Leonardo da Vinci

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(lay-oh-NAR-do dah VINC-ee)
1452 - 1519
Italian Renaissance Painter

Leonardo da Vinci is best remembered in the art world for being the catalyst that precipitated the High Renaissance in Italy. His paintings influenced artistic styles for the next 150 years, and included such techniques as his use of composition based on the triangle; use of mathematic (one-point) and atmospheric perspective; attention to realism and the ideal proportions of the human body; and amazing mastery of the use of light and shadow. He was a true genius, a talented artist, an elegant and witty courtier, and the first—and possibly best—“Renaissance Man.”

Da Vinci spent a long and productive life in quest of knowledge. His voracious interest in nearly everything around him led him to fill extensive notebooks with information on subjects as diverse as military weapons, weather, botany, city planning, puns and riddles, music, anatomy, mathematics, water and wind currents, machinery, costume design, flight, sculpture, architecture and, of course, painting.

“Mona Lisa” and “The Last Supper” were among the very few works he actually completed, due to both political upheaval and his constant desire to move on to the next challenge, but his influence was wide and long-lasting. At his death, he was widely famous for his painting style, which introduced many of the elements that would become hallmarks of the Italian Renaissance. He is one of a few artists whose art has never fallen out of favor, and his “Mona Lisa” is now considered the most recognized art work in the world.

Vocabulary

Chiaroscuro—(Pronounced “key-AR-o-skyoor-o”) From Italian, meaning “bright-dark,” it describes the technique in painting and drawing of modeling three-dimensional figures by contrasting or gradating areas of light and dark.

Renaissance—(Literally “rebirth”) The intellectual and artistic movement that began in Italy (c. 1400-1550). A revival of the values and styles of the ancient classical world brought about a new culture that was more centered on the individual, and influenced an art style that admired beauty, proportion and realism.

Art Elements

Value—Referring to light and dark. Only through changes of light and dark can we perceive anything. These changes, called value contrasts, help us to see shapes by showing how light illuminates and creates shadows on them. Value changes help us “feel” the shape of an object visually. The entire object may be the same color, but its shape is defined by its different values. Leonardo da Vinci used value contrasts to create the illusion of three dimensions in his paintings.

Space—Space that appears three-dimensional in a two-dimensional painting is an illusion that creates a feeling of actual depth. Leonardo da Vinci used several types of perspective to give his paintings a sense of space: atmospheric perspective, which shows objects and the air appearing bluer and hazier as they get farther away; diminishing perspective, which shows objects decreasing in size the farther away they are from the viewer; and one-point perspective, which uses mathematical principles to show lines that recede from the viewer getting closer together as they converge towards a vanishing point on the horizon.

Art Principles

Contrast—Contrast refers to differences in values, colors, textures, shapes and other elements. Contrasts create visual excitement and add interest to a work. Leonardo da Vinci’s use of chiaroscuro (contrasting areas of light and dark) gave a three-dimensional quality to the subjects in his portraits. He also contrasted shape by posing organic subjects in geometrically shaped compositions.

Unity—Visual unity is one of the most important aspects of well-designed art. Unity provides the cohesive quality that makes an art work feel complete and finished. When all of the elements in a painting look as though they belong together, the artist has achieved unity. Leonardo da Vinci used the repetition of color and the clustering of shapes to achieve unity in his paintings. His consistent overall surface treatment, using fine, smooth, almost imperceptible brush strokes, also unified his paintings.
Leonardo da Vinci was born April 15, 1452, in Vinci, near Florence, in northern Italy. He was raised by his father, Ser Piero da Vinci, a Florentine notary, and a stepmother, whom his father married the same year he was born out of wedlock to a barmaid named Caterina. (His mother also married that year). In the more than 7,000 pages of Leonardo’s notebooks that survive, there are no personal comments about his youth. Although he had no formal education, he likely would have received the training expected of a boy from a good family—reading, writing, mathematics, and Latin.

When Leonardo was 17, his father apprenticed him in the workshop of Verrocchio, a leading Florentine artist of the day. Leonardo continued to live in Verrocchio’s house, even after his apprenticeship ended and he began receiving his own commissions. Around this time Leonardo began keeping detailed notebooks of his observations, theories, questions, and goals. Since he was left-handed, he wrote in these notebooks from right to left, most probably for speed and tidiness (it would greatly reduce the likelihood of smearing the ink). One notation from his notebooks reads, “The modern artist must master geometry, optics and perspective: he must understand the mechanisms of the human body; understand the relationship between mathematics and art.”

He was direct and uninhibited in his search for knowledge, and he gained the reputation of being brilliant and multi-faceted. The downside to his temperament was that he was inclined to leave his work unfinished as his mind constantly turned towards new topics and problems. By the time he was 30, Leonardo felt he was not receiving the recognition he deserved in Florence, so he applied to the Duke of Milan for work. In 1482, he arrived in Milan to spend what became nearly a quarter of a century in the Duke’s employment. In Milan, Leonardo was given the opportunity to exhibit the qualities that today define a “Renaissance Man” (a person equally talented in many areas). It was his job to bring interest and entertainment to dinners and celebrations, and he designed and carried off many elaborate pageants, plays and musicals, often designing the stages and costumes, writing the music and dialogue, and creating “displays” ranging from fireworks to horse races. On a personal level, he was witty and interesting in conversation, could sing, dance, and play several instruments, was a talented horseman, and a respectable poet. He also served the Duke as architect, engineer, and military advisor, designing civic improvements such as sewers and elevated roadways, decorating the Duke’s country house and favorite church (where he painted “The Last Supper”), proposing new weapons and improvements to the city’s defenses, and designing an immense commemorative equestrian statue to the memory of the Duke’s father. Although a full-size clay replica of this work (“Il Cavallo”) was erected in the city square, the bronze itself was never cast, due to the invasion of the French army in 1499.

During all this time, Leonardo took notes on all that interested him in the world around him, and the Duke gave him free rein to use what spare time he had in his own pursuits. Throughout his life, he made plans to collect his notes on various topics to publish in book form, but like many of his undertakings, these plans were never completed. Luckily, the vast notebooks survived, and were eventually catalogued according to subject by his heir. His discoveries and teachings on the subject of painting were published in the mid 1500s. The rest of the notebooks remained virtually unknown to the public until they passed into museum ownership in the mid-1800s.

After the invasion of Milan in 1499, Leonardo lived in several places throughout northern Italy, including Venice, Mantua, Florence and Rome. He worked for two years as a military advisor to Cesare Borgia, painted portraits for the d’Este family in Mantua, and returned to Florence during its Republic years. He spent three years living in the papal palace in Rome, working for the Medicis, where he felt overshadowed by the new young artists, Raphael and Michelangelo. He returned to Milan several times over the years, and near the end of his life, he moved to Amboise, France, at the request of the French King, Francis I. He died there on May 2, 1519, still searching for knowledge.

Despite all of da Vinci’s questioning and sketching, all that remains of his genius are his sketches and only a small number of his paintings. Although he was a sculptor, none of his sculptures survive. As an architect, none of his buildings have survived, nor as a scientist can any specific invention be attributed to him. Of all his works, only his paintings and his notebooks remain as a lasting testament to the genius of this “Renaissance Man.”