

St Aiden's Homeschool



Footsteps on the Road to Learning

Biography Leonardo Da Vinci

With Note Pages

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Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci (April 15, 1452 – May 2, 1519) was an Italian polymath, scientist, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, painter, sculptor, architect, botanist, musician and writer. Leonardo has often been described as the archetype of the renaissance man, a man whose unquenchable curiosity was equalled only by his powers of invention. He's widely considered to be one of the greatest painters of all time and perhaps the most diversely talented person ever to have lived. Helen Gardner says "The scope and depth of his interests were without precedent...His mind and personality seem to us superhuman, the man himself mysterious and remote". being reproduced on everything from the Euro to text books to t-shirts. Perhaps fifteen of his paintings survive, the small number due to his constant, and frequently disastrous, experimentation with new techniques, and his chronic procrastination. Nevertheless, these few works, together with his notebooks, which contain drawings, scientific diagrams, and his thoughts on the nature of painting, comprise a contribution to later generations of artists only rivalled by that of his contemporary, Michelangelo.

Leonardo's revered. Relatively few of his designs were constructed or were even feasible during his lifetime, but some of his smaller inventions, such as an automated bobbin winder and a machine for testing the tensile strength of wire, entered the world of manufacturing unheralded. As a scientist, he greatly advanced the state of knowledge in the fields of anatomy, civil engineering, optics, and hydrodynamics.

Life

Childhood, 1452–1466

Leonardo was born on April 15, 1452, "at the third hour of the night" In 1502 Leonardo entered the service of Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI, acting as a military architect and engineer and travelling throughout Italy with his patron. Leonardo's painting's only known from preparatory sketches and several copies of the centre section, of which the best known, and probably least accurate's by Peter Paul Rubens.

In 1506 he returned to Milan. Many of Leonardo's most prominent pupils or followers in painting either knew or worked with him in Milan, However, he didn't stay in Milan for long because his father had died in 1504, and in 1507 he was back in Florence trying to sort out problems with his brothers over his father's estate. By 1508 he was back in Milan, living in his own house in Porta Orientale in the parish of Santa Babila. It was for Francis that Leonardo was commissioned to make a mechanical lion which could walk forward, then open its chest to reveal a cluster of lilies. In 1516, he entered François' service, being given the use of the manor house Clos Lucé near the king's residence at the royal Chateau Amboise. It was here that he spent the last three years of his life, accompanied by his friend and apprentice, Count Francesco Melzi, supported by a pension totalling 10,000 scudi. Vasari also tells us that in his last days, Leonardo sent for a priest to make his confession and to receive the Holy Sacrament.

Some twenty years after Leonardo's death, Francis was reported by the goldsmith and sculptor Benevenuto Cellini as saying: "There'd never been another man born in the world who knew as much as Leonardo, not so much about painting, sculpture and architecture, as that he was a very great philosopher."

Relationships and influences

Florence — Leonardo's artistic and social background

Leonardo commenced his apprenticeship with Verrocchio in 1466, the year that Verrocchio's master, the great sculptor Donatello, died. The painter Uccello whose early experiments with perspective were to influence the development of landscape painting, was a very old man. The painters Piero della Francesca and Fra Filippo Lippi, sculptor Luca della Robbia, and architect and writer Alberti were in their sixties. The successful artists of the next generation were Leonardo's teacher Verrocchio, Antonio Pollaiuolo and the portrait sculptor, Mino da Fiesole whose lifelike busts give the most reliable likenesses of Lorenzo Medici's father Piero and uncle Giovanni.

Leonardo's political contemporaries were Lorenzo Medici (il Magnifico), who was three years older, and his popular younger brother Giuliano who was slain in the Pazzi Conspiracy in 1478. Ludovico il Moro who ruled Milan between 1479–1499 and to whom Leonardo was sent as ambassador from the Medici court, was also of Leonardo's age. Leonardo later wrote in the margin of a journal "The Medici made me and the Medici destroyed me." While it was through the action of Lorenzo that Leonardo was to receive his important Milanese commissions, it isn't known exactly what Leonardo meant by this cryptic comment.

Personal life

Within Leonardo's lifetime, his extraordinary powers of invention, his "outstanding physical beauty", "infinite grace", "great strength and generosity", "regal spirit and tremendous breadth of mind" as described by Vasari

Leonardo had many friends who're now renowned either in their fields or for their historical significance. They included the mathematician Luca Pacioli, with whom he collaborated on a book in the 1490s, as well as Franchinus Gaffurius and Isabella d'Este. Leonardo appears to have had no close relationships with women except for his friendship with Isabella d'Este. He drew a portrait of her while on a journey which took him through Mantua, and which appears to have been used to create a painted portrait now lost.

Assistants and pupils

Gian Giacomo Caprotti da Oreno, nicknamed *Salai* or *Il Salaino* ("The Little Unclean One" for example, the devil), entered his household in 1490. After only a year, Leonardo made a list of his misdemeanours, calling him "a thief, a liar, stubborn, and a glutton", after he'd made off with money and valuables on at least five occasions, and spent a fortune on clothes. Nevertheless, Leonardo's notebooks during their early years contain many drawings of the student, who remained in Leonardo's household for the next thirty years. Salai owned the *Mona Lisa* at the time of his death in 1525, and in his will it was assessed at 505 lire, an exceptionally high valuation for a small panel portrait.

In 1506, Leonardo took on another pupil, Count Francesco Melzi, the son of a Lombard aristocrat, who's considered to have been his favourite student. He travelled to France with Leonardo, and remained with him until the latter's death.

These paintings are famous for a variety of qualities which have been much imitated by students and discussed at great length by connoisseurs and critics. Among the qualities that make Leonardo's work unique are the innovative techniques that he used in laying on the paint, his detailed knowledge of anatomy, light, botany and geology, his interest in physiognomy and the way in which humans register emotion in expression and gesture, his innovative use of the human form in figurative composition and his use of the subtle gradation of tone. All these qualities come together in his most famous painted works, the *Mona Lisa*, the *Last Supper* and the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

Early works

Leonardo's early works begin with the *Baptism of Christ* painted in conjunction with Verrocchio. Two other paintings appear to date from his time at the workshop, both of which are Annunciations. One's small, } long and } high. It's a "predella" to go at the base of a larger composition, in this case a painting by Lorenzo di Credi from which it's become separated. The other's a much larger work, } long.

In the smaller picture Mary averts her eyes and folds her hands in a gesture that symbolised submission to God's will. In the larger picture, however, Mary isn't in the least submissive. The beautiful girl, interrupted in her reading by this unexpected messenger, puts a finger in her bible to mark the place and raises her hand in a formal gesture of greeting or surprise.

Paintings of the 1480s

In the 1480s Leonardo received two very important commissions, and commenced another work which was also of ground-breaking importance in terms of composition. Unfortunately two of the three were never finished and the third took so long that it was subject to lengthy negotiations over completion and payment. One of these paintings's that of *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*. Bortolon associates this picture with a difficult period of Leonardo's life, and the signs of melancholy in his diary: "I thought I was learning to live; I was only learning to die." While the painting's quite large, about, it isn't nearly as complex as the painting ordered by the monks of St Donato, having only four figures rather than about fifty and a rocky landscape rather than architectural details. The painting was eventually finished; in fact, two versions of the painting were finished, one which remained at the chapel of the Confraternity and the other which Leonardo carried away to France. But the Brothers didn't get their painting, or the de Predis their payment, until the next century.

Paintings of the 1490s

Leonardo's most famous painting of the 1490s's *The Last Supper*, also painted in Milan.

The painting represents the last meal shared by Jesus with his disciples before his capture and death. It shows specifically the moment when Jesus has said "one of you'll betray me". Leonardo tells the story of the consternation that this statement caused to the twelve followers of Jesus. | group="nb"}}

Other characteristics found in this work are the unadorned dress, in which the eyes and hands have no competition from other details, the dramatic landscape background in which the world seems to be in a state of flux, the subdued colouring and the extremely smooth nature of the painterly technique, employing oils, but laid on much like tempera and blended on the surface so that the brushstrokes are indistinguishable. Within Leonardo's own lifetime his fame was such that the King of France carried him away like a trophy, and was claimed to have supported him in his old age and held him in his arms as he died. Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists* written about thirty years after Leonardo's death, described him as having talents that "transcended nature".

The interest in Leonardo has never slackened. The crowds still queue to see his most famous artworks, T-shirts bear his most famous drawing and writers, like Vasari, continue to marvel at his genius and speculate about his private life and, particularly, about what one so intelligent actually believed in. While the biographer known as "Anonimo Gaddiano" wrote, c. 1540: "His genius was so rare and universal that it can be said that nature worked a miracle on his behalf ...".

The 19th century brought a particular admiration for Leonardo's genius, causing Henry Fuseli to write in 1801: "Such was the dawn of modern art, when Leonardo da Vinci broke forth with a splendour that distanced former excellence: made up of all the elements that constitute the essence of genius ..." This's echoed by A. E. Rio who wrote in 1861: "He towered above all other artists through the strength and the nobility of his talents."

By the 19th century, the scope of Leonardo's notebooks was known, as well as his paintings. Hippolyte Taine wrote in 1866: "There may not be in the world an example of another genius so universal, so incapable of fulfilment, so full of yearning for the infinite, so naturally refined, so far ahead of his own century and the following centuries."

The famous art historian Bernard Berenson wrote in 1896: "Leonardo's the one artist of whom it may be said with perfect literalness: Nothing that he touched but turned into a thing of eternal beauty. Whether it be the cross section of a skull, the structure of a weed, or a study of muscles, he, with his feeling for line and for light and shade, forever transmuted it into life-communicating values."

The interest in Leonardo's genius has continued unabated; experts study and translate his writings, analyse his paintings using scientific techniques, argue over attributions and search for works which have been recorded but never found. Liana Bortolon, writing in 1967, said: "Because of the multiplicity of interests that spurred him to pursue every field of knowledge ... Leonardo can be considered, quite rightly, to have been the universal genius par excellence, and with all the disquieting overtones inherent in that term. Man's as uncomfortable today, faced with a genius, as he was in the 16th century. Five centuries have passed, yet we still view Leonardo with awe."

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