

Leonardo. Una carriera di pittore. By Pietro C. Marani. 384 pp. incl. 200 col. pls. + 100 b. & w. ills. (Federico Motta Editore, Milan, 1999), L.It.260,000. ISBN 88-7179-196-7.

This book, beautifully produced with lavish illustrations, deals with several aspects of Leonardo da Vinci's career as a painter. In six chapters, three of which have been published before, Marani discusses practically all the paintings attributed to Leonardo, plus a number of important drawings and sculptural projects. After the main text there follows a catalogue of paintings attributed to Leonardo (including works by Verrocchio and other painters in which the young Leonardo may have been involved) and of lost works. The catalogue gives technical data and brief information about the provenance of each painting and in some cases a few bibliographical references. An appendix follows with a choice of a hundred documents edited by Eduardo Villatta, mostly concerning Leonardo's career as a painter. The documents, most of them previously published by Beltrami in 1919, have been checked against the original sources in the archives of Florence, Milan, Mantua, Rome, Paris and Naples. This is a valuable undertaking because Beltrami's book is not only now out of date, given that important documents have been discovered in the last few decades, but also because very often it does not indicate the exact archival references.

The *leitmotiv* of this book is the relationship between Leonardo's paintings and drawings on the one hand, and sculpture, both antique and contemporary, on the

other. Although no single work of sculpture which could reasonably be attributed to Leonardo has come down to us, the theme 'Leonardo and Sculpture' has haunted generations of scholars. Probably, this interest reflects two very simple facts: first, the importance of three-dimensional models in the training of young artists in the fifteenth century and, secondly, the high aesthetic and cultural value attached to antique sculpture. But in discussing Leonardo's interest in the antique, one should not forget that most of his drawings are studies after nature or fantastic variations on natural themes.

Marani's first chapter deals with Leonardo's training as an artist in Verrocchio's workshop and draws particular attention to the use of sculptural models, for example for the depiction of drapery. He tries to identify Leonardo's hand in three of Verrocchio's *Madonnas* – in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, and in the National Gallery in Washington – and also in the *Tobias and the Angel* in the National Gallery in London. In particular the landscape backgrounds in these paintings show some similarities to landscape settings in Leonardo's drawings, thus suggesting that the younger artist could have contributed to his master's paintings. The evidence for this kind of attribution is naturally open to question and one could argue that for example in the case of the two Berlin *Madonnas* Verrocchio used popular types of landscape. Some years ago, E.H. Gombrich directed our attention to a similar procedure for the use of facial types in *Madonnas* by renaissance artists,¹ and the same might be true for landscape types used by both Leonardo and his teacher.

Leonardo stayed for quite a long period in Verrocchio's studio, yet his ability to depart from his master's particular style becomes evident in his portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, which Marani believes to have been produced on the occasion of Ginevra's wedding in 1474 (pp.38–48). Given the arguments presented by Jennifer Fletcher some years ago, this assumption is not convincing: most likely, the painting was commissioned between 1478 and 1480 by Bernardo Bembo and for this reason could not have been a wedding portrait.² Bembo's device on the back of the small painting clearly indicates Fletcher's interpretation to be correct.

In discussing the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi and the *St Jerome* in the Vatican, Marani introduces the issue of antique sculpture which he considers responsible for Leonardo's rendering of three-dimensional forms in his early paintings. Thus he argues that Leonardo was inspired by the study of antique sculpture in Lorenzo de' Medici's garden at Piazza San Marco and finds this view confirmed by the Anonimo Gaddiano who speaks of Leonardo's attachment to the garden (pp.113–16). Whereas one is inclined to see some vestiges of a study of antique sculpture in Leonardo's *St Jerome*, the same cannot be said of his *Adoration of the Magi*. Given the size, format and spatial arrangement of the latter, its major points of reference are not antique reliefs (which the artist may or may not have seen), but rather Botticelli's Del Lama *Adoration* (with

a similar arrangement of figures) and Fra Angelico's S. Marco altar-piece (still the most important prototype for high altar-pieces in Florence before the turn of the century). It is the typology of such high altar-pieces that underlies Leonardo's *Adoration* and, of course, its iconography, to which Marani devotes surprisingly little attention.³ One might add that Leonardo's preliminary drawings for the *Adoration* are by no means inspired by antique sculpture, but show in some instances (e.g. Wallraf Richartz Museum, Cologne, inv. no.460) the typical features of life drawings.⁴ The 'sculptural' qualities of the figures in the *Adoration of the Magi* thus have more to do with the study of nature than with the study of antique art.

A very substantial chapter with mostly new suggestions is devoted to Leonardo's first Milanese period, and to both versions of the *Virgin of the rocks* produced for the confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in S. Francesco Grande, Milan between 1483 and 1508. Almost all the issues regarding the two versions are complicated and have, therefore, produced a great deal of controversy. Following the largely accepted opinion that the Louvre version was produced first, that is between 1483 and 1486, and then sold to Ludovico il Moro or some other client of similar importance, Marani comes up with some interesting ideas about the second version, now in the National Gallery in London. He argues that Leonardo had begun this version in 1493, and that it was then reworked in 1502 and finished in 1508 with very considerable involvement on the part of his pupils Marco d'Oggiono and Giovan Antonio Boltraffio (pp.140–42). Given the visual evidence supplied by detail photographs of Boltraffio's and d'Oggiono's *Resurrection of Christ* in Berlin, this could in fact be accepted for the landscape background of the National Gallery picture, as the somewhat schematic details of the rocks in both paintings are very similar. But for other features, such as plants and flowers, the argument seems far less convincing. Rather more acceptable is the assertion that the haloes and the stick with a cross of the infant St John are later additions (p.139).

Another of Marani's suggestions concerns a golden necklace, donated to the confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in July 1482. The most accepted theory about this piece of jewellery so far has been that the necklace adorned the wooden sculpture of a Madonna which was placed either on top of the altar-piece or within the whole structure; thus the sculpture was effectively covered by Leonardo's *Madonna of the rocks* for most of the year and was displayed only on the feast of the Immaculate Conception.⁵ Marani, however, concludes that the necklace mentioned in the documents was fixed directly to the painting itself, because an X-ray photograph of the relevant part of the National Gallery picture shows two holes (subsequently closed with lead white and painted over) close to the Madonna's neck. These holes supposedly held two nails on which the necklace was hung (pp.142–43).

This is certainly an ingenious solution, but some objections must be raised. First, the two 'holes' are placed asymmetrically,

one penetrating the Madonna's right shoulder, and the other, in a slightly higher position, the rocks behind her left shoulder. Therefore any necklace between these points would look as if it were fixed to a rock by a nail! Secondly, the 'hole' could just be one of many losses in the painted surface, which are not unusual in old panel paintings. In fact, the London panel has a number of such losses: about half a dozen of them are visible in the photographs published on pages 137, 139 and 143 (and similar holes can be seen on the X-rays of the Uffizi *Annunciation* on pages 58 and 59). Thirdly, by the beginning of the sixteenth century Leonardo was already considered to be one of the most excellent painters of his time and it is hard to imagine that nails would have been driven into one of his Madonnas.

In the next chapter Marani discusses the history of the attributions of Leonardo's portraits and gives a detailed and useful summary of the known technical data concerning them (pp.157–207). He also devotes particular attention to the importance for Leonardo of Antonello da Messina's portraits and advocates the older view (put forward by Carlo Amoretti) that the *Belle Ferronnière* in the Louvre should be identified with Leonardo's portrait of Lucrezia Crivelli mentioned in the Codex Atlanticus.

In the following section, '*Verso un nuovo classicismo: dal Cenacolo alla Sant'Anna*', Marani re-introduces the fascinating idea that Leonardo had seen several pieces of antique sculpture excavated in Tivoli in March 1501 (i.e. the Muses, now in the Prado, Madrid) and that this experience led him to develop particular 'sculptural' qualities in his paintings, which later came to be seen as constituting the 'High Renaissance Style'. This certainly is an intelligent explanation for stylistic changes which occurred around 1500, although one should also point out the impact of Michelangelo's early Florentine works on Leonardo's paintings and drawings in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Furthermore, one should keep in mind that we are not sure what Leonardo actually saw at Tivoli. There is also a slight problem with the evidence for the date of Leonardo's visit there, consisting of two short notes in the Codex Atlanticus (fol.618v, formerly fol.227va, here p.259). The first note reads '*A Tivoli vecchio, casa di Adriano*' and bears no date; the second gives the date: '*Laus deo 1500, a di 20 [?] marzo*', but its handwriting is somewhat different and the date almost illegible. For this reason both Carlo Pedretti and Agostino Marinoni had suggested that the date was not written by Leonardo at all,⁶ though later Pedretti convinced himself of the authenticity of the handwriting (p.297).⁷ However, some doubts remained and to explain the different handwriting Carlo Vecce suggested that the artist had written the date with a '*mano tremolante*' as if writing while travelling.⁸ Since the whole argument for Leonardo having studied antique sculpture in Tivoli in March 1501 is closely linked to this slender piece of palaeographic interpretation one hopes for some stronger evidence to emerge.

In his concluding chapter Marani turns

to yet another difficult issue, Leonardo's *St John the Baptist* in the Louvre. Almost everything about this painting is controversial: the attribution, date and occasion of its commission, as well as its exact meaning. Marani, like most scholars in the last decade, opts for a date around 1508. Thus he can return to the *leitmotiv* of his book, the importance of sculpture for Leonardo's painting. In this case Leonardo's ideas for the Trivulzio Monument supposedly influenced the sculpture-like form of his *St John*.

In conclusion, then, this book contains an impressive amount of up-to-date information about Leonardo's paintings and adds some interesting suggestions about his use of antique sculpture.⁹ It is in its discussion of pictorial content that the book sometimes turns out to be rather unsatisfactory, and one would have wished to be provided with at least the basic references concerning the iconography of individual paintings.¹⁰ There are also occasional minor errors: for example Filippo Lippi's Novitiate's Chapel altar-piece from S. Croce in the Uffizi is incorrectly given to Domenico Ghirlandaio (p.17).

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¹E.H. GOMBRICH: 'Ideal and Type in Italian Renaissance Painting', *New Light on Old Masters*, Oxford [1986], pp.89–124.

²J. FLETCHER: 'Bernardo Bembo and Leonardo's Portrait of Ginevra Benci', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE*, CXXXI [1989], pp.811–16. For this portrait, see also A. DÜLBERG: *Privatporträts*, Berlin [1990], pp.11, 23–24, 123–24 and 227–28.

³See in particular M. LISNER: 'Leonardos Anbetung der Könige. Zum Sinngehalt und zur Komposition', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, XLIV [1981], pp.201–42; C. STERLING: 'Fighting Animals in the Adoration of the Magi', *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, LXI [1974], pp.350–59; F. FEHRENBACH: *Licht und Wasser. Zur Dynamik naturphilosophischer Leitbilder im Werk Leonardo da Vincis*, Tübingen [1997], pp.89–114.

⁴For a recent discussion of Leonardo's preparatory drawings, see M. WIEMERS: *Bildform und Werkgenese. Studien zur Zeichnung in der italienischen Malerei zwischen 1450 und 1490*, Munich and Berlin [1996].

⁵P. VENTURINI: 'L'ancona dell'immacolata concezione di San Francesco Grande a Milano', in *Giovanni Antonio Amadeo*, ed. J. SHELL and L. CASTELFRANCHI, Milan [1993], pp.421–37.

⁶C. PEDRETTI: *A Chronology of Leonardo's Architectural Studies After 1500*, Geneva [1962], pp.79–81; A. MARINONI, ed.: *Leonardo da Vinci. Il Codice Atlantico nella Bibliotheca Ambrosiana di Milano*, commentary, VII, Florence [1978], p.242.

⁷See C. PEDRETTI: *The Codex Atlanticus of Leonardo da Vinci. A Catalogue of its Newly Restored Sheets*, II, New York [1979], pp.42–43; I was not able to consult *idem*: 'Leonardo da Vinci: 13 marzo 1500', *Ateneo Veneto*, XIII [1975], pp.121–23, where Pedretti changed his mind.

⁸C. VECCE: *Leonardo*, Rome [1998], p.200. One finds the same argument in C. PEDRETTI: *The Codex Atlanticus of Leonardo da Vinci. A Catalogue of its Newly Restored Sheets*, II, New York [1979] p.43: 'The dated note is in a trembling script as if it had been written on a stage coach.'

⁹One might add that Leonardo's interest in the antique is most evident in his study and use of antique coins; see J. CUNNALLY: 'Numismatic Sources for Leonardo's Equestrian Monuments', *Achademia Leonardi Vinci*, VI [1993], pp.67–78.

¹⁰See note 3 above and D. ROBERTSON, "'In Foraminibus Petrae': A Note on Leonardo's 'Virgin of the Rocks'", *Renaissance News*, VII [1954], pp.92–95; J. SNOW SMITH: 'Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks (Musée du Louvre): A Franciscan Interpretation', *Studies in Iconography*, XI [1987], pp.35–94 (for the *Virgin of the rocks*). C. GILBERT: 'Last Suppers and their Refectories', *The Pursuit of*

Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion, ed. c. TRINKAUS AND H.A. OBERMANN, Leiden [1974], pp.371–407; D. RIGAU: *A la table du Seigneur. L'Eucharistie chez les primitifs italiens (1250–1497)*, Paris [1989] (*Last Supper*). E. BATTISTI: 'Le origini religiose del paesaggio veneto', *Venezia Cinquecento*, I [1991], fasc.2, pp.9–25; M. SCHAPIRO: 'Leonardo and Freud: An Art Historical Study', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XVII [1956], pp.145–78 (*Louvre St Anne*). M. ARONBERG LAVIN: 'Giovanni Battista: A Study in Renaissance Religious Symbolism', *Art Bulletin*, XXXVII [1955], pp.85–101. P. BAROLSKY: 'The Mysterious Meaning of Leonardo's "Saint John the Baptist"', *Source*, VIII [1989], pp.11–15 (*St John*).