

# Leonardo da Vinci Society Newsletter

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## Recent and forthcoming events

### The Annual General Meeting and Annual Lecture, 2011.

The Society's Annual General Meeting was held on Friday 13 May 2011 at 5.30 pm, in the Kenneth Clark Lecture Theatre at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Somerset House, and was followed by the Annual Lecture at 6.00 pm. We are as ever very grateful to the Courtauld Institute for their generous hospitality of this event. This year's Annual Lecture was given by Dr Jill Burke (University of Edinburgh), on 'Leonardo da Vinci and the Perfect Body. Nakedness and Humanity in Renaissance Italy'. Dr Burke opened her lecture by examining the celebrated red chalk study, dating from around 1506, of a male nude seen from the front. As the starting point for the creation of an idealised nude figure, it begs questions. How does one decide what an idealised nude looks like? What is the relationship between the model and the final drawing? Why was Leonardo interested in idealised nudes at all? Life drawings like this became a central part of artistic practice and training in the western tradition. But meanings of nudity in Italian Renaissance society, one that had strong taboos against nakedness, were several and conflicting, yet around 1500 increasing numbers of images of nude men and women were made in all art forms. This may in some instances be related to the enthusiasm for classical sculpture, but as in the case of a nude Diana setting forth on the hunt, it may be impractical.

Antonio del Pollaiuolo's *Battle of Naked Men* engraving, of around 1470, is widely agreed to be a landmark in the depiction of the naked human form, a precursor to the obsessive interest in the male nude in action that became basic to artistic representation. Puzzlingly, there is no literary or pictorial source that can explain why these men are battling. Their nakedness and facial expressions suggest viciousness rather than



heroism; and their curved swords and the background vegetation suggest foreignness. Writing back from North America in 1492, Columbus described the natives as naked, and this reflects observations made by earlier discoverers of new lands in sub-Saharan Africa, India and America. Florentines had special interests in Western Africa, matched by their great interest in geography and cartography. As early as 1447 the Venetian Alvise Cadamosto wrote that 'the blacks of Senegal go around almost completely naked...' Nudity could spell anarchy and loss of identity, and the lack of clothes, for Europeans, related to a lack of civilisation, suggesting a society with little organisation, more akin to the way animals live than humans. The idea of the bestial native was widespread: in his 1450 chronicles of discovery Azurara reported that the natives 'lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings'.

If Africans were sub-human, slavery became less of a moral quandary. Florentines promoted the trade and increasingly bought black slaves for their own use. Pollaiuolo's engraving may be considered in the light of a society that was actively debating whether other, newly-discovered peoples were or were not actually human. If not, then they would benefit from civilising, thus justifying their enslavement. Pollaiuolo's engraving is evidence that discoveries in Africa influenced the Italian Renaissance fascination with the naked human figure. Around 1489 Leonardo was planning a book 'on the human figure', which would draw on the practice of the analytical study of the nude that was being established in Florence at this time, coinciding with his early anatomical studies and interest in human proportion. The increasingly frequent drawings after the live model were a way of formulating the ideal human figure and committing it to memory. The search for ideal form led to the rethinking of the canon of human proportion, a classic example of which is Leonardo's 'Vitruvian Man' drawing. He was influenced by Alberti, who was the first to suggest

systematic measuring of human bodies to find the most beautiful mean; collating information through observation and measurement seems very modern, a precursor to the scientific method. But for the Renaissance, to uncover the perfected human form was to become closer to God. The Renaissance nude has been called 'the quintessential expression of the beauty, dignity and excellence of human beings', and in Renaissance chronicles and letters the bodies of African men were often considered especially well-formed or well built. Paradoxically, drawings of Africans were often made to integrate these beautiful bodies into a decidedly European understanding of idealised beauty.

### **The Society's forthcoming conference on 'Fame in Art and Science'**

'Fame in Art and Science', a meeting organised jointly by the Leonardo da Vinci Society and the Royal Institution, is to be held at the Royal Institution (21 Albemarle Street, London W1) on 4 November 2011.

In both Art and Science some people become famous, whereas others, considered equally significant by their peers, or by historians, do not. Why has Leonardo (rather than, say, Michelangelo) become the standard-bearer of the popular idea of the Renaissance? In science, Galileo has similarly heroic status in regard to heliocentric astronomy and Faraday for the modern study of electricity. How far are such images indebted to Romantic notions of individuality?

Fame is obviously different in Art and in Science, but as we want to examine fame itself rather than the history of either art or science, comparisons may be illuminating. The speakers, in chronological order of their main subjects, will be Paul Hills (Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London) on 'Titian and the Performance of Painting', Stephen Pumfrey (University of Lancaster) on 'Galileo Galilei', J. V. Field (Birkbeck, University of London) 'Johannes Kepler', Jon Whiteley (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) on 'Images of Cultural heroes in the Romantic era', David Knight (University of Durham) on 'A Romantic genius in science: Davy

and his contemporaries', and Frank A. J. L. James (Royal Institution) on 'Why is Faraday so famous and Maxwell not?' The meeting will end with an evening lecture that brings us back to the original question: Martin Kemp (University of Oxford) will speak on 'Leonardo and the Mona Lisa. Why?'

Further details will appear on the Leonardo da Vinci Society and Royal Institution websites in due course. The organisers are J. V. Field and Frank A. J. L. James.

### ***Leonardesque news***

**Leonardo da Vinci and Optics. An international Conference of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institute, in cooperation with the McIntire Department of Art, University of Virginia, organized by Francesca Fiorani and Alessandro Nova, Florence, 26 – 28 May 2011.**

*Hana Gründler (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz) writes:* Hardly any other artist of the Renaissance devoted his attention to optics as intensely as Leonardo da Vinci did. While carefully studying ancient and medieval treatises on optics, such as Aristotle or Alhazen, he investigated the most varied optical phenomena and also conducted numerous experiments. He recorded his discoveries in diagrams, sketches and drawings, as well as in texts, and he transferred them from one system of representation into another. As is well known, Leonardo wished to make optics the basis of artistic training; and he planned an illustrated book on the subject, demonstrating once again that the mutual enrichment of art and science was fundamental to his work.

This conference, organized by Francesca Fiorani and Alessandro Nova and hosted by the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, focused on investigating the importance of optics for Leonardo's thought. In order to re-evaluate the relationship between theory and practice in the Renaissance and to explore further the abovementioned correlation of art and science, not only art-historical perspectives but also scientific, philosophical and literary points of view were considered.

The conference opened with an evening lecture given by David Summers, who analyzed *chiaroscuro* and its relation to perspective and rhetoric. Summers convincingly argued that Leonardo's artful juxtaposition of light and darkness emphasizes the whole pictorial and visual field, and serves to focus the beholder's eye. The final justification of *chiaroscuro*, according to Summers' conclusion, is rhetorical, as it is a more elaborate, emphatic use of optics. In his paper on "Leonardo's Point" Frank Fehrenbach discussed Leonardo's definition of the *ultimo principio* of painting as being a point. In a profound analysis of some notes taken from the *Codex Arundel*, Fehrenbach showed how Leonardo described the point as a liminal but dynamic entity between being and not-being in nature. In a second step he investigated the relations between the dynamics of the point, optics and painting and stressed that the perfect painter, who is able to transgress the materiality of the surface of painting, would be a "point" himself, transitioning from nothing to being.

The morning session continued with a paper by Fabio Frosini, who offered an illuminating reading of a short note and a representation of the so-called "potenzia spirituale" in the *Codex Trivulzianus* and some later notes in the *Codex Atlanticus*, all connected to the problem of light and perspective. Frosini demonstrated that in Leonardo's thought the generalization of the perspectival model and the concept of "specie", fundamental for the idea of a natural philosophy based on perspective, developed over a long period of time. Leonardo's approach was first distinguished by the use of a magical language, which was later transformed, Frosini proposed, into a "language of perspective". In the last paper of the morning, Frank Zöllner discussed theoretical problems regarding the proportions of light and darkness, seeking then to link these theoretical issues to Leonardo's practice of painting. His intention was to identify a paradigm shift: after 1500 Leonardo moved away from sharpness and perspective and became deeply interested in a blurriness that was, according to Zöllner, both less scientific and rational and strongly connected to an aesthetic of reception.

In "Leonardo's Shadows" Francesca Fiorani examined Leonardo's lifelong interest in the

depiction of blurred, coloured shadows from the point of view of painting technique, optics and natural philosophy. She convincingly argued that Leonardo's analysis of shadows is indebted to Alhazen's *De Aspectibus*, stressing, however, that in many of his theoretical and scientific interests, as for example optics, the artist departed from problems inherent to painting itself. Fiorani suggested that Leonardo's experiments in the field of painting represent a concrete contribution to the science of optics. It is a knowledge that is expressed not verbally, but through a visual medium. Romano Nanni analyzed the relationship of light and portraiture in the *Trattato della pittura*, considering if and how Leonardo's art theory constitutes the development of a European vocabulary of aesthetics. In a close reading of Leonardo's *Portrait of a Musician*, the *Lady with the Ermine* and *La Belle Ferronière*, Pietro C. Marani demonstrated the relationship between painting and science, stressing that in these three paintings Leonardo had allegorically and metaphorically anticipated the fundamental themes of the *paragone* debate, creating a 'mute painting' theory.

The conference ended with Martin Kemp's stimulating paper on "Looking and Learning in the *Codex Leicester*". Kemp, who is supervising the online-edition of the *Codex Leicester* in collaboration with Domenico Laurenza, gave an impressive analysis of the material quality of the *Codex*, demonstrating how fundamental its physical make-up is for an appropriate understanding of Leonardo's thought. He also examined the optics of the sun and the moon, and the studies of water in the *Codex Leicester*, and dealt with methodological problems, analyzing questions of knowledge transfer. In the final section of his paper, Kemp focused on Leonardo's understanding of experiment, concluding that for Leonardo the drawing of a thing is in itself an experiment.

All papers thus explored the correlation of theoretical knowledge and artisanal practice. In the discussion Frank Fehrenbach rightly pointed out that the question of the primacy of theory over practice, or vice versa, is less relevant than an appropriate analysis of their mutual influence. Looking at actual discourses in the history of science as well as in the history of art, it is

necessary to have an understanding of science, where creative and material aspects play a fundamental role, and to assume a model of perpetual, reciprocal enrichment of science and art. On the basis of the discussion in the proceedings it would surely be worthwhile further to analyze categories such as artisanal knowledge or tacit knowledge, and to focus on questions like: What is the role of process and materiality in the production of knowledge? How do we deal with networks of knowledge? Is there a non-propositional knowledge that is transmitted particularly well through drawing or painting?

**The 51<sup>st</sup> Lettura Vinciana: ‘Le battaglie di Leonardo’, given by Carlo Vecce, on 16 April 2011, at the Biblioteca Leonardiana, Vinci**

How can a battle be represented visually? More than ten years before the *Battle of Anghiari*, Leonardo had already fully expounded the problem in Codex A (1492), jotting down an extraordinary text amongst the notes destined to become the oldest core of a ‘book on painting’. The title, *Modo di figurare una battaglia* (‘How to depict a battle’), seemed to announce a simple didactic text, nothing more than a compositional grid for painting battles. In fact, the ‘battle’ was a highly successful genre in Quattrocento art (from Paolo Uccello to Piero della Francesca), and the invention and composition of the ‘story’ was considered a difficult test of an artist’s skills. But the word *figurare* had a deeper significance for Leonardo. It was more directly linked to *descrivere* (‘describe’), to the use of verbal language, the instrument required to ‘recount’ the event as a whole and to recreate its temporality from within: and the comparison can be found both in the contemporary texts of the so-called *paragone* and in those of the folios on anatomy.

The outcome is paradoxical: like the late *diluvii*, so too the battles of Leonardo proved ‘impossible’ to *figurare*. Above all this is because they are modern battles: no longer heroic clashes between medieval cavalry, with shining armour and banners fluttering in the breeze, but confused scrums in a mist produced by the gunpowder of the artillery, a chaos of sounds and smells in which men and animals move around like ghosts. Dantesque visions, these battles render visible an

earthly inferno, created by human folly (*pazzia bestialissima*) itself, and ‘measurable’ through observations of a physical and mechanical nature: the lightness and density of smoke and dust, the upward and downward movements of the air, the mixing of fluids (blood, water, mud).

The battle also offers an enormous spectrum of human body movements and of inner feelings exteriorized in facial expressions – a beautiful and terrible spectacle which introduces in almost sacred and ritual terms an essential theme of all of Leonardo’s work: the aesthetics of violence. However, its modernity lies in the artist’s treatment of point of view: that of a soldier who is in the midst of battle, knows he is part of it and that he may be overrun and killed at any moment (as in the battles described in modern literature by the likes of Stendhal, Tolstoy, Crane and Fenoglio). Perhaps only the cinema would manage to give a unitary thread to the different sequences, through the editing process – and it is no accident that one of the most attentive readers of *Modo di figurare una battaglia* was the master of *Alexander Nevskij*, Sergei Eisenstein.

**A series of exhibitions based on Leonardo da Vinci’s notes and drawings in the Codex Atlantico, in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan.**

Since autumn 2009 the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan has mounted four exhibitions each year in a series curated by Leonardo da Vinci scholars under the general curatorship of Pietro C. Marani. The exhibitions alternate between scientific and artistic subjects, and from biographical to political, geographical and natural science themes. In each between 40 and 44 folios from the *Codex Atlanticus* are displayed. Thus far, fourteen exhibitions have either been mounted or are in planning, and themes for a further 27 exhibitions have been proposed. The fifth exhibition, on ‘Le armi e le machine da guerra: il *De re militari* di Leonardo’, which ran from September to December 2010, was curated by Matthew Landrus. The exhibition on display in May 2011, curated by Pietro Marani and Furio Rinaldi, was on ‘Leonardo e la sua bottega: disegni di figura e di animali’; by the time members of the Society receive this *Newsletter*, the eighth exhibition in

the series, on 'Leonardo: studi sul moto' ('Studies of motion in the Codex Atlanticus'), curated by Juliana Barone, will be on display.

The Codex Atlanticus is unrivalled in its range of sheets showing how Leonardo tackled the issue of motion throughout his career. The purpose of the current exhibition is to reveal the major role Leonardo ascribed to motion across the spectrum of his investigations and of his different forms of expression. It focuses on six fundamental themes: human motion; studies of the flight of birds and for the flying machine; Leonardo's visual representations of motion; his investigations into equilibrium and movement in balances, and his ideas on impetus, percussion and friction; geometry and perpetual motion; and finally motion in nature: the movement of air and the formation of clouds and rain, and the motion of water. All these are illustrated by sheets devoted entirely or partially to the basic principles of motion, and others showing Leonardo's graphic strategies for conveying motion. An important objective of this exhibition was to display sheets that have never, or only very seldom previously been shown. It thus offers significant contributions to our understanding of Leonardo on motion: his theoretical ideas, thinking processes, intellectual frameworks and representational techniques, his aspirations, innovations and outstanding contributions.

### **A major Leonardo da Vinci exhibition forthcoming at the National Gallery**

The exhibition on 'Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan', sponsored by Credit Suisse, opens in the Sainsbury Wing exhibition galleries of the National Gallery on 9 November 2011, and closes on 5 February 2012.

This exhibition will concentrate on Leonardo's career as court painter to Lodovico 'il Moro' Sforza, Duke of Milan. Leonardo arrived in Milan early in the 1480s, and left soon after the city fell to the French invaders. when Lodovico Sforza fled, in autumn 1499. During that period of nearly two decades, Leonardo produced an enormous quantity of paintings, drawings, and works in a wide range of court-centred activities from architecture to theatre design, as well as large quantities of writings on artistic and scientific

matters. The National Gallery's exhibition will concentrate on Leonardo's aims and ambitions as a painter. More than sixty paintings and drawings will be displayed, as well as pictures by some of his closest collaborators, including nearly every surviving painting that he produced during these years. Included will be the Biblioteca Ambrosiana's *Portrait of a Musician*, the Vatican *Saint Jerome*, *La Belle Ferronnière* (Paris, Louvre), the *Madonna Litta* (Hermitage, St. Petersburg), the Buccleuch Collection *Madonna of the Yarnwinder*, and the *Lady with an Ermine* in the Czartoryski Foundation in Cracow, as well as the National Gallery's own *Virgin of the Rocks*.

More than fifty drawings relating to the paintings will be displayed, including thirty-three from the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. All the surviving drawings associated with the *Last Supper* will be displayed in a spill-over exhibition in the Sunley Room, accompanied by the copy of Leonardo's mural by Giampetrino, owned by the Royal Academy and normally on view in Magdalen College, Oxford. The drawings will exemplify the wide range of Leonardo's draughtsmanship, from the briefest of pen-and-ink sketches through fully-worked red chalk studies to the full-scale cartoon of the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* in the National Gallery's collection.

The exhibition will be divided into seven sections: 'Arriving in Milan: the Musician', 'Ideals of Beauty: Portraits of Women', 'Representing the Body: Saint Jerome', 'Painting the Divine: The Virgin of the Rocks', 'Companion painters: The Madonna Litta', 'Around 1500: The Burlington House Cartoon', and 'Character and Emotion: the Last Supper'. It will be accompanied by a catalogue in which will be two essays, by Luke Syson (curator of the exhibition) on 'The Rewards of Service: Leonardo and the Duke of Milan', and by Larry Keith, the Director of Conservation at the National Gallery, who has recently worked on the *Virgin of the Rocks*, on 'The Pursuit of Perfection: Leonardo's Painting Technique'.

Unfortunately, it has not proved possible to negotiate a reduced entry price for members of the Leonardo da Vinci Society, but please remember that you can gain entry to the exhibition at half price with an Art Fund National Art Pass.

## Two recently published books on Leonardo da Vinci and related topics

*Glossario Leonardiano. Nomenclatura della macchine dei codici di Madrid e Atlantico*, edited by Paola Manni and Marco Biffi. Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 2011, vol. 1 of the series "Biblioteca Leonardiana. Testi e documenti".

*De divina proportione di Luca Pacioli*, unedited facsimile of a manuscript in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan. Arezzo, Aboca Museum Edizioni. The manuscript is illustrated with drawings by Leonardo of the five regular or 'Platonic' solids.

### *The Leonardo da Vinci Society*

The Secretary is very grateful for the comments and suggestions made by members and very much regrets that he has not had time to reply to them individually.

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 the following address: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/hafvm/leonardo>

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