



Editorial

Red Wine, Sex, and a Genius

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Regular, moderate consumption of red wine is linked to a reduced risk of coronary heart disease and to lower overall mortality. The same protective effects on the whole vascular system could be hypothesized for erectile dysfunction if considered as the “tip of the iceberg” of a systemic vascular disorder [1]. Nevertheless, the relative contribution of alcohol and polyphenol components in wine to these effects is unclear [2]. Red wine polyphenols induce endothelium-dependent dilatation of blood vessels through the nitric oxide (NO) system, increasing the expression of endothelial NO synthase and suppressing the synthesis of endothelin-1, which is a peptide with a consistent vasoconstrictive effect [3,4].

NO from nerves and possibly from endothelia plays a crucial role in initiating and maintaining intracavernous pressure increase, penile vasodilation, and penile erection that are dependent on cyclic guanosine monophosphate synthesized with activation of soluble guanylyl cyclase in smooth muscle cells [5]. However, consensus is lacking on the protective effects of the moderate consumption of red wine, which may interact with the NO system, as a result of not only alcohol but also the presence of polyphenolic flavonoids [6].

The effect of wine on sex life was recently the theme of a special 1-d congress in Leonardo's home town, Vinci.

In a keynote address Carlo Pedretti, Director of the Armand Hammer Center of Leonardo Studies at UCLA and its Italian division at the University of Urbino, focused his discussion on a stunning black-chalk drawing clearly inspired by an *Angel of the*

Annunciation but showing the bold image of a young Bacchus or Dionysus with an obtrusive erection (Fig. 1).

The aspects regarding wine and sexuality have been well known since the time of ancient Greece when a legend told of the birth of wine as one of Dionysus's tears. For the Romans Dionysus became Bacchus, the god of wine and fertility. From the marriage of Bacchus and Venus, Priapus was born.

Pedretti's paper placed great emphasis on the complexities of much new evidence of Leonardo's bisexuality, also viewed with reference to Leonardo's ideas about the effect of wine and drugs on the working of one's mind and body. This offered a different image of Leonardo's own character, indeed of his inner life, which now appears so well in keeping with the spirit of his time and with echoes even in that masterpiece of the French Renaissance, François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, which is a thorough and lively account of the role and importance of wine by a humanist who was also a physician.

The Leonardo drawing, which was discovered in Germany in 1990 and which is the core of his argument, deserves special attention.

From 1993 to 2000 this drawing toured the world, from Europe to America and from South Africa to Asia, with the travelling exhibition *Leonardo Scientist, Inventor, Artist*, which started with three locations in Sweden: Malmö, Stockholm, and Goteburg.

Presented for the first time in New York on March 23, 1991, on the occasion of a congress of art historians and psychoanalysts organized by New York University, it was then the object of

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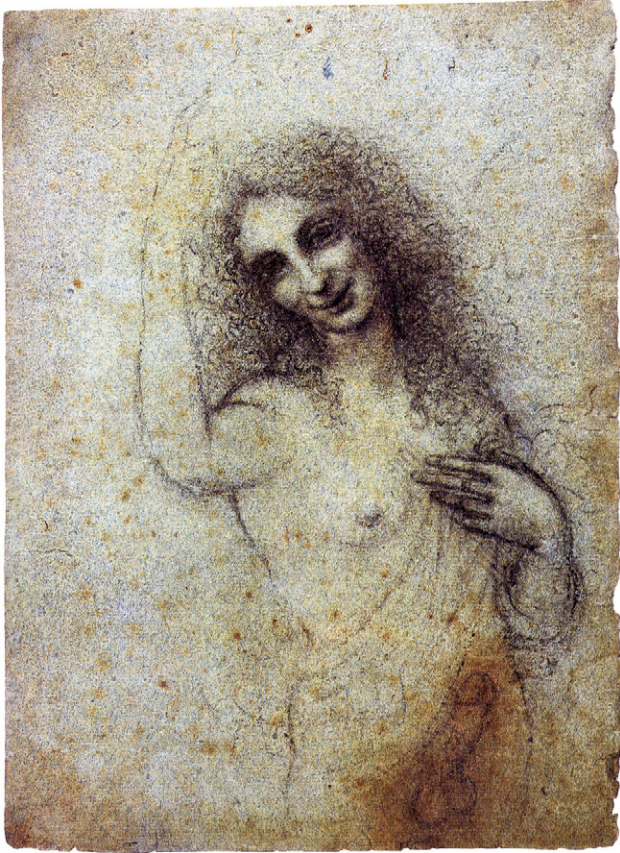


Fig. 1 – Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), The “Angel in the Flesh” (Bacchus with an erection), c. 1513–1515. Black chalk or charcoal on rough, blue paper, 268 × 197 mm. German private property, in trust of The Pedretti Foundation, Los Angeles, CA, USA.

considerations and evaluations on the part of specialists in both disciplines, not only as an exceptional document of Leonardo’s complex psyche but also as a problem of attribution and therefore of style. Its suspected provenance from the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle in the 19th century was to be confirmed by the English art critic Brian Sewell in *The Sunday Telegraph* of April 5, 1992: “It was well known that the Royal Collection had once contained a number of pornographic drawings by Leonardo. I remember being fascinated by the story when I worked for a while in the Royal Library. The whole episode had passed into the mythology of the place. According to the version I heard, a large man in a Sherlock Holmes cape had arrived one day to have a look at the drawings. He was reputed to be a very eminent German scholar. It was not until some time later that the drawings were found to have been stolen [...] There is no doubt that the drawings were a considerable embarrassment, and I think everyone was very relieved to find that they’d gone.” According

to Sewell, recent scholars who knew of the fact but never mentioned it in their publications included Anthony Blunt and Lord Kenneth Clark.

As for the attribution to Leonardo of the newly discovered sheet, aside from the indisputable authenticity of the writing on the reverse, it was immediately considered as a working hypothesis both in terms of an unquestionable conception by the Master with his direct participation in a pupil’s work, and as an autograph work of perplexing quality that could only be explained by psychoanalysis.

School versions of a lost painting by Leonardo of an *Angel of the Annunciation* are known, as is a student drawing on a sheet of Leonardo’s studies for the *Battle of Anghiari* of about 1505. The angel was to be seen from the front until just below the waist line and as a result its sex was partially hidden in the painted versions. In the present drawing this is indeed spelled out. The angelic smile is transformed into a faun-like grin. The pointing hand is merely sketched. The hand raised to the breast and holding a veil over the erect penis is elaborated in considerably greater detail. The female breasts turn the angel’s body into that of a hermaphrodite.

On the back of the sheet Leonardo wrote three Greek words also in black chalk and in his characteristic left-handed script: *astrapen*, *bronten*, *ceraunobolan*. They are taken from Pliny’s account of Apelle’s legendary feat of depicting precisely that which cannot be depicted, such as the atmospheric phenomena referred to by those words, namely, lightning, storms, and thunderbolts.

Style, handwriting, as well as blue paper and technique, all indicate the period during which Leonardo devoted his energies to a series of *Deluge* drawings now at Windsor and dating from around 1515 or later. The same type of blue paper is found in an anatomy manuscript at Windsor from 1513 or later. A pen and ink profile of a young man of comparable features is found on a sheet of almost identical size (258 × 198 mm) in that manuscript.

Recent research has shown a possible source for Leonardo’s bold idea of the *Angel in the Flesh*. This is Antonio Pucci’s *Historia della bella reina d’oriente*, a 14th century poem certainly known to Leonardo since he quotes from it an octave about a grotesque giant. A few octaves before one comes across the erotic scene of the young monarch who had just been transformed by divine intervention from a beautiful girl into an exuberant young man. To the wife wondering about his exceptional male attribute, he explains how it was given to him by the angel Gabriel:

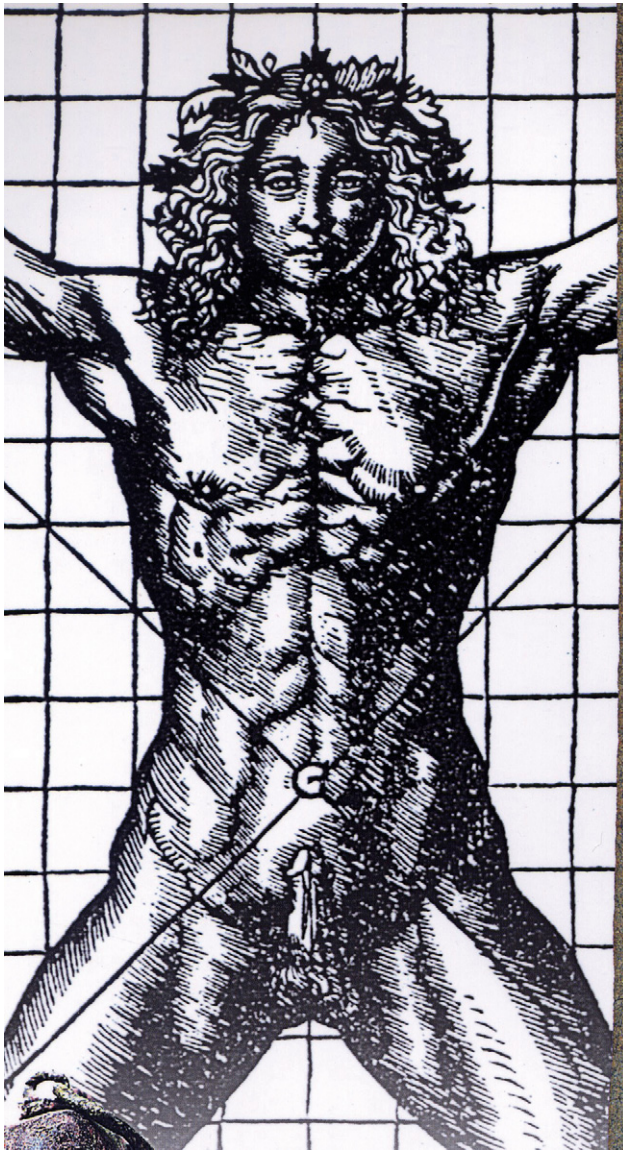


Fig. 2 – Leonardo's Bacchus in Cesariano's edition of Vitruvius (Como, 1521). Detail.

Having tasted that cock she said:
 "My love, where did you get this?".
 And he replied: "Gabriel the Angel,
 As God willed, made it out to me".
 "No wonder that's so good and beautiful",
 She said, "if that's where it comes from!".

And so the gesture of the pointing hand indicating a divine disposition ("as God willed") acquires in this drawing an even more compelling significance. Leonardo does indeed belong to a popular tradition of open and sharp frankness in dealing with scurrilous themes even in a religious context. This is shown by such contemporary works as the *Geta e Biria* and the *Manganello* that he owned.

A humanistic attitude toward erotic imagery inspired by the Antique could well be recognized in Cesare Cesariano's rendering of Leonardo's famous *Vitruvian Man* as published in his 1521 edition of Vitruvius (Fig. 2). In a recently discovered document, Cesariano mentions Leonardo as his own teacher. No surprise then that the youth in his illustration should reproduce Leonardo's *Angel in the Flesh* as a young Bacchus, including not only the penis in full erection but also the facial features framed by luxuriant, wavy hair that barely conceals a crown of vine leaves.

In conclusion, the link between wine and sex was established in art and history at least 500 yr ago and nowadays the link is intriguing in terms of evaluating the quality of life of patients with erectile dysfunction.

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