

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Fiorani, Francesca. The Shadow Drawing: How Science Taught Leonardo How to Paint**

Leslie A. Geddes

Volume 44, Number 3, Summer 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085847ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38021>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Geddes, L. (2021). Review of [Fiorani, Francesca. The Shadow Drawing: How Science Taught Leonardo How to Paint]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(3), 278–281. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38021>

les sujets plus populaires : l'Annonciation, l'Annonce aux bergers, l'Adoration des Mages, la Crucifixion, les vignettes de la vie du roi David, la Nativité, la Présentation au Temple, etc., mais également les représentations de certaines saintes et de certains saints (qui permettent parfois d'associer un ouvrage à une région ou à un commanditaire), et même les caractéristiques des bordures et des initiales ornées. Soulignons finalement certaines capsules informatives sur l'évolution des styles, des traditions du livre d'Heures, des ateliers et des artistes, mais également sur des thématiques qui sauront susciter l'attention : ouvrage réalisé pour une femme (notice 43, 304–313, notamment) ; indications sur les livres d'Heures conçus pour le marché anglais (notice 35, 210–221) ; commentaires sur le motif du dragon (notice 32, 178–189) ; livres de petit format (notice 47, 356–363) ; l'homme anatomique et le fou (notice 49, 372–380) ; coloration (notices 51 et 52, 390–403) ; et, permettez-moi de le souligner, une édition rare de 1583 des *Heures de Notre-Dame*, ouvrage commandé par Henri III qui se trouve aujourd'hui dans la collection du Musée de l'Amérique française (notice 54, 416–423).

En conclusion, le *Catalogue raisonné des livres d'Heures conservés au Québec*, tout en étant un ouvrage scientifique essentiel pour les spécialistes du manuscrit et du livre ancien, s'avère un outil pédagogique incontournable qui saura susciter votre curiosité et votre intérêt pour ces documents précieux qui nous furent parfois transmis par des chemins détournés et dans des états qui laissent à désirer, mais qui sont aujourd'hui remis en lumière.

GUY POIRIER

University of Waterloo

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38020>

**Fiorani, Francesca.**

*The Shadow Drawing: How Science Taught Leonardo How to Paint.*

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. Pp. 374 + 45 b/w ill., 16 colour ill. ISBN 978-0-3742-6196-2 (hardcover) US\$35.

Francesca Fiorani's *The Shadow Drawing: How Science Taught Leonardo How to Paint* is a refreshing corrective to the still-dominant narratives that cast Leonardo da Vinci as a figure who painted in his early years only to become

increasingly interested in scientific pursuits later in life. Fiorani nimbly reconstructs Leonardo's evolving theories on art and science and demonstrates how the two were inextricably intertwined. While offering a lucid history of his manuscripts through the early nineteenth century, she offers a compelling account of how scholars have received (and often misunderstood) the artist's art theories over time.

The central problem lies in the reception of Leonardo's writings—that frustrating mass of folios, notebooks, assembled and disassembled codices, and scraps of paper that cover his many scientific and artistic interests. For Fiorani, the conclusion many scholars have drawn is that Leonardo the writer, someone increasingly preoccupied with philosophy and science at the expense of painting, was a figure that emerged around 1490, when he was in his thirties. That story is, naturally, quite a bit more complicated.

In the first of four parts that comprise the book, she foregrounds the scientific theories, especially the science of optics, that proved formative to Leonardo. Any foray into the history of optics requires navigating a thicket. Acknowledging the difficulties of parsing these texts, Fiorani ably explicates different traditions of optical science and their importance for Italian artists, especially the writings of Abu Ali al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham (known as Alhacen or Alhazen).

The second part of the book focuses on specific paintings, using the circumstances of their commissions to analyze Leonardo's concerns as a painter. Fiorani deftly articulates the exacting process of making oil paintings, connecting it to Leonardo's development of his art theories. Indeed, attending to the artist's process of revision in paintings such as the *Adoration of the Magi* and the *Virgin of the Rocks*, she reveals how changes frequently visible only through advanced photographic techniques provide viewers with new evidence. Fiorani uses these changes as a crucial means to rethink Leonardo's choices and thereby deepen our understanding of his pictorial intelligence at work.

Part 3 of the book turns to how Leonardo articulated his theories on painting, while attending to the *Last Supper* and the *Mona Lisa* as illustrative of his ideas and the risks of experimentation. In his final two decades, he produced (and left unfinished) paintings that were "high-concept experiments" (207) that served as "a synthesis of the knowledge of the world Leonardo had acquired through observation" (228). At the same time, Leonardo spent lengthy

periods devoted to writing, for example during 1504–05 when he developed his writings on flight, geometry, and anatomy.

The fourth and final part of the book contends with the frustrating and fascinating story of what happened to his written corpus after his death. It is therefore also a story of the emergence of Leonardo as a biographical subject. Francesco Melzi, Leonardo's heir, first undertook the important work of organizing his theories on painting into a coherent manuscript. It is due to Melzi's incorporation of the artist's writings on light and shadow that we have indirect access to a manuscript now lost (Libro W). His hard work transcribing and organizing the *Treatise on Painting* did not circulate; rather, a truncated, much abbreviated, and deeply flawed cluster of manuscripts that purported to represent Leonardo's writings entered into circulation, ultimately yielding French and Italian print editions.

Giorgio Vasari emerges as an unexpected villain in Fiorani's account: one who undeniably fashioned a view of the artist that proved durable and yet very much at odds with how the artist himself viewed art. Aiming to become court painter to the Medici, Vasari championed "efficiency, control, a happy patron" (256), not heady ideas about optics and the philosophy of painting Leonardo espoused. The Leonardo that emerges in Vasari's account is the talented polymath who finished little and whose scientific and engineering pursuits were wholly independent of his artistic practice: "It is a view of Leonardo that leaves no role for philosophy or science in his painting—the 'dual genius' hypothesis in its earliest and most consequential form" (258–59). It would be hard to overstate the impact of Vasari's biography on the emerging myth of Leonardo. It is this separation of the painter from the writer, or the artist from the scientist, that Fiorani's book seeks to set right.

Events in the life of Leonardo, even those known to many readers, become riveting in her telling. The successful mounting of the golden orb atop the lantern crowing the dome of Florence's cathedral is a feat rife with uncertainty; the process of making and mounting the segments of the sphere is nail-biting, a story of the ambition of Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo's teacher. This anecdote becomes a way to understand the artist's formation, a lesson in audacity that Leonardo refers to decades later in his notes. While aimed at non-specialists, Fiorani's book makes significant contributions to Leonardo literature, particularly her compelling reading of Vasari. The explication of the tangled history of the manuscript versions of the *Treatise on Painting* presented

here is an enormous service to our understanding of the biographical history of Leonardo and the historiography of his writings.

LESLIE A. GEDDES

Tulane University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38021>

**Foister, Susan, and Peter van den Brink.**

*Dürer's Journeys: Travels of a Renaissance Artist.*

London: National Gallery Company / New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.  
Pp. 304 + 300 ill. ISBN 978-1-8570-9667-5 (hardcover) US\$50.

On 12 July 1520, Albrecht Dürer left his home of Nuremberg to head northward, accompanied by his wife and a servant. His goal was the city of Aachen, where he would attend the coronation of Charles V in October of that year. Having lost his pension at the death of Charles's grandfather, Maximilian, Dürer hoped the young ruler would renew it. Dürer would remain in the Low Countries until the following summer, resident principally in Antwerp, which served as his base for travels throughout the Low Countries. Over the course of the year, Dürer kept a journal of his travels (known through two later copies) and made numerous drawings, documenting the people he met, the food he ate, the cities he visited, and the things he saw, producing a singular body of work. While it was financial security that motivated his journey, Dürer's northward travels proved pivotal for both the artist and those whom he encountered.

It is this journey that is the subject of this catalogue, published in coordination with an exhibition of the same title. Originally slated to open at the Suermondt-Ludwig Museum in Aachen to coincide with the five hundredth anniversary of Dürer's arrival in that city, the installation was delayed by the ongoing pandemic. This impressive book stands largely independent from the exhibition, lacking the usual accompanying catalogue entries. Instead, five thematic sections with sub-chapters by many of the scholars specializing in Dürer examine the artist's well-known sojourn anew. Richly illustrated and accessibly written, the book offers a significant contribution to the study of early modern mobility, artists' lives, and the transcultural connections formed across Europe in the sixteenth century.