

A Peece of Christ

Charles Hope

LEONARDO DA VINCI
at the Louvre, until 24 February 2020

LEONARDO DA VINCI REDISCOVERED
by Carmen Bambach ([/search-results?search=Carmen Bambach](/search-results?search=Carmen+Bambach)).
William Collins, 396 pp., £20, April, 978 0 00 831341 8

THE LAST LEONARDO: THE SECRET LIVES OF THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE PAINTING
by Ben Lewis ([/search-results?search=Ben Lewis](/search-results?search=Ben+Lewis)).
Oxford, 383 pp., £35, November, 978 0 19 881383 5

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LEONARDO'S work has always been in demand. Following his training in Florence he moved to Milan, where he worked for the duke, Ludovico Sforza. After a brief spell as a military engineer for Cesare Borgia, he returned to Florence. Then came a second period in Milan, a few years in Rome at the invitation of the pope and finally a summons by Francis I to France, where he died in 1519, aged 67. His reputation, already very high in his lifetime, continued to grow after his death, and he regularly appeared in lists of outstanding modern painters. The earliest published account of his life, in the first edition of Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550), is largely devoted to comments about his personality, charm, extraordinary range of interests and, perhaps surprisingly today, his reluctance to concentrate on painting. Almost all this material was taken from various manuscript sources then circulating in Florence, but embellished in the retelling. Thus the statement about his death was enhanced by the claim that he died in the arms of Francis I, an episode that became an indispensable part of the Leonardo legend and was later depicted by Ingres. (Although Leonardo did indeed die at Amboise, Francis was not there at the time.) There is no clear indication that the author of the biographical account, the style of which is unlike that of Vasari himself, had actually seen any paintings by Leonardo, so it's understandable that the comments about Leonardo's influence on later artists are extremely vague. More surprising is the fact that no serious attempt seems to have been made by the author to consult people in Florence who had known Leonardo while he was working there, although this was done for other artists. As a consequence, many of the details provided about Leonardo's life are demonstrably wrong.

The expanded biography published in the second edition of the *Lives* (1568) wasn't much of an improvement. Vasari seems to have made some contribution, notably in adding references to drawings by Leonardo in his possession. He may also be the source for a brief passage about the