

Italy and France in spat over anniversary

The Guardian · 2 febr. 2019 · Angelique Chrisafis Paris Angela Giuffrida Rome

He was a Renaissance master – painter, scientist, engineer and inventor – who has been recognised as one of the greatest artists who ever lived.

But as Europe stages a year-long frenzy of events to mark 500 years since Leonardo da Vinci's death, Italy and France are involved in a damaging diplomatic tussle over his legacy that is threatening the centrepiece blockbuster exhibition at the Louvre in Paris.

Leonardo, born the illegitimate son of a notary in the Tuscan hill town of Vinci in 1452, was a humanist who spent his final years at the court of the French king François I in the Loire, where he died on 2 May 1519.

The artist's life and work have been subject to constant mythmaking and legend – including the famous Ingres painting of him dying in the arms of François, who was elsewhere at his son's baptism that day. But for Leonardo to be dragged into the long-running political spat between Italy's far-right ruling League party and France's centrist president, Emmanuel Macron, has saddened historians and worried the museum world.

Negotiations have been stepped up to calm the row created when Lucia Borgonzoni, the Italian farright deputy culture minister, recently announced Italy was putting the brakes on a deal set up two years ago for Italian museums to loan some key Leonardo paintings and drawings to the Louvre show.

Borgonzoni suggested Italy would cancel the loan in disgust at France trying to take centre stage in commemorations. She said to loan any works would “put Italy on the margins of a major cultural event”. She added: “Leonardo is Italian; he only died in France.”

The Louvre exhibition had been scheduled to open in October so as not to overshadow the Italian commemorations for Leonardo's death in May. The Louvre holds five of only 14 paintings attributed to Leonardo but had wanted to borrow from Italy some works considered robust enough to travel. In turn the Louvre was to lend Rome certain works by Raphael for an exhibition next year.

The Leonardos being sought by the Louvre from Italy are thought to include the famous drawing Vitruvian Man, which is in Venice, as well as the unfinished painting St Jerome in the Wilderness.

The French culture minister, Franck Riester, has said the deadlock needed to be dealt with through “peaceful” talks. He will meet with his Italian counterpart, Alberto Bonisoli, next month to try to agree a deal. Bonisoli said he was not against the Leonardo loan agreement, but said there were some “imbalances” that needed to be ironed out.

Barbara Agosti, a member of Italy's Committee for the Year of Leonardo da Vinci and art history professor at Rome Tor Vergata University, said: “I hope [a meeting] happens soon as this situation of a diplomatic stalemate not only affects the Leonardo [events] but also paralyses all the exchanges with French museums, and this is a disaster. This situation has

been conducted in a clumsy manner – but the thing that loses the most in all of this is the story of art. It's a pity for Italian and French museums.”

Jean de Loisy, the head of Paris's School of Fine Arts, said: “There is a universal passion for history and one of the world's biggest artists cannot be reduced to base politics.

“Leonardo's works are universal works, not just of Italy or France,” said De Loisy, whose college has shown four Leonardo works in an exhibition of Renaissance drawings, many never seen in public.

Sophie Chauveau, who has written on Leonardo as a literary figure, said he was “a star who embodied the superlative”.

“He had a human quality, an interest in everything, someone who was attentive to others. But he was never nationalist. He went where he could work – so little conflicts today over what he was seem ridiculous.”