LEONARDO DA VINCI

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AN ARTIST IS BORN

“ I WISH TO WORK MIRACLES”
Leonardo da Vinci was the original “Renaissance man,” and he personified the extraordinary age he dominated. He is famed primarily as one of the greatest painters who ever lived, but he was a universal genius who could conceive anything, from a theatrical tableau of heaven to a string of fortifications or a movable river dam. Leonardo casually tossed off concepts and drawings of inventions that would not come to fruition for centuries, including the calculator, the bicycle, the diving helmet, and the helicopter.

By the time he died in 1519, Leonardo seemed to have accomplished his boyhood ambition: “I wish to work miracles.” At the age of sixty-seven, he was renowned throughout Europe; born a bastard in a hillside village in northern Italy, he had become the protégé of princes, popes, and kings. He had set new benchmarks in the world of painting and created dazzling works of sculpture, architecture, music, and the written word. He had mastered so many fields of learning that we still debate whether he was greater as an engineer, an anatomist, a botanist, a geographer, a cartographer, or a naturalist. Still, he died unhappy, believing he had failed to live up to his potential.

He may have been right; he left dozens of projects unfinished, and many of his completed works crumbled with the test of time. But Leonardo’s genius set a standard that Western civilization still struggles to attain. And he serves as a symbol of the breadth and depth a single brilliant mind can span.

Fortunately for Leonardo, and for us, he was a child of the Renaissance, which began in the early 1400s, after the gloom of the Middle Ages. It dispelled the immense cloud suspended over a Europe devastated by plague and war and provided the mindset needed to nurture a Leonardo.

A new spirit of intellectual rigor and scientific inquiry spread through universities and monasteries, where unconventional notions of liberty were born and depictions of nature appeared in a fresh guise. Artists and sculptors, confined for generations within the conventions of medieval art, embraced and explored naturalism and new forms of human expression. It appeared to many that a new world was emerging, one where people would be freed by reason and knowledge and all the secrets of the universe could be found and put to use.
The city-state of Florence was the intellectual and artistic hub of this upheaval, but as the new era expanded, it became evident that the Renaissance would transform all of European civilization and eventually the world.

Leonardo da Vinci was born on April 15, 1452. Widely admired in his own day, he left enduring masterpieces, including the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper, and a posthumous treatise on the art of painting - 7,000 pages of manuscripts and 3,000 pages of notes filled with his writings and drawings. Yet at his core, he remains a puzzle. “Leonardo is the Hamlet of art history,” wrote scholar and art critic Kenneth Clark, “whom each of us must recreate for himself.”

What we know of him is pieced together from surviving church and town records, a few contemporary letters, and accounts of his life written in the century after his death. Scholars and historians have expanded that material into nuanced, insightful studies, but they remain in large part speculation. “His mind and personality seem to us superhuman,” noted art historian Helen Gardner, “the man himself mysterious and remote.”

Leonardo was from the provincial village of Vinci, some twenty miles northwest of Florence, in the Tuscany region of what was not yet Italy. Lacking the pedigree to warrant a surname, he made do with da Vinci - “from Vinci.” The town was a long day’s ride, and an even longer cultural journey, from Florence. His family history gave no hint of greatness. Leonardo’s father, Piero, was a notary – in those days, an important post since small towns had no lawyers or judges and the notary in a village was charged with handling all its legal affairs. The people of Vinci called Piero “Ser” or “Master” out of respect. Ser Piero da Vinci was also a link between the slow, backward town - a cluster of stone buildings around a castle and a church - and the wealth and glamour of Florence, where he had many friends among the city’s artists, craftsmen, and merchants.

Leonardo was the product of Piero’s liaison with a young woman named Caterina. She is usually described as a peasant, but the only early biographer who mentions her – the unidentified writer known as the Anonimo Gaddiano, who wrote about the lives of several Renaissance artists in 1540 - said she came “of good blood.”
Modern evidence suggests that Caterina was a slave girl, brought from the Middle East to Tuscany by Vanni di Niccolo di Ser Vanni, a wealthy banker and a friend of Piero da Vinci. “A lot of well-to-do and prominent families brought women from eastern Europe and the Middle East,” according to Da Vinci scholar Alesandro Vezzosi. “The young girls were then baptized. The most common names were Maria, Marta, and Caterina.”

This theory is backed by the 2006 reconstruction of a fingerprint, supposedly belonging to Leonardo da Vinci, that analysts said had patterns normally found only among people of Arabian descent. Vanni died in 1451, leaving his house to his friend and executor Piero da Vinci - and his servant, Caterina, to his widow. The widow continued to live in the house, hired a new servant, and probably freed Caterina. The following year, Leonardo was born.

The birth occurred around 10:30 p.m. – “at the third hour of the night,” in Renaissance time, on a Sunday. The next day, the baby was baptized in the parish church in a rough stone font that is still in use, baptizing infants and awing tourists. Within a few months, Caterina was married off to Antonio di Piero del Vaccha – called “Accattabriga,” which means “quick to start a quarrel” in Italian.

When Leonardo was about eight months old, Piero married sixteen-year-old Albiera di Giovanni Amadori, daughter of another prosperous notary. Both matches were made by Piero’s father, Antonio da Vinci, who disapproved of the reckless romance between his son and the peasant girl. Twenty-five-year-old Piero lived in his father’s house – with his younger brother Francesco and his grandparents, just outside the castle walls in Vinci - and was being brought up to take over his father’s established notary business. If Piero had given any thought to marrying Caterina, his father’s influence was enough to change his mind.

For the first five years of his life, Leonardo lived with his mother in the Del Vaccha farmhouse in the hamlet of Anchiano. Then in 1457, it was decided that he would be raised by his father, Piero, and Albiera, who had been unable to bear children. By then, Caterina had given birth to two more babies, both daughters; she would have six children in all, including Leonardo.