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Leonardo da Vinci's drawings are debuting in Hong Kong at the City University in a unique exhibition that celebrates the 500th anniversary of the artist's death, with elements from both the past and the present.

Running until December 15, the exhibition displays 12 original drawings from da Vinci's *Codex Atlanticus*. There will also be 11 contemporary art pieces inspired by his drawings, created by faculty members and alumni of CityU and two Italian visiting artists.

"Even though it was 500 years ago, da Vinci is still talking with us," said Alberto Rocca, the exhibition's co-curator and director of the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, the Italian library that loaned the original sketches to CityU.

"There is no past, no present. The exhibition unites the past and present with mutual understanding."

The gallery provides a rare opportunity to display some of da Vinci's original drawings in Hong Kong. Though there are an estimated 30,000 pages, only 12 are available for display as some are lost and the rest require extensive protective measures.

After the Renaissance painter's death, his friend and pupil Francesco Melzi inherited all of his drawings and writings. Unfortunately,

Age of the *machines*

preserving private notes and memoirs was not a common practice in the 16th century so much of it became disorganized and faded.

As collectors started to gain interest in da Vinci's papers in the 17th century, they were separated from their original groupings and sold to different collectors. It then became challenging to trace, collect and organize the papers.

While the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana has managed to preserve a vast collection of da Vinci's *Codex Atlanticus*, CityU has only received limited access to the original copies due to maintenance issues.

"We have only 90 days every three years to bring specific writings under the light," said chief curator Isabelle Frank.

To protect these 500-year-old drawings, only the pages that are ready to be exposed under this strict maintenance cycle were given to the gallery.

For this exhibition, the gallery has divided the writings into three categories:

mathematics, geometry and art; science, optics, and flight; and the art of war, showcasing da Vinci's diverse range of knowledge and skills.

"Whenever da Vinci introduced himself for a job, he would say he was a scientist, sculptor, architect, engineer, mathematician, and even an artist," said associate curator Jeffrey Shaw.

Indeed, in his 12 pages of technical drawings, artistic sketches are interposed among the practical inventions.

This includes the male driver driving the war machine depicted in the *Large Bent-frame Catapult with Sling* (Folio 141) and the seemingly random placement of a female figure in *Notes on Mechanics of Light* (Folio 816) and *Studies on Geometric Surfaces* (Folio 518).

Shaw speculates there was a practical aspect for overlapping his design and art – it was possibly because da Vinci did not want to waste valuable paper. "Paper was expensive

in his day, he probably did not want to waste them and used them for his drawings too."

Scholars have also agreed that not all of the artistic sketches were the sole work of da Vinci.

Some sketches, such as the female face on *Pyramid in Perspective* (Folio 786), are believed to be the work of a student who copied one of his drawings.

Paying tribute to the legend, the exhibit also features da Vinci-inspired contemporary artwork by members of CityU.

The interactive *LDVVOTR AR* is the creation of Shaw and Sarah Kenderline. With an iPad in hand, visitors can walk around and experience the cave in da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*.

The interactive journey continues with Shaw's *Reconfiguring the Cave*.

"With 3D glasses on, viewers can control the work's audio-visual transformations using virtual puppets," he said.

Technology at the gallery will not only illustrate the contemporary pieces. It will also offer the opportunity for visitors to digitally view all of the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana's collected pages from the *Codex Atlanticus*.

The curators believe the master would have loved this new format of presenting his works. "If he were still alive, he would have been making use of this technology to help with his own creations," said Frank.

■ Clockwise from top left: *Notes on Mechanics of Light* (Folio 816); *Reconfiguring the Cave*; LDVVOTR AR; *Nelle Tue Mani*; 3D models of da Vinci's drawings; *Mechanical Military Drum* model; and exhibition participants posing with the Italian consul general.



■ Study for Multi-barrelled Springald (Folio 157).