

'Let not your rage destroy a life'

by Nora Hamerman

Leonardo da Vinci: The Anatomy of Man

by the Houston Museum of Fine Arts
Bullfinch Press, Boston, 1992
141 pages, hardbound, \$40

As the current exhibition of 41 of his finest anatomical drawings in Houston shows, Leonardo da Vinci had a deep respect for human life. This makes it more than a little ironic that the Queen of England—whose consort is one of the most arrogant human-haters—inherited the largest collection of Leonardo's drawings in the world. Fortunately, over the past 20 years, the Royal Library at Windsor Castle has consistently said "yes" to requests to loan these drawings for exhibitions. The rest of the time, like all precious "old master" drawings, they are carefully stored away from the light and only made available to scholars and artists on request.

The anatomical studies underwent a conservation process in 1970 which will help to ensure their long life and safety. The catalogue which accompanies the show, written by Martin Clayton with commentaries on anatomy by Ron Philo, offers a mostly straightforward account of the state of the art of anatomy in Leonardo's era and his specific contributions to it. The reproductions—all in color—are the most beautiful one can obtain. But, as Philo underlines on p. 101: "No facsimile or reproduction of this and the following image captures the pen-strokes and life of the original."

He adds, "If at the end of an anatomy course, today's students could conceive in their mind's eye anatomy in the manner animated here by Leonardo, anatomists would be content." Anatomy, as Leonardo understood, is largely a visual science, to which verbal description is merely a supplement. Sad to say, the majority of anatomical studies which Leonardo is recorded to have made, in the hopes of publishing an engraved anatomy textbook, have been lost.

I detect a subtle difference in approach between the two authors. Martin Clayton is assistant curator of drawings and prints at the Royal Library and was trained in Cambridge. He divides Leonardo's career as an anatomist into three distinct phases: Early Work, ca. 1487-95; Synthesis, ca. 1504-09;

and Analysis, ca. 1510-13. Ron Philo is a senior lecturer on anatomy at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston, and has written his own anatomy text. His commentaries on anatomical questions combine a warm appreciation for Leonardo's feat with clear indications of the mistakes in the drawings.

Clayton's text suffers, like much (not all; one thinks of the late, great Dr. K. Keele) of British scholarship on Leonardo today, from the materialist prejudice which values only empiricism and inveighs against "tradition," by which he means the search for harmony and proportion in nature typical of the Renaissance era. The fact that Leonardo himself scorned scientific inquiry without hypothesis as a "ship without a pilot," is suppressed in Clayton's commentary.

Refuting this distorted view, two quotations from Leonardo's last phase of anatomy studies, not cited in the catalogue, must be kept in mind while viewing these drawings. One is his insistence that knowledge is the prerequisite to love, which he made in defense of his dissection work when he was slandered before Pope Leo X by the unsavory German mirror maker, Giovanni degli Specchi, in 1515. (As a result of these accusations of unspecified sacrilegious practices, Leonardo was barred from further research at the hospital of Santo Spirito.)

Leonardo's polemic appears on a sheet of sketches made in 1513 in Rome, which treats the heart, related to catalogue No. 23, which was originally part of the same notebook:

"Abbreviators do harm to knowledge and to love, seeing that the love of any thing is the offspring of this knowledge, the love being the more fervent in proportion as the knowledge is more certain, and this certainty is born of a complete knowledge of all the parts, which, when combined, compose the totality of the thing which ought to be loved."

'Nothing compared to the soul'

The second quote is his passionate affirmation of the sacredness of human life, which appears on the sheet of studies of the deep structure of the shoulder, exhibited as catalogue No. 14a in the Houston show. He wrote here:

"And you, O Man, who will discern in this work of mine the wonderful works of Nature, if you think it would be a criminal thing to destroy it, reflect how much more criminal it is to take the life of a man; and if this, his external form, appears to thee marvelously constructed, remember that it is nothing as compared with the soul that dwells in that structure; for that, indeed, be it what it may, is a thing divine. Leave it then to dwell in His work at His good will and pleasure, and let not your rage or malice destroy a life—for indeed, he who does not value it, does not himself deserve it."

The exhibition "Leonardo da Vinci: The Anatomy of Man" will continue at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts until Sept. 6, then travel to Philadelphia Sept. 18-Nov. 19, and to Boston Dec. 11, 1992-Feb. 21, 1993.