ARTnews

The Latest Leonardo Debate

By Hilarie M. Sheets
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The announcement of a new attribution to the Renaissance master stirs up the usual controversy

The discovery of a previously unknown painting by Leonardo never fails to stir up the experts, the press, and the public. There are, after all, only 15 to 20 paintings—finished and unfinished—that are generally attributed to him. In early October, the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera reported the existence of a painting closely resembling Leonardo's colored chalk and pastel drawing of the noblewoman Isabella d'Este in the Louvre.

One scholar has "no doubts" that this painting is a Leonardo, but another calls the attribution "not serious."

The painting is part of a collection of some 400 works housed in a bank vault in Turgi, Switzerland, by an unnamed Italian family since the early 20th century, according to the newspaper account. It has been undergoing an extensive scientific analysis overseen by Leonardo specialist Carlo Pedretti, who was initially approached by a representative of the owner to assess the work. Pedretti, a professor emeritus of art history at UCLA, told Corriere della Sera: "There are no doubts that the portrait is the work of Leonardo." Not everyone agrees. Carmen Bambach, curator of drawings and prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who is completing a three-volume monograph on Leonardo to be published next year by Yale University Press, told ARTnews in an e-mail: "The attribution to Leonardo of the new Isabella d'Este painting is not serious."

The drawing of Isabella in the Louvre, on which the painting is clearly based, was done some time between late 1499 and March of 1500, when Leonardo was a guest at her court in Mantua. According to the newspaper, carbon dating of the painting conducted at the University of Arizona confirms that it was executed sometime between 1460 and 1650, placing it in a corresponding timeframe. Additional tests indicate that the pigments and primer are consistent with those used by Leonardo.

Summarizing what he considered the most compelling evidence supporting his attribution to Leonardo, Pedretti told ARTnews in an e-mail: "The handling of the face in profile in terms of subtlety of sfumato, and therefore style. And the exact correspondence to the Louvre cartoon, as shown by X-ray examination as well. Let's keep in mind that no other painted version is known to exist."

Also quoted in Corriere della Sera was Martin Kemp, professor emeritus of art history at Oxford University and one of the world's most prominent Leonardo scholars. The newspaper account suggested that Kemp, by not rejecting the Leonardo attribution, also supported it. Soon afterward, however, the paper printed a letter from Kemp, who objected that a single quote of his had been extracted out of context. "I declined to express a visual opinion on the basis of the poor reproductions I had seen," he wrote in his letter, "but made it clear that any attribution to Leonardo was not consistent with the documentation." The letter then summarized the documentation relating to Leonardo's dealings with Isabella.

"You can come up with other explanations, but I like the simplest one that meshes with the facts," Kemp told ARTnews in a phone conversation. He laid out a trail of evidence from the surviving drawings and correspondence that he believes rules out the possibility of Leonardo's authorship even before considering matters of style and connoisseurship.

It is known, Kemp said, that in 1498, before the artist's visit to Mantua, Isabella borrowed Leonardo's portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, Lady with an Ermine, to compare with a portrait by Bellini. "Isabella was clearly casting around for who might be good enough to paint her portrait," Kemp said. While in Mantua, Leonardo made a finished drawing of her in profile, with her right hand gently resting over the left in a manner similar to the hands of the Mona Lisa, which he would paint a few years later. He left the drawing with Isabella, but her husband, Francesco Gonzaga, gave it away within the year (it was common among courts to exchange portraits).

Kemp said that before leaving Mantua, Leonardo had his studio assistants transfer the original drawing to another sheet he could take with him back to Florence, potentially as the basis for a painted version. The Louvre cartoon has prick marks that correspond to dots of charcoal, or sploveri, on a similar but uncolored drawing of Isabella now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, he said, suggesting that the latter drawing was copied from the former. The Ashmolean copy was revised slightly in the lower register to give more room for the right arm of the sitter, who leans on a ledge supporting a book, to which she points. "Leonardo could see what you and I can see, which is that the position of her right arm in the Louvre cartoon is very awkward," Kemp said about the revision.

In correspondence over the next six years, Isabella pestered Leonardo for her painted portrait or any painting by him, according to Kemp. Leonardo, who was notorious for not completing commissions and for jilting his patrons, seems to have disappointed her. She eventually gave up.

The recently discovered painting corresponds exactly in composition to the Louvre cartoon, which at some point was cut down at the bottom with the loss of the book and the ledge. "If Leonardo or the studio produced a portrait, it would have been based on the revised Ashmolean version that they had with them, not the one Francesco had given away," said Kemp. "Why would Leonardo, having gone to the trouble in the studio version to correct what was a very uncomfortable composition from the bottom, revert to something which was unsatisfactory? What ends up in the painting is, you've got a pointing gesture which becomes meaningless. She points at nothing."

Asked by e-mail if Kemp's conclusion about the two versions of the cartoon was persuasive to him, Pedretti responded: "We can't expect Leonardo to think the way we do. And then, who can tell us whether the cartoon is now the way he made it."

Two details in the painting but not in the Louvre cartoon are a crown on the woman's head and a palm leaf in her right hand, symbols consistent with both Saint Barbara and Saint Catherine. Kemp hypothesizes that the Louvre cartoon was floating around Northern Italy in the 16th century and was opportunistically used by someone to create this painting of a saint in the style of Leonardo. The fact that it is painted on canvas rather than wood, which Leonardo favored for its slick surface, is another red flag for Kemp. "We have no record of him using canvas," he said. "With Leonardo, it's always dangerous to say he never would have done that because he's always a bit surprising, but it's improbable."

Pedretti said he needs more time to determine if any part of the painting might have been done by Leonardo's students or added later—"possibly everything but the face," he wrote in the e-mail.

Debate among Leonardo scholars is nothing new. In 2010, Kemp published a book, La Bella Principessa: The Story of the New Masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci, summarizing his attribution to Leonardo of a drawing previously thought to be a 19th-century German work. Consensus among experts was divided, with Pedretti agreeing with Kemp in that case, and other scholars, including Bambach, not convinced.

Salvator Mundi, another rediscovered painting, first reported in 2011, has been more widely accepted among scholars as the work of Leonardo: Kemp supports the attribution and Bambach believes that Leonardo worked on parts of the painting, while Pedretti finds the attribution erroneous.

The upgrading of a painting from "in the style of" to a genuine Leonardo could put its value in the ballpark of $150 million. Asked if the owners of the painting in question had plans for it, Pedretti wrote: "Not for exhibition nor for sale but certainly to make it available to scholars after I am through with it."