Arts books

The enduring delight and intrigue of Leonardo da Vinci

As two new books show, 500 years since his death, the Renaissance artist's life remains deeply controversial

A crowd of tourists photograph the 'Mona Lisa' portrait at the Louvre, Paris © Bridgeman Images

Bruce Boucher AUGUST 9, 2019

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the death of Leonardo da Vinci, and his "brand" has never been more potent. Alongside his art, Leonardo's myriad studies anticipated modern concerns with flight and the mysteries of life itself. He epitomised the cliché of the Renaissance man. Leonardo has not lacked attention over the past five centuries, but there is always room for more on this most enigmatic of men.

Many recent books have been of a specialist nature, like Martin Clayton's *Leonardo: A Life in Drawing* or Martin Kemp's personal account *Living with Leonardo*. Walter Isaacson's biography — modestly subtitled "The Biography" — interpreted the artist as a 15th century Steve Jobs and is packaged in a quartet of books on geniuses. Bernd Roeck's new biography provides a more rounded picture of Leonardo while Ben Lewis has thrown a welcome light upon the machinations behind the notorious case of the "Salvator Mundi" — a gripping tale of art market wheeler-dealing.

Before the 19th century, Leonardo was a somewhat mythical figure who attracted whimsical attributions in the way a magnet draws iron filings. Giorgio Vasari, the 16th-century father of art historical writing who hailed him as one of the founders of the High Renaissance style, knew only a few, genuine works, waxing lyrical over the "Mona Lisa", which he never saw.

Kenneth Clark, who wrote one of the best general accounts of the artist in the 20th century, likened those outlier works to "the Cheshire Cat — only the smile remains". But that smile, famously associated with the "Mona Lisa", also attracted more troubling analyses from figures such as Walter Pater and Sigmund Freud. In an influential essay, Pater pronounced Lisa "sinister", adding that "like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave".

> **As with his most celebrated painting, the man is hard to discern behind the mass of legend and speculation**

Freud in turn analysed Leonardo's life in homoerotic terms, bolstered by stunning

misinterpretations of his sources; his interpretation coloured much of the subsequent literature on Leonardo, Clark's book included.

Equally important for the perception of Leonardo was the theft of the "Mona Lisa" from the Louvre in 1911. Stolen by an Italian for patriotic reasons, the incident turned Leonardo's mysterious portrait into an object of fetishism, leading to three physical assaults against it and innumerable parodies by the likes of Duchamp and Dalí.

The painting now rests in a bulletproof, climate-controlled case in a gallery sponsored by Nippon Television. As with his most celebrated painting, so Leonardo the man is difficult to discern behind the accretion of legend and speculation in popular culture.

Roeck's impressive book is therefore a welcome addition to the vast literature on its subject. The subtitle of *Leonardo* brings us closer to the polymath who saw painting as something of a sideline. A distinguished German cultural historian, Roeck brings formidable strengths to his task, and his familiarity with primary sources and Leonardo's cultural milieu makes him an excellent guide to separating the chaff from the wheat.

For example, he dismisses the dotty idea that Leonardo's mother was an Arab slave, and he sheds light on the plausible role taken by Leonardo's father in establishing the artistic career of his illegitimate son.

Roeck is justifiably sceptical about portraits of the artist, especially the putative self-portrait in Turin, which may well date from 1800. He also deals sensibly with the charge of sodomy lodged against Leonardo in 1476, a charge made anonymously against many Florentine youths at that time and, like most of them, quietly dropped.

Roeck explains how Leonardo's period as a court artist to the Duke of Milan enabled him to project his talents on to ambitious projects that reverberated among the artist's contemporaries. The unfinished aspect of Leonardo's career continues to bedevil an appreciation of his achievements to this day. Leonardo set himself implausible goals and consequently finished little; yet what he left behind had greater impact than the perfected works of more productive masters.

In Roeck's book the controversial "Salvator Mundi", which was purchased by a mysterious buyer for more than $450m two years ago, is touched upon only briefly. And so Ben Lewis takes up the story of the world's most expensive painting in *The Last Leonardo*.

In tabloid style, Lewis unravels the complex and often murky history of a panel that was described as "a wreck" at a London auction in 1958 and purchased by the art dealers Robert Simon and Alex Parish for a mere $10,000 when it resurfaced for sale in 2005. From that

date, the value began to jump as it underwent serious study and conservation that turned the wreck into a more promising artefact. The danger, in Lewis's words, was that scholarship risked being "compromised by showmanship and salesmanship", which is exactly what happened.

When Simon and Parish sold it in 2013, the damaged panel had been discussed and debated within the scholarly world as well as debuting in the National Gallery's important Leonardo exhibition in 2011. There it was presented firmly as by Leonardo even though a lack of scholarly consensus existed concerning its autograph status.

Bolstered by that imprimatur, the panel was acquired in 2013 for $80m by a dealer who quickly resold it to a Russian oligarch for $127.5m. Lewis excels in capturing the "world of smoke and mirrors" that led to the final sale of the painting for $450m to a minor Saudi royal, probably acting as a proxy for the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. But controversy continues to dog the work, and its promised showing at the Louvre Abu Dhabi was cancelled.

A major problem with accepting this "Salvator Mundi" lies in establishing a clear history of a painting that exists in more than 20 versions. Then, too, the "wreck" of 1958 has been transformed by time and multiple restorations, rendering definitive judgments of dubious worth.

No doubt it will continue to be a subject of debate for years to come, and this is as it should be. Perhaps Lewis described it best when he called the painting "a Leonardo for our time, a post-truth Leonardo".

Leonardo: Der Mann, der alles wissen wollte (Leonardo: The Man who Wanted to Know Everything), by Bernd Roeck, *CH Beck, RRP€28, 432 pages*

The Last Leonardo: The Secret Lives of the World's Most Expensive Painting, by Ben Lewis, *William Collins, RRP£20, 416 pages*

Bruce Boucher is the director of Sir John Soane's Museum in London

Join our online book group on Facebook at FTBooksCafe. Listen and subscribe to Culture Call, a transatlantic conversation from the FT, at ft.com/culture-call or on Apple Podcasts