RECENSIONI

La Sainte Anne, *l'ultime chef-d'oeuvre de Léonard da Vinci*

Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Louvre, 29 March - 25 June 2012, under the direction of Vincent Delieuvin

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The Louvre's exhibition was inspired by the cleaning and restoration of Leonardo's *Virgin, Child and Saint Anne* – a restoration that, although it caused some controversy, appeared exemplary and wholly successful; it confirmed, incidentally, the analysis of the painting put forward half-a-century ago in a brilliant article by John Shearman, who concluded that in it Leonardo was trying to create a daylight exterior in wich figures and setting were fully coordinated[1].

Such an event might have become no more than an elongated *dossier* display, informative but limited. Instead it proved to be one of the most effectively ambitious and enlightening exhibitions yet devoted to Leonardo. It was an admirable complement to the National Gallery's show: historically in that it included a great deal of material on Leonardo's second Milanese period; intellectually in that it addressed with unprecedented concentration Leonardo's creative processes and their repercussions. The curator responsible, Vincent Delieuvin, organised a complex and heterogeneous body of material with exemplary clarity, a task that must have cost him an enormous expenditure of intellectual and physical energy. But while one is never in doubt about what Delieuvin believes, he is unassertive in expressing his views and punctilious in considering those of others.

The exhibition was divided into four main sections. The first was a brief but cogent survey of some earlier – and a few later – treatments of the theme of the Virgin, Child and Saint Anne. The second was a comprehensive study of Leonardo's versions of the subject, their number, preparation, execution, development and offshoots. The fourth looked at his compositions' influence, mostly in Florence and Milan, including even the *Pitti tondo* as an example of this – no doubt to the annoyance of Michelangelo's shade. The third section grouped together a number of other works by Leonardo or copies after them, mainly from the Louvre: strictly speaking, this stood a little outside the exhibition's trajectory but it provided a welcome breathing space and a good opportunity to expand knowledge of, say, the half-length *Saint John/Angel Annunciate* composition and to look closely at the cartoon for his never-executed portrait of *Isabella d'Este* (I regret only that the Ashmolean replica was not put beside it). Best of all it included the Prado *Mona Lisa* fully restored and exhibited for the first time and the subject of a lucid catalogue entry (no. 77) by Ana González Mozo.

The spine of the exhibition was the second section which addressed the cognate issues of Leonardo's London cartoon of the *Virgin and Saint Anne with the Child and Saint John* and his two versions of the *Virgin and Saint Anne with the Child and the Lamb*. In Delieuvin's view Leonardo's first treatment of the subject was the four-figure London cartoon, which he would have drawn in 1500, immediately on his return to Florence. Leonardo then turned to the formally related but iconographically modified three-figure subject of the *Virgin and Saint Anne with the Child and the Lamb*, the subject of the cartoon that he executed in the church of the Annunziata and displayed to the public for two days; it was this now lost cartoon that was described by Fra Pietro da Novellara in a letter to Isabella d'Este of 3 April 1501. Soon thereafter, Leonardo developed this subject in a different way in another cartoon, which he had transferred to the Louvre panel at sometime before October 1503 when an annotation in a volume of Cicero by Agostino Vespucci – an astonishing and unpredictable documentary discovery of 2005 – records the *Saint Anne* (and the *Mona Lisa*) as underway. Delieuvin shows that the cartoon for the Louvre painting, also now lost, was copied – perhaps more accurate to say replicated – in at least two others: probably the earlier, once owned by Padre Resta, was lost at Budapest during the Second World War but is recorded in photographs (Cat. 25); the second, now in Turin (Cat. 28), is widely attributed to Lanino and was the basis for a painting also generally given to him (Cat. 29) and dated to the 1540s.

Leonardo's new version of the *Virgin, Child and Saint Anne* group, more than the Annunziata cartoon, had a considerable effect in Florence, perhaps most immediately in Raphael's *Madonna del Prato* of 1505. In a sequence of brilliant demonstrations, Delieuvin shows that Leonardo worked on the Louvre panel from then until his death and, while retaining the same basic arrangement, repeatedly and successively modified the figures' draperies and coiffures, both in preparatory drawings made over a wide span of years and on the panel itself. Leonardo contemplated and made peripheral changes to his painting on his

[1] J. Shearman, *Leonardo's Colour and Chiaroscuro*, in «Zeitschrift fur Kunstgeschichte», XXV (1962/1), pp. 13-47.

return to Milan, perhaps during his stay in Rome, and after his final move to France; Clayton's recognition that some of the drawings connected with the Louvre painting – and which had traditionally been grouped together as its starting point – were on paper bearing French watermarks fits neatly with Delieuvin reconstruction of the painting's internal chronology. Delieuvin shows that these drawings were adjustments to forms that had already been devised and that they should be seen as a series of commentaries and improvements, obsessive re-workings of lines of verse to wring out of them further beauties of expression. Leonardo's progress was not even but it essentially followed two apparently opposed paths, that of decoration and that of simplification. The costumes, especially that of the Virgin, became more transparent delicate and voluptuous in their outer layers but, simultaneously, more homogeneous colouristically.

What Delieuvin also makes clear is that Leonardo, like Titian at more or less at the same time, but for different reasons, allowed – no doubt encouraged – pupils and followers to make drawings and painting based on the intermediate stages of his work; some of these versions were themselves modified in response to Leonardo's executed or planned modifications of his original, either directly on its surface, or proposed in drawings. Delieuvin's command of very varied material – drawings by Leonardo, copies of existing and lost paintings and drawings by others, copies and echoes of stages in the preparation of the final painting and associated works – is masterly and, I felt, wholly convincing. In documenting this parallel production Delieuvin has, as it were, magnetised a mass of visual artefacts previously revolving in an inchoate limbo. He has introduced a new level of precision into the study of copies, variants and derivations, many of which now have taken on a much enhanced evidential, and – in a number of cases – artistic value. This material also changes a common perception of Leonardo: rather than an isolated genius with a few weak assistants on the one hand, or an organiser of a commercial bottega on the other, he emerges as an intellectual grandee, a Nobel prize-winning professor, surrounded by research assistants, graduate trainees whose projects he suggests and whose work he supervises, and making use of occasional independent collaborators. And we are also provided with a deeper insight into Leonardo's personality: the Louvre painting, as Delieuvin emphasises, was never finished and while Leonardo was always a fitful worker, he does seem to have been particularly reluctant to bring the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* to a conclusion. One need not accept Freud's analysis in its totality to feel that the vision of the two mothers had for Leonardo a profound resonance that he might not have been able to explain: of all his paintings, it seems to have been the one that Leonardo loved most (art-historians too rarely speak of love) and from which he could not separate...

Among the most interesting and important of Delieuvin's re-appraisals is the version of the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* in Los Angeles (Cat. 50), once in San Celso, whose execution he dates 1508-12; it seems virtually certain that this is by Salaì, to whom it was traditionally given, although Delieuvin does not press the attribution. The very high valuation of the paintings found in Salaì's workshop after his death, now known to be Salaì's own and not ones inherited from Leonardo (see Cats. 96-97), demonstrates that he was perceived to be an artist of real stature. Among Delieuvin's other recoveries are a privately owned version, with a varied landscape, once in the Yarborough Collection (Cat. 52), which is also of high quality, and presumably by another close associate of the master.

Delieuvin's analysis is impeccable and it would be very difficult to fault his reconstruction of stages and events either as a whole or in detail. Nevertheless, a few problems nag. One is that the London cartoon seems hyper-sophisticated and looser and more atmospheric in its drawing-style that anything we know of by Leonardo before or around 1500. And although Delieuvin cites some traces of its influence in Florence, they are tenuous and not wholly secure. It was not until early in second decade that a direct quote is found – that of the pose of the Virgin in Raphael's *Madonna di Foligno* and only after this time that it can be shown to have had some influence in Milan, where it was the basis for a painting by Bernardino Luini (Cat. 100). The possibility that the London cartoon might be a post-Florentine invention was first suggested by Popham and Pouncey –most sober and least self-promoting of scholars – and Delieuvin discusses their view with the respect and care that they – and it – deserve. Undogmatically, he comes down in favour of an early date, but the matter remains ajar and one can only hope that some technique may be devised to examine – and identify – the watermark(s) of the sheets of paper of which the London cartoon is composed.

Another problem is that posed by the appearance of Leonardo's Annunziata cartoon, thought to be identical with that used for the Louvre painting until Suida argued that it was in fact a different design, reflected in two paintings by the brothers Brescianino, which conform more closely to Fra Pietro's description; Suida's suggestion enabled one plausible preparatory study for the cartoon to be identified, the head of Saint Anne, in Windsor (Cat. 19), which although probably reworked seems substantially genuine. Furthermore, the Child's interchange with the Lamb, differently arranged from that in the Louvre version, is echoed – if not precisely copied – in a number of early paintings. But what counted against a full acceptance of the painted panels as accurate records of what Leonardo devised are the stiffness of the poses and the simplicity of the drapery. They must rather be seen as interpretations of it, retrospective by a quarter century or more and inflected in style by Florentine painting of the early 1520s. In this context it is a pity that the controversial drawing published some years ago by Pedretti was not included in the exhibition (although it is illustrated as fig. 52 and well discussed by Delieuvin); it does provide a much more convincing account of how the Annunziata cartoon might have looked, with effectively responsive movements, looser and more inventive drapery and a pentimento in the Child's head: all correspond better to what one might imagine of a cartoon. Whatever its precise status, the drawing, as Kemp and others have argued, does

seem to have a better claim than the Brescianinos to record what Leonardo devised. Common both to this drawing and to the two paintings is that in all three light falls from the left: in principle, therefore, it would seem that the National Gallery Cartoon and the Louvre painting were not conceived for the same project – whatever that was – as the Annunziata cartoon, for in both light falls from the right.

One point that I would make rather more strongly than before, is that between the Annunziata cartoon and the cartoon of the Louvre painting Leonardo must have re-considered Donatello's *Virgin of the Clouds*: the pose of the Virgin in the Louvre painting, with her right leg extended diagonally across the field from buttock through thigh and calf to her exposed foot, can hardly be independent of Donatello's relief. Delieuvin notes this link but does not, in my view, take it sufficiently seriously. Leonardo's return to Florence returned him to an environment much more inventive and competitive than that of Milan: one has only to think of Michelangelo, whose hostility to Leonardo was undisguised, despite his debts to the older man, but whose work was not without its reflex effect. But Leonardo also came once more into contact with the great tradition of Masaccio, of Filippo Lippi, of Desiderio, whom he had greatly admired in his youth and, above all the most variedly inventive of modern sculptors, Donatello the study of whose work he recommended to the young Bandinelli. Leonardo continued to think about Donatello: in one of the intermediary stages of his design, that represented in Cats. 50-53, he returned to the *Virgin of the Clouds* for the fall of drapery over the Virgin's hip. In the second version of the *Saint Anne*, Leonardo thus fused sculpture in the round with sculpture in relief; flattening the form of the Virgin so that she moves across the surface would have been a fine riposte to Michelangelo who did the opposite in the *Doni tondo*.

There were no more than a few points at which I found myself querying Delieuvin's views. Three drawings displayed at the beginning of the exhibition, (Cats. 14-16) showing the Child holding a lamb, seemed to me not to be directly related to the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, although certainly contemporary with it. My guess is that they were made in preparation for a self-sufficient composition of the Christ Child and the Infant Baptist, and, indeed, Delieuvin has found one which he reproduces (Fig.47), but does not discuss – perhaps he came across it only at the last moment. Probably Leonardo prepared this composition for an associate or pupil to paint, rather than for his own execution. It may have had some circulation in Florence for different aspects of the little Saint John are echoed in Raphael's preliminary drawings for the *Madonna del Prato* and the *Belle Jardinière*. And as a meeting of the two children this design would have been a natural prequel to Leonardo's popular and much replicated composition of c.1490 of the *Christ Child and Saint John Embracing*, which, too, may never have been painted by Leonardo himself. One further consequence of Leonardo's return to his native city in 1500 was to prompt him to reconsider his own earlier work and the motif of the Child protecting the Lamb while the Baptist advances towards him, reprises thematically a composition of the kneeling Virgin with her arms spread out over the two children. This is recorded in several copies of which the best known are known are in the Uffizi (Cat. 83) and the Ashmolean. Delieuvin, a propos of the former, suggests that it might be an assemblage of Leonardesque motifs by Llanos or Yañez but, in a rare moment of potential contradiction, concedes that it might indeed record a work by Leonardo. His afterthought is surely correct. My strong impression is that the panels in the Uffizi and the Ashmolean are copies of a lost painting by Leonardo done in Florence, c.1480, shortly before he moved to Milan and closely related to – perhaps developed from – the famous drawing in the Metropolitan Museum. The pose of the Child, holding the Lamb protectively against the young Saint John who advances with a goldfinch in his hand, is close to that of works of Verrocchio and his circle in the 1470s – see for example the cartoon in the Fitzwilliam Museum Inv. 2260 – and the Child in the *Benois Madonna* – and the types of the Children are also similar[2]. The Virgin is very similar to the Virgin in the Louvre version of the *Virgin of the Rocks* and the landscape recalls Perugino's work of the 1480s as much as that of Raphael after 1500. That Leonardo should have reconsidered the theme some twenty years later, focusing just on the children, is perfectly understandable. The colour range and forms of the Uffizi panel, incidentally, do not look much like the work of either of Leonardo's Spanish followers nor, indeed, like those of Leonardo, c. 1500.

Only one other detail strikes me. The exhibition includes an interesting drawing from the Louvre (Cat. 27; Inv. 2561) which shows the cartoon phase of the Louvre panel. It bears an inscription relating it to the lost Budapest cartoon which was then owned by Giorgio Bonola and on the basis of this inscription Delieuvin dates the drawing to the later 17th century. To my eye it looks quite unlike a drawing of that period and I suspect that the inscription was an addition to an old sheet. Without any contrary indication I should have placed it relatively early in the sixteenth century and might even have risked suggesting that it was after a lost sketch copy by Raphael of Leonardo's design: there is some resemblance in handling to what must also be a copy after a lost Raphael sketch – but in this case one for an original composition – by Pellegrino da Modena (Munich, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Inv 2512 recto).

[2] Variously attributed (see D. SCRASE, *Italian Drawings at the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge*, Cambridge 2011, p. 38 as Fra Bartolommeo) but most likely by Verrocchio.