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Honors English

Ms. Penna

Leonardo Da Vinci

“- is it so bad then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.”

~Ralph Waldo Emerson from “Self Reliance”

Leonardo da Vinci was born on April 15, 1452 to Ser Piero, a notary, and Caterina, a peasant girl. Da Vinci thought outside the box. He was often misunderstood. He was excommunicated from the church, and brought to trial at court. He had a numerous amount of critics, yet his ideas were far ahead of his time. Leonardo’s creativity and individuality led him to excel far beyond his peers. He excelled in art as well as in the sciences and engineering; these accomplishments made him one of the most famous men ever to have lived.

At the age of fourteen Leonardo served an apprenticeship with Andrea del Verrochio. It is believed that Leonardo’s father may have shown Verrochio some of Leonardo’s drawings, and the artist was so impressed that he offered Leonardo a position. A little while after beginning his apprenticeship, Piero requested that his son produce a work of art. Piero took his son a shield that was to be painted for a worker in his estate in Vinci. Leonardo decided something frightening should be painted onto the shield, yet did

not want to rely solely on his imagination so he collected lizards, snakes, grasshoppers, bats, crickets, among other creatures which he then observed and studied. He took bits and pieces from each creature combining them to create his own dragonlike creature. The painted dragon looked so lifelike that when Leonardo's father came to inspect it he was frightened at first sight. Piero then sold the painted shield to a Florentine merchant for a large sum of money, and bought a cheap painted shield to give to his worker. (O'Connor)

“...the greatest of all Andrea's pupils was Leonardo da Vinci, in whom besides a beauty of a person never sufficiently admired and a wonderful grace in all his actions, there was such a power of intellect that whatever he turned his mind to he made himself a master with ease.”(Vasari)

Leonardo learned much from Verrochio and lived with him for many years before venturing off on his own.

Leonardo kept his personal life pretty private. There is very little known about Da Vinci, and the first biography written about him was not written until 50 years after he had passed away. Even in his own notebooks not much is said about his personal life, although we do know that he stated he had a dislike for physical relations. He commented that “the act of procreation and anything that has any relation to it is so disgusting that human beings would soon die out if there were no pretty faces and sensuous dispositions.” (*Gesammelte Werke*, bd VIII, 1909-1913). It is believed that Leonardo had relations with numerous young boys. The first known instance of his interest in young boys occurred while he was still living with Verrochio he was accused twice of sodomy with a 17-year-old model, Jacopo Saltarelli. “After two months in jail he was acquitted

allegedly because no witnesses stepped forward, but actually on the strength of his father's respected position." (Saslow, p. 197)

Gian Giacomo Caprotto da Oreno, nicknamed Salai or Il Salaino, entered Leonardo's household at the age of ten as an assistant. Leonardo described Il Salaino as "a thief, a liar, stubborn, and a glutton." However Il Salaino remained his companion, servant, and assistant for the next thirty years. There are many erotic paintings by da Vinci containing Il Salaino's image. Many other of Leonardo's erotic drawings were destroyed after his death by a priest. Sixteen years after taking in Il Salaino, Leonardo met Count Francesco Melzi, the 15 year old son of a Lombard aristocrat. Melzi described Leonardo's feelings toward him as a *sviscerato et ardentissimo amore* ("a deeply passionate and most burning love"). (Crompton, p. 269) Melzi became Leonardo's pupil and life companion and he is considered to have been his favorite student. Leonardo's behavior although very common, was not understood or accepted by the church. His homosexual and erotic paintings were often criticized. He was very misunderstood.

Leonardo's artwork was unique, and his ideas ahead of his time.

"He conceived of ideas vastly ahead of his time, notably inventing the helicopter, a tank, the use of concentrated solar power, the calculator, a rudimentary theory of plate tectonics, the double hull, and others too numerous to mention." ("Leonardo da Vinci" internet)

Not only were inventions unique but his artwork as well, "He wasn't content to follow the techniques handed down to him. He liked to find new ways of doing things."

(O'Connor) Leonardo was fortunate to have a teacher who approved of his independent

nature and promoted creativeness and experimentation. Fifteenth-century artists were not expected to have an unique style, they were expected to emulate the style of their master.

Leonardo experimented with oil paints, a new invention at the time, and became the best at painting with them. Leonardo had many different styles of art, he had his realistic paintings such as the *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*, as well as influential paintings such as the *Vitruvian Man*. Many of his paintings showed opinion and insight into his views of life. Leonardo also had a group of drawings known as the “deluge” series, they are all drawn in black chalk, and very small in size. They all show destruction.

“Leonardo pioneered new painting techniques in many of his pieces. One of them, a colour shading technique called "Chiaroscuro", used a series of glazes custom-made by Leonardo. It is characterized by subtle transitions between colour areas, creating an atmospheric haze or smoky effect. Chiaroscuro is a technique of bold contrast between light and dark.” (Crystal, internet)

“Here was a man, tall and wonderfully handsome, strong enough to bend a horseshoe with his hands and gentle enough to buy caged birds so he could give them their freedom. A man whose skill as a painter seemed miraculous to others, yet never perfect enough to please himself. He would begin huge projects like trying to change the course of a river, but he would leave many of them unfinished.” (Cooper, p.2)

Leonardo rarely finished the projects he started. He started off enthusiastically; he spent weeks and sometimes months planning the organization the piece, often doing hundreds of sketches before making a final decision on the arrangement. He would then begin a cartoon version of his sketch, next he would attach the cartoon to the wooden panel or

wall which he planned to do the painting on. He next punched holes along the outline of the drawing, after that he used black chalk to mark the panel or wall through the punched holes in the cartoon. Finally he would start painting, first applying a coat of oil paint called the undercoating. Once that was dry he was prepared to begin really painting his work with layers upon layers of oil paint.

“The process was long and tedious. Leonardo worked slowly, not satisfied until each step was perfect. Often, he abandoned a project long before it was complete. Perhaps he got bored with it. Perhaps he found other projects that were more interesting. Whatever the reason, he sometimes frustrated his patrons and began to acquire a reputation as an unreliable, though talented artist.”(O’Connor,p.33)

Leonardo had no interest in money, he wanted his patrons to respect him as a creative artist not just a laborer. “He wanted to try new ideas and create new images. This rebelliousness and independence often left his patrons unhappy with his work.” (O’Connor, p.33) He was very different from other artists of his time. He liked to experiment and be original, rather than do exactly what his patrons requested.

Leonardo kept a series of notebooks, now known as the *Codex Arundel*, at the time not bound together just a bunch of papers of various shapes and sizes put together and published after Leonardo’s death. The notes were all written in mirror code, left-handed and from left to right, to keep as private as possible. There is much controversy about Leonardo’s notebooks and if there is symbolism behind his artwork. Dan Brown’s book entitle “The Da Vinci Code” has sparked an interest among people today. Brown’s novel suggests:

“that Jesus had a child with Mary Magdalene whose descendents live in France, and that this “proof” of the feminine principle in Christianity has been kept alive by a secret cult that included Leonardo da Vinci, who hinted at it in his art. Da Vinci’s “code,” the story goes, is encrypted in the artist’s rendering of St. John the Evangelist in his famous painting *The Last Supper* (1498): the androgynous St. John, often called the Beloved Apostle because of Jesus’s special affection for him, is actually Mary Magdalene. Going even further down a feminist path, Brown casts the *Mona Lisa* (1506) as an epicene vision of da Vinci himself.”(Bronski internet)

This has caused a lot of controversy and discussion among the media as well as member of the Vatican. There are many other interpretations of what may be encoded or symbolized in da Vinci’s work. Many believe that da Vinci’s work shows the homosexual believes that he himself lived by. Michael Bronski says, “da Vinci’s code exposes a homoerotic bond between Jesus and St. John, and it posits that this bond was the basis for religious acceptance of not only same-sex love, but also divinely accepted same-sex unions as well.” People believe that da Vinci among a few others knew the truth about Jesus, whether it be that he had a child with Mary Magdalene, or that he and St. John were lovers. Whichever the case, Leonardo’s work is controversial still centuries later.

Leonardo perfectly emulates the quote “...To be great is to be misunderstood.” Leonardo was misunderstood at his time, he often lost interest in work, and did things differently from others. He had a love for men, and a distaste for human procreation. His beliefs and ideas were and are questionable still to this day. Yet his art his amazing and powerful. People travel millions of miles to see his paintings. Almost every person in the

world has seen or heard of the *Mona Lisa*. Leonardo da Vinci is the greatest artist ever to have lived.

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