

**RENAISSANCE ITALY:
LEONARDO DA VINCI:
THE LAST SUPPER**



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Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Leonardo's place in Renaissance Italian society, the techniques he used to produce his masterpiece The Last Supper, how those choices ultimately doomed the painting to the ravages of the elements, and how different restoration and conservation attempts have fared over the centuries.

Subjects

Art / Art History
European History
World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

180 minutes

Tour Links

- [Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan](#)

Essential Questions

- Who was Leonardo da Vinci?
- What was Leonardo da Vinci's place in 15th century Renaissance Italy?
- What technique did da Vinci use to paint the *Last Supper*? Why did he choose this technique? Was this a wise choice?
- Why has the Last Supper suffered so much deterioration over the centuries? What attempts have been made at conservation? Is there anything that can be done to preserve the masterpiece?

Academic Summary

Excerpts from Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists, 16th century Life of Leonardo da Vinci

Truly marvelous and celestial was Leonardo, the son of Ser Piero da Vinci ... It is clear that Leonardo, through his comprehension of art, began many things and never finished one of them, since it seemed to him that the hand was not able to attain to the perfection of art in carrying out the things which he imagined; for the reason that he conceived in idea difficulties so subtle and so marvelous, that they could never be expressed by the hands, be they ever so excellent. And so many were his caprices, that, philosophizing of natural things, he set himself to seek out the properties of herbs, going on even to observe the motions of the heavens, the path of the moon, and the courses of the sun.

He also painted in Milan, for the Friars of S. Dominic, at S. Maria dell Grazie, a Last Supper, a most beautiful and marvelous thing; and to the heads of the Apostles he gave such majesty and beauty, that he left the head of Christ unfinished, not believing that he was able to give it that divine air which is essential to the image of Christ. This work, remaining thus all but finished, has ever been held by the Milanese in the greatest veneration, and also by strangers as well; for Leonardo imagined and succeeded in expressing that anxiety which had seized the Apostles in wishing to know who should betray their Master. For which reason in all their faces are seen love, fear, and wrath, or rather, sorrow, at not being able to understand the meaning of Christ; which thing excites no less marvel than the sight, in contrast to it, of obstinacy, hatred, and treachery in Judas; not to mention that every least part of the work displays an incredible diligence, seeing that even in the tablecloth the texture of the stuff is counterfeited in such a manner that linen itself could not seem more real.

It is said that the Prior of that place kept pressing Leonardo, in a most importunate manner, to finish the work; for it seemed strange to him to see Leonardo sometimes stand half a day at a time, lost in contemplation, and he would have like him to go on like the laborers hoeing in his garden, without ever stopping his brush. And not content with this, he complained of it to the Duke, and that so warmly, that he was constrained to send for Leonardo and delicately urged him to work, contriving nevertheless to show him that he was doing all this because of the importunity of the Prior.

Leonardo, knowing that the intellect of that Prince was acute and discerning, was pleased to discourse at large with the Duke on the subject, a thing which he had never done with the Prior: and he reasoned much with him about art, and made him understand that men of lofty genius sometimes accomplish the most when they work the least, seeking out inventions with the mind, and forming those perfect ideas which the hands afterwards express and reproduce from the images already conceived in the brain. And he added that two heads were still wanting for him to paint; that of Christ, which he did not wish to seek on earth; and he could not think that it was possible to conceive in the imagination that beauty and heavenly grace which should be the mark of God incarnate. Next, there was wanting that of Judas, which was also troubling him, not thinking himself capable of imagining features that should represent the

countenance of him who, after so many benefits received, had a mind so cruel as to resolve to betray his Lord, the Creator of the world. However, he would seek out a model for the latter; but if in the end he could not find a better, he should not want that of the importunate and tactless Prior. This thing moved the Duke wondrously to laughter, and he said that Leonardo had a thousand reasons on his side. And so the poor Prior, in confusion, confined himself to urging on the work in the garden, and left Leonardo in peace, who finished only the head of Judas, which seems the very embodiment of treachery and inhumanity; but that of Christ, as has been said, remained unfinished.

Finally, having grown old, he remained ill many months, and, feeling himself near to death, asked to have himself diligently informed of the teaching of the Catholic faith, and of the good way and holy Christian religion; and then, with many moans, he confessed and was penitent; and although he could not raise himself well on his feet, supporting himself on the arms of his friends and servants, he was pleased to take devoutly the most holy Sacrament, out of his bed. The King, who was wont often and lovingly to visit him, then came into the room; wherefore he, out of reverence, having raised himself to sit upon the bed, giving him an account of his sickness and the circumstances of it, showed withal how much he had offended God and mankind in not having worked at his art as he should have done. Thereupon he was seized by a paroxysm, the messenger of death; for which reason the King having risen and having taken his head, in order to assist him and show him favor, to then end that he might alleviate his pain, his spirit, which was divine, knowing that it could not have any greater honor, expired in the arms of the King, in the seventy fifth year of his age.

Florence, Italy was the center of Renaissance art, architecture and humanist thought during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Museums like the Uffizi and the Academia are filled with priceless paintings and sculptures that are the envy of places around the world. The Piazza della Signoria, Florence's central square and the political hub of the city since the days of the Medici family, contains priceless statues such as the Rape of the Sabine Women by Gianbologna and Cellini's masterpiece Perseus with the Head of Medusa that have stood open to the public since their creation in the 16th century. Even the buildings themselves, many of them constructed during Florence's golden age, were designed to be expressions of artistic beauty. People around the world learn the names of artists, architects and writers associated with Renaissance Florentine society: Donatello, Giotto, Raphael, Machiavelli and Brunelleschi. Florence is even associated with the man arguably known as the greatest artist of the period: Michelangelo.

Perhaps the greatest Renaissance figure of them all was Leonardo da Vinci. Born Leonardo di ser Piero in Vinci (about 40 km east of Florence) in 1452, da Vinci was the illegitimate son of Piero Fruosino di Antonio. Like many people of the period, the man who would come to be known worldwide as "da Vinci" did not have a legal surname (di ser Piero refers to his father). Little is known about his early life, but by his early teens the would-be artist was a student apprentice to the famed Florentine artist Verrocchio, in whose workshop he would learn a vast set of skills ranging from drafting and metal working to leather making and painting. It is even possible that the young Leonardo served as a model for Verrocchio's famous bronze statue David, now housed in the Bargello in Florence.

As he traveled around Renaissance Italy during his lifetime, da Vinci had the

opportunity to learn from and work with some of the period's most important and famous mathematicians, philosophers, artists and architects, including Bellini, Messini, Bramante and Pacioli. Everywhere he went, Leonardo studied and learned as much as he could. By his late twenties, Leonardo had established himself as an artist in Florence and Milan, a city where he painted his now famous *Last Supper* (1490s) for the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie.

The *Last Supper* was commissioned in 1494 by Ludovico Sforza, then Duke of Milan, as a large full wall mural for the duke's family church. It took da Vinci over four years to complete. Today it is arguably the most famous and recognizable painting in the world. It has been extensively copied in various medium over the centuries, but the original is in bad shape. Leonardo faced a number of challenges creating it, and unfortunately the solutions he chose doomed the painting.

The first challenge da Vinci encountered was the demand by his patron that the mural be done in fresco, a technique dating to ancient times. When doing a fresco, an artist first applies wet plaster to the wall and then applies paint directly to the plaster. As the work dries, the paint seeps into the plaster, literally becoming part of the wall itself. This technique requires that the artist work quickly before the plaster has a chance to dry. Leonardo, however, was a perfectionist. The *Last Supper* took over four years to produce, so the artist had to find another way. He first put two layers of plaster on the wall. Once the plaster was dry, he put down a white lead undercoat and then used oil paint to produce the painting.

Leonardo's decisions produced a stunning and detailed masterpiece, one that impressed his contemporaries when it was unveiled in 1498. Unfortunately, those choices also doomed the painting to the elements. Humidity quickly seeped through the back of the wall and into the work, causing problems over time. Within a few years, the paint began to chip and peel and by the mid-1550s Vasari described the painting as "ruined." Various attempts to preserve the painting throughout the centuries unintentionally (and yet ultimately) did even more damage. A bombing raid on the refectory in August 1943 shook the building. The painting survived the raid, but suffered further damage. By the latter decades of the 20th century, the famous painting was hardly recognizable. In 1978, a 20 year major restoration project was undertaken to repair and revitalize the masterpiece (the building was also sealed and climate-controlled). When the work was unveiled in 1999, the public was stunned. Some areas were deemed not restorable, while others were dramatically changed by the restoration process. Controversy continues in the art community to this day. In order to help preserve the priceless masterpiece, access is now restricted. Visitors can only spend 15 minutes looking at the work.

Leonardo's fame during his lifetime that grew to the point that he was known around the continent. Legend says that when he died in France in 1519 at the age of 67, it was with his head in the arms of his good friend King Francis I. His reputation and legacy as the ultimate "Renaissance Man" has only increased over the last four centuries. Today he is as well respected and revered as ever. Perhaps Giorgio Vasari said it best in 1568 when he wrote the following words about da Vinci.

In the normal course of events many men and women are born with remarkable talents; but occasionally, in a way that transcends nature, a single person is marvelously endowed by Heaven with beauty, grace and talent in such abundance that he leaves other men far behind, all his actions seem inspired and indeed everything he does clearly comes from God rather than from human skill. Everyone acknowledged that this was true of Leonardo da Vinci, an artist of outstanding physical beauty, who displayed infinite grace in everything that he did and who cultivated his

genius so brilliantly that all problems he studied he solved with ease.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Leonardo's place in Renaissance Italian society, the techniques he used to produce his masterpiece *The Last Supper*, how those choices ultimately doomed the painting to the ravages of the elements, and how different restoration and conservation attempts have fared over the centuries.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Leonardo's place in Renaissance Italian society.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the techniques Leonardo used to produce his masterpiece *The Last Supper* and why he chose those techniques.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how those choices ultimately doomed the painting to the ravages of time and the elements.
4. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the different restoration and conservation efforts that have been undertaken over the centuries in an attempt to save what is arguably the most famous painting in the world.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What is the most famous painting of all time? Why? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Leonardo da Vinci and the Last Supper (20 min)
- Video – Leonardo da Vinci The Last Supper (50 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Leonardo da Vinci and the Last Supper (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: The Last Supper – an overview (30 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Leonardo's place in Renaissance Italian society, the techniques he used to produce his masterpiece The Last Supper, how those choices ultimately doomed the painting to the ravages of the elements, and how different restoration and conservation attempts have fared over the centuries.
- Alternate Assessment – Students should theorize as to whether restoration of original masterpieces is a good idea (possibly comparing this one to what happened in the Sistine Chapel), and then in groups they can develop different plans for restoring and preserving other major works of art.

Extension

On tour: Il Museo Leonardiano di Vinci, Vinci

Although not specifically related to this lesson, while on tour, students in Italy can visit Vinci (about 45 minutes west of Florence), where they can see for themselves the museum dedicated to Leonardo. Surrounded by Tuscan hills filled with olive groves, the museum presents an idyllic setting, but don't get too caught up in the scenery. Inside the museum, students will see a series of working machines built according to Leonardo's drawings and sketches. What amazes visitors is that many of those original designs were hundreds of years ahead of their time. Look for the museum's website in the links below.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- <http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariLeo.html>
Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Leonardo da Vinci (primary source)
- <http://legacy.mos.org/sln/Leonardo/LeoHomePage.html>
Exploring Leonardo (website) – from the Museum of Science (Boston)
- <http://legacy.mos.org/leonardo/museum.html>
Leonardo da Vinci: Scientist, Inventor, Artist (website) – from the Museum of Science, this website is much more detailed as the one above and is appropriate for AP/Advanced students.
- <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/leonardo-da-vinci-creative-genius>
Leonardo da Vinci: Creative Genius (website) – from the National Endowment for the Humanities
- www.leonardoda-vinci.org/
Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Works (website) – this website contains almost 300 images of Leonardo's works, drawings and sketches. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- www.bibliotecapleyades.net/davi/project/history.htm
The Last Supper (website)
- <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/leonardo-last-supper.html>
Leonardo's Last Supper (website) – from Khan Academy, this website also contains an 8-minute video on the painting that is appropriate for all classes.
- www.italianrenaissance.org/a-closer-look-leonardo-da-vincis-last-supper/
Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper (website)
- www.fischerarthistory.com/the-last-supper.html
Leonardo's Last Supper (website) – from Julia Fischer, Assistant Professor of Art History at Lamar University (TX), this website goes into good detail on the painting and its issues. Highly recommended for AP / Advanced students and classes.
- www.museoleonardiano.it/eng/
Museo Leonardiano Vinci (website) – official website from the Leonardo museum in Vinci
- <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/93>
Church and Dominican Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie (website) – from UNESCO
- www.slideshare.net/guest6c27ff/leonardo-da-vinci-ppt
Leonardo da Vinci (PowerPoint)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSsGRfCqN2s
Leonardo's Universe (video) – from National Geographic
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnV4bkPkZQM
Leonardo da Vinci (video) – from the History Channel, this 45-minute video might be long for some classes, but it is worth showing if possible.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnRUTzYWtT8>
Private Life of a Masterpiece: Leonardo da Vinci The Last Supper (video) – from the BBC, this 50-minute video details the life of the painting from Leonardo and

its creation forward to the modern age. Highly recommended for all students and teachers for this lesson.

Background Information

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo_da_Vinci
Leonardo da Vinci – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Supper_\(Leonardo_da_Vinci\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Supper_(Leonardo_da_Vinci))
The Last Supper – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/milan
On the Road: Milan – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus
Renaissance Florence – Botticelli: Birth of Venus
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo
Renaissance Florence – Brunelleschi: Dome of the Florence Duomo
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello
Renaissance Florence – Donatello
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art
Renaissance Florence – Giotto
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince
Renaissance Florence – Machiavelli: The Prince
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family
Renaissance Florence – Medici Family
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david
Renaissance Florence – Michelangelo: The David
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio
Renaissance Florence -- Verrocchio
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: An Overview
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa
Renaissance Europe – Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Last Judgment
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: The Pieta
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens

Key Terms

- Florentine
- Leonardo
- Renaissance

