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Expert close to cracking Da Vinci code

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AFTER 32 years on the trail of Leonardo da Vinci's lost masterpiece The Battle of Anghiari, **Maurizio Seracini** thinks he is on the verge of solving one of the art world's greatest mysteries.

The Italian engineer and art expert reckons he knows where the fresco, which disappeared nearly 500 years ago, might be hidden -- behind a wall right where it was painted, in Florence's Renaissance town hall.

Now that the Italian government has given him the go-ahead to complete his investigation, Seracini says he is just a few months away from finding out once and for all.

If he is right, there is no overestimating the importance such a discovery would have.

"At the time of Leonardo, the contemporaries considered this not only his best work of art but also the best work of art, the masterpiece of all," Seracini says in his office near the Palazzo Vecchio, where he believes the painting is buried.

"So, we are searching for the most important masterpiece of the Renaissance, the highest point ever achieved, and the most important masterpiece of Leonardo."

Florence's leaders commissioned Leonardo, then at the height of his career, to paint a fresco celebrating the Florentine Republic's victory over the Milanese in a battle on the plains of Anghiari that took place on June 29, 1440.

Leonardo, who loathed war as "a most beastly madness", started working on the huge mural, thought to be three times the size of The Last Supper, in 1505. Its central theme was a group of horses and riders furiously fighting for a standard.

But a year later, perhaps disappointed with an experimental technique he used on the fresco that some experts believe damaged it, Leonardo abandoned the painting and left for Milan.

The work, which one chronicler called "a miraculous thing", remains known today through Leonardo's preliminary sketches of fighters on horseback and copies made by other artists.

But all trace of the original was lost after 16th-century artist and architect Giorgio Vasari renovated the Palazzo Vecchio's Hall of the 500 that was hosting it.

It was widely believed that the painting had been destroyed and replaced with Vasari's own frescoes of military battles.

Then Seracini came along.

"Please don't make me look like Indiana Jones searching for the Lost Ark," Seracini, who sees himself halfway between an art doctor and a detective, says almost apologetically.

With his unassuming manner, the grey-haired 60-year-old is very different to Steven Spielberg's adventurous, whip-cracking archaeologist.

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Seracini says he needs 10 months to develop a scan that can capture radiations from chemical elements contained in the colour pigments used by Leonardo in the fresco -- such as lead for white, copper for blue and mercury for red. Then he can solve the mystery.

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