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In the last few years, there has been a spate of popular books inspired by the “Old Masters.” Drawing upon my experience in Paris and as an artist, I offer the following comments on two of the books viability and accuracy.

The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown

Like action packed thrillers with a pseudo art, history and religious connotation (think of the movie Raiders of the Lost Ark), The Da Vinci Code is page turning fiction reshaping facts and history to suit Dan Brown’s clever plot in this popular book.

However, the move from page to reality prompts laughter or groans for those versed in Paris, art history or religious studies.

The very nature of writing fiction is invention. Engrossing and seemingly credible, the book is nothing more than creative storytelling. No one learns history from Shakespeare ☺

Surprisingly, despite the farcical inaccuracies, some people have assumed the details are reliable.

There is even a tour operator offering “The Da Vinci Code tour” in Paris! When the dark Parisian winters depress me and I need a good laugh, I think I will stake out the tour coach to see how they handle all of the absurd routes in the book.

The very title is proof that the book deserves its placement at the head of the list in its category: Fiction.

Leonardo Da Vinci’s name is Leonardo. Da Vinci is not a last name. It means “from Vinci”, referring to his birthplace, Vinci, and was used to distinguish him from other Leonardos. He would have been addressed as Maestro Leonardo, not Maestro Da Vinci. It is preposterous that an art scholar would refer to Leonardo as “Da Vinci.” The title, “The ‘From Vinci’ Code,” is ludicrous from a historical and linguistic standpoint.

That telling fact should be sufficient, but I would be selfish if I didn’t share with you just a few of the numerous faux pas, starting with the hysterical car ride to the Louvre.

Robert Langdon (the hero) and the French agent start at the Ritz located in Place Vendome and then “*they skimmed past the Opera and crossed Place Vendome.*” The Opera is North; the Louvre is South. Maybe the befuddled agent thought “Oops, wrong way,” and did a U-turn after he passed the Opera?

“*When they reached the intersection at Rue de Rivoli...the agent gunned the sedan across the junction and sped onto a wooded section of Rue Castiglione, which served as the northern entrance to the famed Tuileries Gardens.*” The street from Place Vendome to Rue de Rivoli is Rue Castiglione; in order to hit Rue Castiglione after Rue de Rivoli, the agent gunned across the junction, screeched to an abrupt halt and backed up, once again towards Place Vendome. As to the “wooded section”, maybe he is referring to the two enormous candelabras at the entrance to the Intercontinental Hotel.

His “*northern entrance*” to the Tuileries is up the stairs to a pedestrian entry onto a terrace with more stairs leading down to the park level. That would be an interesting car arrival at any time, but even more so at midnight, since the gates are locked to all parks after sunset. Imagine the wild-eyed passengers as the tour coach executes those moves. Car-sick bags, anyone?

“The Citroen swerved left now, angling west down the park’s central boulevard. Curling around a circular pond, the driver cut across a desolate avenue out into a wide quadrangle beyond.”

The central boulevard mentioned in the garden is not a road but a wide unpaved pedestrian walkway ending in more steps up to the terrace, over an underground tunnel road which would be the author’s traversed “*desolate avenue*.”

The correct route would have provided more interest for his “*sacred feminine*” plot theme than his Tuileries tiles rhetoric. They would have passed the site where Joan of Arc (Jeanne d’Arc) was wounded when she tried to take Paris. The city limits were considerably smaller in 1429. As an aside, you never hear Jeanne referred to only as “d’Arc.” D’Arc burned at the stake?

The ludicrous routes abound. There is the dash from the Louvre to the American Embassy, which mentions that “*the hedges around Carrousel du Louvre were there to hide the perilous chasm in the center – ‘La Pyramid Inversée’ - the upside-down pyramid...It was large enough to swallow their Smart-Car in a single gulp.*” Right! The hedges are there to discourage skaters. Even if it were not covered, leaves, rain, trash, tiny animals, and toddlers would soon fill up that chasm. “Hey Jacques, get the rope. Another kid fell into the pyramid!”

“...cutting sharply past the luxurious Hotel de Crillon...The embassy was less than a mile away now.” Really? It is directly across a tiny street from the Hotel Crillon.

To lose their pursuers, Langdon and Sophie (the heroine) rush to Gare St. Lazare and buy tickets on the “rapid” 3:06 a.m. train to Lille. The author’s observations in the station include “*clusters of blue-clad baggage porters smoking cigarettes*” and “*the train to Lille was belching and wheezing in preparation for departure.*”

This is an alternative Paris, as there are no dead of night trains anymore. Baggage porters are an endangered species and would not be found in the station at 3:00 a.m., though they may be clustered somewhere else smoking. The trains to Lille leave from Gare du Nord and are TGV’s (Très Grande Vitesse or high speed trains) without a belch or a wheeze in them except, perhaps, in some passengers. Amusingly, the agent sent to check out the station went to Gare du Nord, though the author placed the principals at Gare St. Lazare: smart agent, unobservant editor.

Brown’s description of the station’s facade, “*the glass-roofed train terminal resembled the awkward offspring of an airplane hangar and a greenhouse,*” cannot be reconciled with the magnificent 19th Century train stations in Paris, created with an abundance of limestone and sculpture during a time when train travel was a luxury. So much for the ambiance of Paris.

A main premise of the plot has the Paris Meridien (longitude zero before Greenwich received the honor in 1884) running through Saint Sulpice and the Louvre’s inverse pyramid.

Not so! Both are easily 100 yards or more west of the meridian. The “gnomon” mentioned in St. Sulpice concerns the sun’s ray passing through a small opening to indicate the winter and summer solstice, the fall and spring equinox, and therefore, Easter (first Sunday on or after the spring equinox).

What about Langdon's supposed expertise on symbolism in art? He cites "the *Mona Lisa*, *Venus de Milo*, and *Winged Victory*." No expert would call the Victory of Samothrace the Winged Victory, anymore than I would be called a female woman. This is redundant as Victory is always winged.

Langdon muses that the Jeu de Paume as one of the "*four of the finest art museums in the world*." Skip any of his lectures! The Jeu de Paume is a national gallery for contemporary art exhibitions. It lost its museum status when their permanent collection moved to the then new Musée d'Orsay in 1986.

In the episode with Leonardo's "Madonna of the Rocks," "*...the woman had actually lifted the large painting off its cable...At five feet tall, the canvas almost entirely hid her body*." Strong lady...the Madonna of the Rocks is painted on panel.

"The Last Supper" is repeatedly referred to as a fresco. Sadly, it is a mural. Leonardo painted on the wall's dry surface using inappropriate materials (including tempera) with the result that the painting started to deteriorate even before completion.

One of the author's "proofs" that the Apostle John portrayed by Leonardo was really Mary Magdalene is because John looks effeminate in "The Last Supper." Ridiculous! In that case, Leonardo's St. John the Baptist must also be Mary Magdalene in disguise, as well as the angel in the "Madonna in the Rocks" (if the angel is the archangel Uriel as the author suggests). Leonardo's work is known for his idealized, androgynous faces.

Regardless, in art symbology, being the youngest apostle, St. John was almost always shown young and beardless.

Mary Magdalene, John (the beloved disciple), and Mary (the mother of Jesus), were all at the crucifixion illustrating that John and Mary Magdalene were separate individuals. John 19, verses 25 – 27 "*...But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother...and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved (John) standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.*" Jesus entrusted John (a male - son) with the protection and care of his mother.

These few examples of the endless factual "liberties" show that Brown is not a researcher, but rather a costume designer. His cloth is woven from the recognizable dubious material of websites, guidebooks, and spurious writings that copy from one another, perpetuating the clichés. It makes for an elaborate outfit, but off stage, the illusion unravels.