

WHY LEONARDO DA VINCI COULD NOT HAVE PAINTED THE SHROUD

by Isabel Piczek

Very strong arguments can be presented that Leonardo could not have produced the Shroud. The reasons are very simple, Leonardo was too great a genius for his own good. His theoretical ideas projected themselves so far into the future that the technology of his own time, even his own technology, could not follow these ideas with any success. It naturally follows that he had perhaps the most unsuccessful professional life as an artist and, as a scientist of anyone in history.

Thus although he was undoubtedly one of the greatest artists of all time, his cautious temperament as a scientist caused him to be hesitant and slow as an artist, employing incredibly complicated methods. He kept on inventing untried new techniques and one technical failure after the other ensued.

For instance, while fresco painting was the vogue of his days, Leonardo's character was not well suited to this. To paint on the wet plaster of a wall requires a decisive, energetic, quick person with the stamina of a cart-horse. The elegant, nervous, hesitant Leonardo could not handle a wall. The 'Last Supper', his masterpiece was plastered for a secco painting (a wall painting on dry plaster), a technique of his own invention. Alternate coats of lime-sand and gypsum plaster were applied, but these materials adversely react with each other over time. He painted with very mixed media, an inbuilt disaster in most cases. He went from oils to all sorts of tempera and back to oils again, even mixing his pigments with human urine, with the latter actually inventing the mineral mural technique developed on a sound basis' in the 19th. century. He painted the 'Last Supper' for years, abandoning it and returning to it later. Paints have the peculiar property, never properly explained (and true even of modern acrylic paints), that after 'a certain time lapse they refuse to receive successfully another coat of paint. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the 'Last Supper' began seriously to disintegrate even within Leonardo's own lifetime.

Another Leonardo commission was to paint the 'Battle of Anghiari' as a mural for the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence. His surviving sketches and copies by others show this to have been one of the Renaissance's greatest masterpieces. But again he chose an unorthodox technique, one which he had read something about in Pliny, and which involved working in hot oils which had to be reheated upon completion to give the work permanence. When the painting was finished, blazing cauldrons were duly brought in and placed beneath. The paint immediately started to run, and what remained of it became totally destroyed in a matter of years: Leonardo was forced to leave Florence.

In another instance he was commissioned to create a colossal equestrian statue of Francesco Sforza, and typically took a long time to make a giant clay model to the required size. Again he devised a: new method, one akin to the lost wax technique, for the casting of the statue in bronze. He wanted to cast it in one piece, instead of two or more, as would have been safer technically. Predictably, the casting did not work. He hesitated, and in 1499 the statue had an ignominious end as a target for the French troops who invaded Milan in that year.

Most of Leonardo's paintings are therefore lost today because of his technical errors, despite the fact that he was one of the greatest masters of all time. So could he have created the Turin Shroud? It is not very likely. First, we would expect to find hundreds of

sketches in his notebooks, describing the project from every angle and giving long instructions. We would also expect to find meticulously written records of the cost of the linen and all other materials used. He never once missed such information. Every penny spent on the shoelaces of his favourite pupil, Salaino, was carefully accounted for along with the other items bought for his household and for his profession.

If the Shroud had been the work of an artist, he would have to have been the fastest ever, and with incredible technical abilities. The image shows a cadaver in the state of rigor mortis. He would have had to finish his work before that condition changed, and that is a very limited time, too fast for the slow Leonardo. Because of his tendency to great precision he would have recorded the disintegration of the body with uncanny accuracy; working at Leonardo's speed the man of the Shroud would have been not much more than a skeleton. Even if Leonardo had worked from preliminary sketches, he would have used layers of paint applied with contradictory techniques that would now be severely disintegrating.

In other, words, if Leonardo had produced the Shroud, we might marvel about the intellectual excellence of the ideas conveyed, but we would have every reason to be sorry to see the complicated and poor technique chosen. Unlike in the case of the Shroud, Leonardo's paints and painting technique were not beyond the knowledge of his own contemporaries, and certainly not beyond ours. His technology belonged entirely to his own age. Trying to fly, he built his flying machine from wood, imitating the wings of birds and covering them with feathers. We know how to send spacecrafts into outer space. But we do not seem to be able to produce another Turin Shroud...

[This is a slightly abbreviated and edited version of an article by Isabel Piczek written in November 1989, first published by Br. Joe Marino of St. Louis Abbey, St. Louis, Missouri in his useful 'Sources for Information and Materials on the Shroud of Turin' November 1990]