

etc▶TRAVEL

# Leonardo da Vinci’s last journey A tale of castles, kings and the final days of Renaissance polymath

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AS I entered Amboise my eye was drawn across the Loire to the magnificent display of turrets and spires of the Royal Castle silhouetted against the skyline. This looks much today as it did when Leonardo da Vinci arrived there in 1516, as guest of the new young king of France, Francis I. For Leonardo the invitation came just at the right moment, he had spent three restless years in Rome aware that he was being eclipsed by younger artists: Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel and Raphael decorating the papal apartments.

So, coming to France as official peintre du roy with a generous salary of 1,000 scudi per annum and the delightful manor house of Clos Lucé, to live in, was something that he, at the age of 64, was more than happy to accept.

It wasn’t entirely one-sided, for Francis it was quite a coup to have this ‘star’ artist lend some cultural kudos to his court and while Benvenuto Cellini’s statement that the king was besotted (innammorato gagliardissamente) with Leonardo and saw him almost every day, is probably an exaggeration, relations between the two were certainly warm and friendly.

The town of Amboise has still managed to retain its historic atmosphere with small winding streets and gabled houses lying in the shadow of the castle, while at the same time harmoniously incorporating attractive and tempting modern shops and a range of restaurants and bars.

One senses that Leonardo was happy and comfortable here. He had brought with him his servant Battista de Vilanis and his favourite apprentice Francesco Melzi, together with all his notebooks and the canvasses of the Mona Lisa, the Virgin and Child and St Anne and St John the Baptist.

Clos Lucé was, and is, a spacious but not overwhelming little manor house of great charm. Visiting it nowadays it is easy to imagine Leonardo sitting by the open fire eating soup prepared by Mathurine, the French cook provided for him, or working in his studio on the first floor.

We can see the bedroom where he died (although not in the king’s arms as described by Vasari and depicted in several paintings) and in the basement we can examine models of some of his invention and machines.

We can also enjoy wandering in the 15-acre parkland as Leonardo must have done and where, for this 500th anniversary year, there are extra items and installation to see. These include a walking trail which features giant translucent canvasses, sound stations in which you can hear Leonardo talking to



Melzi (in Italian, German and English) and an area called Leonardo’s Garden planted with the trees and flowers which feature in his works.

Perhaps the most magnificent item however, is the huge Tapestry of The Last Supper. A masterpiece woven in silk and gold, it was commissioned by Francis (before he was king) and his mother Louise of Savoy and depicts Christ and the Apostles at the table exactly as in Leonardo’s fresco in Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan but with a completely different background.

Whether Leonardo had any hand in this design is uncertain. Some years after his death it was part of an exchange of gifts on the occasion of the wedding of Francis I’s son Henri II and the Pope’s niece Catherine de Medici in 1533. After this it remained at the Vatican until now, when after meticulous restoration, it has been

**Main image: A family cycling in front of the Royal Chateau Amboise on the banks of the Loire. Inset: Leonardo da Vinci self portrait**

loaned to Clos Lucé. It will subsequently travel to Milan where it will be on show at the Palazzo Reale from 7th October until 17th November 2019 before returning to the Vatican where it will remain on permanent display. It is definitely worth seeing.

The atmosphere of Clos Lucé resonates with Leonardo but traces of him, including a striking bust, can also be found at the nearby Chateau Royal where King Francis lived. There had been a castle on the site since medieval times but it was lavishly rebuilt by King Charles VIII in 1492 and became the first Italianate palace in France.

It was here that Mary Queen of Scots lived for 13 years from the age of five, accompanied by her court and her companions, ‘the four Marys,’ daughters of Scots nobles.

Here, too, she learned to write prose and poetry in four languages as well as music, horsemanship, falconry and needlework.

She was considered a pretty child and later, when she married the Dauphin, a very attractive woman.

Although to the visitor today the castle seems large and magnificent, the interior reflecting the grand lifestyle of the royal residents, it is but a shadow of what it was in Mary’s, or even Leonardo’s day. Its 19th century owners, who could not afford the upkeep, demolished some four-fifths of what he could see from his garden.

An exhibition, The Death of Leonardo da Vinci: The Construction of a Myth, in the castle explores the way in which the friendship between Leonardo and King Francis and the iconic paintings, including that of 1781 by François-Guillaume Ménageot, depicting the king holding the dying Leonardo in his arms, resulted in history being rewritten over the years in such a way as to serve French royalty.

We now know that this famous scene is



a myth and that in fact Francis was at St Germain-en Laye, attending the birth of his son the future Henri II (at whose wedding the tapestry was to feature.)

When Leonardo died he was buried at the chapel of Saint Florentin which, when the court abandoned Amboise, was also demolished. In 1863, however, excavations revealed the skeleton of a tall man with a big skull together with scraps of stone bearing the letters, “LEO.” “AR,” “DUS” and “VINC” from which it was deduced that these were indeed Leonardo’s remains.

THESE now lie under a simple slab in the castle’s exquisite little chapel of Saint Hubert. It is worth mentioning modern technology at this point, as instead of the ubiquitous audioguide, the castle offers visitors the innovative Histopad, a digital tablet that gives 3D views of things; in this case effectively lifting the slab and showing the skeleton beneath.

According to the journal of his servant Vilanis, Leonard did no painting in Amboise. It’s thought he might have had a stroke. He did, however, continue his researches and planned various enterprises with and for Francis including the design of a large palace complex with connecting canals up-river at Romorantin.

This never got further than the drawing board but he did also take up again what one senses was one of his favourite activities and one which he had perfected when working for Ludovico Sforza in Milan – party planning.

In Amboise he organised several large and lavish entertainments for Francis; one to celebrate the baptism of the son, the aforesaid Henri, and another for the marriage of his niece Madeleine to one of the de Medicis. Shortly after this there was a magnificent pageant in which a mock castle was captured with mortars booming and inflated balloons raining down and bouncing on the spectators – a typically Leonardesque element of surprise.

Then, on the 19th June 1518, Leonardo put on an entertainment for Francis at Clos Lucé which featured a huge blue canopy spangled with stars representing the heavens, beneath which the masque of Bellincione’s operetta Il Paradiso was performed.

This in fact was a recreation of the entertainment Leonardo designed for Ludovico Sforza in 1490. It is fitting that Leonardo’s last creation should be such an expression of joy and magic and all of us who love and admire Leonardo can only give thanks that his life ended in comfort, highly esteemed by a king, in this, one of the loveliest town in France.

## Travel notes

Patricia Cleveland-Peck travelled courtesy of Atout France ([www.france.fr](http://www.france.fr)) staying at the 4-star Hotel Pavillon des Lys. Prices from £90 per night including breakfast [www.pavillondeslys.com/en/](http://www.pavillondeslys.com/en/) She travelled to Amboise ([www.amboise-valdeloire.co.uk/](http://www.amboise-valdeloire.co.uk/)) from London by Eurostar and regional trains for £200 return. For details of events commemorating the 500th anniversary of Leonardo Da Vinci’s death see [www.vivadavinci2019.fr/en/](http://www.vivadavinci2019.fr/en/)

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**Length:** 120 miles  
**Estimated journey time:** One day to drive/Three days to explore  
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SARAH MARSHALL