

LEONARDO'S MADONNA REVEALED

Could “Madonna with the Yarnwinder” be the 15th original masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci? As the painting is being restored in Paris, it regains its original colors and pictorial composition: they match in all ways with the painting technique and style of the great master of the Italian Renaissance.

As the Louvre museum is preparing a great exhibition, which will take place in 2019 on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the master passing, the world best experts investigate this mysterious artwork which could be the last completed painting by Leonardo himself.

The story begins in 1809, when a mysterious painting, the “Madonna with the Yarnwinder”, is auctioned in Paris and bought by English aristocrat Duke of Lansdowne. Since then, the art piece has been largely considered as a copy of excellence, done in Leonardo workshop by one of his most talented assistants. But today, as it is restored by Cinzia Pasquali, one of the top restorer in the world, head of Italian paintings collection at the Louvre Museum, it is the subject of a spectacular rediscovery. The artwork is not a copy but an original, executed by the great master in person: every piece of evidence is brought together in order to reach a formal authentication of the painting. Style of composition, quality of the pictorial technic, pigments composition, features of the preparatory drawing: every element of the artwork is under investigation. At the Louvre Museum, the “Madonna with the Yarnwinder” is also compared, in every respect, with other artworks executed by Leonardo himself within the same time frame: the Gioconda and the Saint Ann. Cinzia Pasquali, Vincent Delieuvin, head of the Italian painting at the Louvre Museum, and Italian experts from the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, in Florence, also follow the footsteps of the great master and track the real story of the Madonna with the Yarnwinder. What can we learn from the life of Leonardo at the time of the creation of the painting, at the turn of the 16th century? Already a well-known artist, Leonardo is sought after by the greatest historical figures of his time, and his work is mentioned in several correspondences (diplomatic messages as well as personal letters). Who were Leonardo backers and who commissioned the painting? Why so many copies were painted at the time of its creation? Experts investigate in Florence, Mantua, Milan, as well as in Blois (where was the court of France at this time in history) in order to prove that it is, with certainty, the 15th original art work of Leonardo de Vinci.

Director's Note:

The so-called Lansdowne version of the “Madonna of the Yarnwinder” (Lansdowne being one of the owners of the painting during the mid-19th century) is today held to be the 15th authenticated painting by Leonardo da Vinci. It’s an exceptional work of art, a small and mysterious painting which has numerous copies around the world. Up until now, experts considered the Buccleuch version of the “Madonna of the Yarnwinder” to have been painted, at least in part, by Da Vinci himself, but this is now being questioned, causing a small revolution the world of experts on the Florentine master’s work.

This painting, which was once considered a copy by a talented painter in Da Vinci’s studio, is creating a splash in the art world on the eve of the 500th anniversary of the artist’s death in 2019. And all of this is happening thanks to a group of keen-eyed experts who observed Leonardo da Vinci’s conception, composition, artistic technique and brushstroke in this work.

Cinzia Pasquali, who restored the painting by removing one by one the layers added by previous restorations, gradually saw Da Vinci’s original work appear. From the beginning, she was convinced that this was an exceptional painting, and now feels she knows it’s true creator – a belief that will be shored up by the investigation into the circumstances in which the painting was made. We will witness this discovery by following each step of her restoration.



Presumed self-portrait by Leonardo da Vinci

The story behind the “Madonna of the Yarnwinder” is a complex one, full of twists and turns that span five centuries of history. It all starts in Cinzia Pasquali’s restoration workshop in Paris. It then goes on to the Louvre museum, which has largest collection of works by Leonardo da Vinci in the world. Then the tale takes us to Renaissance Italy, before returning to Paris and the workshop where the painting is restored. “Madonna of the Yarnwinder: A Masterpiece Rediscovered” is an investigation into an enigmatic painting and an elusive character. The two strands of the story are intimately intertwined to become one during the film.

The “Madonna of the Yarnwinder” was painted between 1499 and 1507, during a particularly turbulent period in the artist’s life, largely due to the war between France and the Duchy of Milan. Da Vinci had to leave Milan in a hurry and return to Florence, where he had started his career. From then on, his compositions became increasingly complex, no doubt as a result of the competition with other young artists of his generation, notably Michelangelo.

But his return to Florence ended with failure in the form of his project for a fresco of the battle of Anghiari. With the backing of the king of France and his representative in Milan, Charles d’Amboise, da Vinci managed to escape this commission, for which he had been partially paid, and left Florence for good.

This would be the epilog to the most productive and inventive phase of his life. Telling the story of the “Madonna of the Yarnwinder” means also recounting this difficult period for da Vinci. It is impossible to disassociate his personal life from the drama unfolding in Italy at the end of the 15th century and the emulation between the most important artists of the time. The structure, the dynamic, and the narrative force owe everything to the dialectic which drove him to the summit of his art.

The story of the “Madonna of the Yarnwinder” is also that of the studio of an artist who patently did not operate like other artists of his time. While they wanted their works to be complete before handing them on to their disciples so that copies could be made, da Vinci used his assistants to elaborate his compositions, in a fascinating continual game of back-and-forth. How did this work? The master would make a sketch, then his assistants would make one or more copies from which were produced a series of paintings. Da Vinci would then see what his students had painted and would change the composition accordingly. This process would go on for years, until he was satisfied it was as near perfect as it would ever be.



Copies of the Madonna of the Yarnwinder

“Madonna of the Yarnwinder: The Rediscovered Masterpiece” is an artistic, scientific, and historical exploration. Cinzia Pasquali’s restoration reveals da Vinci’s artistic technique. The stylistic research carried out by Vincent Delieuvin and his colleagues at the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence led to a comparison being made to the “Mona Lisa” and “Saint Anne” in the Louvre museum. Lastly, the exploration also involves the study of written archives in Florence and Milan that trace the painting’s trajectory during the most important years of da Vinci’s life. All of this builds up to a convoluted narrative, full of parentheses and twists, that travels back and forth through time like a police investigation spanning five centuries. The documentary will follow the path of the two main characters, gathering clues and evidence along the way to prove the painting’s authenticity.

Cinzia Pasquali and Vincent Delieuvin both have the necessary scientific knowledge concerning the painting, which is why they play leading roles in this story. They work closely together and are both leading the restoration of and research into the painting, giving them a legitimacy to represent the authentication process. Their respective track records speak volumes: Cinzia Pasquali is one of the world’s most renowned art restorers, having worked on paintings from the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the Galerie d’Apollon at the Louvre, as well as da Vinci’s “Saint Anne”; Vincent Delieuvin is a curator at the Louvre, where he is head of the Italian paintings department. But any authentication process requires a large number of opinions. This is where Cecilia Frosinini and Roberto Bellucci come in, two experts from one of the most prestigious Italian renaissance painting restoration institutes based in Florence. They will appear recurrently, alongside Carmen C. Bambach, who works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is one of the leading specialists on da Vinci’s drawings. These interviewees will be used at several points in the film to punctuate each of the major stages of the narrative. It is also possible that other experts will feature.



Infrared pictures of the Buccleuch and Lansdowne versions of the "Madonna of the Yarnwinder"

3D imagery and animation will be used to make this scientific, historical and artistic study entertaining as well as educational. Some episodes in da Vinci's life, along with daily life in his workshop, will be animated. The esthetic choice for the animation must obviously give a nod to the sketches of the master. Therefore, its style will be realistic, taut, austere, and rather minimal, with a touch of color to give it life and depth, while remaining very much Renaissance drawing. The 3D images will take a completely different approach by deconstructing the layers of da Vinci's paintings, as well as illustrating letters exchanged by the story's main protagonists. They will also recreate part of a museum which belonged to one of the most important collectors of his time, bring to life the Hall of Five Hundred in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, the only place where da Vinci and Michelangelo worked opposite each other. These 3D images will be a tool to reconstruct history as well as scientific research and artistic investigation, turning this sometimes-technical subject into an accessible and hopefully entertaining film.