

Letter from Leonardo to Ludovico Sforza

In 1481, Leonardo wrote a fascinating letter to Ludovico Sforza, later to become Duke of Milan. This letter, aimed at obtaining work at Sforza's court. He notes, almost as a postscript, that he is also a painter and sculptor, able to create an equestrian bronze sculpture, which is to be commissioned.

"Most illustrious Lord, having by now sufficiently considered the experience of those men who claim to be skilled inventors of machines of war, and having realized that the said machines in no way differ from those commonly employed, I shall endeavour, without prejudice to anyone else, to reveal my secrets to Your Excellency, for whom I offer to execute, at your convenience, all the items briefly noted below.

1. I have a model of very strong but light bridges, extremely easy to carry, by means of which you will be able to pursue or if necessary flee an enemy; I have others, which are sturdy and will resist fire as well as attack and are easy to lay down and take up. I also know ways to burn and destroy those of the enemy.
2. During a siege, I know how to dry up the water of the moats and how to construct an infinite number of bridges, covered ways, scaling ladders, and other machines for this type of enterprise.
3. If by reason of the height of the banks or the strength of the place and its position, it is impossible when besieging a place, to avail oneself of the plan of bombardment, I have methods for destroying every rock or other fortress, even if it were founded on rock.
4. I have kinds of mortar; most convenient and easy to carry; and with these I can fling small stones almost resembling a storm; and with the smoke of these cause great terror with the enemy, to his great detriment and confusion.
5. I know how to use paths and secret underground tunnels, dug without noise and following tortuous routes, to reach a given place, even if it means passing below a moat or a river.
6. I will make covered vehicles, safe and unassailable, which will penetrate enemy ranks with their artillery and destroy the most powerful troops; the infantry may follow them without meeting obstacles or suffering damage.
7. In case of need, I will make large bombards, mortars, and fire-throwing engines, of beautiful and practical design, which will be different from those presently in use.
8. Where bombardment would fail, I can make catapults, mangonels, trabocchi, or other unusual machines of marvellous efficiency, not in common use. In short, whatever the situation, I can invent an infinite variety of machines for both attack and defence.

9. And if battle is to be joined at sea, I have many very efficient machines for both attack and defence; and vessels that will resist even the heaviest cannon fire, fumes and gun-powder.

10. In peacetime, I think I can give perfect satisfaction and be the equal of any man in architecture, in the design of buildings public and private, or to conduct water from one place to another.

I can carry out sculpture in marble, bronze, and clay; and in painting can do any kind of work as well as any man, whoever he be.

Moreover, the bronze horse could be made that will be to the immortal glory and eternal honour of the lord your father of blessed memory and of the illustrious house of Sforza.

And if any of the items mentioned above appears to anyone impossible or impractical, I am ready to give a demonstration in your park or in any other place that should please Your Excellency - to whom I recommend myself in all humility, etc.