Preface to the 500th anniversary edition of 2019

The focus of this book, whose 2019 expanded edition marks the 500th anniversary of the artist’s death, are the works of Leonardo as well as a wealth of original sources, which are discussed in depth in the ten chapters of the main text. The accompanying references and further reading can be found in the Bibliography (pp. 233-266) and in the catalogue section, which also offers a critical appraisal of Leonardo scholarship to date. The analyses in the main text approach Leonardo’s works from the perspective of their socio-cultural context and the history of their respective genres. They concentrate upon a “historical explanation of pictures” (Baxandall 1985) and interpret the content of Leonardo’s paintings against the backdrops of context and pictorial tradition. In the main text I have furthermore sought to show that Leonardo’s theoretical and scientific ideas can likewise only be understood in full against the backdrops of their historical contingency. The same approach underpins the comprehensive section on Leonardo’s drawings, which has been expanded with a chapter on his manuscripts.

For publications within the field of Leonardo scholarship in recent years, the reader is directed here to the specialist bibliographies (Bibliography, Section 4, p. 266). In the following pages there is only room to pay tribute to the most important discoveries. These include the painting of Christ as Salvator Mundi presented to the public in 2011 and sold on 15 November 2017 at auction in New York, whose design undoubtedly goes back to Leonardo (fig. 2; see Cat. XXXII). This is evidenced by two autograph studies by Leonardo for Christ’s draperies (Cat. D40–41) and by other versions of the subject that were produced in his workshop or by connoisseurs of his work. The paintings from the Stark and Worsley collections are only documented by old photographs (figs. 4, 7 and 9). Two Salvator Mundi paintings from the former Stark and Worsley collections are only documented by old photographs (figs. 10-11). Like the New York Salvator Mundi, they depict Christ as Savior making the sign of blessing with his right hand and holding a crystal orb in his left. Other variants, which were probably also executed on the basis of Leonardo’s Salvator Mundi design, show a portrait of Christ without crystal orb or gesture of blessing (fig. 8).

The New York Salvator Mundi is a high-quality, albeit heavily restored Old Master painting (see below), on whose completion it is likely that Leonardo was directly involved. But the viewpoint, regularly expressed since 2011, that the New York Salvator Mundi represents a wholly autograph work by Leonardo himself, remains particularly problematic. Doubts over such an attribution arise out of three circumstances. Firstly, in contrast to other original paintings by Leonardo, the New York Salvator Mundi is not mentioned in early sources. Secondly, the painting’s provenance can only be traced back securely to the start of the 20th century. Thirdly, following its rediscovery in 2005, the evidently badly damaged painting has undergone radical restoration, the start of which in 2005 does not appear to be documented at all (Modestini 2014, p. 144).

A documentation of all the restoration works carried out, announced several times since 2011, has still not been published, which casts the previous process of authentication into a bad light and makes it impossible to pass final judgement on the New York Salvator Mundi.

We need only look at certain details of the painting for the problematic nature of the recent restoration to become apparent. An example is the omega-shaped fold in Christ’s draperies, which would have been already present in one of the two drapery studies by Leonardo (Cat. D41) and is also found in the Salvator Mundi paintings from the Ganay Collection (fig. 4), San Domenico Maggiore (fig. 7) and the Worsley Collection (fig. 11). It is least stylized and comes closest to Leonardo’s original drawing in the Ganay Salvator Mundi. In the New York Salvator Mundi, by contrast, the omega motif has shrunk to a barely legible cipher. This reduction of a detail that is also of iconographical interest (Snow-Smith 1948a, pp. 58-60) allows two conclusions: either the execution of the omega motif in the New York Salvator Mundi is not by Leonardo himself, or...
it testifies to the scale of the painting’s damaged state of preservation. The problematic nature of the restoration is highlighted, too, when we compare the photographs of the New York Salvator Mundi published since 2011. From an examination of these widely disseminated images, it is plain that the painting has been altered since its first public presenta-

tion in 2011. Thus the photographs published between 2011 and c. 2014 show, in the right half of the picture (i.e. on Christ’s left shoulder), a whole series of drapery folds of differentiated shape (fig. 5). The exact course of these folds and their shadows can be made out without diffi-
culty even behind the crystal globe which Christ is holding in his left

dehand. By contrast, the photographs taken in 2017 (fig. 4) reveal a simplifi-
cation of the drapery folds in this area, as well as a reduction in their

numbers. Their course beneath the orb has likewise been simplified and is less clearly visible.

An impression of the nature of this alteration is also conveyed by a comparison with a photograph taken around 1904, which shows the painting in a state prior to the restorations carried out as from 2005 (fig. 3). Here the drapery folds behind the crystal orb run visibly further, as is the case in the new photographs of the New York Salvator Mundi published between 2011 and 2014. In the upper area of Christ’s left shoul-
dder, however, the 1904 photograph corresponds to the state of the New

York Salvator Mundi at the time of its auction in November 2017 (fig. 2). A look at a version of the Salvator Mundi formerly in the collection of the Marquis de Ganay is equally illuminating (fig. 4): here, the drapery folds above the crystal orb come closest to the 2011 state of the New York Sal-

tator Mundi (fig. 3). The same detail in the variant in Detroit (fig. 9), by contrast, corresponds more closely to the New York Salvator Mundi in its current state. These comparisons prove, in other words, that even after its exhibition in 2011, and during the period in which it was being marketed in the years up to 2017, the New York Salvator Mundi was altered through its restoration in a questionable manner. The special

characteristics of the New York Salvator Mundi include its iconic pres-

cence, its stigmatic effects and hence its extraordinarily atmospheric im-

pact. These effects are already partially present in a Salvator Mundi

painting from Foss, which served Leonardo as a visual source (fig. 1). In

view of the currently insufficient documentation of the restoration cam-
paign, however, it remains unclear to what extent this sense of aura goes

back to interventions by the restorer. At all events, photographs taken

immediately after the painting’s rediscovery in 2005 show a Salvator Mundi that is somewhat less atmospheric in its effect (Modestini 2014, p. 141f.; 2018, p. 402).

The heated debates over the condition and attribution of the New

York picture have thrust questions of content into the background. One possible historical frame of reference is suggested by the painting’s refer-

cences to devotional portraits of Christ. Of particular interest in this re-

gard are the prayers to St Veronica popular in Leonardo’s day, which in 15th and 16th-century book illumination were often accompanied by pic-

tures of Christ as Salvator Mundi. The text of the prayer was thereby

introduced or accompanied by miniatures either of St Veronica’s veil, a portrait of Christ in the Ecce Homo tradition, or half-length represen-
tations of Christ as Salvator Mundi. Highly significant in this context is

the prayer spoken in front of the picture of the Saviour, which opens with the words “Salve sancta facies”. The person praying thus addresses

the Holy Face directly before their eyes. The “Salve sancta facies” prayer

is bound up with the hope that devotions performed before the eyes of

the Redemser will help reduce a person’s punishments in Hell and

ensure that they pass directly into the realm of the blessed, where in the

last days they will stand before the divine countenance itself.

Miniatures taking up the theme of praying directly before the Holy

Face can be found in many of the illuminated manuscripts of this period, for example in a book of hours illustrated around 1541 by Simon Bening and
today housed in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York (Ms M999, fol. 194f.; fig. 13). Here a gold-framed representation of Christ as

Salvator Mundi is surrounded by the faithful in prayer and a number of

Leonardo da Vinci
The surface dirt covering the Adoration of the Magi was compelling grounds in itself to carry out a thorough cleaning. The extensive nature of this layer of dirt had always been visible to the naked eye. The coats of varnish added after the 1500s, for example, had left clear traces: even in subdued lighting, it was possible to see that they had been applied with a coarse brush, leaving rough streaks, and had positively soaked up grime over the centuries. Restoration was also deemed necessary in view of the painting’s poor state of preservation. Some types of damage could be traced back to the fact that the wood employed was evidently not of the best quality, resulting in the warping of individual panels and in damage to the paint layer, in particular at the butt joints.

Equally fascinating insights have been obtained with diagnostic imaging (fig. 11). According to the latest findings, there can no longer be any doubt that Leonardo drew the 70 or so figures of the composition direct onto the support, in freehand and without the use of a cartoon or any other transfer techniques. The painting is thus fundamentally a huge sketch, which bears witness to the artistic spontaneity of its maker. The spectacular infrared reflectograms bring to light even Leonardo’s famous method of “rough composition” (“componimento inculto”, TPL 189; Gombrich 1966), otherwise known only from his drawings. The artist thereby developed his figures out of a confusing multitude of dynamic compositional lines. This process is particularly apparent in the group of people on the right-hand edge of the Adoration of the Magi. In the restored painting it is now also possible to see more clearly a number of motifs to which Leonardo would regularly return over the course of his career, such as the group of battling horsemen, as well as his spontaneous exploitation of figures in several different positions.

From these investigations, it has also emerged that Leonardo’s painting technique in his Adoration of the Magi is closely related that of his St Jerome (Cat. IX). The idea, occasionally put forward in recent years, that the St Jerome dates from Leonardo’s first Milan period (Syson/Keith 2011), can therefore be dismissed. It is possible that the improved legibility of the Adoration of the Magi will also allow us to understand its iconography more clearly. Thus we might speculate whether the striking luminosity of the restored painting has an introspective meaning. Whatever
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the Prado copy correspond exactly to the Louvre original. It is likely,
in the background, concealed beneath later overpainting in black. They
vators discovered a luminous pale blue, Leonardesque rocky landscape
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Virgin and Child with St Anne
(2005; Syson/Keith 2011). This first
underdrawing was probably executed by Leonardo himself and can be
linked in compositional terms with some of his original sketches. Only
the second underdrawing (fig. 17) corresponds to the figurative arrangement
that is seen in the two versions of the Virgin of the Rocks and which, moreover, directly reflects the patron's wishes (see Ch. III).
Diagnostic scanning likewise contributed to the findings yielded by the restoration of a previously disregarded copy of the Mona Lisa in the Prado in Madrid (fig. 48). The results are discussed in a monumental catalogue on the Virgin and Child with St Anne (Cat. XXVII; Delieuvin 2012) published in conjunction with an exhibition in the Louvre in Paris. During their investigations of the Madrid Mona Lisa copy, the conservators discovered a luminous pale blue, Leonardesque rocky landscape in the background, concealed beneath later overpainting in black. They also established that the dimensions and outlines of the female sitter in the Prado copy correspond exactly to the Louvre original. It is likely, therefore, that the copyist employed a cartoon made by Leonardo as the
starting-point for his own painting (Gonzáles Mozo in Delieuvin 2012, pp. 234–239).
On the surface, the significance of the Madrid copy lies in the fact
that certain details can be made out more clearly here than in Leonardo's original painting. This is true of the landscape background, for example, and the folds and decorative trimming of Lisa's dress. Of greater interest, however, are two further insights. Firstly, the investigations point to the conclusion that the copy was executed at the same time as Leonardo's original. This argument is supported by small changes that are common to both portraits and which have been revealed by diagnostic imaging. The close cooperation this implies between master and pupil is not unusual. A number of investigations over the past few years have in fact shown that Leonardo produced or designed paintings of which his pupils made copies and variations (Cat. XXIII–XXIV, XXVIII–XXIX). We also know from written sources that Leonardo occasionally made his own improvements to the works being carried out by his pupils (see p. 149).
It is surprising, secondly, that an autograph portrait by Leonardo was copied in the master's workshop while the original was still in progress. It is possible that Leonardo saw the commission for the Mona Lisa as an opportunity to teach one of his pupils the finer points of portraiture. Arguing in favour of the didactic nature of the Madrid copy is the clear discrepancy between its fidelity to detail in the figure, and its greater freedom in other areas. Thus the copyist has reproduced the many folds of Lisa's dress and the filigree ornament around her low neckline with pedantic precision. In other parts of the composition, however, he has allowed himself astounding departures. A case in point are the slender columns and their bases that are barely visible in the Paris painting and which bound the pictorial space to the left and right. In the Madrid copy these differ from one another in an interesting detail: the base of the column on the right obviates a different perspective construction to its counterpart on the left, since its plinth, with its two visible sides, descends no longer vertically but at a slight angle onto the supporting parapet. This
There is a sense of experimentation, too, in the treatment of the landscape background in the right half of the picture. For whereas the copyist has adopted the rock formations on the left almost exactly, he has taken greater liberties on the right. Thus the rocks in the lower right-hand background are rendered in a far more differentiated fashion, but thereby appear almost stereotypical. Such comparisons of the two portraits also make it clear that the greatest correspondences between original and copy are found in the left-hand side, while the greatest differences are found on the right. It would seem that the copyist proceeded from left to right and in so doing increasingly distanced himself from his visual source. It is possible a striking departure in the colour of Lisa's sleeves, which in the Paris painting are executed in a mustard tone that corresponds in visual terms with the ochres of the middle ground, is a consequence of its restoration. The Prado Mona Lisa confirms what the results of diagnostic imaging of other works have already suggested: Leonardo's workshop produced paintings not only based on his designs but also based on his paintings even before the originals were finished. And in the case of particularly important commissions, Leonardo stepped in to perfect the results.

An insight into the efficient operation of Leonardo's highly skilled workshop was offered by the above-mentioned Paris exhibition devoted to Leonardo's Virgin and Child with St Anne [figs. 19–20]. It thereby appears that Leonardo contributed primarily the innovative figurative composition, while his pupils were able to elaborate the landscape backgrounds in very different ways, either to suit their own taste or to meet the expectations of potential customers (fig. 21). The almost complete lack of vegetation in Leonardo's primeval landscapes is thereby replaced, in many of these workshop versions, by flourishing trees and gentle meadows. The uncompromising barrenness of Leonardo's landscapes was evidently not to everyone's taste in this epoch. A further focus of the Louvre show fell upon Leonardo's Virgin and Child with St Anne and its accompanying sketches and preliminary studies. The Paris painting had previously undergone a programme of complete restoration whose results, however, take some getting used to and have thereby sparked some controversy. In a similar fashion to Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel following their restoration a few years ago, we now find ourselves confronted with an intensity of colour that, in the case of the Virgin and Child with St Anne, no longer entirely corresponds with the image of Leonardo that we have held for centuries.

With the rigorous cleaning of the darkened and dirty varnish, the painting has also lost areas of sfumato, the subtle blurring and shading that lend Leonardo's works their unique atmosphere and are considered his trademark. The difference between Leonardo's sfumato and the clearly less suggestive appearance of paintings by his workshop is demonstrated by a look at the Madrid Mona Lisa. The copy largely lacks the aura of the sfumato so typical of Leonardo, which essentially results from two effects. The first is the original sfumato that Leonardo consciously sought to achieve with numerous pigment-like glazes and varnishes; the second is the strengthening of this impression of soft transitions as the varnish has darkened with age. These two effects are inextricably bound up with one another, since the varnish was intentionally applied by the artist himself but subsequently became the carrier of a patina that only formed over the course of time (Zöllner 2013). This overlap between the effect originally intended by Leonardo and the patina acquired over the centuries is what the Virgin and Child with St Anne has possibly now lost as a consequence of its restoration.

Another remarkable discovery concerns Leonardo's portrait of Lisa del Giocondo and has been yielded by what has become known in the art-historical literature as the "Heidelberg Cicero". The name refers to an early edition of the letters of Cicero, published in 1477 and today
Leonardo commenced all of his pictures by developing the face and parts of the upper body in detail. Confirmation that Leonardo employed – as Vasari surmises – a working method that took the human face as its point of departure is indeed found in a number of Leonardo’s drawings (Cat. 13, 15, 22, 23, 24, 14, 15, 20, 201) as well as in his cartoons and unfinished paintings. In the Burlington House Cartoons (Cat. XXI), for example, the faces have been modelled in considerably greater detail than the drapery and the background. A similar situation is seen in Leonardo’s St Jerome (Cat. IX), where the head is substantially more finished than other parts of the painting. Vasari’s annotation thus also testifies to Leonardo’s great interest in facial expression, an interest that also characterizes his theoretical writings on art and his scientific studies. (Zöllner 2019)

It is a particularly fortunate find, too, since few such comments – speaking in specific terms about not one but several artworks still in the process of completion – have come down to us from the period around 1500. It is the reference to the Mona Lisa that has attracted the most interest, since the earliest notes otherwise relating to the painting date from the years after 1517 and moreover contain conflicting information. The assumption that the portrait today housed in the Louvre indeed shows Lisa del Giocondo is based on the later writings of Giorgio Vasari (1511/1568). This identification was nevertheless lent weight 20 years earlier by an archival find in Milan (Shell/Sironi 1993) and was subsequently confirmed by further documents (Zöllner 1993; Pallanti 2008). It still counters occasional opposition, however (Krauer 2009; Rogers Mariotti 2009; Zapperi 2010; Hatfield 2013). With the discovery of the “Heidelberg Cicero”, one of the major grounds for doubt has now been removed. The annotation by Vasari, who knew Leonardo well, provides firm evidence that the artist was working on a portrait of Lisa del Giocondo in October 1519. To the Florentine chancellery secretary, the Mona Lisa thereby evidently seemed sufficiently prominent to be mentioned ahead of the Virgin and Child with St Anne and the Battle of Anghiari, even though these two other commissions were more prestigious by the standards of the day.

Proof that the Mona Lisa was indeed seen as an important painting even in Leonardo’s lifetime is furnished by the young Raphael, active in Florence since 1504, who over the following years produced a number of female portraits based on that of Lisa del Giocondo (cf. ill. p. 16). Suffice it to mention here the portrait of Maddalena Doni (fig. 22) and the pen drawing of a young woman (fig. 23), whose position within the pictorial space and the shading of whose face correspond to Leonardo’s Mona Lisa. Independently of Raphael, a follower of Andrea Solario also looked back to the Mona Lisa shortly afterwards in his portrait of Leonardo’s patron, Charles d’Amb由于; painted around 1507 in Milan. In view of these portraits inspired by Leonardo’s Mona Lisa and the information in the “Heidelberg Cicero”, there can no longer be any doubt that the painting housed in Paris indeed shows Lisa del Giocondo.

The “Heidelberg Cicero” also allows further deductions to be made. Thus Vasari describes a Mona Lisa that is still unfinished; Leonardo has only executed the head. In October 1503, in other words, the highly unusual background landscape did not yet exist. This blank section of the painting is also reflected in the portraits by Raphael and Solario, for their very different backgrounds deviate significantly from the jagged rock formations in the Mona Lisa. The wording of Vasari’s marginal note and its relation to the remarks by Cicero furthermore imply that Leonardo commenced all of his pictures by developing the face and parts of the head. It is a fortunate find, too, since few such comments – speaking in specific terms about not one but several artworks still in the process of completion – have come down to us from the period around 1500.

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