



Smithsonian  
*National Air and Space Museum*

# News

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## **Leonardo da Vinci Manuscript on View at National Air and Space Museum**

### ***Rarely Seen Document Part of Year of Italian Culture in the United States***

“Leonardo da Vinci’s Codex on the Flight of Birds,” possibly one of the world’s most famous notebooks, goes on view Friday, Sept. 13, at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum for a 40-day exhibit, ending Oct. 22. Made up of 18 folios (two-sided pages) and written in the artist’s famous “mirror” script, the collection of notes and sketches foreshadows devices and principles of mechanical flight by exploring bird flight and behavior. The Renaissance genius created the notebook between 1505 and 1506, when he also painted his masterpiece, the “Mona Lisa.”

“The opportunity to exhibit ‘Leonardo da Vinci’s Codex on the Flight of Birds’ is an extraordinary privilege for the museum,” said Gen. J.R. “Jack” Dailey, director of the museum. “It allows us to trace the history of flight by sharing the work of a visionary whose genius transcends time, from the 16th century to today’s icons of aviation and space exploration.”

“Bringing Leonardo da Vinci’s Codex to Washington in 2013, as we celebrate the Year of Italian Culture and 50 years of collaboration in space between Italy and America, means hosting a dialogue between the Renaissance and modernity, tradition and innovation,” said Claudio Bisogniero, Italian ambassador to the United States.

The Codex, an early form of a personal notebook, is a fragile 8-by-6-inch (21-by-5-centimeter) document. It is on loan from the Biblioteca Reale in Turin, Italy, where it is kept in a special vault with other Leonardo da Vinci works, including the artist’s famous self-portrait. “The Codex has travelled to the United States only once before, and rarely left Italy,” said director of the Biblioteca Reale, Giovanni Saccani, who accompanied Italy’s national treasure to Washington. “We are very pleased to be able to

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bring this extraordinary work to the National Air and Space Museum, where so many American and international visitors will have the opportunity to see an original work by Leonardo da Vinci.”

While at the museum, the Codex is in a guarded and climate-controlled display case in “The Wright Brothers & The Invention of the Aerial Age,” a permanent exhibition whose centerpiece is Wilbur and Orville Wright’s 1903 Flyer, the world’s first successful airplane. For the only time in history, the Codex and the Wright Flyer share the same space, two works of genius meeting across the centuries. By virtually leafing through the pages of the manuscript on nearby computer devices, visitors learn that centuries before flying machines were invented, the seeds of ideas that would lead to powered flight germinated in the mind of da Vinci. According to the museum’s chief curator, Peter Jakab, who is overseeing the exhibit, “Leonardo da Vinci lived a 15th-century life, but a vision of the modern world spread before his mind’s eye.”

Da Vinci was born in 1452, the son of a wealthy notary, Messer Piero Fruosino di Antonio da Vinci, and his mistress, a peasant girl. Because he was born out of wedlock, he was simply called Leonardo da Vinci (Leonardo of Vinci) for the town where he was born. Da Vinci was raised by paternal family members. As a teenager, he left Vinci to apprentice with artist Andrea del Verrocchio, whose famous workshop was something of a one-man university of the arts in Florence. It was here that da Vinci’s talents matured. In Verrocchio’s studio, the distinction between science and art melded: Art was seen as a foundation of engineering and engineering as an expression of art.

Da Vinci was fascinated with flight and, given his reliance on nature as a foundation for ideas, was inspired by natural flight. Once engaged with the notion of a flying machine, it became an obsession. He sketched flying devices such as ornithopters (flapping-wing flying machines), but it was not until his study of bird flight, “Codex on the Flight of Birds,” that his more forward-thinking ideas were documented. Although primarily known as a sculptor and painter (in addition to the “Mona Lisa,” the other masterpiece for which he is known is “The Last Supper”), da Vinci is renowned for his skills in architecture, music, mathematics, poetry, engineering, anatomy and botany. He died in France in 1519 at the age of 67.

“Leonardo’s Flight,” a seven-minute video produced for the exhibition by Silvia Rosa-Brusin for RAI, Italian National Television and Year of Italian Culture’s Media partner, explores da Vinci’s foresight through his imaginative sketches of machines and devices, traces his influence through time, to today’s exploration of space, and chronicles the intriguing history of the Codex itself. The video also recounts the story of a copy of the Codex’s flight to Mars, accompanied by a reproduction of the artist’s self-portrait.

The “Codex on the Flight of Birds” was taken from Italy to France by Napoleon Bonaparte, travelled to England, was subdivided into separate folios for a time, and even taken to Siberia before it was returned to Italy. The Codex found a permanent home in the Biblioteca Reale, where it has been since 1893.

A model of an ornithopter is suspended just outside the gallery. Although da Vinci sketched many ornithopter designs, it is unlikely he ever constructed one. The full-size model is based on a drawing in da Vinci’s Manuscript B, folio 74 at the Institut de France in Paris. It was built by Opera Laboratori Fiorentini in Italy and is on loan to the museum from Finmeccanica, a global aerospace, defense and transportation holding company headquartered in Italy.

The exhibit is organized by the museum and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Italian Cultural Heritage and Activities, the Embassy of Italy in Washington, D.C., and the Biblioteca Reale in Turin with the support of the Bracco Foundation and corporations Finmeccanica and Tenaris. It is part of “2013: Year of Italian Culture in the U.S.,” an initiative held under the auspices of the President of the Italian Republic, organized by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian Embassy with the support of corporate ambassadors, Eni and Intesa Sanpaolo.

Admission to the exhibition is free, but tickets are required the first week, Sept. 13 through Sept. 19. Call 202-633-2214 for details or see the museum’s [website](#). Information on the exhibition and related activities will also be on the museum’s [website](#).

The [National Air and Space Museum](#) building on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., is located at Sixth Street and Independence Avenue S.W. The museum’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center is located in Chantilly, Va., near Washington Dulles International Airport. Attendance at both buildings combined was 8 million in 2012, making it the most visited museum in America. The museum’s research, collections, exhibitions and programs focus on aeronautical history, space history and planetary studies. Both buildings are open from 10 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. every day (closed Dec. 25).

“[2013: Year of Italian Culture in the United States](#)” has more than 300 cultural events in more than 50 U.S. cities and is supported by greater than 80 U.S. institutions and organizations. To find out more, visit [www.italyinus2013.org/](http://www.italyinus2013.org/). Social Media: #2013ItalianYear; [www.facebook.com/ItalyInUs2013](http://www.facebook.com/ItalyInUs2013)

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