Forensic specialist uses science in the pursuit of art

by Michael Stetz

SAN DIEGO - When it comes to art, one might think Paris. Or Rome, perhaps.

San Diego?

The city is probably better known for its catalog of stunning postcards than for its inventory of priceless works. So what's the world's greatest art forensics scientist - a man mentioned in best-selling novel "The Da Vinci Code" - doing here?

Hoping to make San Diego the international leader in analyzing, understanding and conserving the world's art inventory.

FORENSIC - Maurizio Seracini (left) is an art scientist. He uses the latest technology to unlock secrets of great works of art. He's studied paintings by DiVinci. He walked through the San Diego Museum of Art Monday with the museum's executive director Errick R. Cartwright. Photo by Peggy Peattie.

Maurizio Seracini will head University of California San Diego's Center for Interdisciplinary Science for Art, Architecture and Archaeology, which is believed to be the first of its kind.

Its creation was being announced Wednesday, with Matteo Renzi, the president of the Province of Florence, Italy, present for the big announcement.

Seracini, a 1973 graduate of UCSD, is renowned for using the latest scientific advances - including diagnostic imaging and infrared reflectography - to unlock secrets hidden beneath great artworks without physically touching them.

UCSD is a perfect fit for the new center, he said. The wealth of scientific talent is enormous.

The center already has formed a unique partnership with Florence, giving Seracini and other UCSD professors access to the city's Palazzo Medici, which is packed with Renaissance-era art.

The center also has begun a joint venture with the San Diego Museum of Art, which will allow Seracini to analyze pieces in its collection.

"We're excited," said Derrick Cartwright, the museum's executive director. "I feel very strongly about using new knowledge to teach us what we do not know."

Seracini, 60, has spent the past three decades working in Europe, using his trailblazing methods to analyze art by Leonardo da Vinci, Rafael, Botticelli. Every time he tackles a new project, he says he is overwhelmed.

"Emotions fly all over you," he said. "You cannot help but feel humbled."

For years, Seracini worked in relative obscurity, with some art historians questioning his technique, approach and results.

In 2003, he drew international attention when he became the only living person to be mentioned in Dan Brown's novel, "The Da Vinci Code."

Brown never interviewed Seracini. The first the scientist knew of the book was when he got a call from a friend who was reading "The Da Vinci Code" and saw Seracini's name.

Seracini's work was perfect fodder for Brown. In 2001, using his marvels of science, Seracini had discovered a series of drawings hidden for centuries beneath one of da Vinci's paintings, "Adoration of the Magi."

Brown used Seracini's discovery as evidence that da Vinci's art is not always what is seen or popularly believed.

Seracini wasn't actually thrilled with "The Da Vinci Code" connection, even if it did help bring him a world of publicity.

His goal isn't to validate or refute conspiracies, he said. He sees himself as a scientist who uses non-invasive techniques to reach objective conclusions that may have eluded art historians and restorers.

"You feel a huge weight of responsibility," Seracini said. "You're trying to understand the mind of a genius. And you naturally wonder, Who am I to undertake this?"

FINDING HIS CALLING

Seracini was born and raised in Florence, where he was surrounded by art.

"You breath it," he said. "It gets in your system."

But he also was interested in science and medicine, which was why as a young man he was attracted to UCSD's pioneering program in bioengineering.

His goal was to become a medical doctor, with a background and focus in engineering. But even while tackling science courses, he found time to go to Los Angeles to take art classes at UCLA.

Seracini's medical career was sidetracked in 1977, when he made a trip back to Florence and ran into Carlo Pedretti, a UCLA art professor whom he had studied under. Pedretti was searching for a long-lost da Vinci mural, "The Battle of Anghiari," believed to be hidden in a building called the Hall of Five Hundred.

Only a dozen or so da Vinci paintings exist. This one had disappeared after another artist, Giorgio Vasari, was commissioned to paint new murals in the building.

Pedretti asked Seracini if he could help in the hunt by applying his knowledge of cutting-edge medical equipment.

Using ultrasound and thermo-imaging, Seracini spent two years trying to map the original building. If they could figure out how it was constructed, they might be able to discover the most likely sites of the mural.

The work was discontinued before proof of the mural was found, but Seracini had found something else: his calling.

He started his own art forensics company, even though few understood the science he was using. To build a reputation, he offered his services for free to museums that were about to restore paintings. Over the years, his discoveries stunned the art world.

Despite all his accomplishments, one effort remains unfinished.

In 2000, Seracini got the funding and the permission to set out again on the quest that propelled him into his career: his search for the missing da Vinci.

He has found a void in one section of the current mural in the Hall of the Five Hundred - a space of about a half-inch. Behind it, the da Vinci mural awaits, he believes.

Proving his hunch is a daunting challenge.

He can't touch the existing painting by Vasari, which is, in its own right, a treasure.

He must somehow find a technique that will allow him to detect colors beyond the existing mural.

One problem: That technique doesn't yet exist.

Seracini isn't concerned. A challenge of this scale? That's art to him.

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