

Leonardo da Vinci

by Owen Mitchell
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Leonardo da Vinci was a wonderful inventor and artist. His inventions' concepts are still used today and his art still inspires many people in the modern world. You will learn how he came to be, about his life, and about his contributions to the modern world.

Leonardo da Vinci was "born on April 15 at the third hour of the night," as his grandfather Antonio described it, in the year 1452. Other sources say that Leonardo was born at 10:30. He was born in the small Italian village of Vinci. Leonardo's parents were a wealthy notary named Ser Piero and a peasant named Caterina. Leonardo's parents were unmarried, so Leonardo was illegitimate. This meant he could not become a notary like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather by going to a university. Leonardo lived with his mother for the first years of his life but then moved to Grandfather Antonio's house with his uncle Francesco for another few years. Then, when he was old enough, Ser Piero apprenticed Leonardo to the famous artist Andrea del Verrocchio in Florence. There is a legend that when Leonardo had been studying with Verrocchio for a while, he helped Verrocchio paint a picture of St. John baptizing Jesus by finishing the background and painting one of the angels. When the master saw it, he was amazed at how much better it was than the rest of the painting. Supposedly, after being shown up by an apprentice, Verrocchio never picked a paintbrush up again!

At twenty, Leonardo was accepted into the painters' guild. However, he got off to a slow start. He began paintings but never finished them. Maybe this was because he grew bored or because he put so much care into them, he could finish only a few. An example of this care is this detailed method. First, he sketched and

drew what the painting would look like when it was finished. Leonardo liked this stage and spent months on it. Then, he drew the cartoon (the finished sketch from which the painting would be made). After that, he punched holes along the lines. He then placed the cartoon against the surface he would paint and pressed black chalk in the holes. The work was ready to be underpainted (the painting of the shadows and dark spots that make it look three-dimensional). Then, he put many fine layers of oil paint down to color the painting. Though he was very good at this work, Leonardo needed a patron that could pay him well. Lorenzo de' Medici, the ruler of Florence, was famous for his love of art and music, but he barely ever put his painters to work. So, instead of trying to work for Lorenzo, Leonardo moved north to Milan.

A man named Duke Ludovico Sforza ruled Milan, and Leonardo probably came to Ludovico's court as a musician. But, Leonardo also wrote a letter bragging of his skills. He focused mainly on warfare because Ludovico's personality was very warlike though he did love music. Leonardo's letter did not include much about art. Still, he was assigned to paint a picture of Mary and Jesus with an angel and St. John. At least that was how Leonardo painted it. The monks in charge wanted it done much differently. His painting was unusual because the angel did not have a halo, God was not in the painting, and the angel looked human. Because this painting, called *The Virgin of the Rocks*, was realistic and informal, it was liked by other artists and the style was copied. Besides painting, Sforza used Leonardo's many other skills as a musician, tailor of costumes, inventor, metal caster (giant bronze horse attempt), sculptor, and scientist. Leonardo created many other works than the

painting of Jesus, including the *Masque of the Planets* (a play), *The Last Supper* (a painting), and his great horse (a sculpture).

Leonardo also began his famous notebooks in Milan at about thirty years old. His notebooks are full of illustrations and wonderful writings of intelligence and ideas. For example, I think that his drawings of flying machines are very valuable to us because we use the concept of his helicopter in modern helicopters. Also, we would know much less about flight if Leonardo hadn't studied birds so much. But Leonardo's notebooks were very unorganized. For example, on one page you might find a grocery list, a letter, observations about a bird's flight, and many other subjects. These notebooks and only a few artworks came with him when the French invaded Milan in late 1499, and he had to leave.

For most of the rest of his life, Leonardo wandered Europe searching for another stable patron. A very unlikely one turned out to be the warlord Cesare Borgia. He wanted to take over central Italy using any means. Leonardo worked as his chief military engineer and made maps for Borgia. After leaving Borgia, he got a job painting an important mural. But Michelangelo, another notable Italian artist, was also painting a picture in the same room and was an rival of Leonardo. Both artists eventually failed to finish their pictures. Leonardo's father died in this period, which also left him even more distressed. Leonardo finally moved on to France sometime in 1516 or 1517. The King of France offered him a house and pay. All he wanted in return was the artist's conversation. Unfortunately, Leonardo was ill, and on May 2, 1519, Leonardo da Vinci died.

Long after his death, Leonardo's works became famous worldwide. His most famous piece is none other than the *Mona Lisa*. The *Mona Lisa* is a painting of a woman on a balcony with mountains in the distance. It has been wondered who the *Mona Lisa* was. Maybe, it was an Italian duchess or a wealthy woman, Isabella d' Este, or maybe it was a character of Leonardo's imagination or even Leonardo himself! We also wonder where she is and why she is smiling. A very strange and mysterious cloud surrounds the *Mona Lisa*. The painting also is so famous because it looks so real. He achieved this by using *chiaroscuro*, a way of using light and shadow to create three dimensions. Also, he used *contrapposto*, a way of curving the characters so that they seem to follow you as you move. It has been stolen many times because of its beauty and value. The *Mona Lisa* is worth many millions of dollars, probably priceless. Though the painting is small in size (77 cm x 53 cm), it has a big meaning.

In conclusion, I think Leonardo is helping the world through his inventions and notebooks which represent his mind. We can still learn from him even when he is dead. His artworks alter the soul because they look so real. Despite his limited education and resources, Leonardo da Vinci was one of the world's best inventors, scientists, and artists of all time.

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