ART

Leonardo da Vinci: Painter of Movement

The impact of Leonardo's artwork on us today reproduces an effect which he himself experienced when looking at the dark opening of a grotto, and which he described in the following way:

"After a long moment, two strong feelings overwhelmed me: fear and desire. Fear of the dark menacing grotto, but desire to see if didn't enclose some extraordinary marvel" (Codex Arundel, 155r). This fear "to enter" in the mind of Leonardo emanates from the extraordinary sense of motion which many of his works express, and have become like his signature. It is this powerful impression which harasses our sense-certainty, because it threatens to plunge us suddenly "into a land from which no one returns," i.e., to confront us with our own creativity,— and very often, it is a piece of land barely worked.

But, where did his "vision" of movement came from? Through his readings of Diogenes Laertius, Leonardo might have been inspired by the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, for whom "movement creates all the harmony of the world."

During his first Milanese period, by deciphering Latin texts with the aid of Piero della Francesca's pupil Fra Luca Pacioli, Leonardo might have been introduced to the works of Nicolaus of Cusa.

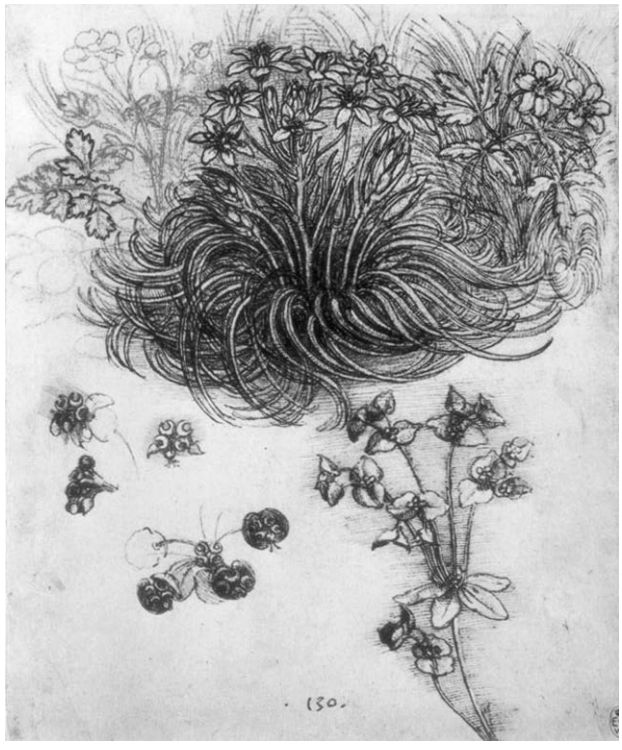
For Cusa, the world is nothing but the development (unfolding) ("ex-plicatio") of the power of envelopment (wrapping-up) ("com-plicatio") of a God, Who is eternity and embraces the succession of all the instants of time. For Cusa, "complicatio" and "explicatio" coincide in one single movement, which is the passing from potential to action, from unity to multiplicity.

Starting from this metaphysical comprehension of movement, Leonardo defined a far-reaching concept of time and space:

"Describe the nature of time as distinguished from the geometrical definitions. The point has no part; a line is the transit of a point; points are the boundaries of a line. An instant has no time. Time is made by the movement of the instant, and instants are the boundaries of time" (Codex Arundel, 176r).

He says, further, "A point is that which has no center. It has neither breadth, length, nor depth. A line is a length produced by the movement of a point, and its extremities are points. It has neither breadth nor depth. A surface is an extension made by the transverse movement of a line, and its extremities are lines. (A surface has no depth.) A body is a quantity formed by the lateral of a surface and its boundaries are surfaces" (Codex Arundel, 159v).

But especially, his optimistic love for the dynamism of a perpetually changing, harmonic world would nourish Leonardo's extremely daring analogical intuitions and hypotheses, which today we call "the work of a genius." For example, he states: "The movement of water within water proceeds like that of



www.clipart.com

FIGURE 1. *Leonardo da Vinci, "Star of Bethlehem," c. 1506.*

FIGURE 2. *"Nike Unbinding Her Sandal," Acropolis, Athens, c. 410-407 B.C.*

FIGURE 3. *"Nike of Paionios," c. 420 B.C.*

FIGURE 4. *"Charioteer," Delphi, c. 475 B.C.*

air within air" (Codex Atlanticus, 116r).

Many of you might have had the occasion to admire the beautiful studies of eddies of water, those vortices sometimes stupidly identified as the "symbolical form" of his worldview. One should note that a spiral vortex represents exactly the type of "stable movement" which caught Leonardo's attention, precisely because it represents a higher idea of harmony, rather than a form as such! Leonardo catches that spiral action in the flight of birds, in the pathway of the blood running through the valves of the aorta, or in the forms of certain plants, such as the "Star of Bethlehem" [SEE Figure 1]. Not forgetting the movements of dancers, or the cascades of falling, curly hair.

In this, the aesthetical act becomes a feisty encounter, in which intellectual approach and poetical intuition meet science and art. Each observation becomes a unique opportunity to unravel and communicate the thrill of the "primal movement," enabling the artist "to render visible the invisible." Concentrated on the forms of movement and the movement of forms, the painter becomes a "morphologist," the scientist who pins down graphically the never-ending transitions, the "rhythms" or "mutations," of movement, as he calls them. For example, a simple anatomical study becomes an eight-phased "kinetic" decomposition of a double movement: the one of a rising arm with a rotating torso.

But, beyond the movement of bodies, Leonardo tries to express what he calls "immaterial movements," which he arranges in five categories. The first "is called temporal, because it deals exclusively with the movement of time, and embraces all the others." The others are the propagation of images by light, those of sound and odors, the movement of the "spirit," and the movement that animates "the life of things" (Codex Atlanticus, 203v-a). In love with and aware of the infinite richness of the universe, Leonardo is unsatisfied with simple mathematical rules, or linear perspective, against which he revolts.

How then paint this movement, this breath of life? Formally, it seems totally impossible, since as soon one catches a form, life escapes from it, as from a butterfly pinned to a little cushion! To succeed, sculptors, poets, and painters have to create an irony, an ambiguity that defines an in-betweenness, which Lyndon LaRouche has defined as "mid-motion." If you analyze a series of fast shots of a running horse, most of those shots will show you a horse that appears to be collapsing. So, don't look at the idea of mid-motion as a sequence of a linear movements, because it is only those precise moments where motion is at a point of inflexion, which evoke in our mind the maximum potential action.

Therefore, I propose to refine even more that concept, by adding the word "change," to make it "mid-motion-*change*": the point of inflexion where an infinity of preferably unforeseeable movements appear as a credible reality to the puzzled viewer, who is trying to find out what *is going to happen*. And that is the great secret of the best of Greek sculpture, as we see, for example, in the victory goddess representation, "Nike Unbinding Her Sandal" [SEE Figure 2, and front cover, this issue], or the Nike statue moving freely in air, like the

one presently at the Bonn exhibit on the Greek Classics, where we're not able to see whether she's going up or down, right or left [SEE Figure 3]. It shows us clearly how to use the motion of the body to express the motion of the soul.

But, if we now look at the "Charioteer of Delphi" [SEE Figure 4], we see that, although the figure looks static, it is completely "mid-motion-change," because it is the single instant before the charioteer sets the horse into motion to run the race, as you can read in the expression of his eyes. So, don't get fooled by the forms, but look instead to the "idea."

So, the isochronical nature of sculpture and painting obliges the artist to use a supplementary trick: by placing several images in analogy, opposition, or parallelism, the artist presents a "metaphorical paradox," which forces the mind of the viewer to reconstruct the unity of movement that makes the whole coherent.

The discovery of that "idea," as a result of the movement of our mind, enables us to meet, that is, to enter into a dialogue, with the creative spark of the artist and to accept the gift he has given us.

'Saint Jerome'

Let us look together at Leonardo's "Saint Jerome," which hangs in the Vatican [SEE Figure 5]. To express the powerful battle of Jerome facing temptation in the desert, the artist has painted him kneeling in prayer. But this tranquility of prayer has been brutally disrupted by the saint's interior struggle.

The dramatic movement of his weak body is organized by two poles of energy: his left hand deploys a gracious but effortless gesture, which underscores the expression of the face, inclined to God's will. Meanwhile, at the complete opposite, his right arm is about to violently strike a stone against the pectorals of his chest, whose muscle fibers are in extreme tension.

The living force we experience derives from the stark opposition of these two radically different movements. Without the tension of the one, there is no grace in the other.

FIGURE 5. *Leonardo da Vinci, "St. Jerome," c. 1483.*

This paradox acquires a supplementary dimension, thanks to the lion. In general, the lion was usually depicted in paintings as the incarnation of domesticated force, since Jerome pulled a thorn out of its paw, making it into a friend. Here, the story is different. Confronted with Jerome's intense struggle against the bestiality of earthly temptation, the lion feels threatened; he rises up, roars, turns his head around, and is at the point of running away, since he might be hit by the stone! One has to note here, that Jerome is right in the middle of interior battle, in between dropping the fight, or winning it, which throws another challenge to the viewer.

The 'Mona Lisa'

To develop the concept of "immaterial movement," one cannot escape dealing with the "Mona Lisa," which he completed in 1505 [SEE Figure 6]. This painting became, not only the symbol of Leonardo, but of Classical art itself.

Now, up to the early 1970's, every modern painter had to engage himself in a symbolic rape of the "Mona Lisa,"

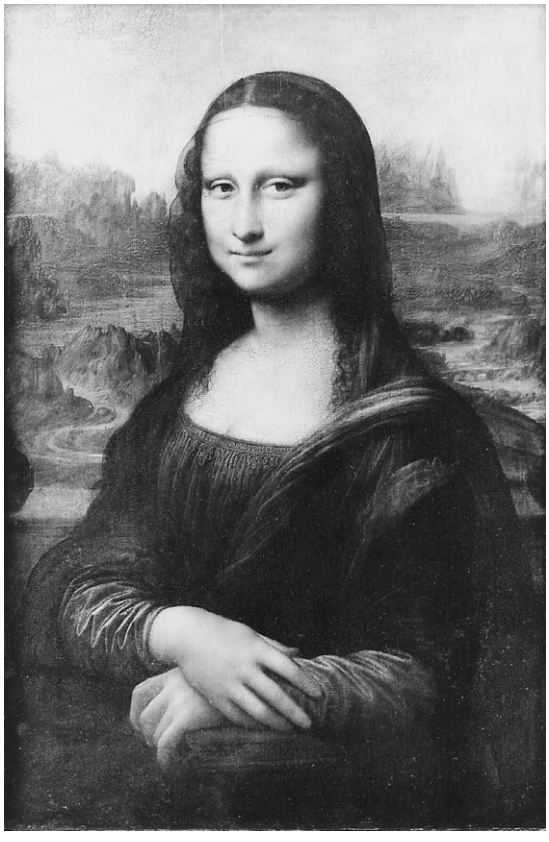


FIGURE 6. *Leonardo da Vinci, "Mona Lisa," completed 1505.*

in order to get accepted as an artist. For this reason, it has become very difficult to talk about this painting, because its image is so familiar.

But, can you imagine a greater difficulty, than to express the "movement of the soul," by having a sitting model almost totally unmoved by muscular agitation? A drawing done by Raphael from Leonardo's first outline, gives us an idea of the initial concept, which Leonardo changed over several years [SEE Figure 7]. The "Ginevra de' Benci" style of portrait of 1474 [SEE Figure 8], was superseded thirty years later, by a face filled with enigmatical paradoxes: one side of the mouth smiles, the other less so; one eye is serious, the other is amused; one eye looks at you, the other sees beyond you; etc. But, that is just the start. Contrary to the initial outline, the balcony of the loggia is now lowered, and the perspective has been developed into incredible dimensions, with a whole series of unequal horizons that end up being lower on the left, and higher on the right.

Leonardo provokes our minds here, by forcing us to reflect on the mobility of our eyeballs. Don't we shape perspective with our brains when we point these outposts of our brain, the eyes, in any direction? Several tricky explanations have been cooked up to "explain away" this paradoxical dimension of the landscape.

For example, it is said that during the time he was conceiving the painting, Leonardo was working on changing the path of the Arno River, which in prehistoric times possessed two mountain lakes that later disappeared due to erosion. So, here they are! And Mona Lisa becomes some mother-earth goddess charged with regulating the water; that is, the fertility of the earth. Another "state of denial" has come from a smart fellow who said that there is no problem, no ambiguity, so don't worry: Mona Lisa's torso is hiding a huge dam of Leonardo's invention, which is leveling the water from one basin to the other!

We get a far more interesting lead by looking at some Chinese paintings, like one called "Festival to Bring Rain" of

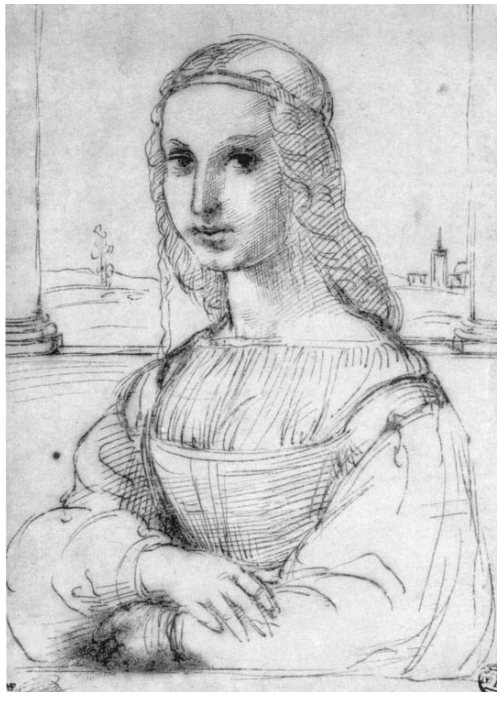


FIGURE 7. *Raphael Sanzio, "Drawing after the Mona Lisa."*

www.clipart.com

FIGURE 8. *Leonardo da Vinci, "Ginevra de' Benci," c. 1474-1478.*

impose Roman art standards as the "party line," obliging artists to conform, and to use muscular masses as visual support for literary allegories and symbolical fantasies, in opposition to the true principle of metaphor.

While Leonardo never openly criticized this current, it is hard not to think of the Sistine Chapel, when one reads, "do not give an exaggerated volume to all the muscles of the figures," since "you will more succeed in representing a bag of walnuts than a human figure" (Codex Madrid II, 128r).

The good news is, to realize that Leonardo painted only about thirty paintings, of which only fourteen authentic ones remain today. With these few paintings, he changed the world. So, if every person reading this were to make only one painting of decent quality during his remaining lifespan, then a new Renaissance will not be just mere words.

—Karel Vereycken

Dong Yuang, painted at the end of the Tenth century, that is, nearly five hundred years before Leonardo [SEE Figure 9]. It is interesting to know that the Chinese word for "landscape" is "mountain-water." Leonardo's geological reflections on the interaction of earth, air, water, clouds, and rain, could have indeed made him appreciate such a type of painting.

The inbetweenness of Mona Lisa's smile, combined with the inbetweenness of Chinese-inspired, multiple-horizon perspective of the landscape, creates such a powerful movement, that it is capable of driving all the Aristoteleans crazy, while it will continue to intrigue open minds for many future generations. We can note that even the great Raphael did not advance beyond these discoveries, and that Leonardo remains to this day the metric of this development. Contrast this to its opposite, the pre-Baroque performances of Michelangelo, which were given—at the expense of Leonardo!—the exclusive title of "the inventor of movement in art." In a deliberate effort to create absence of movement in the mind, this art, which became a propaganda machine for the Counter-Reformation, appears as a theatrical display of wax corpses. It is sad that the discovery of the monumental "Laöcoon" statue in 1506, for example, provided Pope Julius II the excuse to

National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China

FIGURE 9. *Dong Yuang (active 947-970), "Festival to Bring Rain."*