



LEONARDO DA VINCI

Excerpted from Kathleen Krull, *Lives of the Artists*, 1995

Italian painter and sculptor, genius of the Renaissance, famous for the Mona Lisa, The Last Supper, and encyclopedic notebooks

FOR SOMEONE who may have accomplished more than any other man in history, little is known about Leonardo da Vinci-- except that his curiosity was unique. We know that his father (a lawyer) never married his mother (a peasant), which created lifelong legal and emotional problems for him. As a child he lived mostly with his father and had four stepmothers in all, but it's thought that an uncle who lived nearby nurtured Leonardo's powerful drive to learn.

Leonardo was apprenticed as a youth to the artist

Andrea del Verrocchio (a legitimate son would never have been forced to learn a trade, especially one so disreputable as art). One day when Leonardo painted an angel--he was known to draw the faces of angels better than anyone--the older man reportedly threw down his brushes in jealous admiration and swore that he would never paint again. Still, Leonardo always felt at home at Verrocchio's and in times of stress liked to return for visits.

"It is easy to become a universal man," a young Leonardo wrote--and he somehow made it seem so. He never stopped his studies, working on countless projects, or at least starting them. In addition to artist, he could have easily become a city planner, architect, inventor, engineer, physician, musician, anthropologist, botanist, or astronomer. "I question" were the words he wrote most frequently in the elaborate notebooks he kept. He questioned practically everything: What causes tickling? Why are stars invisible during the day? What would it be like to walk on water? Would a fly make a different sound if you put honey on its wings?

Every night Leonardo investigated anatomy in a way few others could have tolerated: he dissected corpses. His sources for bodies were either prisons where criminals had been executed or hospitals for the homeless. He could befriend a one hundred-year-old man one night and make drawings of the corpse the next.

Many of his neighbors were likely to have been scared of Leonardo. He was so mysterious--with his secret autopsies (officially banned by the Catholic Church), his scientific experiments (rumored to be some type of evil magic), and his desire for privacy (his notes were written backward so others couldn't read them). He was even left-handed, believed in those days to be a sure sign of the devil at work.

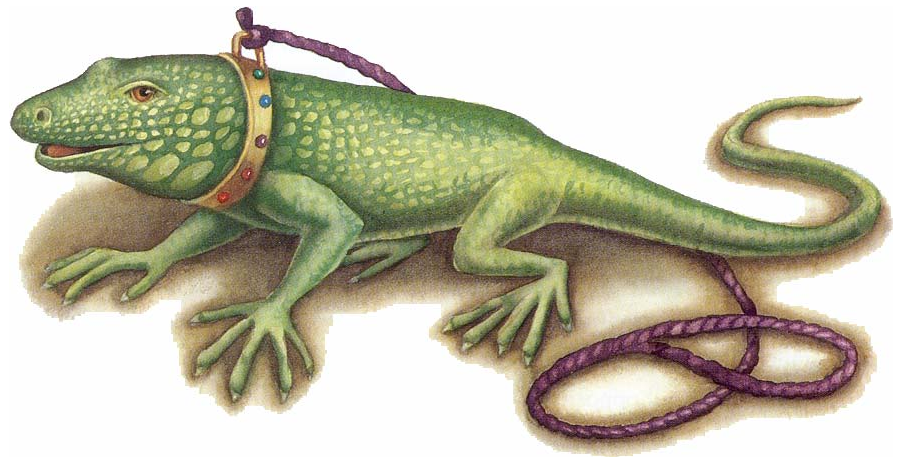
In others, Leonardo inspired devotion. He was strong, healthy, and handsome, with a carefully brushed and curled beard. His rose-colored robes were short, unlike the long robes of most men, and he was always impeccably clean in an age when most people weren't. He couldn't even stand to have paint on his fingers. He carried himself like

royalty and had elegant manners. Usually he was calm, though he was known to blush when he was insulted (as by his arch-rival, Michelangelo). A welcome addition to parties, he devised clever riddles that made people roar with laughter, and he liked to play pranks that would make people scream--once he unleashed what appeared to be a dragon (actually a large lizard). He rode horses well, sang well, played the lyre well, and, of course, could invent his own musical instruments when necessary.

Leonardo could paint all day without eating, but when he stopped, his favorite meal was minestrone soup. He was a vegetarian, an eccentric choice at the time and one more reason few people understood him. He felt sorry for animals and believed that people who ate them were walking burial places. He was known to buy birds in the market in order to free them, as well as to study their flight.

The thought of flying was one of only two things known to put Leonardo in really high spirits {the other was his design for a submarine). In personal relationships most people seemed to find him melancholy and perhaps a bit cold. In his notebooks the only reference to the woman believed to be his mother is a precise list of her funeral expenses {he made a note of every penny he spent).

Leonardo had no family of his own but informally adopted a peasant boy who lived with him for twenty-six years. The boy was known as Salai (Devil), because he constantly stole, even from Leonardo. The older man pampered him anyway, one year buying him twenty-four pairs of shoes, another time a coat of silver cloth lined with velvet. Between his jobs working for patrons at the various courts of Italy and



France, Leonardo traveled; he packed light, taking along his notebooks, his painting of the *Mona Lisa*, and Salai.

While in Florence, Leonardo was accused of heresy against the church, probably for homosexuality, for which the penalty at the time was death. He was acquitted, but after this he became more secretive than ever. Nothing was more important to him than his liberty--two of his earliest inventions had to do with escaping from imprisonment. Relationships with his patrons were often fraught with misunderstanding and bitterness. Leonardo *was* versatile--in a letter to a potential sponsor he listed thirty-six services he could perform--but notorious for his counterproductive work habits. To get himself out of bed each morning {always a difficulty), he invented a water-operated alarm clock. Such inventions did nothing to end his daydreaming, his dislike of deadlines and schedules, his overambitious ideas, or his tendency to be easily distracted. Sometimes he took money for a work, then never did it, or made promises he knew he couldn't keep. When patrons became too frustrated, they would hire someone else to finish what Leonardo had started. Leonardo also experienced more than his share of bad luck, and his work gained a reputation as the most vandalized art in history. As a sculptor he was influential and awe-inspiring, but none of his sculpture survived such assaults as being used for target practice by invading armies. Painting techniques he experimented with caused some of his work to disintegrate in his own lifetime. Once, while painting a battle scene on a wall opposite a wall being painted by Michelangelo, he used a new method he had read about. The technique resulted in disaster when all the paints melted together {he hadn't read the instructions all the way through to the part that said "don't try this on walls").

His last boss, the king of France, remained a great admirer through all of these trials, and Leonardo's final three years were his most serene. Then one or both of his hands became paralyzed and his health declined. He died at age sixty-seven. The story that he died in the arms of the King is probably a myth. He was with Francesco da Melzo, a pupil and companion for the last part of his life. Francesco wrote to Leonardo's half brothers: "It is a hurt to anyone to lose such a man, for nature cannot again produce his like." In his will Leonardo left everything to Francesco, including his notebooks. He was buried in France, where his gravestone reads: "First painter, engineer, and architect of the King."

WORKS

Possibly the world's most famous painting is the *Mona Lisa*, who some think was a real woman named Lisa La Gioconda, the wife of a banker. Her half-smile has mystified whole generations. Was she amused by the comedians Leonardo hired to keep her from getting bored during sittings? Was she missing her front teeth (which is what some dentists believe)? Was she pregnant? Was she really a man? Was she in fact Leonardo himself (some see a resemblance)? And why did Leonardo hold on to the painting all his life?

While Leonardo was painting *The Last Supper* for a group of monks, they kept coming around to ask what was taking him so long (three years). Later the monks carved into the painting to make a doorway. The rest of the work was almost destroyed during the French Revolution (when Napoleon's soldiers threw stones at it) and World War II (when a bomb landed nearby). Recently it has been restored inch by inch, with five hundred years of grime removed.

With the five thousand pages of drawings in his notebooks, Leonardo was the world's first scientific illustrator. He did his technical drawings to improve his painting. He was obsessed with flying machines and also drew the first cars, bicycles, machine guns, tanks, and much more.

NOTE: This reading assignment also includes ["Seeking Mona Lisa," Smithsonian, 5/99.](#)