

# The French History of Leonardo da Vinci's Paintings

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**D**A TURSO, dove se dimorò per tucte le nove del mese, do poi pranso se andò ad Amboys distante VII leghe [...]. In uno de li borghi el signore [Louis of Aragon] con noi altri andò ad videre messer Lunardo Vinci firentino, vecchio de più de LXX anni [the painter was 65 years old, actually], pictore in la età nostra excellentissimo, quale mostrò ad sua Signoria Illustrissima tre quatri, uno di certa donna firentina, facto di naturale, ad instantia del quondam magnifico Iuliano de Medici, l'altro di san Iohanne Baptista giovane, et uno de la Madonna et del figliolo che stan posti in gremmo de sancta Anna, tucti perfectissimi. Ben vero che da lui per esserli venuta certa paralesi ne la dextra non se ne può expectare più cosa bona. Ha ben facto un creato milanese che lavora assai bene. Et benché il prefato messer Lunardo non possa colorire cum quella dolcezza che soleva, pur serve ad fare disegni et insignare ad altri. Questo gentilhuomo ha composto de notomia tanto particolarmente cum la demonstratione de la pictura si de membri, come de muscoli, nervi, vene, giunture, dintestini et di quanto si può ragionare tanto di corpi de huomini come di donne, de modo non in stato mai anchora facto da altra persona. Il che habbiamo visto oculatamente et già lui disse haver facta notomia de più de XXX corpi tra mascoli et femine de ogni età. He anche cumposto de la natura de l'acque, de diverse machine et altre cose secondo ha referito lui, infinità de volumi, et tucti in lingua vulgare, quali si vengono in luce saranno profigui et molto delectevoli. Esso ultra le spese et stantia da re di Franza ha 1000 scuti l'anno di pensione, et lo creato trecento<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> “After the meal we left Tours, where we had been staying since the beginning of the month, to go to Amboise, a distance of VII leagues [...]. We went to a pay a visit, in one of the nearby towns, to Mister Leonardo da Vinci, a Florentine, more than LXX years old, a most excellent painter of a time, who showed three pictures to our Lordship, one of a certain Florentine lady, painted from the model, at the request of the late Magnificent Guiliano de' Medici, another of St. John the Baptist, young, and one of the Madonna with the child sitting on the knees of St. Anne, all three being of a rare perfection [and thoroughly finished]. It is true that because of a paralysis of his right hand, one can no longer expect masterpieces from him. He has with him a Milanese gentleman, who works very well. And although the aforementioned Leonardo can no longer paint with that gentle touch that was his, he nevertheless continues to draw and teach. This noble spirit has compiled a most unusual book of anatomy, illustrated by means of painting, with the limbs, muscles, nerves and veins, different parts of the intestine, a book which permits the discovery of the human body, man and woman alike, which no other before him had yet done. We saw this book with our own eyes and he told us he had undertaken more than XXX dissections of bodies of men and woman of all ages. He has also written on the nature of water, on various machines, and on so many other things, that he might, after what he told us, use to fill numerous tomes, all in the common tongue, which, if they ever saw the light of day, would be beneficial and most pleasant. He has obtained from the king of France, in addition to his expenses and lodgings, one thousand crowns per annum as a retainer and three hundred for his assistant”. Antonio de Beatis, *Itinerario di Monsignor R.mo et Ill.mo Cardinale de Aragonia per me dom. Antonio de*

The date is 10 October 1517. In his travel journal, Antonio de Beatis recorded the meeting between his patron, Cardinal Louis of Aragon, and Leonardo da Vinci, who, a few months earlier, had set up home in the manor of Cloux. As we well know, this entry is a decisive one. It helps us to gain a clearer picture of the master's daily life in the Loire Valley; it also helps us to deduce that the Italian had brought part of his artistic and scientific equipment to France. The master actually showed his hosts certain paintings – a portrait of a Florentine lady, a young St. John the Baptist, and a Virgin and Child with St. Anne – as well as projects involving machines and anatomical studies. However, as valuable as it may be, this account brings many questions to the fore<sup>2</sup>. One wonders which paintings were thus designated. Given that visitors were probably received in a reception room, and not in the painter's studio, one supposes also that Leonardo had other pictures with him. But which ones? Lastly, one has to wonder about the fate of these paintings. When the master passed away, what became of them? These questions are all the more relevant because we know that a part of the master's works today held in the Musée du Louvre have been in France since the early sixteenth century.

For a long time, by referring to the favours which Leonardo enjoyed at the French court, and the close bonds which, if we are to believe Giorgio Vasari, drew the painter and the sovereign together, it was thought that the paintings had passed from the master's hands to the king's<sup>3</sup>. Nowadays, this thesis is refused. In fact, Leonardo's will makes no mention either of the paintings, or of Francis I. On the other hand, the document stipulates that Francesco Melzi should obtain “li libri che el dicto Testatore ha de presente, et altri Instrumenti et Portracti circa l'arte sua et industria de Pictori”<sup>4</sup>. At that time, the term “portracti”, a transliteration of the French “pourtraits”, meant drawings, and nothing else<sup>5</sup>. It thus referred to the cartoons, sketches and models, i.e. to the working

*Beatis, 1515–1517* (the passages referring to Leonardo have been published by Edoardo Villata, *Leonardo da Vinci. I documenti e le testimonianze contemporanee*, Milan, 1999, n° 314; the French translation is taken from Carlo Vecce, *Léonard de Vinci*, Paris, 2001, pp. 285 and 286).

<sup>2</sup> Laure Fagnart, *Léonard de Vinci en France. Collections et collectionneurs (XV<sup>ème</sup>-XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècles)*, Rome, 2009, pp. 38–41.

<sup>3</sup> This thesis has been upheld in particular by Sylvie Béguin, *Léonard de Vinci au Louvre*, Paris, 1983, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> “The books which the said testator presently has in his possession, and the other instruments and drawings concerning his art and profession as a painter”. Cf. Edoardo Villata, *Leonardo da Vinci. I documenti e le testimonianze contemporanee*, Milan, 1999, no. 323.

<sup>5</sup> Edmond Huguet, *Dictionnaire de langue française du seizième siècle*, Paris, 1961, vol.V, pp. 88–89.

instruments and studio equipment of Leonardo, and not to his pictures. Francesco Melzi was also bequeathed the sums due from the royal treasury, the artist's cash, and his wardrobe. As for Battista de Vilanis, the master's servant, along with Gian Giacomo Caprotti da Orena, his favourite pupil, better known as Salaì, who was probably not at Cloux when the will was actually being drawn up, they received "la metà zoè medieta de uno iardino che ha fora a le mura de Milano, et l'altra metà de epso iardino ad Salay suo servitore nel qual iardino il prefato Salay ha edificata et constructa una casa"<sup>6</sup>. Battista de Vilanis also received "tutti et ciaschaduni mobili et utensili de caxa"<sup>7</sup>. Ordinarily, paintings are considered "mobili de casa" or household furniture, but it is not very likely that Leonardo would have left his pictures to his servant. So, based on the will, Salaì only received one half of the land that Leonardo had been given by Ludovico Sforza in 1498. Given the lengthy relations between master and disciple, such a difference in treatment is a source of endless surprise. The silence surrounding the fate of the pictures and the meagre share of the inheritance left to Salaì could be explained if, at the time when his will was drawn up, Leonardo no longer possessed the paintings that he had brought with him to France. Had the master then sold or given his works to Francis I? Such a scenario is unlikely: sources, as well as the will itself, would have confirmed such a transfer of goods, which is not the case. Did the painter give his paintings to Salaì, either in a final moment of weakness with regard to his disciple, or prior to receiving the letter of naturalization, which was required for him in order to bequeath his goods to whom he saw fit, because it made it possible to sidestep the right of escheat, whereby the possessions of a foreigner dying in France reverted to the crown? This is quite probable.

In 1991, Janice Shell and Grazioso Sironi contributed a new document to the dossier. They published the post-mortem inventory of Salaì, which was drawn up on 21 April 1525, in Milan, for the division of his goods<sup>8</sup>. The document lists pictures whose subjects

unhesitatingly conjure up paintings by Leonardo, that is, a "quadro dicto una Ledde"; un "quadro de Santa Anna"; un "quadro dicto la Honda C"; un "quadro cum uno Santo Johanne Grando"; un "quadro cum uno Santo Hieronimo grando"; un "quadro cum una meza nuda"; ... Even if the name of Leonardo never appears in the document, the considerable sum of the estimates led Janice Shell and Gustavo Sironi to conclude that the highest priced works in the document had to tally with the originals which Leonardo had given to Salaì and which this latter had taken to Milan, after the master's death. For these authors, the numerous Milanese copies of the paintings which Leonardo had with him in France confirm this reconstruction of the facts: these copies cannot have been made unless the originals were in Milan in the 1520s. However, despite the argument involving the high estimates and that involving the Lombardic copies, part of the critical body has reckoned that the references in the Salaì inventory corresponded rather to copies, and not to the originals<sup>9</sup>.

In 1999, Bertrand Jestaz came up with a new reconstruction, which is nowadays the authoritative one<sup>10</sup>. On 13 June 1518, an estimated balance was drawn up for the revenues expected and the payments to be made for the year 1518. In this document, Jean Grolier, treasurer and general collector of finances of the duchy of Milan, made provision "a messire Salay de Pietredorain [literal translation of the Italian formulation Salaì di Pietro d'Oreno], peintre, pour quelques tables de peintures qu'il a baillées au Roy, II<sup>M</sup> VI<sup>C</sup> III l.t III.s. III d"<sup>11</sup>. The term "baillé" should not be misread. It is explained by the fact that one never sold anything to the king, one offered him goods, and this latter remunerated the supplier. The fact remains that the sum of 2,604 livres 3 sols and 4 deniers tournois was astronomical: it was greater than the retainer accorded Leonardo for the whole year 1518. According to Bertrand Jestaz, the amount is so large that it cannot refer to pictures

<sup>6</sup> "Half the garden he owns outside Milan [the vineyard of San Vittore], and the other half of this same garden to Salaì, his servant, on which he has built a house". Cf. Edoardo Villata, *Leonardo da Vinci. I documenti e le testimonianze contemporanee*, Milan, 1999, n°323.

<sup>7</sup> "All the household furniture and utensils". Cf. Edoardo Villata, *Leonardo da Vinci. I documenti e le testimonianze contemporanee*, Milan, 1999, n°323.

<sup>8</sup> Janice Shell and Grazioso Sironi, "Salaì and Leonardo's legacy", in *The Burlington magazine*, CXXXIII, 1991, pp. 95-108. Salaì died in Milan, on 19 January 1524, after a brawl with some French soldiers. His possessions would be divided between his two sisters, Angelina and Lorenziola, described by the document as "quarrelsome, greedy and dishonest".

<sup>9</sup> For example Janet Cox-Rearick, *Chefs-d'œuvre de la Renaissance. La collection de François I<sup>er</sup>*, Anvers, 1995, pp. 138 and 139, and Daniel Arasse, *Léonard de Vinci. Le rythme du monde*, Paris, 1997, p. 519, note 608.

<sup>10</sup> Bertrand Jestaz, "François I<sup>er</sup>, Salaì et les tableaux de Léonard", in *Revue de l'art*, 4, 1999, pp. 68-72. This reconstruction has been accepted in particular by Cécile Scaillièrez, *Léonard de Vinci. La Joconde*, Paris, 2003, pp. 25-26, and Janice Shell, "Salaì and the royal collection at the Louvre", in Pietro C. Marani, Françoise Viatte and Varena Forcione (eds.), *L'opera grafica e la fortuna critica di Leonardo da Vinci*, proceedings of the international convention (Musée du Louvre, 16-17 May 2003), Florence, 2006, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> "To mister Salay de Pietredorain [literal translation of the Italian formulation Salaì di Pietro d'Oreno], painter, for some paintings which he leased to the king, II<sup>M</sup> VI<sup>C</sup> III l.t III.s. III d". Bertrand Jestaz, "François I<sup>er</sup>, Salaì et les tableaux de Léonard", in *Revue de l'art*, 4, 1999, p. 69 and note 10.

painted by Salai, but rather to the works of a recognized painter who, in view of the special relationship between disciple and master, could only be Leonardo.

Although the estimate gives no specific detail about the pictures concerned, Bertrand Jestaz concludes that Francis I acquired originals from Leonardo prior to June 1518, that is during the master's lifetime. This reconstruction of the facts has the merit of shedding light on the reading of the will of 1519. We can better understand why Leonardo's pictures are not mentioned therein: the painter was not in possession of them. Likewise, Salai was not disinherited: the disciple has already received the bulk of the inheritance, probably during a sojourn at the Clos Lucé, early in 1518. The estimated balance also explains the financial ease of Leonardo's disciple, who, in those particular years, had at his disposal more money than was to be expected for a painter who had almost always worked as an assistant. Lastly, it would seem that the works that had been listed in the inventory after Salai's death were overestimated. In December 1531, nine pictures, whose subjects conjure up paintings by Leonardo (among them a "figuram sancte Anne cum figura beate Virginis Marie et figura Dey cum agno", a "Ioconde figuram" and two "imaginem sancti Iohannis"), were given as a pledge for a debt which Salai's sister, Lorenziola Caprotti, had contracted. Now, henceforth, the works were "only" valued at 241 livres whereas, six years earlier, in the inventory of Salai's possessions, four paintings had been evaluated at 2,424 livres<sup>12</sup>. As a result, the argument involving the high estimates is not acceptable to back up the authenticity of the paintings which are mentioned in the inventory of Leonardo's pupil's possessions. It remains to define which are the Leonardo paintings that Francis I purchased in 1518. In all probability, these were pictures that the master had brought to France, that is – in part at least – those which Antonio de Beatis saw at Cloux, to wit, a portrait of a woman (which must probably be associated with a version, from the school, of the *Portrait of a Nude Lady*, which has disappeared), a young St. John the Baptist (the *St. John the Baptist/Bacchus*) and a Virgin and Child with St. Anne (the *St. Anne*). This list needs to be completed by the paintings which are mentioned, in the form of copies, in the post-mortem inventory of Salai's goods. A reading of the sources which make it possible to reconstruct the royal French collection leads in fact to the thought that Francis I also owned the *Mona Lisa*, as

well as a *Leda Standing*, probably a version by a follower, but long passing muster as authentic.

And afterwards? What do we know of the career of Leonardo's works in France<sup>13</sup>? In the early sixteenth century, the royal French collection was kept in the region of Tours, an area which, at that time, enjoyed the advantages of the royal favour. So the *St. Anne* adorned the chapel in one of the residences of Francis I, probably in Blois or Amboise, which were the castles most regularly used by the monarch. In the 1540s, the sovereign's prestigious collection of works was assembled at Fontainebleau. Contrary to what is usually claimed, Leonardo's paintings were not all hung in the apartment of the castle baths, a set of rooms earmarked for physical care in which Francis I had had several easel paintings set up. Among the works by the Italian master, the only ones here for sure were the *St. John the Baptist/Bacchus*, whose poor state of conservation – it being old – might be explained by this move into the warm, dank atmosphere of the baths, and an *Abduction of Proserpina* (whereabouts today unknown), which was then attributed to the Italian. For the other pictures by Leonardo, it is not possible to reasonably advance any such precise place of conservation. The *Mona Lisa* for example was kept, not in the baths, but in another room in the castle, before rejoining, in the 1600s, the picture room. For more than a century and a half, works of Leonardo and those then attributed to him, would be held here. Thus, in 1651, when the first printed edition of Leonardo's *Trattato della pittura* appeared in Paris, the famous portrait in the Louvre was still in that room, which foreshadows our contemporary museums, because it presented the king's pictures without any decorative intent. Let us note that the French version of the treatise, which also appeared in Paris in 1651, was illustrated by the first engraved copy of the *Mona Lisa*: only Lisa's bust was reproduced and her famous smile was transformed into a pout. At the beginning of Louis XIV's reign, at the time when Anne of Austria and Mazarin assumed the government of the realm, the *Mona Lisa* was hung in the gilded cabinet in Anne of Austria's bedchamber, as was the *St. Anne*, which, after spending many years in the Tours region, was dispatched in 1646 to Fontainebleau, after a possible detour by way of the Tuileries. At the same moment, paintings attributed to Leonardo vanished: the *Abduction of Proserpina* was no longer inventoried after 1644, and the *Leda Standing* was no longer listed after 1692.

<sup>12</sup> Edoardo Villata, *Leonardo da Vinci. I documenti e le testimonianze contemporanee*, Milan, 1999, n° 347 and 348.

<sup>13</sup> Laure Fagnart, *Léonard de Vinci en France. Collections et collectionneurs (XI<sup>ème</sup>-XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècles)*, Rome, 2009, pp. 53-148.

In 1665-1666, when the personal reign of Louis XIV had just started, several paintings by Leonardo were sent to Paris, by the same token as other masterpieces of the French royal collection. The refurbishment of Louis XIV's picture room was then temporary: the pictures passed from the Louvre to the Gallery of the Ambassadors in the Tuileries. In the period 1690-1695, the Italian artist's paintings, and those attributed to him, were transferred to Versailles. They did not occupy any outstanding place there: the first installations of pictures at Versailles, which were carried out in 1673, with pride of place given to the works of Raphael and Caravaggio, presented no work by the Italian, and it was not until the later changes made to these rooms that the master's paintings rejoined the Sun King's residence. In addition, when Leonardo's

works, or those so claimed as such, were finally hung in the rooms reserved for the exhibition of the pictures in Louis XIV's Cabinet (the *Mona Lisa* was thus hung in the small gallery of the king's apartment, i.e. one of the most prestigious rooms of Louis XIV's collection), it was their format which seemed to determine how they were hung. Lastly, with the exception of the *St. John the Baptist/Bacchus* and the *St. Anne*, which once adorned the castle at Meudon, most of works by Leonardo, or then considered as such, were sent to the Surintendance, i.e. to the castle reserves. At the end of the eighteenth century, Leonardo's works left the Château de Versailles for the Museum central des arts, the future Musée du Louvre, an exhibition place which they would thenceforth only ever leave on rare occasions.



The very first reproduction of the Mona Lisa in the French edition of the *Traité de la peinture* by Leonardo da Vinci in 1651