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Leonardo Da Vinci Still Making Headlines

Yet even after 500 years the famous Italian polymath and artist recently made headlines on two separate dates and for two separate reasons

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



The portrait of Mona Lisa by Leonardo Da Vinci (Pixabay).

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The first chronologically took place on June 21st at the Stampa Estera or Foreign Press Association in Rome, when Professor Ernesto Solari and handwriting expert Ivana Rosa Bonfantino announced that they had authenticated the earliest known artwork by Leonardo, also his first self-portrait. And not even a month later, on July 9th the Uffizi unveiled a new Leonardo room

Born in the Tuscan hill town of Vinci on April 15, 1452, the oldest illegitimate son of a promiscuous wealthy notary and a peasant, **Leonard** was a polymath. His interests included invention, painting, sculpting, architecture, science, music (performer and composer),

mathematics, engineering, literature, anatomy, geology, astronomy, botany, writing, history, and cartography.

According to *Wikipedia*, “many historians and scholars regard Leonardo as the prime exemplar of the ‘Universal Genius’ or ‘Renaissance Man’, an individual of ‘unquenchable curiosity’, and ‘feverish inventive imagination’. Art historian Helen Gardner confirmed that the scope and depth of his interests were without precedent in recorded history, and ‘his mind and personality seem to us superhuman, while the man himself mysterious and remote’”. He epitomized the Renaissance humanist ideal.

Of all his talents Leonardo, was, and is renowned primarily as a painter. His two most famous works are the enigmatic portrait *Mona Lisa*, today in the Louvre, and his “fresco” of *The Last Supper* in the Church of *Santa Maria delle Grazie* in Milan, which is the most reproduced religious painting of all time.

Over the years Leonardo worked in Florence, Bologna, Cesena, Venice, and Rome before King Francis I lured him to France where he died in Amboise on May 2, 1519, yet even after 500 years Leonardo recently made headlines on two separate dates and for two separate reasons.



Archangel Gabriel.

The first chronologically took place on June 21st at the Stampa Estera or Foreign Press Association in Rome, when Professor Ernesto Solari, who has written extensively about Leonardo, and handwriting expert Ivana Rosa Bonfantino announced that they had authenticated **the earliest known artwork by Leonardo**, also his first self-portrait.

The work, which was put on public display at Stampa Estera for the first time ever, is a small (c. 8 inch x c. 8 inch) majolica glazed clay roof tile that the two scholars claim is a self-portrait of Leonardo who depicts himself in profile facing left as the Archangel Gabriel. The work has been dated to 1471, when Leonardo, who had perhaps recently left Verrocchio's workshop in Florence, (because some sources say he worked there only from 1469-70; others from 1468-78), could have been working at his paternal grandfather's kiln in Bacchereto near Montelupo. He would have been 19-years-old so the tile would be his earliest known painting. Up to now his earliest known artwork was a "Landscape Drawing for Santa Maria della Neve", a pen, ink, and pencil depiction of the Arno River Valley and Montelupo Castle. It's dated August 5, 1473, even if some scholarly sources and Solari's press release predate it to 1469, and hangs in the Uffizi Museum in Florence. Other sources say "The Annunciation" because of the Madonna's odd contorted posture with one arm longer than the other and the painting's off-kilter perspective was his earliest work (1472).

Solari told us journalists that the tile had been given to him to analyze by a member of the Fenici family of Ravello, who'd been given the artwork by Giovanna of Aragon (1477-1510), the Duchess of Amalfi, in 1499 as a reward for its services to her family and has owned it ever since. It's a mystery how the Duchess obtained it but one explanation, Solari mentioned, is that she may have been romantically connected Leonardo, who gave her the tile as a remembrance of him, after she sat for her portrait by him, now in Rome's Doria Pamphili Gallery. (In an aside during the press conference Solari also pointed out the close resemblance of the Duchess to the Mona Lisa.) "The descendants of the Fenici family," said Solari, "had recently spotted tiny lettering on the lower jaw of the angel, but couldn't read it, so asked for our help. Our research took three years; we examined over 6,000 documents."

First of all the scholars used thermoluminescence dating, which measures residual radiation,

to confirm the date of the tile's firing and the provenance of its clay, which is unusually low in quartz like that of Bacchereto. An infrared analysis further revealed the encoded inscriptions that the owners had not been able to read: the artist's mirrored (from left to right) signature, "Da Vinci Lionardo" next to the date 1471. Below the name Leonardo are the numbers 52 and 72. Solari explained that 52 probably indicates Leonardo's birthdate 1452 while 72 refers to the seventh and second letters of the alphabet—G and B— which alludes to the Archangel Gabriel. A second "signature": LDV ib, which reappears on other of Leonard's artworks, can be found along the bottom edge of the tile. "Originally the writing was legible," Solari said, "but it smudged during the firing process."

Bonfantino told us that she'd compared these signatures with other examples of Leonardo's handwriting, in particular his signature on the contract for the "Virgin of the Rocks" signed on April 25, 1483 and discovered in 2011 in the State Archives of Milan.

Not every Leonardo expert agrees with Solari's and Bonfantino's hypothesis. Professor Emeritus of Art History at Oxford University, Martin Kemp, told the British newspaper the *Guardian*: "The handling of the hair is spectacularly unconvincing—it looks like vermicelli pasta. Thus the chance of the tile having been painted by Leonardo is less than zero. The silly season for Leonardo never closes."

Not even a month after Solari and Bonfantino revealed their discovery, on July 9th the Uffizi unveiled a new Leonardo room: Room 35 in the West Wing. This is the third rearrangement of the Uffizi's artistic treasures: Caravaggio and other 17th-century artists in February and Michelangelo and Raphael in June.

Room 35 contains only three paintings by Leonardo, all of which were commissioned originally for churches. To ensure optimal conditions, the paintings are now displayed in special glass cases that reduce light refraction.



Baptism of Christ.

On the left is “The Baptism of Christ”, tempera and oil on wood, painted for the San Salvi Church near Florence and in the Uffizi since 1914. There are contradictions about its dates, but scholars seem to agree that it was painted in Verrocchio’s workshop and much of it by Verrocchio himself. However, according to Vasari, Leonardo painted the young angel in profile (like the tile’s Archangel Gabriel but facing right) holding Christ’s robe in a manner that was so superior to his master’s that Verrocchio put down his brush and never painted again. Undoubtedly Vasari exaggerated, but on close examination, it can be seen that much of the landscape originally painted in tempera by Verrocchio has been painted over or touched up with oil paint and shows the hand of Leonardo as does the Christ figure.

On the facing wall is the “Annunciation”, oil on wood, painted for the sacristy of the church of San Bartolomeo at Monteoliveto outside the gate of San Frediano in Florence. It too is an early work dating to 1472-3 and has been in the Uffizi since 1867.



Annunciation.



Adoration of the Magi.

At the center of the room is the “Adoration of the Magi”, oil on wood. Influenced by an earlier work, the middle panel of the St. Columba Triptych (1455) also of the “Adoration of the Magi” by the Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden (1399-1464) today in Munich’s Alte

Pinakothek, Leonardo's had been commissioned for the church of San Donato a Scopeto and was left unfinished when Leonardo went to Milan in 1482 to work for Ludovico Sforza. In the Uffizi since 1670, it recently underwent a six-year restoration.



Rogier Van Der Weyden Adoration of the Magi.

In a press release the German Director of the Uffizi Eike Schmidt, hotly contested at the time of his appointment last year because he was not Italian, explained the reason for the new Leonardo Room. “The new arrangement,” he wrote, “has been designed not only to permit a slow, meditate visit, whereby visitors can compare the art and understand the stylistic evolution of Leonardo in his youth, but it is correct in terms of art history, placing the artist’s works immediately after the rooms dedicated to the Florentine *Quattrocento*...It is part of a set of changes implemented to adjust the Uffizi to the needs of understanding by visitors as well

as adhering to the museum’s educational principles.”



Close-up of the angels in Leonardo's "Baptism of Christ".

Epilogue: After looking myself at the tile, the “Baptism of Christ”, and the “Annunciation” and comparing the angels’ hairstyles, the angel’s long and loosely curly hair style in the two paintings is similar, but not with the tile’s shorter and tightly curled ringlets. Thus, in spite of the tile’s provenance and the date of its firing corresponding to a possible early work by Leonardo, the tiles’ angel’s hairstyle and the fact no other tile painted by Leonardo has ever been discovered cause me to doubt the authenticity of the Fenice family’s tile.

Perhaps this southern Italian noble family is anxious to make a fortune. Last year in November 2017 at an auction at Christie’s in New York an anonymous Saudi prince purchased the last privately owned and one of the fewer than 20 known paintings by Leonardo. It depicts a “*Salvator Mundi*” and it too is of dubious authenticity. The prince paid US \$450 million and donated “the masterpiece” to the newly-opened branch of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates. The Fenice family and Solari are hopeful the Italian Government will purchase the tile.

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Italian Hours

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