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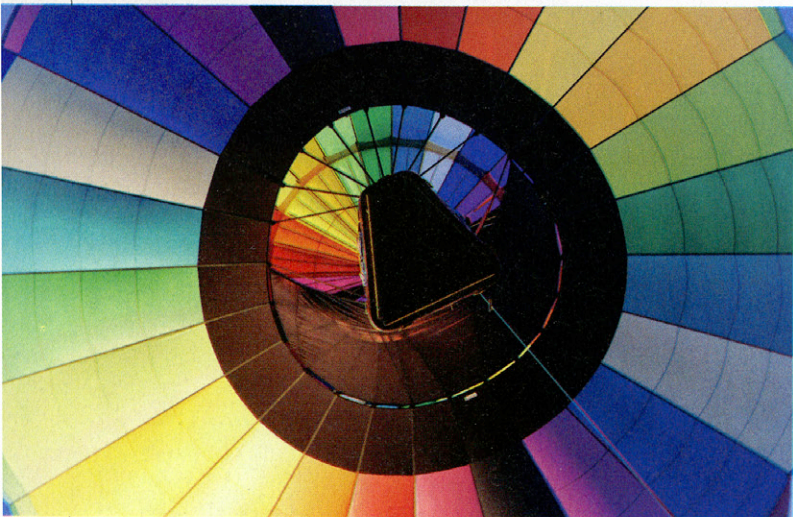
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By Tania Hershman

So Many People

MANY PEOPLE FORGOT he was a Russian spy. They enjoyed his coffee. They said, “How do you make it so...?” They sipped and grinned at him and he poured and offered around biscuits, which many people found so astonishing they dreamed about them. “Those biscuits,” they mumbled to themselves in the mornings, deciding to ask him for the recipe, wanting to be there always, in his living room, where everything was best.

Many people forgot he was a Russian spy. They enjoyed his conversation, he was so funny, and he had read every book they had read and every book they wanted to read but couldn't get hold of. They said, “How did you find ...?” And he smiled and passed around more coffee, biscuits, promising he would source it for them.

When they were alone, sometimes one of them would say, “But isn't he...?” And another would immediately jump in with an anecdote, or talk about how they'd been experimenting with the biscuit recipe.

“I'm nearly there,” they said, “it almost tastes like...”

When the Russian spy was found not to be a spy at all, and not even to have been Russian, many people were – although they would not say so – disappointed. That he was not who he never said he had been but who they thought he was and tried to forget but never truly did, this was a letdown. His soirees began to thin, no matter coffee, biscuits. They began to dream of other things, of swings and cross-country chariot-races, of cats that stood on their legs and spoke.

They lost their taste for novelty, returned to the foods of their childhoods. “We do love these,” they said to each other, passing around the hot dogs at their outdoor barbecues. Many people wondered, though, while eating burgers, laughing and talking politics, who was that person who passed them a napkin, who was that woman standing in the corner they'd known for twenty years, who was that man at the grill who had always lived next door? *

“So Many People” was awarded 1st place in the 2018 Flash Fiction Contest of synaesthesiamagazine.com.

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LEONARDO'S WORKSHOP HAS BEEN RE-CREATED AND DECORATED WITH ITEMS THAT HE WOULD HAVE USED. THE VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH ST ANNE (LEFT) WAS PAINTED BY LEONARDO DA VINCI ON 1510. ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST (RIGHT) WAS PAINTED ON WALNUT WOOD BETWEEN 1513-1516. IT WAS BELIEVED TO BE HIS FINAL PAINTING. SOME SPECULATE THAT HE FINISHED IT WHILE IN AMBOISE. THE CHÂTEAU DU CLOS LUCÉ (OR SIMPLY CLOS LUCÉ) IS A LARGE CHÂTEAU IN THE CITY OF AMBOISE, FRANCE.

Leonardo in Amboise

A Meditation on the 500th Anniversary of the Death of Leonardo da Vinci

By Dan Burstein
Photos by Julie O'Connor

I AM STARING INTO a mirror of history. At first it is black. But when I look at it from the proper angle, a Renaissance scene comes to life.

Leonardo da Vinci is seated at a table next to his beautifully enigmatic *Mona Lisa* mounted on an easel. Standing next to him is the Cardinal of Aragon, who is holding a celestial globe and engaging Leonardo in conversation. I take a picture with my iPhone and send it to some friends with the message:

"Julie and I are visiting Clos Lucé in Amboise, France, where Leonardo da Vinci died in 1519 after nearly three years as the house guest of King François I. In this Disneyesque hologram in Leonardo's petit-château

on the royal property, I imagine the visitor saying, "I don't want to tell you how to do your work, master Leonardo, but don't you think you should give her a little fuller smile?"

THIS YEAR MARKS five centuries since Leonardo da Vinci died in Clos Lucé, in the lovely Loire River town of Amboise, a little over two hours southwest of Paris by car. Festivals will be held, television specials will air, and new books will be published. Major exhibitions are scheduled, particularly at the Uffizi in Florence and the Louvre in Paris, even though earlier this year it looked like French and Italian authorities were ready to go to war with each other over Leonardo's

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ABOVE: LEONARDO DA VINCI'S BURIAL SITE RESTS IN THE ORNATE GOTHIC CHAPEL SAINT- HUBERT. HE WAS ORIGINALLY BURIED IN ST. FLORENTIN CHURCH. AFTER THE CHURCH WAS DESTROYED IT IS BELIEVED THAT HIS BONES WERE THOSE MOVED HERE IN 1863.



LEFT: THE BURIAL OF LEONARDO DA VINCI INSIDE THE CHAPEL SAINT-HUBERT (ST HUBERT CHAPEL) ON THE GROUNDS OF THE ROYAL CHÂTEAU D'AMBOISE, AMBOISE, FRANCE IN 2018. THE TOMB OF LEONARDO IS A SIMPLE GRANITE GRAVE WITH A BRONZE MEDALLION ON TOP IN HIS LIKENESS WITH HIS NAME.

cultural legacy and might renege on agreements to lend key artworks. Throughout Europe, 2019 will be the summer of Leonardo da Vinci from a tourist point of view.

While I am not an art historian, I have spent time at various points in my life thinking about Leonardo, his paintings, his famous notebooks, and the futuristic inventions and innovations that have kept him, in history's view, as a man who was centuries ahead of his time.

I also have a couple of small personal connections to Leonardo that make our trip to Amboise in August, 2018 of special note.

First, I am 64 years old, about to turn 65, the same age as Leonardo when he arrived in Amboise in 1516. He had already painted his greatest paintings, made his brilliant contributions to defining the art of perspective, developed his unique approach to capturing shadows and light (known as *sfumato*), and excited the imagination of Italy's most powerful secular and religious leaders with his art and ideas.

Yet he willingly left his fame behind in his native country, and said farewell to the warring factions of Florence, Rome, and Milan and to the never-ending politics of patronage among Popes, Cardinals, Dukes, and Medici family members. He put his rivalries with Michelangelo and other rising stars of the Renaissance in the rearview mirror, shook off a lifetime of near-scandals over his born-out-of-wedlock status and other people's perceptions of his sexual identity and religious beliefs,

and accepted an offer made by the 22-year-old French King, François I, of permanent patronage in France. (In making this offer, François was supported and encouraged by his highly educated and worldly mother, Louise, and sister, Marguerite).

François bestowed on Leonardo the titles of “Premier Painter, Engineer and Architect of the King.” He offered Leonardo a significant annual stipend and the use of the beautiful home at Clos Lucé. François paid for Leonardo’s staff, which included

his dutiful assistant Francesco Melzi, his on-again, off-again secretary/assistant (and sometimes lover) Salai, Leonardo’s vegetarian chef, and a variety of others who traveled by mule with Leonardo over the Alps from Italy to Amboise in 1516. The traveling party brought three of Leonardo’s masterpieces with them, as well as paints, pigments, and art supplies then unknown in France.

François imposed no requirement on Leonardo to work, only the hope that he would enliven the cultural level of the court

centenary. My mother was born in May, 1919 (an eventful year: think Women’s Suffrage, Prohibition, and League of Nations). She died of cancer way too young at 64 in 1983. She was fascinated by Leonardo. I had the pleasure of seeing the *Last Supper* in Milan with her in 1971 (when there were no crowds, no advance tickets needed, and my father just parked the rental car in front of the Santa Maria delle Grazie monastery and we walked right in... Try doing that today!). It strikes me as mind-and-time-bending to think that my mother, who I perceive as so modern, so 20th century, was actually born one-fifth of the historical continuum back to the last days of Leonardo in Amboise.

Finally, I spent a significant chunk of the last 15 years thinking about Leonardo, researching his life, studying his paintings,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LEONARDO'S WORKSHOP HAS BEEN RE-CREATED AND DECORATED WITH ITEMS THAT HE WOULD HAVE USED. THESE DRAWINGS HAVE BEEN REPRODUCED AS AUTHENTICALLY AS POSSIBLE FROM LEONARDO'S NOTEBOOKS AND OTHER DRAWINGS.

“THE DEATH OF LEONARDO DA VINCI” “FRANCIS I RECEIVES THE LAST BREATHS OF LEONARDO DA VINCI” IS AN 1818 PAINTING BY THE FRENCH ARTIST JEAN AÜGUSTE DOMINIQUE INGRES, SHOWING THE PAINTER LEONARDO DA VINCI DYING, WITH FRANCIS I OF FRANCE HOLDING HIS HEAD. IT WAS COMMISSIONED BY THE PIERRE LOUIS JEAN CASIMIR DE BLACAS, THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR IN ROME, AND NOW HANGS IN THE PETIT PALAIS IN PARIS. THIS COPY OF THE INGRES PAINTING HANGS IN CLOS LUCÉ.

THE CHÂTEAU DU CLOS LUCÉ (OR SIMPLY CLOS LUCÉ) IS A LARGE CHÂTEAU IN THE CITY OF AMBOISE, FRANCE. LEONARDO DA VINCI LIVED HERE FROM 1516 UNTIL HIS DEATH IN 1519. IT IS NOW THE MAIN ENTRANCE TO THE CLOS LUCÉ. THIS IS WHERE THE ROYALS WOULD WATCH THE FESTIVALS - THE COURT AND ITS LADIES WOULD SIT IN THIS ELEGANT GALLERY TO WATCH THE TOURNAMENTS, PARTIES, FESTIVITIES THAT LEONARDO ORGANIZED FOR THE KING.



and help François launch a French version of the Italian Renaissance. Leonardo’s Amboise experience was intended to be a time to look back on all he had done in his life, create new ideas and new works if he wanted to, and mentor an ambitious young warrior-king who wanted to build a new highly cultured civilization in France, all expenses paid.

Second, we are traveling to Amboise just in advance of the 500th anniversary hoopla for Leonardo. 2019 has a special significance for me, because it will also be my mother’s



interviewing art historians, and tracking down all manner of theories about him. These activities were in the course of writing half a dozen critical guidebooks to the fiction of Dan Brown, starting with our 2004 book, *Secrets of the Code*, a collection of essays and interviews with experts about *The Da Vinci Code*. Unlike Dan Brown’s books, our books were *non-fiction*. But despite my years of work on Leonardo, I still have a lot of unanswered questions.

IT IS SAID THAT Leonardo died in the arms of his great friend and patron, François I, at Amboise on May 2, 1519. A painting by the French artist Ingres (three centuries after the fact) records the scene beautifully, mythically. It probably didn’t happen that way. François seems to have been out of town on the day Leonardo died. But the King’s appreciation of Leonardo’s genius was so fervent that he wanted it recorded for history that the great man whom he called “father,” took his last



THE CHÂTEAU D'AMBOISE WITH A HOT AIR BALLOON AFLOAT IN THE SKY.

breath in François' arms.

We toured the magnificent Amboise castle of François I, and Leonardo's adjacent Clos Lucé home that has been turned into an informative exhibition on his life and work. The re-creations of Leonardo's bedroom, library, workshop, and kitchen seem quite realistic and educational. After the tours, we ended up at the gothic jewel box Chapel of Saint-Hubert, where Leonardo is presumed to be buried (although after a long, complicated history of fire, chapel rebuilding, and re-interring bones, no one is certain it is actually Leonardo's remains that are in the crypt).

Unexpectedly, hot air balloons start to appear over the castle, as if in a drawing by Leonardo five hundred years ahead of his time. Leonardo is credited with the first designs for parachutes, helicopters and other proto "flying machines." Amboise, it turns out, is the terminus of a popular Loire Valley ballooning experience. As the colorful balloons drop down over the castle, I take notes on my own thoughts relating to the enduring enigmas about Leonardo.

Number one on my list is this: Leonardo is widely considered the greatest painter in the history of painting. Yet he painted less than two dozen paintings in his lifetime and many of them are unfinished.

When Leonardo arrived in Amboise to take up residence, he brought the *Mona Lisa* with him. Yes, today's best-known and most widely recognized visual image from the history of art, was never given to whoever commissioned it. Leonardo had painted it years earlier, probably doing much of the work around 1503, although he continued to refine it and repaint and retouch it—and copy it. He kept it with him always, taking it to France, and ultimately dying with *Mona Lisa* still in his room at Amboise, which

is how it ended up at the Louvre in Paris rather than in Italy.

Walter Isaacson points out in his bestselling 2017 biography of Leonardo, that when the 30-year-old young man from Vinci was on the make in the 1480s, he wrote a now-famous letter to the Duke of Milan in the hope of obtaining employment. In this letter, Leonardo spent ten paragraphs "touting his engineering skills, including his ability to design bridges, waterways, cannons, armored vehicles, and public buildings." Only in the eleventh paragraph near the end of the letter did Leonardo note that he was also an artist and, in Isaacson's words, call to the Duke's attention that, "I can also paint." So, the greatest painter of all-time *did not even see himself* primarily as a painter.

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP in the 1950s and '60s, American culture seemed to hold Michelangelo as the ultimate "Renaissance Man." But there has been a decided shift in Leonardo's favor in the 21st century. Leonardo is so much more fascinating, more mysterious, more complex, resplendent with so many more secrets. Both men are geniuses, but Leonardo's form of genius ranged over even more disciplines and topics and he dreamed even further into the future. Like Einstein or Steve Jobs, Leonardo does not seem "confined" in space/time to the Renaissance era. He seems like someone who could appear in 21st century life, find himself at home, and even be ahead of his times today.

As we sit on the bench outside the chapel where Leonardo is buried and take in the majestic castle where the twenty-something King François I used to meet with his maestro, three times his age, I contemplate what their discussions might have been like

five centuries ago.

What made Leonardo's mind so special? In an age of so many talented artists and "Renaissance Men" (and, as we are discovering, "Renaissance Women," as well), what made him so unusual?

I think it had something to do with his unique powers of observation and perception, his ability to translate those perceptions into drawings and paintings, and then his meta-talent for connecting the perceptions across disciplines, bodies of knowledge, micro and macro worlds, to see the similarities and metaphors in the patterns.

When he studied the anatomy of hundreds of birds, he was able to draw out structural principles from bones, wings, feathers, and stabilization and directional mechanisms that would allow him to understand how humans would fly someday. Similarly, when he watched the way water flowed in gentle streams and raging rivers, he came to understand that the pathways of water were not unknowable, disorganized, random, or determined by supernatural forces. He could know them by studying them and drawing them. He could organize them and de-randomize them in his supple, curious, yet meticulously detailed mind.

Few people before or since have been as good generalists—as good at connecting the dots, decoding the secret language of nature and recognizing the patterns that make up the universe—as Leonardo. And none have had his ability to take ideas and visions and put them on paper or parchment or wood panels or frescoed walls, and invoke awe and wonder in people five hundred years after his time. *

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Dan Burstein and Julie O'Connor live in Weston, Connecticut. Dan is co-founder and Managing Partner of Millennium Technology Value Partners, based in New York. He is also a *New York Times* bestselling author of 14 books, including *Secrets of the Code*, the world's bestselling guidebook to *The Da Vinci Code*, with more than 3 million copies sold in more than 30 languages. Julie O'Connor is an award-winning photographer who created the first non-Western "doors" poster with her "Doors of Tibet" in 2003. Her book, *Doors of Weston: 300 Years of Passageways in a Connecticut Town*, was published in partnership with the Weston Historical Society.