

THE  TIMES**Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan, The National Gallery**

Leonardo da Vinci. *Madonna and Child (Madonna Litta)* The State Hermitage Museum , St Petersburg

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This is a show that you have to see; in the most literal as well as the more loosely colloquial sense – and even if sometimes you find your sight blurred by the tears which a sense of wonder has stirred.

Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan represents a landmark moment: both for the National Gallery which, after a sequence of somewhat lacklustre shows, redeems itself with a marvel and for the wider public who are being offered a “never-again” chance to stand awestruck before an assemblage of paintings of such spellbinding beauty, such scholarly depth and precious fragility that it will surely go down in the annals as among the most sensational shows of our century, even with 90 odd years still to run.

“I want to work miracles” Leonardo once scribbled in his cryptic mirror script. This exhibition could be one of them. Of the only 15 surviving paintings attributed to him, the National Gallery brings together nine, all but one loaned from the foreign collections of which they more usually form the beating heart. To coax out one alone would be a coup. To

gather so many is little short of incredible. Now, shown together, they bring glinting to life a fresh facet of the great uomo universale.

Leonardo – “that most relentlessly curious man in all history” as Kenneth Clark described him – tends in our modern times to be cast as a sort of secular scientist: a creature of ideas whose feverishly inventive imagination probed the complexities of anything from aerodynamics to optics.

But this show shifts the emphasis. In the notes for his planned treatise on light, Leonardo put sight at the pinnacle of senses. It is “one of the quickest and takes in at a glance an infinite variety of forms”, he wrote, and, as the anatomical drawing which greets visitors to this show makes plain, it linked directly to the soul. The painter’s art, therefore, as his 1486 portrait of a young man (his only surviving male portrait) suggests is superior even to that of the musician whose work must be heard right through to be understood and which then fades once finished.

And even though later, distracted by new fascinations, Leonardo laid down his brushes, leaving even such dramatically inventive compositions as his *Madonna of the Yarnwinder* (both Raphael and Michaelangelo were inspired by its squirming Christ child) to be finished by someone else, his fundamental way of thinking, this show argues, remained always that of the painter. He looked, observed and analysed before making his marvellous imaginative leaps.

Leonardo was about 30 when, in 1482, armed with a sound theoretical training, a well-stocked technical arsenal and an immodest letter of introduction (drafted by himself), he left the mercantile republic of Florence to seek work in the wealthy Milanese Court. There, a court salary offered an already more than proficient painter (his previous master had, if a probably apocryphal story by Vasari story can be believed, given up painting after comparing his pupil’s talent to his own) the contemplative leisure to soar towards unsurpassed heights. During the 18 years that he spent there – the years which this show spans - he not only reached the pinnacle of his fame as a painter but also created a lofty new ideal of art. He left a medieval world vision behind him, and showed the way forwards to our modern world view.

This show invites its spectators to bear witness to a moment no less earth- shaking than that in which the high Renaissance was born. Look at his two female portraits. They hang there, so small, so quietly lovely: and yet they revolutionise their genre.

Here is his 1489 *Lady with an Ermine*, a mesmeric beauty (and mistress of Leonardo’s patron Ludovico) who – for all that the sinuous rodent in her arms is a symbol of purity – is rendered with an all but eroticised fascination for her perfect beauty. Leonardo moves away from clear cut profile format that was favoured at that time, slightly twisting her head so that she appears to be listening and, combining the exquisite detail of Netherlandish masters with his own alert attention to facial expression he creates an image which proves quite how literally a painting can communicate.

But by the beginning of the next decade he is creating his c1493 *The Belle Ferronnière* who,

with a teasing nod by curators to the possibility that she may have been a subsequent mistress of Ludovico, has been hung so that she casts a long slantwise look at her entrancing predecessor. Leonardo moves away from lifelike mimesis towards idealisation. Playing with perfect geometry, he seeks to create something even more perfect than nature: an ideal not discovered in reality but wrought in a way that is akin to the creation of God.

Leonardo reveals his vision of a world infused with the mysteries of what Vasari described as “divine grace”. And yet it’s not simply a sense of the linear progress by which he attained this vision but the depths of his probing that this show successfully presents. For all that it may be fundamentally chronological it is so richly-layered, so multi-faceted, that a review cannot even begin to cover its many aspects. Here are myriad sketches which relate to the paintings, works by other artists of the era, a gallery which relates the ambitions of his unfinished (but still haunting) St Jerome to other works. The layout is clear and spacious – the works, hung against chocolate dark backgrounds, allowed to speak for themselves. Try and read the catalogue first. It is written with an insight and clarity that convey not just scholarship but also profound feeling.

And yet nothing can be as revelatory as the experience of actually looking. Leonardo’s two versions of *The Virgin of the Rocks* (a relatively straightforward commission that turned into one of the most tortuous in Renaissance history), brought together for the first, and very possibly last time, lie at the heart of the exhibition. To stand between them, slowly turning your head, is to witness what feels like the miracle of transubstantiation. It is to see the earthly instilled with a heavenly aura “The divinity which is the science of painting transmutes the painters mind into a resemblance of the divine mind” as the stencilled quote by Leonardo says.

Leonardo reached his painterly pinnacle at the Court of Milan with his 1492-7 *The Last Supper* – a bravura display of talent which for obvious reasons could not be brought over, though all the surviving drawings which relate to it, a photograph of the much damaged original fresco and a period scale copy (one can’t help feeling a bit sorry for the other painters in this show, roped in like stooges to highlight the superiority of the master) are all on display in the nearby Sunley Room.

The ghost of Leonardo’s most ambitious achievement hovers over this show. And yet its loss (within 20 years of its making it was already a ruin of its former self) feels somehow resonant – even right. Leonardo was scrying not just into the structures but into the very soul of creation. To look at his paintings is to marvel at their naturalistic detail: the translucence of a veil as it slips between fingers, the muscles that ratchet beneath skin. It is to appreciate their technical mastery, their compositional mechanics, to probe the complex philosophies that underpin them. But the fundamental mystery which their maker was reaching for would always remain un-representable. That may be why Leonardo abandoned so many of his works.

But it’s also why it’s so essential to actually see this show.

Where an individual painting might make anyone marvel, his works all together weave an ever more intricate web. You can grasp hold of the threads. But it’s the untouchable spaces

between them that create the entire fragile miracle. This show is not simply about expertly painted surfaces – it's about the responses they stir in their viewers. The mind of a genius brushes against you like a ghost. It is the single most amazing show I have ever seen – or felt.

Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan is at the National Gallery from November 9 to February 2012

All this and a helicopter too

- Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci was born out of wedlock to a notary and a peasant woman on April 15, 1452 in the Tuscan hill town of Vinci, in the Medici-ruled Republic of Florence
- Leonardo was a polymath of the Italian Renaissance and became the ultimate personification of the humanist ideals of the period
- He is generally thought to be one of the greatest painters of all time, but also had a uniquely diverse set of further talents such as music, architecture and science, to name but a few
- Leonardo is best known as a painter and his most famous works are the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper. However, he is also revered for conceptualising technological breakthroughs such as a helicopter, a tank and a calculator way before their time
- He was coy about his private life but his sexuality — and alleged homosexuality — have been much speculated upon
- Leonardo died at Clos Lucé, in Amboise, France on May 2, 1519. King Francis I, his patron, had become a close friend and Vasari records that the monarch held Leonardo's head in his arms as he died

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