On the trail of Leonardo

Penelope Johnston

In brief

A NIGHT COURSE TAKEN ALMOST 25 YEARS AGO SPARKED AN INTEREST in Leonardo da Vinci that has become a passion for a London, Ont., neurosurgeon. Dr. Rolando Del Maestro now boasts one of the largest collections of da Vinci artifacts in North America.

En bref


London, Ont., neurosurgeon Rolando Del Maestro’s fascination with Leonardo da Vinci’s scientific observations, anatomical drawings and personal search for the soul’s location within the body did not begin until after he graduated from the University of Western Ontario in 1973.

The interest was sparked during his internship year at London’s Victoria Hospital, when he took a night course on the psychology of creativity.

The teacher, Dr. Jaroslav Havelka, believed Mozart was one of the most creative people to ever live and challenged each student to identify a similar individual and defend the claim. Del Maestro came upon a paperback about Leonardo by Kenneth Clark while browsing in a used-book store, and the rest is history.

“Clark asserted that Leonardo’s art and personality should be reinterpreted for each generation,” he recalls. “As I researched the topic I became as enthralled as many others had been. Books and manuscripts based on his drawings became my passion.”

By 1998 Del Maestro had amassed one of the largest private collections of da Vinci’s works in North America — more than 4000 volumes, drawings, translations, manuscripts and other collectibles. His expertise in the field is now so well respected that he acted as curator for a special exhibition, “Leonardo da Vinci: The Search for the Soul,” that was held in conjunction with the 31st Canadian Congress of Neurological Sciences in 1996.

Del Maestro never stops collecting. One of his recent acquisitions is an Italian edition of Leonardo’s first published book, his Treatise on Painting. Del Maestro said that when Leonardo died in 1519 at age 67 he left all his scientific and artistic papers to his favourite pupil, Francesco Melzi (1491-1570), who attempted to organize the notes.

“When Leonardo died he left more than 12 000 pages of notes in a total of 50 to 55 pocket books,” says Del Maestro. “About 50% to 60% have been lost and only 20 now exist. Leonardo car-


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ried these pocketbooks everywhere he went, opening them to make quick notes in red or black chalk, and on returning home, outlining the figures in ink and adding elaborate notes. It fascinates me that Leonardo, being left-handed and not corrected by formal education, wrote from right to left. Medically I find it interesting that no human being — novelists included — has written so extensively or so copiously.”

Leonardo had hoped to publish 3 books during his lifetime — one each on anatomy, engineering and painting — but this task was uncompleted at his death. His pupil Melzi got his Treatise on Painting ready for publication. “I had owned the first French edition for more than 15 years but had never seen an Italian edition for sale — this is a very rare book. I found out through a colleague that a first edition was going up for auction in New York, and I was able to obtain it in 1997.”

Another recent acquisition was the Jan. 21, 1637, “deed” or record of a donation of Manuscript B, which contained diagrams of many machines, including the helicopter. After Melzi’s death the manuscript was bought by an Italian patriot, Count Galeazzo Arconati, who willed it and 10 other items to the Ambrosiana Library in Milan. “Eventually this deed came into the possession of someone in Italy who wanted to sell it. A book dealer in New York contacted me in 1990. The amount he was asking Leonardo had a keen interest in embryology, and after an autopsy on a pregnant woman drew this fetus in utero. Del Mastro speculates that Leonardo probably had physicians and other members of the guild contact him when a cadaver was available for dissection. It appears he was able to do things in Florence and even Milan that were not permitted in cities like Rome. Leonardo wrote: “The Pope [Leo X] has found that I have skinned three corpses and that Giovanni the mirror maker has hindered me in anatomy, blaming me before the Pope and likewise the hospital.”
was too high and I turned it down. The book dealer
couldn’t find a buyer, the price went down, and in 1996 he
contacted me again. I bought it.”

Del Maestro, who used part of a 3-month break from
his medical practice to prepare the Leonardo exhibit for
the neurological congress, says he’s decided to take sabbaticals more frequently. “I’m going to mix my interests
in the history of medicine and my role as a neurosurgeon. During the past 3-month sabbatical I was not
working nights or on weekends and I had time to do
other things. I want to spend more time in my lab.”

He also wants to enjoy time at his home in south
London, which he and his wife designed and which fea-
tures a glass-shelved library. Besides the huge Leonardo
collection, the shelves contain a large number of books
by surgeon Harvey Cushing and a volume containing all
of Sir Frederick Banting’s early scientific articles, with
the scientist’s pencilled notations in the margins. The
book was bound and presented to Banting by his staff.

In one corner of the house is a stained-glass window,
based on Leonardo’s Madonna of the Rocks. It is a constant
subtle reminder of where Del Maestro’s true passion lies. ‡