

Press release
Exhibition
March 29–June 25, 2012
 Napoleon Hall

The *Saint Anne*, Leonardo da Vinci's Ultimate Masterpiece



Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*.
 After restoration. 1503–1519. Oil on wood.
 168 x 130 cm (original width: 112 cm). Musée du
 Louvre, Paris, Inv. 776 © RMN, musée du Louvre /
 René Gabriel Ojéda

**Salvatore Ferragamo is the
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 Delieuvin. Co-published by Musée du
 Louvre Editions and Officina Libraria.

The *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* is one of Leonardo da Vinci's most ambitious compositions. Celebrated already by those having visited the Florentine master's studio in the early stages of the painting's conception, this work was the culmination of a long process occupying the artist during the last twenty years of his life. To this day, a number of questions remain unanswered, particularly as to the origin of the commission, how the painting evolved, and its early history. Recently, several historical and scientific discoveries have provided important clues, although without resolving all of the doubts surrounding this work.

This exhibition aims to present the state of existing knowledge about this now restored masterpiece by bringing together, for the first time since the artist's death, all of the related works and documents. One hundred and thirty works are thus presented, including two exceptional loans: the Burlington House cartoon from the National Gallery in London and a group of twenty-two drawings by the master lent from the Royal Collection by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. These works allow visitors to explore the intellectual and artistic journey leading Leonardo to this particular lasting legacy, which has had considerable influence on the development of the arts, from the early sixteenth to the twentieth century.

The exhibition retraces the slow, deliberate and complex genesis of Leonardo's *Saint Anne*, left unfinished at the artist's death in 1519, by bringing together for the first time archival documents, composition sketches, preparatory studies, landscape studies and studio versions showing the various formal and iconographic solutions successively imagined by the master. The presentation of other painted works by Leonardo from the same period helps to establish the *Saint Anne* as the genuine consummation of the artist's lifelong investigations, his numerous and wide-ranging studies on the nature of art.

In order to fully characterize the ways in which this work marked a new departure in the history of art, the exhibition aims to situate the work within the iconographic tradition relating to its subject (the "Saint Anne trinity") and focuses on the immediate impact of the work on Italian art. In addition, more recent works inspired by Leonardo's interpretation of this subject, by artists such as Delacroix, Degas and Max Ernst, bear witness to the lasting influence of this masterpiece.

The project to restore Leonardo's *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* was launched in June 2010, in collaboration with the Centre de Restauration et de Restauration des Musées de France (C2RMF). These efforts have successfully revived and returned clarity to this work, which had been greatly diminished due to discolored overpainting and multiple uneven varnish layers. Leonardo's incredible genius as a painter is now much more readily apparent through the *Saint Anne*. The painting also recovers a nearly sculptural depth and relief, with its intense palette of pigments ranging from lapis lazuli blue to red lacquers and rich grays and browns.

Exhibition curator: Vincent Delieuvin, curator, Department of Paintings, Musée du Louvre.

Centered around the newly restored Louvre painting and the Burlington House cartoon (National Gallery, London), the exhibition is organized into two main sections: the first explores Leonardo's conceptual labors and pictorial experimentation behind the creation of this major work, while the second examines the seminal influence of this masterpiece on later artists.

The exhibition's introduction addresses the iconographic challenges raised by the subject of this commission awarded to Leonardo: the Virgin and Child with Saint Anne, also known as the "Saint Anne trinity." In the sixteenth century, iconographic traditions for this type of subject had already been established for some time and were highly codified. Several painted and sculpted works included in the exhibition illustrate the usual compositional approaches, favoring a strictly organized trinity devoid of movement, with figures either aligned one above the other in a vertical presentation, or juxtaposed horizontally. This section also deals with the delicate question of the patron behind the commission for the *Saint Anne*, through two works illustrating the most likely hypotheses, although no surviving documents allow us to lend credence definitively to one more than the other: the first situating the work as a commission from Louis XII of France, suggested by a miniature representing his wife Anne of Brittany holding a Saint Anne trinity (Musée du Louvre, Paris) and the second as resulting from a Florentine commission, implied by the study drawn by Fra Bartolommeo for the altarpiece of the Palazzo Vecchio's Grand Council Chamber (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles).

Genesis and evolution of Leonardo's concept for the *Saint Anne*

The many preparatory drawings in Leonardo's hand, studio versions or period copies executed by other painters provide evidence of the changes made by the artist to his composition over time. All of these works reflect the master's tenacity in attempting to find the ideal solution for this iconography, through a continual process of renewal. In the end, Leonardo decided to meld the traditional horizontal or vertical approaches to the Saint Anne trinity, transforming a holy conversation frozen at a single moment in time into a scene emphasizing movement and natural interaction within a landscape. The hieratic image comes alive while also conveying a new symbolic interpretation of Christ's sacrifice.

The exhibition retraces the main stages in Leonardo da Vinci's execution of this commission, bringing together all known related works in a chronological presentation. Three compositional studies (from the British Museum in London, the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, and the Louvre) reveal the possible solutions considered by Leonardo before starting work on the Louvre painting. These small sketches are elements in a process referred to by the artist as *componimento inculto* ("intuitive or associative elaboration"), a rough platform for working out ideas, occasionally going so far as to create an utter confusion of shapes and lines, as in the British Museum drawing. After working through, then abandoning the solution shown in the cartoon held today at the National Gallery in London, Leonardo developed a different conception and drew a second cartoon in 1501—the one that Fra Pietro de Novellera describes in a letter to Isabella d'Este—using a presentation in which the positions of the three human characters are the reverse of those in the Louvre painting, depicting Saint Anne attempting to restrain the Virgin Mary so as to prevent her from separating the infant Jesus and the sacrificial lamb. This cartoon, now lost, is known mainly thanks to a copy by Brescianino (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) and the more personal reinterpretations offered by Raphael and Michelangelo, thus providing significant confirmation of its existence, occasionally challenged by some specialists.

Following this second composition in 1501, Leonardo devised an alternative, reversing the positions of the figures and representing Saint Anne in a more contemplative pose. All of these ideas, maturing over a period of several years, culminated in a third cartoon, which served as the basis for the Louvre painting. It corresponds to the under-drawing visible today by means of infrared reflectography. This cartoon is known through copies, which have until now been considered as reproductions with unexplained variations.

A marginal notation dating from 1503 found in an incunabulum held at the library of the University of Heidelberg by a researcher in 2005 indicates that work on the painting had already begun as of that date but was unfinished. Always a perfectionist, Leonardo made further modifications to almost all aspects of his composition while executing the painting, as evidenced by several sumptuous preparatory studies. Moreover, these drawings were used by the master's disciples to paint versions of the work at intermediate stages, including the lovely painting executed by a student held today at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. In 1516, Leonardo da Vinci left Italy for France, with the *Saint Anne* in tow, and continued to make further alterations, leaving the work unfinished at his death in 1519.

Leonardo's *Saint Anne*, or the art of painting

Without a doubt, the high point of this exhibition is the unprecedented opportunity to view the Louvre painting alongside the Burlington House cartoon. The large drawing from the National Gallery is the full expression of Leonardo's first vision of the Saint Anne theme upon being awarded the commission. The composition is considerably different from that of the Louvre painting, both from a formal standpoint and in terms of the iconographic approach: the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne are seated next to each other, in a horizontal presentation, and the infant Saint John the Baptist appears in the place of the lamb. The master therefore altered his conception in both its form and content.

Owing to the way in which the works are presented in this room, audiences will be able to view, for the very first time, the three drawings discovered on the back of the Louvre panel in 2008.



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Young Saint John the Baptist*. Around 1500. Black chalk, heightened with white. 141.5 x 104.6 cm. The National Gallery, London, NG 6337 © The National Gallery, London, Dist. RMN / National Gallery Photographic Department

The exhibition furthers greater understanding of the *Saint Anne* and its importance by including earlier works by the artist, such as the *Virgin and Child with Cat* (British Museum, London) or the *Virgin of the Rocks* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), which prefigure many of its formal and expressive aspects. These Virgin and Child compositions testify to Leonardo's quest to render in the most compelling manner the tenderness of the relationship between Jesus and the Virgin Mary, in particular by developing the interaction between these two characters through an especially lively and sensitive treatment of their body language and their exchange of glances.

Years later, when he was painting the *Saint Anne*, Leonardo was also working on a small number of other paintings, the study of which allows us to provide some explanations as to the development of his conception for the *Saint Anne*. In these works, we note similar explorations of the possibilities of movement and expression, the relationship between painting and sculpture, the way in which figures are set against a dark background or a landscape, etc. The master's variations on a number of themes—*La Gioconda*, shown here in a studio version (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), *Saint John the Baptist* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), the *Virgin with the Yarnwinder* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), and *Leda* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)—are telling examples of the artist's constantly renewed creativity.

Leonardo's *Saint Anne* as an object of fascination

In Florence, where it was conceived, the *Saint Anne* quickly drew considerable attention and can be seen as a watershed moment in the evolution of artistic language, inspiring many disciples and colleagues who sought to emulate Leonardo's style and technique in this work. Florentines were fascinated by the various cartoons executed by Leonardo and by the painted work, even in its initial rough outlines. Its influence can already be noted around the turn of the sixteenth century in works by Michelangelo, Raphael and Piero di Cosimo, among others. But its imprint also remained strong for the next generation of Florentine artists, the Mannerists, and especially Pontormo. The *Saint Anne* was at the center of an aesthetic whirlwind, nourishing an outpouring of creativity. For instance, Raphael conceived some of his paintings as homages to Leonardo (*La Belle Jardinière* or *Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, Musée du Louvre, Paris), whose genius inspired the younger artist toward greater maturity in his art. Michelangelo's tribute was more in the realm of confrontation, clearly making use of Leonardo's ideas, but imbuing his own interpretations with greater energy and dynamism. But Leonardo and Michelangelo can also be seen as sharing a penchant for leaving works in an unfinished state as a means of formal expression. The exhibition also explores the influence of Leonardo's *Saint Anne* among Milanese artists, through works by Cesare da Sesto, Bernardino Luini and Andrea Solario. In this less inventive artistic milieu, direct inspiration was the preferred tribute. After the *Saint Anne* had joined the collections of François I in France, Raphael and Andrea del Sarto rekindled their fascination with this work, in two paintings intended as gifts for the royal family (respectively, *The Holy Family of François I* and *Charity*, both in the Musée du Louvre, Paris), while Leonardo continued his work on the painting. Flemish painters were also influenced by the *Saint Anne*, including Joos van Cleve (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City) and Quentin Massys, who modeled his delicate *Virgin and Child with a Lamb* (Muzeum Narodowe, Poznan) on the work of the Florentine genius.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the painting was hung in the Salon Carré at the Louvre alongside other masterpieces of European painting. Copied by the period's leading artists, including Delacroix, Manet and Carpeaux, who were intrigued by its strong artistic statement, at once complex and natural, yet conveying a sense of strangeness, the *Saint Anne* was also to inspire tributes by Redon (*Homage to Leonardo da Vinci*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) and Ernst (*The Kiss*, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice). The work was also central to Freud's famous study on Leonardo da Vinci, after Pfister had alerted him to the shape of a vulture hidden in the folds of the Virgin's garment.



Odilon Redon, *Homage to Leonardo da Vinci*. Pastel. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Inv. A-6439 © Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Related events and publications

Publications

- Exhibition catalogue, edited by Vincent Delieuvin, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Officina Libraria. 45 euros.
- Exhibition album, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Officina Libraria. 8 euros.

The publication of these two works is made possible thanks to the support of ArjoWiggins Graphic.

Multimedia guide

Thanks to the Louvre's new partnership with Nintendo, the museum is currently preparing an innovative visitor's guide for its permanent collections and for the *Saint Anne* exhibition, which will be offered to the public starting in March 2012, based on 3D technology and made available on Nintendo's latest generation stereoscopic handheld consoles.

In the Auditorium du Louvre

Lecture

Friday, April 13 at 12:30 p.m.

Presentation of the exhibition

by Vincent Delieuvin, Musée du Louvre

Event in the series "Meaning of art, art of meaning. On interpretation in the visual arts"

Monday, March 26 at 6:30 p.m.

Images of devotion in the works of Leonardo and Raphael

by Robert Williams, University of California, Santa Barbara

Related film

From March 26 to June 25, in Alvéole 7 (meeting area for groups) under the Pyramid. Also aired by Arte on **April 8**, as part of a special day of programming dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci and the *Saint Anne* exhibition.

Léonard de Vinci, la restauration du siècle

Directed by Stan Neumann, France, 2012, 52 min. Co-produced by Nord-Ouest Documentaires, Arte and the Musée du Louvre. Available on DVD (co-published by Arte Développement and the Musée du Louvre) in March 2012.

Guided tours of the exhibition

For further information call +33 (0)1 40 20 52 63 or visit www.louvre.fr



Raffaello Sanzio or Santi, called Raphael, *Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, known as *La Belle Jardinière*. 1507-1508. Oil on wood. 122 x 80 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, Inv. 602 © RMN / Hervé Lewandowski

Visitor information

Hours

Open daily except Tuesdays from 9 a.m. to 5:45 p.m., until 9:45 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays, until 7:45 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

Admission fees

"Leonardo da Vinci's Ultimate Masterpiece, the *Saint Anne*" only: €11
Permanent collections + "Leonardo da Vinci's Ultimate Masterpiece, the *Saint Anne*": €14
Youths under 18, the unemployed, and holders of the "Louvre Jeunes", "Louvre Professionnels", or "Amis du Louvre" cards may access the exhibition directly without waiting in line and free of charge.

Further information

+33 (0)1 40 20 53 17 - www.louvre.fr



Leonardo da Vinci, *Study of a tree (verso)*. Red chalk. 19.1 x 15.3 cm. Inv. 12 431. The Royal Collection © 2012 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II