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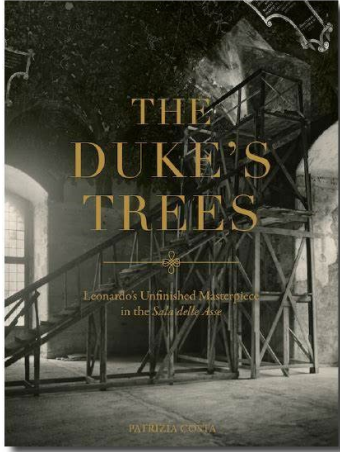


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Review: Costa, *The Duke's Trees*. First published online 1 December 2022.  
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## *The Duke's Trees: Leonardo's Unfinished Masterpiece in the Sala delle Asse*

**Patrizia Costa**

Pittsburgh, PA.: PC Press, 2021.

ISBN 9781736707401

239pp, USD 90.

**Review by Janis Bell, followed by the author's response. First published online 1 December 2022.**

This lavishly produced volume testifies to the inexhaustible interest in Leonardo da Vinci, for whom some 250 new publications in the quincentennial of his death in 1519 only seems to have spurred the desire for more. On heavyweight glossy paper, with high quality color illustrations, including several two-page spreads, the volume can hold its place on any art lover's coffee table and provide countless hours of enjoyment to those who like to browse as well as those who read from cover to cover.

The subject of the volume is an unfinished mural painting in the Ducal Palace of Milan known as the *Sala delle Asse*. The room gets its name from the boards that formerly lined the walls of the room to provide insulation. The work has been known for over a century, but as the author points out, what we know is not Leonardo's original painting but a nineteenth-century overpainting. Luca Beltrami (1854-1933), a prolific art historian, specifically requested the restoration as part of his effort to save the Ducal Palace of Milan from an angry public who wished to see the building razed. Yet in his zeal to transform a fragmentary ruin into an impressive decoration of intertwined tree branches, leaves, and knots rising to form a dense canopy, Beltrami instructed his restorer, Ernesto Rusca, to completely fill the spaces with leaves, branches, and knots. Costa's unique approach to the problem of the *Sala delle Asse* is to give equal time to Beltrami and Leonardo on the principle that Beltrami's role historically shaped the reception of the work for over a century, and still colors our understanding of it today.

The study is divided into two halves. The first focuses on Beltrami, including biographical details and the history of his Leonardo studies. Costa rightly faults him on two accounts: for suppressing the work of German art historian Paul Müller-Walde, who spent nine years working in Milanese archives and at the Sforza Castle; and for failing to adequately document the state of the painting before the restoration. Costa attempts to reconstruct Muller-Walde's work but, without having discovered his personal archive of letters, can only speculate on what he might have accomplished and why Beltrami perceived him as a threat. Part I ends with a discussion of Rusca's repainting and the negative reception which it met almost immediately. Considering that Beltrami's ahistorical approach has been much criticized, Costa takes a surprisingly accepting view with language that seems designed to evoke sympathy for Beltrami's choices: "Instead of making a slavish attempt at historical accuracy, he [Beltrami] moved forward with a bold and self-assured homage to the sacrifices of the Milanese who funded the work and were denied the congenial and communal result they were apparently promised" (p.26).

Part II then turns to the fifteenth century history of the painting and its patron, Duke Ludovico Sforza. Costa emphasizes the duke's support of the silk industry, including legislation requiring private landowners to plant mulberry trees, the regulation of quality, both of the silk and the gold threads with which it was often woven, and the restriction of foreign imports. Although Rusca's restoration obscured the specific details of the

botanical species, *Morus alba*, Costa cited early documents that referred to the room as “of the mulberries,” and the consensus of art historians is that the trees are the kind of mulberry used for breeding silkworms. Yellow ropes twisted into elaborate decorative knots tie the branches to one another making a visually dense ornamental pattern blending human ingenuity with the fecundity of nature. The final chapter investigates the importance of knot designs in Leonardo’s oeuvre (there are multiple designs on pages of his autograph notebooks in addition to engravings celebrating his art academy) and proposes that Donato Bramante, an architect, painter, and perspective expert working in the Milan at the same time was a source of inspiration for these motifs.

The scholarly apparatus to the volume is substantial: an appendix includes a register of documents from 1468 to [after] 1903, transcribed in the original language with an English summary and a brief bibliography. Most of the documents were previously known, but the author wished to bring them together in one place in the hope of facilitating future research on the *Sala delle Asse*. However, despite the author’s thorough compilation of documents, and her careful attention to the hypothesis and suggestions of previous scholars, the volume fails to contribute significantly to the scholarship on Leonardo. This is partly due to the inexplicable omission of a detailed analysis of the restoration undertaken in recent years by the Beni Culturali e Paesaggistici della Lombardia together with the Soprintendenza dei Beni Storici, Artistici, et Etnoantropologici di Milano, and the help of the Florentine center for restoration studies, the Opificio di Pietre Dure, which began in 2013 and opened to the public in 2019. After devoting nearly half of the volume to discussion of Beltrami’s restoration, any reader would be curious as to how much of Rusca’s overpainting was removed and what was left of the original campaign by Leonardo and his assistants.

A scholarly volume of this scale ought to include recent bibliography of note. Given that there is often a lag of two years between the delivery of the finished manuscript and its appearance in print, it is not surprising that the author does not take into account the most recent work on the *Sala delle Asse* by Jill Pederson (Harvey Miller, 2020), although I suspect she would have welcomed Pederson’s focus on the importance of Bramante, a relationship to which Costa devotes considerable attention. More surprising is the omission of Carmen Bambach’s monumental *Leonardo Rediscovered* (Yale, 2019)—to name only one example

from the prolific quincennial year—that has received considerable acclaim. The two-volume study of the *Sala delle Asse* by Claudio Salsi and Alessia Alberti (*La Sala delle Asse del Castello Sforzesco: Leonardo da Vinci. All’ombra del Moro*, Milan, Silvana Editoriale) contains additional essays and the catalogue of the exhibition, *Intorno alla Sala delle Asse. Leonardo tra natura, arte, e scienza*, held in the summer of 2019; this volume should have engaged the author’s attention, if only in notes to confirm or dispute her own findings.

I also found jarring Costa’s dismissal of Leonardo’s interest in Dante (p.117) which, while probably less important than his interest in other writers, nevertheless engaged his mind and his hand (he sketched Dante’s portrait on Windsor RL 12459); there is more than one booklist of Leonardo’s library holdings, and there is ample evidence of Leonardo’s familiarity with the *Convivio* and the *Divine Comedy*; (the bibliography on his reading of Dante is concisely summarized in *La Biblioteca di Leonardo*, ed. by Carlo Vecce, Giunti, 2019). Poetry played an important role at the Sforza court, where Leonardo engaged in disputes with those who advocated for the superiority of poetry over painting, his persuasive arguments in favor of painting recorded in the *Prima parte* of the Book on Painting that his student, Francesco Melzi, compiled after his master’s death; and his praise of the beauties of landscape stand out as some of the most evocative passages of his pen.

Barring such inaccuracies and omissions, Costa’s volume does offer a thorough overview of the issues involved in studying a work of considerable historical complexity. To her credit, she does not skip over disagreements, taking each head on and seeking – if not to resolve them – to elucidate why a clear solution cannot be found. While reluctant to engage in issues relating to the quality of its workmanship – issues that have led scholars to assign its execution to workshop assistants, this reader was disappointed by the absence of focus on the roots and rocks drawn and brushed directly on the wall, passages showing strata of rock that recall Leonardo’s geological explorations. Despite the author’s frequent acknowledgement of Leonardo’s botanical interests, I found myself longing for more depth in this area, both to understand how this elaborate arboreal invention arose from his understanding of the growth patterns of trees and branches, and how his studies of light on green leaves against the sky, or against a dark ground of branches, might have manifested in a more magnificent image

than the overpainted work we know today. Costa's suggestion that the patches of sky between the tree trunks would have included distant vistas of mountains (p. xl) is an intriguing thesis that deserves to be further developed. To her credit, Costa did expand discussion of the elaborate knots to the broader interest in knot designs at the time and their appearance in other Milanese decorations and well as in frescos such as Raphael's *Dispute over the Sacrament* in the Vatican. She also noted the existence of a room in the Visconti palace decorated with trees that could have served as a precedent for Leonardo's arbor of mulberries in the *Sala delle Asse* (p.113).

*Janis Bell* gained her Ph.D. from Brown University in 1983, on "Zaccolini's Prospettiva del colore and the Heritage of Leonardo." Since then, she has researched Leonardo da Vinci's theory of aerial perspective and the reception of Leonardo's writings in the 16th and 17th centuries. She also explores the relationship between theory and practice, particularly in regards to color.

## Response by the author

This note is in response to Janis Bell's thoughtful review of my book, *The Duke's Trees: Leonardo's Unfinished Masterpiece in the Sala delle Asse* (2021) for which I am grateful, knowing what an investment of time it is to write academic reviews and to do them well. In the essence of time—the editor of the NCIS has informed me of a pressing deadline for publication—I will limit my response to what Bell calls "jarring" and "surprising" omissions, while remaining appreciative of her assessment of what the book gets right. Indeed, my book went to press before the release of Jill Pederson's 2020 book *Leonardo, Bramante, and the Academia: art and friendship in fifteenth-century Milan* and Carmen Bombach's 2019 *Leonardo Rediscovered*. Therefore, it was not possible to engage with their interpretations or findings. There will be opportunity for this in future writings, and I would welcome the possibility of a conference on the *Sala delle Asse*, when it reopens to the public. By then, even more studies will have joined our enthusiastic scholarly cohort and it will be a pleasure to reflect on the *Sala* as a collective.

Comments on the restoration are, however, another matter. Bell is right to suggest that I could have said more, but it seemed premature at the time, and I did not see the results myself until summer 2022 because of the pandemic. The restoration is ongoing. The Castello Sforzesco published reports of preliminary

At the beginning, Costa proclaimed her plan to eschew the solitary genius approach to art history in favor of examining a broader social, political, and historical context, hoping to open further discourse on the painting in the absence of documentation that could resolve disagreements. This she has managed to do, at least for this reader, who was pleased to discover a rich, recent bibliography on the *Sala delle Asse* (much of it stimulated by the restoration), expanding on the themes of nature and gardens, commerce and agriculture, showing how much the art historical study of objects benefits from cross-disciplinary studies.

findings in 2017 but these address the bottom half of the *Sala* only (where the monochrome paintings are located). Restorers are now working on the top half, where the bulk of Leonardo's heavily retouched paintings are located (the trees, foliage, golden cord and shields). I did review all the reports so far and corresponded with the Castello about them. This was to make sure that my analyses were in line with their findings. I also gave them a close-to-finished draft of

my manuscript in 2017 (upon ask) when they started working on volume II (*All'Ombra del Moro*) with Silvana Editoriale (shared knowledge is power). The monochromes are exceptional because they are the only original evidence of drawings on a wall by Leonardo, and it is likely that these were untouched over the centuries. As such, all present and future interpretations of the *Sala* must contend with these findings. I would not have been able to speculate on the intended iconographic plan as I did without considering, for example, the small townscape on the south-west wall. The restoration is also starting to reveal a painting technique like the one for the *Last Supper* and this, of course, is very exciting. It should confirm Leonardo's hand beyond the archival documentation on which the attribution has rested all this time.

Specialists of Leonardo are familiar with Edmondo Solmi's 1908 compilation of literary evidence for Leonardo's knowledge of Dante. For me, there were also long discussions on *Dantism* in graduate school with Dennis Looney, a renowned Dante scholar whom I was fortunate to have on my dissertation committee. Still, a connection between Dante and the *Sala*'s iconographical program never came together in my mind—at least not yet. I appreciate that Bell sees it differently. Dante was certainly a huge influence on Bramante, whom Gasparo Visconti described as “poeta non umile” and “sviscerato partigiano di Dante.” Bramante emulated Dante's writing style, he admired his experimentalism of language and, according to Isabella d'Este, spent long evenings reading the *Commedia* to Pope Julius II. The cult of Dante was omnipresent in the Florence of Leonardo's youth. It was an important emblem of cultural unity and consciousness, it shaped aesthetic views, and it fueled moral and ethical convictions. Every Florentine who could read and afford to buy one of the 1200 *Divina Commedia* copies printed in 1481 with Cristoforo Landino's scholarly commentary took turns reciting the beautiful canti. For much of the Quattrocento, a knowledge of Dante's work became a powerful means for artists and men of letters to legitimize their intellectual ambitions. Their competency was rewarded with humanists' recognition and lucrative commissions. For example, Alessandro Botticelli (a friend of Leonardo's) had a deep and abiding interest in Dante and, according to the anonymous author of the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Codice Magliabechiano*, “painted and worked with stories of Dante on vellum for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco di Medici, which was held to be a marvelous thing.”

Scholar after scholar, including Paül Muller Walde, Peter Meller, Carlo Pedretti, Martin Kemp and Carmen Bombach to name a few, have drawn connections between the *Commedia*, the *Convivio* and Leonardo's allegorical drawings. There are also Dante verses, sometimes word for word, on folios dating to Leonardo's Milanese period. From these practices, the jump to persuasive comparisons for all of Leonardo's oeuvre is to be expected. What painting of the great master has *not* been matched to imagery from the *Purgatorio*, *Inferno* or *Paradiso*? Ernst Gombrich likened the compositional arrangement of the *Last Supper* to the double movement of water when a circular vase is struck, as in the dialogue between Saint Thomas Aquinas and Beatrice. Italian literature

specialist Renè Stella and Martin Kemp have separately argued that the Mona Lisa's silent laughter and potent glare follow Dante's tenet that the soul operates in two places of the face: the mouth and the eyes. For the *Sala delle Asse*, Jeanette Zwingenberger recently proposed (in *L'énigme des images*, another book I did not have the opportunity to read before mine went to press) that the golden rope of the *Sala* refers to Dante finally arriving in Paradise and perceiving the loving bonds of his beloved. These literary connections are fascinating and important. They point to a Leonardo who was immersed in the literary traditions of his time. But they are not enough to establish an iconographical program for the *Sala*.

Dantesque qualities, on the other hand, *can* be read in the *Sala*—they are inevitable—and we can also learn a lot from putting the *Sala* into systematic dialogue with the *Dantismo* of Leonardo's time. This dialogue could also extend to the period under Luca Beltrami, when the poet reemerged as a prominent figure during the cultural and political controversies in Milan from the early Risorgimento to World War I. But I never thought to go so far as to interpret the *Sala* as Leonardo's paradigmatic tribute to Dante. Dantesque symbolism could have occurred unconsciously, but I don't see Leonardo attaching his aspirations for the *Sala* on Dantesque themes as a way of relating with the humanist culture of Milan.

Leonardo famously referred to himself as “omo senza lettere.” Scholars have assumed that he was describing his lacking a formal education (he didn't know much Latin) or that he was expressing his humility before the exceptional studies he took on later in life. But it may also have been a way to defend his intellectual credentials, artistic competence and respectability without attachment to a great poet or literary figure (as in “under no influence”). In discussing Leonardo's book list of ca. 1495 in the *Codice Atlantico* (f. 559r), Carlo Vecce argued that despite the absence of books on Dante from the list, Leonardo surely owned an edition of the *Commedia* and the *Convivio*: “non poteva mancare Dante, e soprattutto la *Commedia*, col commento del Landino, e il *Convivio*.” Alessandro Parronchi suggested that the reason for the absence was because at the time of the inventory, the book was not on the shelf but on the nightstand: “la mancanza del Dante in questo elenco non è indicativa. Forse il Dante non figura ... perché al momento in cui lo stesero non era nella scaffale ma sul comodino.” In other

words, Dante was such a favorite that Leonardo did not bother to list it. Dante is also missing from the 116 volumes listed in the 1503-1504 inventory in the *Codex Madrid II* (Ms. 8936, f.2v). It is largely believed that Leonardo compiled this list in conjunction with a move. It was titled "ricordo de' libri ch'io lascio serrati nel cassone" and "in cassa al munisterio" (perhaps the convent of S. Maria Novella where Leonardo was working on his cartoons for the Battle of Anghiari). Because the books were under lock and key (*serrati nel cassone*) it seems reasonable to conclude that the list was intended to reduce further the possibility that any would go missing. Where was Dante this time? On the nightstand once more? Leonardo included his "abaco" (an ordinary math manual typically used by merchants) and his Bible (another library staple) but, surprisingly, not Dante. Ovid, Petrarch, Burchiello, Livy are, instead, all there. It now seems appropriate to share another story from the same *Anonimo* who described Botticelli's obsession with Dante. He wrote about an encounter that seemingly occurred between Leonardo and Michelangelo when the two masters were working alongside one another in the Palazzo Vecchio (Leonardo on the *Battle of Anghiari* and Michelangelo on the *Battle of Cascina*). A group of educated men, once engaged in a conversation outside the Palazzo Spini, glimpsed Leonardo passing by and pressed him to elucidate a few difficult lines of Dante. When Michelangelo then turned up, Leonardo declined their request, deferring, with sarcasm, to his working companion and rival. Why didn't Leonardo take the opportunity to impress the men with a witty line or two? Perhaps it was the "omo senza lettere" way of saying, "Michelangelo needs the exercise in cultural self-legitimization more than I do."

Lastly, I welcomed Bell's suggestion that my book "can hold its place on any art lover's coffee table" even though I am aware that in academia, the term is often used pejoratively to indicate a superficial approach to a subject. The layout was a deliberate choice. Despite receiving offers from several academic and university presses, I decided to go the self-publish route to break free from the standard series format that has become typical for my field and to include many more illustrations. The esteemed Gillian Malpass offered precious advice about the production process. I worked with British designer Paul Sloman, who has designed books for Yale University Press, Rizzoli, Thames & Hudson as well as art museums. Sloman embraced the challenge of working with two periods—the

Renaissance and the late-19<sup>th</sup>-early-20<sup>th</sup>-century—and created a visual language that honors both. It was important to me that the book offer high resolution spreads and color details. These convey the *Sala's* exceptional design and splendor. Despite its unfinished condition, the *Sala* is Leonardo's largest wall painting in a prestigious court setting. The elegant knots Sloman designed for the section dividers (a tribute to Leonardo) are one of my favorite things. Any shortcomings to the approach of subject are, of course, mine alone.

Much gratitude goes also to NCIS for the favorable stance taken towards authors replying to reviews. These exchanges can be productive and interesting, especially if the reader is moved to want to know more about the subject. Just today, and serendipitously so, a friend shared a beautiful essay entitled *Anatomy of a Book Review(er)* by James E.G. Zetzel sent to her by the the Bryn Mawr Classical Review. The essay offered a precious reminder of the momentum that reviews provide for moving the subject forward: "Scholarship is a collaborative enterprise, not in the sense of being done by committee, as far too much scholarship now is, but in the sense that one' person's ideas or discoveries almost inevitably start from something someone else has said. And a review can provoke that."