

**RENAISSANCE
FLORENCE: LEONARDO:
AN OVERVIEW**



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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 Florentine society, his major scientific and artistic works, and how da Vinci's thirst for knowledge and his genius combined to produce the ultimate "Renaissance Man".

Subjects

European History, World History, Art / Art History, Science, Engineering

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Louvre Museum, Paris
- Museo Leonardo da Vinci, Florence
- Galleria Michelangelo, Florence
- Accademia Museum, Florence
- Leonardo Museum, Milan
- Museo Leonardiano, Vinci
- Uffizi Museum, Florence

Essential Questions

- Who was Leonardo da Vinci?
- What was Leonardo da Vinci's place in 15th century Renaissance Florence?
- Was Leonardo an artist, scientist, inventor or all three? Why is he called the "Renaissance Man"?

Academic Summary

Excerpts from Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists, 16th century

Life of Leonardo da Vinci

The greatest gifts are often seen, in the course of nature, rained by celestial influences on human creatures; and sometimes, in supernatural fashion, beauty, grace, and talent are united beyond measure in one single person, in a manner that to whatever such an one turns his attention, his every action is so divine, that, surpassing all other men, it makes itself clearly known as a thing bestowed by God (as it is), and not acquired by human art. This was seen by all mankind in Leonardo da Vinci, in whom, besides a beauty of body never sufficiently extolled, there was an infinite grace in all his actions; and so great was his genius, and such its growth, that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease. In him was great bodily strength, joined to dexterity, with a spirit and courage ever royal and magnanimous; and the fame of his name so increased, that not only in his lifetime was he held in esteem, but his reputation became even greater among posterity after his death.

Truly marvelous and celestial was Leonardo, the son of Ser Piero da Vinci; and in learning and in the rudiments of letters he would have made great proficiency, if he had not been so variable and unstable, for he set himself to learn many things, and then, after having begun them, abandoned them. Thus, in arithmetic, during the few months that he studied it, he made so much progress, that, by continually suggesting doubts and difficulties to the master who was teaching him, he would very often bewilder him. He gave some little attention to music, and quickly resolved to learn to play the lyre, as one who had by nature a spirit most lofty and full of refinement: wherefore he sang divinely to that instrument, improvising upon it. Nevertheless, although he occupied himself with such a variety of things, he never ceased drawing and working in relief, pursuits which suited his fancy more than any other. Ser Piero, having observed this, and having considered the loftiness of his intellect, one day took some of his drawings and carried them to Andrea del Verrocchio, who was much his friend, and besought him straitly [sic] to tell him whether Leonardo, by devoting himself to drawing, would make any proficiency. Andrea was astonished to see the extraordinary beginnings of Leonardo, and urged Ser Piero that he should make him study it; wherefore he arranged with Leonardo that he should enter the workshop of Andrea, which Leonardo did with the greatest willingness in the world. And he practiced not one branch of art only, but all those in which drawing played a part; and having an intellect so divine and marvelous that he was also an excellent geometrician, he not only worked in sculpture, making in his youth, in clay, some heads of women that are smiling, of which plaster casts are still taken, and likewise some heads of boys which appeared to have issued from the hand of a master; but in architecture, also, he made many drawings both of ground-plans and of other designs of buildings; and he was the first, although but a youth, who suggested the plan of reducing the river Arno to a navigable canal from Pisa to Florence.

He made designs of flour-mills, fullingmills, and engines, which might be driven by the force of water; and since he wished that his profession should be painting, he studied much in drawing after nature, and sometimes in making models of figures in clay, over which he would lay soft pieces of cloth dipped in clay, and then set himself patiently to draw them on a certain kind of very fine Rheims cloth, or prepared linen; and he executed them in black and white with the point of his brush, so that it was a marvel, as some of them by his hand, which I have in our book of drawings, still bear witness; besides which, he drew on paper with such diligence and so well, that there is no one who has ever equaled him in perfection of finish; and I have one, a head drawn with the style in chiaroscuro, which is divine.

And there was infused in that brain such grace from God, and a power of expression in such sublime accord with the intellect and memory that served it, and he knew so well how to express his conceptions by draught-man-ship, that he vanquished with his discourse, and confuted with his reasoning, every valiant wit. And he was continually making models and designs to show men how to remove mountains with ease, and how to bore them in order to pass from one level to another; and by means of levers, windlasses, and screws, he showed the way to raise and draw great weights, together with methods for emptying harbors, and pumps for removing water from low places, things which his brain never ceased from devising.

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.

Leonardo undertook to execute, for Francesco del Giocondo, the portrait of Mona Lisa, his wife; and after toiling over it for four years, he left it unfinished; and the work is now in the collection of King Frances of France, at Fontainebleau. In this head, whoever wished to see how closely art could imitate nature, was able to comprehend it with ease; for in it were counterfeited all the minuteness that with subtlety are able to be painted, seeing that the eyes had that luster and watery sheen which are always seen in life, and around them were all those rosy and pearly tints, as well as the lashes, which cannot be represented without the greatest subtlety. The eyebrows, through his having shown the manner in which the hairs spring from the flesh, here more close and here more scanty, and curve according to the pores of the skin, could not be more natural. The nose, with its beautiful nostrils, rosy and tender, appeared to be alive. The mouth, with its opening, and with its ends united by the red of the lips to the flesh-tints of the face, seemed, in truth, to be not colors but flesh. In the pit of the throat, if one gazed upon it intently, could be seen the beating of the pulse. And, indeed, it may be said that it was painted in such a manner as to make every valiant craftsman, be he who he may, tremble and lose heart. He made use, also, of this device: Mona Lisa being very beautiful, he always

employed, while he was painting her portrait, persons to play or sing, and jesters, who might make her remain merry, in order to take away that melancholy which painters are often wont to give to the portraits that they paint. There was very great disdain between Michelangelo Buonarroti and him, on account of which Michelangelo departed from Florence, with the excuse of Duke Giuliano, having been summoned by the Pope to the competition for the facade of S. Lorenzo. Leonardo, understanding this, departed and went into France, where the King, having had works by his hand, bore him great affection; and he desired that he should color the cartoon of S. Anne, but Leonardo, according to his custom, put him off for a long time with words. 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.

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. 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.

Above all, Leonardo was a humanist who tried to use observation to learn everything. He lacked a formal education in Latin and math, but dove into his studies with unbridled abandon. He studied anatomy and made hundreds of detailed drawings in his journals on the subject, including the first detailed drawings of the fetus in utero. He was fascinated by engineering and machines, and his journals contain a vast number of possible inventions that were centuries ahead of practice use, including flying machines, steam cannons, hydraulic pumps and a helicopter. In the late 20th century, a project was undertaken by scientists and engineers attempted to build Leonardo's machines. They were astonished to find that many of them actually worked.

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 Florentine society, his major scientific and artistic works, and how da Vinci's thirst for knowledge and his genius combined to produce the ultimate "Renaissance Man."

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Leonardo's place in Renaissance Florentine society.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how da Vinci's thirst for knowledge and his innate genius combined to produce the ultimate "Renaissance Man."

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Who is the most famous artist of all time? (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 (20 min)
- Video – Leonardo da Vinci (50 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Leonardo da Vinci (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Leonardo Da Vinci – an overview (30 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Leonardo's place in Renaissance Florentine society, his major scientific and artistic works, and how da Vinci's thirst for knowledge and his genius combined to produce the ultimate "Renaissance Man."

Extension

On tour: Il Museo Leonardiano di Vinci, Vinci

While on tour, students in Florence can visit Vinci (about 45 minutes west of the city), 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.
- <http://leonardodavinciworkshop.com/>
Leonardo da Vinci's Workshop (website)
- www.loc.gov/loc/kidslc/LGpdfs/leo-teacher.pdf
Leonardo's Workshop (PDF Teacher's Guide) – from the Library of Congress
- www.museoleonardiano.it/eng/
Museo Leonardiano Vinci (website) – official website from the Leonardo museum in Vinci
- 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.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rog5i2n1QVs
Leonardo da Vinci: The Man Who Wanted to Know Everything (video) – from the BBC, this 50-minute video goes through Leonardo's life and inventions.

Background Information

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo_da_Vinci
Leonardo da Vinci – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence
On the Road: Florence – from Passports Educational Travel

- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence_sightseeing
On the Road: Florence Sightseeing – 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
Renaissance Rome – Raphael: School of Athens

Key Terms

- Apprentice
- Florentine
- Leonardo
- Renaissance

