



Leonardo da Vinci's Geology: The Authenticity of The Virgin of the Rocks

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Viewed from a geological perspective, all of Leonardo's paintings and drawings reveal a remarkable fidelity to nature. The *Virgin of the Rocks* in the National Gallery in London (1495-1508), attributed to him, displays no such fidelity. If we compare it to the *Virgin of the Rocks* in the Louvre in Paris (1483-86) whose geological accuracy is astounding, we cannot help questioning whether Leonardo painted the background in the National Gallery work.

Over the centuries, various arguments have called into question the attribution of the National Gallery painting to Leonardo. Scholars have analyzed the brush strokes, undertaken document searches and tried to prove definitively that Leonardo produced the National Gallery version. However, there have always been doubts, naysayers and many unanswered questions concerning its authenticity.

The fact that attribution of the work has been the subject of such controversy throughout history suggests that new diagnostic means of determining authenticity is in order. A comparison of the representations of geological formations in the two paintings offers such means. It seems unlikely that the same person could have portrayed rock formations so accurately in the Louvre work and so incongruously in the National Gallery painting.