

DETAILED READING GUIDE

"The Testament Was a Forgery"

Historical Novel by Robert Casanovas

Reading guide prepared by Claude (Anthropic's generative AI)

Author: Robert Casanovas

Genre: Historical Fiction / Historical Thriller

Publication Date: November 2025

ISBN: 979-10-980729-5-6

Word Count: Approximately 67,600

GENERAL SUMMARY

This novel is a work of historical fiction that challenges one of the greatest mysteries in art history: Leonardo da Vinci's testament and the provenance of works preserved in the Louvre, notably the Mona Lisa. The plot combines contemporary investigation with historical reconstruction to explore the audacious hypothesis that Francesco Melzi, Leonardo's favorite disciple, forged a fake testament to claim ownership of the master's works.

The novel is structured around two parallel timelines:

2023: Pierre Bertier, a researcher at the National Archives of France, discovers a major inconsistency in documents relating to Leonardo da Vinci

1516-1519: Reconstruction of Leonardo's final years at Clos Lucé, near Amboise, and the events surrounding his death

NOVEL STRUCTURE

Prologue

Contemporary Period (October 2023) - National Archives of France, Paris

Pierre Bertier, a meticulous researcher, makes a disturbing discovery: the famous "letters of naturalization" that Leonardo da Vinci supposedly received from Francis I do not exist in the royal registers. This absence poses a major legal problem: without French naturalization, Leonardo had no right to make a testament under French law.

The hypothesis explodes: if Leonardo could not bequeath his works, how did the Mona Lisa become royal property? The Louvre's official version claims that the work was "given" to the king in 1518 by Melzi. But how can a student give away a painting that doesn't yet belong to him?

Key Quote: *"I am telling you that Leonardo's testament, on which the entire history of the French royal collection rests, could be a forgery"*

Chapter 1: The Master of Clos Lucé

Autumn-Winter 1516 - Settling at Clos Lucé

This chapter sets the scene for Leonardo da Vinci's final years. At 64, exhausted by his Italian wanderings, the master arrives in France with his two disciples: Francesco Melzi and Gian Giacomo Caprotti, known as "Salaì."

Characters Introduced:

Leonardo da Vinci: Universal genius, aging, right hand partially paralyzed, vegetarian, obsessed with scientific research

Francesco Melzi: 29 years old, Milanese nobleman, devoted disciple for 11 years, organized, methodical, treated like a spiritual son

Salai: 36 years old, former street urchin taken in at age 10, competent but capricious artist, ambiguous relationship with Leonardo

Francis I: 22 years old, ambitious young king, art lover, calculating beneath generous appearances

Important Elements:

- Leonardo receives a pension of 1,000 gold écus per year
- He brings his major works: the Mona Lisa, Saint Anne, Saint John the Baptist, Leda and the Swan
- His manuscripts contain extraordinary scientific discoveries: anatomy, flying machines, hydraulics
- The manor is connected to the castle by an underground passage
- Francis I consults Leonardo on the Château de Chambord project (double helix staircase)

Atmosphere: Peaceful installation, detailed description of daily life, father-son relationship between Leonardo and Francesco

Chapter 2: The King's Agents

1517-1518 - Tensions and Stakes

This chapter introduces the political dimension and power games surrounding Leonardo's inheritance. We understand that King Francis I and his advisors already see Leonardo as an investment: a thousand écus per year is the price of a regiment of mercenaries.

Themes Developed:

- Leonardo's declining health
- Regular visits from the king
- Growing interest in the master's works
- Political calculations behind royal generosity
- The question of succession and inheritance

Secondary Characters:

- Guillaume Gouffier (the king's secretary)
- Admiral Bonnivet
- The Count of Saint-Pol

Chapter 3: The Years of Deception

1518-1519 - Preparing the Testament and Leonardo's Death

This chapter is the heart of the alleged machination. It traces:

- The deterioration of Leonardo's health
- Preparations for drafting the testament
- The legal problem: Leonardo was not naturalized as French
- The possible fabrication of the fake testament by Melzi
- Leonardo's death on May 2, 1519
- The murky circumstances surrounding the succession

Questions Raised:

- Did Melzi invent the non-existent "letters of naturalization"?
- How did the works come into royal possession?
- What role did Salai play in this affair?
- Was the king aware of the deception?

Chapter 4: The Architecture of Lies

Post 1519 - Consequences and Building the Myth

This chapter explores how the fake testament (if it was one) was preserved and how the myth was built around the royal collection. It shows the dispersal of manuscripts, negotiations over works, and how the official history was established over the centuries.

Themes:

- Creation of the myth
- Legitimization of the royal collection
- The fate of Leonardo's manuscripts
- Melzi's enrichment
- The transformation of historical truth

Epilogue

Return to 2023 - Contemporary Implications

The epilogue returns to Pierre Bertier's investigation and its implications for the Louvre and France. It raises major ethical and legal questions:

- The legitimacy of the Louvre's ownership of the Mona Lisa
- Possible claims from Italian heirs
- The status of works in national collections
- France's historical responsibility

MAIN CHARACTERS

Leonardo da Vinci

Age: 64 years old at the beginning, dies at 67

Character: Universal genius, perfectionist, obsessive observer, vegetarian, contemplative

Evolution: Weary man seeking peace, aware of his mortality, concerned with transmitting his knowledge

Peculiarities: Paralyzed right hand, mirror writing, insatiable curiosity about all natural phenomena

Francesco Melzi

Age: 29 years old

Origin: Milanese nobleman, captain's son

Character: Devoted, methodical, organized, intelligent but without scientific genius

Role: Favorite disciple, confidant, daily life manager, possible forger

Motivation: Filial love for Leonardo? Greed? Desire to preserve the legacy?

Salai (Gian Giacomo Caprotti)

Age: 36 years old

Origin: Street child taken in at age 10

Character: Capricious, seductive, undisciplined, competent artist

Role: Second disciple, ambivalent character, possible accomplice

Relationship with Leonardo: Complex, mixture of affection and exasperation

Francis I

Age: 22 years old

Character: Ambitious, cultured, calculating beneath generous appearances, art lover

Role: Royal patron, possible accomplice or victim of the deception

Motivation: Royal prestige, art collection, military innovations

Pierre Bertier (Contemporary Period)

Profession: Researcher at the National Archives

Character: Meticulous, stubborn, upright

Role: Investigator who discovers the hidden truth

Antoine Marchand (Contemporary Period)

Profession: Curator of the National Archives

Character: Cautious, protective of institutions

Role: Superior who tries to limit the impact of discoveries

MAJOR THEMES AND TOPICS

The Question of Artistic Legacy

The novel explores how a great artist's works are preserved and transmitted. Who should inherit genius? Blood heirs or spiritual heirs?

The Construction of Historical Myths

How do national institutions construct narratives to legitimize their collections? How does official history sometimes hide murky origins?

Truth vs. Preservation

Should uncomfortable truths be revealed if they could destabilize cultural institutions? Is preservation of works more important than historical truth?

Master-Disciple Relationships

The complex relationship between Leonardo and his disciples, especially Melzi, illustrates the ambiguities of transmission: devotion, manipulation, love, greed.

Renaissance Law and Inheritance

The novel sheds light on 16th-century legal practices regarding testaments, naturalization, and property rights of foreigners.

Cultural Nationalism

How do nations claim artists and their works? France claiming Leonardo through the Mona Lisa vs. Italy claiming him as the Italian genius

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

France in 1516-1519

- Francis I, young king seeking prestige
- Italian Wars continuing
- French Renaissance at its peak
- Major construction projects (Chambord, Fontainebleau)

- Ambitious royal patronage

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

- Arrived in France in 1516 at age 64
- Died at Clos Lucé on May 2, 1519
- Brought his major works with him
- Left thousands of pages of manuscripts

The Real Legal Problem

Historical Fact: No trace of letters of naturalization for Leonardo in royal archives

Legal Consequence: Without naturalization, Leonardo could not make a testament under French law

Unresolved Question: How did the works become royal property?

The Controversial Testament

Date: April 23, 1519 (9 days before Leonardo's death)

Content: Bequeaths everything to Melzi

Problem: Doubtful legality without letters of naturalization

Novel's Hypothesis: Possible fabrication by Melzi

IMPORTANT PLACES

Clos Lucé (Amboise)

- Manor of pink brick and white tufa stone
- Offered to Leonardo by Francis I
- Connected to the royal castle by an underground passage
- Terraced gardens descending to the Amasse river
- Leonardo's final residence (1516-1519)

The National Archives of France (Paris)

- Site of the contemporary investigation
- Repository of royal documents
- Symbol of national memory

The Louvre

- Current keeper of the Mona Lisa
- Institution at the heart of the controversy
- Symbol of French cultural heritage

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE NOVEL

Historical Questions

1. Did the letters of naturalization really exist?
2. Is Leonardo's testament authentic?
3. How did the Mona Lisa become royal property?
4. What was Melzi's true role?
5. Was Francis I an accomplice?

Ethical Questions

1. Should a truth that could destabilize a national institution be revealed?
2. Does the end (preserving works) justify the means (forgery)?
3. Who is morally right: Melzi the devoted forger or the legitimate heirs?

Legal Questions

1. What is the legal validity of a testament without letters of naturalization?
2. Could Italian heirs claim the works?
3. Should the Louvre return the Mona Lisa?

Philosophical Questions

1. What is historical truth?
2. How do we distinguish myth from reality?
3. Does cultural heritage belong to a country or to humanity?

NOVEL'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Strengths

Thorough Research: The novel is based on verifiable historical facts

Bold but Plausible Hypothesis: The theory of the fake testament is supported

Well-Developed Characters: Especially Leonardo and Melzi

Vivid Descriptions: Clos Lucé and Renaissance daily life come alive

Intellectual Suspense: The contemporary investigation maintains interest

Reflection on Institutions: Relevant questions about museums and heritage

Potential Weaknesses

Sometimes Slow Pace: Detailed descriptions can slow the action

Complexity: Requires some historical and artistic knowledge

Speculative Nature: Remains fiction, not historical proof

Possibly Frustrating Ending: No definitive resolution (faithful to historical reality)

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND ANALYSIS

On Melzi's Character

Melzi is the novel's most fascinating character. If he really fabricated a fake testament, his motivations remain ambiguous. Was it:

Out of Love: To protect his beloved master's works?

Out of Greed: To enrich himself personally?

Out of Pragmatism: To prevent dispersal of the works?

Out of Respect: To fulfill what he thought were Leonardo's true wishes?

The novel suggests that reality is probably a complex mixture of all these motivations.

On the Mona Lisa

The irony of the novel is that the Mona Lisa, the world's most famous artwork and symbol of French culture, could legally belong to Italy. This revelation, if proven, would have major diplomatic and cultural consequences.

On Historical Research

The novel is also a tribute to stubborn researchers who, like Pierre Bertier, spend years in archives tracking down details. They are the ones who sometimes shake established certainties.

On Cultural Institutions

The novel poses a disturbing question: are major national museums prepared to question the legitimacy of their collections? Would the Louvre acknowledge that the Mona Lisa might have been illegally acquired?

MEMORABLE QUOTES

"I am telling you that Francesco Melzi may have fabricated a fake testament to claim the inheritance of the greatest genius of the Renaissance."

"Without naturalization, without the king's letters, Leonardo had no right to make a testament in France. Legally, all his works should have gone to his Italian heirs."

"A thousand gold écus per year was the price of a regiment of mercenaries. What did he get in return? The prestige of having the greatest genius of the age at his court."

"Perhaps it was finally here that he would find peace." (About Leonardo's arrival at Clos Lucé)

CONCLUSION

"The Testament Was a Forgery" is an ambitious historical novel that successfully combines contemporary investigation, historical reconstruction, and reflection on cultural heritage. Its central hypothesis, though speculative, rests on solid historical foundations and raises important questions about art ownership, the construction of national myths, and the role of cultural institutions.

The novel addresses a cultured audience interested in art history and the Renaissance. It offers an immersive dive into Leonardo da Vinci's final years while proposing a contemporary reflection on national collections and their legitimacy.

Beyond the historical investigation, it is also a touching portrait of the aging Leonardo, his genius still awakened despite illness, and his complex relationship with his disciples, particularly Francesco Melzi, the spiritual son who might also be his greatest betrayer.

GOING FURTHER

Suggested Additional Research

- Consult the mentioned academic article:
<https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/94357>
- Visit Clos Lucé in Amboise
- Study Francis I's naturalization registers
- Examine Leonardo's original testament (if accessible)
- Read biographies of Leonardo da Vinci and Francesco Melzi

Related Works by the Author

La chambre volée (mentioned as another work by Robert Casanovas)

Pillage (mentioned as another work by Robert Casanovas)

Themes to Explore

- Artistic property rights during the Renaissance
- Testament practices in the 16th century
- The French royal collection and its origins
- France-Italy relations regarding cultural heritage
- Art restitution: contemporary issues

Final Note: This novel, though fictional, is based on serious historical research and raises legitimate questions about one of the greatest mysteries in art history. It deserves to be read not only for its plot but also for the reflection it proposes on our relationship with cultural heritage and historical truth.

END OF READING GUIDE

Document prepared by Claude, January 2026

Based on the novel "The Testament Was a Forgery" by Robert Casanovas (2025)