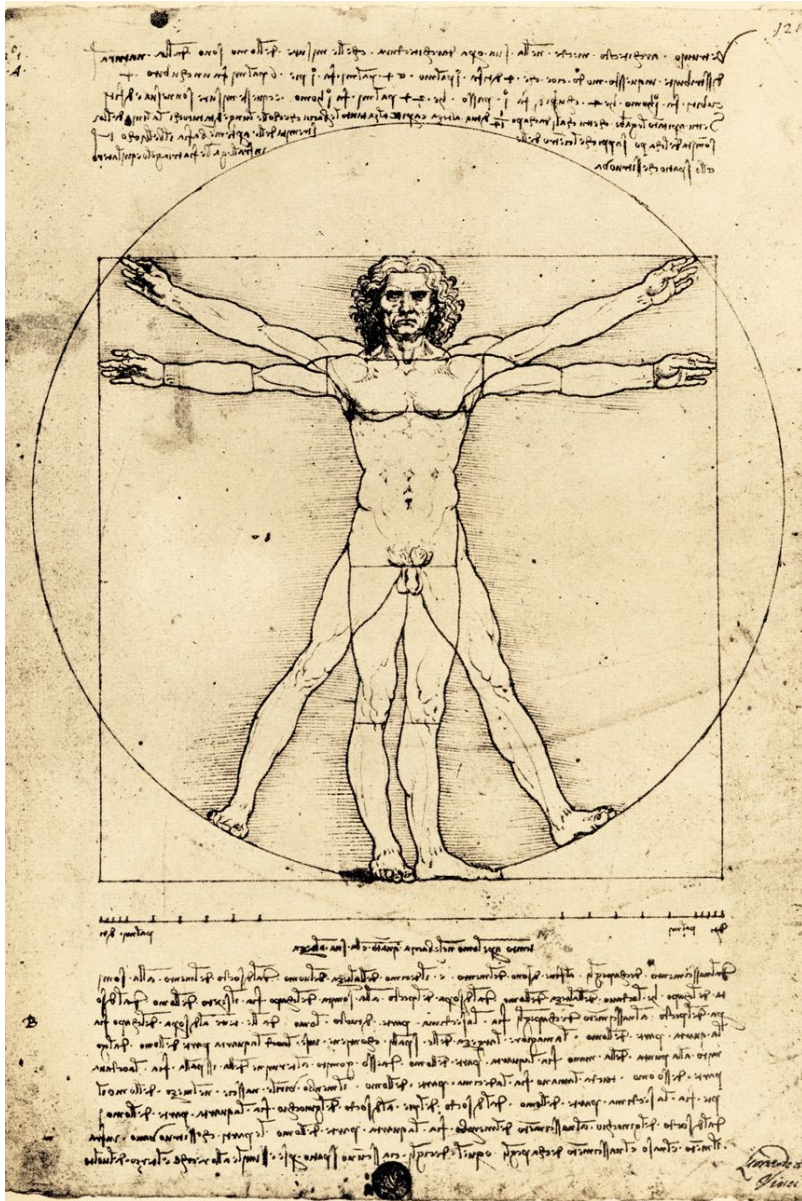


EUROPE

Italian Court Lets Leonardo's 'Vitruvian Man' Travel to France

Ruling counters push by heritage group to keep work in Italy amid strains with Paris



Leonardo da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man' is set to travel to France after an Italian court ruling on Wednesday. PHOTO: UIG/GETTY IMAGES

By Eric Sylvers

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MILAN—An Italian court gave the go-ahead for Leonardo da Vinci's iconic "Vitruvian Man" drawing to travel to the Louvre for an exhibition that starts next week, after a bid to block the loan amid acrimony between Italy and France.

The ruling on Wednesday clears the way for the drawing, a nude figure with outstretched arms and legs inside a circle and a square, to be displayed at an exhibition celebrating the 500th anniversary of Leonardo's death that opens on Oct. 24 and runs until the end of February. In return, France will lend Italy two Raphael paintings for an exhibition next year marking the 500th anniversary of the painter's death.

Because of its fragility, "Vitruvian Man" is rarely displayed and spends most of its time in a vault at Venice's Gallerie dell'Accademia.

France and Italy, staunch allies since the end of World War II, engaged in a war of words this year, and Paris recalled its ambassador in February. That followed months of verbal attacks from Matteo Salvini, head of the far-right League and at the time the interior minister and a deputy prime minister.

French President Emmanuel Macron criticized Mr. Salvini's decision to bar ships carrying migrants picked up at sea from docking in Italian ports. Mr. Salvini in turn demanded France stop blocking migrants from crossing into France from Italy and called for the extradition of several dozen Italian leftist militants who have taken refuge in France.

The public spat allowed Mr. Salvini to push his far-right agenda while it gave Mr. Macron the chance to present himself as the leader of Europe's centrist political forces holding off the rise of populism.

Mr. Salvini, who is close to Mr. Macron's domestic political rival Marine Le Pen, called Macron "a terrible president."

Tensions began to abate after the ruling coalition of the League and the antiestablishment 5 Star Movement collapsed in August. The center-left establishment Democratic Party took the place of the League in the new coalition. Last month, Mr. Macron met with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in Rome.

The original accord between the two countries on the lending of the Leonardo sketch in exchange for the Raphael paintings dates to 2017 when the Democrats led a center-left coalition.

Leonardo was born in Italy and spent much of his life in the country, working principally in Florence and Milan, but many of his most important artworks are in France, where he died. The Louvre holds five Leonardo paintings, including the "Mona Lisa," and 22 sketches. Some Italians have bristled at a French museum holding such a rich trove of Leonardo's works.

The same Venice court that issued Wednesday's ruling last week temporarily suspended the transfer of the Leonardo sketch after Italia Nostra, a nonprofit that promotes Italian heritage, filed a complaint.

The court said that expert assessments made clear that problems relating to the fragility of the Leonardo sketch could be resolved by taking special care when moving it and by limiting the light in the room where it will be displayed at the Louvre.

The dispute over whether the sketch could be lent also touched off a debate within Italy, where many art historians were in favor of lending it to the Louvre.

If the loan doesn't proceed, "the world won't get to see an iconic Leonardo drawing because it will be in a vault in Venice and the Italian public won't have its Raphaels," Vittorio Sgarbi, an Italian art critic and politician, said in an interview in *Il Messaggero* before the court's decision.

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