

Exhibit at the Metropolitan: Leonardo da Vinci— Master of Motion and Time

by Bonnie James

Leonardo da Vinci, Master Draftsman
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
Jan. 22 to March 30

“If you scorn painting, which is the sole imitator of all the manifest works of nature, you will certainly be scorning a subtle invention, which, with philosophical and subtle speculation, considers all manner of forms: sea, land, trees, animals, grasses, flowers—all of which are enveloped in light and shade. Truly, this is science, the legitimate daughter of nature, because painting is born of that nature; but to be more correct, we should say, the granddaughter of nature, because all visible things have been brought forth by nature and it is among these that painting is born. Therefore, we may justly speak of its as the granddaughter of nature and as the kin of God.”

—Leonardo da Vinci

When Leonardo wrote, toward the end of the 15th century, about the marriage of science and art, among whose offspring is painting, he spoke as the unparalleled genius in an age of geniuses. His contributions to universal civilization are recognized throughout the world today. Through them he has become immortal, and it is our great fortune, at the beginning of the 21st century, 600 years later, to have the opportunity to get to know this extraordinary man, through his work. The 120 drawings by Leonardo da Vinci, now on exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, provide us with such an opportunity to look into one of

the most creative minds in human history. And, not a moment too soon: Our civilization is presently poised on the brink—as it was in Leonardo’s time—of either a renaissance, or a new dark age. It is hoped that the hundreds of thousands of people, many of them young, who are visiting this exhibit, will be inspired to recognize that man is made to accomplish great and beautiful things, and that they will set about to turn history’s direction away from the path of destruction it has now taken.

As a museum employee informed me, the number of Leonardo’s visitors is staggering: 900 people each hour; 8,000 a day; 50,000 a week—there will be nearly half a million, between Jan. 22 when it opened, and March 30, when it closes. They stand in long lines, and wait, often for more than an hour, to view this extraordinary exhibition, “Leonardo da Vinci, Master Draftsman,” billed as “the first comprehensive exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings ever presented in America.”

The drawings span the period from Leonardo’s earliest works, as a young apprentice in the most celebrated workshop in Florence, that of Andrea del Verrocchio, to his late notebooks and sketches—those from the Codex Leicester are exhibited here—representing his remarkably far-flung scientific interests. Providing “bookends” to the exhibition, are, at the start, several extremely fine works by his teacher Verrocchio, and, at the conclusion, works of some of Leonardo’s students and followers.

While the exhibit is not large for a major show, comprising only seven galleries, the scope of Leonardo’s vision is so all-encompassing, so universal, that, thinking back on it, it seems enormous. The works are gathered from the leading museums in the world: in addition to the Met, there is Louvre in Paris; the British Museum in London; Washington’s



FIGURE 1: Madonna and Child with a Bowl of Fruit (study for 'Benois Madonna').

National Gallery of Art; the Musei Vaticani, Rome; and many more.

Most of the works are small: one, a tiny drawing of the Virgin and Child Holding a Cat (legend has it that a cat was born at the same moment as Jesus), is barely three inches square, yet, it is in these drawings that the central purpose in Leonardo's art comes into focus: His overriding passion is to portray motion. It was not enough merely to create a third dimension in his art, as the development of scientific perspective, including Leonardo's own innovations in this area, made possible. Leonardo was striving for something more: the dimension of time itself. Building upon the discoveries of the greatest of the Greek Classical sculptors, who succeeded, in their marble figures, in expressing the moment of transformation between one idea, or motion, and the next; as well as the discoveries and achievements of the greatest of the Renaissance artists who preceded him, Leonardo's astonishing breakthrough was to portray motion and time—on a two-dimensional surface.

Depicting Motion

For Leonardo, the *moti corporali* (motions of the body) reveal the *atti e moti mentali* (attitudes and motions of the



FIGURE 2: Rearing Horse (study for Battle of Anghiari).

mind). These mental attitudes, along with the *accidenti mentali* (emotions) “should accompany the hands with the face, and thus also with the person,” he wrote.

A rapidly executed sketch (pen and brown ink, with a brown wash over stylus and metalpoint, from the Louvre), *Virgin and Child with a Bowl of Fruit* (Figure 1), is an early example: The child turns in his mother's arms, his legs and feet are drawn with lightning speed, moving through several different positions. Leonardo's pen rushes to keep pace with the fast-moving child, as he twists toward his mother, in a motion of child-like affection, either to feed her a grape, or to caress her face. Although the sketch (a study for the *Benois Madonna* from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia) is unfinished, it is clear that Leonardo is concentrating on capturing the movement of the twisting child, and of the Virgin's head, as she bends her face to meet his upwardly stretched hand. It is not hard to image walking 360° around the two figures: Even in this early work, which was influenced by Donatello's sculptures, Leonardo already exhibits his uncanny ability, with only a few quick strokes of the pen, to render figures with a sculptural quality, giving them weight and three-dimensionality in space.

One of the works most wonderfully expressive of this idea of motion, is Leonardo's Rearing Horse (Figure 2), a sketch for his lost, unfinished masterpiece, The Battle of Anghiari. Leonardo was commissioned in 1505 by the Commune of Florence to execute a large mural, or fresco, in the Council Hall of the Palazzo Vecchio where the city government held its meetings, to commemorate Florence's military victory over Milan in 1440. While nothing remains of Leonardo's fresco (unless it is rediscovered, as some believe it may be, behind another painting by Giorgio Vasari), there are numerous studies for this work, which give a flavor of what might have been.

The Horse, in red chalk, despite its diminutive scale—it is only 5 1/2" by 6"—appears monumental. At first glance, it looks as though it were done with time-lapse photography! Leonardo's hand follows the rapid motions of the horse as it rears up on its hind-legs, seeming to recoil in fear from some invisible foe; its front legs flail in the air, moving through an infinite number of positions. Most fluid of all is the horse's head and torso, which seem to twist full circle in space. No one before, or since has drawn like this.

Painting Immortality

Beyond question, the highlight of this exhibit, its only painting, albeit unfinished, of Saint Jerome Praying in the Wilderness (c.1482) (Figure 3), on loan from the Vatican Museum. In the Codex Atlanticus, Leonardo writes, "The greater one is, the greater grows one's capacity for suffering. I thought I was learning to live; I was only learning to die."

Here we see Jerome, in whose vision, we comprehend the sum of his life, condensed into one moment in time. Jerome is clearly suffering, but we know by his expression, that he is striving to live in the image of God, and thus, through his suffering, which is so plainly writ on his face, to achieve what Schiller calls the "Sublime"—to face death, knowing that he has become immortal through his contributions to future humanity. In this unfinished work, only Jerome's face and torso are complete. The Saint sits at the opening of a cave, beyond which is a misty landscape, suggesting perhaps, a beautiful afterlife; on the right side of the painting, is an scene with a Classically designed church. And, at Jerome's feet, his faithful companion, the lion, the beast who becomes "human" through his association with Jerome. Yet, as we see from the lion's expression, which contrasts so strongly with Jerome's, the animal can never achieve immortality. Only man can do this, if he can overcome fear.

Leonardo, like his Jerome, lives for us today, through his genius, in which we are privileged to participate, in the simultaneity of eternity.



FIGURE 3: St. Jerome Praying in the Wilderness (unfinished painting).