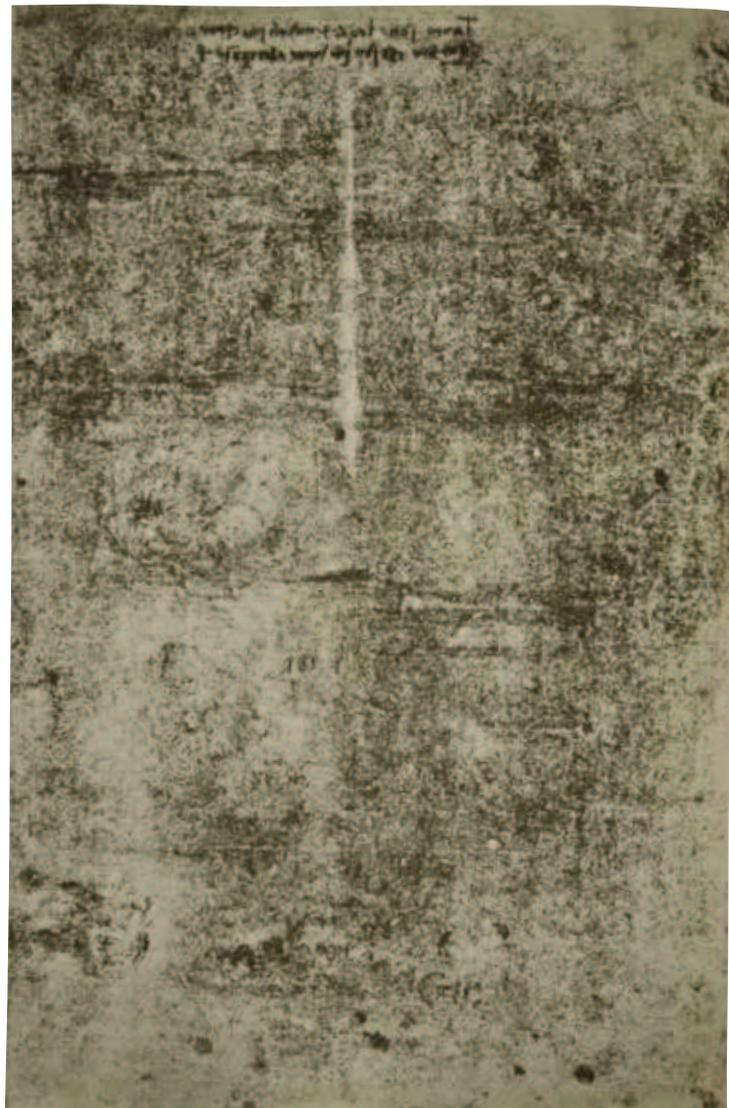


## Introduction

Carlo Pedretti

THE LAST date written by Leonardo's hand appears on a double sheet of the Codex Atlanticus, f. 249 v-b [673 r]: "a 24 dj giugno il dj dj san giovannj | 1518 in ābosa nel palazzo del Clu [Cloux Lucé]". This date is written at the top in the center of a page of geometrical studies on the left leaf of the double sheet. The page is oddly prepared with black charcoal. In the same codex there are other such double sheets, with the same black-colored half. Among Leonardo's drawings at Windsor, one sheet of the same size, RL 12391, also prepared with charcoal, contains amorphous images of clouds, banks of fog, and hilly landscapes dotted with trees, which bring to mind those stains on walls mentioned by Leonardo as a stimulus to the imagination. In addition, near the upper margin, at the center, there is a single note which seems to have been written with the same pen and the same ink, and just in the same ductus as the last date referring to the "palace of the Clu". And like this date, it is arranged on two lines that in English would read as follows: "The paler the shadows of the clouds | the closer the clouds are to the horizon". Another sheet at Windsor, RL 12670, which is of the same format and on the same paper, but not tinted, and which could well have been the counterpart of RL 12391, contains on the recto various geometrical studies of *lunulae*, those characteristic "curvilateral stars" that only appear on French sheets from after 1517, for example on f. 90 v-b [246 r] of the Codex Atlanticus, which includes a small sketch of a French village, quite possibly none other than Amboise as seen from the Clos Lucé. On the back of the Windsor sheet there are one or two rough sketches of geometry, possibly just a test of the pen, and also a most beautiful head of a woman drawn undoubtedly by Leonardo with strong, sure pen strokes, an image which brings to mind both the countenance of the 1501 *Madonna of the Yarnwinder*, commissioned by Florimond Robertet, secretary to Louis XII and Francis I, and a *Flora* or *Colombina* by Francesco Melzi, Leonardo's young pupil in France, who was by then already treating such mythological subjects, including the splendid Berlin *Pomona*. Verification is still needed with regard to another sheet of geometrical studies in the Codex Atlanticus, f. 98 r-a [268 r], to ascertain if it is really French, as it would appear to be, because the delightful drawing of a cat licking itself is unquestionably related to those on the famous sheet of the cats and other animals at Windsor, RL 12363, which is certainly French, and has a note on feline movements intended for the *Book on Painting*.

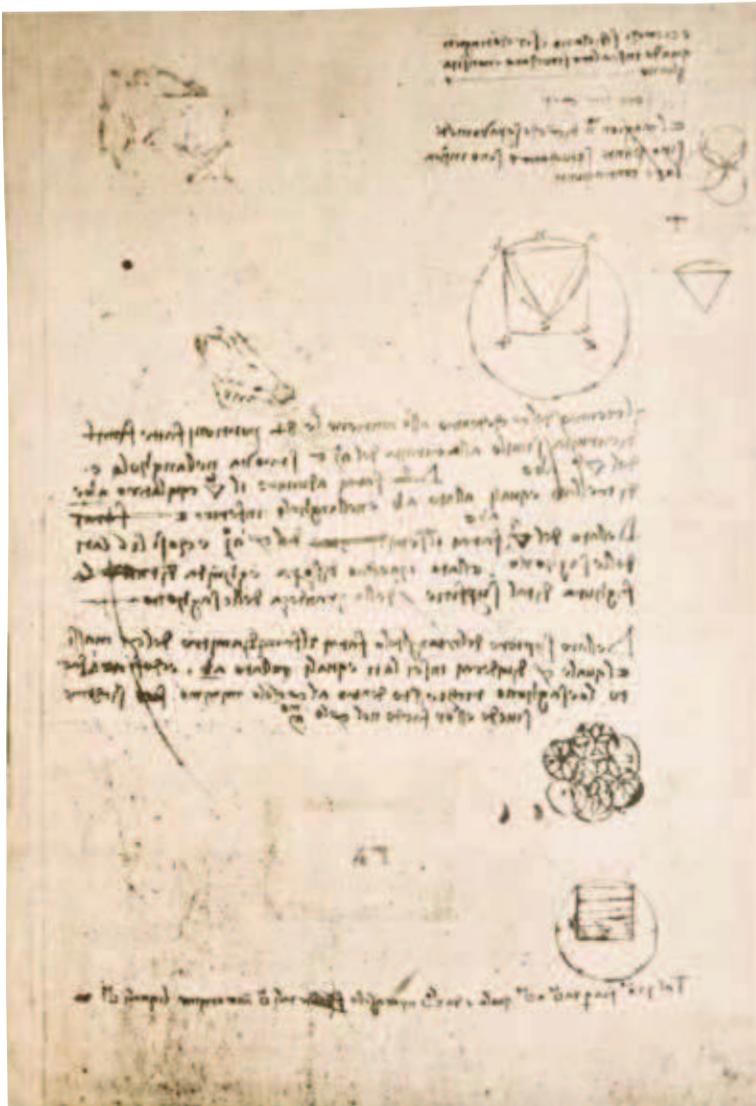
These are just minor clues to what might have been a great outpouring of artistic and scientific activity by Leonardo and his assistants at Clos Lucé, studies for pictures and costumes for



Windsor, RL 12391, c. 1518

theatrical performances, and above all the theme of the Deluge, not in the traditional Biblical sense, but seen from the scientific viewpoint as a supreme manifestation of the forces of nature and their effects on people, animals, plants, and the mighty rock formations of mountains.

It would be quite correct to think that, during his last, brief stay in France, Leonardo's time was fully taken up by the major, bold territorial plans for the Sologne canal system in connection with the grandiose urban project for a new royal residence at Romorantin. This project was embarked upon, then abandoned at his death in 1519, but straight away taken up at Chambord, at least for its conceptual and innovative ideas. It is no longer the case to think that he would keep obsessively involved with the punctilious study of geometry, his idea being possibly to draw up a vast treatise on the transformations of surfaces and volumes, the famous *De ludo geometrico* that could well have contained thousands



Windsor, RL 12670 r, c. 1518



Windsor, RL 12670 v, c. 1518



CA, f. 90 v-b [246 r], c. 1518. Détail ( Photo Luca Beltrami, 1919 )



CA, f. 98 r-a [268 r], c. 1518. Detail of *lunulae* and a cat

Francesco Melzi,  
*Vertunno and Pomona*.  
 Oil on wood,  
 c. 1510–1520.  
 Berlin, National  
 Museum.  
 A study by Melzi  
 in the Leonardesque  
 “red on red” technique  
 held at the Biblioteca  
 Ambrosiana in Milan  
 (Codex Resta, f. 35 bis)  
 contains the small  
 sketch of a Lombard  
 landscape by Leonardo  
 himself,  
 and, on the back,  
 not prepared in red,  
 notes on painting  
 and the flight of birds,  
 also in Leonardo’s hand,  
 which can be dated  
 to 1511 or thereabouts

*Facing page, top:*

Notes on wind  
 and water written  
 by Francesco Melzi,  
 dictated and retouched  
 by Leonardo, who  
 added at the bottom  
 various notes and rough  
 sketches of the Deluge  
 with a reference to  
 the planned *Book on  
 Painting*, plus a note  
 in charcoal about  
 a military operation  
 involving the transport  
 of artillery: “Bombards  
 from Lyon to Venice  
 in the manner that  
 I did at Gradisca  
 in Frigoli [Friuli] and  
 in aun ...” [...]. The  
 same reference to Friuli  
 is on one of the studies  
 for the royal palace  
 at Romorantin  
 in the Codex Arundel,  
 f. 270 v (P 153)

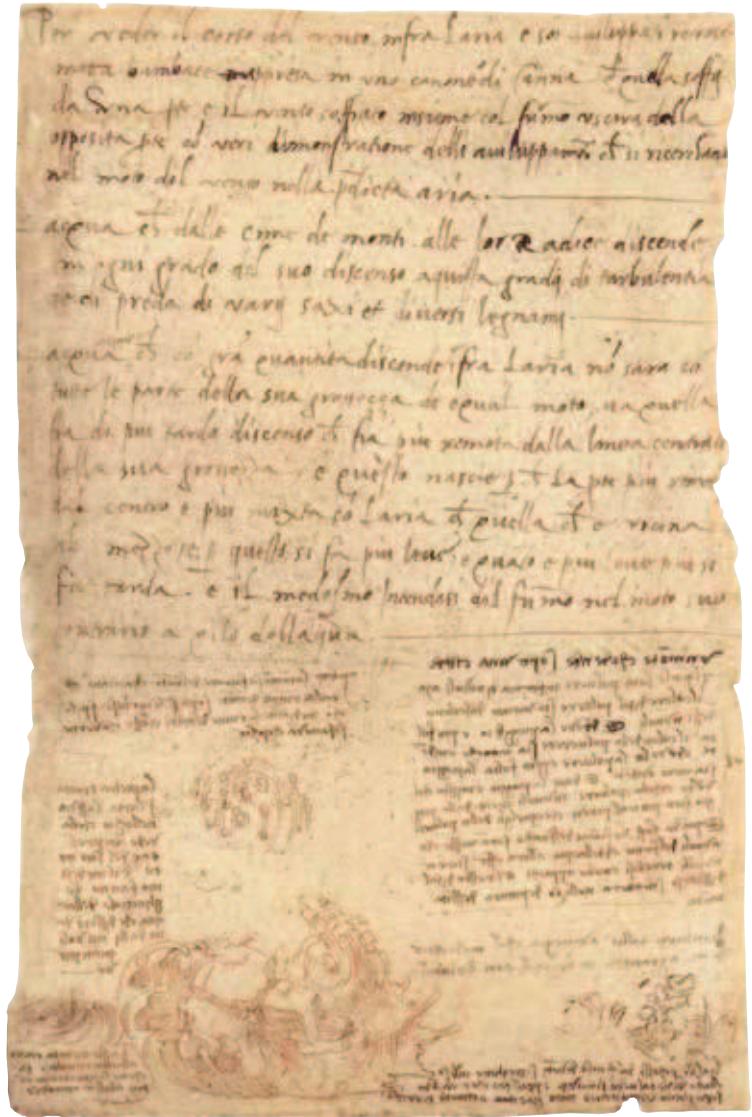
*Facing page, bottom:*

Leonardo,  
 Study for the Deluge,  
 c. 1517–1518,  
 Windsor, RL 12380 r



of variations on the subject of the *lunulae* of Hippocrates, a project already conceived during his earlier stay at the Vatican. This, in any event, is a theme that could possibly be linked to architecture through stereometry, on which he had already prepared a first treatise in 1505 that was to be developed in successive stages of complex elaborations until about 1515, shortly before moving to France. In the welcoming however formal atmosphere of the “palace of the Clu”, where one of the windows of his apartment looked out at the imposing and very impressive castle of Amboise – the very same image that a pupil might have drawn precisely from that vantage point in a drawing now at Windsor – Leonardo, who “no longer paints with the sweetness of touch that was his wont”, as De Beatis observed during the visit made by cardinal Louis of Aragon on 10 October 1517, would never forget that he was a painter; he would continue to busy himself with a project that was particularly dear to him and dating back to the period of his first sojourn in Milan, eighteen years from 1482 to 1500, hallmarked by his impassioned activity not only as an architect and engineer, but also as a painter and sculptor in the service of Ludovico Sforza. On a sheet of the Codex Atlanticus, f. 79 r-c [215 r], which contains various observations on the movements of water and wind, written by Melzi but dictated by Leonardo, who also retouched them with his own hand, one finds at the bottom various rough sketches and notes that are the prelude, so to speak, to the most spectacular drawing of the Deluge, RL 12380, where the rocky crags of a mountain, which explodes as it tumbles onto a town, take on the curious configuration of the petals of an enormous chrysanthemum. The note describing this terrifying terrestrial event ends with an observation that reveals a surprising aspect of his programs during his stay at Clos Lucé: “And when the flames of the fire are mingled with the clouds of smoke and water, then dark and most opaque clouds will be created. **And the rest of this discourse will be dealt with separately in the Book on Painting**”.

Since he started using codices and notebooks, in about 1490, for collecting practical observations and theoretical reflections on his craft as a painter of *istorie* and for portraits, Leonardo had become increasingly persuaded that he had to write a *Book on Painting* to set forth the result of his own studies, first in the field of optics and perspective and then on the human figure from the viewpoint of anatomy and movement. This of course was to become for him a way to devote himself to researching, ever more in depth, each and every aspect of the various manifestations of the forces of nature, following a research schedule already mapped out in an admirably





Fragment cut out from a Leonardo French sheet, Chatsworth, Devonshire Collection, c. 1517-1518

all-encompassing manner by his legendary predecessor Leon Battista Alberti, who had always been, for him, both an inspiration and a model. Hence the idea for a vast treatise no longer confined to the traditional theme of painting, which, again in the very last superhuman efforts of Michelangelo, would in any event still have been the “figured Bible” of scholastic tradition, but painting as philosophy, based on his own definition, and thus founded on the principle of art as a form of creative knowledge. A treatise, in a word, in which to bring together the findings of his experiments carried out over the years, increasingly involved in the praxis and theory of painting, despite the scope and intensity of the many other different involvements which characterized the closely linked phases of his scientific and technological activities after 1500, from Tuscany to Romagna and central Italy, and again in Lombardy, and lastly from Rome to France. As his story unfolded, a complex one not only intellectually speaking but also from a human and poetic standpoint, there was a final stage which would seem to be a resigned decline, but which was, quite to the contrary, a triumphant finale, destined to be thrust forward into the future by the work of a handful of devoted disciples, whose role, in this sense, is still largely unrecognized and underestimated.

It behooves us here to think above all, and once more, of Francesco Melzi who, about 1510, had joined Leonardo as an apprentice to remain at his side as both assistant and interpreter until his last days in France, in 1519. As heir to the impressive bequest of the Master’s manuscripts and drawings, he produced the *Book on Painting* in accordance with a plan, signs of which appear, as it happens, on sheets of Leonardo’s French period, for example those containing the studies for the Deluge. It was probably on the strengths of personal information confided by Melzi that the secretary of

the cardinal of Aragon, having first mentioned “a paralysis” that had struck Leonardo’s right side, could add: “and although the aforementioned master no longer paints with the sweetness of touch that was his wont”, **at the very least he keeps himself busy making drawings and looking after the work of others**”. Here we have a research topic that is yet to be tackled in its entirety, five centuries later. In a future exhibition at Clos Lucé, it will be most appropriate to include the archetype of Leonardo’s *Book on Painting* compiled by Melzi – now kept in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana –, as well as the main versions of its abridged edition, starting with the *editio princeps* published in Paris in 1651 under the title *Traité de la peinture*. A distant echo of Leonardo’s last teachings imparted to his disciples (probably not only Italians) during his sojourn at the “Palace of the Clu” can be perceived in his writings which can now be recognized with certainty as belonging to his last French period. And of course documents may still be found pertaining to the impact of Leonardo’s ideas on the art and culture of the French Renaissance. Suffice it to mention in this connection that in the burial document dated 12 August 1519, sadly lost, but the authenticity of which I have recently been able to prove, the name of “M.e [Messer] Lionard de Vincy” is accompanied by the titles of “noble millanois, I.<sup>er</sup> peintre et ingénieur du Roy, meschanischien d’estat”, with this specific detail: “et ancien directeur de peinture du duc de Milan”, a designation that might be read as another clue to the existence of a school or academy founded by Leonardo in Milan, under the aegis of Ludovico Sforza. There is also an odd allusion to a Leonardo academy in Gerolamo Borsieri’s *Il supplemento della nobiltà di Milano* (Milan, 1619), pp. 57–58, where it appears in connection with the transcript of Leonardo’s lessons on perspective, of French origin, including technological and architectural studies as well: “I myself have already seen in the hands of Guido Mazenta several lessons on perspective, machinery and edifices, written in a French script but in the Italian language, which had already come out of this Academy, and which in fact were attributed to the same Leonardo”. A new clue, which is not exactly documented proof of the existence of the much debated *Achademia Leonardi Vinci*, has recently been brought to the fore by a valuable contribution from Jill Pederson (“Henrico Boscano’s *Isola beata*: New evidence for the Academia Leonardi Vinci in Renaissance Milan”, in *Renaissance Studies*, 2008, pp. 1–26), and it would come as no surprise if it could be proven that a similar teaching program had been pursued by Leonardo in France. This would accordingly explain, *inter alia*, the existence of a book “written in pen and ink copied from one of the great



Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, f. 271 Inf. 12, c. 1517-1518. Fragment cut out from a French sheet

Leonardo”, a book “on the three great arts, sculpture, painting and architecture” which Cellini claimed to have purchased from an impoverished gentleman in France in 1542, and in which, “among other marvelous things that there were by him, I found a discourse on perspective, the finest that has ever been found by another man in the world, because the rules of perspective show just the foreshortening of length and not that of breadth and height [...]”. These few allusions and signs are enough to give us a new idea about Leonardo at Clos Lucé, quite unlike the one based on an entrenched opinion that still gives credence to an alleged state of exile and premature decline of his physical and intellectual faculties. This is a mistaken opinion which will require years of diligent, committed work on the part of the new forces of study and research united in their intention to gather all possible information having to do both with Leonardo’s last activities in France, and with his earlier relations with leading figures in French politics and culture, not only through his manuscripts and drawings, but by way of new archival and library-based explorations in France and elsewhere. There is already one most positive result from this type of research program organized in this volume, where an initial series of catalogue entries and essays forms an undeniable established fact

about what might quite rightly be defined as the beginning of the “count down” for the celebrations of the fifth centennial of Leonardo’s death at Clos Lucé. These celebrations can no longer be merely suited to the occasion, but must include the much-awaited contribution to the knowledge of what has been, and still is, the impact that Leonardo’s thought and work continues to exercise the world over. The last date in Leonardo’s manuscripts, 24 June 1518, with the note that Leonardo was at the “palazzo del Clou”, thus comes across as the most fitting symbol for the program of annual events and encounters whereby Clos Lucé, in cooperation with cultural institutes both in France and throughout the world, intends to promote study and research which, within ten years, are expected to produce spectacular results to be presented in a commemorative exhibition dedicated to every aspect of Leonardo’s activity in France in the last three years of his life. Meanwhile, the special collections of the British Library and of the Gallerie dell’Accademia in Venice have immediately subscribed to this proposal with the exceptional loan of manuscripts and drawings representing Leonardo’s return to the Clos Lucé for the first time in five-hundred years.

NOTE – The news that the twelve volumes of the Codex Atlanticus at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan are in the process of being dismantled to afford access to each sheet, fragment and fascicle is recent. This will facilitate study thereof, by also making them available for possible exhibitions, the way the sheets of the Codex Arundel in the British Library are now available; these are kept unbound in double sheets, just as they had been prepared by Leonardo. The Codex Atlanticus contains many sheets belonging to Leonardo’s last period in France. They are illustrated in the Introduction to my critical and facsimile edition of the Codex Arundel (Florence, 1998), and can be brought together and presented at the major exhibition planned for 2019 at Amboise.



Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, f. 274 Inf. 25, c. 1518. Fragment cut out from an unknown French sheet



Windsor, RL 12470. Fragment cut out from CA, f. 103 r-b [284 r] dated 22 May 1517 (“Ascension day at Amboise”)