Leonardo da Vinci

Life and Times of Leonardo Da Vinci

Article Outline

Introduction; Early Life in Florence; Years in Milan; Return to Florence; Later Travels and Death; Paintings; Sculptural and Architectural Drawings; Scientific and Theoretical Projects

I Introduction

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Florentine artist, one of the great masters of the High Renaissance, celebrated as a painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, and scientist. His profound love of knowledge and research was the keynote of both his artistic and scientific endeavors. His innovations in the field of painting influenced the course of Italian art for more than a century after his death, and his scientific studies—particularly in the fields of anatomy, optics, and hydraulics—anticipated many of the developments of modern science.

II Early Life in Florence

Leonardo was born in the small town of Vinci, in Tuscany (Toscana), near Florence. He was the son of a wealthy Florentine notary and a peasant woman. In the mid-1460s the family settled in Florence, where Leonardo was given the best education that Florence, a major intellectual and artistic center of Italy, could offer. He rapidly advanced socially and intellectually. He was handsome, persuasive in conversation, and a fine musician and improviser. About 1466 he was apprenticed as a garzone (studio boy) to Andrea del Verrocchio, the leading Florentine painter and sculptor of his day. In Verrocchio's workshop Leonardo was introduced to many activities, from the painting of altarpieces and panel pictures to the creation of large sculptural projects in marble and bronze. In 1472 he was entered in the painter's guild of Florence, and in 1476 he was still considered Verrocchio's assistant. In Verrocchio's Baptism of Christ (1470?, Uffizi, Florence), the kneeling angel at the left of the painting is by Leonardo.

In 1478 Leonardo became an independent master. His first commission, to paint an altarpiece for the chapel of the Palazzo Vecchio, the Florentine town hall, was never executed. His first large painting, The Adoration of the Magi (begun 1481, Uffizi), left unfinished, was ordered in 1481 for the Monastery of San Donato a Scopeto, Florence. Other works ascribed to his youth are the so-called Benois Madonna (1478?, Hermitage, Saint Petersburg), the portrait Ginevra de' Benci (1474?, National Gallery, Washington, D.C.), and the unfinished Saint Jerome (1481?, Pinacoteca, Vatican).

III Years in Milan

About 1482 Leonardo entered the service of the duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, having written the duke an astonishing letter in which he stated that he could build portable bridges; that he knew the techniques of constructing bombardments and of making cannons; that he could build ships as well as armored vehicles, catapults, and other war machines; and that he could execute sculpture in marble, bronze, and clay. He served as principal engineer in the duke's numerous military enterprises and was active also as an architect. In addition, he assisted the Italian mathematician Luca Pacioli in the celebrated work Divina Proportione (1509).

Paintings Year Cost

Ginevra de' Benci 1474 5.5

The Adoration of the Magi 1481 49.3

Lady with an Ermine 1483 44.4

The Last Supper 1498 199.3