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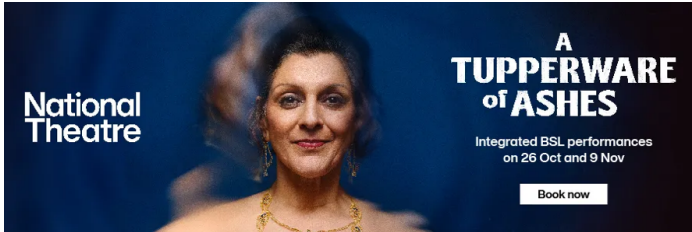
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Dr Rosamund Oates: The Renaissance through Deaf Eyes (BSL)

Posted on August 8, 2024 by **Editor**



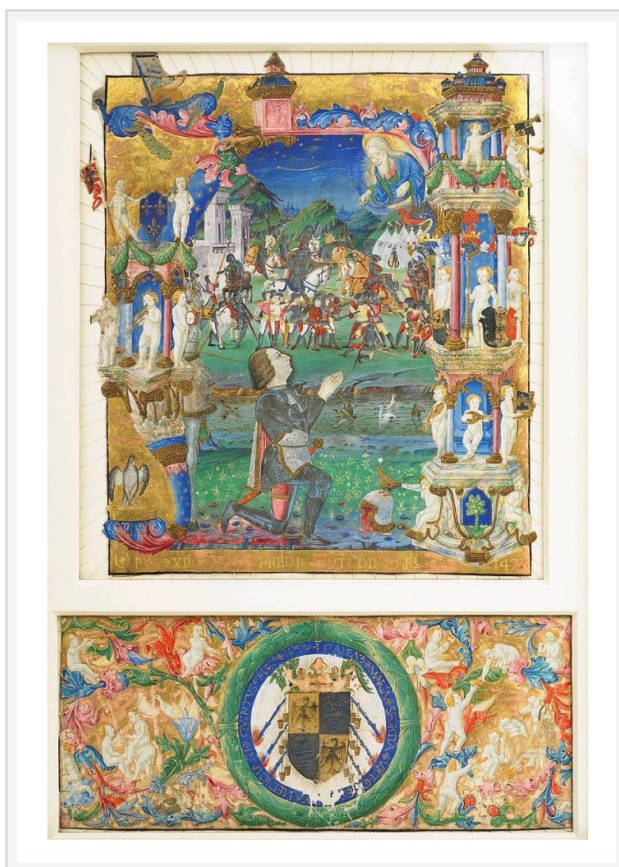
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The renaissance was one of the most important movements in Western art and culture. Starting in Italy in the 15th century, it produced some of the most famous artists we know, including Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Donatello. (So famous they named some turtles after them!). But did you know that deaf people were at the heart of this revolutionary artistic movement?

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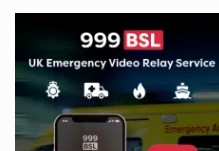
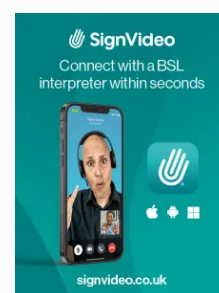
1483, Leonardo Da Vinci went to live in Milan after winning a prestigious commission to paint an altarpiece for a church in the city. Today, this is one of his most well-known

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paintings, 'The Virgin on the Rocks'. Da Vinci was not working alone. Two local artists – brothers Ambrogio and Evangelista De Predis – were employed to work alongside him. The De Predis family lived near to the church where they were working, and so when Leonardo Da Vinci arrived in the unfamiliar city of Milan, he stayed with them. And that is when he met another of the De Predis brothers, Cristoforo De Predis.

Cristoforo was also an artist. He was incredibly successful, employed by the richest and most important families in Milan, and appears to have run the family art business. Unlike his brothers, Cristoforo decorated manuscripts rather than painting large pictures. And unlike his brothers, he was deaf from birth.

Born between 1440 and 1450, Cristoforo became one of the most successful artists in renaissance Milan, illustrating books and manuscripts. Before the printing press took off, books were incredibly rare and expensive. They were copied by hand, often onto costly parchments that only the wealthiest people could afford. Rich families employed artists specialising in miniature paintings to decorate their books, which is how Cristoforo made his money.



Cristoforo was employed by important figures in Milan, including the Duke of Milan, the



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notorious Galeazzo Maria Sforza (c. 1444-1476). Even by standards of renaissance Italy the Duke was considered cruel; raping, murdering, and torturing those he disliked. Despite this, he commissioned a book of biblical stories, getting Cristoforo to add scenes from the bible and set them in Milan. So, Cristoforo painted Jesus on a donkey on Palm Sunday arriving at the walls of Milan rather than Jerusalem. And local landmarks, like the recently completed cathedral of Milan featured in other pictures.

It was a sign of how

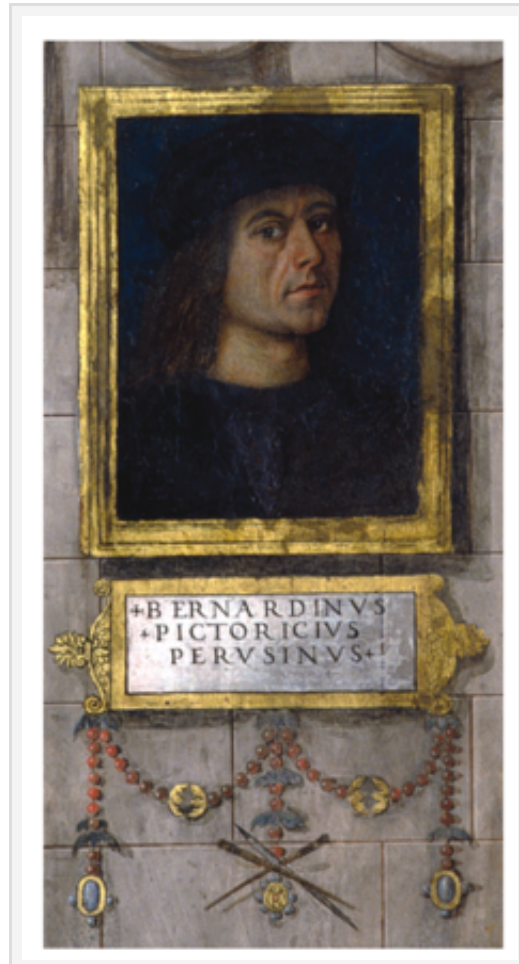


talented Cristoforo was that he worked for all the leading families in Milan and was continuously employed despite the dangerous political infighting of Milan. (Some of the stories makes Game of Thrones look tame!). His work survives today, and can be seen in libraries and museums across Italy. As well as stories of Jesus, he painted miniature pictures of his patrons; pictures of star signs; and much darker images of what he imagined the apocalypse would look like.

Cristoforo and his family used sign language. In 1472, the De Predis brothers wanted to sell some land outside Milan which used to belong to their father, but there was a problem. Doubts were raised whether Cristoforo could legally inherit or sell land since he was prelingually deaf. There were two issues at stake: was he mentally competent to make the sale, and how would he agree to it if he did not

speaking vocally? His brothers argued that he used sign language instead of speech, so he could consent to the sale. They also wrote to the local duke, arguing that if anyone needed further evidence of Cristoforo's intelligence, they only had to look at his artwork. The duke agreed, and the brothers were able to sell the land.

At the same time in a different part of Italy, another deaf artist was involved in one of the most



prestigious projects of the period: the Sistine chapel in Rome. This was Bernadetto di Betto, (c.1545-1513). In this period, lots of artists were known by nicknames and Bernadetto di Betto was better known by the names 'Sordicchio' (meaning 'little deaf man' in Italian) and 'Pinturicchio' (little artist). In 1481, his old teacher Perugino (from Perugia in northern Italy) invited Bernadetto to work with him, painting pictures onto the walls of the Sistine chapel. He even made Bernadetto a partner in the business. It was the start of a high-profile career, and Bernadetto di Betto went on to

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decorate the Vatican Palace, and new cathedrals in Sienna and Orvieto.

Leonardo Da Vinci recognised the unique talents that deaf people could bring to art and painting. When Da Vinci came to stay with the De Predis family in 1483, he was impressed by the expressiveness of the sign language used by Cristoforo and his family. Da Vinci recorded how the people he had seen signing used their whole bodies, faces, and hands to express their thoughts and feelings. Da Vinci even came to believe that if artists wanted to understand how to convey emotions, they should watch deaf people signing with their friends and families.

Many years after Leonardo da Vinci's time in Milan, he repeated this suggestion to his pupils. He thought they would be surprised to be told to go and watch deaf people signing. But Da Vinci told his students: 'do not laugh at me for proposing a tutor without a tongue'. Deaf signers, he thought, could teach artists a lot about gesture and feeling.

These Italian examples were not unique. Across renaissance Europe, deaf people trained as artists, earning a living as painters and teachers, with some gaining international renown. The renaissance that started in Italy changed the way Europeans thought about everything, from art to the afterlife. Deaf people were right at the heart of that movement.

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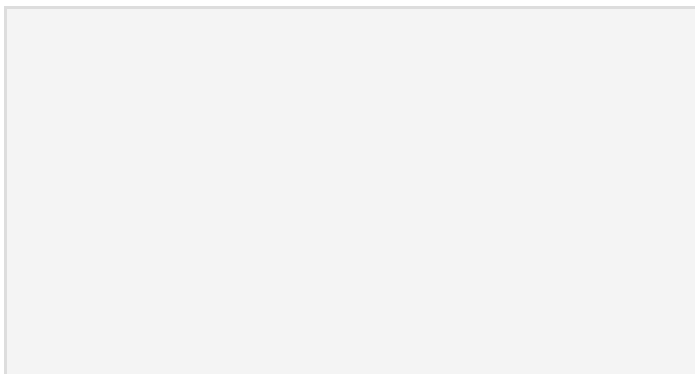
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