

Leonardo Da Vinci - By Maurice W. Brockwell

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[Illustration: Plate 1--MONA LISA. Frontispiece

In the Louvre. No. 1601. 2 ft 6 ½ ins. By 1 ft. 9 ins. (0.77 x 0.53)]

LEONARDO DA VINCI

By MAURICE W. BROCKWELL

Illustrated With Eight Reproductions in Colour

[Illustration]

"Leonardo," wrote an English critic as far back as 1721, "was a Man so happy in his genius, so consummate in his Profession, so accomplished in the Arts, so knowing in the Sciences, and withal, so much esteemed by the Age wherein he lived, his Works so highly applauded by the Ages which have succeeded, and his Name and Memory still preserved with so much Veneration by the present Age--that, if anything could equal the Merit of the Man, it must be the Success he met with. Moreover, 'tis not in Painting alone, but in Philosophy, too, that Leonardo surpassed all his Brethren of the 'Pencil.'"

This admirable summary of the great Florentine painter's life's work still holds good to-day.

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HIS BIRTH

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Leonardo Da Vinci, the many-sided genius of the Italian Renaissance, was born, as his name implies, at the little town of Vinci, which is about six miles from Empoli and twenty miles west of Florence. Vinci is still very inaccessible, and the only means of conveyance is the cart of a general carrier and postman, who sets out on his journey from Empoli at sunrise and sunset. Outside a house in the middle of the main street of Vinci to-day a modern and white-washed bust of the great artist is pointed to with much pride by the inhabitants. Leonardo's traditional birthplace on the outskirts of the town still exists, and serves now as the headquarters of a farmer and small wine exporter.

Leonardo di Ser Piero d'Antonio di Ser Piero di Ser Guido da Vinci--for that was his full legal name--was the natural and first-born son of Ser Piero, a country notary, who, like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, followed that honourable vocation with distinction and success, and who subsequently--when Leonardo was a youth--was appointed notary to the Signoria of Florence. Leonardo's mother was one Caterina, who afterwards married Accabriga di Piero del Vaccha of Vinci.

[Illustration: Plate II.--Annunciation

In the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. No. 1288. 3 ft 3 ins. By 6 ft 11 ins.

(0.99 x 2.18)

Although this panel is included in the Uffizi Catalogue as being by Leonardo, it is in all probability by his master, Verrocchio.]

The date of Leonardo's birth is not known with any certainty. His age is given as five in a taxation return made in 1457 by his grandfather Antonio, in whose house he was educated; it is therefore concluded that he was born in 1452. Leonardo's father Ser Piero, who afterwards married four times, had eleven children by his third and fourth wives. Is it unreasonable to suggest that Leonardo may have had these numbers in mind in 1496-1498 when he was painting in his famous "Last Supper" the figures of eleven Apostles and one outcast?

However, Ser Piero seems to have legitimised his "love child" who very early showed promise of extraordinary talent and untiring energy.

HIS EARLY TRAINING

Practically nothing is known about Leonardo's boyhood, but Vasari informs us that Ser Piero, impressed with the remarkable character of his son's genius, took some of his drawings to Andrea del Verrocchio, an intimate friend, and begged him earnestly to express an opinion on

them. Verrocchio was so astonished at the power they revealed that he advised Ser Piero to send Leonardo to study under him. Leonardo thus entered the studio of Andrea del Verrocchio about 1469-1470. In the workshop of that great Florentine sculptor, goldsmith, and artist he met other craftsmen, metal workers, and youthful painters, among whom was Botticelli, at that moment of his development a jovial _habitué_ of the Poetical Supper Club, who had not yet given any premonitions of becoming the poet, mystic, and visionary of later times. There also Leonardo came into contact with that unoriginal painter Lorenzo di Credi, his junior by seven years. He also, no doubt, met Perugino, whom Michelangelo called "that blockhead in art." The genius and versatility of the Vincian painter was, however, in no way dulled by intercourse with lesser artists than himself; on the contrary he vied with each in turn, and readily outstripped his fellow pupils. In 1472, at the age of twenty, he was admitted into the Guild of Florentine Painters.

Unfortunately very few of Leonardo's paintings have come down to us.

Indeed there do not exist a sufficient number of finished and absolutely authentic oil pictures from his own hand to afford illustrations for this short chronological sketch of his life's work.

The few that do remain, however, are of so exquisite a quality--or were until they were "comforted" by the uninspired restorer--that we can unreservedly accept the enthusiastic records of tradition in respect of all his works. To rightly understand the essential

characteristics of Leonardo's achievements it is necessary to regard him as a scientist quite as much as an artist, as a philosopher no less than a painter, and as a draughtsman rather than a colourist. There is hardly a branch of human learning to which he did not at one time or another give his eager attention, and he was engrossed in turn by the study of architecture--the foundation-stone of all true art--sculpture, mathematics, engineering and music. His versatility was unbounded, and we are apt to regret that this many-sided genius did not realise that it is by developing his power within certain limits that the great master is revealed. Leonardo may be described as the most Universal Genius of Christian times-perhaps of all time.

[Illustration: PLATE III.-THE VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS

In the National Gallery. No. 1093. 6 ft. ½ in. h. by 3 ft 9 ½ in. w.
(1.83 x 1.15)

This picture was painted in Milan about 1495 by Ambrogio da Predis under the supervision and guidance of Leonardo da Vinci, the essential features of the composition being borrowed from the earlier "Vierge aux Rochers," now in the Louvre.]

HIS EARLY WORKS

To about the year 1472 belongs the small picture of the "Annunciation," now in the Louvre, which after being the subject of much contention among European critics has gradually won its way to general recognition as an early work by Leonardo himself. That it was painted in the studio of Verrocchio was always admitted, but it was long catalogued by the Louvre authorities under the name of Lorenzo di Credi. It is now, however, attributed to Leonardo (No. 1602 A). Such uncertainties as to attribution were common half a century ago when scientific art criticism was in its infancy.

Another painting of the "Annunciation," which is now in the Uffizi Gallery (No. 1288) is still officially attributed to Leonardo. This small picture, which has been considerably repainted, and is perhaps by Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo's master, is the subject of Plate II.

To January 1473 belongs Leonardo's earliest dated work, a pen-and-ink drawing--"A Wide View over a Plain," now in the Uffizi. The inscription together with the date in the top left-hand corner is reversed, and proves a remarkable characteristic of Leonardo's handwriting--viz., that he wrote from right to left; indeed, it has been suggested that he did this in order to make it difficult for any one else to read the words, which were frequently committed to paper

by the aid of peculiar abbreviations.

Leonardo continued to work in his master's studio till about 1477. On January 1st of the following year, 1478, he was commissioned to paint an altar-piece for the Chapel of St. Bernardo in the Palazzo Vecchio, and he was paid twenty-five florins on account. He, however, never carried out the work, and after waiting five years the Signoria transferred the commission to Domenico Ghirlandajo, who also failed to accomplish the task, which was ultimately, some seven years later, completed by Filippino Lippi. This panel of the "Madonna Enthroned, St. Victor, St. John Baptist, St. Bernard, and St. Zenobius," which is dated February 20, 1485, is now in the Uffizi.

That Leonardo was by this time a facile draughtsman is evidenced by his vigorous pen-and-ink sketch--now in a private collection in Paris--of Bernardo Bandini, who in the Pazzi Conspiracy of April 1478 stabbed Giuliano de' Medici to death in the Cathedral at Florence during High Mass. The drawing is dated December 29, 1479, the date of Bandini's public execution in Florence.

In that year also, no doubt, was painted the early and, as might be expected, unfinished "St. Jerome in the Desert," now in the Vatican, the under-painting being in umber and _terracotta_. Its authenticity is vouched for not only by the internal evidence of the picture itself, but also by the similarity of treatment seen in a drawing in the Royal

Library at Windsor. Cardinal Fesch, a princely collector in Rome in the early part of the nineteenth century, found part of the picture--the torso--being used as a box-cover in a shop in Rome. He long afterwards discovered in a shoemaker's shop a panel of the head which belonged to the torso. The jointed panel was eventually purchased by Pope Pius IX., and added to the Vatican Collection.

In March 1480 Leonardo was commissioned to paint an altar-piece for the monks of St. Donato at Scopeto, for which payment in advance was made to him. That he intended to carry out this contract seems most probable. He, however, never completed the picture, although it gave rise to the supremely beautiful cartoon of the "Adoration of the Magi," now in the Uffizi (No. 1252). As a matter of course it is unfinished, only the under-painting and the colouring of the figures in green on a brown ground having been executed. The rhythm of line, the variety of attitude, the profound feeling for landscape and an early application of chiaroscuro effect combine to render this one of his most characteristic productions.