

SECRETS OF DA VINCI: THE DA VINCI HOAX UNCOVERED

By Carl E. Olson and Sandra Miesel

A frequent question asked by readers of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is "How much of the novel's depiction of historical events, people, artwork, and institutions is correct." The short answer is "Not much." In fact, the only thing more amazing than Brown's consistent misrepresentation of facts is a widespread acceptance of his claims, with both reviewers and readers praising the "research" and "knowledge" supposedly evident in his novel. ***The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code*** examines, in much detail, the lengthy list of claims made in the *Code*. Here is a brief look at just a few of the claims made in Brown's novel and on his web site.

LEONARDO DA VINCI

On a webpage titled "Bizarre True Facts from *The Da Vinci Code* . . .", Brown writes that Leonardo was a "prankster and genius" who is "widely believed to have hidden secret messages within much of his artwork." Widely believed by whom? It's difficult to find any reputable art scholar or historian who would agree with that remark. But according to Brown, "most scholars agree that even Da Vinci's most famous pieces—works like *The Mona Lisa*, *The Last Supper*, and *Madonna of the Rocks*—contain startling anomalies that all seem to be whispering the same cryptic message."

First, no scholar would ever refer to the great Italian artist as "Da Vinci" since his given name was "Leonardo"; "da Vinci" indicates the province he was from. Secondly, few, if any, scholars would concur with Brown's dramatic assertion. Thirdly, there are no "startling anomalies" in any of the paintings Brown mentions. Any such anomalies can only be found in his novel and conspiracy-heavy books such as *The Templar Revelation*, which happens to be the source of almost all of Brown's "research" into Leonardo. As for the cryptic message, which one is Brown referring to? He claims the *Mona Lisa* is an androgynous self-portrait, insists *The Last Supper* depicts Mary Magdalene at the right of Jesus, and claims *Madonna of the Rocks* (better known as *The Virgin of the Rocks*) depicts John the Baptist scandalously blessing the Christ-Child.

Brown's site states that this cryptic message "hints at a shocking historical secret which allegedly has been guarded since 1099 by a European secret society known as the Priory of Sion." Nevermind that the Priory of Sion was founded in the 1950s in France by a political radical, that its mysterious history is an admitted fabrication, and that it

has been proven more than once to be a complete hoax. And yet the Priory of Sion is a central element in the plot and logic (so to speak) of *The Da Vinci Code*.

THE VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS

Brown and his main character, symbologist Robert Langdon, state that "the nuns" of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception gave Leonardo specific dimensions and themes about a commissioned painting for an altar triptych. But there were no nuns in the Confraternity; it was an all-male group, consisting of either brothers, or lay men, or a combination of both. More importantly, Brown states that "the nuns" had asked for a painting that would include Mary, Jesus, John the Baptist, and the angel Uriel, and he followed that request, but his first painting was filled with "explosive and disturbing details".

Actually, Leonardo did not follow the Confraternity's directives as to the subject matter of the painting. The original contract was to include a depiction of God the Father overhead, with two prophets on the side panels (*The Virgin of the Rocks* was the centerpiece). There has been much scholarly discussion about the exact nature of the contract and what exactly transpired between Leonardo and the Confraternity. What is clear is that Leonardo deviated substantially from the original plan for the subject matter—not that it contained "several disturbing 'un-Christian' anomalies".

The Da Vinci Code correctly notes that there are two versions of this painting—the earlier one is in the Louvre in Paris and the later one is housed at the National Gallery in London. But Brown describes the painting as a "a five-foot-tall canvas", when it is actually 198 x 123 centimeters, or about 6.5 feet tall (1.99 meters tall x 1.22 meters wide, according the Louvre web site). It was originally painted on wood panel, but was transferred to canvas; the second version of the painting, in London, is still on a wood panel.

In the novel, the main female character, Sophie, picks up the painting and moves it with relative ease; it is described as flexing as she pulls it from the wall. In reality, she likely wouldn't have been able to move it or pick it up, and it's doubtful that it would flex. Normally, such artistic license wouldn't be much of a concern, but Brown insists his details are accurate, claims that he attended art school in Spain, and points out that his wife is an art historian. And yet he is completely wrong about the dimensions of a painting, even though the information can be obtained in a few minutes at the library or on the internet. ❖

UNCOVER
the HOAX

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