

# Leonardo the Myth alongside Leonardo the Architect

Ruairi Smith

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*In May 2021, Ruairi Smith completed her undergraduate degree in Contemporary Studies and French at the University of King's College, on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in Nova Scotia, Canada. Next, she will study Art History at the University of St Andrew's in Scotland. At the time of this publication, she is tree-planting in northern British Columbia—spending her free moments reading MFK Fisher, playing euchre, and eagerly awaiting CJLPA's first edition.*

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**Fig 1.** Château de Chambord, France. Benh LIEU SONG, CC BY-SA 3.0 (disclaimer of warranties included), <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons (unmodified). <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chambord\\_Castle\\_Northwest\\_facade.jpg?fbclid=IwAR3ORG96zd-Y\\_1TW7aVVGm8UgzSBUG-A1dEHSgkp2Bu3OnD77\\_1E7tISEvs](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chambord_Castle_Northwest_facade.jpg?fbclid=IwAR3ORG96zd-Y_1TW7aVVGm8UgzSBUG-A1dEHSgkp2Bu3OnD77_1E7tISEvs)>.

Leonardo da Vinci is a constant of the Western cultural tradition. We grow up with a vague sense of Leonardo's achievements, knowing him to be a general titan of art and science. Our cultural attachment to Leonardo, however, has expanded beyond the individual himself. In the mid-sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari writes voraciously about Leonardo in *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. This mammoth work offers Vasari's take on the 'great' artists of history and his own time, thus marking the birth of art history as a discipline in the West. Vasari enjoys great and lasting political, cultural, and artistic influence. His book is dedicated to the powerful Cosimo de' Medici, and his Lives discuss and pay homage to well-established Florentine and Roman artists. This political patronage solidifies a precedent of systematic exclusion that we continue to navigate in our own contemporary. Reading Vasari with a critical eye, we understand that his artist biographies conceal just as much as they reveal.

History itself is a creative, authored, and imperfect account of the past. In the essay 'What Men Saw: Vasari's Life of Leonardo da

Vinci and the Image of the Renaissance Artist', art historian Patricia Rubin supports this claim. She writes, 'Renaissance biography was a commemorative art. Its aim was to preserve and to exalt the names and deeds of worthy men in order to provide examples, both of actions and of their rewards.'<sup>1</sup> The Leonardo that we are introduced to and encouraged to remember is necessarily a mythologised version of Leonardo, prompting us to ask how exactly Vasari codifies the myth of Leonardo through biography, and how we might continuously be rehearsing this myth.<sup>2</sup>

The career of Leonardo, the original 'Renaissance man', is too polyvalent and illustrious to digest at once. In this research paper, I will focus on Leonardo the architect, specifically in regards to the Château de Chambord (fig 1). I will consider primary sources

- 1 Patricia Rubin, 'What Men Saw: Vasari's Life of Leonardo Da Vinci and the Image of the Renaissance Artist' (1990) 13(1) Art History 34.
- 2 Janette Vusich, 'Leonardo: a legend in his own time' (lecture, The University of King's College, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 16 January 2020).

such as Leonardo's own writing on and sketching of architecture, alongside secondary sources which allege his involvement in the design of Chambord. The central question that puzzles art historians is the extent to which the architect Domenico da Cortona relied on Leonardo's original sketches in his ultimate design and construction of the French château. My objective, however, is not to make any final claims about design origins. Rather, it is to consider the legitimacy of Leonardo's association with the project, and examine the value we attach to individual achievement. How does the knowledge that the great 'artist-genius' himself may have been the mind behind Chambord affect our appreciation of the already awe-inspiring architecture? Does Leonardo's relation to this architecture necessarily change what we see? To better understand these questions, I will engage with Vasari and Rubin, as well as other art historians such as Anthony Blunt, Ludwig Heydenreich, Patrick Ponsot, and Hidemichi Tanaka. In doing so, I hope more clearly to discern the relationship between Leonardo the myth and Leonardo the architect.

In his *Lives*, Vasari endeavours to elevate painting to its rightful place as an honorable liberal art, alongside grammar, rhetoric, and music. To do so, Vasari must distance art from its connection to manual labour and establish it as an intellectual pursuit, associated with divinity itself. Vasari's affinity for melodrama comes across from the very start of Leonardo's biography:

The greatest gifts often rain down upon human bodies through celestial influences as a natural process, and sometimes in a supernatural fashion a single body is lavishly supplied with such beauty, grace, and ability that wherever the individual turns, each of his actions is so divine that he leaves behind all other men and clearly make himself known as a genius endowed by God (which he is) rather than created by human artifice.<sup>3</sup>

In the soap opera that is Vasari's *Lives*, Leonardo holds star status. Furthermore, Leonardo is an intellectual ('Vasari's portrayal of Leonardo, who is presented as a philosophizing artist.')

<sup>4</sup> His art is so natural that it creates reality. He is a great man who is the creator and definer of his zeitgeist.<sup>5</sup>

Vasari explains away Leonardo's inability to finish projects, arguing that it is a result of the artist's unending curiosity. Leonardo famously only finished a handful of pieces in his career and although Vasari would have desired more completed pieces, he writes: '[T]he truth is that Leonardo's splendid and exceptional mind was hindered by the fact that he was too eager and that his constant search to add excellence to excellence and perfection to perfection [is] the reason his work was slowed by his desire.'<sup>6</sup> As with all biography, the work tells us as much about the author as it does the subject. Vasari and his peers prize a certain heroic individualism and we must read his work within this context. If nothing else, the art historical canon is a study of imperfect practitioners who represent their imperfect realities. History, we are told, rhymes more than it repeats. As we explore the rhythm of the art historical canon, we unearth Vasari's own biases and eccentricities riddled throughout his life of Leonardo.

3 Giorgio Vasari, 'The Life of Leonardo Da Vinci, Florentine Painter and Sculptor (1452–1519)' in Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (first published 1568, reissue edn, Oxford University Press 2008) 285.

4 Rubin (n 1) 35.

5 Vasari (n 3) 290.

6 *ibid* 292.

Notwithstanding the author's fingerprints on the work, Rubin argues that Vasari paints a lively picture of Leonardo, as a man we want to know and remember. She asserts that Vasari did 'know Leonardo in ways that we cannot. Friends and acquaintances of Vasari's ... had known Leonardo and could supply their reminiscences. And there were certainly echoes of Leonardo's words still to be caught in Florence in the 1520s when Vasari arrived there.'<sup>7</sup> Vasari's extravagant and sometimes absurd tone is distracting, but Rubin reminds us that under the exorbitant layers lies a certain intimacy with Leonardo. Leonardo's notebooks offer an insight into the artist's perception of himself, but Vasari presents us with what 'men' saw when they turned their gaze towards Leonardo. Vasari's contemporary cultural appraisal of Leonardo 'is a fabrication, not a fiction'. Rubin goes on to write that 'with Vasari's biography, Leonardo entered history as a charming, complex and compelling character. He is associated with the highest goals of art and with the marvelous powers needed to investigate them.'<sup>8</sup> In his *Lives*, Vasari sets into motion the mythical Leonardo, who then marches across history, enchanting and engrossing us right up until the present day.

Complicating the narrative is intimidating and hard, but also enriching and essential. In her influential essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', Linda Nochlin writes that 'when we ask the right questions about the conditions for producing art ... there will no doubt have to be some discussion of the situational concomitants of intelligence and talent generally, not merely of artistic genius.'<sup>9</sup> Nochlin contends that we must question norms and deeply ponder why they seem natural and set in stone. When we do so, Leonardo emerges from under the shrouded veil of the artist-genius, into the light of a much more complexly interesting artistic and political network of collaboration and cooperation.

The myth of Leonardo casts its shadow across the Château de Chambord, a formidable castle nestled in the French countryside. Built between 1519 and 1547, Chambord is palatial. It is symmetrically bookended by rounded corner towers, with a roof forested by chimneys, turrets, and spires. In his 1952 article 'Leonardo Da Vinci, Architect of Francis I', Heydenreich argues that 'it is known that in the last years of his life, on the banks of the Loire, Leonardo da Vinci worked out for his royal master—no doubt Francis I's request—a vast project for the amelioration of the Sologne.'<sup>10</sup> These improvements were to take the form of a château named Romorantin, for the king's mother. In line with Vasari's characterisation of Leonardo, Heydenreich describes the artist-architect as 'the most universal of Renaissance artist-philosophers', and continues:

This castle of Chambord as it was in fact built—enormous and fantastic—is perhaps the only "ideal architecture" of the renaissance ever carried out. And the singularity of its conception can only be explained by the intellectual cooperation of two minds gifted with similar creative ingenuity: Francis I and Leonardo da Vinci.<sup>11</sup>

All this talk of universality and idealism is simultaneously born out of and feeds into the myth of Leonardo. Heydenreich merges the political and the aesthetic, contending that Chambord's uniqueness

7 Rubin (n 1) 39–40.

8 *ibid* 43.

9 Linda Nochlin, 'From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (*ARTnews*, 30 May 2015) <[www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/](http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/)> accessed 9 March 2021.

10 Ludwig Heydenreich, 'Leonardo Da Vinci, Architect of Francis I' *The Burlington Magazine* (1952) 94(595) 277.

11 *ibid* 276 and 285.

could only be the result of a collaboration between the king (munificent patron) and Leonardo (celebrated artist-genius).

Tanaka, in 'Leonardo Da Vinci, Architect of Chambord?', endeavours to determine what hand Leonardo had in the architecture of Chambord. Much in step with Heydenreich, he writes:

None of Leonardo's surviving architectural plans is clearly intended for the château. And yet the initial inspiration for Chambord—for its square keep on a central plan, with four round corner towers and a spectacular double spiral staircase at its heart—could hardly have come from an ordinary architect.<sup>12</sup>

Both scholars agree that Leonardo had a hand in the design of Chambord, but they differ in the extent to which they discern this participation.

Heydenreich is convinced that the singularity of Leonardo's genius establishes his clear and substantial role in the design. By contrast, Tanaka concludes that it is likely Leonardo drew up initial plans for Romorantin and that, after Leonardo's death, Cortona took them up for Chambord and naturally modified them. Tanaka asserts that Leonardo 'must have prepared [the plans for Romorantin] in detail, so it is entirely possible that his plans for that palace were closely studied and even adopted by Cortona for the new project replacing it.'<sup>13</sup> Blunt echoes Tanaka's argument—an argument that emphasizes the layers of cooperative design that went into the ultimate design of Chambord. Blunt, in his seminal book *Art and Architecture in France, 1500–1700*, expresses skepticism of Heydenreich's unwavering commitment to his thesis being based on stirring yet ambiguous evidence. Blunt asserts:

[Heydenreich] maintains that Leonardo was responsible for the conception of Chambord, but the arguments in favor of this view are not quite conclusive. On the other hand, it is certain that Leonardo designed the château which Francis intended to build for his mother at Romorantin, for which drawings survive.<sup>14</sup>

Leonardo died on 2 May 1519, and the planning of Romorantin stopped abruptly. It is likely, however, that Cortona dusted off these drafts when he began his work on Chambord that same year. This possibility of Chambord's cooperative design does not fit within the bounds of Vasari's singular definition of greatness: the individual and original genius.

Let us take as an example the attic windows at Chambord. Tanaka postulates that the similarities between Leonardo's drawings for Romorantin and the actual design of Chambord's stately windows are no coincidence: 'A window which Leonardo drew for Romorantin is very similar to an attic window at Chambord, in that both are rectangular and have scallop-shell pediments as well as three ornamental vases.'<sup>15</sup> Tanaka considers it feasible that Leonardo never intended to build the château at Chambord, but that his designs were nonetheless used as a guide to the younger Cortona for his great architectural masterpiece.

12 Hidemichi Tanaka, 'Leonardo Da Vinci, Architect of Chambord?' (1992) 13(25) *Artibus Et Historiae* 85.

13 *ibid.* 94.

14 Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France, 1500–1700* (Yale University Press 1999) 276.

15 Tanaka (n 12) 100.

As time passes and we move further from the spring of 1519, it becomes increasingly difficult to completely solve this particular Leonardo-related quandary. Over the years, the château has been remodelled and restored, making it harder to trace the genius of Leonardo, if it was there at all in the first place. 'Subsequent modifications in a more refined French style have obscured the original Italian design ... making it all the more difficult to detect the hand of Leonardo.'<sup>16</sup> This possible 'Frenchification' of original Italian design (which would correspond with Francis' efforts to strengthen central power in France and expand the French empire) may explain Blunt's problems with Heydenreich's claim. Blunt notes that 'in its general appearance Chambord is entirely French and still largely medieval. The massive round towers with their conical tops could be matched in any fifteenth-century château.'<sup>17</sup> In this way, capricious history plays games with art historians, who are certain. In 'Les terrasses du donjon de Chambord: un projet de Léonard de Vinci?', Ponsot adeptly concludes: 'D'une certaine manière, tous ces constituants mal connus du passage du temps contribuent à rendre plus difficile encore l'interprétation d'une œuvre hors du commun.'<sup>18</sup> ('In a certain way, all of these little-known elements of the passage of time contribute to making an extraordinary work even more difficult to interpret.') Because of the uncertain factors of time and memory, it is almost impossible to demonstrate decisively Leonardo's connection to Chambord.

We always bring ourselves to the act of interpreting. This reality is beautifully articulated by Peter Schjeldahl: 'I like to say that contemporary art consists of all art works, five thousand years or five minutes old, that physically exist in the present. We look at them with contemporary eyes, the only kinds of eyes that there ever are.'<sup>19</sup> Our attempts to discern any obvious trace of Leonardo in the remarkable Chambord prove fruitless. Because we expect solidity and non-change, that fact the Chambord has been formed and reformed by history surprises us. As Rubin adeptly writes, 'Leonardo was not only a subject of Vasari's history. He was subjected to history.'<sup>20</sup> In our desperation to loosely attribute art and architecture to Leonardo, perhaps we are asking the wrong questions and losing out on the much more interesting possibility of an interconnected history. Instead of asking whether Leonardo was the architect of Chambord and trying to conclusively trace his singular and genius hand, we could ask how Leonardo's work and thought contributed to the artistry of others. How were others shaped by the legacy of Leonardo, just like Leonardo, while undeniably talented and remarkable, must have been shaped by the artists before him? I am less compelled by great men than by the societies that cultivate and receive them. Vasari provides us with an intimate, albeit veiled, connection to Leonardo. Cortona's connection to Leonardo is real and significant. By investigating and acknowledging the legitimacy of other people's work, we begin to observe a more real image of Leonardo: what men saw and now what people continue to see.

16 *ibid.* 85.

17 Blunt (n 14) 15.

18 Patrick Ponsot, 'Les Terrasses Du Donjon De Chambord: Un Projet De Léonard De Vinci?' (2007) 3(165) *Bulletin Monumental* 259.

19 Peter Schjeldahl, 'The Art of Dying' *The New Yorker* (December 2019) <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/12/23/the-art-of-dying>> accessed 20 December 2020.

20 Rubin (n 1) 38.