What We Talk About When We Talk About Leonardo

Mark Rosen

Associate Professor of Visual and Performing Arts
The University of Texas at Dallas

Walter Isaacson, *Leonardo da Vinci*. Simon and Schuster, 624pp., $22 paper.

Martin Kemp, *Living with Leonardo: Fifty Years of Sanity and Insanity in the Art World and Beyond*. Thames and Hudson, 288pp., $35 cloth.

Leonardo da Vinci's Salvator Mundi has been in and out of the news. It is the world's most expensive painting, having sold for $450.3 million dollars at a Christie's auction in 2017. No one's seen it for a while, but it's believed to be somewhere in the Persian Gulf. Or in storage, where the owner can avoid paying duties. It's been heavily restored, with less than a quarter of its surface original to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. It may have been painted by Leonardo with assistance. Actually, it might not be by the artist's hand at all.

The painting is like a shell company, or a shell game. Many millions of dollars are at stake, and in a mutually fulfilling show of synergy, the restorers, auction houses, and speculators lean hard on museums and scholars to validate their a priori conclusions. The *Salvator Mundi* is one of several new works, supposedly by Leonardo, that have come to light in recent years after resting in private hands for decades.[1] Not completely previously unknown to scholars, the *Salvator Mundi*, the so-called *Bella Principessa* (more on that one later), and the early variations on the *Mona Lisa* (with the Prado version being given special attention in the past couple years) are now put forward with well-financed bouts

1 From here on out I'll follow tradition, descending from Italian scholarship and usage, in calling him "Leonardo" rather than "da Vinci," much as I'd refer to the great thirteenth-century reformer as "St. Francis" rather than "Assisi." Dan Brown has a lot to answer for besides this unfortunate coinage, but in the age of editorial cutbacks "da Vinci" is sadly starting to creep into reputable publications.

Figure 1 "Léonardo de Vinci," installation view. Musée du Louvre, Oct. 24 2019 to Feb. 24, 2020. Photo © Musée du Louvre / Antoine Mongodin.

of publicity and videos advocating their acceptance. On more solid ground, two 2019–20 exhibitions—"Leonardo: A Life in Drawing" (London and Edinburgh) of 200 sheets from the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, and the eponymous career-spanning Louvre blockbuster (Figure 1) —sold out every ticketed slot, while even a show on the artist's teacher and later colleague Verrocchio at the National Gallery in Washington made much of its Leonardo connections, spotlighting his portrait of *Ginevra de' Benci* at the center of the exhibition. The 2019 renovation of the Louvre's Salle des États in anticipation of the quincentenary of the artist's death relocated the *Mona Lisa* to the hall featuring Rubens's phenomenal Marie de' Medici cycle, which was overrun with anxious pilgrims forced into serpentine queues (Figure 2). Meanwhile, major restorations are undertaken on the few surviving and well-documented works in major collections, with the Louvre *Madonna and Child with St. Anne* receiving widespread criticism for overcleaning its surface and the unfinished Uffizi *Adoration of the Magi* earning praise by removing some of the panel's later overpaint to reveal a near-crystalline level of brush drawing on the surface.

Because there's a finite number of works, and seeing them in person can be a challenge (scalpers control most of the timed-entry tickets to *The Last Supper* in Milan and most of the artist's drawings are normally kept far from public view), perhaps these new frenzies are inevitable. Moreover, interest in

Figure 2 *The Mona Lisa* on view in the Galerie Médicis, Musée du Louvre, summer 2019.
Photo: Musée du Louvre.

Leonardo is not limited to the public or to museum curators; scholarly work remains vibrant, with established curators Carmen Bambach of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Martin Clayton of the Royal Collection Trust contributing substantive new monographic studies; established academics like Claire Farago and Frank Fehrenbach continuing to find new topics to illuminate; and young scholars like Leslie Geddes and Francesca Borgo moving beyond the paleographic approach that defined Leonardo studies for nearly a century. That tradition, which in the English-speaking world dates back to Kenneth Clark's 1935 catalog on Leonardo's Windsor drawings, had a nearly unbroken chain, with Clark's onetime assistant Carlo Pedretti devoting nearly his entire sixty-plus-year scholarly career to the artist. (Pedretti, who actually bought a villa in a town neighboring Vinci and lived there in the last years of his life, was a jolly and extravagant presence, calling up lines from the artist's notebooks easily by memory.) Martin Kemp, emeritus of the University of Oxford, is currently the senior traditionalist of Leonardo scholars, even if many of his recent publications have been surprisingly accepting of new attributions.

With the majority of the artist's sheets and manuscripts in private hands or largely inaccessible before the era of photography, Clark, Pedretti, and Kemp performed an important role in Leonardo scholarship as the first group to consider the entirety of his output, not simply a scattered selection of damaged, decaying, badly restored, or overly visited paintings. It's easy to forget that the popular picture of Leonardo as an inventor of machines (and the many science-museum

exhibitions that have followed) and as a scholar of anatomy was essentially formed in the twentieth century as his manuscripts and drawings were widely published for the first time. Unlike, say, Michelangelo, whose most important works remained intact and visible in historically important buildings, Leonardo received a dramatic image upgrade beginning in the era of photography and ramping up in the late twentieth century, as his private, schematic, or unfinished thoughts became a gathering point for humanist reflection on the possibilities of the interdisciplinary mind.

Even so, the recent flood of interest does seem astonishing, and the field remains fiercely contested. Productivity gurus like to use Leonardo as a free-floating avatar for human problem-solving, often divorced from many of the contexts (drainage, warfare, exegesis of ancient texts) that actually generated those ideas. Others get lost in or overwhelmed by the new digital editions of the once-inaccessible bound manuscripts, such as the Codex Leicester and the Codex Arundel. The fact that over the past half century, the former has passed hands from old British nobility to petroleum tycoon Armand Hammer (who during his ownership renamed it the "Codex Hammer") to Bill Gates, gives a sense of the magnetic pull of money toward the totemic power of Leonardo's unpublished thoughts.

It does seem worth a moment's pause to consider what we want out of Leonardo, and two recent books aimed beyond specialists, Walter Isaacson's best seller *Leonardo da Vinci* and Martin Kemp's *Living with Leonardo*, open up that discussion. I should mention that these are hardly the only recent books in the field, which include *The Last Leonardo* (New York, 2019), Ben Lewis's journalistic account of the recent saga of the *Salvator Mundi*, and curator Carmen Bambach's four-volume *Leonardo da Vinci Rediscovered* (New Haven, 2019), the latter of which will probably take a few years for even specialists to absorb. Isaacson and Kemp reflect differing approaches to why Leonardo matters, and why his unanswered riddles continue to attract both novice visitors and lifelong obsessives. Many laypeople are instantly familiar with a handful of works (*The Last Supper*, *The Mona Lisa*, *Vitruvian Man*) and may have visited a science museum with recently produced three-dimensional models based on the artist's sketches; maybe they've seen an anatomical drawing or a sketch of horses, and a sheet of a bearded, balding older gentleman believed by some to be a self portrait. Yet it can be difficult to tally the artist's character based on these disparate data points without expert assistance. These books aim to reach those who haven't necessarily spent their lives deep in the weeds of Leonardo studies. One is directed to those wanting to learn practical life lessons from Leonardo's example; the other charts a life spent literally contemplating the artist's works and career, with battle-bruised wisdom to share with the outside world.

Isaacson's Leonardo is not just a Renaissance man, but part of his ongoing series of great-minds biographies that include Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, and Steve Jobs. What do these men have in common? Perhaps the answer can be most easily ascertained by citing another title, of a book edited by Isaacson in 2010: *Profiles in Leadership: Historians on the Elusive Quality of Greatness*. Each biography is presented both as a step-by-step charting of its subject's unusual career path while trying to draw out practical or moral applications beyond the contingencies of their moments. In Isaacson's telling, each of these biographical subjects is simultaneously iconic and iconoclastic, both the best example of what they do and the least typical.

Despite the daunting historiographic tradition descending from Clark, there's no reason that an outsider like Isaacson cannot make a useful foray into the field; many of the debates for lifers are questions of paleography and chronology that may not have strong repercussions on the overall impression.
To his credit, Isaacson doesn't cheat in his

Leonardo biography—he attempts to cover the entire career, and has consulted most of the important authors, to put together his general-interest study. Beyond B-school consultants, the book is also intended to reach casually interested tourists about to make their first trek to Paris or Milan, although at a weight of over three pounds the hardback is traveler-unfriendly.

"His genius was of the type we can understand, even take lessons from," the introduction to Isaacson's *Leonardo da Vinci* assures us. "It was based on skills we can aspire to improve in ourselves, such as curiosity and intense observation." Or, later: "One mark of a great mind is the willingness to change it." From the conclusion: "His life offers a wealth of lessons. *Be curious, relentlessly curious*." Sounds great, but to Be Like Leo also takes immense graphic skill, years and years of apprenticeship and training, deep-pocketed and patient patrons, and reasonably safe sinecures that care little about immediate results. Most of these probably sound like wondrous dreams to the debt-riddled college graduate, and wastes of time to results-oriented employers and confounded parents. Plus there's also the ineffable origins of the nature of genius itself, which nobody—not even Leonardo's most talented and original contemporaries—ever really doubted (nor should they have) was a rare thing indeed, and that Leonardo possessed it. We can't really easily account for that part. Even Freud struggled to explain him: "[Regarding] the artistic gift and the capacity for work, being intimately bound up with sublimation, we must admit that the essence of the artistic function also remains inaccessible to psychoanalysis." Nonetheless, Leonardo's vegetarianism, homosexuality, recurring dreams of deluges, and preference for female portrait subjects—these were all run through the Freudian process without much useful practical advice for acolytes of either the artistic process or psychoanalysis, and were taken apart by Meyer Schapiro in his endlessly rereadable 1956 "Leonardo and Freud: An Art-Historical Study."

We see echoes of Freud's approach in Isaacson at times: "As a gay, illegitimate artist twice accused of sodomy, he knew what it was like to be regarded, and to regard yourself, as different." This sets up an ineffable yearning to solve nature's riddles:

> *His curiosity, like that of Einstein, often was about phenomena that most people over the age of ten no longer puzzle about: Why is the sky blue? How are clouds formed? Why can our eyes see only in a straight line? What is yawning? Einstein said he marveled about questions others found mundane because he was slow in learning to talk as child. For Leonardo, this talent may have been connected to growing up with a love of nature while not being overly schooled in received wisdom.*

Despite such table-setting, however, Isaacson's is a conventional biography, for the most part, charting Leonardo's moves and accomplishments chronologically. The young Leonardo bristled at the constraints of artistic production in Quattrocento Florence, an ostensible republic under the control of the Medici and its partisans. Working alongside Verrocchio and then on his own in the 1470s, he found the demands of its patronage system—usually with contractual obligations to deliver a work by an established deadline, then to search out the next project—antithetical to the kind of untethered exploration he would later become famous for. An artist could go stretches between jobs, preparing studies or *modelli* without any compensation whatsoever, and Leonardo's slow pace and imperviousness to pressure gave him major disadvantages in that competitive mercantilist system. What was especially remarkable about his attitude was that he succeeded (multiple times!) in finding court appointments that provided him a regular salary and time to pursue his expanding interests. His two periods in Milan and final years and France were not entirely free from the expectation that he produce

works—*The Last Supper* and the aborted Sforza equestrian monument most famously, and also the more standard production of court artists like portraits and ephemeral decorations. But during those periods he was allowed much more time to pursue studies of optics, anatomy, weaponry, machinery, and much else besides. Upon his return to Florence in his middle age (from around 1500 to 1505), he was highly enough regarded (vide his friendship with Machiavelli) that he could pick and choose artistic projects (*Mona Lisa*, *The Battle of Anghiari*) while also serving both Florence and others (notably papal son/military commander Cesare Borgia) in matters relating to engineering, hydrography, warfare, and cartography.

Isaacson regards these skills, requiring discrete talents and years of study, as evidence of "a combinatory creativity… able to perceive the details and patterns of nature and then remix them in imaginative combinations." The author is aware that the chronology of Leonardo's manuscripts is far from settled, and has been the subject of never-ending debate in terms of their direct linkage to actual projects, but this makes him a difficult biographical subject from which to derive easy takeaways. We know the general contours of where he was and with whom he worked; the big commissions (the two iterations of *The Madonna of the Rocks*, the Sforza Horse, *The Last Supper*, *The Battle of Anghiari*) have fairly secure documentation and contemporary witnesses. But it is precisely in the undated notebook sheets for unrealized or unspecified projects that Leonardo's "remix" ability (if we must use that construct) seems most powerful. While we can trace the design evolution of the perspective or figure groupings in *The Adoration of the Magi* or identify bends of the Arno for which a water project was designed, many resist the Freudian approach because they still remain elusively unmoored from life events, at least to the best of our present knowledge. Chronology and causality are hardly the only things that matter in a biographical portrait, but in Isaacson's book we're left plodding through mostly familiar ground without fresh eyes, seeking practical connections to our present overworked condition. In a sense, at this moment of history a traditional biography alone feels insufficient, especially to the tech-savvy, information-overloaded clientele it imagines as its audience. The many recent interactive editions (both apps and websites) may provide more useful tools for those readers, allowing them to select their own area of interest and giving them the ability to experientially poke around for a while rather than following a standard birth-to-death itinerary.

Clark, Pedretti, and Kemp performed an important role in Leonardo scholarship as the first group to consider the entirety of his output.

The other recent book, Martin Kemp's *Living with Leonardo: Fifty Years of Sanity and Insanity in the Art World and Beyond*, is altogether different from Isaacson's study. The title is apt. Kemp's book is an intellectual biography of his flirtation and then deep-seated romance with Leonardo studies, a project only now winding down after decades supervising countless MA and Ph.D. theses at the University of Oxford. After a brief mention of growing up in a middle-class community "deeply suspicious of foreigners" and a short resume of his academic itinerary in the first dozen pages, almost no other extracurricular information is shared. It's purely devoted to only the parts of his life connected to Vinciana.

Like Pedretti, Kemp has considered nearly every facet of the artist's output, from anatomy to engineering to artistic technique, and he has produced the most widely read English edition of Leonardo's writings on art

(*Leonardo on Painting* [New Haven 2001] and the best general-interest monographic study in any language (*Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* [Oxford, 1981; rev. 2006]). At the start of Kemp's career, he recognized that tackling Leonardo was probably a lifelong commitment: "He looked big and difficult—the sort of figure you should either do wholeheartedly, or not at all." Before diving into that fateful choice, Kemp wrote his first book on Venetian colorist Cima di Conegliano, a near-exact contemporary of Leonardo. And over the decades, he has produced substantial non-Leonardo books, most notably *The Science of Art* (New Haven, 1992), *Behind the Picture* (New Haven, 1997), and a new edition of Alberti's *On Painting* (London, 1991). But since the early 1970s, he has returned to the artist repeatedly, especially over the past twenty years, when he's been called to weigh in on current controversies or author catalog essays for dozens of Leonardo-related exhibitions worldwide.

As someone whose research has gained greatly from the advances made by Clark, Pedretti, and other twentieth-century scholars, Kemp is acutely aware that almost every supposition made about the artist remains provisional, even at this late date. *Living with Leonardo* is larded with qualifications, necessarily so. "Each age claims that it has reached the right solution, and present assumptions are likely to be superseded," he notes about *The Last Supper*. "Seeing is a malleable business." He judiciously lashes out at those who would cheapen the artist's name and work, such as the "conspiratorial codswallop" of *The Da Vinci Code* and other conspiracy-minded websites. Participating in the Leonardo business, with its never-ending stream of supplicants looking for a connoisseur to sign off on their latest finds, must wear out a scholar, which makes it remarkable that his tone throughout seems measured, tolerant, and patient. Not long before the publication of this book, Kemp made a statement on his website that he was retiring from offering opinions on new attributions; the Internet age had made it a nearly full-time job for him, and one with huge financial and legal ramifications.

The last case Kemp spent significant time with became the most controversial in his career. While the *Salvator Mundi* generated healthy conversation before its sale and is taken seriously by most experts (Kemp is convinced, though its attribution as a fully autograph Leonardo remains unsettled among many), the ink-and-pastel-on-vellum female portrait that emerged from a private collection in 1998 is a different matter (Figure 3). The Christie's sale that year identified it as "German School, Early 19th Century: The Head of a young girl in Profile to the left in Renaissance Dress, pen and brown ink, bodycolor on vellum." In other words, the auction house, which had little incentive to be overly cautious, saw the work as a Romantic fantasia on Renaissance themes. From the formality of its profile format to the Spanish-inspired clothing of the sitter to her *coazzone* (the horsetail–like braided and bejeweled coiffure), the drawing clearly is "set" in late Quattrocento/early Cinquecento Milan, and can be cross-referenced to portraits from that era by Ambrogio de' Predis, Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, and Leonardo himself. But the whole history of art (not to mention of forgery) had those other works available to study as well, and the long-running historical fascination of Academic artists reviving Renaissance subjects or motifs (Ingres's 1818 *Death of Leonardo da Vinci* in the Petit Palais being a prominent example) would be worth keeping in mind when approaching this drawing of uncertain provenance. At that auction it sold to a New York dealer for $19,000.

Kemp was perhaps inevitably drawn into the melee via Peter Silverman, who had bought the drawing from the dealer in 2008 for $21,000, claiming he had been haunted for a decade that he hadn't managed to secure it at the 1998 auction. Silverman was making the rounds of experts, some of whom—the formidable

Figure 3 *La Bella Principessa*. Ink and pastel on vellum, 33 x 24 cm. Wikimedia / Public domain.

Leo Steinberg and Carmen Bambach, for example—dismissed it out of hand. Others were curious and could see it as a late Quattrocento work, even if its format (partly pastel on vellum) was hugely unusual for the period. Kemp reluctantly agreed to have a look, and trekked to a Zurich freeport (where collectors are allowed to store their holdings tax-free, and where the portrait remains even today) to render judgment. "The first moments are always edgy. If a certain 'zing' does not occur, the encounter is going to be hard going. The portrait 'zinged' decisively." Once seduced, Kemp went all in on joining with technical analysts and other curators to produce a circuitous explanation for this work, which unlike the *Salvator Mundi* had no substantive contemporary evidence to suggest its creation by someone in Leonardo's circle. He quaintly dubbed the work *La Bella Principessa* (The Beautiful Princess) and at the end of his researches believed its subject to be Bianca Maria Sforza, daughter of Galeazzo Maria Sforza and Bona of Savoy, Duke and Duchess of Milan. A NOVA episode, "Mystery of a Masterpiece," ran on PBS in 2012, starring Kemp and Silverman and making a leading case for the work's acceptance as an autograph Leonardo. In the program, Silverman especially plays up his "eye" in seeing the work as a Leonardo long before anyone else, as if its obvious allusions to Renaissance Milanese portrait conventions were somehow overlooked by experts rather than recognized as conscious and studious references to known works. Kemp is shown investigating the vellum and, via technical analysis, claiming it as a sheet from 1496 torn out of a manuscript, the *Sforziada*, today in the National Library in Warsaw. A few naysayers, such as the illustrious Renaissance drawings scholar David Ekserdjian of the University of Leicester, were brought in to speak against the work, but in terms of screen time they're vastly outnumbered. Kemp's involvement with the attribution is detailed in *Living with Leonardo* with considerably less hyperbole than in the NOVA video or the two books on the portrait that Kemp co-authored with French technical advisor Pascal Cotte. But no second thoughts, other than "I do sometimes wonder if I should have left others to stick their necks out." Much of the establishment remains unconvinced, including the Met's Bambach and the Albertina's director Klaus Albrecht Schröder. I too have many doubts, and believe the Christie's description—a German emulation of an Italian mode—seems eminently reasonable. Many believe it's an outright twentieth-century fake made for gullible investors.

Isaacson also gives an account of the attempts to authenticate the work, mostly based on interviews with Kemp and the scholar's published writings. What's the meaning of this hullaballoo, to Isaacson? It "provides us with some insights into what we do and do not know about Leonardo's art." Despite the shrugging vagueness of that phrase, it's strangely accurate in this case. At times viewers and historians have to take a long journey to grasp Leonardo's work; it does not unravel its secrets easily to outsiders, nor did the artist leave us with simple instructions. The fact that so many of his sheets are filled with text, some even presentably legible, does not mitigate the fact that his research was not prepared in publishable form in his lifetime, nor that so many of his painted works were left unfinished or deteriorating. Yet his cultural capital still holds sway; witness Beyoncé and Jay-Z's "Apes**t" video, in which the couple's time alone in front of the *Mona Lisa* is the ultimate signifier of status. But there's still a lot of reimagining left to be done in Leonardo scholarship. His work was always an ongoing project, rich in depth and at times impenetrable to the prying eyes of outsiders, even those who devote years to its pursuit. What becomes clear from these two recent books, and the others that continuously arrive, is that we're still at a relatively early age in Leonardo studies. A