

Leonardo da Vinci Society Newsletter

editor: Francis Ames-Lewis

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Recent and forthcoming events

The Autumn 2007 Symposium, on 'Leonardo da Vinci and his Patrons'

The Symposium on 'Leonardo da Vinci and his patrons' was held on Friday 21 September 2007 at 2:00 pm, in the Birkbeck Lecture Theatre at 43 Gordon Square, WC1. It was organised by Professor Francis Ames-Lewis on behalf of the Leonardo da Vinci Society. Following a chronological sequence, the four presentations offered contributions with respect to key patrons and periods of Leonardo's career.

The first speaker was Dr Monica Azzolini (University of Edinburgh), whose presentation focused on Leonardo and Sforza Milan. By referring to the famous letter in which Leonardo offered his services to Lodovico Sforza, to the documents relating to the *Virgin of the Rocks*, and to the project of the Sforza horse, Dr Azzolini established a context for addressing Leonardo's activities at the Milanese court. Her main inquiry revolved around how Leonardo acquired his knowledge of anatomy. First, she drew attention to the need for further studies on Leonardo's knowledge of Latin, and suggested that even if rudimentary (something to be further determined), he probably counted on the help of prominent scholars and physicians related to the Sforza court for reading anatomical texts. Dr Azzolini drew attention to the fact that Leonardo was in contact, for instance, with Fazio Cardano (father of the better known Girolamo), and that other acquaintances probably included members of the Ghiringelli and Marliani families. She added that Leonardo had the privilege of access to the Ducal library of Pavia and that, in short, he was not alone. Instead, he was part of a large network in which there were lively intellectual debates (such as that referred to in Luca Pacioli's introduction to his *De divina proportione*), and plenty of opportunities also for fruitful exchange of knowledge. Furthermore, Milan could boast an active medical community, as testified by the 'books of the dead' that are still preserved in the Milanese archives. These registers give the name of the person, the cause of death, and almost always the

name of the physician. Autopsies on corpses were almost certainly performed in Leonardo's time, and in 1491 a major 'deliberation' allowed doctors to perform dissections on bodies of the poor at the Ca' Granda Hospital, by then the major hospital in the city. The provisions also indicated that draughtsmen were required to record them. Dr Azzolini concluded that Leonardo was most likely familiar with this practice, and wondered if he himself did not contribute drawings.

The second presentation was by Professor Francis Ames-Lewis (Birkbeck College), who considered Leonardo's relationship with his famous patron, Isabella d'Este, the Marchioness of Mantua. Professor Ames-Lewis started by drawing attention to the fact that although Isabella has been seen as an intemperate, demanding and ungrateful patron, there is also evidence that she learned to adapt her wishes to what painters could offer, as becomes apparent from her negotiations with Leonardo. These negotiations seem to have started with her commission from Leonardo of a portrait of herself. To this she certainly contributed her choice of the profile view facing right (a pose usually adopted for male sitters in diptychs, and which suited her status as a ruler), but which is unlikely to have appealed to Leonardo because of the emotional detachment from the viewer. It would seem, Professor Ames-Lewis suggested, that the fact that this portrait was one of status, rather than of personality, largely accounted for Leonardo not turning it into a painting. In the negotiations that followed, although there is an indication that Isabella requested the final portrait, there is also evidence of her flexibility and fine perception of Leonardo's style. Drawing attention to the appropriateness of Isabella's words to characterise Leonardo's works, 'executed with that sweetness and soft ethereal charm', Professor Ames-Lewis pointed to a link between her appreciation of Leonardo's art and the freedom she offered him with respect to subject matter. Leaving aside the portrait and not insisting on a *studiolo* painting (which she probably realised was at odds with Leonardo's manner), Isabella suggested a 'little Madonna', and later, a 'youthful Christ'. There were finally no paintings by Leonardo for Isabella (he

seems to have produced only sketches, some of which were re-utilised in workshop paintings), and what he actually executed for her were drawings of antique vases that she intended to acquire. Professor Ames-Lewis concluded nonetheless that the traditional view of their relationship as unproductive can be questioned: we learn about Isabella's sensitivity and strategies as a patron; about the importance of drawings (presentation drawings) as a means of conveying information about objects for patrons; and about workshop procedures and the diffusion of the 'Leonardesque' type.

Turning to Leonardo in Republican Florence, the third presentation, by Dr Jill Burke (University of Edinburgh), opened with a reference to David Franklin's recent book on Renaissance Florence and his view, shared by Dr Burke, that because Leonardo did not finish his works he was an artist difficult to understand in the Florentine context. That perception of Leonardo, Dr Burke explained, was also apparent amongst Leonardo's contemporaries, not least in Florence's republican leader, Piero Soderini, and in Leonardo's main biographer, Giorgio Vasari, both of whom did not view Leonardo as genuinely Florentine and felt it difficult to accept, or explain, the fact that he constantly left his works half way through. Dr Burke pointed out that, between 1500 and 1506, Leonardo did not finish the *St Anne*, the *Mona Lisa* or the *Battle of Anghiari* (a work that would celebrate the recently established Florentine republic). She also drew attention to Leonardo's involvement in a range of apparently unconnected activities, which included working as a military engineer for Cesare Borgia and as a 'water' engineer for Florence. However, underlying these seemingly unrelated activities, Dr Burke suggested that there was the common theme of war; and that we may well find new clues to Leonardo's Florentine commissions by looking at where he was lodged and its surroundings: the Santissima Annunziata complex, the Sapienza building, and the San Marco convent and annexes. Dr Burke drew particular attention to the fact that in the church of the Santissima Annunziata there was a chapel of the Giacomini family devoted to St Anne, which, she suggested, could shed light on the commission of Leonardo's painting and the unusual fact that the cartoon was displayed there. Dr Burke explained that Antonio Giacomini, the head of the family, must have been popular because of his links with the Soderini government and his important role in the war against Pisa. She concluded that other patrons, such as Antonio Segni (for whom Leonardo executed the presentation drawing of *Neptune*), and Francesco del Giocondo (who commissioned the famous portrait of his wife, the *Mona Lisa*), were also connected with the Florentine government, and that such relationships could lead to renewed investigations of Leonardo's patrons and works.

The final presentation was by Dr Tom Tolley (University of Edinburgh), who looked at Leonardo and his French patrons before Francis I. Questioning the traditional view that French painting began only with Leonardo (a view that was largely based on Vasari's *Vite*), Dr Tolley pointed out that Leonardo did not start a new era, and that, also contrary to Vasari's account, Leonardo did not move to France as a result of his rivalry with Michelangelo. Instead, his moving to France happened only after twenty years of constant discussion with the French, for which Dr Tolley provided an extensive survey. Dr Tolley started with a document of 1507, in which the French were negotiating Leonardo's stay in their occupied Milan (as opposed to his return to Florence and resumption of work on the *Battle of Anghiari*), and in which there is allusion to Louis XII's wish to commission a portrait from Leonardo. Then Dr Tolley recalled the French obsession with the *Last Supper*, epitomised by the King's desire to transport the painting to France, and the commission of copies and versions. Dr Tolley wondered if the *Salvator Mundi* might have been linked to Louis XII's patronage, and suggested that the commission for the *St Anne* could well have had a similar origin. His examination of Leonardo's relationship with the French also included the analysis of further works and documents, such as the *Madonna of the Yarnwinder*, for Florimond Robertet (of which several versions are now known), and drafts of letters and records in which there are references to gifts and to the salary Leonardo was receiving from the King. Dr Tolley also drew attention to the 'Ligny memorandum' (which consists of a note in the Codex Atlanticus written shortly after the 1499 French invasion of Milan), in which Leonardo records his intention to go to Naples with the Comte de Ligny (Louis de Luxembourg); and, lastly, he recalled that the *Virgin of the Rocks* (now in the Louvre) probably was in France by 1514, since this motif appears in a French prayer book. Thus, Dr Tolley concluded, contrary to Vasari's view, Leonardo's art was not only well known in France, but also fitted with their taste and expectations.

The Annual General Meeting and Annual Lecture 2008

The AGM and Annual Lecture next year will be held as usual in the Kenneth Clark Lecture Theatre at the Courtauld Institute of Art, on Friday 9 May 2008: the AGM at 5.30 pm and the Annual Lecture at 6.00 pm. The Annual Lecture will be given jointly by Professor Martin Kemp (University of Oxford) and Dr Antonio Criminisi, who will discuss the investigation of perspective in pictures.

An exhibition on ‘Leonardo. From studies on proportions to the *Treatise on Painting*’, in Milan

This exhibition, on display in the Sala delle Asse in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan from 5 December 2007 to 2 March 2008, is sponsored by the Ente Raccolta Vinciana and the City of Milan, and curated by Pietro C. Marani and Maria Teresa Fiorio, with the collaboration of Martin Kemp (*The Universal Leonardo*, London).

Leonardo da Vinci was continually fascinated by the proportions of the human figure and of the horse. Numerous chapters in the third section of his *Treatise on Painting* are dedicated to human limbs, and there we also find passages dedicated to what he called the “*membrificazione*” (the articulation of the limbs) of animals and to their movement (paragraphs 284, 300, 304, 374, and many others), or to descriptions of battle scenes or horses in combat. But most especially, it was Leonardo’s involvement with the equestrian monument to Francesco Sforza that provided him with the stimulus to apply to the horse the patterns and methods he had already made use of for the human body. These studies on the modular divisions of the horse’s body, like those for human proportions, are also known to have influenced Dürer. This exhibition therefore takes its beginnings from the *Treatise on Painting* and from a highly selective number of drawings by Leonardo on the human figure and on the horse. On display will be a drawing for a *Leda*, attributed to Leonardo, held in the Castello Sforzesco’s Civiche Raccolte di Arte Antica; a drawing by Verrocchio of the proportions of the horse (on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); a drawing by Leonardo on the proportions of the horse, from the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle; and a study for the equestrian monument to Francesco Sforza now held at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan. Exceptionally, the exhibition will also present a “model” of the horse, attributed to Leonardo himself and held in a private collection, which has not been made available for public viewing for over fifty years.

The itinerary of the exhibition continues with a very rare group of apographs (ancient manuscript copies, in this case dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) of Leonardo’s *Treatise on Painting*. Some of these belong to the Ente Raccolta Vinciana at the Castello Sforzesco, while others are in private collections; a number of these are hitherto unpublished. The apographs, which are illustrated with exquisite “stenographic” drawings, include three manuscript versions (from the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan) executed by Cassiano dal Pozzo and illustrated with Nicolas Poussin’s human figure drawings. Also in the exhibition are miniatures from the Sforza era that show the “great horse” of Milan; and some forty printed editions of Leonardo’s *Treatise*, beginning

with the first editions published in Paris in 1651, and including others from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of which are truly rare and not present in public library collections. The series ends with editions from the nineteenth century, drawn primarily from the historical collections of the Ente Raccolta Vinciana and from private collections. This extraordinary wealth of offerings is a measure of the high fortune enjoyed by the text and drawings of Leonardo from his time up to the present day. Further enhancing the exhibition are engravings, reproductions, and facsimiles, including some original engravings and a drawing by Antonio Canova, and prints by Giuseppe Bossi in which the theme of the proportions of the human figure and of the horse are reconsidered, in the wake of Leonardo’s studies, at the height of the Neoclassical period.

A Dialogue between Fritjof Capra and Paolo Galluzzi, held at Vinci on 24 September 2007

Dr Romano Nanni (Biblioteca Leonardiana, Vinci) writes: In his philosophical and epistemological reflections on today’s science in *The Network of Life (La rete della vita, 1966)*, Fritjof Capra considered the necessity of a change of paradigm in physics, abandoning the mechanical model of Descartes and Newton in favour of an organic and ecological view. Such a change of paradigm would interchange the positions of physics and the life sciences. The title of one of the central sections of Capra’s monograph is “Leonardo’s science as a science of living form” (“La scienza di Leonardo come una scienza delle forme viventi”). The science of living form he claims to find in Leonardo is mainly based on a use of geometry that is said to anticipate modern topology.

A few examples of historiographical problems will help us understand the implications of Capra’s attempt to re-read Leonardo’s scientific work in terms of a science of living form.

Leaving to one side works that see Leonardo as making no contribution to the development of science (such as those of George Sarton or John Randall Jr.), we may turn to some twentieth-century historians who dealt with Leonardo’s ‘science’, from Duhem to Dijksterhuis, Koyré, Clagett and Truesdell: authors who cannot be lumped together under a single label. However, the historiographical concerns that guide their approach to understanding and evaluating Leonardo’s work are to do with concepts connected with the origin of statics and dynamics. These comprise the question of a dynamical or geometrical approach to statics; the ideas of virtual work and composition of forces; the development and applications of the law of the lever and the theory of motion on inclined planes; the study of falling bodies, ideas of force, and of the relation between impetus and

the concept of inertia; and the connection between the science of weights and the mechanics of fluids in Leonardo's proto-geological speculations. Even the anatomical drawings were considered (for instance by Dijksterhuis and Koyré) as studies by an engineer trying to understand the body in mechanical terms, a kind of anticipation of the idea of man as a machine.

The attention paid to Leonardo's intellectual tools (geometry and mathematics in general) is almost always but not exclusively (we must remember Marcolongo) largely derived from these historiographical preconceptions, which are also to be found in studies of physical optics and the theory of vision (Ronchi, Lindberg, Crombie). As Dijksterhuis formulated it, the problem, in the 1950s was to study Leonardo as a representative case of the transition from Aristotelian to modern science.

Investigations of Leonardo's work in the life sciences have confined themselves more closely to what is found in his manuscripts: Duhem and Baratta at the beginning of the century, then Kemp, and more recently Gould, have stressed the acuity of Leonardo's observations in understanding organic phenomena such as fossilization, and the historical significance of some of his speculations about connections between palaeontology and the 'geological' history of the Earth.

Capra, motivated by a belief that there have been few studies of Leonardo's mathematics by mathematicians, considers that the science of living form he identifies in Leonardo's work is mainly based on geometry. A geometry that in Leonardo's late work will extend beyond its original Euclidean framework, to use geometrical figures to represent linear functions, and continuous variables; a geometry that is dynamic, like reality in motion; in fact a geometry of transformations (for instance of rectilinear figures into curvilinear ones) which looks forward to the conservation of volumes. All this allows one to see Leonardo as anticipating modern topology, a geometry of continuous transformations, such as that of Poincaré, appropriate to investigating and representing living form. Capra re-reads Leonardo with the assumption that primacy must be given to the geometry connected with theories of complexity.

In his initial presentation, Romano Nanni, briefly rehearsing these elements of the history of Leonardo historiography, pointed out that this proposed re-reading of Leonardo's geometry is the chief purpose of Capra's book. He noted that Capra had set out along a narrow path already taken, at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, by the art historian Thomas Cook and the biologist D'Arcy Thompson, both of whom were especially interested in the biology of spiral forms, on which they had found insights in the drawings of Leonardo and Dürer; and similarly by

Paul Valéry, who had tried to combine ideas from Leonardo and Poincaré in the light of a theory of the continuity of the real.

In his contribution, Paolo Galluzzi drew attention to the many difficulties to which we are exposed by historiographical approaches that seek to re-read history from the viewpoint of present concerns. For instance, Leonardo's geometry, in its entirety, can be traced back to the kinematic geometry of Archimedes. Sometimes, reflections on changes in epistemological paradigms in the development of today's science are obviously in themselves legitimate and acceptable, but they are questionable if they claim to be able to rewrite the history of science and to read Leonardo outside his own temporal context.

[translation by Dr J.V. Field]

A new book on Florentine fifteenth-century art and society

Patricia Lee Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-century Florence*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-300-12342-5.

'I proudly admit to being one among a number of art historians interested in examining the ways that form, style, and subject matter might be related to specific social, political, and institutional contexts' declares Patricia Rubin in the Foreword to her new book. It is therefore about 'the social dynamics of the visual', and Professor Rubin believes that 'images served to articulate the identities of fifteenth-century Florentines as instruments of social definition and of cultural expression'. Her book 'is a series of essays whose purpose is to locate the visual arts in the society' of fifteenth-century Florence: as such is not intended to be a social history of the arts at that time nor 'an exhaustive reading of the imagery of a century', but rather 'to provide keys to further and future readings'.

Although the frontispiece shows the celebrated pair of angels by Leonardo da Vinci and another painter (Verrocchio?) in the San Salvi *Baptism of Christ* (Florence, Uffizi) painted in the Verrocchio workshop, Leonardo receives rather little coverage in this book. Certainly it can be argued that compared with older masters like Verrocchio and the Pollaiuolo brothers, and with his closer Florentine contemporaries like Botticelli, Ghirlandaio and Cosimo Rosselli who had won major commissions to paint frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, Leonardo was still relatively undistinguished when he left Florence for Milan in 1482. Even the innovatory, although unfinished, *Adoration of the Magi* (Florence, Uffizi) is discussed only briefly here, in relation to a detailed and stimulating analysis of Filippino Lippi's inventiveness. Leonardo's principal appearance is in the context of Professor Rubin's

discussion of 'the perspective of depiction', optics and the sense of sight; otherwise quotations from his writings on painting and reproductions of paintings and drawings of the early Florentine period are little more than passing references. Nevertheless, Professor Rubin's essays offer a number of perceptively analysed contexts within which Leonardo's Florentine works can be placed and further considered: 'future readings' of these works may well be informed by her astute and thoughtful discussion.

The Society's Kenneth Keele Library at the University of York

Dr Kenneth Keele, who founded the Leonardo da Vinci Society in 1986 and died the following year, was an eminent scholar of Leonard's work on the physiology of the human body. Negotiations are in progress for the long-term loan of the Kenneth Keele library of books on Leonardo da Vinci, bequeathed to the Society by his widow the late Mary Keele, to the library of the University of York. The terms of the agreement between the Society and the University ensure free access by all members to the Society's books, and allow for other books owned now and in the future also to be loaned to the University of York Library. It is hoped that the books will be delivered to the University of York Library early in the New Year.

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 this address:

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

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