

World-renowned Leonardo da Vinci expert relates his fifty-year relationship with the work of the world's most famous artist

Provisional

Living with Leonardo

Fifty Years of Sanity and Insanity in the Art World and Beyond

Martin Kemp

c. 80 Illustrations

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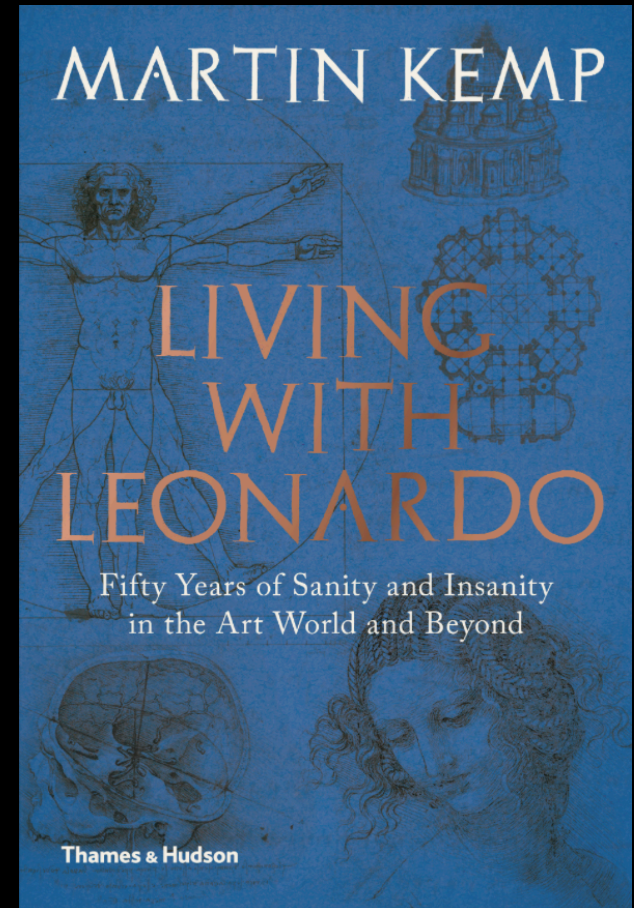
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Praise for *Living with Leonardo*

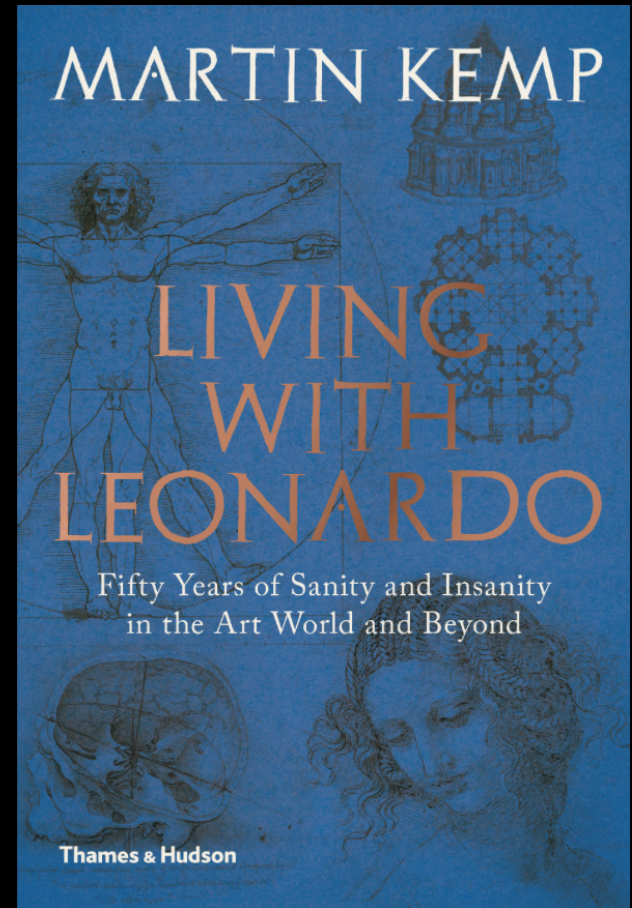
'Fascinating'

The Lady

'Kemp is a natural storyteller ... This book leads you on a journey through the life, work and legacy of one of history's most intriguing figures. Kemp emerged as a guide whom you feel you can trust – and, perhaps just as importantly, who will prove entertaining company when you pitch camp'

The Times

Previous Edition



Key Sales Points

- Martin Kemp's memoir proves to be a story populated with colorful characters, sycophants, deviants, 'Leonardo loonies' and fantasists
- From scholarly musings to Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, we are able to examine what has helped to maintain and engorge the posthumous celebrity of an artist from half a century ago
- Published to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Leonardo da Vinci's death in spring 2019
- Crucial questions of attribution and conservation that relate to key works of Leonardo's are assessed

MARTIN KEMP

LIVING
WITH
LEONARDO

Fifty Years of Sanity and Insanity
in the Art World and Beyond

WITH 105 ILLUSTRATIONS

 **Thames & Hudson**



Frontispiece: Follower of Leonardo, A portrait of Leonardo in profile, c. 1515. Red chalk, 27.5 × 19 cm (10⁷/₁₆ × 7¹/₂ in.).

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CHAPTER 1

THE *LAST SUPPER* AND THE FIRST STEPS

When I first saw the *Last Supper* in the flesh I found it difficult. I recognized, of course, that it is the most iconic of narrative paintings, rivalled only by Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Ceiling in Rome. But really engaging with it was a different matter.

My first encounter with what remained of Leonardo's masterpiece was in 1964, during my first visit to Italy. This was in the summer vacation between the two years of my studies for the Postgraduate Diploma in the History of Art at the Courtauld Institute in London, following my conversion from Natural Sciences to Art History at Cambridge. It would be worth saying a little about how I arrived at this point.

I had 'gone up' to Downing College at Cambridge from Windsor Grammar School, intending to become a biologist. I steadily lost impetus in my studies of science, and (courtesy of fellow students) was drawn into unimagined worlds of foreign films, the visual arts and music. The college cabarets featured John Cleese, while Trevor Nunn was producing the plays. I had no criteria with which to judge that they were special. I played a lot of sport. I joined with John Sharp, a friend who was studying to be a mathematician, in haunting the lecture series in the nascent Department of the History of Art. One evening John asked, 'Would you like to hear Pevsner speaking on William Morris?' Not wishing to admit that I knew of neither, I said 'Yes'. We also spent a magical afternoon looking privately at the Turner watercolours in the study room of the Fitzwilliam Museum. The cumulative result of these little moves was that I decided to thrust the prow of my tiny boat into the new Part II in



Drama in the 'upper room':
The Last Supper, 1495-8. Tempera on gesso, 460 × 880 cm (181 × 346 in.).



Searching for the centre of the cranium: *A skull sectioned*,
1489. Pen and ink over black chalk on paper, 19 × 13.7 cm (7½ × 5½ in.).



The eye as window of the soul: *Sections of the Human head and an onion*,
c. 1490–93. Pen and ink and chalk on paper, 20.3 × 15.2 cm (8 × 6 in.).

CHAPTER 2

THE 'ORIGINAL' *LAST SUPPER*

The most controversial and enduring issue with the *Last Supper* concerns what we are actually looking at. Can we see the 'original' at all? This question disturbed me from my very first encounter with the mural in the refectory.

The *Last Supper* is a wreck, and deteriorated early in its life. The prime reason is Leonardo's experimental technique. His approach to the job of painting was ill-suited to the normal technique of fresco, in which a pre-planned composition is painted at some speed onto patches of wet plaster before they dry. His answer was to treat the wall more or less as if it were a wooden panel, sealing the surface with a layer of white lead paint and using egg as a binder to secure his pigments. This allowed a wider range of colouristic effects and a slower, more contemplative pace of execution. Leonardo's pace, or rather the lack of it in the years around 1497, tested the patience of the Duke, who was simultaneously paying for an extensive series of architectural and sculptural works at Santa Maria delle Grazie, including Bramante's dome and crossing. Leonardo was unlucky. The high water table in that part of Milan and a sealed space behind the wall encouraged dampness to rise behind his primed surface. Adhesion was severely compromised from an early date. We can imagine what would happen if we were to paint gloss paint onto the plaster of wall with no damp-proof course. I have enough trouble with my old house, using paints that let the wall 'breathe'.

A long series of interventions has occurred over the centuries, pious attempts to resurrect Leonardo's crumbling masterpiece. The early restorations relied on filling in lost areas and substantial repainting to enhance what remained. I was introduced to the image of what remained



Reopening of Leonardo's *Last Supper* in Santa Maria delle Grazie after the 1951-4 restoration.

CHAPTER 7

THE SAVIOUR

On 5 March 2008, my birthday, an email arrived announcing the appearance of a new Leonardo – a painting rather than a drawing. I am of an age when one birthday seems much like any other and is best overlooked, but this time the message granted the day a special significance. It came from a well-known source: Nicholas Penny, then director of the National Gallery in London.

I would like to invite you to examine a damaged old painting of Christ as Salvator Mundi which is in private hands in New York. Now it has been cleaned, Luke Syson and I, together with our colleagues in both painting and drawings in the Met, are convinced that it is Leonardo's original version, although some of us consider that there may be [parts?] which are by the workshop. We hope to have the painting in the National Gallery sometime later in March or in April so that it can be examined next to our version of the Virgin of the Rocks. The best-preserved passages in the Salvator Mundi panel are very similar to parts of the latter painting. Would you be free to come to London at any time in this period? We are only inviting two or three scholars.

To put things in perspective, a demonstrably authentic Leonardo painting had not emerged 'from nowhere' for over a hundred years. The last one had been the so-called *Benois Madonna*, which made its public debut in 1909 and entered the Hermitage in St Petersburg in 1914. We agreed on a date of Monday 19 May for me to travel to London.



The true Saviour:
The *Salvator Mundi*, c. 1490. Oil on walnut, 45.4 × 65.6 cm (17 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 25 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.).



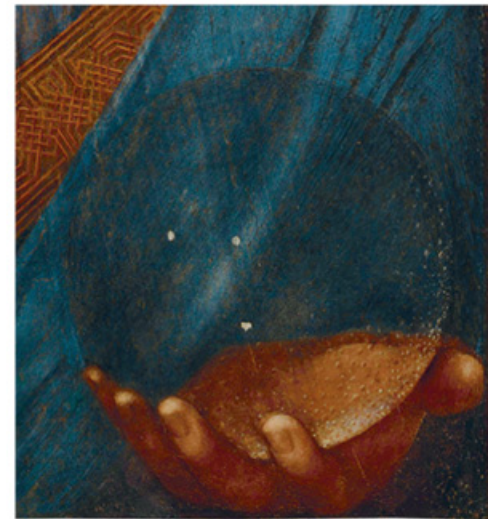
Distinguished company in the conservation studio:
The *Salvator Mundi* and *Virgin of the Rocks* in the National Gallery.

I entered the gallery by the staff entrance and was taken to the conservation studio, where I had been once or twice before. It is a kind of infirmary for paintings with various maladies, and it typically contains an array of pictures in various stages of treatment – all of them known to the public, some of them mega-famous. It is always a thrill to see masterworks close up, without glass and sometimes stripped of previous restorations. In 2007, when the gallery was considering whether to tackle the cleaning of the *Virgin of the Rocks* (which was bound to attract some hostile attention), I had been involved in discussing the pros and cons in front of the painting in the studio.

Today there were more people in the room than normal, including the conservation staff, led by Larry Keith. Two paintings were propped up and clamped to easels. One was the *Virgin of the Rocks*, again out of its frame and naked; the other was the painting mentioned by Nick. Which to greet first – the people, or the new picture? It was a confusing moment. With one eye on the picture I said cursory hellos to Pietro Marani and Maria Teresa Fiorio from Milan, and Carmen Bambach from New York. I was introduced to the art historian and dealer Robert Simon, also based in New York. They had already made the acquaintance of the *Salvator Mundi*.

The painting was asserting its presence in the studio even before I approached it, the image confronting me before I could confront it. It seemed much bigger than it was – actually a little over two feet by one-and-a-half feet. It gave off ‘a vibration’, to quote its former owner, Dmitry Rybolovlev. In a sense, that was enough. I had seen copies and variants. This was something different. However, not wishing to be seen by my peers as rushing intemperately to judgment, I examined it carefully from different ranges and with my rather battered magnifying glass. I also looked at the back, as any serious art historian should. This showed that the panel, seemingly of walnut, had suffered severe cracking along its curving grain and that a sizeable knot towards the bottom was causing problems. The cracks had recently been stabilized. I later learned that during conservation the cracked panel had been dismantled into separate sections before being reunited.

Signs of Leonardo’s magic asserted themselves: the soft skin over the bony joints of the fingers of Christ’s right hand, implying but not describing anatomical structure; the illuminated tips of the fingers



The crystalline sphere.



The drug-crazed hippy: *Salvator Mundi* before cleaning and restoration.

of his left hand; the glistening filaments of vortex hair, above all on the right as we look at the picture; the teasing ambiguity of his facial features, the gaze assertively direct but removed from explicitness; the intricately secure geometry of the angular interlace in the neckline and cross-bands of his costume; the gleaming crystal ellipse on the pendant plaque below his neckline; the fine rivulets of gathered cloth on his chest. *Mona Lisa*-ish echoes were sounding loudly.

I stared hard at the sphere cradled in Christ's left hand. Damage was very evident, as elsewhere across the surface, but I could see that it was absolutely not one of the standard kinds of orb, and did not seem to be a hollow sphere of glass speckled with bubbles. It looked like rock crystal with 'inclusions' – small gaps of varied configurations, laid down

as the crystalline substance was generated as a liquid under intense heat. I just about recalled something I had seen when ineffectually studying a half-subject in geology at Cambridge. I had been visually fascinated by the specimens of crystalline minerals in the museum, but not much engaged with proper geology. I said now, to the others gathered in the conservation studio, 'That's a rock crystal sphere' – probably with more confidence than was supportable at that stage. If it was crystal, it signified the crystalline sphere of the heavens. But there was much to do to make this stick.

No one in the assembly was openly expressing doubt that Leonardo was responsible for the painting, although the possibility of participation by an assistant or two was generally acknowledged. I sensed that Carmen was the most reserved about the painting's overall quality. A general discussion followed. Robert Simon, the custodian of the picture (whom I later learned was its co-owner), outlined something of its history and its restoration. He seemed sincere, straightforward and judiciously restrained, as proved to be the case in all our subsequent contacts. We looked, we talked and we looked again. It was a remarkable occasion. By the time I left, I was determined to research every aspect of the *Salvator Mundi*. It seemed at first sight to resonate deeply with key aspects of Leonardo's science of art and his views of the role of God in the cosmos.

I remained in touch with Robert Simon, who is strongly committed to scholarly research. I learned that the eloquent painting we had viewed was in fact one of the known versions of the *Salvator Mundi*, formerly in the Cook Collection – previously heavily overpainted, it had now been cleaned and retouched. It had never before attracted serious attention; we had paid only passing attention to the black-and-white photograph (left) of it that had occasionally been used as an illustration. I had in fact once described it as looking like 'a drug-crazed hippy', and dismissed it as one of the nastier copies. We should have looked more carefully.

The collection of paintings owned by Sir Francis Cook, built up from the late 1860s onwards, ran to well over six hundred items and was one of the finest in private hands. His Italian Renaissance holdings were a particular strength, and many of them now adorn major galleries around the world. Cook acquired a good number of the best items from the

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