Leonardo da Vinci's decoration of the Sala delle Asse in the Castello Sforzesca in Milan is a fresco decoration commissioned by Ludovico Il Moro, the Duke of Milan in 1498. The work is best described as an emblem of ducal power. In this thesis I will provide interpretations for two of the principal motifs in the room. The fresco, which covers the walls and vault, is developed around an illusionistic structure formed by sixteen mulberry trees whose interlaced branches are bound by a golden, knotted rope. The trees and the rope both offer a wealth of symbolic and punning allusions. The mulberry, or moro tree, referenced the Duke's nickname, The Moor, and the knotted, arabesque rope provided additional wordplays. The complex, interlaced patterns of the rope represented Moresque, or Moorish designs. Ludovico Il Moro, The Moor, used these ornamental patterns as a personal symbol. The rope motif alludes to the name of the artist, as Moresque interlaces were also known as fantasia dei vinci. In addition to these puns, there are various layers of symbolic meaning encoded within the iconography of the room. Political, dynastic, and Platonic allusions are all referenced in the fresco decoration. In this study I will seek to integrate the
In 1498 Leonardo decorated the north-east room of the Sforza Castle with a painting depicting clusters of rock out of which grow eighteen huge trees. The branches of the trees rise from the walls to form a broad canopy, leaving only some patches of sky visible. A rope of golden knots intertwines with the foliage, the composition culminating in the centre of the vaulted ceiling where the Sforza ducal coat-of-arms appears. The naturalistic design has been seen by some as a symbolic depiction of the valley of Tempe, locus amoenus of classical literature. The knots, an emblem of Leonardo himself, are in keeping with the decoration of the room. The Sala delle Asse was possibly intended as a meeting place for cultural events. The Sala delle Asse that he would design a dozen years later combined the knots with nature. For a recent study, see Francis Ames-Lewis, “Leonardo’s Botanical Drawings,” Academia Leonardi Vinci X (1997), pp. 117–124. Google Scholar.

Many trees planted in such a way as to touch, by the second year will have learnt how to dispense with the bark that grows between them and become grafted together; and by this method you will make the wall of the gardens continuous and in four years you will even have very wide boards.” Codex Atlantics 76 r a; see Edward MacCurdy, The Notebooks of Leonardo de Vinci, Vol. 1. A visit to Sala delle Asse. The “Vincian” knots. The symbolism of the mulberry. The preparatory drawing. The room at the first floor of the north-east great tower of Sforza Castle, also called Sala delle Asse, got its name from the wooden planks which covered the walls long time ago, probably with the aim to safeguard the room from humidity. The room was a significant and important setting where Sforza family welcomed their guests and ambassadors. La grande sala alberata di Leonardo. Luci e rivelazioni dal cantiere di restauro.