

Newly identified portrait of Leonardo da Vinci to go on display for the first time

Announcement marks the 500th anniversary of Leonardo's death on 2 May 1519

A newly identified sketch of the Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci will go on public display for the first time later this month in ***Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing*** at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace (24 May – 13 October 2019). Selected entirely from the unrivalled holdings of the Royal Collection, the exhibition is the largest display of Leonardo's work in more than 65 years and marks the 500th anniversary of the artist's death.

The drawing is one of only two surviving portraits of Leonardo made during the artist's lifetime. While undertaking research for The Queen's Gallery exhibition, Martin Clayton, Head of Prints and Drawings, Royal Collection Trust, identified the sketch as a study of Leonardo made by an assistant shortly before the master's death in 1519. The only other contemporary image of Leonardo is by his pupil, Francesco Melzi, and was produced at around the same time.

Both portraits of Leonardo will go on display alongside 200 drawings by the artist at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace in ***Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing***. The exhibition explores the full range of Leonardo's interests – painting, sculpture, architecture, anatomy, engineering, cartography, geology and botany – providing a comprehensive survey of the life of Leonardo and the workings of his mind. Leonardo believed that visual evidence was more persuasive than academic argument and that an image conveyed knowledge more accurately and concisely than any words. Few of his surviving drawings were intended for others to see: drawing served as his laboratory, allowing him to work out his ideas on paper and search for the universal laws that he believed underpinned all of creation.

The newly identified image of Leonardo is found on a double-sided sheet of studies. On both sides of the paper are detailed studies by Leonardo of a horse's leg, made in preparation for an equestrian monument – one of three such monuments planned by the artist during his lifetime, none of which was ever completed. The sheet was then used by another artist (probably an unidentified assistant of Leonardo) to sketch two heads: a handsome smiling youth and a pensive old man with a full beard.

Exhibition curator Martin Clayton said, 'If you compare this sketch with Francesco Melzi's portrait of Leonardo, you can see strong indications that this too is a depiction of the artist. The elegant straight nose, the line of the beard rising diagonally up the cheek to the ear, a ringlet falling from the moustache at the corner of the mouth, and the long wavy hair are all exactly as Melzi showed them in his portrait. Leonardo was renowned for his well-kept and luxuriant beard, at a time when relatively few men were bearded – though the beard was rapidly coming into fashion at this time.'

‘Alongside Melzi’s portrait, this is the only other contemporary likeness of Leonardo. In the sketch, he is aged about 65 and appears a little melancholy and world-weary. However, the presence of the portrait alongside studies for another grand equestrian monument shows that Leonardo’s ambitions remained undimmed in later life.’

The portrait of Leonardo by Melzi is likely to have been drawn from the life. The chalk is more richly handled and varied in its textures than in other drawings attributed to Melzi, and it is conceivable that Leonardo himself added some finishing touches. The sheet is discoloured and shows other signs of having been framed and hung in the light at an early date. It is probable, therefore, that this is the portrait recorded in 1568 by the great biographer Giorgio Vasari as hanging in Melzi’s villa as a memento of his former master. Leonardo bequeathed his thousands of drawings and dozens of notebooks to Melzi, who spent the next 50 years looking after these papers and attempting to put them into order.

Other highlights of The Queen’s Gallery exhibition include Leonardo’s ***Studies of hands for the Adoration of the Magi*** (c.1481), also on public display for the first time. While this appears to be a blank sheet of paper, examination in ultraviolet light has revealed ‘disappeared’ drawings of great beauty, and visitors will be able to see these ‘recovered’ drawings in a full-size ultraviolet image. Other major works on display are studies for ***The Last Supper*** and many of Leonardo’s groundbreaking anatomical studies, such as ***The Fetus in the Womb*** (c.1511).

The drawings in the Royal Collection have been together as a group since Leonardo’s death and were probably acquired in Charles II’s reign. Leonardo was revered in his day as a painter, but he completed only around 20 paintings. He was respected as a sculptor and architect, but no sculpture or buildings by him survive; he was a military and civil engineer who plotted with Machiavelli to divert the river Arno, but the scheme was never realised. As a scientist, he dissected 30 human corpses with the intention of compiling an illustrated treatise on anatomy, and other treatises on light, water, botany, mechanics and much else besides, but none of these was ever finished. As so much of Leonardo’s work was unrealised, many of his finest achievements survive only in his drawings, which provide an unparalleled insight into the workings of the artist’s mind.

Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing at The Queen’s Gallery, London, is one of a nationwide series of exhibitions of the artist’s drawings from the Royal Collection throughout 2019. It follows 12 simultaneous exhibitions at museums and galleries across the UK (until 6 May 2019). Later in the year, a selection of 80 drawings will travel to The Queen’s Gallery, Edinburgh, to form the largest exhibition of Leonardo’s works ever shown in Scotland (22 November 2019 – 15 March 2020). Collectively, these 14 exhibitions offer the widest-ever UK audience the opportunity to see the work of this extraordinary artist.

Ends

***Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing* (24 May – 13 October 2019)
The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, London**

***Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing* (22 November 2019 – 15 March 2020)
The Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh**

For more information, please visit www.rct.uk/leonardo500/london

A selection of images will be made available on www.picselect.com from 10am Thursday, 2 May.

For further information please contact the Royal Collection Trust Press Office, +44 (0)20 7839 1377, press@rct.uk

Additional photographs and B-roll footage is available from Press Association

Notes to Editors

Royal Collection Trust, a department of the Royal Household, is responsible for the care of the Royal Collection and manages the public opening of the official residences of The Queen. Income generated from admissions and from associated commercial activities contributes directly to The Royal Collection Trust, a registered charity. The aims of The Trust are the care and conservation of the Royal Collection, and the promotion of access and enjoyment through exhibitions, publications, loans and educational programmes. Royal Collection Trust's work is undertaken without public funding of any kind.

The Royal Collection is among the largest and most important art collections in the world, and one of the last great European royal collections to remain intact. It comprises almost all aspects of the fine and decorative arts, and is spread among some 15 royal residences and former residences across the UK, most of which are regularly open to the public. The Royal Collection is held in trust by the Sovereign for her successors and the nation, and is not owned by The Queen as a private individual.

The Royal Collection contains by far the greatest collection of drawings by Leonardo da Vinci. The group of more than 550 sheets has remained together since Leonardo's death in 1519. Because of the potential for damage from exposure to light, these very delicate works on paper can never be on permanent display and are kept in carefully controlled conditions in the Print Room at Windsor Castle. All the drawings can be viewed online on the Royal Collection Trust website at www.rct.uk/collection.