

# 'Leonardo da Vinci' Review: Genius in Its Many Stages

The multifaceted exhibition at the Louvre commemorating the 500th anniversary of Leonardo's death shows not just his finished works, but the process and evolution behind their creation.



Leonardo da Vinci's 'La Belle Ferronnière' (c. 1490-97) PHOTO: THIBAUT CAMUS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By

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The Louvre has the sort of problem many museums might envy: a single work of art that guarantees ticket sales in the tens of thousands every day. Yet the strange and arbitrary nature of the situation that the fame of the "Mona Lisa" has created is brought home by a beautiful new exhibition at the Louvre, "Leonardo da Vinci," commemorating the 500th anniversary of his death. It features 160 works, most by Leonardo, at least a handful of which easily rival the "Mona Lisa" in beauty and

significance. Meanwhile the “Mona Lisa” herself remains marooned in another part of the museum, not by choice but by necessity, since the 30,000 visitors who stream in daily to see the painting would overwhelm the exhibition.

Leonardo da Vinci

*Louvre Museum*

*Through Feb. 24, 2020*

But never mind. The Louvre has mounted an intelligent, generous exhibition that stands up brilliantly with or without the “Mona Lisa.” Thanks to the show’s paintings, sculptures, notebooks and drawings by Leonardo, his workshop and his contemporaries, there is no shortage of absorbing and beautiful things to see. The pairing of the Louvre’s curator of painting, Vincent Delieuvin, and curator of drawing, Louis Frank, makes perfect sense for Leonardo, who expended enormous energy generating ideas, only a fraction of which were brought to fruition.

Indeed, the great pleasure the show affords lies in the groupings of full sequences of preparatory drawings with the paintings they lead up to. Rather than just pick the most polished examples, the curators have favored working drawings, quick sketches, and ideas on the point of formation.



Leonardo da Vinci's studies for 'Virgin and Child With Cat' (c. 1478-80) PHOTO: THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Charming sequences include several pen studies from the British Museum and other collections of the "Virgin and Child With Cat" (c. 1478-80), showing Christ as a child squeezing an unwilling cat a bit too hard. His swift sketches imbued well-worn religious subjects with an elevated level of humanity, liveliness and even humor.

Leonardo never executed a precise painted version of these studies, but aspects of the Virgin and Child's tender physical interactions and jocular mood make their way into the "Benois Madonna" (c. 1480-82), [on loan](#) from the Hermitage in St.

Petersburg and on view in the same room, or years later into the way the Christ child clutches the wily lamb in the "Virgin and Child With St. Anne" (c. 1503-19), a painting from the Louvre in the exhibition's penultimate room.

Another highlight is the Louvre's own "La Belle Ferronnière" (c. 1490-97), a portrait of a young woman painted with crystalline clarity, in contrast to the smokiness of the "Mona Lisa." She gazes obliquely upward with a serious expression, her slightly upturned lip hinting at a complex inner life. Nearby, the curators have included Hans Memling's "Portrait of a Man Holding a Coin of Nero" (c. 1471-74), from the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium, making a pointed visual suggestion that Leonardo did not invent the physiognomic and psychological precision his portraits display, but learned it in part from observing the art of Netherlandish painters, whose work was beginning to trickle into Italy.



Leonardo da Vinci's 'Virgin and Child With St. Anne' (c. 1503-19) PHOTO: RMN-GRAND PALAIS/MUSEE DU LOUVRE/RENE-GABRIEL OJEDA

The curators rightly situate Leonardo's investigations of nature, astronomy, geometry and anatomy at the heart of the show, recognizing these pursuits as an extension of his dedication, as a painter, to observation. With so many digital projects under way around the world, and exhibitions reconstructing this or that machine, it is a delight and a thrill to see the actual notebooks in their varied sizes and configurations. Among more often noted interests in astronomy and machines, his enthusiasm for architecture also emerges in these sheets—in an exquisitely imagined reconstruction of an Etruscan tomb, seen in plan, section and elevation; in a centralized church envisioned from above; and of course in the “Vitruvian Man,” inspired by the ancient writer on architecture, and so iconic that it is incredible to see it in the flesh as merely a faint pen drawing.

Another highlight of the show is the opportunity to see two versions of “The Madonna of the Yarnwinder” (c. 1501-10?), both from private collections, one of which is held in the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. The paintings offer a fascinating example of how Leonardo enlivened Christian iconography with human observation. He shows the Christ Child staring at the cross he holds in his hands, deeply absorbed, while the Virgin raises a hand as if to take it away from him. It hovers between the familiarity of a mother trying to win back the attention of a distracted child and the sacred symbolism of the crucifixion story. The two works may have been mostly painted by members of his workshop, but the conception is absolutely Leonardo's.



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Leonardo's 'Study of Hands' (c. 1486-90) PHOTO: ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST/HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

With so many original objects, it is puzzling that the curators chose to intersperse them with other kinds of representations. There is a cast of a drapery study, and many full-scale infrared reflectograms of paintings not in the show, and some that are. Strangest of all, in an adjacent room, visitors who don a VR headset will encounter a creepy virtual doppelgänger of the “Mona Lisa,” breathing and blinking.

These anomalies aside, this is an intellectually ambitious show that does not pander. Against all odds, including the pressures of Leonardo's popularity and political wrangling with Italy among other places, Messrs. Delieuvin and Frank have mounted a scholarly, measured and deeply rewarding exhibition.

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