



Two portraits by Leonardo: left, the well-known *Mona Lisa* preserved at the Louvre in Paris; in the middle, *The Young Lady with a Fur*. Above, Sebastiano del Piombo's *Portrait of a Young Roman Woman*. Below, the historian, prolific author, and broadcaster Silvano Vinceti

REDISCOVERED LEONARDO

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

With my articles, "Leonardo Still Making Headlines," *ITV*, December 2018 and "Celebrations for 500th Anniversary of Leonardo's Death," February 2019, I thought that I'd sufficiently covered the news about Leonardo da Vinci. Then, on January 3, I received an e-mail from the *Comitato Nazionale per la Valorizzazione dei Beni Storici, Culturali e Ambientali* (National Committee for the Evaluation of Historical, Cultural and Environmental Patrimony). It was an invitation to me and the other several hundred members of Rome's Foreign Press Association to a press conference there a few days later. The conference's subject was the re-emergence and authenticity of a painting by Leonardo, *The Young Lady with a Fur*. Its main speaker was historian, prolific author, and broadcaster **Silvano Vinceti**, the founder in 2002 and still president of the Committee, which up to now focused on reconstructing the facial appearances of Petrarch, Pico della Mirandola, Caravaggio, Leonardo and others from their remains. Vinceti's theses about Leonardo's "rediscovered" painting were supported by art historian, restorer, and court-authorized art expert **Marco Castracane**, seated beside him. Castracane seldom spoke, but when he did it was to confirm that he had a "sixth sense" and instantly recognized forgeries in Swiss bank vaults, but when he saw this painting he had been pleasantly surprised.

Vinceti began by giving a brief history of the painting (61.5cm x 54.5cm). It was painted, he said, with tempera on a poplar wood panel between 1495/1499, when Leonardo was in Milan at the service of Duke **Ludovico Sforza**, and it was probably still in Leonardo's possession while he was in Rome and in Amboise. From 1691-1700 the painting was in the Collection of **Antonio Pignatelli**. Pope



Innocent XII (1691-1700), who'd probably acquired it from **Louis XIV** in France. (He is best known for his papal bull forbidding nepotism in the Church and for being the last pope with a beard.) On January 29, 1748, the painting went from the estate of Antonio Pignatelli and Bishop **Giulio Pignatelli** to the Collection of **Domenico Morelli** (1714-1804), Bishop of Strongoli, later Bishop of Otranto, who was a relation of the Pignatelli.

In 1792 it was in the Collection of **Vincenzo Maria Morelli**, also Bishop of Otranto. Around 1850 it belonged to the **Marchese Moramarco** in Milan before being sold around 1920 to a West German family of industrialists. Most recently, in 1975, it was sold to another wealthy German (and probably Jewish) family from Hamburg, who still own it and had it restored. The conference's press release states: "There exists a statutory declaration executed before a renowned company of auditors in Hamburg, which confirms the provenance of the painting and its lawful acquisition free of third party rights." I was assured that it was not among the artworks confiscated by the Nazis and later restituted.

Vinceti went on to explain his involvement, saying that last year he was contacted by an attorney in Zurich, a liaison for the German owner, who'd expressed interest in selling the painting.

However, when Vinceti and Castracane arrived in Zurich to see the painting, which is in the vault of a bank there, the owner rescinded the offer to sell, giving no reason. At that point the only concession the owner made was that Vinceti could publicly announce the existence of the painting and that it was certainly by Leonardo.

Vinceti went on to say that, although he had not seen the painting, many distinguished experts had. These included **Adolfo**

Venturi, Professor Dr. Ed Fischer, Professor Zimmermann and Dr. Stangel (all in 1967), the restorers Professor Stube and Beate Strube-Bischof (in 1977), and more recently Professor E. Ullmann from Leipzig and Professor Ingo Sander from Cologne (in 2000) and Professor Carlo Pedretti (2002). They all agreed in writing that it was by Leonardo.

In addition to the experts' opinions and numerous scientific examinations such as x-rays and infrared reflectography as proof of the painting's authenticity, Vinceti listed its several similarities to other works by Leonardo: the young lady's and the *Mona Lisa*'s enigmatic smile, the similarity of their landscapes (the actual place still not identified), to the one in *Sebastiano del Piombo's Dorothea* (because she's holding the same attribute, the fruit basket, as St. Dorothea) also known as *Portrait of a Young Roman Woman*, now in the *Gemäldegalerie* in Berlin, painted after he'd seen Leonardo's painting when they both worked in Rome (1513/4), and the young lady's and the *Salvator Mundi's* and *Mona Lisa's* eyes and melancholy expression, and the position of the hands here and in Leonar-



Leonardo's *Lady with the Ermine* and a detail of the *Virgin of the Rocks* in the National Gallery of London

do's *Lady with the Ermine*. Lastly, but no less important, is the whiteness and luminosity of this *The Young Lady with a Fur's* skin, which is unlike any other painting by his contemporaries because Leonardo and only Leonardo experimented with lead carbonate or hydrocerussite, which he'd also used in his first *Madonna of the Rocks* (1483-5).

After Vinceti's initial disappointment of no sale, he still hopes that his efforts of bringing Leonardo's *The Young Lady with a Fur* to world attention will not be in vain. On the contrary, he hopes they will persuade the owner to lend the painting, which has

always — so for more than 500 years — been in private collections, to one of the many anniversary exhibitions in Italy and, if not in Italy, at the Louvre. For, even if a photograph of *The Young Lady with a Fur* has been on the Internet since 2014, so its re-emergence is not a discovery, the painting itself has never been displayed in public. Dr. Vinceti strongly believes that such masterpieces should not disappear into Swiss bank vaults; that, instead, they should be made available, at least during special occasions, for public display and enjoyment. □

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