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# The Guardian

Leonardo's earliest surviving work? Self-portrait as Archangel Gabriel unveiled  
Experts' claim that small tile with profile image is by artist at 18 is already disputed



*Maev Kennedy and agencies*

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Small tile bearing an image of the Archangel Gabriel, which art experts in Rome claim is the oldest surviving work by Leonardo da Vinci. Photograph: Press Office Handout/EPA

A small square tile with the profile image of a beautiful angel has been claimed not only as the earliest surviving work by Leonardo da Vinci, but as his own self-portrait as the Archangel Gabriel.

If genuine the tile has survived miraculously unbroken for more than 500 years, since the 18-year-old artist made it in 1471.

The claim – dismissed out of hand by the world renowned Leonardo expert Martin Kemp – is certain to spark academic debate. Scarcely a year passes without the claimed discovery of a previously overlooked work by Leonardo, and argument still rages over the authenticity of the heavily restored Salvator Mundi which became the most expensive painting in the world when it sold for more than \$450m (£340m), at a Christie's auction in New York last winter.

Kemp, emeritus professor of art history at Oxford University, who thought the “vermicelli like” hair particularly unconvincing, told the Guardian: “The chance of its being by Leonardo is less than zero. The silly season for Leonardo never closes.”

Very few genuine works by Leonardo survive, and almost all are in museum collections, partly because his academic and scientific interests were so wide, including inventions such as flying machines and siege engines: he left a trail of unfinished projects throughout his career.

The tile was presented like a holy relic, encased in glass, at a press conference in Rome. According to the Italian news agency Adnkronos, Prof Ernesto Solari, who has written extensively on the Renaissance genius, claims that his research with Ivana Bonfantin, a handwriting expert, proves that the tile bears clues leading to the polymath.

There are secret inscriptions including a sequence of numbers, and Leonardo's signature back to front – his later notebooks are full of his mirror-writing – together making up a coded message translated as: “I, Leonardo da Vinci, born in 1452, represented myself as the Archangel Gabriel in 1471.”

Solari claims that extensive scientific dating tests including thermoluminescence bear out the 15th century date of the tile, which is owned by an aristocratic family in Ravello.

He believes the tile was fired in the pottery kiln of Leonardo's paternal grandparents, although by 1471 Leonardo, who was illegitimate, had left the home in Vinci where he was brought up, and completed years apprenticed to the workshop of Verrocchio.

One recently claimed and fiercely contested Leonardo discovery, La Bella Principessa, which if genuine had been valued at up to £100m, has been counter-claimed by the forger Shaun Greenhalgh, whose work has fooled many experts. He

insisted the drawing is his work, a portrait of Sally, a checkout operator in the Co-op branch at Bromley Cross in Bolton.