



LEONARDO
DA VINCI

THE LANGUAGE OF FACES

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31718

Michael W. Kwakkelstein
in collaboration with Michiel Plomp

With contributions from
Dennis Geronimus, Bram de Klerck
and Paula Nuttall



THOTH PUBLISHERS BUSSUM

TEYLERS MUSEUM

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53

Leonardo da Vinci
(1452-1519)
Young Woman
Washing a Child's Feet

c. 1478-80

Pen and brush in brown ink
over traces of black chalk, 185 x 114 mm
Faculdade de Belas Artes,
Universidade do Porto, Porto
(inv. 99.1.1174)

PROVENANCE Commendatore Vittorio
Genevoso, Turin, L. 545; Marchese Giovanni
Antonio Turinetti di Priero; unknown
Portuguese collector; Academia de Marinha
e Comercio, Oporto; 1835, Academia de
Belas Artes, Oporto

LITERATURE Pouncey 1978, p. 405; Pedretti
1979, p. 15; Weston-Lewis 1994, pp. 130-31,
143; Almeida-Matos 1998

EXHIBITIONS Cambridge 1985, no. 28;
Cambridge/Lisbon/Porto 2000-2001, no. 2;
New York 2003, no. 21

The young woman is holding the rather bashful toddler close to her. As if the water is either very cold or very hot, she is washing his feet in a bowl. It is a simple everyday little scene of a mother with her young child that is a convincing and eloquent illustration of tender love. It fits in well with Leonardo's maxim that the action and expression of a figure in a painting or drawing must clearly and very specifically reveal the purpose in their minds (Richter 1970, I, p. 344, § 593); see also cat. no. 55.

Leonardo drew the initial design with very thin, barely visible lines with black chalk. He then added the outlines of the two figures very loosely and precisely with pen and brown ink. The fresh contrast between the areas of paper left white and the washes applied with the brush create the impression of sunlight playing across the group. At the same time he modelled the figures with them. Finally, he added hatchings to reinforce the shaded passages a little. With this 'dazzling pen-and-ink-with-wash technique' he appears to be anticipating the virtuoso draughtsmen of later centuries like Guercino and Tiepolo (New York 2003, p. 302). The loosely drawn child's buttocks in the foreground look a little clumsy, but they are nevertheless generally accepted as being by Leonardo as well.

It is not known whether Leonardo had a specific idea in mind with this scene. It could have had something to do with biblical stories, apocryphal or otherwise, about the birth of the Virgin, of John the Baptist or of Christ. The foreground of such scenes often shows the newborn baby being bathed. Throughout the second half of the 1470s Leonardo made many pen and ink sketches of the Madonna and Child and of the Child alone (Popham 1994, nos. 9-16). Those sketches were made in connection with one or more commissions for scenes of the Madonna and Child, such as *The Madonna of the Carnation* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich) and *The Benois Madonna* (Hermitage, St Petersburg). In the same period his father, who had married three times, had two sons: Antonio in 1476 and Giuliano in 1479. Leonardo almost certainly drew inspiration from seeing his two half-brothers. MP

CREDITS

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition
Leonardo da Vinci being held in Teylers Museum,
Haarlem, from 5 October 2018 to 6 January 2019

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Nieuwe 's-Gravelandseweg 3, 1405 HH Bussum
WWW.THOTH.NL

Front cover

Leonardo da Vinci
Study of the Head of a Young Warrior in Profile
to the Left (detail), c. 1504-05
Red chalk on paper with a pale pink preparation
Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest

Back cover

Leonardo da Vinci
A Girl's Head and Shoulders,
Three-Quarters to the Left (detail), c. 1490
Metalpoint, heightened with white on paper
with a pale ochre yellow preparation, 181 x 159 mm
Biblioteca Reale, Turin

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Design

Studio Berry Slok, Amsterdam

Lithography

BFC Graphics, Amersfoort

Printing and binding

Drukkerij Wilco, Amersfoort

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ISBN 978 90 6868 767 5