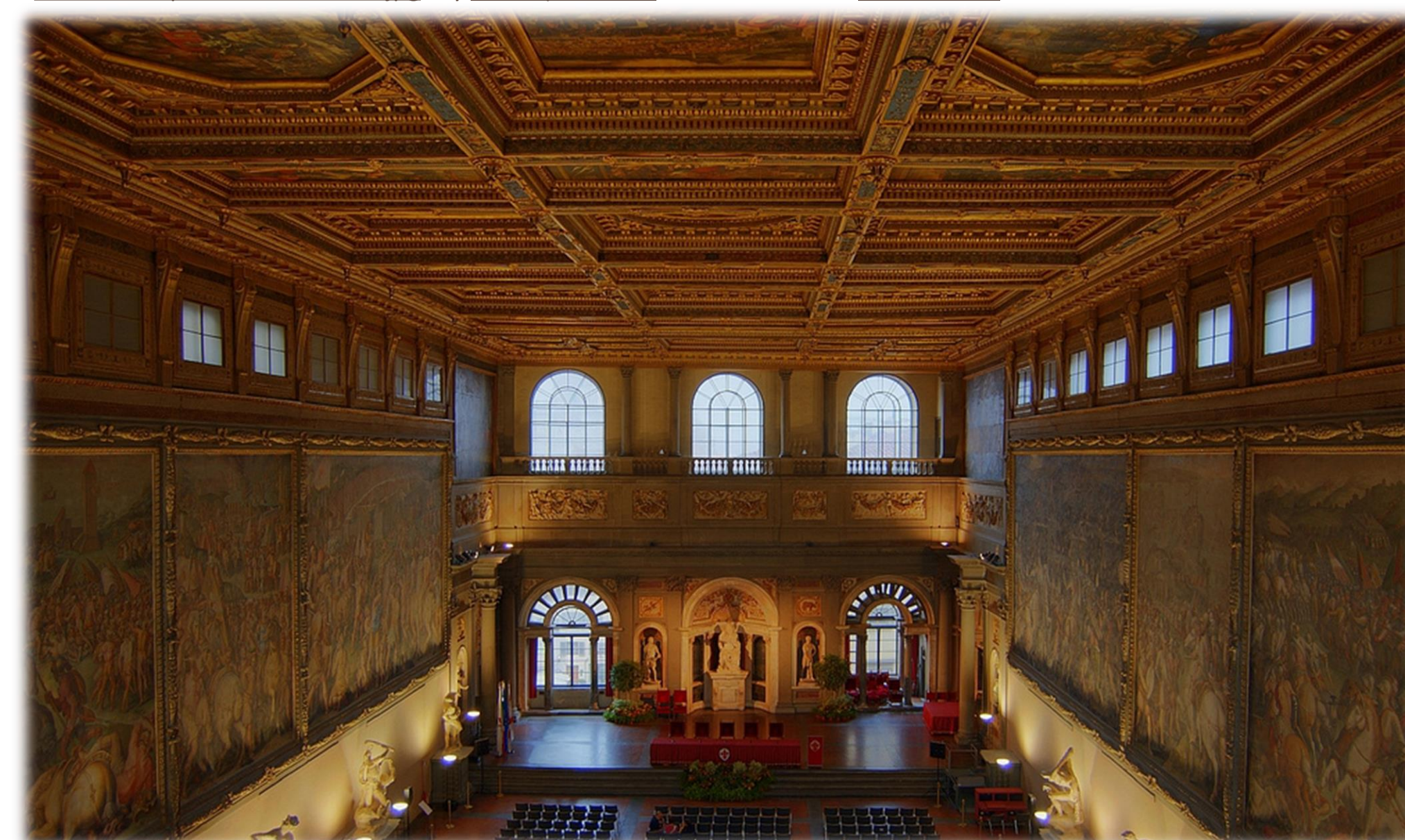
"Study of a Figure for the Battle of Anghiari" by markldiaz is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.



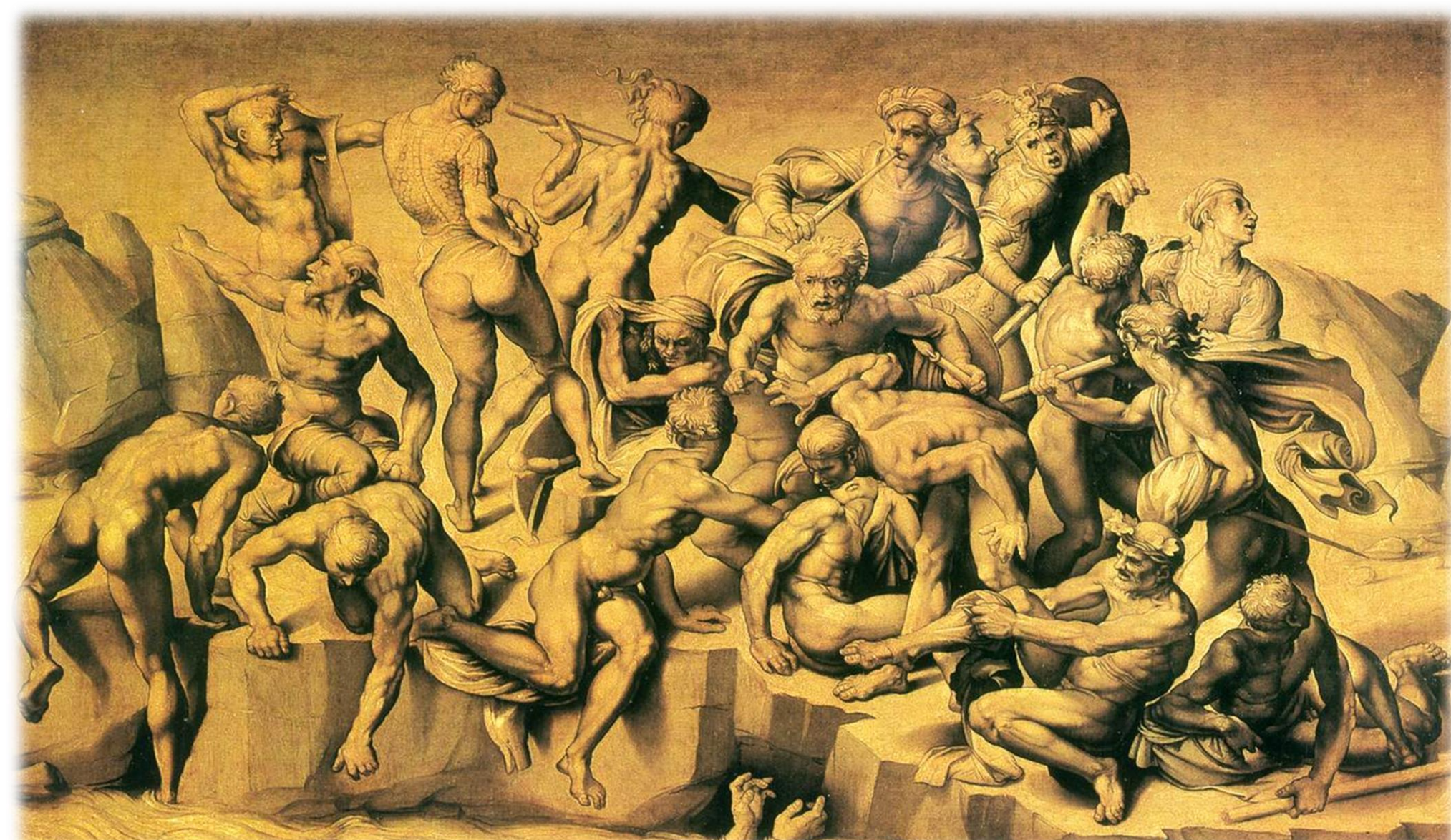
### Leonardo Sketch

Original study sketch of a face for the *Battle of Anghiari*, it can be seen in the copy as the face of the Florentine Knight on the far right. These sketches are the only reference we have to Leonardo's original piece.

"File:Firenze-palazzo vecchio 24.jpg" by Bradley Grzesiak is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.5.



"Buonarroti Michelangelo, Battle of Cascina (central section), 1505, Oil on panel, 77 x 130 cm, Holkham Hall, Norfolk" by Emme Debi is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.



### Palazzo Vecchio

Leonardo's final piece was meant to be on display in the Salone dei Cinquecento in the Palazzo Vecchio on a wall opposite Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* (pictured above).

### Introduction:

Leonardo Da Vinci was commissioned to paint the *Battle of Anghiari* for the council halls of the Palazzo Della Signoria in 1503. However, it would never be finished and what little did exist of the piece would be painted over in the early 1560's. Fortunately however, many copies were made of Leonardo's original work, most famously Peter Paul Rubens' Baroque copy, created around the early 17th century.

The *Battle of Anghiari* was the centerpiece of what was meant to be a three-panel work for the Palazzo Della Signoria. With all the action being centered on the canvas, we are put directly into the thick of it, with two Florentine/Coalition soldiers on the right side of the piece, and two Milanese knights on the left. What most immediately stands out about the *Battle of Anghiari* is the immense amount of expression on all of the figures' faces and motions. The rage and fury on the knight's faces contrasted with the skittishness of the horses and the fear of the soldiers beneath them.

### Peter Paul Rubens' 1603 copy of *The Battle of Anghiari*



"Peter Paul Ruben's copy of the lost Battle of Anghiari, c. 1603" by markldiaz is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

### Background:

The context behind the commission of the *Battle of Anghiari* is one of Florence in an era of change. In 1494 the Medici's were expelled from power at the hands of Girolamo Savonarola, who himself would be excommunicated by the Pope and executed in 1498. With the Great Council taking over as the governing body of Florence, Leonardo was commissioned to paint the *Battle of Anghiari* in the Palazzo Della Signoria as a marker to the new republic Florence was to be.

Leonardo abandoned displaying historical realism in favor of demonstrating his skill in drawing muscular structure. Depicting all the figures wearing little to no armor, or even clothes for that matter showing off the full range of muscularity in their legs. None of the knights are wearing any of the typical plate-armor or equipment expected by this period. The only figure that is properly armored is the Milanese knight in the center, wearing a properly depicted full suit of Milanese plate-armor. It is almost as though Leonardo wished to depict the Milanese knight as more robotic or cowardly, wearing full plate armor compared to the three coalition/Florentine knights wearing little to no armor, as if they were meant to be braver, more independent, or simply manlier.

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Hartt, Frederick. "Leonardo and the Second Florentine Republic." *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 44 (1986): 95-116. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20189024>.  
Konečný, Lubomír. "Leonardo Da Vinci's 'Battle of Anghiari' Revisited." *Artibus et Historiae* 39, no. 78 (2018): 219-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45120855>.

### Connecting it back to Antiquity:

Something that struck me as I first began to analyze *The Battle of Anghiari* is that it has some curious stylistic and thematic references to works of antiquity. I knew from Lubomír Konečný's *Artibus et Historiae* that Leonardo was familiarizing himself with literary and artistic depictions of battle, leading him to *De Eloquentia* and by extension Nicias (a prominent Athenian aristocrat from the 5th century BC); from which point it isn't much of a stretch that Leonardo may have discovered Pliny's (a Roman author and natural philosopher) *Historia Naturalis*, of which he owned a translated copy. If that were the case, not only would Leonardo have an inspiration on ancient artistic style, but also content from ancient Greece and Rome.

Later I discovered Barbara Hochstetler's work in *The Art Bulletin* 66, she was analyzing the tomb of Louis XII, by the Juste brothers, and noted a resemblance between the reliefs in the tomb and *The Battle of Anghiari* and that they were likely inspired by Leonardo's piece. Meyer also makes the observation that the soldiers' proportions and musculature are reminiscent of Roman prototypes, as is their military garb. The Juste brothers were born in Martino a Mensola, close to Florence; the brothers moved to France in 1505 and began working on the royal tomb in 1516, the same year that Leonardo moved into an estate not far from Chateau Amboise where the Juste brothers resided and worked from. As Meyer pointed out this almost guaranteed that Leonardo had some influence on the brothers work on the royal tomb. Suggesting that Leonardo had at least some semblance of understanding and knowledge of Ancient Greco-Roman military appearance and attire. Thus, the connection between *The Battle of Anghiari* and its direct classical influences becomes more concrete. Some potential motivation for Leonardo's choice of figures becomes clear once we look at how the Florentines viewed themselves in comparison to these ancient powers. Leonardo Bruni was a Florentine statesman and council of Florence from 1410-11 and 1427-44, he describes Florence as a gorgeous city, descendant from the Roman Republic, a city that is both generous and just, with outstanding civil institutes and laws, and that Florence is a supreme power just as the Romans once were.

Kohl, Benjamin G. "Panegyric to the City of Florence." *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (1978): 135-175.  
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"Tomb of Louis XII and Anne de Bretagne, Saint-Denis (2)" by Prof. Mortel is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.



### Tomb of Louis XII

This a relief from the *Tomb of Louis XII* by the Juste brothers, it depicts several scenes from the battle of battle of Agnadello. However, the figures in the scenes resemble Roman Legionaries rather than medieval soldiers, depicted with bear legs and arms, long tunics beneath their armor, and oval shields. When compared with Roman reliefs and engravings they bear a striking resemblance.

"Trajans Column Detail Depicting Scene From the Dacian Wars Roman 2nd century CE (3)" by mharrsch is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.



### Trajan's column

This relief from *Trajan's Column* serves as a prime example of the depiction of Roman soldiers in art. We see they have bear arms and legs, have long tunics beneath their armor, and are often depicted with oval shields.

### Conclusion:

Power is the penultimate message of *The Battle of Anghiari*, a standing ovation to the revival of the Florentine republic. On every layer Leonardo's piece conveys the power of Florence, from the choice of composition and style of figures represented, the overarching meaning of the battles, down to the personal reasoning of Florence's first council. The two heroic Florentine knights dressed in minimal armor, evoking Roman legionnaires, bravely changing against the alien, modern, and mechanically dressed Milanese knights. Stylizing the characters to evoke Rome and the glory of the Republic. As such, it is perhaps poetic that the short-lived revived republic would never see these pieces finished in their full glory.

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