
ARTS & LETTERS

*Ambidextrous
Leonardo*

"Freud's Psychohistory of Leonardo da Vinci: A Matter of Being Right or Left" by P. G. Aaron and Robert G. Clouse, in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Summer 1982), MIT (Journals), 28 Carleton St., Cambridge, Mass. 02142.

Sigmund Freud looked at the writings and paintings of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and found evidence of a neurotic obsessional personality—a man whose repressed love for his mother prevented normal heterosexual development. Aaron, an educational psychologist, and Clouse, a historian, both at Indiana State University, see instead the effects of a peculiarly organized brain.

Most human brains are organized into two specialized hemispheres. The left (responsible for language) perceives the world sequentially and in bits, by analysis; the right (responsible for shapes and designs) takes in what it "sees" simultaneously and as a whole. But many left-handed and ambidextrous people have brains that are far less compartmen-



*Leonardo da
Vinci's painting of
Jesus, Mary, and
St. Anne (circa 1510):
Freudian slip?*

Paris, Louvre. Photograph
courtesy of Giraudon, Paris.

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talized: They tend to perceive the world in terms of shapes, while linguistic skills are often underdeveloped. Leonardo, according to contemporaries, was ambidextrous.

Leonardo was a poor writer, as he himself confessed. Freud seized upon one of his more garbled sentences—"On the 16th day of July Caterina [his mother?] came on the 16th day of July 1493"—as a sign of repressed emotion. But the authors say such lapses in sequence are common among ambidextrous people. They detect the same phenomenon at work in Leonardo's mirror-reversed writing, which scholars have long attributed to his fear of censorship. If Leonardo had really sought to avoid discovery, they note, he would have used a code whose solution required more than holding up a mirror. To Leonardo, mirror writing seemed as "natural" as any other kind.

Freud's interpretation of Leonardo also rests on two paintings. He saw the triangular arrangement of the Virgin Mary, St. Anne, and the infant Jesus in *Virgin and Child with St. Anne* and the "double meaning" of the *Mona Lisa* smile as illustrations of how "the two mothers of his childhood"—his real mother, who bore him out of wedlock, and his father's wife—were "melted into a single form." But triangular composition was common in Leonardo's work (for example, in *The Last Supper*), and the famous smile is probably the result of the ambidextrous artist's unusual ability to recall and reproduce in entirety what he saw—in this case, a fleeting expression on his model's face.

Leonardo's work, say Aaron and Clouse, does not betray early childhood obsessions; it reflects the organization of his brain.

Fakes Preferred

"Art Versus Collectibles" by Edward C. Banfield, in *Harper's* (August 1982), P.O. Box 2620, Boulder, Colo. 80321.

When former Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller began selling high-quality reproductions of his private art collection, the art world was shocked. Hilton Kramer, former art critic of the *New York Times*, lamented "a new era of hype and shamelessness." Banfield, a Harvard government professor, argues that Rockefeller had the right idea.

The same connoisseur who buys recorded Beethoven symphonies shrinks from the thought of high fidelity re-creations when it comes to paintings and sculpture. Yet to see art masterpieces today, the average citizen must travel to a major city and endure museum crowds for a glimpse. Why not show first-rate reproductions of masterpieces in schools and small museums nationwide? Don't university art departments teach students to appreciate art by showing slides?

As most museum heads have ruefully discovered, fakes need not be "inferior." The National Gallery long unwittingly displayed as "Vermeers" two paintings by the 20th-century master forger Hans van Meegeren. The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibited several fifth-century B.C. Etruscan terra cotta warriors for 40 years before finding out they were modern. Much art is not created by the hand of the artist