

Leonardo da Vinci

1452–1519

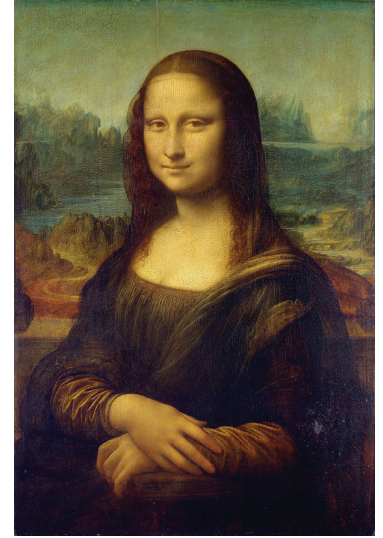
LEONARDO DA VINCI has become known as one of the best examples of a “Renaissance Man.” A Renaissance Man is a term that describes what many artists were doing during the Renaissance: they were exploring science, technology, and art all at the same time.

Da Vinci was born in the Florence area of Italy in the 1400s. At the time, Florence was the center of the Renaissance’s beginning. Florence had been in the Dark Ages for many years, but by the time Da Vinci was born, life had settled down enough that people had time to learn about ancient art and science. People were inspired to try these things on their own and a whole new age of learning began.

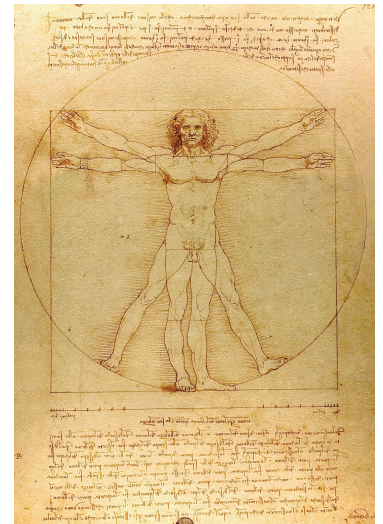
Before the Renaissance, paintings were very religious. Most were done in an iconic style, meaning the painter wanted people to focus more on the religion behind the painting rather than the artistry. However, Da Vinci had studied Greek and Roman art and wanted to make art in a similar style. Greek and Roman art was very realistic and was inspired by scientific study. Da Vinci took it one step further — when he painted human figures, even in clothes, he would start by drawing the skeleton, then the body over that, then finishing the painting. His paintings and drawings of people were very realistic. His famous drawing, The Vitruvian Man, is one of the first examples of someone trying to map out the proportions of the human body.

Accurate perspective was another part of painting that Medieval art often ignored. Da Vinci discovered a way of painting that showed depth. If something is far away, it looks very small. Medieval art was not very good at showing objects that were far away. Through careful observation, Da Vinci was able to paint backgrounds in a way that looked realistic.

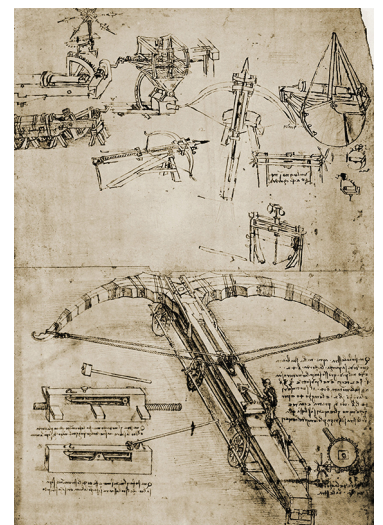
Da Vinci used the curiosity and attention to detail he showed in his art in other areas as well. He was also a great scientist, mathematician, engineer, and many other things. He drew many plans for machines that we now use, like helicopters and tanks. Science and art were very closely linked during the Renaissance and were especially close in Da Vinci’s mind. Both require a great imagination and a curiosity about what is real and what could be possible.



Mona Lisa, c. 1503–1506



Vitruvian Man, c. 1490



Giant crossbow study, c. 1500

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Drawing Exercise: Observing the Natural World

Da Vinci was well-known for his careful observations and research of the natural world. Many of his paintings and drawings were based on his findings. Find a leaf outside and look at it very carefully. Try to find all the veins and stems in it, and pay attention to its shape. After you have studied it, draw it in the space below, using as much detail as possible.

