Da Vinci studio find thrills art lovers, experts

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Art lovers, historians and experts around the world are marveling at news Leonardo da Vinci's workshop may have been found in Florence. Italian researchers uncovered the room in a building just off the Piazza of the Santissima Annunziata in the central part of the celebrated city.

"It's obviously tremendously exciting, if it's true," David Franklin, chief curator at the National Gallery of Canada, told CTV's Canada AM.

"The people involved are the most serious, impeccable experts, so I think there's a great reason for optimism," he said.

The abandoned five-room studio was found beyond a hidden staircase that had been covered up during earlier restoration work.

"We certainly know that Leonardo did live and work in that monastery in Florence at that period after 1500, so there's an air of possibility to it."

On the walls, there were paintings that researchers suspect were created by the Renaissance master's own hand.

"For the first time in this case we see birds which are absolutely dynamic, animals which are absolutely vivid, and which remind us of the study done by Leonardo on birds in flight," said art historian Robert Manescalchi.

The bird images are similar to drawings found in the Codex Atlanticus, an atlas-size collection of da Vinci's work.

But one theory is that the fading frescoes were painted by a workshop student about 500 years ago. Art historians and scientists are eager to put their theory to the test -- but some are urging caution.

"Without having seen the frescoes, anything we have to say is just babble," Keith Christiansen, a curator of European paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, told the New York Times.

Still, Manescalchi says he's been inundated with requests for viewings by curious art historians.

The discovery also strengthens the findings of a recent study which claimed da Vinci likely met Mona Lisa in the church of the Santissima Annunziata, where her husband's family had a chapel.

"The fact that (the Mona Lisa) might have been depicted inside the Annunziata can't be excluded," said Professor Alessandro Vezzosi, director of the Museo ideale Leonardo da Vinci.

"There is nothing which confirms this, except for the fact that the Gherardini family (Mona Lisa's family) had a relationship with the convent."

Still, Franklin was skeptical about the suggestion that da Vinci's famous painting, the Mona Lisa, was actually painted in those rooms.

"The painting was a kind of touchstone for him, and he worked on it for a very long period of time," he said -- noting that da Vinci likely moved the painting around to other locations, including Milan.

Still, the researchers hope their discovery will help flesh out the life of da Vinci, an artist, inventor and scientist, who embodied the ideal of the Renaissance man.

"Every piece of information helps us to understand not only the person but the historical climate at that time," said Annamaria Petrioli Tofani, the director of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

Franklin told Canada AM one reason why the rooms were forgotten for so long could be because, while he was alive, da Vinci was not nearly as famous as he is today.

"At the time, his fame was very much a fleeting thing in Florence. In fact, there was a lot of antagonism towards him as a negative figure, as a figure who was a little bit unreliable, a little bit flighty."

Still, now that the rooms have been found, Franklin would like to see them kept in tact and open for all to see.

"It would be wonderful to be able to walk up those steps to feel that kind of magnetic, super-charged atmosphere in which Leonardo worked," he said.

"It should be preserved."