# LA MEN

*Leonardo da Vinci's beauties have captivated for centuries. Hannah Rothschild describes their miraculous journey to London. Portrait by David Yo*

*This year's Great Italian Exhibition, Leonardo da Vinci: Painting Perfection, has 17th-century Italian, Dutch and Flemish masterpieces. The Madonna of the Yarnwinder (c 1501) is pictured on the left*



A recent weeks, nine well-dressed beauties have left their royal, ducal and municipal palaces, bound for London's National Gallery. Arriving in separate vehicles, different times, under the cloak of utmost secrecy, their journey has taken five years to plan. Far too precious to be packed in the same aircraft or lorry, first class, they have been transported in specially constructed containers and accompanied by their own curators, who have flown from Italy to the gallery. As one of the curators said, they were "very happy." The exhibition is the fulfilment of a seemingly impossible dream: to gather in one exhibition half the panel paintings and drawings by the Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci.

Several hundred people, from museum directors to museum and fire curators to guards, have been involved. Negotiations with one lender became a protracted and internecine. Her Majesty's Government was asked to intervene. Each painting is priceless and has been insured for a fortune, beyond super-gross, drawing audiences from around the world to London until February 2012. As one of the trustees of the National Gallery, I know how difficult this exhibition was to organise.

Our fascination with Leonardo's pictures is spread around our knowledge of his life. He was the illegitimate son of a notary, a lute player, an artist, inventor, philosopher, scientist, a

musician and author. Most artists' reputations are established only after their death. Leonardo is more revered now than during his lifetime. Even in the village of Vinci he is family with no apparent artistic leaning. Leonardo was illegitimate, a bastard, a mamzer in Hebrew. According to his contemporaries, he was "extraordinarily beautiful", fastidious and a dandy. He adored clothes and dressed in rose-pink tunics, rings made of jasper and bosts of the softest leather. Leonardo advised his associates to "take fresh rosewater and sweeten your hands with it, then take the leaves of lavender and rub it between your hands", and he invented a "fragrant" lamp for perfuming work. Perhaps he was too talented, too impulsive, too mercurial to settle. Here was a man who could design a helicopter or fortifications, write philosophical tracts, and play the lyre as well as any professional musician. Tellingly, he called himself a "disciple of experience". The extent of Leonardo's influence is extraordinary given his relatively short life. He began his career he worked on only 20 pictures, 14 survive and only 10 of these are complete.

Leonardo believed that his work could "inflame men" and make them "fall in love with a painting". He claimed that a picture became so obsessed with one of his religious pictures that he begged Leonardo to vary his reference to God so that he could kiss the image without fear of being burned. Leonardo refused and the love-struck person unable to contain his ardour, had to send the pictures away. Even today, his Mona Lisa regularly receives love letters and, in 1910, one hapless admirer shot himself in front of her.

Leonardo understood that while beauty relies on harmony and symmetry, real appeal is conjured out of a combination of looks, character, and life. Beauty is a mix of intriguing and mysterious, their sly smiles and averted gazes hint at unknown pleasures and delicious secrets. Many of Leonardo's women were probably composites of people he spotted and sketched in the street. He was known to prefer the locks of fresh-faced peasant girls to those of ladies of the court. Biographers believe that his mother Caterina's image haunts his work, while others claim that it is his beautiful young lovers who peer out of his pictures. Half a millennium after the *Mona Lisa* was painted, books and films are still being made about her identity and history. Did she really exist? Was she, in fact, in some sense, Leonardo himself? Was she his mirror image?

These quests take their within feeling of a fatal mutation; mine took me to museums. My father, Jacob, was a collector of Gothic and has little interest in cards or board games but he does have an infectious, passionate interest in paintings, and was pleased to find a fellow bibliophile. The thrill for me, then, was being with him; loving the paintings came later. While other children learnt about players, transfers and managers, he taught me about the Medici and provenance. At weekends we went to museums or to visit dealers who might have something interesting for sale. I grew up surrounded by Roman busts, Japanese monstrances, Greek urns, Venetian sculptures, Bloomsbury portraitists and Venetian Mannerists, all exhaibiting happily. My father used his fear children as part-time porters, summoning us with the whistle he used for his Alsatian, Nan. "Nan's arrived back home!" Then, under his tutelage, we would shift objects into Sotheby's in order to get their position just right. "Half an inch to the right," he commanded as we struggled under the weight of a side table or canvas. "No, Eight hand up a fraction."

I was 11 when my father took me to Italy for the Renaissance. It was the first time I had been away from my mother and siblings. We drove from Venice to Florence, visiting churches and palaces along the way. My father has a knack for finding a dusty annexe or aspse where paintings and frescos are hidden away from light and prying eyes. "Who's got the key?" he demanded in English at the local bar or office. "We've come from miles away."

In Florence, we visited the Uffizi and the Accademia. I already knew a detail well, the angel, as it was reproduced on a coke tin at home; perhaps my love for Leonardo can be partly explained by this subliminal association with delicious treats. The next has a huge impact on the museum's prestige and academia in general. Scholarship solved some but not all of the mystery. Contemporary documents reveal that Leonardo painted one *Virgin of the Rocks* and started work on a similar painting. Most agreed that parts of the original Gallery composition were damaged by water and that Leonardo painted a given definitive attribution while the painting was covered with the greenish-brown varnish darkening its delicate balance of colour and composition. Leonardo liked to create figures from shadows rather than hard outlines, believing that light and shade should blend "without line or borders in the manner of smoke". Bad questions about the authenticity of the Gallery painting, the quality of the overlap and painting under the layers of grime. The decision to restore any work is fraught with danger. Paintings corrode over time, making them more delicate. The cumulative effects of light, travel and temperature wear

*Above: The Lord Emperor (c 1490-95). Opposite: The Lady with an Ermine (c 1489-90)*

*Above: The Madonna of the Yarnwinder (c 1501). Opposite: La Bella Principessa (c 1494)*

*Above: The Annunciation (c 1472-75). Opposite: The Lady with an Ermine (c 1489-90)*

*Above: The Madonna of the Rocks (c 1483-86). Opposite: La Bella Principessa (c 1494)*