



questions that several generations of students brought to his classes over the past 30 years. He also wanted to adopt an alternative approach to Leonardo because the many gaps in the historical record prevent us from writing a full and accurate biography of the artist. Finally, this book serves as a vehicle to express his quite noticeable consternation with what he calls the “Da Vinci Worlds” that are so evident in our time.

Characterizing the book as an anti-biography, Campbell explains that this approach is intended to counter how Leonardo biographies and even some historical monographs are written as typologies, where Leonardo has come to *stand for* (his italics) or personify something larger than a localized historical experience.

[M]ass culture’s “Da Vinci” is a guarantee of one of Western culture’s most cherished myths, that of the “Renaissance Man,” and of European cultural supremacy. Academics have largely given up on those tarnished stereotypes, no less old-fashioned than ethnocentric and sexist, and in recent years the core of a racist identity politics. However, the myth of multitalented intellectual daring and innovation sits well with the twenty-first-century image of the *creative class* [his italics], the technological entrepreneur, those whose facility in “mak-

ing connections” marks them out as supreme achievers (pp. 15–16).

Campbell says his alternative approach allows him to place Leonardo in terms of his own historical moment, remove the taint of terms used to describe the artist, and his “rigorous scholarship” will make Leonardo unfamiliar to us. In other words,

the goal is not to produce a fussy academic critique of popular stereotypes but a Leonardo that can be less easily instrumentalized by the forces that shape our twenty-first-century mental ecology, a description that might resist the banalities of the Da Vinci Industry. It seeks to make Leonardo unfamiliar, in ways that will allow the sometimes shocking character of the writings and images to resonate in their own historical moment as well as ours (p. 16).

The *Da Vinci—The Genius* exhibition at the Boston Science Museum is used as an example of what Da Vinci Worlds are. This show, Campbell tells us, included art in an entertaining surrogate form bordering on parody due to how the curators displayed animated presentations of Leonardo works such as *The Last Supper*, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, and *Vitruvian Man*—but exhibited no authentic paintings or sculptures. Its statement, which Campbell believes taints our understanding of who Leonardo was, “might be taken as the credo of the Da Vinci Worlds, the faith-based justification of the importance of science over history” (p. 58). It read:

Da Vinci had a remarkable, inquisitive mind, an insatiable curiosity about the world around him and the ability to conceptualize, design and construct tools and technologies. These essential STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) skills are vital to today’s students and tomorrow’s innovators (p. 58).

Campbell’s telling purposefully presents a more fragmented and less

BOOKS

LEONARDO DA VINCI: AN UNTRACEABLE LIFE

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Reviewed by Amy Ione, *The Diatropé Institute*, Berkeley, CA. Email: amy.ione.2@gmail.com.

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Recently released and beautifully illustrated, *Leonardo da Vinci: An Untraceable Life* by art historian Steven J. Campbell was shaped by interconnected influences. One was the

coherent view of Leonardo da Vinci as an artist and a person. However, his decision to focus on him primarily as an artist—without integrating his investigations into nature, technologies, optics, math, neuroscience, and so forth—limits the analysis and obscures the degree to which Leonardo's notebook writings and drawings offer extensive documentation about his multifaceted process of exploration. More importantly here, the author's narrow focus on Leonardo's art in terms of his contemporary art community misses the degree to which Leonardo harnessed his art training to explore an array of subjects that today do not come under the standard rubric of art. While Leonardo's own writings and exquisite drawings are not autobiographical or psychologically self-reflective, they do offer us endless details as to how he innovatively pursued a breathtaking range of topics that interested him.

The book unfolds with Chapter 1 serving to fully flesh out Campbell's trepidation about the Da Vinci Worlds, particularly in terms of how traditional cultural spaces like museums, such as the Boston Science Museum example mentioned above, have created spectacular simulations and media spectacles. The thrust of this is that Da Vinci World presentations are not only organized to deliver an experience but are also filled with misinformation, clichés, and myths as artworks are transformed into electronic reproductions and entertainment. He says that although he originally intended for this chapter to serve as a straightforward primer on Leonardo's art, it morphed into the Da Vinci Worlds trope, because “you have to follow the money” (p. 13). His extensive commentary on *Salvator Mundi* underscores this choice. Comments on work by conservators and scientists who look closely at art to ascertain its age, authenticity, and so forth offer some balance, as do notations showing that opinions vary even among art historians.

Chapter 2 explains that this anti-biography is a counternarrative to what he sees as the highly debatable

facts that now compose the structure of the modern Leonardo biography. That biographical hodgepodge presents Leonardo as the stereotype of the flamboyant social and sexual outsider, the religious agnostic, the vegetarian, and the humanitarian. Campbell begins the chapter by taking issue with the common assumption that Leonardo's drawing of the Arno valley was made by him and was the first landscape drawing we know of currently. Although it is dated by Leonardo on the upper left-hand corner, Campbell argues it was made as a part of a routine workshop process in Verrocchio's studio and tagged as a Leonardo later. His arguments, which seem no more convincing than the writings attributing the sketch to Leonardo, were a part of the author's quest to show that the trope that Leonardo was “ahead of his time” is the kind of statement that arises because biographical writing since the nineteenth century has centered on categories like personhood, identity, and subjectivity. To be sure, there are many examples of elaborate landscapes in paintings even before Leonardo's time, but I think the counter-argument is that this is a drawing, and Leonardo signed it. Overall, this chapter served as a reminder that art history is a qualitative field and opinions differ significantly.

One of the larger points in Chapter 2 is that later biographical categories are inapplicable when examining a premodern individual like Leonardo. Moreover, in Leonardo's case, the challenge is even more daunting because his writings do not chart the events of his life or his art commissions. Rather, according to Campbell, they reveal the permeable nature of the premodern self because Leonardo recorded things like expenses and paraphrases of classical authors. Even his writing on painting, according to Campbell, has been misinterpreted. Campbell concludes that one of the reasons Leonardo appears so incoherent in the notebooks is that his life had little stability, and political crises made it difficult for him to complete projects. Strangely, Campbell gives minimal attention to the scope, trajectories, and

analytic details that compose the notebook drawings and how they show that the artist came back to certain subjects repeatedly over the course of his life. Water, movement, mathematics, and anatomy are among the areas that were repeatedly revisited in different stages of his life.

While Chapter 2 begins the argument that the standard biographies of Leonardo are constructed from sources that postdate the artist's 1519 death by decades, Chapter 3 is intended to amplify Campbell's point that the biographies are inadequate and have shaped the conversation in both useful and misleading ways. Much of Chapter 2 is arguable because Vasari drew heavily on Michelangelo, who was very much one of Leonardo's contemporaries and, indeed, the two of them crossed swords frequently. Later historical biographies by Giovanni Battista Venturi, Walter Pater, Paul Valéry, Sigmund Freud, Bernard Berenson, EH Gombrich, and Martin Kemp, as well as the many released in the twenty-first century, are examined. While Campbell explains that disagreements abound in these critiques, he is perhaps more concerned that too many nonspecialists have polluted the well, as he puts it. “Such books will lead off with Leonardo as the proto-scientist, *ahead of his times* [Campbell's italics] as usual, rather than Leonardo the painter and sculptor” (p. 150). According to Campbell, by the twentieth century Leonardo became representative of creative genius, for better or worse, and the casualty is art-historical expertise.

The commentary in the book is often contradictory, but given how much he rails against writings by those who are not trained art history specialists, I was somewhat surprised to find that in Chapter 3 he presents the *Leonardo* journal in a favorable light (although the book gives no indication that he read articles from the journal). Campbell writes:

In 1967, a group of historians, scientists, and artists led by Frank Malina had founded an organiza-

tion named after Leonardo, with an eponymous journal that sought to further collaboration between technology and the sciences, the visual arts, and research in the humanities. While the journal *Leonardo's* main activity consisted in documenting “ways in which artists have appropriated almost all fields of scientific research and new technologies,” it has featured work by historians and art historians, including original research on Leonardo (p. 149).

Contrary to the deconstructive approach of previous chapters, Chapter 4 attempts to reassemble and produce the historical Leonardo so many have imagined by looking at the shape of premodern lives. Outlining the conditions of life-writing in the pre-modern era, this chapter compares Leonardo's writings with those of artists like Ghiberti, Alberti, Michelangelo, and Cellini, all of whom wrote autobiographical texts. Campbell asks why, on the one hand, Leonardo not only refrained from narrating his own biography but also excluded references to his own body in his writing. Pointing out that Leonardo's writings are complex, he talks about how, in his view, they “betray a profound ambivalence about the materiality of the human and animal bodily life that he saw, touched, smelled, and drew” (p. 174). Campbell also thinks that the artist's outlier status was a factor, as was his sense of rivalry with literary professionals.

In one section (that I admittedly found rather incoherent), Campbell argues that Leonardo's elevation of painting over poetry had a neurological basis. A more convincing assertion was that the absence of the body from his writing was a way of undercutting the bias of his time against those who labored with their hands. In addition, Campbell says:

Leonardo's own writing constituted a mirror for selfhood that was gathered together and embodied only on the page. This written Leonardo provides us too with a mirror of sorts, a cloudy one in which we

will never be able to see the man himself in other than fragmentary terms, no matter what present-day biographers might claim (p. 204).

Chapter 5, titled “Leonardo, Extended,” was the most disappointing chapter in the book because I had high hopes that he would add clarity to Leonardo as a premodern thinker and maker. Campbell says this chapter was intended to underscore that Leonardo was not a solitary, beleaguered voice but rather serves as a point of relay within the collective production of knowledge in a time quite different from our own. Grounded in an analysis of Leonardo's artworks, their reception by other artists, and the art community, topics include the industry of Leonardo replicas, the *Leonardeschi*, painting as atmosphere, and transregional Leonardo.

The thrust here is Campbell's claim that any effort to explain Leonardo in terms that isolate him from his milieu is misguided and anachronistic, because seeing him in terms of his milieu means something more than “historical context.” Unfortunately, this chapter is so art-focused that it essentially misses large swaths of Leonardo that we know of from his notebooks. As Campbell points out on the opening pages, the copious Leonardo manuscripts reveal his involvement in multiple fields of knowledge in the decades on either side of the year 1500—optics, anatomy, engineering, hydrodynamics, natural history, and so forth. This chapter does not enhance our comprehension of how these interests were integrated contemporaneously, and it is unclear why Campbell totally sidestepped this element of Leonardo's life story. The artist's pursuits of these endeavors included integrating his work with physicians (e.g., Marc'Antonio della Torre), engineers, and an array of others of his time.

In summary, this book's narrow focus is its weakness. Whereas Campbell makes gestures at times to Leonardo's research on optics and why some categorize him as a “modern scientist,” he does not grapple with the

more nuanced and complex reality of this artist in both modern and non-modern terms. The book's conclusion affirms that this anti-biography is not in a set of a priori psychopathologies that have, he believes, dominated biographies of Leonardo since Freud, and possibly as early as Pater. These biographers, he claims, have become the mainstay of the Da Vinci Worlds. His alternative, *Leonardo da Vinci: An Untraceable Life*, is intended to show a Leonardo “entangled with other lives, shaped by the clamor of the workshop as well as the performative poise of the court, of random encounters and serendipitous connections” (p. 259). Campbell's point here is that advocates of “learning from Leonardo” chose not to learn that he writes time and again against the instrumentalization of knowledge. Rather, this artist saw the natural world in terms of its marvelous singularities, patterns, and deep structures.

At the end of *Leonardo da Vinci: An Untraceable Life*, Campbell tells us that two of the most powerful contemporary responses to Leonardo have been stage performances. In 2022, Jerron Herman, a Black disabled performer, did a solo dance titled *Vitruvian*. Also mentioned is Mary Zimmerman's *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (1993 and 2022). In her play, multiracial performers kinetically visualize his inventions and scientific demonstrations with their bodies. Campbell applauds both these works because he believes we know so little about Leonardo, because all of his biographies are a form of fiction, and because we need fictions about him that are better informed. These kinds of fictions, he claims, show respect for the opacity and unknowability in the life of another, in this case Leonardo.

Those interested in a broader scope might prefer the various interpretations based on the few solid details we have about Leonardo's life. These are projects that offer more balanced discussions. Among them are *Leonardo da Vinci*, a two-part film by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon and A. Richard Turner's *Inventing Leonardo*. The former

was released in 2024 and integrated commentary from interdisciplinary specialists [1]. *Inventing Leonardo* was published in 1993. Although it is somewhat out of date, it is also less opinionated than Campbell's book. I have suggested it here because, like Campbell, Turner acknowledges that the lack of known facts has created an array of mythologies. Yet he seems more open to the value of acknowledging that histories are always incomplete and subject to re-interpretations. In Turner's view, "The one thing that seems certain is that there are new Leonardos yet to be born, for undefinable contingencies and impenetrable silences spur the ongoing project of interpretation" [2].

In closing, I'm not sure who the audience for this book is. I suppose art historians may find it informative, but those who see Leonardo as a person whose scope touched upon more than artmaking will likely find him too narrowly construed in Campbell's analysis. To be sure, Campbell's art-historical detail is scholarly, and copious notes are included. Yet his bias against what he calls "Outsider" scholarship doesn't give him enough space to adequately probe the breadth of Leonardo's accomplishments. His lack of attention to Leonardo's intense interest in anatomy, engineering, technology, and how nature works its wonders critically limits the scope and value of this book.

References

- 1 See my review: *Leonardo da Vinci*, September 2024, <https://leonardo.info/review/2024/09/leonardo-da-vinci>.
- 2 A. R. Turner, *Inventing Leonardo* (Knopf, 1993), 237.

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Amy Ione

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