

TELEVISION REVIEW

JOHN ANDERSON

Ken Burns's Da Vinci Extravaganza on PBS

Among the multiple masterpieces given a scrupulous examination in “Leonardo da Vinci” is “Lady With an Ermine” (1486-89), which marked a turning point, we are told, in the artist’s career: a commission by Ludovico Sforza, the duke of Milan, and a portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, the teenage daughter of a Milanese civil servant whom “Il Moro” had recently settled in a suite of rooms at the palace.

It is a picture familiar to many, the subject not looking at us, or the symbol of purity she holds in her arms, but into the space at her left.

“She is turning away from us, smiling slightly,” says art historian Martin Kemp, “so you must imagine the duke is over there. We are looking at her; she is looking at the duke. And she is given status by this unseen presence.”

The unseen presence giving status to all those involved in this nearly four-hour documentary is Leonardo himself: The curious sense one gets from this two-night art extravaganza created by Ken Burns is that it is slightly superfluous, perhaps even impertinent. Mr. Burns himself, introducing a recent performance in New York of Caroline Shaw’s exhilarating score (performed, as in the series, with the Attacca

Quartet, Sō Percussion and classical vocal group Roomful of Teeth), declared Leonardo “*the* person of the last millennium.”

He might have said the last two if not for Jesus and Muhammad; he made no predictions about the future. But since each Burnsian project seems to arrive announcing itself as the last word on a subject (“Jazz,” “Baseball,” “The Civil War,” “The Vietnam War”), having the last word on Leonardo, even if that is not the intention, seems presumptuous.

But it *is* ambitious, musically, visually and intellectually. Directed by Mr.

Burns, daughter Sarah Burns and David McMahon, “Leonardo da Vinci” is always a feast for the eyes and often enough for the mind, the first non-American subject to be part of the Burns oeuvre and a stylistic departure from previous projects.

Yes, there is the close visual inspection of stationary pieces, including the mirrorwritten notebooks (as Leonardo was lefthanded and didn’t want to smear the ink), the anatomical drawings, machine schematics and the major paintings, from the disintegrating “Last Supper” to the “Mona Lisa.” But there are also wild visual departures into imagery meant to convey the originality of the subject’s thinking.

There is also a comfortable balance between the biographical-anecdotal content of Leonardo’s life, struggles, philosophy and curiosity, and the works themselves— what they meant, where they

led, how they erupted out of his worldview. Some of the authorities are questionable. Others sparkle. Timothy Verdon, for instance, art historian and Catholic priest, delineates with spiritual and aesthetic insights the allegorical significances of “The Virgin of the Rocks,” the “most complex Madonna of the entire Renaissance” and a narrative painting done when narrative painting was something new.

Almost everything Leonardo did was new, from the plastic art to the conceptual drawings of devices that Leonardo knew would never be realized in his time but anticipated so much to come. That “Leonardo da Vinci” includes mechanical engineer Morteza Gharib explaining the aerodynamics of the maestro’s flying machines is as engaging as having biographer Serge Bramly discuss his charisma and growing popularity circa 1500, or historians Ingrid Rossellini and Ross King talk about Leonardo’s return to Florence, whence he had started his career and which was only recently made Savonarola-free. Or writer Adam Gopnik worriedly advocating that the documentary’s subject was a man of antiquity, but also of the present. He needn’t have worried.

The strokes of brilliance in “Leonardo da Vinci” include the use of narrator Keith David, a Burns veteran (“Jazz,” “Muhammad Ali”), and the sonic infiltration throughout of Ms. Shaw’s period-inspired but very modern music. Having actor Adriano Giannini (son of Giancarlo) voice Leonardo—in heavily Italian-accented English—is one of those misfires one has to overlook. Which isn’t much of a struggle, given the genius at hand.

Leonardo da Vinci

Begins Monday, 8 p.m., PBS *Mr. Anderson is the Journal's TV critic.*

UFFIZI GALLERY A likely self-portrait of the Renaissance genius.

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