

Leonardo da Vinci

The Renaissance was a transformational period in European history from roughly the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. It was a cultural movement that began in Italy and eventually spread throughout Europe. The Renaissance transformed nearly all facets of European culture and society. It saw a resurgence of classical texts, and the development of new scientific techniques and novel and innovative styles of art. Leonardo da Vinci (1450–1519) is perhaps the most famous figure of the Renaissance. His life and work reflected the popular humanist ideals that shaped the Renaissance era. In many ways, Leonardo da Vinci reflects the fundamental components of the Renaissance, as his interests spanned the fields of art, architecture, music, science, mathematics, anatomy, geology, and botany.

Renaissance

By the sixteenth century, the Renaissance had spread throughout Europe, impacting the course of literature, science, philosophy, religion, politics, and art. However, the Renaissance initially started in Italy with figures such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, who studied and dabbled in an extraordinary number of intellectual and artistic branches. Many consider da Vinci to be the epitome of the “Renaissance man”—a Renaissance polymath, someone whose intellectual achievements and interests span a wide variety of fields in art, science, and literature. Along with Leonardo da Vinci other Renaissance figures such as Michelangelo, Galileo Galilei, and Copernicus are considered to embody the qualities and characteristics of a classic Renaissance man. Many of these men, including da Vinci, are also considered humanists, humanism having emerged as a significant intellectual movement during the Renaissance.

Humanism developed as a reaction to the rigid and narrow teachings of medieval Scholasticism, which promoted the education of a small portion of the population in preparation for becoming doctors, lawyers, or theologians. The humanist movement emerged as an alternative path of education and civic engagement. It emphasized the benefits of creating a citizenry equipped with the ability to converse intelligently and participate in civic life toward the betterment of humankind. Humanists believed that the path to this could be found through study of the humanities—rhetoric, grammar, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Humanist education was also deeply grounded in the restoration of classical texts, to be used as guides to moral philosophy.

Da Vinci the Artist

At an early age, Leonardo da Vinci moved to Florence, where he apprenticed with the painter and sculptor Verrochio. Da Vinci’s capacity for brilliance was obvious even at this early stage in his life. He often experimented with different artistic forms and techniques. In the Italian art environment, he was in the vanguard of using oil in paintings. His work sparked a new style of art in Italy. In 1481, at approximately the age of 30, da Vinci moved to Milan to work for the Duke of Milan. It was during his time

in Milan that Leonardo produced one of his most famous works of art, and arguably the most famous fresco in history—*The Last Supper* (1495–1498).

During the first decade of the sixteenth century, the Italian city-states and territories launched into war that spanned from Milan to Rome. This war, combined with the Catholic Church's condemnation of his work, led da Vinci to flee to Paris under the patronage of the French court of Francis I. While living in France, he painted the world renowned *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503–1506), the world's most well known portrait.

Da Vinci the Inventor

One of da Vinci's famous drawings, "Vitruvian Man" (ca. 1487), reflects his intersecting interests in art and science. It also demonstrates the impact of humanism on his work. "Vitruvian Man" depicts the image of a man superimposed in two positions. In addition to the visual representation, Leonardo included detailed notes based on the writings of the ancient classical architect Vitruvius. Vitruvius viewed the human body as the primary source of proportion in the classical style of architecture. Leonardo paid homage to Vitruvius in his illustration of the relationship between ideal human proportions and geometry. "Vitruvian Man" combined Leonardo's study of art, science, anatomy, and geometry with his veneration for the writings of antiquity.

In addition to his great work as an artist, da Vinci, drawing his inspiration from the natural world, attempted to create works of science and engineering. His methods involved an emphasis on observation and detail, as opposed to theory, which was the traditional approach to science during this period. He produced a large number of studies and depictions of plants and animals. He sought to portray the intricacies of horses, the movement of water, and the complexities of the human body. He drafted rudimentary sketches and designs of a wide range of machines, from helicopters to tanks. Leonardo also dabbled in the examination of human anatomy, and at times would obtain corpses from local hospitals and partake in dissection toward the furthering of art and science. Because of this, the church declared Leonardo to be anti-Christian and denounced his work.

Summary:

- The Renaissance shaped the intellectual, social, cultural, and political facets of European life from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century.
- Humanism emerged as a dominant method of learning and philosophy that encouraged a revival of classical texts and a study of five humanities: poetry, grammar, history, moral philosophy, and rhetoric. Humanist thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas More influenced Europe's intellectual and political environment up through the eighteenth century. Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci continued to do the same for Europe's cultural and artistic development.
- Leonardo's adherence to the methods of humanism and his fervent inquiry into a vast array of studies—from science, to literature, to art—represent the major transformations of the Renaissance period.

- Leonardo's legendary works of art, such as the *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*, continue to stand as some of the most iconic pieces of art in Western history. His influence on the fields of art and the study of the natural world are nearly unparalleled.