

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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ADVANCE FACT SHEET

Exhibition: Leonardo's Horses: Studies of Horses and Other Animals by Leonardo da Vinci from the Royal Library at Windsor Castle

Itinerary: National Gallery of Art
February 24 - June 9, 1985

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
June 22 - October 13, 1985

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
November 9, 1985 - February 23, 1986

Background: This exhibition was announced on March 2, 1983 in conjunction with the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the West Coast.

Content: For the first time, a selection of fifty studies of horses and other animals relating to several of the artist's major projects are being lent by Her Majesty from the Royal Library at Windsor Castle for an American tour premiering at the National Gallery, Washington. These are among the most renowned animal studies in the world.

Range: The drawings date from 1478 to around 1517, covering Leonardo's early days in Florence to later years in Milan and the last years in France.

Subject: Most of the drawings selected for this exhibition focus on Leonardo's treatment and studies of horses. Several sheets also include sketches of donkeys, oxes, cats, dragons and other fanciful creatures. The horse studies are widely recognized as another instance of Leonardo's genius in his vast corpus of drawings of natural life, science and art. They reveal the very special relationship between man and horse, as well as intense study of the animal.

Projects and Related Drawings: The drawings fall into seven chronological groups, several of which involved tremendously important projects that Leonardo worked on but which have not survived or were never completed, giving their preparatory studies an added significance.

Early Adorations: These seven drawings are among Leonardo's earliest. They are studies for two paintings: an Adoration of the Shepherds, on which he was at work around 1478 but never completed, and an Adoration of the Magi, now in the Uffizi, done in 1481 for the convent of San Donato a Scopeto just outside Florence and Leonardo's first major commission. These drawings include nativity animals, some of his earliest fantastic animals and, of course, horses. They

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are shown in chronological sequence to reflect Leonardo's ideas as they developed. Several sheets done from nature reflect how readily the artist's observations of the horse's standing position could shift to details observed in a brisk walk. In another series of three drawings, the form is refined by a more sensitive rendering of the smooth surface of the horse with a neat and deliberate contour line.

Proportion Studies: Leonardo's horses are images true to nature but idealized by a classical concept of beauty. In his early Florentine days, he began to measure and study the proportions of the horse. Later, he is known to have prepared a treatise on the horse's anatomy and its proportions, which apparently was lost in 1499 during the French invasion of Lombardy. For this work, he had access to a variety of breeds in the famous Sforza and other excellent stables. He invented a measuring device for the horse, as a number of sketches in this group indicate. It is difficult to explain the markings but they seem to suggest a modular system of measurement, in some instances based on a live model, on others on classical models. One extraordinary drawing in this group, a horse in profile, with details of its forelegs and chest in frontal and three-quarter views, reflects Leonardo's sublime balance between knowledge and impression. Many of these drawings also bear notes in his hand.

The Sforza Monument: The Sforzas were rulers of Milan for over eight decades. In 1480, when Leonardo was 30 years old, he asked Ludovico Sforza for work there as an architect and engineer. Leonardo also indicated that he was a painter and a sculptor and suggested he produce an equestrian monument to Ludovico's father. Leonardo received the commission shortly after moving to Milan and worked on the project for about ten years, from about 1484 to the end of 1493, when unstable political conditions forced aside plans to cast a clay model. During this time, there may also have been a change in the composition: from a horse rearing above a fallen foe to a horse walking at a solemn pace, producing a more majestic monument, but in any case the result was more suitable for casting in the colossal proportions projected. This casting was set for December 20, 1493, and one awed observer noted that it was to be 24 feet high - two earlier equestrian monuments, Donatello's Gattamelata and Verrocchio's Colleoni, being respectively only around ten and thirteen feet high. But the bronze, when collected, was made into cannon, and though Leonardo continued to work on the project throughout the 1490s, and although the moulds were ready, Leonardo moved back to Florence, where even greater plans awaited him, and the Sforza Monument was essentially forgotten.

The greater part of the surviving studies for this project is at Windsor. In one drawing, exceedingly important but no bigger than a postage stamp, Leonardo revives the antique concept of colossal statuary. It comes from a sheet of the Codex Atlanticus in which the artist records his reaction in the spring of 1490 on seeing in Pavia the classical horse called the Regiole, which led him to write, "the imitation of antique works is more praiseworthy than that of modern ones." Another sheet, covered with studies for the casting, is

typical of Leonardo's pages of notes, both in content and character, ending with a quotation from Dante's Inferno, "He who, without Fame, burns his life to waste, leaves no more vestige of himself on earth than wind-blown smoke, or the foam upon the sea."

The Battle of Anghiari: The ten drawings in this section fully demonstrate Leonardo's powers as a draftsman. They are images of incomparable beauty and exuberant vitality from one of his major works which has not survived. Their impetuous and explosive penwork matches the dazzling effect of vivid red chalk touches, with black chalk forms in contrasting atmospheric effect. Leonardo's composition commemorated the battle fought by the Florentine army at Anghiari in 1440 against the Milanese forces. It was painted in 1505 on a wall of the new Council Hall in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.

In 1563 Vasari was ordered to alter the Council Hall's architecture and provide new decoration for it. He described the painting, which he either had destroyed or painted over, as a knot of interlocked forms vibrating with energy, the vortex of an impetuous flight. He judged it as "a work that was held to be very excellent and of great mastery, by reason of the marvellous ideas that he had in composing that battle; seeing that in it rage, fury, and revenge are perceived as much in the men as in the horses." A sheet of studies of heads and of a rearing horse is dominated by the ferocious expressions of the horses, varying in intensity and fierceness depending on how the mouth stretches open to expose the upper teeth, the nostrils expand, the fiery eye emerges from the depth of its socket, or the neck arches over the proudly projecting chest.

The Neptune: Leonardo made a presentation drawing, now lost, of Neptune and his sea-horses for his friend Antonio Segni, who left Florence for Rome in 1504. It was executed while Leonardo was at work on the Battle of Anghiari. A highly finished, large and spirited black chalk drawing in this group is all that remains of the gift. It clearly reflects the power of the Anghiari picture. Another study in this group, but probably of a later date, may be for a Neptune fountain project. Although apparently inspired by Michelangelo's David, a Neptune was intended, as indicated by the sea-horses sketched at the feet of the standing figure.

The Trivulzio Monument: Many of the equestrian studies at Windsor are attributed to the Sforza project, but some may be for this equestrian monument, of which nothing would be known except for Leonardo's own reference to it on a sheet of the Codex Atlanticus. The monument was meant to represent a condottiere, Giovanni Giacomo Trivulzio, who worked principally for the French in opposition to the Sforzas. The date of this monument, about 1508-12, is inferred from the style of the drawings, there being no other documentary evidence. One sheet bearing four studies is an exceptionally fine example of Leonardo's mature style, combining the forceful and impetuous penmanship of the Anghiari studies with the probing line of the late anatomical and architectural studies. The composition returns to Leonardo's favored motif of the horse trampling a fallen foe. Among

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1784

this group of drawings are several sculptural renderings of a walking, or gaited, horse, mannered yet majestic and sympathetic.

Late Allegories: These drawings date from Leonardo's latest period, after 1510, but they are in a direct line of subject matter going back to his earliest work, inspired principally by medieval bestiaries but strongly suggestive of his own thinking. Explanations of most of them remain speculative, although some seem to be produced as illustrations for literary texts or architectural decoration. On first glance, many of the drawings in this group seem almost comic, but continuing study may reveal genuine monsters of the mind. Even a sheet of studies of a cat, so disarming at first, begins to take on the ferocity of larger feline animals.

Catalogue: A fully illustrated catalogue has been written by Jane Roberts, Curator of the Print Room at the Royal Library, Windsor Castle, and by Dr. Carlo Pedretti, Leonardo scholar and Professor of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The Royal Library, Windsor Castle: The Royal Collection of drawings and watercolors, numbering around thirty thousand separate items, is kept in the Print Room attached to the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. The unrivalled group of six hundred drawings by Leonardo is first mentioned in the Royal Collection in 1690. By that time there is evidence that other important Italian Renaissance drawings were also part of the collection, in addition to the portrait drawings by Holbein. During the 1760s, two magnificent groups of drawings acquired by King George III were joined by works of major Italian artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Further additions, mainly by contemporary artists, have been made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The loans which Her Majesty has made in recent years to exhibitions at the National Gallery of Art give some idea of her generosity and the importance and range of the collection: ten drawings to Prints and Drawings by the Carracci Family, 1979; seven to Claude Lorrain 1600-1682, 1982; two to Raphael and America, 1982; six to Piazzetta: A Tercentenary Exhibition--Drawings, Prints and Illustrated Books, 1983; twenty to Leonardo's Last Supper: Before and After, 1983; and five to Correggio and His Legacy: Sixteenth-Century Emilian Drawings, 1984.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer), or Carolyn Amiot, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565 (202) 842-6353.