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INTRODUCTION

If you were looking for a book to read on Leonardo da Vinci, and you picked this one, you are probably aware that there are numerous other possibilities. More than two hundred fifty books on the artist have been published, across the globe and in multiple languages, during and in the aftermath of his quincentennial in 2019. Not that there weren't already hundreds of Leonardo titles available: books for children, books by and for specialists, books by nonspecialists promising sensational new revelations, books that offer self-help, or the refinement of your mental prowess, or of your effectiveness as a corporate strategist. Many of these books promise a unique access to the mind of a genius, to the man as he really was, a supreme achiever despite a career thwarted by misunderstanding and adversity, a timeless example.

Most of these books are biographical in their approach. That is, they assess the meaning of a life as a whole: from Leonardo's illegitimate birth in an obscure village, to a long and hard ascent to growing recognition and fame, despite painful failure; to breakthroughs in knowledge that were centuries ahead of their time. The human-interest character Da Vinci is so well-known that he has become over-familiar, just like his works. Yet somehow this story needs to be told over and over again. Why?

The obvious answer is that his legacy of drawings, writings, and paintings seems so rich that it rewards repeated examination. The copious but scattered archives of Leonardo manuscripts reveal his involvement in multiple fields of knowledge in the decades on either side of the year

1500—optics, anatomy, engineering, hydrodynamics, natural history (including geology, zoology, and paleontology); the reception of the Greek philosopher Aristotle and his teachings on the mind; the theory and practice of painting; recodified according to scientific principles; sculpture and technologies of bronze casting; the culture of books and libraries. As a window into the history of ideas about the nature of human beings, their relation to non-human animals and to a volatile and fragile natural world, these writings—fraught by both wonder and pessimism—have much to say to us today, although the challenges to editing and circulating them remain immense.

Somehow, these achievements need to be framed by a life story. I'd go further: we need the works and the writings to *become* that life story. We want a character somehow like ourselves, still living and breathing at the heart of that complicated legacy. An individual who can reconcile that legacy of achievement, to make sense of it all.

The character or personality of Leonardo, then, serves a purpose—even if that character is largely a fiction, a made-up person created by highly partisan interests after his death, elaborated into a timeless genius in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and increasingly made to resemble ourselves in the twenty-first.

Be reassured, this is a book about Leonardo da Vinci. As an art historian, I am invested in what my profession—in all its technical and critical and archival subfields—can say about his extraordinary legacy and the fascination it continues to exert. It considers Leonardo according to what we are still learning about the lifeworld of a Renaissance artist and its transformation around 1480–1520. I am interested in how questions of selfhood and identity, as we would now call them, were conceived by premodern individuals, especially artists—and in the radical differences from our own conceptions. Precisely for this reason, I began above with the Leonardo books—I now own tottering piles of them—because their very quantity, and the version of the artist and writer that they offer their readers, can shape new historical questions: namely that their version of Leonardo seems to be compensating for a sense of lack, or a loss.

Hence this is also a book about biography, a distinctively modern form of life-writing that seeks to interpret a subject's inner and public worlds, to see life and works in terms of each other, and to assign significance to the life as a whole. While modern forms of biography may succeed as entertainment, I will show how they often fail as history with regard to individuals like Leonardo da Vinci. I also maintain that the failures of biography are useful for getting to grips with Leonardo as a historical phenomenon. Lack, or absence, will be a major focus of the chapters that follow.

In contrast with the biographical optimism of much recent writing, the present book is about Leonardo's resistance to becoming a subject of biography, as well as the gaps in the historical record that have invited projection and fictionalization. We thereby gain an understanding of a Leonardo who is not like ourselves, who refuses our attempts to make him so. Because the Leonardo who emerges here manifests a distinctly nonmodern way of being a person, of having what we call a "self." And, in making Leonardo strange, we also gain an understanding of ourselves, or the historical contingency of our notions of personhood. We were not always as we are now, and there were always other possibilities. And we will also learn from our own desire for a fully realized Leonardo in the twenty-first century, as well as the various interests that are served (and ill-served) by the ubiquity of this largely made-up "character" in our time.

I will be returning to the documents to address what they actually warrant us to say about the professional life and the personal life of Leonardo da Vinci. Despite an abundance of records by contemporaries about Leonardo, and despite thousands of pages of notes and longer drafts in Leonardo's own hand, there is remarkably little that can be said with confidence about his life, let alone about his "character" and "personality." We know the circumstances of his illegitimate birth in Anchiano near Vinci in 1452, we have very sketchy knowledge of his childhood and apprenticeship, and we know more or less about whom he worked for as an artist and engineer, and where—Florence, Milan, Florence again, Rome, France. For much of his surviving artistic production, however, dates and documents are a problem: about one-third of Leonardo's surviving paintings lack records confirming his authorship or indicating for whom the work was made. Accounts of Leonardo's works by contemporaries often worryingly differ from the surviving works that we connect them to. While a few contemporaries refer to Leonardo's charisma and sociable nature, there is almost nothing in Leonardo's own words about Leonardo himself. In stark contrast, we have abundant poetry and letters by his contemporary Michelangelo that dramatically (though no less fictively) stage the challenges and vexations of being an artist, his sense of betrayal and disappointment with patrons and family members, his professions of affection and of love, his state of physical health.

What is most egregiously at stake is the nature of our relation to the past—to the art of the past, to the past as record of human experience and accomplishment. Leonardo represents an extraordinary convergence of invention, imagination, skill, and curiosity that takes us into a premodern world discontinuous from ours, into a spectrum of relations with other makers and thinkers, that demands an adjustment of our twenty-first-century perspective on the past. How do we understand and build on the evidence while respecting the remoteness, the unknowability of past lives? How should we rise above the deadening presumption of the *claim to know*?

DA VINCI: NEW, IMPROVED, REANIMATED

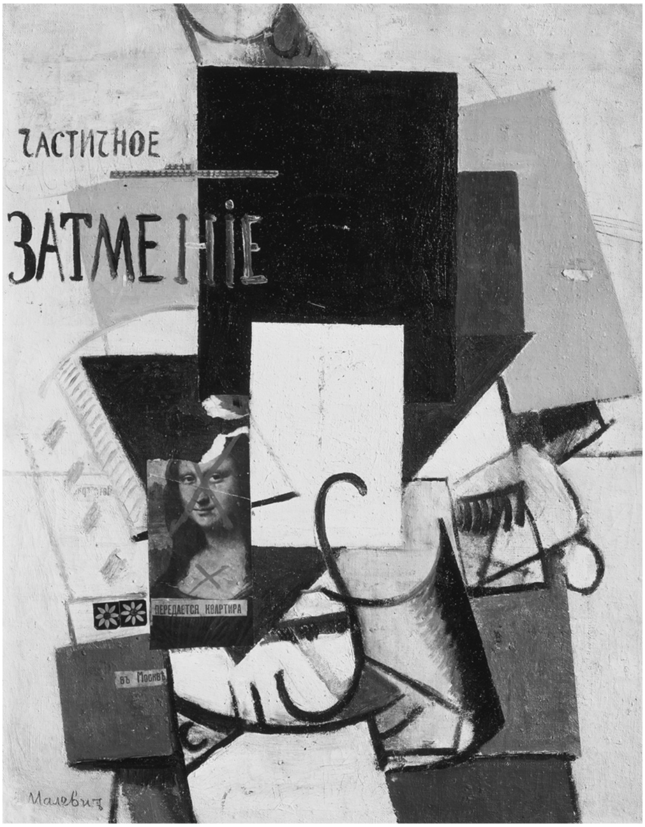
Why am I doing this? And, is there not a tension between my desire to undermine the cult of Leonardo with yet another book that seeks to bring us closer to understanding him? What I hope to do here is not invalidate centuries of curiosity about the man and his works but push that curiosity in directions that undermine the myth and give us something better.

As a university-based art historian (and occasional curator), I have taught several courses on Leonardo over a thirty-year period. This book is shaped by the questions and interests that several generations of students brought to class. Such questions were not shaped by their desire to be or to impress an art historian but from their vocations as engineers and scientists, or their interest in science fiction and gaming, or their skepticism about a historical phenomenon, "the Renaissance," centered on dead white male celebrities like "Da Vinci." I thus began to think of multiple images of Leonardo, shaped by cultures far broader than the historical study of art and science. This proliferation of images, in publishing, in electronic media, in tourism and museums, in the art market and its journalistic echo chamber, seemed to be a distinctly twenty-first-century symptom—but of what?

Most obviously, the constant spotlighting of Leonardo "discoveries" in popular media shows how "Da Vinci" has become a historical legitimation of our obsessions with art, genius, and technological innovation as a means of obtaining celebrity and wealth. Let's pursue this a little further.

"Leonardo" is manifest in a series of different platforms, fields of inquiry, realms of spectacle—let's call them "Da Vinci Worlds." Think of the image of Leonardo in TV and electronic media, commercial publishing, online gaming, tech branding, mass tourism, the art market, museums and pseudo-museums. Our Da Vinci has been refashioned to fit the profile of twenty-first-century celebrity: a wayward nonconforming painter; a pioneering technical innovator and problem-solver; an athlete, even, and a fashion influencer. A type whose idealisms and *personal struggles* draw as much attention as his achievements—gay, vegetarian, pro–animal rights, a religious agnostic. We seemingly cannot get enough of this phantom celebrity, this Da Vinci. But what does this Da Vinci have to do with the artist known in his lifetime as Leonardo da Vinci, or Leonardo of Florence, Léonard de Florence, and in occasional literary contexts as "Vincius" or "Vinci"? He was never called "Da Vinci" until the 1800s.[1]

And "Da Vinci Worlds" are also a way of containing and exploiting our boredom with the personality cult and its ubiquity. Exasperation with the overhyped portrait, and with the Leonardo cult in general, is nothing new—more than a century ago, it caused the art connoisseur Bernard Berenson to celebrate the 1911 theft of the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre. His most famous portrait has long symbolized "old master," "masterpiece," and "European canon" and been a focus for modernist iconoclasm—a series of defaced Giocondas from Kasimir Malevich to Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol (fig. 1). If you're an influencer in the art world, *Mona Lisa* can stand for everything you dislike or resist: Robert Hughes's 2008 BBC documentary *The Mona Lisa Curse* opens with a chilling screen blend of the face of the *Mona Lisa* with *For the Love of God*, a diamond-encrusted skull by Damien Hirst—epitomizing the twenty-first-century art world as a hoax-ridden ritual squandering of wealth. If you've been to the Louvre you'll know that it is of very little interest to anyone that you're



1. Kasimir Malevich, *Composition with Mona Lisa*. 1914. Oil, collage, and graphite on canvas, 62.5 × 49.3 cm. St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum.

underwhelmed with the painting in its bullet-proof shrine-like enclosure, that you can't see what all the hype is about.[2] And yet, while what lies at its center seems pointless and dead, the cult is real: as we will see, it is one facet of a globalizing network of capital and expertise that binds in its mesh museums, fine art publishing, tourism, social media and big tech, and an unregulated and seemingly unstoppable art market that funnels billions of dollars annually to an elite corps of dealers and investors.

What distinguishes most of these worlds from the college classroom or specialist seminar is the phenomenon of complete visibility, the claim to know, to crack codes and dispel mysteries. One of the compulsions that animates Da Vinci Worlds is the desire to *give a face* to the artist from

Vinci. Classical and Renaissance experts on persuasion—rhetoricians—called this *prosopopoeia*, from the Greek word for mask, *prosopon*. So too, the constant claims to have identified a new portrait, or a new personal glimpse, are part of an elaborate apparatus of persuasion. We need our Da Vinci to have a face, a body, and a biography, and we need to resurrect it in his physical traces, his fingerprints, even his DNA. We want a reembodied Da Vinci to guarantee the existence of a genealogy of male genius (including Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs); we need this Da Vinci to prove to us that the Renaissance really existed, that artistic genius and "the creative brain" are problems to be solved by science. Since the documents don't give us what we need, we have fabricated a series of pseudo Da Vincis that finally mostly resemble ourselves.

What is at stake, for instance, in claims that "traces of DNA" have been found on his manuscripts, or that there are fingerprints detectable in his paintings, or that locating the bones of Lisa Gherardini (aka Mona Lisa) might solve a "Leonardo mystery"? It is as if we would clone him if we could. Many of those engaged in studying and teaching his work see him as increasingly lost and dispersed in the fog of overexposure, like an abraded and overpainted presence in a damaged and overvalued old painting. As the hype intensifies, might there be less actually "there" to see?

Da Vinci, we are constantly told, is one of us. He has more to do with our world of technological entrepreneurism than the premodern world of superstition and prejudice in which he made his untimely appearance. Professional Leonardo scholars have been far from blameless in reinforcing this image of the artist's untimeliness, his precocious individualism, his scientific ability to see through the benightedness and superstition of his age. Either they have cheerfully jumped on the bandwagon or they've tried to maintain a dignified distance from all the Da Vinci media noise.

What, though, if that noise were placing expertise itself at risk? This was the publicity, for instance, for an exhibition of Leonardo manuscripts and alleged new "scientific" discoveries about the artist in Madrid: "Curated by one of the big da Vinci experts, the Spanish actor, television presenter and writer Christian Gálvez, it is the only exhibition in the world endorsed by the Leonardo DNA Project. It is an international project involving Gálvez together with a team of geneticists, historians, archaeologists and other experts that wish to reveal da Vinci mystery using his DNA in the year of his 500th anniversary."[3]

With the backing of a media corporation, a powerful auction house, a private art foundation, or even their own self-created institute, anyone can be a *Da Vinci expert*. Going by the roster of contributors to a 2021 publication from a reputable scholarly press, a dead-in-the-water Leonardo attribution can be given credibility by experts with credentials in "cultural heritage," directing a national Academy of Food and Wine, or being the director of documentaries for the History Channel.[4]

Fair enough. Academics and curators don't own Leonardo. National and local economies benefit from marketing the past. But there's a problem if, increasingly, scholars find that they have to jump on the Da Vinci bandwagon in order not to have their voices drowned out in the hype and the noise. From what is now held to constitute "expertise" in a Da Vinci World platform, you might think that a traditional enclave of specialists had lost control of their Leonardo. A certain media-friendly version of the Leonardo expert—like the genial Oxford emeritus Martin Kemp, or Lord Kenneth Clark, the once-anointed guide to *Civilisation* for a deferential television audience in the late 1960s—no longer controls the discussion. Nor, it seems, do his present-day counterparts, the art historian or curator. These only appear in the media to the degree that they can keep the whole circus going, and the circus is run by journalists, commercial publishing, and the art market. Is that such a bad thing? For me, it's a question of who benefits. While *Da Vinci* might seem to be "the people's Leonardo," something between a celebrity brand and an inspirational role model, that is very far from the case.

As specialist voices caution skepticism, freelancers, dealers, amateur art sleuths, and outlier scientists, many with a new explanation of an eternal mystery or a new one no one had noticed, are guaranteed a journalistic echo chamber. "Outsider" scholarship has long proliferated on the fringes of the visual arts in particular, and was generally regarded as the domain of amateurs and cranks. "Surfacing unexpectedly, often characterized by a tone of near-fanatical urgency, and typically accompanied by a lengthy and disputatious footnote apparatus," it almost never bypassed the academic policing operation of peer review.[5] In the age of the internet, it is the peer-reviewed experts who have begun to look like the outsiders. Wielding the word "science" is always helpful (and medical journals in particular have long provided a haven for eccentric scholarship offering pathological diagnostics of figures in Renaissance masterpieces). The promise, explicitly or implicitly, is that the true Da Vinci is being *revealed*, that we are finally making contact with the genius in his untimely and subversive wisdom, despite denials by an elite cabal of academics and tradition-bound experts. Such anti-specialists can pronounce on his thought, his character, and his sexual life with seemingly undeterred confidence. And, what Leonardo does not reveal in his often fragmentary and mostly impersonal writings can be gleaned through signals and clues, enigmas that he supposedly bequeathed to true disciples of later times.

I have characterized this book as concerned with art history's Leonardo, which means that it is also concerned with the role of expertise in historical scholarship. Expertise, in a field like Leonardo studies, increasingly has to take account of questions of cultural capital and market value in the objects that it claims to study. This means that this book is also concerned with that precarious and contentious thing we call "the public interest," toward which scholarship in the academy and the museum is (or was) nominally devoted. It addresses the erasure between a research- and education-oriented paradigm of public interest and one better described as a consumer market for entertainment. It also addresses the responsibility attending on such expertise and on its complicity in propagating the Da Vinci phenomenon. While this erasure has deeper historical roots, it has escalated in recent years.

SALVATOR MUNDI

> "In the increasingly high-stakes world of multimillion-dollar fine art sales, science is becoming ever more important. The purpose, ultimately, is to 'get inside the head of the artist.'"[6]

Let's take a notorious recent example. The painting known as the *Salvator Mundi* is emblematic of how the artist *has become a problem*. It was first sold as an authentic Leonardo in 2008, exhibited in a public museum in 2011, underwent conservation and consolidation for several years, and then obtained its present incessant notoriety when it was sold for $450 million in 2017 and then sequestered at an unknown location. A gift to some sectors of the art world, perhaps—but otherwise the frenzy around the hapless painting has become a blight to art historical scholarship, to art museums with a commitment to creating informative public conversations through exhibitions and acquisitions, and to the principle of a public culture independent of market forces. On the other hand, the *Salvator Mundi* has become a triumph of branding and of marketing, of how to generate profit from cultural artifacts and keep the public avid for wilder rumors and allegations. Any aesthetic or historical aura that might still accrue to the artifact is beside the point. Aura was generated instead from a bundling together of intoxicating cultural fetishes: the "last Leonardo," the "lost Leonardo," the "male Mona Lisa," as well as the unimaginable wealth of super-elites, shady oligarchies, conspiracy theorists, entrepreneurial dealers, whistleblowers of art fraud.

Above all, this painting of the face of Christ raises the specter of the fake, a hunger for a denouement where the artifact is revealed to be not what it was claimed to be, where the "expert elites" were deceived or deceived themselves and the public, or perhaps betrayed science through the allure of fame and wealth.

The point is not that art world elites should be exempt from public scrutiny, or that experts should not be called out by watchdog media for self-deception or opportunistic self-publicity. The persona of the journalist as skeptic and as sleuth is in many ways more appealing. And yet, in such coverage the outlier characters are often afforded sympathy and respect, a pat on the back: the traditional expert elites are "exposed" as fallible, weak, or mendacious. The anti-establishment posturing of such popularizing accounts is palpable. In one such exposé, the dealer Alexander Parish is quoted regarding "some of these museum people": "They're really woeful in terms of their practical application of looking at pictures. People in the trade, they look at five thousand pictures a year, if you add all the auctions together and all the pictures they're shown. Somebody who's an associate curator, he's looked at the same two hundred pictures in his collection over and over again, but they're not getting out there. . . . This is the truth. They don't have the practical experience to be in the field, as it were, on their feet, judging pictures as they come in."[7] Parish was a stakeholder in the 2008 sale of the *Salvator Mundi*.

Such exposé narratives, with their webs of subterfuge and cast of characters both dubious and duped, have the ring of the crime thriller about them. When the *Salvator* is referred to as "the Holy Grail" of art history, you begin to realize the hold that Dan Brown's lucrative "Da Vinci" bestseller has over the journalistic presentation of "true stories." "There was no formal process by which the attribution of the painting was conducted. The National Gallery did not ask to have the painting left with it to be examined by its own restorers in its own restoration studios. . . . For all the outside world knows, incense may have been shaken and incantations uttered in Latin, along with Knights Templar oaths."[8] (There was in fact a vetting of the picture at the National Gallery by a team of Leonardo experts, although several later stated that they never supported the attribution.)

Given what is at stake, the *Salvator Mundi* seems less like a Holy Grail than a poisoned chalice: with such vast profits to be made, assessments of authenticity can risk appearing compromised. No major museum sought to acquire the work, and the response by Leonardo experts was for the most part noncommittal or skeptical.[9] To weigh in with an opinion, or to produce new historical and technical scholarship, could have effects on the work's highly disruptive market value. The work is by no means a "fake," as some journalists insinuate, but has been heavily damaged by shifts in the wooden panel and old restorations; it required retouching over areas of damaged but intact original paint layer, the refilling of the background, and reconstruction of lost areas of the face and hair.[10]

There is little consensus about whether the original portions reveal the hand of Leonardo, or Leonardo and assistants, or a Leonardo follower like Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio or Bernardino Luini, and even the painting's provenance—that is, the history of its past ownership—is much debated.[11] With its off-the-charts valuation, the *Salvator Mundi* has been placed off-limits for scholarship—and not just because art historians have had little opportunity to see the work. Whether in a Swiss free port or on a billionaire's yacht, the painting has acquired a tainted status, resembling illegally trafficked cultural artifacts (although its repeated resales are legal), removing it from the purview of responsible scholarship.

In the buildup to the Louvre's great quincentennial exhibition of 2019–20, the museum's director, Jean-Luc Martinez, stated in a radio interview that the *Salvator Mundi* was expected to make a star appearance.[12] The painting was certainly topical, and one of the goals of the exhibition was to bring together the greatest number of Leonardos ever displayed. Since it was widely reported in 2017 that the *Salvator* had been acquired for the Louvre Abu Dhabi, there was a clear dimension of co-branding of "Louvre" with "Leonardo." The actual political ramifications, including diplomatic overtures between President Macron and the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, were less widely known. An agreement was reached, a catalog entry was written, and exhibition designers included the work in the maquette for the final room of the show. And yet an alternative version of the catalog without the entry was printed, just in case.

It was the prospective appearance by the "last Leonardo"—however justifiable in art historical terms—that turned a scholarly and didactic exhibition into a Da Vinci World. And yet for reasons variously explained, the loan was canceled shortly before the opening (one account suggests that the prince wanted the painting displayed next to the *Mona Lisa*, which was never intended to be part of the exhibition but to remain on display in the permanent collection).[13] The alternative catalog was placed on sale, and a workshop version known as the Ganay *Salvator Mundi* stood in for the absent painting. The exact whereabouts of the *Salvator Mundi* remain a mystery at the time of writing, although certain Louvre staff may have had access to it in the run-up to the exhibition. More than that, the Center for Research and Restoration of the Museums of France (C2RMF) had conducted a technical examination of the painting, and the museum had even produced a forty-eight-page book, *Léonard de Vinci: Le Salvator Mundi*.[14] The publication presented diagnostic analyses of the paint layers and panel support using the most up-to-date repertoire of non-invasive techniques: x-radiography, multispectral imaging, infrared reflectography, thermoluminescence mapping, and optical coherence tomography, complementing evidence published by the painting's conservator, Dianne Dwyer Modestini, in 2011. X-rays of the Louvre's own Leonardos—the *Mona Lisa*, the *St. John*—presented similar characteristics to the radiography of the *Salvator Mundi*—a ghostly indistinctness resulting from the artist's characteristic use of opaque white lead underpainting in his late works, and not found in versions of the *Salvator Mundi* by Leonardo followers.

When the loan was withdrawn, the book—its existence still a secret—was suppressed. As a national museum the Louvre is prevented by law from providing expert assessment on the authenticity of works in private hands: the only exception is where the work in question is displayed by the museum. In other words, there was a clear policy in place to safeguard the balance of public and private interests. While the Louvre's technical study would have been of benefit to scholarship (usually considered a public good), its advantage to the work's owner, its past and future vendors, outweighed the case for the public interest served by making it available.

And yet the publication went on sale. Or at least one copy did, on December 18, 2019, when after an early morning visit to the Louvre exhibition I added it to a bundle of Leonardo-related titles that I purchased at the museum's bookstore: it had been placed on a table along with stacks of the catalog for the show. I barely looked through it over the following weeks, until—as part of the research for this book—I met with Dianne Modestini, the conservator who had restored the painting and who had published the most thorough case for its authenticity.[15] I asked for her opinion and was surprised when she told me she had known nothing of the book's existence. Failing to find it for sale online, Modestini contacted the Louvre and was informed that no such book existed.

In late February 2021 I received an admonishing email from a colleague at the Louvre stating that "the book doesn't exist anymore and it is forbidden to mention it or use it." By that time, news of the book had reached the *Art Newspaper*, which ran a story on March 31, describing the contents and detailing the book's suppression. Modestini was quoted as saying that the withdrawal of valuable information was "unfortunate."

"I would, of course, like to study high-resolution digital files of the new images," she told the *Art Newspaper*, appealing to the principle of sharing information with the larger community of scholars. "Scientific and chemical imaging can change or greatly add to our understanding of how a work of art was created. Due to the expense of the equipment and the computational power required to process the data, only a few museums and conservation institutes are able to study paintings with these new methods and when this information is shared it benefits the entire community." By April 2021 *Art Newspaper* reported that scans of the publication had been released to the media to counter the claims of a documentary broadcast on French TV purporting that the painting had been withdrawn because the Louvre's technical studies had caused the museum to *question* its autograph status—exactly the contrary of what the little "non-book" claimed to reveal.[16]

Like many students of Leonardo, I am agnostic as to whether the *Salvator Mundi* is by "Leonardo" or "Leonardo and . . ." The painting's historical interest and importance do not ride on its status as a 100 percent autograph work, nor even on its aesthetic qualities, and are utterly independent of its market value. As we will see further in chapter 5, much of Leonardo's pictorial production after 1500 was created in collaboration with if not delegated to assistants; contemporaries were aware that he had trained a group of followers who could replicate his manner of painting and that the degree of his commitment to various artistic projects was inconsistent and unpredictable.

Some of my own research over the past ten years has concerned followers of Leonardo working during the span of his lifetime (1452–1519), in the geographical region in which he worked and traveled (northern Italy from Florence to Milan to Venice). One of the most distinctive aspects of Leonardo as a shaping force in the history of art is the way his style and his methods came to be transmitted and extended in the work of others, and in ways that we are still learning about. As with the *Salvator Mundi*, so it is the case for many of Leonardo's works—the *Mona Lisa*, the *Leda and the Swan*, the *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, the Louvre *St. John*—a copious level of production of replicas and variants. Present-day expertise, on the other hand, has tended to limit the Leonardo corpus to the strictly autograph, solo performances of the artist, perpetrating the aura of absolute rarity and inestimable value. Every author of such a catalog has to determine the cutoff between "Leonardo" and "Leonardo and . . ." in the penumbra of workshop collaborations. It is likely that the difference mattered little, if at all, to Leonardo's original clients.

Today's art market seeks to have it both ways. On one hand, it demands a loosening of criteria for distinguishing between the artist and his followers. On the other, it seeks to capitalize on the rarity of every alleged Leonardo discovery, with the stoking of market value to sensational levels. The chapters that follow do not offer a way out of this complicated entanglement of specialist research and the market cult of authenticity. Nor am I attempting a critique of connoisseurship—the art historical practice, really an essential skill acquired only with time and patience, of discriminating between the hands of particular artists. Rather, I would argue for the necessity of connoisseurship *and* technical analysis as a means of curtailing the seemingly endless market supply of Leonardesque paintings that Leonardo did not paint.

At the same time, I will argue that such criteria for determining the limits of an artist's work existed only loosely, if at all, in the lifetime of Leonardo. The notion of the artist as solitary author acting alone is challenged first of all by the conditions of workshop production. Second, the idea of individual artist-as-author is called into question by radically different notions of selfhood, of personal history and identity in the premodern world. We will see that the history of Leonardo, too often taken to be the story of a solitary, misunderstood genius, is far more meaningful as a history of his encounters and entanglements with a collective of colleagues, followers, and assistants.

This book is also an exploration of the critical demands of art history, the potential and limits of art history as a discipline, and its capacity to challenge cultural myths. Most commonly, mass culture's "Da Vinci" is a guarantee of one of Western culture's most cherished myths, that of the "Renaissance Man," and of European cultural supremacy. Academics have largely given up on those tarnished stereotypes, no less old-fashioned than ethnocentric and sexist, and in recent years the core of a racist identity politics. However, the myth of multitalented intellectual daring and innovation sits well with the twenty-first-century image of the *creative class*, the technological entrepreneur, those whose facility in "making connections" marks them out as supreme achievers.

The image of Leonardo in more rigorous historical scholarship might seem rather faceless by comparison: a manifestation of social displacement, even of political disintegration, rather than a solitary genius, less an independent voice than a point of convergence for different currents of thought, both classical worldviews and artisanal wisdom, some of it not especially progressive or forward-looking. With this book, which you can think of as an anti-biography, the goal is not to produce a fussy academic critique of popular stereotypes but a Leonardo that can be less easily instrumentalized by the forces that shape our twenty-first-century mental ecology, a description that might resist the banalities of the Da Vinci Industry. It seeks to make Leonardo unfamiliar, in ways that will allow the sometimes shocking character of the writings and images to resonate in their own historical moment as well as ours.

Chapter 1 explores how traditional cultural spaces like the museum have been transformed by the twenty-first-century emergence of what I call Da Vinci Worlds—spectacular worlds of simulation, of enhanced sensation, where the historical and the fragmentary are transformed into "experience." For most people, the museum, or the historical site turned into a museum, serves as the primary interface between Da Vinci Worlds and the historical traces of Leonardo. The Louvre in Paris and Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan are the point of contact for several million visitors every year, many of whom will probably never see another painting by Leonardo. At the same time museums, as notionally public spaces, have become theaters for spectacular interventions of various kinds—not only the thrills of the blockbuster exhibition but highly mediated demonstrations against a cultural establishment constantly upbraided for cultural complacency and resistance to progress. While the focus is on "Da Vinci" spectacles of the past quarter century, the chapter also describes how various practices of art history—despite pressure from the realm of media spectacle—offer a redress to misinformation, cliché, and myth.

Chapter 2 will closely examine some highly debatable "facts" and received ideas that structure the modern Leonardo biography—the stereotype of the flamboyant social and sexual outsider, the religious agnostic, the vegetarian, the humanitarian. We will look at the instability and ambiguity of the evidence on which it is based, at the same time demonstrating that the fragmentary nature of such evidence is of rich historical significance in itself. Again, the counternarrative in this chapter shows how historical disciplines including art history and literary studies have responded or might respond to the received ideas of the Leonardo biography.

The Leonardo biography is considered historically in chapter 3, which traces the artist's conflicted afterlife over the past two centuries, focusing in particular on the combined impact of the writings of Walter Pater, Paul Valéry, Sigmund Freud, and Bernard Berenson on the various Leonardos of the twentieth century. Returning to some of the concerns laid out in this introduction, it will then examine some of the motivations at work in the twenty-first-century production of Leonardo biographies.

Chapter 4 gets to grips with the conditions of life-writing in the premodern era, exploring who got to have written lives and why, as well as the practices of writing that emerged among artists and craftsmen in the 1400s. It reveals some governing preoccupations of the world in which Leonardo lived, of how people conceived personhood or "identity" in relation to groups and individuals. A key question to be confronted is why artists like Ghiberti, Alberti, Michelangelo, and Cellini could become authors of autobiographical texts—the last three with conspicuous attention to the physical life of the author. Leonardo seems to have pointedly refrained—except very partially and obliquely—not only from narrating his own biography but from references to his own body in his writing. This brings us to the question of writing and literary persona in the case of a figure like Leonardo and the ways in which writing came to be a form of surrogate embodiment.

The final chapter will be devoted to Leonardo as a premodern thinker and maker. Less as a solitary, beleaguered voice, an echo chamber of modern existential selfhood, Leonardo will appear more as a point of relay within a collective production of knowledge, manifesting conceptions of social and personal identity very different from our own. Grounded in an analysis of Leonardo's works and in their reception by other artists, it will advance some new conclusions about the radical aesthetics of Leonardo's painting and the curious ways in which it seeks to challenge notions of a boundaried selfhood.

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