Do Art and Science Mix?

By Michael D. Shaw

Charles Falco, a professor of optics at the University of Arizona, would certainly seem to qualify as a Renaissance man. Falco is a brilliant scientist, art enthusiast and intrepid historian. He believes there was a quantum leap in the quality and realism of paintings in the early 15th century and argues that optics&#151in the form of a camera obscura&#151was used to help create the images.
His contention is supported by an intensive study of certain works, in which incredible detail down to the millimeter was reproduced as well as the distortion that one would expect from this technique. Falco and artist David Hockney have promoted this point of view for the last few years. Some people, of course, are not happy with this notion. These include hero-worshipping art historians who seem to think that artists would not have used any available tool to advance their craft. No doubt Jan van Eyck, Lorenzo Lotto and others whose works were examined by Falco would have eschewed shortcuts, since, after all, they were Old Masters. Right? One of the loudest voices against Falco is another scientist, David Stork, who has gone to extreme lengths to disprove Falco. Stork has written articles, which are now being publicly attacked by Falco for cooked data, and has touted credentials, which have been proven to be false even though he is a well-regarded optics expert in his own right. My take on this is that ego plays a big part: Falco discovered something that “should” have been found by the great David Stork. And now Stork will do all he can to discredit the finding.
One thing’s for sure: The paintings in question are still beautiful examples of classic art, whether the artists created them with mirrors or not.
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