

Genius: Leonardo was the model of the Renaissance man and one of the most talented individuals in our history.

Born   
15 April 1452, Vinci, Republic of Florence

Died   
2 May 1519 (aged 67) Amboise, Kingdom of France

Known for  
Art, science

Notable work   
Mona Lisa  
The Last Supper  
The Vitruvian Man  
Lady with an Ermine

Movement  
High Renaissance

The best known, the most visited, the most written about, the most sung about, the most parodied work of art in the world.

Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci or simply Leonardo (15 April 1452 – 2 May 1519), was an Italian polymath whose areas of interest included invention, painting, sculpting, architecture, science, music, mathematics, engineering, literature, anatomy, geology, astronomy, botany, writing, history, and cartography. He has been variously called the father of paleontology, ichnology, and architecture, and is widely considered one of the greatest painters of all time. Sometimes credited with the inventions of the parachute, helicopter and tank, he epitomized the Renaissance humanist ideal.

Leonardo is revered for his technological ingenuity. He conceptualized flying machines, a type of armored fighting vehicle, concentrated solar power, an adding machine, and the double hull, also outlining a rudimentary theory of plate tectonics. Relatively few of his designs were constructed or even feasible during his lifetime, as the modern scientific approaches to metallurgy and engineering were only in their infancy during the Renaissance. Some of his smaller inventions, however, such as an automated bobbin winder and a machine for testing the tensile strength of wire, entered the world of manufacturing unheralded. A number of Leonardo's most practical inventions are nowadays displayed as working models at the Museum of Vinci. He made substantial discoveries in anatomy, civil engineering, optics, and hydrodynamics, but he did not publish his findings and they had no direct influence on later science.

Today, Leonardo is widely considered one of the most diversely talented individuals ever to have lived.

Life

In all Leonardo had twelve half-siblings, who were much younger than him (the last was born when Leonardo was forty years old) and with whom he had very few contacts, but they caused him difficulty after his father's death in the dispute over the inheritance.

Leonardo received an informal education in Latin, geometry and mathematics. In later life, Leonardo recorded only two childhood incidents. One, which he regarded as an omen, was when a kite dropped from the sky and hovered over his cradle, its tail feathers brushing his face. The second occurred while he was exploring in the mountains: he discovered a cave and was both terrified that some great monster might lurk there and driven by curiosity to find out what was inside.

Verrocchio's workshop, 1466–76

In 1466, at the age of fourteen, Leonardo was apprenticed to the artist Andrea di Cione, known as Verrocchio, whose bottega (workshop) was "one of the finest in Florence". He apprenticed as a garzone (studio boy) to Andrea del Verrocchio, the leading Florentine painter and sculptor of his day. Other famous painters apprenticed or associated with the workshop include Domenico Ghirlandaio, Perugino, Botticelli, and Lorenzo di Credi. Leonardo would have been exposed to both theoretical training and a vast range of technical skills, including drafting, chemistry, metallurgy, metal working, plaster casting, leather working, mechanics and carpentry as well as the artistic skills of drawing, painting, sculpting and modelling.

Professional life, 1476–1513

Florentine court records of 1476 show that Leonardo and three other young men were charged with sodomy but acquitted; homosexual acts were illegal in Renaissance Florence. From that date until 1478 there is no record of his work or even of his whereabouts. In 1478, he left Verrocchio's studio and was no longer resident at his father's house. One writer, the "Anonimo" Gaddiano, claims that in 1480 Leonardo was living with the Medici and working in the Garden of the Piazza San Marco in Florence, a Neo-Platonic academy of artists, poets and philosophers that the Medici had established. In January 1478, he received an independent commission to paint an altarpiece for the Chapel of St. Bernard in the Palazzo Vecchio; in March 1481, he received a second independent commission for The Adoration of the Magi for the monks of San Donato a Scopeto. Neither commission was completed, the second being interrupted when Leonardo went to Milan.

In 1482, Leonardo, who according to Vasari was a most talented musician, created a silver lyre in the shape of a horse's head. Lorenzo de' Medici sent Leonardo to Milan, bearing the lyre as a gift, to secure peace with Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. At this time Leonardo wrote an often-quoted letter describing the many marvellous and diverse things that he could achieve in the field of engineering and informing Ludovico that he could also paint.

Leonardo worked in Milan from 1482 until 1499. He was commissioned to paint the Virgin of the Rocks for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception and The Last Supper for the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie. In the spring of 1485, Leonardo travelled to Hungary on behalf of Ludovico to meet Matthias Corvinus, for whom he is believed to have painted a Holy Family. Between 1493 and 1495, Leonardo listed a woman called Caterina among his dependents in his taxation documents. When she died in 1495, the list of funeral expenditures suggests that she was his mother.

Leonardo was employed on many different projects for Ludovico, including the preparation of floats and pageants for special occasions, designs for a dome for Milan Cathedral and a model for a huge equestrian monument to Francesco Sforza, Ludovico's predecessor. Seventy tons of bronze were set aside for casting it. The monument remained unfinished for several years, which was not unusual for Leonardo. In 1492, the clay model of the horse was completed. It surpassed in size the only two large equestrian statues of the Renaissance, Donatello's Gattamelata in Padua and Verrocchio's Bartolomeo Colleoni in Venice, and became known as the "Gran Cavallo". Leonardo began making detailed plans for its casting; however, Michelangelo insulted Leonardo by implying that he was unable to cast it. In November 1494, Ludovico gave the bronze to be used for cannon to defend the city from invasion by Charles VIII.

Old age, 1513–1519

From September 1513 to 1516, under Pope Leo X, Leonardo spent much of his time living in the Belvedere in the Vatican in Rome, where Raphael and Michelangelo were both active at the time. In October 1515, King Francis I of France recaptured Milan. On 19 December, Leonardo was present at the meeting of Francis I and Pope Leo X, which took place in Bologna. Leonardo was commissioned to make for Francis a mechanical lion that could walk forward then open its chest to reveal a cluster of lilies. In 1516, he entered Francis' service, being given the use of the manor house Clos Lucé, now a public museum, near the king's residence at the royal Château d'Amboise. He spent the last three years of his life here, accompanied by his friend and apprentice, Count Francesco Melzi, and supported by a pension totaling 10,000 scudi.

Some 20 years after Leonardo's death, Francis was reported by the goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini as saying: "There had 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."

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, as well as all other aspects of his life, attracted the curiosity of others. One such aspect was his respect for life, evidenced by his vegetarianism and his habit, according to Vasari, of purchasing caged birds and releasing them.

Leonardo had many friends who are now renowned either in their fields or for their historical significance. They included the mathematician Luca Pacioli, with whom he collaborated on the book De divina proportione in the 1490s. Leonardo appears to have had no close relationships with women except for his friendship with Cecilia Gallerani and the two Este sisters, Beatrice and Isabella. While on a journey that took him through Mantua, he drew a portrait of Isabella that appears to have been used to create a painted portrait, now lost.

Assistants and pupils

In 1506, Leonardo took on another pupil, Count Francesco Melzi, the son of a Lombard aristocrat, who is considered to have been his favorite student. He travelled to France with Leonardo and remained with him until Leonardo's death. Melzi inherited the artistic and scientific works, manuscripts, and collections of Leonardo and administered the estate.

Painting

Despite the recent awareness and admiration of Leonardo as a scientist and inventor, for the better part of four hundred years his fame rested on his achievements as a painter. A handful of works that are either authenticated or attributed to him have been regarded as among the great masterpieces. These paintings are famous for a variety of qualities that have been much imitated by students and discussed at great length by connoisseurs and critics. By the 1490s Leonardo had already been described as a "Divine" painter.

Early works

Leonardo first gained notoriety for his work on the Baptism of Christ, painted in conjunction with Verrocchio. Two other paintings appear to date from his time at Verrocchio's workshop, both of which are Annunciations. One is small, 59 centimeters (23 in) long and 14 centimeters (5.5 in) high. It is a "predella" to go at the base of a larger composition, a painting by Lorenzo di Credi from which it has become separated. The other is a much larger work, 217 centimeters (85 in) long. In both Annunciations, Leonardo used a formal arrangement, like two well-known pictures by Fra Angelico of the same subject, of the Virgin Mary sitting or kneeling to the right of the picture, approached from the left by an angel in profile, with a rich flowing garment, raised wings and bearing a lily. Although previously attributed to Ghirlandaio, the larger work is now generally attributed to Leonardo.

Paintings of the 1480s

In the 1480s, Leonardo received two very important commissions and commenced another work that was of ground-breaking importance in terms of composition. 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 was St. Jerome in the Wilderness, which Bortolon associates with a difficult period of Leonardo's life, as evidenced in his diary: "I thought I was learning to live; I was only learning to die." Although the painting is barely begun, the composition can be seen and is very unusual. Jerome, as a penitent, occupies the middle of the picture, set on a slight diagonal and viewed somewhat from above. His kneeling form takes on a trapezoid shape, with one arm stretched to the outer edge of the painting and his gaze looking in the opposite direction. J. Wasserman points out the link between this painting and Leonardo's anatomical studies. Across the foreground sprawls his symbol, a great lion whose body and tail make a double spiral across the base of the picture space. The other remarkable feature is the sketchy landscape of craggy rocks against which the figure is silhouetted.

Paintings of the 1490s

Leonardo's most famous painting of the 1490s is The Last Supper, painted for the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria della Grazie 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 just said "one of you will betray me". Leonardo tells the story of the consternation that this statement caused to the twelve followers of Jesus.

The novelist Matteo Bandello observed Leonardo at work and wrote that some days he would paint from dawn till dusk without stopping to eat and then not paint for three or four days at a time. This was beyond the comprehension of the prior of the convent, who hounded him until Leonardo asked Ludovico to intervene. Vasari describes how Leonardo, troubled over his ability to adequately depict the faces of Christ and the traitor Judas, told the Duke that he might be obliged to use the prior as his model.

Paintings of the 16th century

Among the works created by Leonardo in the 16th century is the small portrait known as the Mona Lisa or "la Gioconda", the laughing one. In the present era it is arguably the most famous painting in the world. Its fame rests, in particular, on the elusive smile on the woman's face, its mysterious quality perhaps due to the subtly shadowed corners of the mouth and eyes such that the exact nature of the smile cannot be determined. The shadowy quality for which the work is renowned came to be called "sfumato", or Leonardo's smoke. Vasari, who is generally thought to have known the painting only by repute, said that "the smile was so pleasing that it seemed divine rather than human; and those who saw it were amazed to find that it was as alive as the original".

Fame and reputation

Leonardo's fame within his own lifetime 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. Interest in Leonardo and his work has never diminished. Crowds still queue to see his best-known artworks, T-shirts still bear his most famous drawing, and writers continue to hail him as a genius while speculating about his private life, as well as about what one so intelligent actually believed in.