Preface to the revised edition of 2018

First published in 2003, this book focuses on the works of Leonardo as well as on numerous original sources, which are discussed in depth in the ten chapters of the main text. The accompanying references and further reading can be found in the Bibliography (pp. 253–266) and in the catalogue section, which also offers a critical appraisal of Leonardo scholarship to date. The analyses in the main text approach Leonardo’s works from the perspective of their socio-cultural context and the history of their respective genres. They concentrate upon “a historical explanation of patterns” (Baxandall 1985) and interpret the context of Leonardo’s paintings against the backdrop of conflict and pictorial tradition. In the chapters of the main text I have furthermore sought to show that Leonardo’s theoretical and “scientific” ideas, and their reflection in his art, can likewise only be understood against the backdrop of their historical contingency.

A great deal has been published within the sphere of Leonardo scholarship in recent times, and the reader is directed here to the specialist bibliographies, some of which are annotated (Bibliography, Section 4, p. 266). In this preface, however, there is only room to pay tribute to the most important recent discoveries. These include in first place the Abu Dhabi Salvator Mundi (fig. 2; see Cat. XXXII). The painting, of which a number of other variants by Leonardo’s workshop also exist, has been known since the 19th century but was for a long time lost from view. In 2005 it appeared on the art market and in 2011 was presented to the public as an original painting by Leonardo da Vinci in a spectacular exhibition in London (Syson/Keith 2011). Its attribution to Leonardo nonetheless remains the subject of heated debate. Despite this controversy, on 15 November 2017 the painting sold for US$ 450 million at auction in New York (Gossez/Wetmore 2017) and is today housed in the Louvre Abu Dhabi (fig. 2).

The Abu Dhabi Salvator Mundi is undoubtedly a work of very high quality, whose design goes back to Leonardo himself. It is also more than likely, on the basis of current findings, that Leonardo was involved in its execution. But the viewpoint, regularly adopted since the London exhibition of 2011, that the painting represents a 100% autograph work by Leonardo himself, remains not entirely unproblematic.

Three factors in particular give rise to doubts over the attribution, which was also greeted with scepticism by some reviewers of the London exhibition (see Cat. XXXII). Firstly, in contrast to other authentic paintings by Leonardo, the Abu Dhabi Salvator is not mentioned in early sources. Indeed, the opposite is the case: contemporaries lament Leonardo’s lack of productivity (see below), while a Salvator listed in an inventory of 1513 was – judging by the evidence – the work of a Leonardo pupil (Shell/Simoni 1999).

Secondly, following its rediscovery in 2005, the badly damaged painting underwent very extensive restoration, the start of which in 2005 does not appear to be documented at all (Modestini 2014, p. 142). A publication documenting the entire restoration has been announced on several occasions but has yet to appear, which greatly hinders our ability to make any assessment of the Abu Dhabi Salvator from the outset.

Thirdly, the proposed dating of the Salvator Mundi to the period around 1500 (Syson/Keith 2011; Gossez/Wetmore 2017) cannot be reconciled with the chronology of Leonardo’s works as it currently stands. Arguing against this early dating of the Abu Dhabi Salvator, for example, is the fact that its design is oriented in formal terms towards Melozzo da Forlì’s Salvator Mundi in the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino (fig. 1), which it would appear that Leonardo only saw for the first time in 1512. Support for a later dating is also provided by the two undisputedly autograph drawings which Leonardo made for the Salvator (Nathan/Zöllner 2014, Cat. 40–41) and which the majority of Leonardo scholars assign to around 1504. Carlo Pedretti (Pedretti/Bartolotti 2017, p. 145) recently dated these two decades even later, to the years between 1510 and 1515. Furthermore, the Abu Dhabi Salvator Mundi in its present state exhibits a highly developed sfumato technique that corresponds more closely to Leonardo’s late works than to the period around 1500.
Leonardo himself, but goes back to the restoration carried out between 2005 and 2017. In order to dispel this suspicion, complete documentation of the restoration would need to be published, including a seamless photographic record of the interventions and additions made between 2005 and 2017. A discussion, moreover, of the criteria by which the authenticity of heavily restored Old Master paintings is assessed, would also be useful. Raphael’s Madonna del Cardellino, for example, was likewise substantially restored, but its authenticity is not in dispute. The Abu Dhabi Salvator Mundi thus offers a welcome opportunity to rethink questions regarding the authenticity of Old Master paintings. What is also urgently needed, lastly, is a comparative study and detailed technical analysis of all the variations and copies of Leonardo’s Salvator design that have so far come to light (Heydenreich 1994; Snow-Smith 1996; Pedretti/Barbatelli 2017). It is true that none of the known variants achieves the Abu Dhabi Salvator’s level of quality, but on the basis of comparison and diagnostic findings, we would be able to assess more accurately the extent to which Leonardo, his workshop and his pupils, or the recent restoration, are responsible for the Abu Dhabi painting as it currently appears.

Even a provisional comparison of the known variants, however, allows us to reach a number of conclusions. Firstly, and in contrast to the other variants, the Abu Dhabi Salvator clearly possesses a certain aura, one familiar to us from other Leonardo paintings. Secondly, the variants and copies of the Salvator can be divided into two groups. The first group comprises the Abu Dhabi Salvator, a version formerly in the collection of the Marquis de Ganay (fig. 4) and a painting attributed to Girolamo d’Ambra from San Domenico Maggiore in Naples (fig. 7). These three works exhibit a number of similarities in their details, for example in the design of the sleeve covering Christ’s blessing hand. Similarities can also be found in the style crossed over Christ’s chest, whose ornamentation approximately the same in all three paintings and is extraordinarily differentiated in its drawing. This is also true of the border of Christ’s robe, which displays a geometric pattern of a similar design. In the second
group, the ornamentation on the stole and on the border of Christ’s garment is of a different design: in place of strictly geometric patterns, it is dominated by decorative floral motifs. Falling into this group are the versions from the Stäck (fig. 8) and Worsley (fig. 9) collections, a painting attributed to Giampietrino in the Detroit Institute of Arts (fig. 10), and a further panel today in the National Museum in Warsaw, which was probably executed by Cesare da Sesto and shows no crossed stole at all (fig. 11).

Thirdly, a comparison of these paintings in terms of their treatment of the copious drapery folds reveals a superior level of quality in the Abu Dhabi Salvator. In all the other variants, these pleats and folds – for example in the sleeve of Christ’s blessing hand, or in other parts of his robe – are worked in a far more schematic fashion. Even in the Ganay Salvator, likewise a work of high quality, the drapery folds are rendered throughout with greater stylization.

The drapery folds of the two different fabrics behind Christ’s blessing hand are also revealing. The inner fabric belongs to a pale shirt, whose folds are gathered closely around Christ’s wrist. The outer robe is somewhat darker in colour and its fabric falls around that of the shirt in more generous folds. A study for these draperies can be seen in one of the two above-mentioned autograph drawings which Leonardo made for the project (Nathan/Zöllner 2014, Cat. 40). It is interesting to note that, in their treatment in particular of the outer sleeve, several versions of the Salvator exhibit parallels with Leonardo’s study and with each other. This is true of the Abu Dhabi Salvator (fig. 2 and 3), the version in the Stäck Collection (fig. 8) and the painting attributed to Giampietrino (fig. 10). Even the Warsaw panel, which departs quite substantially from the other versions, adheres to this particular detail (fig. 11). The same applies, lastly, to the Salvator attributed to Giuliano Alibrandi in Naples (fig. 3). There thus exists a close formal relationship between these paintings, which suggests that they were the products of a thriving workshop during Leonardo’s own lifetime. At the same time, however, the version by Cesare da Sesto (fig. 11) is also evidence that more creative artists took certain liberties when using Leonardo’s pictorial inventions.

Another detail which may well be relevant for the evaluation of the different versions of Leonardo’s Salvator design is the omega-shaped fold in the fabric of Christ’s robe, to the left of the ornamental bands. This distinctive detail is already present in one of Leonardo’s preliminary studies (Nathan/Zöllner 2014, Cat. 40) and is also found, with slight modifications, in the Ganay (fig. 4), Naples (fig. 9) and Worsley (fig. 9) paintings.

It is least stylized and comes closest to Leonardo’s original drawing in the Ganay Salvator, while in the other two variants it is somewhat simplified. In the Abu Dhabi Salvator, by contrast, the omega motif has shrunk to a barely legible cipher. This reduction of a detail that is also iconographical in interest (Snow-Smith 1982, pp. 58–61) is astonishing and suggests two very different conclusions: either this part of the painting is not by Leonardo himself, or it is the result of a restoration.

The Worsley Salvator (fig. 9), lastly, exhibits another formal parallel with the original study for Christ’s blessing hand (Nathan-Zöllner 2014, Cat. 40). Leonardo’s red-chalk drawing shows vertically rising folds of fabric that end in a cuff at the wrist. The Worsley Salvator is alone among the currently known versions to take up this motif of narrow, vertically rising pleats. It once again becomes clear that artists from Leonardo’s sphere sometimes tolerated the motifs they sourced from among their master’s drawings with a degree of freedom. This use of original Leonardo drawings with a degree of freedom (fig. 12). According to the latest findings, there can no longer be any doubt that Leonardo drew the 70 or so figures of the composition directly onto the support, in freehand and without the use of a cartoon or any other transfer techniques. The painting is thus fundamentally a large sketch, which bears witness to the artistic spontaneity of its maker. The spectacular infrared reflectograms bring to light even Leonardo’s famous method of “rough composition” (“composizione inerba”, TPL 188; Gombrich 1966), otherwise known only from his drawings.

The artist thereby developed his figures out of a confusing multitude of dynamic compositional lines. This process is particularly apparent in the group of people on the right-hand edge of the Adoration of the Magi. In the restored painting it is now also possible to see more clearly a number of motifs to which Leonardo would regularly return over the course of his career, such as the group of battling homuncles, as well as his spontaneous exploration of figures in several different positions.
From these investigations, it has also emerged that Leonardo’s painting technique in his Adoration of the Magi is closely related to that of his St John’s (Cat. IX). Evidently Leonardo had originally intended to show not the Virgin with the Infant Christ and Infant St John together with Archangel Uriel, but a very much simpler Adoration scene with the Virgin of the Rocks (Cat. XVI). According to the Gospels, the Three Wise Men were guided by the Child as a bright source of light, the Star of Bethlehem. The young man to the left of the tree in the middle ground is pointing towards this star with the index finger of his right hand. The bearded old man is shielding his eyes from its brilliance with his raised right arm. And if divine light is a central theme of the picture, then a role is perhaps also played by the metaphysics of light set out a few years earlier by the Augustinian (Fahrenheit 1997), for whom Leonardo had embarked on the painting.

Diagnostic imaging has also played a key role in the investigation of other Leonardo paintings. Infrared reflectography has thus revealed two very different underdrawings beneath the London version of Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks (Cat. XVII). Evidently Leonardo had originally intended to show not the Virgin with the Infant Christ and Infant St John together with Archangel Uriel, but a very much simpler Adoration scene with the Virgin and Child (Syson/Billinge 2003; Syson/Keith 2011). This first underdrawing was probably executed by Leonardo himself and can be linked in compositional terms with some of his original sketches (fig. 13). Only the second underdrawing (fig. 14) corresponds to the figural arrangement that is seen in the two versions of the Virgin of the Rocks and which, moreover, directly reflects the patron’s wishes (see Ch. III).

Diagnostic scanning likewise contributed to the findings yielded by the restoration of a previously disregarded copy of the Mona Lisa in the Prado in Madrid (fig. 15). The results are discussed in a monumental catalogue on the Virgin and Child with St Anne (Cat. XXVII; Delravez 2012) published in conjunction with an exhibition in the Louvre in Paris. During their investigations of the Madrid Mona Lisa copy, the conservators discovered a luminous pale blue, Leonardo-esque rocky landscape in the background, concealed beneath later overpainting in black. They also established that the dimensions and outlines of the female sitter in the Prado copy correspond exactly to the Louvre original. It is likely, therefore, that the copyist employed a cartoon made by Leonardo as the starting-point for his own painting (González Monto in Delravez 2012, pp. 234–239).

On the surface, the significance of the Madrid copy lies in the fact that certain details can be made out more clearly here than in Leonardo’s original painting. This is true of the landscape background, for example, and the folds and decorative trimming of Lisa’s dress. Of greater interest, however, are two further insights. Firstly, the investigations point to the conclusion that the copy was executed at the same time as Leonardo’s original. This argument is supported by small changes that are common to both portraits and which have been revealed by diagnostic imaging. The close cooperation this implies between master and pupil is not unusual. A number of investigations over the past few years have in fact shown that Leonardo produced or designed paintings of which his pupils made copies and variations (Cat. XXIII–XXIV, XXVIII–XXIX). We also know from written sources that Leonardo occasionally made his own improvements to the works being carried out by his pupils (see p. 149).

It is surprising, secondly, that an autograph portrait by Leonardo was copied in the master’s workshop while the original was still in progress. It is possible that Leonardo saw the commission for the Mona Lisa as an opportunity to teach one of his pupils the finer points of portraiture. Arguing in favour of the didactic nature of the Madrid copy is the clear discrepancy between its fidelity to detail in the figure, and its greater freedom in other areas. Thus the copyist has reproduced the many folds...
Leonardo da Vinci

Perfect the results. An insight into the efficient operation of Leonardo’s workshop produced paintings not only based on his designs but also based on his paintings even before the originals were finished. And it is possible a striking departure in the colour of Lisa’s sleeves, which in the Paris painting are executed in a mustard tone that corresponds in visual terms with the ochres of the middle ground, is also experimental in nature (pp. 162/163). The copyist has opted instead for a reddish fabric that introduces a lively colour contrast in place of the homogenous tonality (pp. 162/163). The copyist has opted instead for a reddish fabric that introduces a lively colour contrast in place of the homogenous tonality of the original painting. The Prado Mona Lisa confirms what the restoration whose results, however, take some getting used to and have thereby sparked some controversy. In a similar fashion to Michelangelo’s frescos in the Sistine Chapel following their restoration a few years ago, we now find ourselves confronted with an intensity of colour that, in the case of the Virgin and Child with St Anne, no longer entirely corresponds with the image of Leonardo that we have held for centuries. With the rigorous cleaning of the darkened and dirty varnishes, the painting has also lost areas of sfumato, the subtle blurring and shading that lend Leonardo’s works their unique atmosphere and are considered his trademark. The difference between Leonardo’s sfumato and the clearly less suggestive appearance of paintings by his workshop is demonstrated by a look at the Madrid Mona Lisa. The copy largely lacks the aura of the sfumato so typical of Leonardo, which essentially results from two effects. The first is the lost areas of sfumato, the subtle blurring and shading that lend Leonardo’s works their unique atmosphere and are considered his trademark. The difference between Leonardo’s sfumato and the clearly less suggestive appearance of paintings by his workshop is demonstrated by a look at the Madrid Mona Lisa. The copy largely lacks the aura of the sfumato so typical of Leonardo, which essentially results from two effects. The first is the original sfumato that Leonardo consciously sought to achieve with numerous pigments-like glazes and varnishes; the second is the stiffening of this impression of soft transitions as the varnish has darkened with age. These two effects are inextricably bound up with one another, since the varnish was intentionally applied by the artist himself but subsequently became the carrier of a patina that only formed over the course of time.

There is a sense of experimentation, too, in the treatment of the landscape background in the right half of the picture. For whereas the copyist has adopted the rock formations on the left almost exactly, he has taken greater liberties on the right. Thus the rocks in the lower right-hand background are rendered in a far more differentiated fashion, but thereby appear almost stereotypical. Such comparisons of the two portraits also make it clear that the greatest correspondences between original and copy are found in the left-hand side, while the greatest differences are found on the right. It would seem that the copyist proceeded from left to right and in so doing increasingly distanced himself from his visual source. The uncompromising barrenness of Leonardo’s landscapes thereby appears that Leonardo contributed primarily the innovative figural composition, while his pupils were able to elaborate the landscape backgrounds in very different ways, either to suit their own taste or to meet the expectations of potential customers (fig. 18). The almost complete lack of vegetation in Leonardo’s primeval landscapes is thereby replaced, in many of these workshop versions, by flourishing trees and green meadows. The Prado Mona Lisa confirms what the copyist has opted instead for a reddish fabric that introduces a lively colour contrast in place of the homogenous tonality (pp. 162/163). The copyist has opted instead for a reddish fabric that introduces a lively colour contrast in place of the homogenous tonality of the original painting. The Prado Mona Lisa confirms what the re...
It is the reference to the Mona Lisa that has attracted the most interest, since the earliest notes otherwise relating to the painting date from the years after 1517 and moreover contain conflicting information. The assumption that the portrait today housed in the Louvre indeed shows Lisa del Giocondo is based on the later writings of Giorgio Vasari (1550/1568). This identification was nevertheless lost weight 20 years ago by an archival find in Milan (Shell/Sironi 1991) and was subsequently confirmed by further documents (Zöllner 1995; Pallanti 2008). It still encounters occasional opposition, however (Krauer 2009; Rogers Mariotti 2009; Zapperi 2010; Hatfield 2011). With the discovery of the “Heidelberg Cicero”, one of the major grounds for doubt has now been removed. The annotation by Vespucci, who knew Leonardo well, provides firm evidence that the artist was working on a portrait of Lisa del Giocondo in October 1503. To the Florentine chancellery secretary, the Mona Lisa thereby evidently seemed sufficiently prominent to be mentioned ahead of the Virgin and Child with St Anne and the Battle of Anghiari, even though these two other commissions were more prestigious by the standards of the day. Proof that the Mona Lisa was indeed seen as an important painting even in Leonardo’s lifetime is furnished by the young Raphael, active in Florence since 1504, who over the following years produced a number of female portraits based on that of Lisa del Giocondo (cf. ill. p. 165). Sufficient to mention here the portrait of Maddalena Doni (fig. 19) and the pen drawing of a young woman (fig. 20), whose position within the pictorial space and the shading of whose face correspond to Leonardo’s Mona Lisa. Independently of Raphael, a follower of AndreaSolario also looked back to the Mona Lisa shortly afterwards in his portrait of Leonardo’s patron, Charles d’Amboise, painted around 1507 in Milan. In view of these portraits inspired by Leonardo’s Mona Lisa and the information in the “Heidelberg Cicero”, there can no longer be any doubt that the painting housed in Paris indeed shows Lisa del Giocondo.

The “Heidelberg Cicero” also allows further deductions to be made. Thus Vespucci describes a Mona Lisa that is still unfinished. Leonardo has only executed the head. In October 1503, in other words, the highly unusual background landscape did not yet exist. This blank section of the painting is also reflected in the portraits by Raphael and Solario, for their very different background deviations signify from the juggled rock formations in the Mona Lisa. The wording of Vespucci’s marginal note and its relation to the remarks by Cicero furthermore imply that Leonardo commenced all of his pictures by developing the face and parts of the upper body in detail. Confirmation that Leonardo employed – as Vespucci surmises – a working method that took the human face as its point of departure is indeed found in a number of Leonardo’s drawings (Nathan/Zöllner 2013, Cat. 13, 17, 21, 23, 24, 187, 204, 209) as well as in his cartoons and unfinished paintings. In the Burlington House Cartoon (Cat. XX), for example, the faces have been modelled in considerably greater detail than the draperies and the background. A similar situation is seen in Leonardo’s St Jerome (Cat. DL), where the head is substantially more finished than other parts of the painting. Vespucci’s annotation thus also testifies to Leonardo’s great interest in facial expression, an interest that also characterizes his theoretical writings on art and his scientific studies (Zöllner 2010).