

# Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci was born on April 15, 1452, "at the third hour of the night" in the Tuscan hill town of Vinci, in the lower valley of the Arno River, near Florence. He was the illegitimate son of Messer Piero Fruosino di Antonio da Vinci, a 25-year-old Florentine notary, and Caterina, a peasant woman who may have been a slave from the Middle East. His full birth name, "Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci," simply meant "Leonardo, son of (Mes)ser Piero from Vinci," as surnames in the modern sense did not exist.

Leonardo spent his first years in the hamlet of Anchiano before moving into his father's household in Vinci, where he was raised by his father, grandparents, and uncle Francesco. Growing up, he had access to scholarly texts owned by family and friends and was exposed to Vinci's long standing painting traditions.

At the age of 14, in 1466, Leonardo was apprenticed to the renowned Florentine artist Andrea del Verrocchio. Verrocchio's workshop was at the center of Florence's intellectual and artistic currents, providing Leonardo with a well-rounded education. He learned drafting, chemistry, metallurgy, metalworking, plaster casting, leatherworking, mechanics, carpentry, and the artistic skills of drawing, painting, sculpting, and modeling. The workshop also trained other famous artists, including Ghirlandaio, Perugino, Botticelli, and Lorenzo di Credi.

Leonardo quickly demonstrated exceptional talent. He collaborated with Verrocchio on "The Baptism of Christ," painting an angel in such a masterful way that, according to legend, Verrocchio never painted again. It is believed that Leonardo may have served as a model for some of Verrocchio's works, including the bronze statue of David in the Bargello and the Archangel Michael in "Tobias and the Angel." By 1472, at the age of 20, Leonardo qualified as a master in the Guild of St. Luke, though he remained attached to Verrocchio's workshop for several more years. His earliest known dated work is a pen-and-ink drawing of the Arno Valley, created on August 5, 1473.

In 1482, Leonardo left Florence for Milan, entering the service of Duke Ludovico Sforza. He abandoned his first major commission, "The Adoration of the Magi," in Florence in pursuit of new challenges. He remained in Milan for 17 years, until Sforza's fall from power in 1499. During this period, he reached new heights in both art and science. The Duke commissioned him for paintings, sculptures, and elaborate court festivals, but Leonardo also designed buildings, weapons, and machinery. Between 1485 and 1490, he conducted extensive studies on subjects ranging from nature and flying machines to

municipal construction, fortifications, and human anatomy. His work included designs for advanced war machines, tanks, submarines, and various combat devices.

Despite his brilliance, Leonardo's diverse interests often led him to leave projects unfinished. During his years in Milan, he completed only about six paintings, including "The Last Supper" and "The Virgin of the Rocks," while leaving numerous other works incomplete. Between 1490 and 1495, he developed a habit of recording his studies in meticulously illustrated notebooks, covering themes of painting, architecture, mechanics, and anatomy. These codices, later collected by museums and private collectors—including Bill Gates, who purchased the Codex Leicester for \$30 million—remain a testament to his genius.

After Ludovico Sforza's downfall in 1499, Leonardo spent the next 16 years working across Italy, securing commissions from various patrons, including the infamous Cesare Borgia. As Borgia's military engineer, he traveled with his army for a year and even collaborated with Niccolò Machiavelli. During this period, he designed a bridge to span the Golden Horn in Constantinople and, around 1503, began work on the "Mona Lisa."

Between 1513 and 1516, Leonardo lived in Rome, where he maintained a workshop while Michelangelo and Raphael were also active in the city. He continued his anatomical and physiological studies, but the Pope forbade him from dissecting cadavers, limiting his research. In 1515, he attended the meeting between King François I of France and Pope Leo X in Bologna. For François, Leonardo created a mechanical lion that could walk forward and open its chest to reveal a cluster of lilies.

In 1516, following the death of his patron Giuliano de' Medici, Leonardo entered the service of King François I of France. The king granted him the title of "Premier Painter, Engineer, and Architect" and provided him with a manor house at Clos Lucé, near the Château d'Amboise. Though suffering from paralysis in his right hand, Leonardo—who was left-handed—continued to draw, teach, and produce studies on a wide range of subjects, including nature, water, dragons, horses, and human anatomy. He was accompanied in his final years by his apprentice and friend, Count Francesco Melzi, and supported by a pension of 10,000 scudi.

Leonardo da Vinci died at Clos Lucé on May 2, 1519.

## Da Vinci and the Renaissance

The Renaissance was a transformational period in European history from roughly the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. It was a cultural movement that began in Italy and eventually spread throughout Europe. The Renaissance transformed nearly all facets of European culture and society. It saw a resurgence of classical texts, and the development of new scientific techniques and novel and innovative styles of art. Leonardo da Vinci (1450–1519) is perhaps the most famous figure of the Renaissance. His life and work reflected the popular humanist ideals that shaped the Renaissance era. In many ways, Leonardo da Vinci reflects the fundamental components of the Renaissance, as his interests spanned the fields of art, architecture, music, science, mathematics, anatomy, geology, and botany.

### Renaissance

By the sixteenth century, the Renaissance had spread throughout Europe, impacting the course of literature, science, philosophy, religion, politics, and art. However, the Renaissance initially started in Italy with figures such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, who studied and dabbled in an extraordinary number of intellectual and artistic branches. Many consider da Vinci to be the epitome of the “Renaissance man”—a Renaissance polymath, someone whose intellectual achievements and interests span a wide variety of fields in art, science, and literature. Along with Leonardo da Vinci other Renaissance figures such as Michelangelo, Galileo Galilei, and Copernicus are considered to embody the qualities and characteristics of a classic Renaissance man. Many of these men, including da Vinci, are also considered humanists, humanism having emerged as a significant intellectual movement during the Renaissance.

Humanism developed as a reaction to the rigid and narrow teachings of medieval Scholasticism, which promoted the education of a small portion of the population in preparation for becoming doctors, lawyers, or theologians. The humanist movement emerged as an alternative path of education and civic engagement. It emphasized the benefits of creating a citizenry equipped with the ability to converse intelligently and participate in civic life toward the betterment of humankind. Humanists believed that the path to this could be found through study of the humanities—rhetoric, grammar, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Humanist education was also deeply grounded in the restoration of classical texts, to be used as guides to moral philosophy.

## Da Vinci the Artist

At an early age, Leonardo da Vinci moved to Florence, where he apprenticed with the painter and sculptor Verrochio. Da Vinci’s capacity for brilliance was obvious even at this early stage in his life. He often experimented with different artistic forms and techniques. In the Italian art environment, he was in the vanguard of using oil in

paintings. His work sparked a new style of art in Italy. In 1481, at approximately the age of 30, da Vinci moved to Milan to work for the Duke of Milan. It was during his time in Milan that Leonardo produced one of his most famous works of art, and arguably the most famous fresco in history—The Last Supper (1495–1498). During the first decade of the sixteenth century, the Italian city-states and territories launched into war that spanned from Milan to Rome. This war, combined with the Catholic Church's condemnation of his work, led da Vinci to flee to Paris under the patronage of the French court of Francis I. While living in France, he painted the world renowned Mona Lisa (ca. 1503–1506), the world's most well known portrait. Da Vinci the Inventor One of da Vinci's famous drawings, "Vitruvian Man" (ca. 1487), reflects his intersecting interests in art and science. It also demonstrates the impact of humanism on his work. "Vitruvian Man" depicts the image of a man superimposed in two positions. In addition to the visual representation, Leonardo included detailed notes based on the writings of the ancient classical architect Vitruvius. Vitruvius viewed the human body as the primary source of proportion in the classical style of architecture. Leonardo paid homage to Vitruvius in his illustration of the relationship between ideal human proportions and geometry. "Vitruvian Man" combined Leonardo's study of art, science, anatomy, and geometry with his veneration for the writings of antiquity. In addition to his great work as an artist, da Vinci, drawing his inspiration from the natural world, attempted to create works of science and engineering. His methods involved an emphasis on observation and detail, as opposed to theory, which was the traditional approach to science during this period. He produced a large number of studies and depictions of plants and animals. He sought to portray the intricacies of horses, the movement of water, and the complexities of the human body. He drafted rudimentary sketches and designs of a wide range of machines, from helicopters to tanks. Leonardo also dabbled in the examination of human anatomy, and at times would obtain corpses from local hospitals and partake in dissection toward the furthering of art and science. Because of this, the church declared Leonardo to be anti-Christian and denounced his work.

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