The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Da Vinci Designs Come to Life in St. Pete Exhibit

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October 06, 2011

The exhibit sees Da Vinci's plans for an early flying machine realized, left, as well as those for a wooden tank.

ST. PETERSBURG — Leonardo Da Vinci may be best known as the creator of the "Mona Lisa" and her enigmatic smile, but the artist and inventor's boundlessly diverse repertoire had a darker side too, stretching to designs of military machines for mass killings.

The multiple talents of the ultimate Renaissance man and one of the art world's most mysterious figures are now on display at St. Petersburg's Artillery Museum, including fascinating machines built using sketches made by Da Vinci for inventions that until recently remained on paper.

Titled "Da Vinci: The Genius," the exhibition gives visitors a chance not only to see many of the devices that the artist dreamed of bringing to life, but also to touch them. Until now, most of his ideas were no more than sketches between the lines of his legendary codexes. For more

than 10 years, the Italian expert Modesto Veccia, president of the Fondazione Anthropos and curator of the Il Genio di Leonardo Da Vinci museum in Italy, has devoted his time to painstakingly reconstructing ingenious machines according to Da Vinci's drawings. Along with a group of colleagues, Veccia analyzed about 6,000 pages of manuscripts — a task that was even more challenging than it was time-consuming, for in a cunning 15th-

century way of securing his copyright, Da Vinci deliberately made mistakes in some of his designs in order to stop them from being stolen.

By piecing together all the necessary information chaotically spread out among the codexes, Veccia managed to unravel the artist's complex designs. On their basis, 120 different machines and devices were eventually created.

"In making this exhibition, we wanted to show the different sides of the genius of Da Vinci," said Bruce Peterson, the exhibition's organizer.

"The exposition is extremely educative due to the great variety of information you can see here," he said. Moreover, you can interact with all the inventions on show."

The exhibition begins with a collection of small books with yellowed pages — exact copies of Da Vinci's priceless codexes. Even a cursory glance at the notebooks of Da Vinci, packed with weird and wonderful sketches, creates the impression that their author knew all the secrets of the universe. The script is unintelligible, even to Italian speakers: The artist was famous for his mirror writing, perhaps another way of safeguarding his inventions.

Luckily, the exhibition includes a touch screen display where visitors can look through all of the codexes and find detailed information about all of the machines on show. This is sometimes essential, as it can be difficult to understand what exactly Da Vinci intended his contraptions to do. In others, however, it is easy to see in the outlandish wooden models the prototype of modern equipment.

Da Vinci foresaw the invention of both the clock and the automobile as far back as the 15th century. His lack of formal education did not prevent him from dreaming of — and designing — flying apparatus. As a child, he was fascinated by birds, and he devoted a considerable amount of time to examining the world around him and teaching himself the principles of aerodynamics.

"I think that the most fascinating thing created by Da Vinci is scuba diving equipment," Peterson said. "He accurately developed a special breathing apparatus that humans could use to stay underwater."

Da Vinci's proposed application for diving equipment was to defend territories from enemies underwater. Another of his military machines on display is a prototype of a modern tank. The compact wooden machine equipped with cannons was designed to cause mass destruction.

It is difficult to reconcile some of these plans for deadly machines with the polymath's more beautiful works of art, which are also featured in the exhibition. Indeed, no exposition of Da Vinci is complete without his most famous painting, the "Mona Lisa," a replica of which hangs in the middle of the hall. Unlike in the Louvre, however, where the original is kept,

visitors can see both the front and back of the iconic masterpiece. All the wear of the painting has been preserved; every mark and crack of the original has been copied.

The small painting is dwarfed by the accompanying information boards devoted to some of the mysteries that "La Gioconda" may conceal. For example, in the middle of the back panel of the portrait is the number "29." This in itself is no mystery: It is the number in a series of masterpieces that were moved from Versailles to the Louvre after the French Revolution. But above the number, the letter "H" has been scribbled. Nobody knows what it stands for, or when it appeared on the back of the painting.

Other riddles are little by little revealed by fine art photographer and scientist Pascal Cotte's powerful 3D replica. Numerous close-ups of the "Mona Lisa's" smile, hands and eyes are exhibited, with the aim of showing how the project developed and changed in the artist's mind. Cotte's camera also reveals the original pigment colors of the painting.

The exposition ends with an entertaining documentary about "The Last Supper," Da Vinci's other best-known painting.

The extravaganza of talent on display may well leave visitors surprised that Da Vinci, who once said that "we, by our arts, may be called the grandsons of God," reproached himself at the end of his life for having offended both God and mankind because he had not "labored in art as he ought to have done."

"Da Vinci: The Genius" runs until Jan. 10 at the Artillery Museum, 7 Alexandrovsky Park, St. Petersburg. Metro Gorkovskaya. Tel. 232-0296. www.davincithegenius.com

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