

Leonardo da Vinci Society Newsletter

editor: Francis Ames-Lewis

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Recent and forthcoming events

The Leonardo da Vinci Society's Annual General Meeting and Annual Lecture, 20 May 2005.

The Society's Annual General Meeting was held at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Somerset House, at 5.30 pm on Friday 20 May 2005. The officers and committee of the Society were re-elected. There was also a Special General Meeting at which two proposed amendments to the Society's constitution were approved. These are that 'An annual general meeting will be held, on or around the Friday nearest to 2 May each year...', and that the sentence 'When it is considered necessary, the Committee may make cooptions to full vacancies' has been added to section 5.

Following this, the Annual Lecture was given by Professor Claire Farago (University of Colorado, Boulder), on 'Leonardo's *Trattato della Pittura* in its cultural context. Rodney Palmer writes: Professor Farago established how in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy authorial identity differed from that of the Foucauldian individual authors' rights that have prevailed since the late eighteenth century. She made us aware of the reality of the collaborative production of editions of illustrated texts after Leonardo by making mention of recent work by Ingrid Rowland on the constructed identity of Raphael the author, and by Charles Hope and Thomas Frangenberg on the multi-authorship of Vasari's *Lives*.

Regarding the chronology of specific manuscripts of Leonardo's *Trattato*, Professor Farago seconded Donatella Sparti's understanding of the sequence of transmission from the Codex Pinellianus of around 1585, source of Codex Barberini 4304 and not *vice versa*, up to the first edition of the *Trattato*, ostensibly edited by Raphael du Fresne, of 1651.

Professor Farago concentrated on the group of sixteenth-century Florentine manuscripts associated with a group of Florentine literati, the Concini, Gaddi and Giacomini, their relationship to Codex Urbinas 1270, and the editorial ramifications of the latter, in which Francesco Melzi's books 5-8 on what is now called 'aerial perspective' were eliminated by efficient editors quite uninterested in the subtleties of Leonardo's art theory.

The Giacomini manuscript is a hybrid text combining Egnatio Danti's commentary on Vignola's two rules of Albertian linear perspective (which

Leonardo did not advocate) with Leonardo's 'Precetti' on figure drawing and on colour. The whole imitates the three-part format of Alberti's *Trattato della pittura* of 1436. Professor Farago deems the Giacomini manuscript to have been made with publication in mind, in the ambience of the Medicean *Accademia del Disegno*, founded in 1563, where Gaddi was involved in the production of treatises, Giacomini played a part as censor, and Danti (who referred in his own work to Leonardo's 'Precetti') taught mathematics from 1571. Certainly there were potential academic, courtly and wider readerships for what would have been the first treatise on painting published in Florence since Alberti's. Professor Farago's hypothesis about the intended outcome of the Florentine group of *Trattato* manuscripts – their publication – is plausible enough in itself; the main problem being that one cannot help feeling that some period source would have referred explicitly to what would have been such a major cultural enterprise.

Professor Farago easily explained the non-appearance, assuming one was planned, of any edition of Leonardo in later Cinquecento Florence. The programme of Cosimo de' Medici's *Accademia del Disegno* was at odds with Leonardo's, which is one reason why few qualms were felt at having Vasari paint over Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* in the Council Chamber of the Palazzo Vecchio. By the 1580s, partly due to its Republican connotations, artistic licence was discouraged in Grand Duke Francesco I's absolutist state. Both Gaddi and Giacomini communicated in the 1580s with the great Bolognese naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi and thus were more disposed to optical naturalism in the representation of nature. It seems likely that the Codex Urbinas was meanwhile sent away from Florence, then unsympathetic to Leonardo's ideas, for safekeeping in the Marches, where, Professor Farago ended by suggesting, Federico Barocci might have consulted it in his pursuit of leonardesque optical effects of reflected colour.

Leonardesque News

Lettura Vinciana XLV

The forty-fifth Lettura Vinciana was delivered at the Biblioteca Leonardiana in Vinci, on Saturday 16 April, by Dr Françoise Viatte, formerly Director of the Department of Graphic Arts at the Musée du Louvre, Paris. Her title was “Della figure che va contro il vento”. Il tema del soffio nell’opera di Leonardo da Vinci’ – the theme of breath in Leonardo’s work.

This quotation from the *Treatise on Painting*, and the drawing that accompanies it, taken from Manuscript A and dating to around 1508-1510, served as the starting point for a reading of Leonardo’s writings about air, breath and wind. Both Leonardo’s descriptions of these, and the place that they occupied in his creative process were discussed. The lecture dealt with natural and weather-related phenomena generated by the movement of air, such as dust, smoke, wind and rain. It also engaged with a series of related, broader issues that never ceased to engage the painter: distance, the infinite, indistinctness and the theme of flight itself, devices and machines designed to rise off the ground, the flight of birds, allegories and flying figures.

By extension, Dr Viatte suggested, the notion of breath can also be employed as the basis for an examination of Leonardo’s drawing. It can be used as a pointer in the attempt to develop an interpretation of the beginnings of a work, characterized by the impulse, the mark and the rapidity of the annotation. Reference was made to some of Leonardo’s finest works, for instance the *Adoration of the Magi* and the *Battle of Anghiari*, and emphasis was placed on the role of drawing as precursor in his work. As has recently been shown with regard to the manuscripts, drawing often preceded the text.

In her lecture Dr Viatte sought to offer a critical interpretation of drawing as an expression of breath. At the same time she delineated the role of air, in all its different forms, in Leonardo’s work, especially in the texts that deal with *sfumato* and observations on light.

Two Leonardo da Vinci reprints from Dover Publications

At the end of April Dover Publications issued an unabridged republication of the translation of the *Treatise on Painting* by John Francis Rigaud, first published by George Bell and Sons in 1877. This rather wooden, dated translation of a relatively small selection of Leonardo’s advice to the painter cannot stand comparison with more recent anthologies available in English. A second unabridged reissue, published at the end of May, is of Edward McCurdy, *The Mind of Leonardo da Vinci*, London (Dodd, Mead

and Co.), 1928, which presents a detailed investigation of all aspects of Leonardo’s endeavours and achievements, not only in sculpture and painting but also in music, engineering and experimental aviation. Rather coarsely divided into three sections, the biography, the manuscripts and Leonardo’s thought, and his painting and sculpture, this book is now of interest principally to the historian of Leonardo studies.

Leonardo’s *Trattato della Pittura* in Greece

We have received a copy of Chrysa Damianaki, *Translation and Critical Reception of Leonardo da Vinci’s Trattato della Pittura in Greece*, Rome (Vecchiarelli Editore), 2003. This is the first study in a series entitled ‘Mnemosine. Studi e Testi’ edited by the author, who is Associate Professor of the History of Art at the University of Lecce, Italy. The book deals with the two illustrated manuscript copies, in the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice (Codex Gr. IV 50), and in the National Library, Athens (MS. 1285) of the Greek translation of the *Trattato* by Panagiotis Doxaras (1662-1729), the first Greek exponent of an Italian style of painting. In her Preface, Claire Farago summarises the important findings and implications of this study. Damianaki is the first to give detailed descriptions of the two practically unknown manuscripts; to compare the two versions; to establish the text in relation to its Italian sources; and to place it in its contemporary cultural context. Moreover, Damianaki is able to establish that Doxaras had ambitions to westernize Byzantine painting: he intended that the Athens manuscript should be published with engraved illustrations, many closely based on the engravings in the Du Fresne *editio princeps* of 1651.

The book is an expansion of the paper read by the author at the ‘The *fortuna* of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Trattato della Pittura*’ conference at the Warburg Institute, 13-15 September 2001, with which the Society was closely associated (see this *Newsletter* issue 00, November 2001). It may be seen as one facet of the larger research project on the *Trattato* and its *fortuna* on which Claire Farago and Thomas Frangenberg are currently engaged.

Did someone mention Leonardo? : Recently discovered rooms at the Santissima Annunziata, Florence

Matthew Landrus writes: Before news of another ‘lost Leonardo’ dissipates into www oblivion, a record of recent events may be in order. It is early to judge all results of the Santissima Annunziata discovery, though it already has the underpinnings of what many might want of a Leonardo mystery: an exhumation of his lost places and things, of a secret stairway, a secret room

for human dissections, and a ghost image imprinted on a wall. To this form of story we might attribute traditional cravings for Leonardo mysteries. Would it matter as much – for example, if a lost Michelangelo were found? As Leonardo frequently appears and disappears in the news, a note of his latest ‘ghosts’ is worthwhile whilst they linger. Articles and photographs at the web sites numbered and addressed herein were online as of 25th February 2005.

The popularity of Leonardo da Vinci has never been greater, especially for the wrong reasons. In forty-two countries, purchasers of eighteen million copies (at last count) of *The Da Vinci Code* have been apparently curious about Dan Brown’s approach to Leonardo; and many have noted that this is not because of its fictions, but because of its supposed facts.[1] To think of Leonardo’s association with ancient conspiracies adds quasi-historical legitimacy to the unfolding of a present-day story that could overturn fundamental principles of two millennia of Christian tradition. What fun. Of course the enjoyment of such ideas occasionally involves the suspension of disbelief ...to believe in da Vinci’s codes. This undoubtedly sold the book, and many of us.

We know very little about Leonardo’s personal life, though we have a great legacy of his work. His writings show an almost Tacitean ability to get a lot of information into just a few statements or sketches. Does any of his work suggest that he tried to hide ancient secrets? No – on the contrary, his work reveals his obsession with methods of direct communication. What would Leonardo want us to have of his? Presumably, the kind of material that he left behind will do (or so one would think).

Why, then, the tendency to jump to conclusions with the possible discovery of something ‘Leonardo’ related? As proven by *The Da Vinci Code*, even false conclusions can gross £140 million in book sales.[2] Certain associations with Leonardo can offer lucrative results.

On Monday, 10th January 2005, the Military Geographical Institute (IGM) in Florence issued a statement and photographs about the discovery of ‘lost’ rooms and a ‘secret stairwell’ that were presumably used and partially painted by Leonardo. General Renato De Filippis, Commander of the IGM, reported on behalf of an IGM appointed research team: Alessandro Del Meglio, Roberto Manescalchi, and Maria Carchio.[3] The demolition of walls during a renovation of the IGM revealed the location of the ‘lost’ rooms, situated at a top floor, between the IGM and the Santissima Annunziata monastery.[8]

The first online report was at adnkronos.com on the day of the announcement. According to the site, General De Filippis made this announcement “during the presentation” of the exhibition, *Leonardo, i giochi e lo sport*, (Leonardo, the games and sports).[3] The Regional Council of Tuscany had this exhibition

installed at the Palazzo Panciatichi, Florence, just for the period of 10th - 20th January.

Curated by the Museo Ideale Leonardo da Vinci (Vinci, Italy), the exhibition was sponsored by the Fondazione Monte dei Paschi di Siena in celebration of Italian successes in the Athens Olympics and Paralympics of 2004, and possibly in anticipation of 2006 Winter Olympic Games in Turin, as well as the Milan bid for the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. Journalists were allowed a special viewing of the exhibition at 11:30am on the 10th, the day of General De Filippis’ press conference. The 2006 Olympic torch was unveiled in Milan on the 20th, the final day of the show. Also opening on the 10th was an exhibition of Leonardo’s Codex Atlanticus and reconstructed ‘inventions’ at the Palazzo Corsini, Rome, in place until 28th February.[4] The exhibitions were well timed.

On Wednesday, 12th January, Rome correspondent Richard Owen reported for *The Times*: “Found: the studio where Leonardo met Mona Lisa.”[5] The analogy for such a claim?: for all or part of the period between April 1500 and mid 1502, evidence suggests that Leonardo stayed at the Santissima Annunziata church complex; he could have used the recently discovered rooms as his studio spaces; the family of Francesco del Giocondo – husband of Lisa Gherardini (a.k.a. Mona Lisa) – happened to have a chapel at the monastery; therefore Leonardo could have met Lisa Gherardini at Santissima Annunziata. (Perhaps visions of the two of them – eyes meeting at the church and then off to share a bottle of chianti at a local trattoria – come to mind, though it could never have happened.) At best, Francesco del Giocondo and Leonardo knew one another through contact with the Medici. The most surprising detail, however, is that of the discovered rooms – small spaces with tiny windows, being used previously as studio spaces. Moreover, there was the suggestion that Leonardo possibly helped paint the rooms’ frescoes.

The day after, on 13th January, the Regional Council of Tuscany announced three meetings at the Palazzo Panciatichi on the 14th, 17th, and 19th, addressing the following topics, respectively: “Leonardo: vero o falso,” “Leonardo all’ Annunziata, tra il convento dei Servi di Maria e l’Istituto Geografico Militare,” and “Arte e design, giochi e sport dall’Etruria alla Firenze medicea.” Alessandro Vezzosi, director of the Museo Ideale di Vinci, directed the first discussion; Maria Carchio, Alessandro Del Meglio and Roberto Maniscalchi directed the second meeting; and the third arrangement was a round-table discussion with Paola Cassinelli Lazzeri, Guiseppina Carlotta Cianferoni, Yoritsugu Katagiri, Massimo Ricci, and Alessandro Vezzosi.[6] Thanks to these ongoing discussions, whilst the jury convened – so to speak, little or no fresh news about the discovery appeared online.

Enter Associated Press writers Marina Sapia, with the help of Aiden Lewis, and Francis D’Emilio, who produced a detailed report on 21st January, compiled with the help of interviews and press conferences during the previous eleven days. This is the version of the story to which most readers and viewers had access in the following weeks, as it formed the basis of this topic on the most web sites. Exhibit ‘A’ for the story was a photo, released on the 10th – though not published by international news media until the 21st, of a fresco with decorative swirling tracery, two simple birds and an angel’s face – with wings attached – at the centre.[7] At issue: “...that the rooms served as a studio for Leonardo and his pupils has grabbed the imaginations of many. If they worked in the convent, might not they have done the frescoes, including one depicting birds – a motif that tickled Leonardo’s fancy.”[7] James Beck is quoted as saying that “there is no real evidence.” Vezzosi refers to the various possible links to Leonardo, his pupils and Lisa Ghirardini. Manescalchi notes that the “birds... remind us of the study done by Leonardo of birds in flight.” Colin Eisler reminds us that the birds are not ‘unique’ for the time in which they were likely painted. The article also considers an attribution of certain monastery frescoes to Vittorio da Feltre, who visited Florence in the early 1500s, according to Vasari, specifically to meet Leonardo and Michelangelo.

Also on the 21st, the Associated Press released a short video of a tour of the Santissima Annunziata’s newly discovered rooms.[8] This was available at the AP.org site, as well as re-edited by CBS and made available at cbsnews.com.[8] The tour begins at a doorway in the Santissima Annunziata, continues up the recently discovered ‘secret stairway’, and ends at a corner room thought to have been Leonardo’s personal studio, or ‘secret room’. Included in the video is a view of the outline of a kneeling angel, chipped away from the surrounding fresco (as a planned addition to or a sign of removal from the wall), thought to be similar in profile to that of Leonardo’s *Annunciation* – as noted in Sapia’s AP report. A comparison of these two examples suggests otherwise.

For Discovery News (discoverychannel.com), Rosella Lorenzi reported on the 21st the details of the Military Geographical Institute’s recent press conference.[9] She notes relevant points noted above, along with further historical information about the church complex, and that Leonardo possibly had an interest in the monastery’s collection of 5000 manuscripts. Especially useful at the web site is the first international online publication of five photograph details (around 540 x 380 pixels in size), showing a floor plan of the rooms and ‘secret stairwell’, fresco details of birds in flight, frescoes in the secret stairwell, and an exterior view of the monastery. This was an opportunity for readers to see what might or might not have been Leonardesque about the bird paintings, and to get a three-dimensional

sense of the discovered rooms with the help of a floor plan.

That Sunday, the 23rd, RedNova (rednova.com) uploaded an update to the Associated Press story, inserting at the beginning, “One of the world’s leading specialists on Leonardo da Vinci cast doubt Saturday that fading frescoes... might be the work of the Renaissance master or one of his pupils.”[10] This and the three other additions to the AP report are thanks to an interview with Martin Kemp and his studies of high-quality photos of the frescoes in question. He informs me that his original advice on this was that: “They look like absolutely standard 1480-ish frescoes and the birds are not notably Leonardesque.”

Thus, lost rooms, secret stairwells, Vasari’s travelling painter reference, and quasi proto-Leonardesque birds do not locate a Leonardo studio. The story lacks a smoking gun – some form of direct proof. After two days of relative silence on the matter, on 25th January, Phil Stewart (from Rome) republished the story for Reuters (reuters.com): “Da Vinci workshop discovered in Italy.”[11] Two relatively macabre elements emerge with the story: the idea that Leonardo used one of the discovered chambers as “a secret room to dissect human cadavers” and that the fresco silhouette of an angel is “the ghost” of Leonardo’s previous interest in a fresco painting of the archangel Gabriel. Stewart attributes these ideas to a slide presentation by Manescalchi. About the angel’s ‘ghost’ and Leonardo’s *Annunciation*, I have commented above. About the dissections, I would have to say that such ideas would only put nails in the coffin of this mysterious discovery. Institutions could only very rarely get permission for dissections from the Pope, and the order of the Servi di Maria (Servants of Mary) would have been actively against such a practice especially at the Annunziata church complex.

“We are researching,” said Manescalchi, referring to the ongoing search for documentation among the monastery’s records for evidence that Leonardo may have stayed there in the early 1500s. This is at least encouraging, as further documentation, or even discoveries of Leonardo’s marginalia in the monastery’s previous manuscripts, might attest to the idea that the newly discovered rooms are of an age when rooms of this kind at the monastery had boarders such as Leonardo. What the news media and press conferences make of all this is another story. For example, Stewart may or may not have quoted the following statements in context: “It’s easy to say ‘It’s not true’,” [Manescalchi] said. “I didn’t paint the Angel’s ghost.”[11]. In any event, I have my doubts about this angel’s ghost, though not about the periodic passing of Leonardo’s.

Sources (as of 25th February 2005):

- 1 <http://www.spectator.co.uk/newdesign/books.php?issue=2004-12-18&id=2632>
- 2 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/11/16/wcode16.xml>
- 3 <http://www.adnkronos.com/news/prod/bolletti/storia/2005/gennaio/culgen2.htm>
- 4 <http://www.parlamento.toscana.it/Stampa.asp?IDNotizia=12224>
- 5 <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-1435948,00.html>
- 6 http://www.consiglio.regione.toscana.it/Informazione/Comunicatistampa/comunicato_testo_comunicato.asp?id=5070
- 7 <http://entertainment.tv.yahoo.com/entnews/ap/20050121/110634708000.html>
- 8 <http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/search/search.php?searchString=discovering+mona+lisa&source=cbsvideos&sort=1&type=any&num=10&offset=0>
- 9 <http://dsc.discovery.com/news/briefs/20050117/leonardo.html>
- 10 <http://www.rednova.com/news/display/?id=121102>
- 11 http://www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=science_News&storyID=7427028
And here: http://sciencenews.orb6.com/stories/nm/20050125/arts_italy_davinci_dc.php

The Leonardo da Vinci Society

We would always be grateful for suggestions of material, such as forthcoming conferences, symposia and other events, exhibitions, publications and so on, that would be of interest to members of the Society for inclusion in this *Newsletter* or on the webpage, which can be visited at <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/hafvm/leonardo>>

President: Dr J.V. Field, School of History of Art, Film and Visual Media, Birkbeck College, 43 Gordon Square, London WC1H.0PD; e-mail: jv.field@hart.bbk.ac.uk

Vice-President: Professor Francis Ames-Lewis, School of History of Art, Film and Visual Media, Birkbeck College, 43 Gordon Square, London WC1H.0PD; 020.7631.6108; e-mail: f.ames-lewis@bbk.ac.uk

Secretary/Treasurer: Dr Tony Mann, School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences, University of Greenwich, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS; 020.8331.8709; e-mail: A.Mann@gre.ac.uk

Committee members:

Rodney Palmer, 4 Holland Street, Cambridge CB4 3DL; e-mail: rodpalmer63@hotmail.com

Professor Frank A.J.L. James, Royal Institution Centre for the History of Science and Technology, Royal Institution of Great Britain, 21 Albemarle Street, London W1X.4BS; e-mail: fjames@ri.ac.uk

Matthew Landrus, Wolfson College, Oxford; e-mail: Matthew.landrus@wolfson.oxford.ac.uk

Please send items for publication to the editor of the *Leonardo da Vinci Society Newsletter*, Francis Ames-Lewis, School of History of Art, Film and Visual Media, Birkbeck College, 43 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PD; fax: 020.7631.6107; e-mail: f.ames-lewis@bbk.ac.uk