

Leonardo DaVinci

The illegitimate son of a 25-year-old notary, Ser Piero, and a peasant girl, Caterina, Leonardo was born on April 15, 1452, in Vinci, Italy, just outside Florence. His father took custody of him shortly after his birth, while his mother married someone else and moved to a neighboring town. He eventually had a total of 17 half sisters and brothers.

Growing up in his father's Vinci home, Leonardo had access to scholarly texts owned by family and friends. He was also exposed to Vinci's longstanding painting tradition, and when he was about 15 his father apprenticed him to the renowned workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio in Florence. Even as an apprentice, Leonardo demonstrated his talent. Indeed, his genius seems to have seeped into a number of pieces produced by the Verrocchio's workshop from the period 1470 to 1475. Leonardo stayed in the Verrocchio workshop until 1477 when he set up a shingle for himself.

In search of new challenges he entered the service of the Duke of Milan in 1482. He spent 17 years in Milan, leaving only after Duke Ludovico Sforza's fall from power in 1499. From 1485 to 1490, Leonardo produced a study on loads of subjects, including nature, flying machines, geometry, mechanics, municipal construction, canals and architecture (designing everything from churches to fortresses). His studies from this period contain designs for advanced weapons, including a tank and other war vehicles, combat devices, and submarines. Also Leonardo produced his first anatomical studies.

Alas, Leonardo's interests were so broad, and he was so often compelled by new subjects, that he usually failed to finish what he started. This lack of "stick-to-it-ness" resulted in his completing only about six works in these 17 years, including "The Last Supper" and "The Virgin on the Rocks," and he left dozens of paintings and projects unfinished or unrealized. He spent most of his time studying science, either by going out into nature and observing things or by locking himself away in his workshop cutting up bodies or pondering universal truths.

Between 1490 and 1495 he developed his habit of recording his studies in meticulously illustrated notebooks. His work covered four main themes: painting, architecture, the elements of mechanics, and human anatomy.

Over the next 16 years, Leonardo worked and traveled throughout Italy. He traveled for a year with Borgia's army as a military engineer. About 1503, Leonardo reportedly began work on the "Mona Lisa." On July 9, 1504, he received notice of the death of his father, Ser Piero.

From 1513 to 1516, he worked in Rome, maintaining a workshop and undertaking a variety of projects for the Pope. He continued his studies of human anatomy and physiology, but the Pope forbade him from dissecting cadavers, which truly cramped his style.

Following the death of his patron Giuliano de' Medici in March of 1516, he was offered the title of Premier Painter and Engineer and Architect of the King by Francis I in France. His last and perhaps most generous patron, Francis I provided Leonardo with a cushy job, including a stipend and manor house near the royal chateau at Amboise.

Leonardo died on May 2, 1519 in Cloux, France. Legend has it that King Francis was at his side when he died, cradling Leonardo's head in his arms.

Michaelangelo Buonarroti

Born on 6 March 1475, in a Florentine village called Caprese. His father was a serving magistrate of the Florentine Republic and from an important family.

However, Michelangelo did not wish to imitate his father's career, and was attracted by the artistic world. But, aged 13, Michelangelo was apprenticed to Domenico Ghirlandaio, the leading fresco wall painter in Florence. Here Michelangelo learned some of the basic painting techniques, and also taught himself new skills such as sculpting.

His talents were soon noticed by one of the most powerful families in Florence - Lorezo de' Medici. Here, at de Medici's court, Michelangelo was able to learn from the classic Masters and he became determined to improve upon the great classics of Greek and Latin art. But the de Medici's, lost power and Michelangelo was forced to look elsewhere for commissions. In 1496, he travelled to Rome where he began a long relationship of doing commissions for the Popes who were making St Peter's Basilica a pinnacle of Western art. It was in 1496, that he began work on his beloved Pieta, commissioned by a

French cardinal-diplomat, Jean Bilheres. The Pieta is a tender and compassionate sculpture of the Virgin Mary, nursing her crucified son - Jesus Christ. His next most famous sculpture was his huge undertaking of a life size David. Michelangelo created a masterpiece - a perfection of the human form - and most agreed, Michelangelo had surpassed the classic predecessors.

In 1505, Pope Julius II summoned Michelangelo to Rome and commissioned him in a number of projects. The first was to create a magnificent tomb. Michelangelo was quick to anger - it did not matter even if it was the Pope. But, the Pope deflected Michelangelo's anger and through a combination of persuasion, threat and flattery, later offered Michelangelo a new commission to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

This was a huge undertaking. Initially the Pope suggested scenes from the New Testament, but, Michelangelo chose the Old Testament with its great variety of characters and dramatic scenes. The project took four years to complete and involved Michelangelo working in awkward positions painting through great neck pain.

But, on completion, everyone was awestruck by the magnificence of the work. Michelangelo gained the reputation of the 'divine Michelangelo' - A reputation he was only too quick to encourage. Michelangelo suffered from no false modesty and always felt himself to be God's Artist.

In later years, Michelangelo returned to Florence and became embroiled in politics as he helped defend the city against the attacks of the De Medici's. When the city fell to the De Medici's, Michelangelo feared for his life. But, his fame as the greatest artist of his generation made him too valuable to kill and he was simply given more art to work on.

In his final years, he became increasingly religious. His depth of religious feeling can be seen through his poetry and direction of his art.