

Universal Projects for the Universal Man

Peter Furtado

The artist, scientist, botanist, anatomist, engineer, inventor and all-round genius Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) used paper in a unique way.

His notebooks are full of ideas sketched just as they poured into his head, seeking solutions to problems while pursuing lateral connections between his disparate fields of enquiry in such profusion that the pages of sketches and notes resemble a state of continual brainstorming. The books have always been highly valued, and this summer they will be revealed in a unique manner in a series of exhibitions across Europe, linked by a website called www.universalleonardo.org ^[1].

The exhibitions kicked off in Florence and Oxford earlier in the year, and will continue in Munich and Budapest, as well as in London where many of Britain's great Leonardo holdings will be displayed at the V&A in an exhibition opening in September entitled Leonardo da Vinci: Experience, Experiment and Design.

Leonardo has long fascinated scholars and the general public. In 1994 Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, acquired the notebook entitled Codex Hammer (now renamed the Codex Leicester) and a few years later challenged scholars to find a new way of looking at the artist. The Universal Leonardo is the result.

Other exhibitions have looked at the contents of the notebooks, but this one will explore the way in which his mind worked, the 'plastic process of thought' in the words of Martin Kemp, Professor of Art History at Oxford University and the exhibition's curator. Kemp has set himself the target of showing how Leonardo thought on paper, how he developed new ways of visualising things that had never been visualized before, through cutaways and see-through sketches (one thinks of the drawing of the foetus in the womb), not just to record his observations but to help him think through problems. The task is not straightforward as some pages of his notebooks may have up to 16 separate elements – drawn and written – on them, and deconstructed their contents and their relations is a complex task.

Kemp hopes, though, to be able to show how the process of visualization fed directly back into the welter of ideas in Leonardo's fertile brain. Thus for example, next to some of his exceptional drawings of turbulence in water flowing past an obstruction, the artist has noted that the force of the water resembles the fall of tresses of curly hair.

Continually he sought unity between human beings and nature, with the eye as the essential interface between the two: what he called the 'window of the soul' through which we can look at and understand nature. We can see him pursuing similar analogies between fields of enquiry, the microcosm and macrocosm that were so important to him. Thus he compared the human body to the earth, its arteries 'canals' that might become silted up in old age, while

conversely he described his terrestrial maps as images of the 'living body of the earth'.

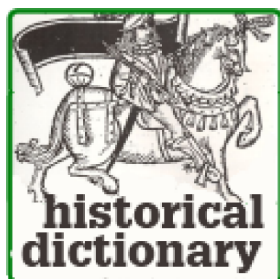
As well as the V&A's own holdings of three of the Leonardo notebooks, the exhibition will include many of the rich holdings from the Royal Collection, and pages from the Arundel Codex from the British Museum, which has itself been staging a remarkable exhibition of the drawings of the other great Renaissance genius, Michelangelo. So Londoners will have an unrivalled opportunity to compare and contrast their approaches. 'Michelangelo's drawings are extremely beautiful, the product of the quintessential Renaissance master-artist, says Kemp. 'Leonardo was spreading himself in an extraordinary way.'

As well as the small, delicate pages of the notebooks (some bound, others now in separate sheets), the exhibition will offer new ways of entering their contents. Computer animations will enliven some of the drawings, such as a small sequence of six sketches of a man using a large hammer. And models of some of the designs for large machines, such as the flying machine, the tank and the giant crossbow, will provide focal points for the viewer.

Leonardo has always been a crowd-puller. When the Mona Lisa was stolen briefly in 1911, the queues to see the gap on the wall exceeded the queues on her return. This year, he is again in the news with a best-selling thriller and movie. In response to the inevitable question as to whether there was a 'code' contained in Leonardo's paintings, Kemp is definite but patient. 'There are no codes in Renaissance paintings. It's true there are many allegories, which deepen the surface message, but are of a piece with it. But there are no hidden meanings distinct from the overt subject of the work. I regard the current interest as a fantastic opportunity; it engages people and provides a wonderful starting pint to get them involved in understanding one of the most remarkable men who ever lived.'

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