

Painter at the Court of Milan

A REMARKABLE EXHIBITION OF LEONARDO'S WORK LEADS MATTHEW KIERAN TO REFLECT ON ART THAT STANDS THE TEST OF TIME

Leonardo is celebrated for being a great inventor, proto-scientist and artist: the epitome of a true Renaissance man. So art lovers booked up months in advance and £16 tickets were sold for £250 or more for the "Painter at the Court of Milan" exhibition at the National Gallery. It is the first and perhaps last time viewers will get to see more than half of Leonardo's paintings in one place. This is not because there are so many of them. Far from it (we'll come on to that). It is just that rarity, ever increasing insurance costs, and fragility militate

against drawing these works together again. The question is, what light does this once in a lifetime show throw upon Leonardo's artistic genius?

We are used to the reputations of artists waxing and waning over the years. The violent brilliance of Caravaggio all but disappeared from view until his twentieth-century rehabilitation as a rebellious artist suited the tenor of the age. Yet Leonardo never seems to have fallen from his rarefied place in the artistic firmament. Leonardo was a slow starter by Renaissance standards, he produced little of artistic note before 30, but his star shone brightly once creative fusion got going. Thus Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, written soon after Leonardo's death, has it that "besides a beauty of body never sufficiently extolled, there was an infinite grace in all his actions; and so

"The Inventions of Genius: Leonardo da Vinci – Painter at the Court of Milan", the National Gallery, London



Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (*The Lady with an Ermine*), about 1489–90. Property of the Czartoryski Foundation in Cracow on deposit at the National Museum in Cracow. © Princes Czartoryski Foundation.

great was his genius, and such its growth, that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease. In him was great bodily strength, joined to dexterity, with a spirit and courage ever royal and magnanimous; and the fame of his name so increased, that not only in his lifetime was he held in esteem, but his reputation became even greater among posterity after his death.” So just what is it about Leonardo’s work that would prompt such a eulogy?

Early Renaissance Italy was the economic and trading powerhouse of Europe. Its art celebrated human individuals and, in particular, the social status of newly enriched mercantile classes. The resultant explosive demand, alongside artistic emancipation from craft guilds, gave rise to the first great age of European portraiture. When Leonardo arrived in Milan, playing his lyre and touting wild engineering schemes,

artistic convention was to portray princes, clerics, merchants’ wives, prospective brides and mistresses in profile. Leonardo was the first to break with the custom in Milan, turning his sitter two thirds or three quarters toward the viewer. He was not the very first to do this, Mantegna went before him, but what counts is what Leonardo did with such a radical innovation.

He was a visual thinker driven by an insatiable curiosity about the world

The most celebrated portraits in the exhibition are beguilingly realistic figures. *The Lady with an Ermine* (c. 1489–90) is a portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, the sixteen-year-old mistress of Leonardo’s Milanese patron Ludovico Sforza. In three-quarter profile her head is turned in line with her shoulders, as if gazing upon someone within the picture world. The white stoat held to her breast is similarly alert and orientated in the same direction. The sharply delineated figures are caught in a frozen moment capturing the natural inquisitiveness of a lively young woman. Leonardo’s *The Belle Feronnière* (c. 1493–4), possibly representing Sforza’s wife, is similarly psychologically bewitching. Yet both portraits simultaneously idealise their subjects. This carries through in various different ways from the two versions of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, the early one (c. 1483–5) with its solidly real figures amid a bizarre rocky landscape to the blue coolness of the later version (c. 1491/2–9 and 1506–8), to the eeriness of *Christ as Salvator Mundi* (c. 1499 on). The use of *sfumato* builds throughout

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– fine brushwork creating hazy gradual tone shifts – and is particularly strong, not to say overdone, in the last. *The Last Supper* (c. 1495–8), Leonardo's severely restored fresco, haunts the exhibition's end. If Giampietrino's early painted copy (c. 1515–20) as displayed is anything to go by, Leonardo's mural must have been astounding. The disciples cluster into threes, responding dramatically to the revelation that one among them would betray Jesus. Here is a revolution that would ultimately issue in the emotional drama of Caravaggio and the naturalism of Velazquez.

A striking feature of the exhibition is the large number of drawings and sketches. The very first image is a head profile in cross-section. The scalp's tissue-thin layers are precisely detailed showing an eye attached to three ventricles in the brain. Here we see where clear-sighted observation meets hypothesis in visual representation. The mess of Leonardo's dissections yielded anatomical drawings apprehended in terms of imagined mechanisms and hypotheses.

In some quarters it is fashionable to think of Leonardo as something of a dilettante; not so much the Renaissance man, more the attention deficit disorder type. Leonardo was notorious for not finishing things. He only managed to finish about 20 paintings (and some of those are incomplete). The monks who commissioned the *Virgin of the Rocks*

had to wait well over ten years to see the results of what they had paid for (and Leonardo sold the first one on privately, hence he had to do another). Yet this exhibition gives the lie to such an image. Leonardo was neither a dabbler nor a painter in the specialised way that we tend to think of artists nowadays. He was a visual thinker

The Virgin of the Rocks, about 1491/2–99 and 1506–8. © The National Gallery, London



The ventricles of the brain and the layers of the scalp, about 1490–4. Lent by Her Majesty The Queen. The Royal Collection © 2011, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II



driven by an insatiable curiosity about the world. Art was pursued not merely for art's sake but for the love of knowledge.

From Plato through to the Romantics it has been common to think of artistic genius as non-rational inspiration. Yet here is a true genius inspired and motivated by the very rational attempt not just to understand matters but to represent the world aright. The visual skills involved in Leonardo's observation, precise rendering and artistic techniques are impressive, as is the conceptualisation and imaginativeness involved. What is most startling, however, is how all-encompassing Leonardo's central motivation seems and just how perpetually unsatisfied and insatiable over so many domains he must have been. The intrinsic motivation of knowledge for its own sake helps to explain why Leonardo did what he did; to remain true to it in such a fashion is a great achievement of character. Creativity, in whatever sphere, often requires

us to resist the blandishments of others or the temptations of material reward and strive for the self-knowledge required to avoid easy satisfaction. If one is intrinsically motivated then, other things being equal, one is more likely to produce more worthwhile and creative work. Thus we may be better off thinking about creativity in terms akin to intellectual or non-moral virtue rather than the unbidden frenzies of romantic mythology.

Of course in and of itself Leonardo's creative character and motivation do not explain why his reputation has seemed forever undimmed. To echo Hume, the test of time involves works being valued highly through different ages and attitudes. Yet artistic stars often rise and fall because one age prefers one value of art over that preferred by another. Blameless differences in individual temperament or culture can lead to legitimate variations in admiration and esteem. Where the classical veneration of truth to nature is preferred, the subdued realism of Vermeer or Courbet may find favour, while romanticism's concern with emotional expression may resonate more with work by Blake or Munch. Leonardo's achievement is that the work does not just speak to one particular value of art or artistic temperament. He opens out the pursuit of naturalism, the exploration of psychological depths and the refinement of aestheticised experience. By opportunity, talent, and excellence of character, it turns out that Leonardo did not merely illuminate some of the richest values of art as breathe new life into them.

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