

ART

Exhibits Mark 500 Years of Leonardo da Vinci, the Original Renaissance Man

Leonardo da Vinci's 'Codex Leicester' is among treasures on view 500 years after the death of the Renaissance polymath

By John Hooper

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Florence

Leonardo da Vinci died almost 500 years ago but is still perhaps the best-known artist in the world. A host of events is planned for next year's anniversary and this week saw the opening of the first major show in his homeland.

The Uffizi Galleries unveiled an exhibit of the Codex Leicester, a notebook of mostly scientific observations Leonardo wrote in Florence between 1504 and 1508. The 72-page manuscript is written in the artist's distinctive "backwards" script, which appears normal when reflected in a mirror. In 1994, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates paid more than \$30 million for the Codex, making it the world's most expensive book at the time. It is named for its earlier owners, the Earls of Leicester.

The Codex reveals Leonardo's fascination with the movement of water, making it relevant at a time of rising sea levels. The show's curator, Paolo Galluzzi, said it even prefigured a doomsday scenario: "At a certain point [Leonardo] says it's not impossible that in the future, water will cover the entire earth and, he says, that will be the end of humanity."

At the presentation, Mr. Galluzzi said preparations for the exhibit had led to the rediscovery of 70 photographic plates taken of the Codex, which had been in the archives of the Italian national library in Rome. Made between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the plates reveal lines that had faded from the original manuscript.

Other quincentenary shows are set for England and France next year. In Italy, the Sforza Castle in

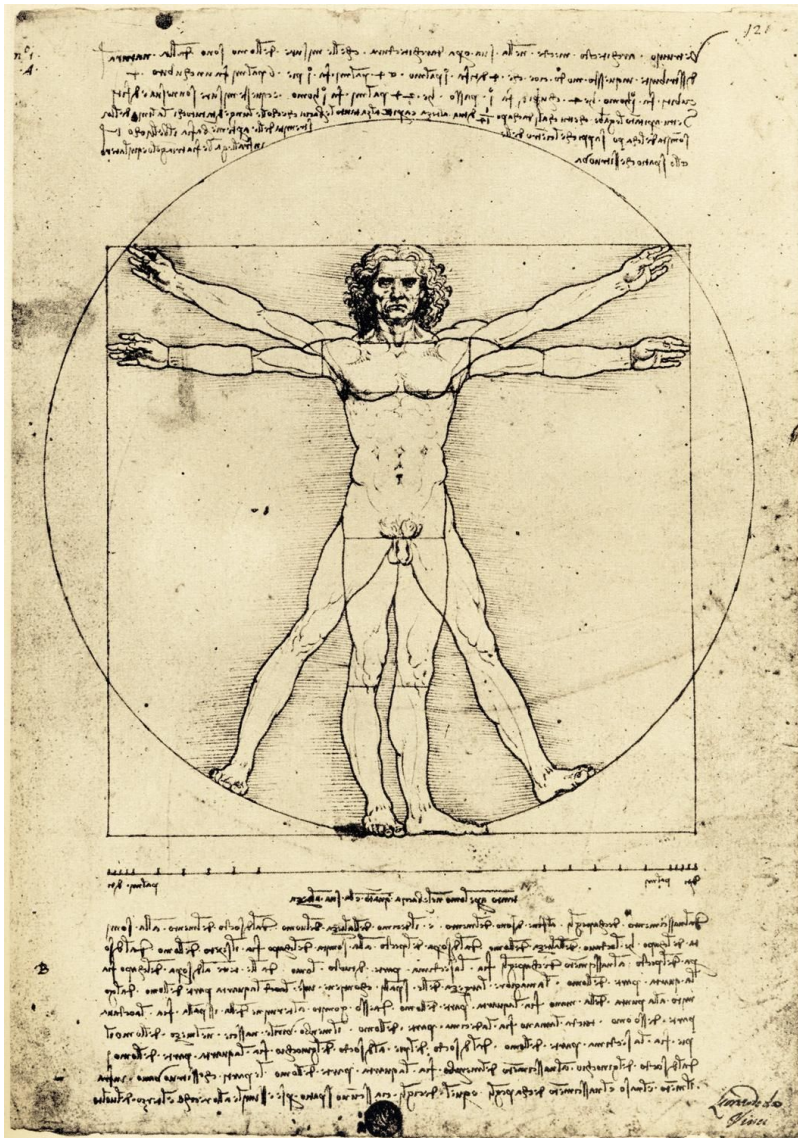


A show at the Uffizi Galleries in Florence will include notes and observations by Leonardo da Vinci, including his Codex Leicester. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Milan will open the restored Sala delle Asse. Leonardo decorated the room for his patron Duke Ludovico in 1498.

Leonardo isn't an easy artist to celebrate. Raphael, who died in 1520 aged 37, left behind almost 200 works. Leonardo, who lived to be 67, left hundreds of drawings. One, "The Vitruvian Man," has become a favorite for T-shirts, mugs and tattoos.

But while often hailed as the greatest painter of all, he left behind a tiny collection of paintings. Only five completed paintings are universally acknowledged to be Leonardos. They include the earlier version of "The Virgin of the Rocks," "The Last Supper," "The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne" and what is perhaps the world's most famous painting, the "Mona Lisa." "The Last Supper" is at a convent in Milan and all the others are in the Louvre in Paris. Leonardo's fifth undisputed painting is his trompe l'oeil decoration of the Sala delle Asse.



'Vitruvian Man,' Leonardo da Vinci's drawing from the late 15th century, has become a familiar image on T-shirts, posters and mugs. PHOTO: UIG/GETTY IMAGES

Add two unfinished works, and maybe a dozen widely accepted as his and the total still comes to fewer than 20 paintings. Included in that tally is the most expensive painting ever sold, "Salvator Mundi." Bought last year by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, it fetched \$450 million despite the doubts of some experts.

Finally, there are the paintings a minority of art historians attribute to Leonardo. A show this year at Yale University Art Gallery made the case for at least seven works from the studio of Leonardo's teacher, Andrea del Verrocchio.

One reason for the confusion is that Leonardo didn't sign his paintings. In addition, he was as much addicted to experimenting in art as in science and technology. His repeated changes of style and technique make him an attributionist's nightmare.



The Worcester Art Museum's 'A Miracle of Saint Donatus of Arezzo,' a painting attributed to Leonardo da Vinci and Lorenzo di Credi, will travel from Massachusetts to Florence for the Verrocchio exhibition and then to the Leonardo show at the Louvre.
 PHOTO: WORCESTER ART MUSEUM, WORCESTER/THEODORE T. AND MARY G. ELLIS COLLECTION

Leonardo's creations appear again and again in Western art, from early copies of his work to Marcel Duchamp's parody of the "Mona Lisa" and Andy Warhol's interpretations of "The Last Supper."

Despite his global fame, Leonardo remains in many respects as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa's smile. Artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari, writing more than 30 years after Leonardo's death, represented him as a compassionate man, fond of buying caged birds to set them free.

Yet Leonardo left almost nothing of himself. "There are no substantial letters. There is no confessional poetry," says Luke Syson, head of European sculpture and decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Leonardo's normal mode, Mr. Syson said, is to "give himself distance ... the dispassion of science." The only exceptions are "moments of exasperated self-expression," often written in the margins of his manuscripts.

Even then, they can raise more questions than they answer. One of the best known is his assertion that the Medici, the all-powerful ruling family of Florence "made me and destroyed me." Little in what is known of his life supports such a claim.

Leonardo's quincentenary isn't just an opportunity to reassess his genius but, with the 500th anniversary of Raphael's death in 2020, the start of two years in which to ponder the Renaissance.

Timothy Verdon, who lectures on Renaissance art at Stanford University's campus in Florence, said that intrinsic to the Renaissance was the rediscovery of the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. "One lesson the Renaissance can teach us moderns is that it's possible to delve into cultures distant from that in which we have been brought up, find universal messages and harmonize them with concepts that are more familiar to us." The result, Monsignor Verdon says,



Leonardo's self-portrait? Many—but not all—experts believe this drawing in red chalk is one. Leonardo experimented ceaselessly and didn't sign paintings, making attribution a challenge. PHOTO: UIG/GETTY IMAGES

can be “a wonderfully varied composite.”

WHERE TO FIND LEONARDO

Oct. 5, 2018—Jan. 6, 2019: **Teylers Museum, Haarlem, the Netherlands.** More than 30 Leonardo drawings, including three studies for ‘The Last Supper.’

Oct.13, 2018—Jan. 13, 2019: **Il Museo del Cenacolo Vinciano, Milan.** Ten drawings for ‘The Last Supper.’

Oct. 29, 2018—Jan. 20, 2019: **Uffizi Galleries, Florence.** Codex Leicester, on loan from Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates.

Feb. 1—May 6, 2019: **Twelve locations across the U.K.** ‘Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing,’ includes 144 drawings from the Royal Collection.

Mar. 8—Jul. 14, 2019: **Palazzo Strozzi and Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.** ‘Andrea del Verrocchio: Sculptor-Painter of Renaissance Florence.’ Works by Leonardo’s master. A version of the exhibit travels to the **National Gallery in Washington**, where it will be on display Sept. 29, 2019-Feb. 2, 2020.

Apr. 15—Oct. 15, 2019: **Museo Leonardiano, Vinci, Italy.** Located in Leonardo’s home town, this museum devoted to the artist has an exhibit linking his work to the local landscape. Until May 26, it will include his earliest surviving drawing (of the mountains of Montalbano) on loan from the Uffizi.

May 2, 2019: **Sforza Castle, Milan.** Opening of the restored Sala delle Asse, decorated by Leonardo. The castle is also staging two exhibitions: one of Leonardo’s Milan and one of his designs for the Sala delle Asse.

May 24—Oct. 13, 2019: **The Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace, London.** ‘Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing,’ has more than 200 drawings from the Royal Collection. Billed as the largest exhibition of Leonardo’s work in 65 years.

Oct. 24, 2019—Feb. 24, 2020: **Louvre, Paris.** ‘Leonardo da Vinci’ will feature the ‘Mona Lisa’ and four other fully accepted paintings already on display in the museum. The show may include the controversial ‘Salvator Mundi.’

Nov. 22, 2019—Mar. 15, 2020: **The Queen’s Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, Scotland.** ‘Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing,’ has a selection of 80 drawings from the Royal Collection.