
The Life and Contributions of Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci was a one of a kind talent that the world may never see again. His inquisitive nature and desire to learn helped him achieve some of the most marvelous works that mankind has ever seen. He was a painter, sculpture, architect, and an engineer amongst many other things. Throughout his life, Leonardo contributed to humanity in so many different areas that many scholars and historians to this day refer to him as a “universal genius”.

How we know about him

There are many sources that claim that Leonardo was a mysterious man and that there is a lot that we don't know about him as a person, "...his mind and personality seem to us superhuman, while the man himself mysterious and remote". However, it seems that this myth has been debunked by the overwhelming evidence. Robert Payne says in his book that “the only mystery is how he was able to accomplish so many works of genius in so short a time”. Before his death, Leonardo left around ten thousand pages (about five thousand survive today) manuscripts of his life. He was not an introvert person at all, he would voice his thoughts in his notes and stated that they should be preserved and published. As if that wasn't enough, he also explained exactly how he wanted them to be published. We have a very good idea as to where and what Leonardo was doing for the majority of his life, and there are also existing records in Florence, Rome, Milan, and many other places that help cover those missing gaps.

Other evidence comes from the works of Giorgio Vasari, a mid-sixteenth century midcore painter who took it upon himself to document the lives of the greatest Italian artists. Much of what we know about Italian artists today derive from his works. His works began to gain success in 1564, where by then he had made a second edition of the Lives in which the new version was larger with more illustrated portraits.

The Man

Leonardo was a man who was motivated by curiosity and had a will to succeed in his works, “he accomplished what he set out to accomplish...” He lived what would have been considered to be a full life at the time, dying at the age of sixty-seven. He was also well traveled and achieved many high positions in his lifetime as he cruised through various cities.

The first skill that Leonardo mastered was the art of painting. It is said that he started perhaps as early as the as the age of 14. He also loved animals, he loved them so much that he became a vegetarian and refused to eat them. His favorite of the animals were the horses and he painted them better than any other man before him. He was a diverse man who expanded his knowledge throughout various different fields that include music, literature, history, anatomy, geology, astronomy, and many other areas of science. Leonardo also self-taught himself mathematics later in his life at the age of thirty. Math was perhaps his most useful tool since he had to apply it to most of his works, including the Mona Lisa.

Early Youth

Leonardo was born on April 15, 1452 as a bastard in Anchiano, Tuscany. His father was a well-respected Florentine notary and his mother was a peasant. He was raised by his father and his stepmothers until he moved to his father's family home in Vinci, where he gets the last name da Vinci (from Vinci) because he was not even worthy of taking his father's name. He was not expected to be much of anything, specially being born out of wedlock to a father that had multiple children. Most (if not all) of the inheritance would have been passed to his brothers before they ever got to him. Nobody could have foretold that this child would have grown to be the mastermind that would redefine the Renaissance. Outside of basic reading, writing, and mathematical instructions, Leonardo did not really receive that much of an education because his family was not willing to pay for his education.

At fourteen years of age, da Vinci started a long apprenticeship with Andrea del Verrocchio, a recognized artist in the city of Florence. Under his wing, he acquired many skills that influenced his art such as metalworking, carpentry, molding, painting, and drawing. By the time he was twenty, he gained membership in Florence's Guild of Saint Luke and created his own workshop where he would later hire many apprentices and would make some of them his pupils.

Some of His Positions

In 1578, da Vinci received his first independent commission to reside in a chapel at Palazzo Vecchio. After three years, some monks from the city wanted him to paint "Adoration of the Magi". Leonardo started the painting but left the city sometime after without ever completing the painting and leaving behind his commission. About a year later after relocating to Milan, Lorenzo de Medici (Florentine ruler) payed him to make a silver lyre and to deliver it to Ludovico Sforza. He served as an engineer, court festival designer, sculptor, architect, and a painter for the Sforza clan until 1499 when they fled due to an invasion by the French.

In 1502 around summer time, Cesare Borgia "...was on a rampage through the Romagna region of northern Italy, brutally seizing city after city in the name of his father, Pope Alexander VI". Cesare, with his eagerness for power and conquest hired Leonardo as a military engineer due to his great inventing skills (at the risk that Leonardo was known for not finishing tasks that he was payed to do). This has created some (not a lot) of controversy in religious discussions. Some people think that the image of Jesus Christ that is idolized today comes from Leonardo's images and that it is in fact a depiction of Cesare. Since Cesare was known as the most handsome man alive by some people, Leonardo used his face as a guideline to draw a beautiful Jesus (some say). While many of the sources that make the claim for and against this hypothesis do not seem very reliable, there are some interesting points to take into consideration. But there does not seem to be a whole lot of evidence to make a solid conclusion about this subject. Neither does it seem that interesting.

After the French ruler Francis offered to give Leonardo the title of "Premier Painter and Engineer and Architect to the King" in 1516, he finally left Italy indefinitely. This offer gave da Vinci the freedom to paint and draw at his own comfort while living in a country manor house close to Amboise, France. Melzi, a painter that had accompanied Leonardo in previous trips, went with him. It is said that Leonardo's final years were not happy ones due to the bitter tone that were seen in some of his correspondence. This was his final destination before his death in 1519.

Some of the Works

Predominantly known for being a painter during his time, two of da Vinci's most famous paintings are the Mona Lisa and the Last Supper. The Mona Lisa is believed to be a painting of the third wife of a merchant named Francesco di Bartolommeo, a wealthy man. She is sitting on a "...marble chair, in that circle of fantastic rocks, as if in some faint light under sea". The original painting of this art work still exist to this day but it is not really messed with too much for fear that it will suffer further damage. There are many pictures that are similar to the Mona Lisa, but one of the theories as to why this one has gained so much popularity is because perhaps it is one of the few works of Leonardo that was actually finished and managed to survive. The Last Supper on the other hand was a painting that was painted on the wall of a dining room at the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie. It depicts the last meal that Jesus had with his disciples before he prophesized that one of them would betray him, Matthew 26: 23. The painting has been touched up so many times that when we look at it, it is no longer the original painting that Leonardo painted. Even though this painting still survives, it is slowly deteriorating.

Some of Leonardo's works also include dissections of human and animal bodies. He was curious about how the human body worked and was intrigued by the subject of death. While working at a hospital one day, he was talking to an old man who was on the verge of dying. The man told Leonardo that he had never been sick in his life before. So once he died, Leonardo immediately started to cut the body up to see what are the physical changes that bring death. However, Leonardo had some kind of sympathy in him. He drew a portrait of the old man the way he was before he died as a salute to his living memory "while he was engaging in dismembering the body". He had kept journals of other bodies that he had dissected as well. Leonardo believed that the eyes were the most useful tool that mankind had, and he would use his eyes to draw everything that he saw when dissecting corpse. Every detail.

As an inventor, Leonardo had great designs that he had drawn up. Some of the designs include tanks, bicycles, parachutes, helicopters, giant crossbows, [self-propelled carts](#), scuba gears, revolving bridges, and much more. Much of his collection of works were lost for some time due to (probably) Leonardo leaving it all to Melzi. Melzi later dies and leaves it all to his son, who gets rid of it by selling it all including Leonardo's estate.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Leonardo was a genius, his inventions and discoveries had very little effect on the scientific world since they were never published. Writing them left handed and backwards to the point that they could only be read off a mirror did not help either (though this trick seems pretty cool). If he would have been born in later time period, perhaps he could have had some major influences in the science realm that could have influenced the world today. The only thing that seems to be surprising is that with his very profound love of nature, he never realized the similarities in animals. Perhaps if had more access to travel he could have preceded Darwin in discovering the theory of evolution. Or perhaps he did notice this, but those works of him are lost and just haven't been found yet.

It should also be noted that Leonardo da Vinci was not a religious man at all. The most interesting thing about him was that during a time where religion was highly influential, he still searched to find the truth about the way nature worked. He "never believed for a moment that the universal deluge of the Bible ever took place". Despite his several portraits that show Jesus and other religious icons, Vasari wrote in 1550 that Leonardo believed that it was better to die a philosopher than to die a Christian. He did not like the idea of a religion that had chosen to be

symbolized by an act of human ferocity (the crucifixion) and therefore rejected this aspect of the fables. Instead, he tried to search for the more pleasant parts of it by believing that artists are just like poets and can produce “a fiction that signifies great things”. “Even in his religious paintings he was representing actors of the human comedy or tragedy”.

Since da Vinci was born outside of his time and didn't really contribute a whole lot to humanity (not to say he was irrelevant), it seems more like he is a symbol. People such as Albert Einstein, William Shakespeare, and Immanuel Kant can be said to have contributed a lot to different fields because they actually changed the world in different ways. Leonardo did not. But that is not to take away from his greatness, he seems to be more of an ideal figure who symbolizes curiosity, wonder, and determination. We could use more minds like him in the modern era, minds that have an intellectual desire to learn how the world works and who have a deep appreciation for all the aspects of nature. He seems to be more of a figure of inspiration more than anything else.

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