The 400-year journey of Leonardo’s anatomical drawings

Leonardo da Vinci had intended to publish his ground-breaking anatomical studies in a treatise on anatomy. At the time of his death in 1519, however, his anatomical researches remained unpublished and among his private papers. A mass of undigested and disorganised material, they were effectively lost to the world for almost 400 years. It was not until the turn of the 20th century (between 1898 and 1916) that finally all of Leonardo’s anatomical papers were published in a series of facsimile editions.

Leonardo bequeathed his notebooks and drawings to his young assistant Francesco Melzi. Over the next 50 years Melzi attempted to make sense of Leonardo’s daunting legacy. He copied out passages from the theoretical writings in Leonardo’s notebooks in an effort to construct the treatise on painting that Leonardo himself had never completed, but there is no evidence that Melzi made any sustained attempt to investigate the anatomical papers.

Melzi died around 1570, and by 1590 his son had sold the majority of Leonardo’s papers to the sculptor Pompeo Leoni, who preserved the notebooks intact and mounted the loose drawings into several large albums. Among the contents of one of these albums were almost all the anatomical studies now known to us.

By 1630 the album was in England in the possession of Thomas Howard, 2nd Earl of Arundel. Arundel left England shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War, and it is not known whether he took the Leonardo album with him into exile. The album is next recorded in 1690, when it was seen in London in the possession of William III and Mary II. The means by which the volume entered the Royal Collection is unknown, but it was probably acquired, by purchase or gift, by Charles II.

There was only sporadic interest in the album during the 18th century. It was the physician and anatomist William Hunter who appears to have been the first person to appreciate fully the content and significance of the drawings, having examined them in George III’s library by 1773. He said of Leonardo’s drawings that they…introduce[d] into the annals of our art, a genius of the first rate, Leonardo da Vinci, who has been overlooked, because he was of another profession, and because he published nothing upon the subject…he was, by far, the best Anatomist and physiologist of his time.

Hunter planned to publish the studies, but died in 1783 before he was able to do so. In 1796 John Chamberlaine published his Imitations of Original Designs by Leonardo da Vinci, including a number of etchings by Francesco Bartolozzi, with Leonardo’s notes transcribed and reliably translated. For the first time the beauty and accuracy of at least some of Leonardo’s anatomical drawings could be appreciated by a wider public. In 1797 the artist James Barry attempted to persuade the Committee of the Royal Academy to revive Hunter’s intentions. This initiative came to nothing, and the publication of most of Leonardo’s anatomical work had to wait another century.

The 600 Leonardo drawings in the Royal Collection are kept in carefully controlled conditions in the Print Room at Windsor Castle. From the 1970s all the drawings were lifted from their 19th-century mounts and suspended between ultraviolet-filtered acrylic sheets for conservation reasons.