

XIIth FLORENCE BIENNALE

Design Unveiling

The *Florence Biennale* has engaged in design, thus broadened their horizons: a new insight into that fascinating world will be offered in a dedicated pavilion within the framework of the XIIth edition of the International Contemporary Art Biennial of Florence, to be held at the Fortezza da Basso from 18 to 27 October 2019.

Making such a choice means responding to the stimuli from many artists who have participated in the past editions of our biennial and are multitalented individuals working also in the fields of architecture and/or design, especially in graphic design and other major clusters of the so-called creative industries. In the newly unveiled Florence Biennale DESIGN Pavilion, light will be shed on breakthrough projects envisaging old and new technology, and competing in six contest categories, namely *Architecture & Town Design, Industrial & Product Design, Interior Design, Fashion & Jewellery Design, Communication & Graphic Design, and Technology & Game Design*. Indeed, the Design exhibition, to be set up by a renowned studio of architecture and design, represents an attempt to showcase new ideas for innovation and development while fostering values such as aesthetics and sustainability, already promoted within the previous edition of the *Florence Biennale*.

The projects presented will be examined by an International Jury of design experts. The XIIth *Florence Biennale* is part of the 2019 programme of initiatives aimed at celebrating the genius and art of Leonardo da Vinci. By unveiling the Design pavilion in his native town, the Florence Biennale also remembers his imagination and experimental approach to designing machines, devices, and new inventions - some of which were so pioneering that they would have aroused amazement for five hundred years since his death.

The essential part of the theme of the XIIth *Florence Biennale* may thus be interpreted giving novel meaning to the wording "**Ars et Ingenium**". In their own right, these words would have conveyed much broader meaning to the early humanists, who would also attribute cosmological significance to them. On the stage of contemporaneity, however, we have dared to indulge in a play on words to allude to the "Art + Design" binomial which we are showcasing this year for the first time.

ARS ET INGENIUM

Toward Leonardo da Vinci's Legacy of *Similitude and Invention*

In anticipation of the fifth centenary of Leonardo da Vinci's death in 2019, the International Contemporary Art Biennial of Florence will reflect on the cognitive and creative approach of the great master of the Renaissance who is regarded as an unsurpassed genius.

In particular, the theme of the XIIth *Florence Biennale* will focus on Leonardo's multifaceted being: an outstanding artist, he was also a 'scientist' committed to exploring nature in order to grasp the fundamental knowledge spanning the disciplines of comparative anatomy, botany, geology, physics, and intertwining cosmology with his studies on light, and more besides. In his letter to Ludovico Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan (also known as 'Ludovico il Moro'), he boasts of his ability to represent anything in form of 'of marble, bronze, and clay xstructural elements because he also was a skilled architect and engineer.¹ He designed mobile bridges, buildings and channels as well as breakthrough artillery, pyrotechnic effects, and a wide variety of devices. We may find the fantasy of some of Leonardo' inventions evoked in the artistry and imagination of artists from around the world participating in the XIIth Florence Biennale, thus exhibiting their works at the Fortezza da Basso. Adding to the pioneering *machine* drawn by Leonardo in his codices, including the mechanical flying equipment which he dreamed of for soaring through the air or the diving apparatus he imagined for breathing while exploring the depths of water, are the musical instruments he designed and played, for instance his famous horse skull shaped and silver decorated lyre.²

Leonardo also designed and built amazing scenic devices and automata.³ Bearing witness to the *Paradiso di Plutone*, made for the staging of Poliziano's *Orfeo* at the court of Gian Galeazzo Sforza and that of Isabella d'Este-Gonzaga in Marmiolo around 1490-91, for instance, is the Arundel Codex.⁴ Besides, an anonymous chronicler provided a description of Leonardo's *grande ingegno* (great ingenious device) which featured a rotating cupola giving shape and motion to 'paradise and all seven planets' within the framework of the *Festa del Paradiso*, a spectacular festival held on the occasion of Gian Galeazzo Sforza and Isabel of Aragon's marriage, on 13 January 1490.⁵ Building on the theatre and festival tradition perpetrated by the *festaioli fiorentini*, Leonardo enchanted the courtly audience of his day also with fables and *facetiae*.⁶

In the light of all this, the Lorenzo il Magnifico Lifetime Achievement Awards for Arts and Culture 2019 will be bestowed to outstanding personalities whose names will be disclosed shortly.

Meanwhile, thinking of Leonardo as an extraordinary *exemplum* for contemporary creativity, we wish to draw attention on the fact that, by joining

art practice and ‘scientific’ research with experimentation, he challenged the long held distinction that had long been made between *artes mechanicae* and *artes liberales*. In this way he ennobled the visual arts, especially painting, which in his view was ‘science and legitimate daughter of nature’. Like music and geometry, according to Leonardo, painting was based on the laws of harmony since, according to Leonardo, ‘it considers all continuous quantities, the qualities of the proportions of shadow and lights, and distances through its [science of] perspective’.⁷ In his *Treatise on Painting*, he also claimed that ‘the mind of the painter must resemble a mirror, which always takes the colour of the object it reflects and is completely occupied by the images of as many objects as are in front of it. Therefore you must know, Oh Painter! that you cannot be a good one if you are not the universal master of representing by your art every kind of form produced by nature. And this you will not know how to do if you do not see them, and retain them in your mind’.⁸

In Leonardo’s perspective it was essential for a painter to grasp a knowledge of nature through observation and to be able to represent it. The creative process, however, is not a mere reproduction of what the artist can see.

As a man of his time, Leonardo shared - to some extent - a way of knowing theorised in Marsilio Ficino’s *Theologia platonica*, which he presumably read after learning Latin in his adulthood.⁹ Indeed, his vision of the world corresponds to what Michel Foucault described as the ‘episteme of the Renaissance’ based on the concepts of *similitude* and *interpretation* ‘to know about things’, which means ‘to bring to light the system of resemblances that made them close to, and dependent upon one another’.¹⁰ In that perspective we can better understand Leonardo da Vinci’s belief that ‘the godliness in the painter’s science makes the mind of the painter turn into a resemblance of the Divine Mind’.¹¹ Accordingly, the cognisance of nature for the purpose of its representation confers to the artist’s intelligence the creative power of the Author of nature. Leonardo’s approach actually envisages the interpretation of natural phenomena based on observation and imagination: in his *Treatise on Painting* he argues that resemblance to an endless variety of scenes and objects shall be discovered by looking at ‘confused things, which arouse the ingenious mind to various inventions’ such as ‘battles with animal and human figures in action, landscapes, as even compositions with monstrosities like devils and similar beings’ because through those inventions recognition can be gained’.¹²

As offspring of a fertile mind aiming to compete in creativity with the divine, a treasure trove of *invenzioni mirabilissime* (amazing inventions) were

given breath of life by Leonardo. Although at times they crystallised within the pages of his manuscripts, they enriched painting as well as scenic design, and sculpture. An example of this is the innovative casting system that he developed to complete the bronze horse statue commissioned by Ludovico il Moro, as we can see in surviving drawings.¹³

Leonardo da Vinci's work, which has been a source of inspiration for five centuries, is being reinterpreted in a variety of ways by many contemporary artists at different career stages and with different cultural backgrounds, interests, and talents who will participate in the XIIth Florence Biennale. To them we dedicate Paul Valéry's words, inviting all of us to imagine Leonardo at work and follow him 'as he moves throughout the crude and dense wholeness of the world, where nature becomes so familiar to him that he wishes he could imitate it well enough to grasp it, and yet he will ultimately face the difficulty of conceiving an object which is not in nature'.¹⁴

Especially in times of darkness, when the art world still faces that difficulty while struggling with recurring issues and new global-scale challenges - from defining 'art' to researching aesthetic and technical values, from seeking redemption from the presumed supremacy of conceptual art to opposing deskilling - Leonardo's legacy appears to be 'light' cast onto a way to knowledge and perfection. Such a path may be undertaken with an holistic approach aimed at divining the contours of any human being in their physical, psychic and spiritual unity, and realising fully the worth of an artist and their creative acts, which can always be reinterpreted and re-enlivened, and thus revived.

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