

LEONARDO'S LOST HORSE

The Odyssey of Il Cavallo

by Béatrice Walker

Powerfully standing 24 feet in height, Leonardo da Vinci's legendary horse, *Il Cavallo*, was conceived to be the world's largest equestrian bronze sculpture ever created. Commissioned in 1482 by Lodovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, to execute the monument in memory of his father, Francesco Sforza, Leonardo worked on it for many years, during which, as can be seen in his sketches, he constantly changed its design. His notebooks also reveal that, while working on the horse, he was elaborating revolutionary new techniques for large-scale bronze casting, including methods for controlling temperature in furnaces, adding tin to copper, and hastening the melting process. In fact, he wanted his horse to be cast in one piece, modifying the traditional casting process.



That casting never occurred. According to some sources, the massive clay model of *Il Cavallo*, which measured 12 *braccia* (about 24 feet), was displayed in the main courtyard of the ducal palace in Milan in 1493—to the acclaim of court poets whose verses at the time praised its magnificence. But with war on the horizon, the bronze intended for casting *Il Cavallo* was sent off to make cannons as French troops approached the city. It is said that, after the French entered Milan in September 1499, they used the clay model for archery practice and that it was eventually destroyed.