

Leonardo da Vinci was one of the greatest painters of all times, but is also known as the ultimate [Renaissance](#) man because he was perhaps the most widely talented person ever to have lived. Da Vinci is a my favorite because he was not only was he a consummate painter and sculptor, he was a great inventor, military engineer, scientist, botanist, and mathematician.

ONE: A Boy in Vinci

Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci was born on April 15, 1452, in the small village of Vinci, in a region of Italy called Tuscany. His parents were not a big part of his life and he was sent to various family members. Because of this, Leonardo had little early education, other than the local priest teaching him how to read and write and use an abacus. Shuffled around to various family members as a child, Leonardo was left to himself quite often, and perhaps this solitude is what we're still grateful for five centuries later, as he spent his days outdoors studying birds, plants, and nature.

Watercolor paints

Paintbrush

Cup of water

Absorbent paper

Draw a dog

When you draw or paint something, you notice things you may not have seen before. That's why Leonardo grew up to be a great artist and a great scientist. He was one of the first artists to draw things exactly as he saw them in nature. While sketching and painting birds, he learned a lot about their anatomy, or body structure.

Play with your paints! Get used to holding your brush and trying different strokes. See what it's like to use a little water or a lot on your brush. Mix paints to get new colors.

TWO: The Young Apprentice

When Leonardo was 14, his father sent him to Florence, where the young boy became apprenticed to the renowned master [Verrocchio](#). It was with Verrocchio that young Leonardo was trained in all the countless skills of a traditional workshop - not only drawing, painting, sculpting and modeling, but drafting, chemistry, metallurgy, metal working, plaster casting, leather working, mechanics and carpentry.

Leonardo and Verrocchio worked together on the painting *Baptism of Christ* (1472-1475). Vasari wrote that Leonardo painted the young angel holding Jesus' robe so skillfully and with such superior quality to his master that Verrocchio put down his brush and never painted again.

New ideas in painting, and indeed culture, were rising up in Florence around this time, as the Renaissance was blossoming. Oil painting had just been introduced to Italy from northern Europe, and Leonardo spent a lot of time mixing different materials, and soon surpassed everyone in his use of the new medium. Leonardo also brought new perspective and depth to painting, as he used his skills in math and geometry to calculate the placement of lines in his drawings and paintings. And perhaps foremost to the new Renaissance art was Leonardo's passion to draw things as realistically as possible. He sketched incessantly and was an ardent observer of nature, animals, plants, people.

THREE: A Genius at Work

When Leonardo da Vinci was 30 years old, he left Florence for Milan, where he spent the next 17 years. Da Vinci presented himself to the Duke of Milan, [Ludovico il Moro](#). Leonardo wrote a letter to Ludovico, offering himself as a military engineer, and came before the Duke with a *lira da braccio*, lute, which he made himself and beautifully played before the court. Leonardo's letter told of all the weapons and fortifications he could design to keep the city safe.

Leonardo was fascinated by technology and the workings of machines. He invented fire throwers and missiles, and made an early design for a machine gun. Hundreds of inventions were sketched out in his notebooks - tanks, helicopters, bicycles, submarines, hang gliders, pulleys, cranes, bridges, and more.

He wrote many notes in what is called his famous notebooks. Some are easily understood while others seem to be in a code of some sort. A lot of his writings were in mirror images.

MIRROR NAMES

Leonardo's love of music led him to study the science of sound, and he was one of the first to liken it to the motion of waves. He was also one of the first to note that *il sole non si muove*, the sun does not move - a remarkable observation in a day when people thought the sun revolved around the earth.

Anatomy was another passion of Leonardo. He went to hospitals to watch operations, he visited morgues to dissect bodies of the dead. He measured muscles, diagrammed organs, discovered the way blood flows through the body, and made important conclusions about lungs and oxygen. His knowledge surpassed the

doctors of his time. Leonardo applied this deep understanding of the human body to his art, and excelled in drawing proportional anatomy.

In 1484 the plague struck Milan, and the thousands of dead people were left to rot in the streets. Leonardo, being the ultimate problem solver that he was, turned his attention to disease prevention. He designed a layout of the city that had wide streets and canals in place of the narrow ones, wide enough for proper sewage disposal, and a system for washing the streets automatically with locks and paddle wheels. It was a two-tiered town design, with the top streets for homes and churches, and the bottom streets to be used for deliveries and wagons.

Throughout all of these other pursuits, Leonardo da Vinci continued to paint. His patron, Ludovico, was invaluable during his time in Milan. Ludovico had Leonardo paint his friend Cecilia Gallerani, and Leonardo called the painting *Lady with Ermine*. It was so lifelike that a poet commented that “Nature herself was jealous.”

Leonardo also received a commission to paint an altarpiece. One of Leonardo’s most famous paintings, [*The Last Supper*](#), was also painted in Milan. It took him over three years to complete this painting. Leonardo’s work habits are best reflected in *The Last Supper*. He often didn’t even finish his work, so the world is fortunate to have this masterpiece. Here’s how Herbert describes his work on *The Last Supper*:

Leonardo would sometimes appear at the refectory at sunrise and paint until dark without ever once putting down his brush to eat or drink. On other days he would simply stand in front of his work for hours with his arms folded. Sometimes he could be seen racing down the streets to the monastery where he would grab a brush, climb up the scaffolding, add a couple of brushstrokes to the mural, and abruptly leave. Sometimes weeks would go by and he wouldn’t show up at all.

When Leonardo finally finished, the painting was immediately acclaimed as a masterpiece, with superb design and characterisation. However, because Leonardo had used tempera paint over a ground of mostly gesso, instead of the more reliable fresco, it rapidly deteriorated. *The Last Supper* has undergone extensive restoration over the centuries, but is still one of the most reproduced works of art ever.

proximately 3 by 3 inches) at one end of the lid of the shoe box. Ask an adult to help you cut the shape out

FOUR: “I Shall Continue.”

With Italy at war with the French, Leonardo returned to Florence in 1500. In 1502, Leonardo entered the services of [*Cesare Borgia*](#), the Duke of Valentinois. Borgia helped the French conquer Milan, and had

ambitions to conquer all of central Italy. Borgia hired Leonardo da Vinci to be his military engineer, and Leonardo traveled all over Italy with him, examining castles and fortresses, and suggesting improvements for fortifications.

Around this time, Leonardo painted the *Mona Lisa*, beginning in 1503, the most famous painting in the history of art. Leonardo took the painting with him everywhere. Many historians say the *Mona Lisa* wasn't finished when he left Florence, and that he completed it during his final stay in France. After Leonardo died, the painting was given to the king of France, and today, it hangs in the Louvre in Paris.



It is now known that the identity of the woman in the portrait is Lisa di Gherardini, the third wife of a Florentine silk trader named Francesco del Giocondo. Lisa di Gherardini was 26 years old at the time of the sitting and had recently lost a child. Herbert invites students to question the portrait:

And what is she thinking? Why does she smile? A story is told that Leonardo had musicians and clowns in his bottega as the woman sat for her portrait, so that she would smile as he painted. But this smile has appeared in other paintings by Leonardo. Is he trying to tell us something? Is this a peaceful smile or is it a little disturbing? Why does she smile when she wears a black veil and all around her is dark and gloomy?

Leonardo was back in Milan by 1508, and then moved to France at the behest of [King François](#) in 1516. He settled in the Loire valley in the beautiful manor house [Clos Lucé](#), near the royal chateaux in Amboise, France, and became First Painter and Architect and Engineer of the King. Leonardo and King François visited together often, discussing philosophy, art, science. Though now paralyzed in one arm, Leonardo could still draw and supervise the work of his pupil. Leonardo wrote in his notebooks, “**I shall continue,**” and he never gave up his studies or his work. Leonardo died on May 2, 1519, and French legend tells us that he died in the arms of King François.