



## Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

by Julia Pastore

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A polymath with an extraordinary range of knowledge, Leonardo da Vinci embodies the notion of the aspiring and inquisitive Renaissance Man. One of the greatest painters in the history of art and an outstanding empirical scientist and inventor of machinery, his life was shadowed both by his illegitimacy and rumors of homosexuality.

The child of middle-class notary Ser Piero da Vinci and a local peasant girl, Leonardo was born out of wedlock in Vinci, a town near Florence, on April 15, 1452. He never escaped the stigma of being a bastard.

Denied entrance to university or any of the respected professions because of his birth, he was deprived of the humanist education of his day. For all the limitations his lack of an education imposed on him, however, Leonardo more than compensated for the deprivation by devising his empirical approach to natural phenomena.

In his mid-teens, Leonardo was apprenticed in Florence to Andrea del Verrochio, a sculptor and painter affiliated with the powerful Medici family, under whose guidance the boy's artistic talents quickly flowered.

### Leonardo's Sexuality

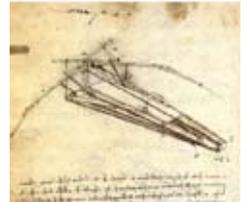
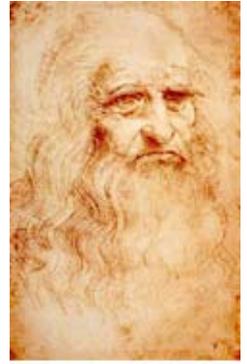
One of the most traumatizing experiences of Leonardo's life occurred in 1476 while he was still living in Verrochio's house. Sodomy charges were anonymously brought against him and three others for allegedly having sexual relations with a seventeen-year-old male artists' model.

After two hearings the charges were eventually dropped on a technicality. Although he was not convicted, the accusation seems to have haunted Leonardo throughout his life.

Although homosexuality was widespread in Florence, and associated with a number of prominent artists, charges of sodomy could be very serious. In addition, the unfavorable public attention could gravely damage the career of an artist dependent on patronage, including the patronage of the Church.

There is no doubt that one effect of the traumatic experience of the trial was that Leonardo doubled his efforts to keep his life private, even going so far as to use mirror writing to keep his thoughts hidden. Hence, little of his emotional life is known directly.

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence for the conclusion of many historians that the artist's primary erotic interests were directed toward men. Throughout his life, Leonardo surrounded himself with beautiful young men, and his drawings and writings evince a deep appreciation for male beauty. In contrast, there is no



**Top:** A sketch of Leonardo da Vinci believed to be a self portrait.

**Center:** Part of a design for a flying machine by Leonardo.

**Above:** *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo's most famous painting.

evidence that Leonardo was ever intimately involved with a woman or even had a close friendship with one.

Indeed, Leonardo's ignorance of women seems obvious in light of his sketches. Whereas he made many studies of the nude male, often featuring detailed attention to the genitalia, he drew few women below the neck. When he did, the genitals are grossly inaccurate and distorted.

Moreover, Leonardo developed close relationships with his (male) students and many references in his notebooks hint at his love for his male companions. Rumors circulated about the nature of his relationship, lasting for almost twenty years, with a "curly-haired youth" named Gian Giacomo de' Caprotti, nicknamed Salai (lamb of Satan) for his misbehavior.

In the last ten years of Leonardo's life, Francesco Melzi, a young Lombard aristocrat, became his constant companion and ultimately served as the executor of his estate.

In 1910, Sigmund Freud conducted an extensive psychoanalytic study of Leonardo's sexuality, using the artist's notebooks as his sources. Freud traced Leonardo's homosexuality back to his relationship with his mother and absent father. According to Freud, Leonardo sublimated his sexual urges into his work. The psychoanalyst considered the artist's many unfinished projects as a sign of acute sexual frustration.

Freud's analysis is based upon assumptions that have been challenged and that many consider dubious at best. It is also based on an interpretation of one of Leonardo's dreams that is flawed by translation errors. Thus, Freud's study must be approached with caution; nevertheless, the psychoanalyst deserves credit for confronting directly the question of the artist's sexuality at a time when such questions were the stuff only of scandalous gossip.

### **Leonardo's Scientific Genius**

To escape the scandal of the accusation of sodomy, Leonardo traveled to Milan in 1481 or 1482, where he designed military equipment for the duke, Ludovico Sforza. The detailed notebooks he carried everywhere are filled with sketches of hand arms, projectiles, flame-throwers, cannons, and crossbows.

Many of Leonardo's inventions are highly impractical, or at least were impractical at the time, but his meticulous drawings reveal a mechanical genius, despite his lack of formal training. Some of his drawings anticipate such later inventions as the bicycle and the helicopter.

By the end of his life, Leonardo had compiled a vast collection of notebooks (over 5,000 manuscript pages), detailing his research on optics, acoustics, mechanics, hydraulics, flight, astronomy, weaponry, and anatomy. During his lifetime, he kept his scientific findings hidden for fear his ideas would be stolen.

After his death, many of Leonardo's papers were lost to the world; some were never recovered. Many believe that had they been shared or published, they might have changed the course of scientific discovery because his observations prefigured the work of Newton, Galileo, and Kepler.

### **Leonardo's Paintings**

Although Leonardo produced only a small number of paintings, his revolutionary technique and style made him one of the most influential artists of the Renaissance. One measure of the visceral emotion that his works continue to inspire is that they are the most vandalized paintings in the world.

One of Leonardo's first commissions was to paint a mural of *The Last Supper* (1495-1498) in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Depicting the final meal of Jesus with his disciples, *The Last Supper* is celebrated for its ingenious composition and use of perspective, as well as for its psychological depth.

Unlike previous artists, Leonardo skillfully uses shadow to reveal the betrayer Judas' character with subtlety.

Unfortunately, Leonardo executed the image in an experimental fresco technique, and it had deteriorated within fifty years of its completion; yet even in its severely compromised condition it has had a profound influence on the history of art.

Leonardo returned to Florence in 1500 and in 1501 began work on an altarpiece for a community of Servite monks titled *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*. He left the painting unfinished in 1502 to accept a position as military engineer to the ruthlessly ambitious Cesare Borgia. During this time he became friends with the most celebrated political writer of his day, Niccolò Machiavelli.

Disgusted by Borgia's vicious tactics, Leonardo left Borgia's service after only nine months. However, he did not return to *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* and the painting remains incomplete.

Leonardo's mature years are filled with some of his most recognizable works. It is impossible to date these with any certainty, but many believe *Mona Lisa* was painted first, followed by *Leda*, and then his final painting, *Saint John the Baptist*.

*Mona Lisa* (or *La Gioconda* as it is known in Italy), now in the Louvre in Paris, is Leonardo's most famous and most ambiguous painting. Although the painting purports to be a portrait of the wife of a merchant, Francesco del Giocondo, some scholars have speculated that it is an idealized version of the artist's mother or even a self-portrait en travesti.

The identity of the woman remains uncertain, but her enigmatic smile, hinting at a secret joke or private knowledge, has haunted viewers since it was first shown. The painting was never completed or delivered to its owner, and Leonardo carried it with him throughout the last years of his life.

Although only sketches remain of Leonardo's *Leda*, it remains one of the most perplexing works in his oeuvre. His only female nude and his only picture inspired by classical mythology, *Leda* depicts the union of Zeus, disguised as a swan, with Leda, Queen of Lacedaemon.

The result of this union was two sets of twins hatched from eggs: the divine Castor and Pollux and the mortals Helen and Clytemnestra. This myth inspired countless artists, but Leonardo's vision is unique in that it highlights the grotesqueness of the rape.

He imbues the image with terror rather than eroticism, yet he also makes the encounter tantalizing and memorable. Fascinated by the natural world and committed to pushing its boundaries, Leonardo was no doubt intrigued by this aberration of the natural order.

In 1507, Leonardo entered the service of King François I of France, first in Milan and then later in France itself. Most of his last years were spent in intellectual and scientific pursuits at the court of the king. However, he did complete one major painting during this period, the androgynous *St. John the Baptist*. The model for St. John in this beautiful yet curiously disturbing painting may have been the "lamb of Satan" himself, Gian Giacomo de' Caprotti.

The artist died in Cloux on May 2, 1519.

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**Julia Pastore** is a New York-based freelance writer who works in book publishing.