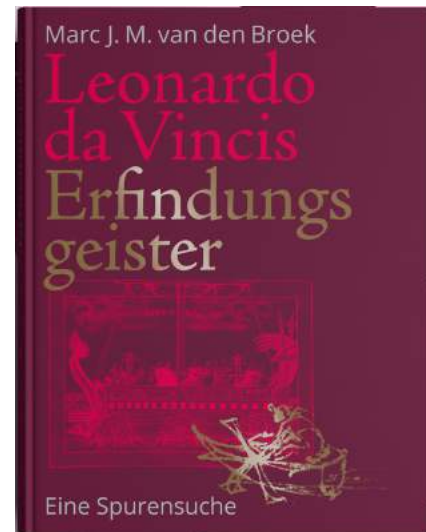


Marc van den Broek
Leonardo's Spirits of Invention
A Track Search



Whenever the name Leonardo da Vinci is mentioned, the label “universal genius” is not long in coming. His productivity, his inventions, his anatomical studies point far beyond his own time and ever since have shaped our view of the world. Fascinated by the cosmos that is da Vinci, the Belgian painter and sculptor Marc J. M. van den Broek embarks on a most entertaining and vividly imparted time travel all the way back to pre-Christian eras. And discovers on the way: not everything is da Vinci that has his name on or under it.

Van den Broek’s volume is at once a picture book and a cultural primer, a detective story and an atlas of drolleries. A sheer joy to leaf through, a pleasure to read.

An eye-ful are the 332 illustrations that Marc van den Broek has researched and collected for his study. They include original sketches of da Vinci’s, which represent his inventions, and sketches of the same phenomena designed and recorded on paper by more or less unknown persons, who were Leonardo’s contemporaries or else lived in remote eras. They depict paddle-wheels and fountains, helicopters and perpetuum mobiles. Graphically juxtaposed with each other, their similarity and conceptual proximity are stunning. Here the patent sway of Da Vinci begins to crumble. His ingenious line finds itself confronted with academic, meticulously elaborated drawings of whole views and details by pre-industrial engineers. They cannot compete with da Vinci’s easily dashed-off artistic skill, cannot come up to his emotion, his poesy and his charisma. But they nevertheless relativize his innovative geniality in puzzling out and asserting “new” machines and mechanisms. It is stunning to discover clearly and visually that he had precursors – men from the Arabian world, from China, from ancient Rome. Was da Vinci conscious of his “plagiarisms”? Was there a knowledge exchange between science-freaks? Along what paths did they network?

Here van den Broek performs a quick run-through of cultural history: period-shaping trade routes, expansive and mainly religion-based territorial claims, military power obsessions and pre-modern scientific networks. All of this in vivid images that will animate the imagination of the reader. Historical scenes are so concretely envisaged that they become unforgettable: history to be touched, within reach, as in a 3D animation, by means of words, by the unbridled urge to grasp history as the yesterday of today. The present becomes alterable thereby as well, the

status quo of relations softens. It is an endlessly fascinating vista that van den Broek opens up: not as a scholar and intellectual, but as an intuitively groping artist, who knows about line, about perspective and the dynamics of light and dark. Here is someone who knows how to take the reader by the hand and to compile and open a family album of mankind for him.

Van den Broek is not out to defame and settle a score with Leonardo in his book: he does not try to knock him off his pedestal. His attitude toward the Renaissance man is both loving and respectful. Leonardo's artistic professionalism fascinates him as much as his restless, untiring life-style. For all its modernity compared with the Middle Ages, da Vinci's time is still far from today's liberality and tolerance. With his anatomical studies, opening and dissecting cadavers, Leonardo ventured on forbidden territory. As a homosexual in a bigoted society, he had to live a double life. Social hostilities he met with vitality and perfunctory dissimulation. He was in demand as an artist, as a communicator, as an entertainer. For his employers, he designed monumental statues – which never got executed. He obsequiously arranged costly court festivals, grandiose illumination shows, was much in demand as a pro in the entertainment business. Like today's popstar, he played with identities, garnered recognition from a system that at the bottom of his heart he despised; or, to put it more mildly, one that he never really seemed to fit into. Nature he studied out of love for, not in order to exploit, her.

Leonardo da Vinci directly and immediately relativized an artist cult by playfully negating the mechanisms of commissioned work and slavish obedience to the possessors of power, albeit with sacrifices – and not only financial ones. Marc van den Broek here places his stakes on a larger field, on a new, unexpected focus: Leonardo da Vinci as our contemporary, a spiritual brother of such crass antipodes as Andy Warhol and Josef Beuys. Audaciously and provocatively, but supported by evidence, van den Broek projects a picture of the Renaissance that quasi automatically merges into our present. The emancipatory strength of the Renaissance reveals its seamy side as spearhead of the industrial revolution, leading to a mindless consumer society. Van den Broek's book inevitably ends with pessimistic, wholly un-lachrymose questions: "How do we reconquer the freedom and the love, which in our frenzy of producing and buying have become commodities and are hawked for a song? And where can answers be expected to the cardinal questions about the nature of man and the meaning of the creation?" The book closes on our painful lack of a visionary, a dreamer and starry-eyed idealist. It ends in a sincere obeisance before a great artist.

What remains is a great deal of insight and a lovely picture book to boot: a rousing feast for the intellect and the senses.

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(photo: Bertold Fabricius)

The author, **Marc J. M. van den Broek**, a Belgian painter and sculptor, studied Electromechanics and Art. Upon completing his studies, he worked at first at the “Koninklijke Opera” in Gent, but soon began to devote himself to the construction of flying and kinetic objects and put his focus on art in the public domain. After a ten-year stay in New York, where he worked as creativity consultant “Look and Feel” for international enterprises and museums, Marc van den Broek moved to Hamburg-Rothenburgsort and since then has been enlivening *stadtteil* and studios.

The list of his exhibitions is long and extends from Versailles through Berlin and San Sebastian all the way to Brooklyn. Van den Broek has received numerous honors and awards; his six-minute art film “#MEAT” – an original approach to the Faust myth, which issues in a digital dystopia – competed in over twenty different Independent-Short-Film Festivals and ranked as “Best Film” in Bucharest, London and Houston.

Marc van den Broek’s dual professional qualification, with degrees both in Fine Arts and Electromechanics – dubbed “Imagineering” in the U.S. – sharpens his eye for artistic transformations of technical inventions and their construction. For more than thirty years, van den Broek has been wrestling with Leonardo Da Vinci and his work. *Spirits of Invention* is the quintessence of his investigations.