
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Quiviger, François. Leonardo da Vinci: Self, Art and Nature

Guita Lamsechi

Volume 43, numéro 2, printemps 2020

Transformative Translations in Early Modern Britain and France
Traductions transformatives dans la première modernité française et
britannique

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072225ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i2.34864>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lamsechi, G. (2020). Compte rendu de [Quiviger, François. Leonardo da Vinci: Self, Art and Nature]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(2), 404–406. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i2.34864>

showing “how that early Elizabethan book changed over the rest of the reign” (xxv).

MICHAEL O’CONNOR
St. Michael’s College
University of Toronto

Quiviger, François.

Leonardo da Vinci: Self, Art and Nature.

London: Reaktion Books, 2019. Pp. 221 + 71 colour ill. ISBN 978-1-78914-070-5 (hardcover) £15.95.

Leonardo da Vinci: Self, Art and Nature is a highly readable narrative on the world’s best-known artist. Here, Leonardo is viewed from multiple perspectives, including his reputation in our time as the creator of the most expensive painting ever sold, and during the High Renaissance when Leonardo was not only a celebrated artist but also a courtier, humanist, and mechanical engineer. Providing glimpses into his work as an interdisciplinary artist, François Quiviger addresses the personal and professional aspects of Leonardo’s diverse interests directly and succinctly. The goal of this small but very fine volume is to offer a tantalizing introduction to a historical figure that has already received attention and adulation from generations of scholars stretching as far back as the early sixteenth century to the first art historian, Giorgio Vasari.

Quiviger combines various strands of Leonardo scholarship to provide an engaging chronology of the artist’s life and work. He traces the artist’s biography through the evidence of Leonardo’s explorations of art and nature that frame his oeuvre as a painter, sculptor, cartographer, military engineer, and theatrical designer who produced automata and costumes for celebrations and tournaments. Readers are also treated to insights into Leonardo’s role as a court artist. His mastery of *sprezzatura*, the apparently effortless grace of a perfect courtier as defined by Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*, is found in Leonardo’s art and his demeanour.

Anecdotal evidence and art historical comparisons with his contemporaries reinforce Quiviger’s depiction of the artist’s cultural circumstances. Leonardo’s genteel personality expressed itself without the passions displayed

by rivals such as Michelangelo, yet his observations of facial articulation demonstrate the artist's interest in the muscular animation and physiognomic distortions that accompany emotional strain, the subtler communications of religious figures, and the subdued social personas that are displayed in his portraits of the Tuscan elite.

The unusually frank gaze of the female subject in the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci is considered within its particular historical moment through contemporary gender politics as well as through the lens of Renaissance Platonism. In the Platonic gaze, Quiviger finds two different mental and physical spaces that reflect the social conditions of the male patron who commissioned the painting and the woman who is its object. This commission brought Leonardo into contact with the foremost intellectual circles of Italian nobility. Ginevra herself was an educated member of the Florentine elite and a poet. Her portrait was painted for the Venetian ambassador Bernardo Bembo whose circles included Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, and Angelo Poliziano.

Quiviger takes us from Leonardo's intellectual influences to his entanglement in the political intrigues of the ruling Medici family in Florence, from which he ultimately emerged relatively unscathed. Sent by Lorenzo de' Medici to serve Ludovico (*il Moro*) Sforza in Milan, he later served their political successors as well. At the end of the fifteenth century, Leonardo was employed not as an artist but as a military engineer for the son of Pope Alexander IV, Cesare Borgia, whom Quiviger describes as having the personality of a Mafia boss.

Leonardo's drawings for the production of artillery and military machines already produced in the last quarter of the fifteenth century are considered in relation to his artistic apprenticeship in Verrocchio's studio. Referring to this early training, Quiviger allows us to understand that learning about the properties of smoke raised by heating metals for sculpture are complementary to Leonardo's later preoccupations as a military designer. The smoky effect of *sfumato* achieved in his later paintings and drawings may derive from his experiences with smoke and fire power; however, this effect can also be understood in the broader context of Leonardo's studies of nature, optics, and states of matter. His sketches that explore the material properties of curling hair, the movement of rushing water interrupted by other objects, and smoke mingled with the dust raised by the agonistic movements of men and horses are rendered as the furls of *sfumato* that animate his battle scenes and the *Deluge* series.

We discover the beginnings of this hazy effect in the finger smudging Leonardo used to blur the edges in his early works that elide distinctions between figures and their landscape backgrounds. Quiviger informs us that the artistic innovation of *sfumato* results as much from experiments involving smoke, as well as interest in the science of optics and the effects of light and reflected colour, as from a pre-modern conception of the interconnectedness of all objects in nature.

The varied threads of a practical studio education, studies of plants and flowers, minerals, optics, anatomy, corporeal movement, and facial expression, as well as the humanist education Leonardo encountered among the Italian intelligentsia, are pulled together in Quiviger's narrative. Guided by masterful prose, as we alight upon paintings, drawings, and the artist's own writings, we discern their multiple functions in service of his patron's political goals, self-fashioning, or courtly entertainments. The *Trattato della pittura* contains both the artist's advice to his own assistants and his contribution to the intellectual debate of the *paragone*—disputations on a rivalry between the arts of painting and poetry, for example—that edified and pleased courtly companies.

The research materials that provide a foundation for the interpretation of Leonardo's life and work here are gleaned from the lexicon of earlier art historical scholarship, yet these references are also complemented by digital collections and repositories in which Quiviger invites new generations of Leonardo scholars to find fresh alternatives for comparative study of the foremost interdisciplinary artist of the High Renaissance.

GUITA LAMSECHI
Carleton University

Renck, Anneliese Pollock.

Female Authorship, Patronage, and Translation in Late Medieval France from Christine de Pizan to Louise Labé.

Texts & Transitions 13. Turnhout: Brepols, 2018. xx, 251 p. + 26 ill. ISBN 978-2-503-56921-5 (relié) €85.

Le propos d'Anneliese Pollock Renck dans *Female Authorship, Patronage, and Translation in Late Medieval France*, est ambitieux et vient à point nommé :