

Drawing identified as second known sketch of Leonardo

The Guardian · 2 magg. 2019 · Mark Brown Arts correspondent Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing is at the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 24 May-13 October

A drawing of a melancholic, thoughtful old man caught off guard has been identified as only the second image of Leonardo da Vinci made in his lifetime.



The hastily drawn sketch, buried away in the Queen's enormous and unrivalled collection of Leonardo drawings, will go on public display at Buckingham Palace this month for the first time.

Probably drawn by one of his studio assistants, it gives a uniquely informal insight in to Leonardo.

The only other surviving image of Leonardo made in his lifetime is a formal drawing made towards the end of the artist's life by his pupil Francesco Melzi. In the newly identified sketch Leonardo "looks more thoughtful, more troubled, more wistful maybe", said Martin Clayton, head of prints and drawings at the Royal Collection Trust.

"It is a very quick casual sketch of Leonardo, it is the closest that we get to a snapshot of Leonardo during his own lifetime," said Clayton. "It may be trivial as a work of art but it's hugely important, even moving, as a record of the man himself."

The existence of the drawing was announced on the day of the 500th anniversary of the death of one of history's greatest polymaths, a man who was an extraordinary artist, inventor, engineer, mathematician, architect, map-maker and more.

The drawing will be one of 200 going on display in the largest exhibition of Leonardo's work in more than 65 years.

It is on a double-sided sheet of Leonardo's studies of a horse's leg, made in preparation for an equestrian monument for King Francis I of France.

"Sheets of paper could be picked up in the studio and used by Leonardo's pupils and companions as rough paper for sketching things on," said Clayton.

The assistant sketched a smiling youth and the old, troubled, bearded man. "I think it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is an image of Leonardo, sketched rapidly under who knows what circumstances."

The similarities between it and Melzi's formal sketch seem obvious when seen side by side, particularly the shape of the beard which at the time, about 1517-18, was an unusual thing. Leonardo would have been "one of the few bearded men around at that time", said Clayton.

The melancholic expression chimes with feelings that historians know Leonardo was experiencing at the time. He was around 65 years old and knew he was dying. A paralysis in his left arm had left him unable to paint.

It is not the first time that this theory has been articulated, although it has largely fallen through the gaps of art history. Kenneth Clark, in his 1935 catalogue of the Leonardo drawings, mentions it as an aside.

There is also a Turin drawing of an old man that has been attributed as a self-portrait by Leonardo. But Clayton is one of many experts to seriously doubt the attribution.

The drawings, which are at Windsor Castle, have been together as a group since Leonardo's death and entered the royal collection during the reign of Charles II.

The big London show follows 12 smaller and hugely popular displays at museums and galleries across the UK.

Also going on display will be Leonardo's incredible map of Imola, made for Cesare Borgia, two studies he made in preparation for The Last Supper, and drapery studies he made for the Salvator Mundi, a painting which became the world's most expensive painting in 2017 when it sold at auction for \$450m (£342m).

The painting was purchased by a buyer acting for the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, and was expected to go on display at the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Ever since that display was postponed, the painting has remained unseen, shrouded in mystery and conspiracy theories.

Some experts still doubt its authenticity. "For what it's worth, I believe it is," said Clayton. "My opinion is not a controversial one among Leonardo scholars ... the people who have been saying: 'No, Leonardo would never paint anything like that,' tend to be people who, to be frank, aren't great Leonardo scholars."