Marvelous and divine, indeed, was Leonardo the son of Ser Piero da Vinci.

—GIORGIO VASARI

March 1958: A twenty-two-year-old student from Munich made a pilgrimage to Anchiano, Italy, the birthplace of Leonardo. I wanted to understand the landscape—today I would say the biosphere—from which he originated. It was the spiritual existence of this genius that I wanted to track down. I still keep the small notebooks in which I recorded my impressions: “A drizzle accompanies the descent to Vinci. The grief of the mountain in its gorse blossom. The gold of the setting sun about Galuzzo. The farewell was pure gold. The sun threw back her death, beaming.” Was Leonardo a phantom for this curious, budding artist? Today I would say: He is a hologram! Leonardo the artist, the researcher, the communicator is a hologram!

“How would Leonardo have tackled the problem of sending a high-definition image from one point to another?” A brilliant question asked in 1962 by a brilliant mind—that of science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke. Clarke was “thinking aloud” (to quote an email from “LEONARDO II” main brain and executive editor Roger Malina) about the “telettransportation” not of sound but of the images of real objects. How would Leonardo handle it? How many artist-scientist-researchers within the worldwide LEONARDO II community have asked this question? [1] And this is just one question for him, among hundreds.

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Leonardo’s death on 2 May 1519, with major exhibitions in Florence, London and Milan, we cannot help but call to mind the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt’s death in 1669. Jonathan Jones, who wrote a book about the artistic duel between Leonardo and Michelangelo, which defined the Renaissance, comments on this art war in the year 2019: “Rembrandt is the Shakespeare of painting. But Leonardo is Shakespeare, Einstein and the Wright brothers rolled into one” [2]. In my own words: Rembrandt is a painted canvas, while Leonardo is a hologram, a memory in information, unmatched, endless, ever reflecting the location of the observer. Let’s celebrate him!

And let’s be proud to be part of a journal whose every issue proves once again that Leonardo lives. We, the artist-scientist-researchers of LEONARDO, an MIT Press publication out of Cambridge, Massachusetts with offices in California and a global community, are greatly indebted to him. But so is he greatly indebted to us: he lives on, undisputedly, his interventions kept ever topical, ever current and in infinite variety through our efforts.

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References and Notes

1 “Leonardo would be very lucky to send one digit a second, and he has 1,750,000 to cope with. . . . Leonardo could cut down the time, at the cost of mechanical complication, by having a number of men working in parallel, but he would soon reach the point of diminishing returns. . . . That it could ever be performed in a thirtieth of a second would have seemed to Leonardo, perhaps the most far-seeing man who ever lived, an absolute and unquestionable impossibility. Yet five hundred years after his birth, thanks to electronics, it was happening,” Arthur C. Clarke, Profiles of the Future (London: Pan Books, 1962) pp. 77–78.