

Definition: **Leonardo da Vinci** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Florentine painter, sculptor, architect, engineer and scientist. By the 1470s, he developed his characteristic style of painting figures who seem rapt in sweet melancholy. In c.1482 Leonardo moved to Milan where he worked mainly for Ludovico Sforza. While in Milan, he worked on an altarpiece, *The Virgin of the Rocks* (1483-85). Leonardo painted the *Last Supper* (c.1498) on the walls of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, using a new mural technique that proved unstable. When the French invaded Milan in 1499, he left for Florence. From 1500-06, he created his finest easel paintings, including the enigmatic *Mona Lisa* (c.1504-05). His 19 notebooks contain detailed scientific drawings, including plans for a helicopter-like flying machine, a tank, and a submarine.



Image from: [The Virgin of the Rocks \(The Virgin with the Infant Saint John adoring the Infant Christ accompanied by an Angel\)](#) in [National Gallery Collection](#)

Summary Article: **Leonardo da Vinci**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(dɛ̃ vɛ̃nˈtʃɛ̃, Ital. lãõnãrˈdõ dã vɛ̃nˈtʃɛ̃), 1452–1519, Italian painter, sculptor, architect, musician, engineer, and scientist, b. near Vinci, a hill village in Tuscany. The versatility and creative power of Leonardo mark him as a supreme example of Renaissance genius. He depicted in his drawings, with scientific precision and consummate artistry, subjects ranging from flying machines to caricatures; he also executed intricate anatomical studies of people, animals, and plants. The richness and originality of intellect expressed in his notebooks reveal one of the greatest minds of all time.

Early Life and Work: Vinci and Florence

Leonardo was the illegitimate son of a Florentine notary and a peasant woman. Presumably he passed his childhood with his father's family in Vinci, where he developed an enduring interest in nature. Early sources describe his beauty, charm of manner, and precocious display of artistic talent.

In 1466 Leonardo moved to Florence, where he entered the workshop of Verrocchio and came into contact with such artists as Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Lorenzo di Credi. Early in his apprenticeship he painted an angel, and perhaps portions of the landscape, in Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ* (Uffizi). In 1472 he was registered in the painters' guild. The culmination of Leonardo's art during his first period in Florence is the magnificent unfinished *Adoration of the Magi* (Uffizi) commissioned in 1481 by the monks of San Donato a Scopeto. In this work is revealed the integration of dramatic movement and chiaroscuro that characterizes the master's mature style.

Middle Life and Mature Work: Milan and Florence

Leonardo went to Milan c.1482 and remained at the court of Ludovico Sforza for 16 years. There he composed the greater part of his *Trattato della pittura* and the extensive notebooks that demonstrate the marvelous versatility and penetration of his genius, which experimented freely in the arts and sciences. As court artist he also organized elaborate festivals. Severe plagues in 1484 and 1485 drew his attention to problems of town planning, an interest which was revived during his last years in France. Many drawings of plans and elevations for domed churches reflect a concern with

architectural problems that must have been stimulated by contact with Bramante during these years. He worked c.1488 on a model for the tambour and dome of the cathedral at Milan. In 1490 he was employed with Francesco di Giorgio as consulting engineer on the restoration of the cathedral at Pavia and later on the cathedral at Piacenza.

In 1483, Leonardo, with his pupil Ambrogio de Predis, was commissioned to execute the famous *Madonna of the Rocks*. Two versions of the painting exist—one in the Louvre (1483–c.1486), another in the National Gallery, London (1483–1508). Leonardo's fresco of the *Last Supper* (Milan) was begun c.1495 and completed by 1498. This work is now badly damaged. Leonardo's own experiments with mural painting—in the *Last Supper* he did not use traditional fresco technique—account in part for its disintegration, which was already noticed by 1517, and subsequent deterioration and repeated restorations obliterated details and individual figures. In 1978 a major (and controversial) restoration was begun, and in 1994–95 protective air-filtration and climate-control equipment were installed. The restoration was completed in 1999, leaving the mural brightened considerably with some details clarified, but also revealing the extensive loss of the original painting. Nonetheless, the composition and general disposition of the figures, in which all lines and attention intersect at the mural's center—the head of Christ outlined against a clear sky and landscape—reveal a power of invention and a sublimity of spiritual content that mark the painting among the world's masterpieces.

While at Ludovico's court Leonardo also worked on an equestrian monument to the duke's father, Francesco Sforza. The work was never cast, and the model, admired by his contemporaries, perished during the French invasion of 1499. In 1511 he undertook a similar work with the commission of an equestrian monument for Gian Giacomo Trivulzio. This work was also never completed and known only through drawings related to the project. After the fall (1499) of Ludovico Sforza, Leonardo left Milan and, following brief sojourns in Mantua and Venice, returned to Florence in 1500.

Back in Florence Leonardo engaged in much theoretical work in mathematics and pursued his anatomical studies at the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, dissecting cadavers, drawing, and making copious notes in an attempt to understand the muscles, bones, and other aspects of body that lay beneath the skin and dictated the human countenance and form. In 1502 he entered the service of Cesare Borgia as a military engineer. His engagement took him to central Italy to study swamp reclamation projects in Piombino and to tour the cities of Romagna. At Urbino he met Niccolò Machiavelli, who later became a close friend.

By 1503 he was back in Florence, where he was commissioned to execute the fresco of the battle of Anghiari. This work, like its companion piece assigned to Michelangelo, was never completed, and the cartoons were subsequently destroyed. The work exerted enormous influence on later artists, however, and some impression of the original may be had from anonymous copies in the Uffizi and Casa Horne (Florence), from an engraving of 1558 of Lorenzo Zacchia, and from a drawing by Rubens (Louvre). From about this time dates the celebrated *Mona Lisa* (Louvre), the portrait of Lisa del Giocondo, a Florentine silk merchant's wife, which he worked on for 16 years.

In 1506, Leonardo returned to Milan, engaged by Charles d'Amboise in the name of the French king, Louis XII. Here he again served as architect and engineer. Gifted with a gargantuan curiosity concerning the physical world, he continued his scientific investigations, concerning himself with problems of geology, botany, hydraulics, and mechanics. In 1510–11 his interest in anatomy quickened considerably. At the same time he was active as painter and sculptor, had many pupils, and profoundly influenced the

Milanese painters. A painting generally ascribed to this period is the *St. Anne, Mary, and the Child* (Louvre), a work that exemplifies Leonardo's handling of *sfumato*—misty, subtle transitions in tone.

Late Life and Work: Rome and France

In 1513 Leonardo went to Rome, attracted by the patronage of the newly elected Medici pope, Leo X, and his brother Giuliano. Here he found the field dominated by Michelangelo and Raphael. The aging master was assigned to various architectural and engineering projects at the Vatican and received commissions for several paintings. It was perhaps in this period that he executed the enigmatic painting of the young *St. John the Baptist* (Louvre). Giuliano de' Medici left Rome in 1515 and died at Fiesole in the following year.

It is conjectured that Leonardo left with him, attached to his household, and that soon afterward he accepted an invitation of Francis I of France to settle at the castle of Cloux, near Amboise. Here the old master was left entirely free to pursue his own researches until his death. Although there is no certain record of his last years, he seems to have been active with festival decoration and to have been interested in a canal project. Notes and drawings ascribed to this late period show his continued interest in natural philosophy and experimental science.

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