An interview with Paolo Galluzzi

Leonardo da Vinci: an exceptional figure, a man of his time

Q.: How does your exhibition *The Art of Invention* deal with Leonardo? To what extent do you show him as one of many figures in this long development, and to what extent does he stand out from the rest?

PG: *The Art of Invention* does not isolate any figure. The exhibition tries to locate a number of artist-engineers within a historical process, which lasted a century and a half. But within this process, Leonardo unquestionably has his own, specific position. It is not possible to reduce him to the same status as any of the others. He is different--but different in a context. If you examine his career, you will discover an ambition he shared with these other people, to pass from a purely manual role to a more intellectual position. All of these people tried to train themselves. That meant learning Latin and higher geometry--the elements needed to make the job different from what it had been in the Middle Ages. And this effort at self-education can be found in the others as well as in Leonardo.
The artist-engineers also shared the same need to answer to the demands of the market, principally the lords. The 15th century was full of small wars among these lords, who needed people who could build fortresses, escape tunnels, military machinery. The difference you encounter, as you pass from Brunelleschi to Leonardo, lies in the growing need to pass from practice to theory. With Leonardo, this passage is achieved dramatically. His development ends with a refusal of purely mechanical activity, and with an explicit declaration that mechanical applications must derive from theoretical principles. He becomes what is known as a natural philosopher. Leonardo investigates the principles of nature that underlie machines. In my view, this is what sets him apart. But this aspiration, this ambition, was already present in the other artist-engineers.
Q: Could you explain more fully the meaning of being a "natural philosopher"?

PG: What you discover behind the term is the drive to imitate nature. The philosophers of the Renaissance believed that nature does things better than humankind. But if humans were to understand the principles of nature, they would be able to get very close to imitating nature. That was the philosophical tension--not a practical tension, but a philosophical tension--between human reason and a natural world that was both secretive and intelligible, like a book written in code.