

Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci 1452 – 1519

1452 - Born 15 April in the Tuscan hill town of Vinci, in the lower valley of the Arno River in the territory of Florence. He was the illegitimate son of Piero Fruosino di Antonio da Vinci, a Florentine notary, and Caterina, a peasant. Little is known about Leonardo's early life. His father had married a 16 year-old girl named Albiera, who loved Leonardo but died young.

1466 - at the age of 14, Leonardo was apprenticed to one of the most successful artists of his day, Andrea di Cione, known as Verrocchio. Verrocchio's workshop was at the centre of the intellectual currents of Florence, assuring the young Leonardo of an education in the humanities. Other famous painters apprenticed or associated with the workshop include Ghirlandaio, Perugino, Botticelli, and Lorenzo di Credi. Leonardo would have been exposed to a vast range of technical skills and had the opportunity to learn drafting, chemistry, metallurgy, metal working, plaster casting, leather working, mechanics and carpentry as well as the artistic skills of drawing, painting, sculpting and modelling. According to Vasari, Leonardo collaborated with Verrocchio on his Baptism of Christ, painting the young angel holding Jesus's robe in a manner that was so far superior to his master's that Verrocchio put down his brush and never painted again. This is probably an exaggeration. On close examination, the painting reveals much that has been painted or touched up over the tempera using the new technique of oil paint, the landscape, the rocks that can be seen through the brown mountain stream and much of the figure of Jesus bearing witness to the hand of Leonardo.

1472 - At the age of 20, Leonardo qualified as a master in the Guild of St Luke but continued collaborating with Verrocchio.

1476 - Court records show that Leonardo and three other young men were charged with sodomy, and acquitted. From that date until 1478 there is no record of his work or even of his whereabouts although it is assumed that Leonardo had his own workshop in Florence between 1476 and 1481.

1481 - Commissioned to paint the The Adoration of the Magi for the Monks of San Donato a Scopeto.

1482 - Lorenzo de' Medici sent Leonardo, bearing the lyre as a gift, to Milan, to secure peace with Ludovico il Moro, Duke of Milan. At this time Leonardo wrote a letter to Ludovico, describing the many marvellous and diverse things that he could achieve in the field of engineering and informing the Duke that he could also paint.

1482 -1499 - Leonardo settles and works in Milan between. He painted the Virgin of the Rocks for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, and The Last Supper for the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie. He worked on many different projects for Ludovico, including the preparation of floats and pageants for special occasions, designs for a dome for Milan Cathedral and a model for a huge equestrian monument to Francesco Sforza, Ludovico's predecessor. In 1492 the clay model of the horse was completed. It surpassed in size the only two large equestrian statues of the Renaissance, Donatello's statue of Gattamelata in Padua and Verrocchio's Bartolomeo Colleoni in Venice, and became known as the "Gran Cavallo". Michelangelo rudely implied that Leonardo was unable to cast it. In November 1494 Ludovico gave the bronze intended for the statue to be used for cannons to defend the city from invasion by the French King Charles VIII. The French troops used the life-size clay model for target practice.

1499 - Ludovico Sforza overthrown by a second French invasion. Leonardo, with his assistant Salai and the mathematician Luca Pacioli, fled to Venice, where he was employed as a military architect and engineer.

1500 - Returns to Florence. Settles with his household at the monastery of Santissima Annunziata where the Servite monks provided him with a workshop. It's there that, according to Vasari, Leonardo created the cartoon of The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist, a work that won such admiration that "men and women, young and old" flocked to see it "as if they were attending a great festival".

1502 – Enters the service of Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI, acting as a military architect and engineer and travelling throughout Italy with his patron.

1503 - Returns to Florence where he rejoins the Guild of St Luke. Spends two years designing and painting a great mural of The Battle of Anghiari for the Signoria, with Michelangelo designing its companion piece, The Battle of Cascina.

1506 – 1508 - Returns to Milan. His most prominent pupils in painting in Milan will be Bernardino Luini, Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio and Marco D'Oggione. Brief trip back to Florence to settle his father's estate with his brothers in 1507. By 1508 he was back in Milan, living in his own house in Porta Orientale in the parish of Santa Babila.

1513 – 1515 - Leonardo spent much of his time living in the Belvedere in the Vatican in Rome, where Raphael and Michelangelo were both active at the time. In 1515, François I of France recaptured Milan. On 19th December, Leonardo was present at the meeting of Francois I and Pope Leo X, which took place in Bologna. It was for Francois that Leonardo was commissioned to make a mechanical lion which could walk forward, then open its chest to reveal a cluster of lilies.

1516 – Enters François' service. He is given use of the manor house Clos Lucé near the king's residence at the royal Château of Amboise. It was here that he spent the last three years of his life, accompanied by his friend and apprentice, Count Francesco Melzi, supported by a pension totalling 10,000 scudi.

1519 - Leonardo died at Clos Lucé, on May 2. François I had become a close friend. Vasari records that the King held Leonardo's head in his arms as he died, although this story, beloved by the French and portrayed in romantic paintings by Ingres, Ménégeot and other French artists, may be legend rather than fact. Vasari also tells us that in his last days, Leonardo sent for a priest to make his confession and to receive the Holy Sacrament. In accordance to his will, sixty beggars followed his casket. He was buried in the Chapel of Saint-Hubert in the castle of Amboise. Melzi was the principal heir and executor, receiving as well as money, Leonardo's paintings, tools, library and personal effects. Leonardo also remembered his other long-time pupil and companion, Salai and his servant Battista di Vilussis, who each received half of Leonardo's vineyards, his brothers who received land, and his serving woman who received a black cloak of good stuff with a fur edge. Some twenty years after Leonardo's death, François was reported by the goldsmith and sculptor Benevenuto Cellini as saying: "There had never been another man born in the world who knew as much as Leonardo, not so much about painting, sculpture and architecture, as that he was a very great philosopher.”