



Image first, then the word

*From the first scream to the first word
to the first thought is a wondrous
road each person travels.*

Robert Kromhof

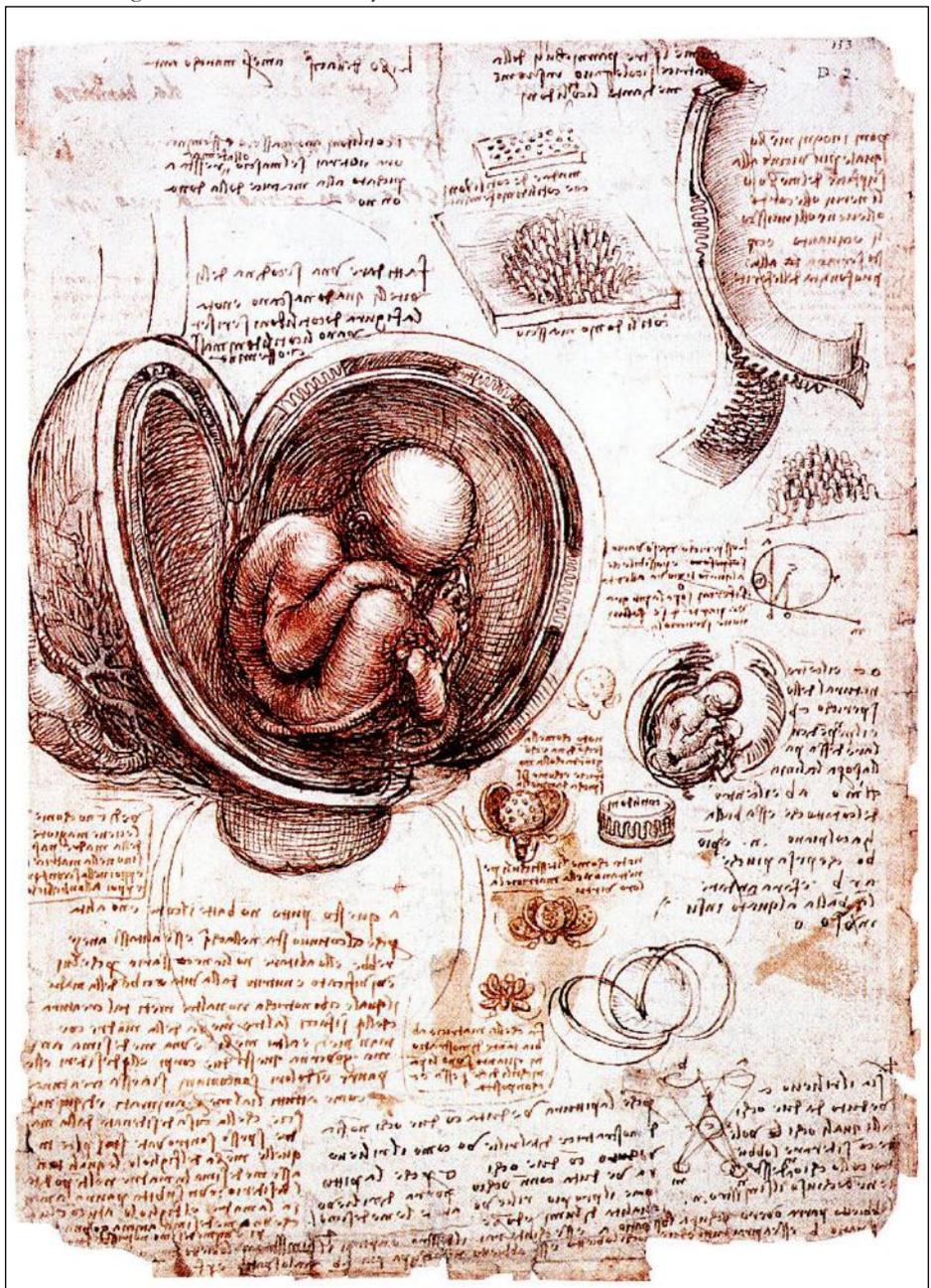
THE WORLD DOES NOT MANIFEST itself through words; a baby explores the world with its mouth, hands, eyes and ears. He does not need anyone to teach him, these things all come naturally. But the world of words needs to be practised with unending patience, or the child will never learn to speak.

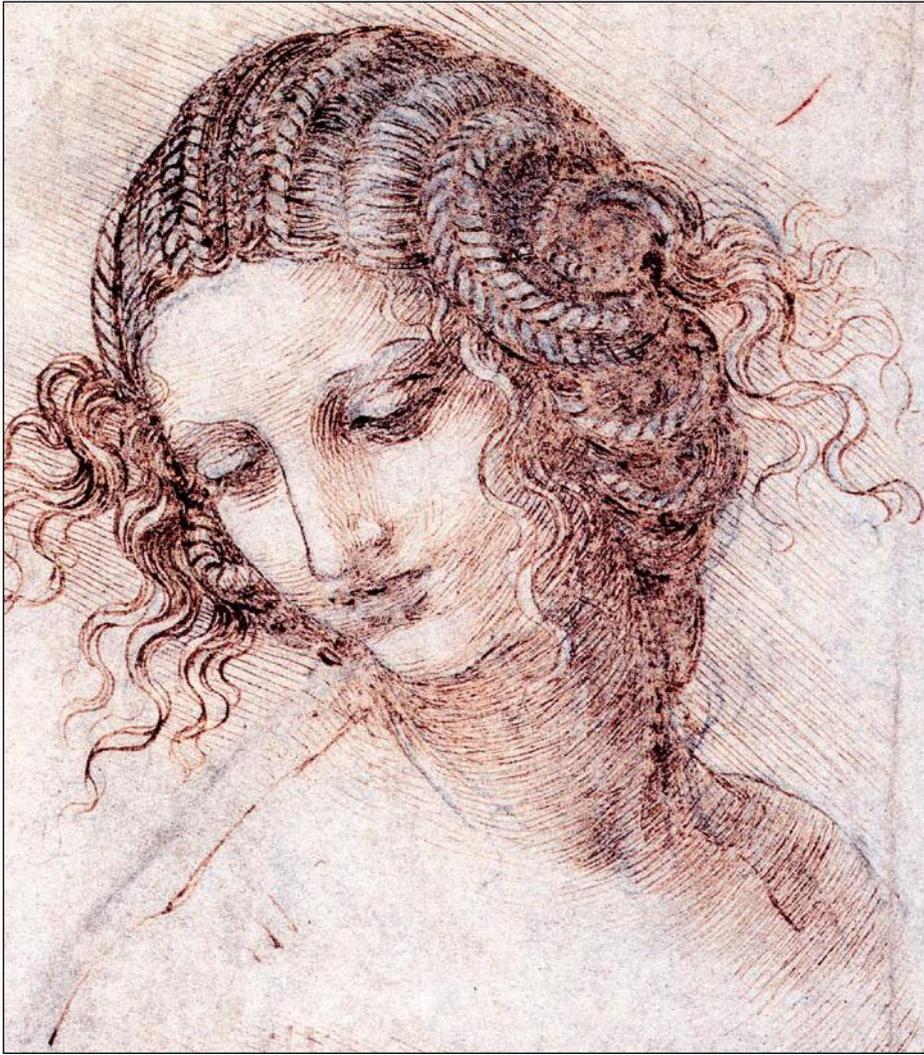
A child obtains its vocabulary by pointing at objects and producing the same sounds over and over, an acquired skill and a remarkable way of bringing the world within its reach. The first sounds refer to concrete objects, it is not until later that more and more sounds referring to abstractions such as gravity, democracy or art are added.

A Sound for an Answer

People assign a sound to each observable phenomenon and think that by doing so, they will get a grip on this phenomenon and understand it. When a child wonders and asks its parents why everything falls down, its parents will tell the child that it is because of gravity. This makes it seem as if the phenomenon has been explained through a meaningless sound, because the child is satisfied with the sound his parents have assigned to it and stops wondering why everything falls down. But there is a possibility that the child comes back a few years later to ask what exactly gravity is. Gravity is one of the laws of nature, the parents will answer this time, masses gravitate toward each other. Perhaps the child is again satisfied with the

Leonardo da Vinci, depiction of a foetus inside the womb, ca. 1510, pen and two shades of brown drawing ink, washed, with red crayon





Leonardo da Vinci, Leda's head, ca. 1505-1510, pen and ink over black crayon

impressive term 'laws of nature', but there is a chance that it will wonder why masses gravitate toward each other, or why they do not reject each other, or are neutral. And this is how a thought process is set in motion. But even with all this thinking, gravity will still only be wrapped in more and more words without ever making it any clearer what exactly gravity is.

A Word for Reality

The philosopher Plato (427 b.C.) is the one who declared the word sacred. Only through words could people get to the essence of all things. According to Plato, reality had no colour or appearance and true reality could only be observed through thought. He thus created a world of words that rose above the existing visible world.

It was Plato who pushed out the visible but changeable reality in favour of the metaphysical but fixed reality of Ideas that could only be observed through thought. He created a world of words apart from the visible world.

It was because of him that from then on, the use of words (i.e. philosophy) became the highest form of knowledge and the use of paint (i.e. art) a much lower form of knowledge.

Defining through Words

A phenomenon loses some of its miraculousness with every description. What remains of human beings themselves in a dictionary: *"the most highly developed living creature, belonging to the biological class of mammals (genus Homo), who's reason and language skills distinguish it from the other animals"* In this definition, it is conveniently assumed that no other animal has the capacity for thought or language. This description of humankind is empty in comparison with one of Leonardo da Vinci's studies of the human body.

In the term "human beings", all sorts of people, Chinese to African, even each individual human being, have become one sound in one fell swoop. Language is the great equaliser, the classifier, the demystifier of the world. With each description, the thing that is being described loses its own reality. Because of people's words the world loses its infinity, its multiformity, its mystery; the world appears to come within reach through sounds but the distance between people and the visible world is only growing wider.

De-wording

Putting reality into words has become second nature to people and more and more often, the word comes before the actual observation. In war, the enemy is not seen, but caught in a word, "enemy", to be shot down. But sometimes we



Leonardo da Vinci, study for Madonna with Child and cat, ca. 1478-1480, pen and ink over black crayon



Leonardo da Vinci , five grotesque heads, ca. 1494, pen and ink

suddenly see the uniqueness in one person who suddenly enchants us and who we do not want to leave for the rest of our lives. Only very rarely do we succeed in breaking free from words and seeing a thing or a person as completely unique and, in other words, beyond words.

Painters are the people who push language out of the way and shoot holes through the language with their images. Painting should focus on the destruction of meaning that words attach to all phenomena. Once the words fall away from things, they will reappear in all their mysteriousness to be seen in all their clarity. Seeing things clearly can only be done after language has been eliminated.

The greatest painters succeed in showing the world to us in such a way that we gaze at it without words. Because as soon as a spectator utters sounds when looking at a painting, he no longer sees. Through painting it has become possible to detach ourselves from words, for those who depend on words will never truly see.

A Firm Belief in the Word

It is ironic how the art world still believes in language and often tries to understand works

of art through words. Whole books may be written about the painter, his vision, his time, his contemporaries, all kinds of analyses may be let loose on his works of art, but still the reader will feel the essence cannot be caught in words.

How many words have been wasted trying to gain insight into Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa? But the work of art itself, like real life, cannot be caught in words. The work of art remains a mystery and will survive all explanations and interpretations. It has even proved to be able to survive autonomously, away from its time, its painter with his vision. For too long people have thought words can contain the essence of all that can be seen. We still have not shaken off Plato's belief in the word. Many people still believe they can reach beyond, or into, or higher than the visible world. Many people still believe they can get closer to reality through words than through drawing or painting. But Leonardo da Vinci already showed us that active observation brings us closer to the visible world than putting it in words does. The explanation for this phenomenon is simple: people observe the world as an image first, not until much later do they make their observations through an acquired language.