Introduction

THIS BOOK is about the cultural consequences of Leonardo da Vinci. I write for a general reader who is basically conversant with the languages of literature and the visual arts, curious about Leonardo, but as yet perhaps not knowing very much about him or his posthumous fortune.

Knowledge of the genesis of Leonardo, of the formative factors of his cast of mind and work, speaks only partially to the question of why he has been valued through the centuries, and why we value him today. Why after his death did figures as diverse as Vasari, Goethe, Michelet, Pater, Valéry, and Freud—to mention only a few—offer such passionate but differing interpretations of Leonardo? What did they see in him? Was it that each writer needed something from him? Why is it that essays written on him today inevitably address different issues than essays written a century ago? Can we achieve anything like historical certainty about Leonardo, or does the center of anything that could be called the holding truth about him lie more in the manner in which successive interpretations illuminate the nature of the era in which each was written? These are some of the questions to be explored in what might be called essays in cultural consequences.

Leonardo and his works are quicksilver in the hands of historians for two reasons. First, he belongs to that select circle of men and women who produced masterpieces. And second, Leonardo in his own day had the honor, and perhaps the misfortune, to be called the New Apelles.

Masters and masterpieces tend to roil the waters of written history. *Mona Lisa,* probably the world's best-known painting, is surely a masterpiece if ever there was one (fig. 1). The historian may tell us that the portrait was painted in the first decade of the sixteenth century, and may have a few things to report about its cultural context and the pos-

sible identity of the sitter. Yet that same historian usually does not go on to complain that *Mona Lisa* exasperatingly refuses to stay anchored in her time. Rather she floats on the stream of history down to our own day, claiming a perpetual relevance in a succession of ages. The rise and fall of reputations is not for her, nor will her obituary list positions held and surviving relatives. Indeed the living issues of which she partakes assure that there will be no need for an obituary, now or later.

This is to say no more than *Mona Lisa,* as we have come to understand her, is as much or more the creation of a succession of interpreters as she is of Leonardo himself. Masterpieces have not only something sufficiently provocative about them to sustain continuing interpretations, but also the resiliency and toughness to withstand the deluge of words. Masterpiece status, then, has to do with the fusion of an artifact and the words written about it. These words are intended to persuade us—persuade, not demonstrate—that the work in question embodies enduring values that transcend historical particularities.

What is true of *Mona Lisa* holds for Leonardo in general. An unambiguous history of the man and his work seems all but an impossibility, and in any event does not take us far in discovering just what it is that we so value in the cultural inheritance that bears the name Leonardo. The significance of the aura surrounding Leonardo is bound to the innumerable stories told about him, stories often shot through with affective issues couched in the rhetoric of persuasion. Of course, many of these stories can be shrugged off as bad history, yet their value, like that of imaginative literature, centers not in their historical veracity but rather in their capacity to suggest something of what it is to be human.

There is, I suppose, a tendency to make up more and better stories about people who seem to possess dimensions broader than those of ordinary lives. When relatively little is known about an individual, there are fewer constraints in telling the story. And that is where the problem of being the New Apelles comes in. It was normal practice in the Renaissance to link an illustrious contemporary with an ancient forerunner. For instance, Apelles was a famed painter of ancient Greece, and Leonardo's name was paired with his, it has been argued, in the belief that Leonardo had revived Apelles's dark manner of painting. However the coupling of these two names began, in retrospect it is problematic. Apelles is famous simply because ancient writers tell us so; not a paint-

ing survives to corroborate their assertions. Apelles, then, is all reputation and no surviving product. In this respect, Leonardo is a highly plausible candidate to be the New Apelles, if not in the way the Renaissance intended the compliment. Until only a century ago, when publication of Leonardo's notebooks began, knowledge of him was sketchy. His few paintings tended to be lost in the oblong blur of modest images made by his Milanese followers; his most famous works were destroyed, never completed, or in ruin; the some seven thousand sheets of his notes and drawings (surviving from a corpus perhaps three times as large) lay in various libraries, mainly unseen, let alone carefully studied; and of this man who spent much of his time as a technologist and engineer, not a machine or battlement survives.

Leonardo had a great reputation, all right, provided for him in the beginning by the writers of his own time. While not all that he did had disappeared, as had happened to Apelles, what remained was fragmentary, inchoate, and the source of endless confusion. In this situation it was easy enough to make up good stories about Leonardo. While "fact-checkers" in the form of serious scholars began to emerge in some numbers around 1800, the history of Leonardo's fate until the late nineteenth century is mainly a story of critical interpretations unhindered by the protocols of what might be called systematic modern scholarship.

This book is largely about these critical interpretations and the contexts from which they arose. It is not a history of scholarship on Leonardo, nor is it about later artists' responses to him, both of which are fascinating but quite different subjects.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is "A Working Life," using the word "working" to mean two things: a brief account of the work he did, and a summary of the information that most scholars agree on as the basis for any working interpretation. This may serve as an introduction for the reader new to Leonardo, or as a quick review for those already informed.

The second part is "The Anatomy of a Legend." In his copious notes on anatomy, Leonardo records his frustration in attempting to distinguish among the various layers and systems when confronted with the moist viscera of the body cavity. So it is with the layers of the legend of Leonardo, extending from Vasari to Freud. There is a 1550 Leonardo, an 1800 one, an 1850 one, and so on. Each is a different character based

on the needs of the given time that produced him, and each has ties to the Leonardo that went before.

The last part is "Leonardo Now." With no pretense to comprehensiveness or depth, these four final essays discuss issues by juxtaposing present concerns and Leonardo's themes in a way that I believe may be illuminating. I suggest neither that Leonardo is a precursor of our time, nor that the only codes worth considering in exploring him are those of the late twentieth century. Nevertheless, try as we may to transcend it, we cannot help but be partial prisoners of our own age.

Memories are essential to any wise perspective on the present. The significances of Leonardo, and surely they are multiple—as are those of any great figure—are only unearthed and made relevant to our own time through an archaeology of memory. Without those memories, the living present, which is the only holy ground we can know with certainty, is barren soil.

> Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
> The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
> Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
> Isolated, with no before and after,
> But a lifetime burning in every moment
> And not the lifetime of one man only
> But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
>
> —T.S. ELIOT, *Four Quartets*

PART I

A WORKING LIFE

Being a brief account in three chapters of the life and works of Leonardo da Vinci, stressing what reasonably may be said to be known about him and—just as important—what is not known about him.

SELF-REVELATION was not Leonardo's strong suit. Although he kept copious notes for some thirty-five years, they yield little concerning his personal feelings, daily activities, or relationships to other people. This so-called universal man in fact possessed penetrating brilliance only in several delimited areas, most notably painting, engineering/technology, and the study of the human body. Other fields from the nineteenth century onward called history, politics, sociology, anthropology, and most of the humanities held slight if any interest for him. His written notes in his preferred areas of concentration have a strongly empirical and only at times hypothesizing flavor, concerned as they are with the close observation of phenomena and attempted explanations of how things work. They contain few expressions of Leonardo's subjective judgments or values.

The bits and pieces of testimony about Leonardo by his contemporaries are also disappointing. The picture emerges of a multitalented man, yet one diverted too often from his allegedly proper vocation as a painter, a vacillator unable to bring his projects to completion. But there is no commentary from his own time that can be called intimately revealing; and the literary portraits written after his death must be evaluated in terms of the conventions of biography of the day.

Our building blocks for a working life, then, will tell us far less than we would like to know about the man, but much about his work. Those blocks consist of documents—accidental and sporadic as documents from a distant time usually are—and the surviving words and images from Leonardo's own hand.

Words and images must be interpreted, and because images are mute, it is all too easy to tell stories about them of which they themselves are

Fig. 3: Raphael, *School of Athens* (detail: Plato). Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican City

innocent. Before embarking on Leonardo's life, I offer an example as a cautionary note.

The striking red-chalk drawing of a bearded man, at Turin, is almost always identified as a self-portrait (fig. 2) and holds the place of honor as frontispiece in a number of books on Leonardo. An image almost too good to be true, it represents a man rich in years and filled with wisdom. This drawing has become a talisman of Leonardo, and indeed the embodiment of genius in general. But is it in fact a self-portrait? The drawing first came to light in the 1840s in Italy, although it (or a drawing like it) served as the model for an engraved frontispiece of a book on *The Last Supper* published in Milan in 1810. If it is indeed a faithful portrait of Leonardo, it would have to have been done late in his life (he died in 1519 at the age of sixty-seven, perhaps handicapped by a stroke in his last years).

Are there other images that might be self-portraits? Yes, for instance the drawing of a bearded old man by a pupil, which is similar to the famous woodcut that heads the chapter on Leonardo in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (edition of 1568), the first extended treatment of artists' lives and works written since antiquity. But these portraits are in profile, not full face. Barring some yet-to-be-made discovery, there was no tradition for three centuries of a frontal portrait of Leonardo; and the only exceptions have been forgeries, of which one of the most famous is in the portrait gallery of the Uffizi in Florence.

Could there be an alternative identification of the subject of the Turin drawing? In Raphael's *School of Athens* (1511), Plato and Aristotle hold court among the assembled philosophers of antiquity. Aristotle is younger and swarthy, Plato a balding and bearded sage (fig. 3) who bears a striking resemblance to the so-called *Self-Portrait* of Leonardo. What is to be concluded? Is the Turin drawing a straight self-portrait, an idealized philosopher type, or a self-portrait as a philosopher? There is no sure way to decide. All that is certain is that it was during the nineteenth century—not the sixteenth—that Leonardo's Turin drawing came to be regarded as a self-portrait.

To choose one identification over another is to choose one story as preferable to another. In our heart of hearts we know what we want the answer to be: somehow our idea of Leonardo is diminished if this old man is in fact not Leonardo. But in truth it may not be Leonardo, in which case the iconic center of our received image of Leonardo does not hold, and we are compelled to tell a different sort of story. *Caveat emptor!*