



Celebrating the 500th anniversary of Leonardo Da Vinci's death in his birthplace

Roberta Barsanti and Monica Taddei (eds.): *Omaggio a Leonardo per cinque secoli di storia 1519–2019*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2023, 152 pp, 53 color illustrations, €32.00 PB

Francesca Fiorani¹

Accepted: 13 June 2024

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2024

The volume edited by Roberta Barsanti and Monica Taddei gathers lectures by eight leading scholars of Leonardo da Vinci. The lectures were delivered in Vinci, the artist's native town on the hills near Florence, throughout the year 2019, which marked the 500th anniversary of the artist's death—the event was commemorated with a trove of initiatives across the globe. The cycle of lectures in the book was one of the initiatives of the Biblioteca Vinciana. Housed in the town of Vinci, since 1960 the Biblioteca Vinciana has been sponsoring a yearly *Lettura vinciana*—or Da Vinci Lecture—which is traditionally delivered on or around Leonardo's birthday on April 15. For the year 2019, the Biblioteca Vinciana's director, Roberta Barsanti, and its head librarian, Monica Taddei, decided to expand the yearly *Lettura vinciana* to a series of lectures delivered throughout the year, asking scholars to focus their papers on some aspects of Leonardo's art and thought that intersected specifically with the artist's hometown. The resulting essays vary by topic and approach. Some are closely related to Vinci and its vicinity, such as Marzia Faietti's essay on Leonardo's famous landscape drawing dated 1473, or Domenico Laurenza's contribution on Leonardo's ideas on nature, or Paola Salvi's on Leonardo's study on the universal rules of nature. Others are more wide ranging; Paolo Galluzzi examines the different ways Leonardo da Vinci was commemorated in the past century and half; Pietro Marani reviews Leonardo's work for the French king Francois I; Maria Teresa Florio presents Leonardo's influence on Lombard sculpture; and Mario Salvini delves into the artist's technological expertise in weaponry. As a whole, the book offers a rich panoramic view of current themes pertaining to the interpretation of Leonardo's art, thought, and science.

✉ Francesca Fiorani
ff6f@virginia.edu

¹ University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA

Paolo Galluzzi opens the collection with a thoughtful essay on “Leonardo nei Centenari” (Leonardo in the Centenaries), which focuses on the significance the Renaissance artist came to play in Italy from the formation of the Italian nation state in 1871 onward. With great attention to the broader political and cultural contexts of the past hundred and fifty years, Galluzzi explains the creation of the *Commissione Vinciana*, a national committee instituted by the Ministry of Education for the publication of Leonardo’s writings in 1884, which still exists; the low key celebration for the 400th anniversary of the artist’s death in 1919, which, occurring only one year after the close of WWI, presented Leonardo as *the* key figure of the intellectual alliance between Italy and France, an intellectual alliance that followed the political and military alliance of the two nation states during the war. But, as Galluzzi explains, a few years later, when Fascism took over in Italy, Leonardo was heralded as the ultimate genius of Italy and celebrated in a monumental exhibition significantly entitled *Leonardo and Italian Inventions*, which was held in Milan in 1939, at the outset of WWII. The political climate changed again after WWII and in 1952, for the 500th anniversary of the artist’s birth, the artist was claimed by opposing Italian political parties for different reasons: the Christian democrats praised him for his religiosity, while members of the communist party viewed him as the epitome of the “new man” freed from superstition and religion. Galluzzi concludes his essay recalling the recent disputes between Italy and France on the loan of famous works by Leonardo for an exhibition at the Louvre in 2019, disputes that closely reminded those of a century ago.

Marzia Faietti in her essay “Leonardo 1473, 1481 circa. La natura e la storia in punta di penna” (Leonardo ca. 1473, 1481 ca.: Nature and History at the Tip of the Pen) examines the famous landscape drawing Leonardo sketched in pen and ink in 1473. This fragile drawing, which is in the collection of the Uffizi Gallery, was exceptionally loaned for display for a couple of months in Vinci in 2019. Focusing on the artist’s original invention of his graphic signs, Faietti shows how, unlike his contemporaries, Leonardo did not rely on parallel hatching but devised instead a variety of fluid, diverse, and malleable signs that went beyond the definition of an outline and that were meant to suggest the fluidity of nature itself—be it the flow of branches in the wind, or the lighting effects of the sun on leaves, or the fuzzy air emerging from marshes. This innovative graphic sign was germane to represent landscape in motion, rather than as a fixed, static entity, and to render smoky effects, which would eventually become signature effects of Leonardo’s drawings and paintings. Perceptively, Faietti subscribes to the view that Leonardo created this famous drawing at his desk: even though Leonardo did observe in person the places represented in the drawing, he did not copy a specific view, preferring instead to change the perspective, positioning, and portrayal of various features to fit his own personal view of the landscape. Faietti also points out how Leonardo did not abandon the graphic sign as outline altogether: he kept using it only for architectural details. But for nature, animals, and people, he invented a new graphic sign to render their motion—both physical and emotional.

Pietro Marani in his essay “Leonardo e Francesco I. Fonti e ipotesi sulla committenza reale” (Leonardo and Francis I. Sources and Hypothesis on Royal Patronage) offers a rigorous review of the interactions between Leonardo and Francis I, King of France. As Marani points out, it is certain that the king invited Leonardo to

join his court in France, but what Leonardo did for the French king remains a matter of speculation. No documentary evidence has surfaced thus far, although stories recounted by people who wrote numerous decades after the events abound, starting with the spurious account by Giorgio Vasari about Leonardo's death in the arms of the French king—the king was not even in the same city as Leonardo that day. Many are the undocumented works Leonardo did for Francis I: a mechanized lion that opened his chest to reveal bouquets of French lilies; a painting representing the goddess Pomona; an equestrian monument; an architectural project for a royal palace at Romorantin. It is certain, though, that the king acquired some of Leonardo's masterpieces—the *Mona Lisa*, the *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, the *St. John the Baptist in a Landscape*—which are all at the Louvre, although we do not know when the king acquired them, let alone how much he paid for them. Marani shows how much more research is needed to clarify fundamental aspects of Leonardo's work, especially his relations with Francis I.

Maria Teresa Fiorio in her essay on “Leonardo e gli scultori lombardi” (Leonardo and Lombard Sculptors) reviews Leonardo's involvement with the practice of sculpture, starting from the artist's training in Verrocchio's workshop, where—Fiorio reminds us—the artist must have been extensively exposed to and trained in clay, bronze, and marble sculpture. But, as it is well known, no sculpture is securely attributed to Leonardo, and Fiorio judiciously reviews the many proposals that have been put forward by scholars in the past century or so. Convincingly, Fiorio shows how Leonardo's art—especially his drawings and paintings—had considerable impact on the sculpture produced by Milanese artists in the course of the sixteenth century. The names of those sculptors are known to specialists, less to the public—Benedetto Briosco, Cristoforo Solari, Bambaia, Pietro Bussolo, Giovanni Angelo del Maino, Andrea da Corbetta—but the figures in marble, wood, and terracotta that these artists created were heavily inspired by Leonardo's compositions for paintings of the Virgin, Baby Jesus, or the apostles, demonstrating that they did have direct access to Leonardo's designs and compositions.

Domenico Laurenza's essay “Figura umana e paesaggio: trasfigurazioni artistiche della ricerca anatomica e geologica di Leonardo” (The Human Figure and Landscape: Leonardo's Artistic Transfigurations of Anatomical and Geological Research) expands the author's earlier studies on the anatomy of the human body and of the body of the earth. Laurenza reviews the connection between these two branches of knowledge—anatomy and geology—with a special attention to how the artist's late interest in geology influenced the way he painted the landscapes of his paintings. Laurenza focuses on Leonardo's Codex Leicester, since the artist gathered in it notes and sketches on the earth, on water, on the sky, and on the moon that he had written throughout his life. Laurenza was part of the team of experts who recently published an extensive critical edition of the Codex Leicester. Bill and Melinda Gates now own the Codex Leicester.

Paola Salvi's essay on “Leonardo and ‘le regole’ della natura” (Leonardo and the ‘Rules’ of Nature) explains the different meaning that necessity (*necessità*), reason (*ragione*), and rules (*regole*) have in Leonardo's mind. Building on the work of previous scholars, including Cesare Luporini, Eugenio Garin, and Paolo Galluzzi, whose writings she summarizes in a very helpful appendix to her essay, Salvi reminds us

of the principles of Aristotelian philosophy that are always present in Leonardo's thought. Starting from experience rather than books from ancient authors, the artist searched for necessity, reasons, and rules in every aspect of nature—be it the flight of birds, air, water, the human body, animals, and even the art of painting.

Mario Scalini's contribution on "I cannoni di Leonardo" (Leonardo's Cannons), is an interesting essay on Leonardo's technological knowledge, which the artist based on his direct observation of the melting and soldering of metals, casting, fortifications, and contemporary techniques of war and weaponry. Scalini suggests that Leonardo improved his technological knowledge when he was at the service of Cesare Borgia in 1501–1502, especially in relation to his study of the fortification of the city of Cesena. One of Scalini's contributions is in recalling that a deep knowledge of building techniques and of technology more generally is essential to fully understand the functioning and even the dating of many works by Leonardo, especially works for which no other archival sources exist to document them.

This edited volume is a valuable resource that adds to the incredible production of books, exhibition catalogues, critical editions, and collections of essays that have been produced on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the artist's death.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.