

Eppur si muove

Leonardo

Experience a Masterpiece

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Robin Richmond, November 8, 2019

When Galileo Galilei was put on trial by the Inquisition in 1633 for asserting that the earth moves around the sun, defying Scripture, he was forced to recant his heretical view. But he was heard murmuring after his trial “*eppur si muove*” (and yet it does move). Leonardo da Vinci, as great a scientist as Galileo, was born in the previous generation, and unlike Galileo, he never bowed to ecclesiastical pressure. This show presents us with a fine expression of personal integrity and intellectual freedom of expression.

He would have loved this exhibition. Born in the right place but at the wrong time, his austere ghostly presence and his dark materials haunt this set of rooms at the National Gallery. He had a Theory of Everything and would have been utterly thrilled at the panoply of scientific techniques used here to analyse one - and only one painting. It's a delightful thought experiment to imagine him in front of an infra-red reflectography machine, or a device to measure macro x-ray fluorescence, or a sophisticated tool that renders hyperspectral imaging. It's all too beguiling to think of him in front of a computer. His astonishment at the digital recreation of his work in this show is quite a thought.

On the 500th anniversary of his death, the National Gallery celebrates him as a painter, but much more than that, it celebrates its scientific department, a section of the museum that is all too often ignored. Conservation and restoration are the quiet, unsung heroes of art - discreet companions to the great art on museum walls. We are allowed into the lab. We see what the painting looked like during its construction. Its afterthoughts. Its thinking and re-thinking in both line and tone. It



Leonardo da Vinci, The Virgin with the Infant St. John the Baptist Adoring the Christ Child Accompanied by an Angel (The Virgin of the Rocks), c. 1491/2 - 9 and 1506 -8.

is reassuring indeed that such a great artist is always unafraid of changing their mind. We are privy here to Leonardo's thoughts.

The show examines in great detail one of its stellar masterpieces, the *Virgin of the Rocks*, which was acquired by the Gallery from the Earl of Suffolk in 1880, and which is a core painting in the collection. It is one of two versions Leonardo made of the subject, the other being in the Louvre. It was begun in 1501 and not finished for 25 years, when Leonardo, poor, poor man, was finally paid. A familiar story. Like so many artist's patrons before and after him, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin in Milan was an exigent holder of the purse strings, and rejected the work for what it deemed to be its heretical, far too even-minded emphasis on the Baptist child, the heavenly angel and the infant Christ. Like Galileo, born over a hundred years later, Leonardo was a free thinker, not given to accepted normative ideas and conventional iconography, and he invariably rejected orthodoxy in favour of what he personally deemed truthful. One of my favourite examples of his "heresies" is very apposite right now. Whereas the Holy Church took the discovery of seashells on mountain tops to be evidence of the Biblical Flood, Leonardo speculates in his notebooks that the land must at one time have been a seabed. Greta Thunberg would surely have had an advocate in Leonardo da Vinci.

It is nevertheless a thin show. Too over-designed. One enters into a very big and confusing space filled with mirrored letter boxes reflecting his storied mirror writings. Sounds of a Dolomitic mountain stream are meant to evoke the rocks of the Italian Alps projected behind the boxes. It veers steeply towards the trite. The next room is empty save for digital projections of the building of San Francesco Grande, home to the Confraternity, and dismantled in 1576. There are some side rooms with rather unconvincing installations designed to illustrate *chiaroscuro* (light and shade) and *sfumato* (smudged shadows). There is a mock-up of the conservators' studio, meant to evoke the arcana of Leonardo's own work space. This does not work. Reverential, ecclesiastical music plays in the background of the darkened galleries, designed to hush us into worship of this great man. We do not need this. Leonardo is bigger than this and doesn't need the pomp and circumstance.

The painting itself, in the last room before you exit through the gift shop (imagine how many Virgin of the Rocks Christmas cards will end up in all our recycling bins) is the most wonderful fusion of art and science. The painting in its gilded frame is set into a continuously evolving digitally rendered altarpiece, where raw wood evolves into sculpture, and blank empty plinths become veined marble. It's wonderful.

I have to come clean here. I don't like this painting and never have. I find it dark, contrived, metallic, and austere. But it is a privilege to look inside the work and marvel at the evolution of what is a masterpiece. The show aims to break down the apartheid of art and science. Leonardo's work always does this.

But the sun didn't move for me.