Editorial

I am delighted to have been invited to edit this special issue of the Leonardo da Vinci Society’s Newsletter. Leonardo’s work attracts the interest of both historians of art and historians of science. Today, often the coupling of “art and science” goes hand-in-hand with hackneyed terms such as ‘inter-disciplinarity’ and the “two cultures”. This disciplinary division sometimes becomes the subject of great lament or earnest attempts at reconciliation. In a similar vein Leonardo, construed as the archetypal “Renaissance Man” (a twentieth-century phrase), has come to symbolize a polymathic ideal for the art-science dichotomy, and the Renaissance a golden age when art and science were happily married. Indeed, Leonardo status as a symbolic figure having worked in both spheres now identified as “art” and “science”, the Leonardo da Vinci Society is interested in the art/science overlap in all periods. In this issue I have invited contributors to reflect critically on the theme of ‘art and science’ in history.

In the first of two feature articles, Chiara Ambrosio considers how history – through the example of an eighteenth-century engraving – can provide useful models for thinking about contemporary crossovers between science and art. J. V. Field argues in a review of the National Gallery’s “Sansovino Frame” exhibition for the importance of frames to the historian of art, as being, like paintings, exemplars of craftsmanship. Martin Kemp answers questions about his career, the history of art and his interest in Leonardo. In our second feature article, Elspeth Whitney traces the conceptual and disciplinary category of “art” through history, from antiquity to the present day.

Recent and forthcoming events

The Leonardo da Vinci Society Annual Lecture 2015

“It is a minefield or at least swampy ground to mention Leonardo da Vinci and Venice to the Leonardo da Vinci Society”, Paul Hills, Professor Emeritus of Renaissance Art The Courtauld Institute of Art, began his lecture at The Courtauld on 8th May 2015, “for he was only there once”. Nevertheless, Professor Hills’s lecture on ‘Leonardo, Luca Pacioli and the Venetian optic c.1480-1510’ traced the fascinating intellectual and artistic influences of the mathematician, and friend of Leonardo, Luca Pacioli on Venetian painting. Through the work of Carpaccio, Giovanni Bellini and Giorgione, Hills described a ‘Euclidian moment’ in Venice around 1500 in which a unique geometry and regard for light in painting flourished. It was almost as if Professor Hills anticipated the theme of this newsletter!
The Milan Expo, 31 October 2015

There are currently two major exhibitions on Leonardo. The Mind of Leonardo - Drawings by Leonardo from the Codex Atlanticus across two venues, the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana and the Bramante Sacristy, from 10 March – 31 October 2015.


On Art and Science – A View from the (Historical) Trenches

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As an academic involved in research on the historical and philosophical relations between art and science, I am often invited to comment on, or even facilitate, projects that involve some combination of artistic and scientific research. The practice of adding an artist or writer in residence to grant applications is now becoming ubiquitous in academia (and beyond), especially when one of the decisive criteria for funding allocation tends to be the “interdisciplinarity” of a project. While this seems a desirable move for artists and scientists alike, the results of these collaborations are often not as successful as the initial plans promise. At best, what are now called “art-sci” collaborations turn into illustrations of scientific ideas that allow scientists to take pride in “having taught the science well” to their (supposedly) scientifically illiterate collaborators. At worst, artists and scientists part ways somewhere in the middle of their collaborative interaction and never speak of it again. Are we still under the spell of the “two cultures” debate, and what needs to be done in order to leave that rhetoric behind us?

One way to resolve this impasse is to look at history a little more closely. It seems to me that much of the rhetoric surrounding art-science collaborations is one of rather uncritical emphasis on the novelty of bringing art and science together. But before the rise of disciplines in the nineteenth century, what is now pitched as a unique novelty was pretty much the order of the day. Historians of art and historians of science know this well. J.V. Field’s work on the role of craftsmen in the production and circulation of scientific knowledge, for example, has taught us to take very seriously the complex relations between natural philosophy and the arts in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. This kind of scholarly analysis reveals an important function that artistic practice embraced throughout the centuries: along with mastering concepts and practices that we would nowadays define as “scientific”, artists served as crucial critical voices in challenging the knowledge that scientists took for granted.

Fig.1 Bernhard Siegfried Albinus, Tabulae Sceleti et Musculorum Corporis Humani, Plate IV. The Wellcome Library, London.

This critical role for artistic practice seems very uncontroversial when it comes to evaluating and understanding the relations between art and politics. In the work Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing 2013), the French philosopher Jacques
Rancière argues that art is first and foremost a means of disclosing ways of “distributing the sensible”. Artworks are concrete, historically contingent manifestations of what we are able to experience and perceive in a particular cultural and historical context. The critical aim of art, and of aesthetics construed in its broadest sense, is thus to disturb the current distribution of the sensible, and propose new criteria for ordering and partitioning what we have access to. Art should make new configurations of experience possible, and it is in this sense that it acts as a way of producing knowledge.

It is easy to see how this claim, in its disarming simplicity, can be transferred from the relations between art and politics to the relations between art and science. Approached as (constructively) critical partnerships, art-science collaborations can (and should!) be built as ways of mobilizing each other towards new ways of configuring the fabric of the sensible, and disclose corners of experience that we would consider unimaginable. One of my favourite examples of how this can happen in practice is an eighteenth century anatomical illustration (fig. 1) by Jan Wandelaar, produced specifically for Bernhard Siegfried Albinus’ 1747, Tabulae Sceleti et Musculorum Corporis Humani.

The rhinoceros in the background of the image is the famous Clara, on a grand tour of Europe at the time of Wandelaar’s collaboration with Albinus. The presence of Clara in the background of the engraving is often justified as adding an element of sophistication to the anatomical representation in the foreground, but a closer look at the historical record reveals that there is more to Wandelaar’s story. The artist had been obsessed with representations of rhinos for decades. In 1727, when commissioned to produce an image of the rhino in the (then ubiquitous) manner of Dürer (fig. 2) for an atlas on the flora and fauna of Cape of Good Hope, Wandelaar produced two illustrations: a Dürer-like engraving, labelled "The rhino as it has been commonly depicted" and a second, somewhat “rectified” image, labelled "The rhino according to this description". In this second representation, Wandelaar highlights, among other things, the fact that according to the description African rhinos have two horns (as opposed to the Indian variety, which has only one), and explicitly departs from the representational tradition inaugurated by Dürer’s iconic 1515 image of the animal.

It is therefore no wonder that, when finally able to observe the animal in the flesh in Leiden, Wandelaar seized the opportunity to produce a record of his observations in the background of Albinus’ table.

Wandelaar’s image is beautifully subversive. Its lasting legacy is the tension between the idealised skeleton in the foreground – notoriously produced through a complex system of grids to ensure that the proportions of the body would reflect Albinus’ commitment to reproduce “the best pattern in nature” – and the particular rhino in the background – Clara, a two year old rhinoceros observed in Leiden by Wandelaar himself. It is a model of how artistic practice can challenge values and commitments that science unquestioningly places in the foreground, and in doing so reconfigure what at certain points in history is considered “established knowledge”. That an eighteenth century engraving might offer a template for our contemporary ways of thinking about art and science will certainly perplex contemporary scientists, and perhaps even contemporary artists. But if we are committed to interdisciplinarity and the knowledge we attach to it, perhaps the best way forward is to do it with an eye on the past, and use it to disturb and re-distribute the assumptions we make about the present.

Fig. 2 Albrecht Dürer, Rhinoceros, 1515, woodcut. The British Library
Frames in the frame or Context contextualised contextualised

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‘The Sansovino Frame’ is an exhibition of picture frames.

On the conceptual level a frame is liminal, marking the boundary between the art and the non-art world around it. Similarly the glass case and the pedestal. On the practical level a frame is a piece of craftsmanship designed to establish the work of art is part of the furniture. Sometimes a coat of arms marks ownership, or patronage of an altarpiece.

Integral framing elements are found in many paintings (such as fresco cycles) and the carved stone frame is sometimes part of the overall design of a painting used as an altarpiece. No visual hint of these parallels or antecedents is given in the exhibition, where the wooden and mostly at least partly gilded frames are presented as objects in their own right. In an art world in which one regards a urinal as a work of art because Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968) chose it and called it ‘Fontaine’, one obviously cannot refuse to look at frames, however little heed one is accustomed to pay them in the ‘normal’ circumstances in which it is the picture within the frame that commands attention. Historical training and Dada alike tell us that context is significant.

And in its native or original habitat, the frame itself provided a context, one that may legitimately interest the historian. The frames here are Venetian, dating from the sixteenth century. Their style is named after the Florentine sculptor and architect Jacopo Sansovino (1486 – 1570), who made his career in Venice. The designs do indeed incorporate some architectural elements, which look rather Florentine, though the later examples, in particular, reminded me of the playful style of Berdardo Buontalenti (c. 1531 – 1608) rather than the generally more sober Sansovino.

The frames also belong in the context of woodcarving and ecclesiastical and domestic furniture. The lack of this context in the exhibition is presumably due to the constraints of space. However, the thirty frames on show provide an enjoyable visual experience — and a visitor who would rather look at Titians more convincing than the two (ascribed and partly ascribed) that appear in this exhibition does not have far to walk.

A Sansovino frame with well-preserved original gilding, perhaps from the 1580s.
Frame: 136 × 159 cm
© photo The National Gallery, London / courtesy the owner

Interview with Martin Kemp

(Some of the answers are drawn from a forthcoming book, Living with Leonardo.)

1) Who or what first turned you towards the History of Art?
I dropped arts subjects at school at an absurdly early age. Cambridge, where I was studying Natural Sciences, turned me on to the arts. There were always fellow undergraduates who knew more than me about art, film, music, theatre… I was at Downing with Trevor Nunn and John Cleese. Not bad! I started going to lectures on the history of art with John Sharp, a mathematician. We went together to see the sollander boxes of Turner watercolours in the Fitzwilliam Museum. It was magical.

2) How did your interest in Leonardo da Vinci begin?
At the Courtauld Institute as a graduate student I steered clear of Leonardo because he looked big and difficult. A year later I was contacted by a trainee television producer at the BBC and his designated assistant who were working towards his graduation programme on Leonardo’s studies of water in motion. I am ashamed to say that I can no longer remember their names and I cannot recall why they chose this unusual subject. They had obviously done the rounds of qualified specialists who could contribute, presumably headed by Sir Ernst Gombrich, then Director of the Warburg Institute, and John Shearman at the Courtauld. I imagine that neither of the notable professors was inclined to spend time on a programme that was not going to be transmitted. Somewhere, far down the line, they reached me and I said I would help them, without knowing how. They had also recruited a real expert on hydraulic science from London University, who skilfully conducted experiments to recreate the phenomena of flow and turbulence drawn so wonderfully by Leonardo. The redeeming feature from my point of view was that Gombrich very generously lent us his then unpublished paper on “The Form of Movement in Water and Air” delivered at an international symposium on Leonardo’s Legacy at the University of California in Los Angeles. Reading the paper I felt that I had come home.

3) If you could meet Leonardo, what one question would you ask?
I would ask him to correct the thumbnail gallery (small catalogue) in my Leonardo (OUP), and to add a list of lost works. That would get rid of attribution and dating disputes, and we could concentrate on really understanding him.

4) What has been your best moment in your career?
To be judged as a fit and proper person to see the Leonardo drawings at Windsor, I was examined for 20 austere minutes by the then Librarian, Robin Mackworth-Young. Having been brought up in Windsor and having a few mutual contacts of impeccable credentials seems to have helped. Over the next few days, seeing first-hand the extraordinary intensity and minute subtleties of Leonardo’s actual drawings was an intensely engaging experience. The best.

5) What is the most annoying popular myth that persists about Leonardo?
It used to be that Leonardo never finished anything. In the wake of Dan Brown it is that the
paintings and drawings are full of codes. Allegories and symbols to be sure, but no “codes”.

6) If you were not a historian of art, what other career might you choose?
Tennis player. I was actually better at hockey, but you can’t play that professionally.

7) What are your favourite books in the History of Art?
Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*, not least because it casts its visual net so wide, outside what we call art.
Kenneth’s Clark’s monograph on Leonardo, which shows that insights can give the right answers even before all the evidence is known.
All the thirteen volumes in the series *Sources and Documents in the History of Art*, because primary sources are the bedrock of what we do.

8) What one thing should everyone know about Leonardo?
That *Mona Lisa* was a commissioned portrait of Lisa del Giocondo (née Gherardini), an apparently unremarkable woman from an old aristocratic family who married into new money, which makes what he achieved even more remarkable than if the painting had extraordinary origins.

*The history of “art”*

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The modern system of the arts, that is, the concept of the fine arts as a separate category of human endeavour, distinguished from crafts and decorative arts on the one hand, and the sciences, on the other, only emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, first in France and later in Europe generally. At this point, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry and, sometimes, dance came to be regarded as a distinct type of art that had pleasure as its end and was associated primarily with aesthetics and the beautiful. Yet this notion of art, current in the West during the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and underpinned by historically specific social and cultural institutions, was preceded by quite different ideas about the arts and has since been eroded by a multiplicity of views on what art is and what it does.

Classical Greece produced some of the now most highly regarded works of art in the Western canon. Although the most famous Greek sculptors were accorded a degree of social recognition, ancient Greek thinkers as a group did not conceptualize the activity that produced these works as distinct from other forms of craftsmanship, ranging from shoemaking to construction to poetry. “Art” or *techne* might mean any skilled human activity that caused something to come into being, as opposed to *scientia* or theoretical knowledge.

Distinctions among the arts were made on the basis of a variety of criteria, including whether an art produced a concrete object or according to whether the art was regarded as preparatory for the study of philosophy, as did language and mathematical arts (the liberal arts). The Greeks, and later the Romans, therefore, might include architecture among the liberal arts, along with agriculture, medicine, and sometimes mechanics, while placing painting and sculpture among the ill-liberal arts. Poetry and music tended to be more highly regarded, in large part because of their association with eloquence and, in the case of the latter, mathematics, both aspects of elite education. However, one late ancient list, reflecting a less rarefied perspective, includes singing and dancing among acts that “are not done in regard to or through others”, along with vomiting, having sex and hanging oneself.

Conceptually, however, the arts were most often categorized according to a hierarchy of processes. Aristotle, for example, distinguished theoretical knowledge (mathematics, physics, and metaphysics), the practical arts that are expressed in action (economics, ethics and politics) and productive arts by which a product such as a poem or a shoe are brought into being, a classification that would have a long history into the Renaissance. Overall, classical culture oscillated between a negative and a positive conception of the arts. The artist was not clearly separated from the craftsman and the activities of both could at times come under the indictment of being done for money, as merely imitative of nature and as requiring a kind of mindless skill rather than true knowledge or inspiration. At other times, Greek and Roman writ-
ers expressed a deep respect for human intelligence as revealed in the ability of art to “create a second nature.”

During the Middle Ages, art was primarily decorative and didactic, designed to teach spiritual or political lessons. Architecture, painting, and sculpture were grouped with crafts, although the category of crafts was itself elevated during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries into the artes mechanicae (which also included theatre); these were regarded as ministering to the body, as philosophy and the liberal arts did for the soul. Intellectual and empirical experimentation also resulted in a new emphasis on how some arts, primarily alchemy, could correct, improve and transform nature. Theoretical music and poetry continued to be associated with the liberal arts.

We begin to see the beginnings of the modern system of the arts in the Renaissance when classical and medieval understandings of art, nature, and craft began to be destabilized. Although there was still no consistent concept of the modern category of the “fine arts”, painting, sculpture, architecture were given new status as liberal arts and the visual arts, in particular, were linked to the sciences and, sometimes, to poetry and literature. The artist emerged as a more individualized and professional figure claiming intellectual gifts beyond the manual dexterity and skill accorded artisans. Clear-cut distinctions between the capacities of “art” and “nature” eroded, as did barriers between the artisan and the humanist. These developments, supported by new economic and social structures, contributed to the “new science” of the Scientific Revolution and, in the eighteenth century, to the appearance of the fine arts as a conceptual category.

The notion of the “fine arts” as it developed in European culture prioritized aesthetics, imagination and originality, in contrast to applied arts which retained the craft connotation of functionality. Art was now “art for art’s sake”. The status of “high” art was promoted by institutions such as academies and museums that reinforced the distinctions between fine art – seen as reflecting inspiration and a refined sensibility in both the artist and the viewer – and popular art, regarded as mere entertainment. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, the presence of new electronic and digital mass media, a global art market, and a voracious consumer culture has collapsed distinctions between fine, applied and popular art and introduced new forms such as performance art, installation art, conceptual art, and multimedia. At the same time, mass production has created a renewed respect for the “hand-made” and the artisanal. Today, the concept of “art” is expansive, multi-faceted and self-referential: “art” can be what someone claims to be art. Consequently, many philosophers of art no longer find the query, “what is art?”, to be a useful question.

Bibliography:


The Leonardo da Vinci Society

The Secretary and Newsletter Editor are very grateful for the comments and suggestions made by members. We welcome suggestions of material, such as forthcoming conferences, symposia and other events, exhibitions, publications, reviews, 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 the following address: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/hosted/leonardo>

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