

“Life of Leonardo da Vinci” (1452-1519)

From Giorgio Vasari: **Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects**

Explanations and Questions

...Marvelous and divine, indeed, was Leonardo the son of Ser Piero da Vinci. In erudition and letters he would have distinguished himself, if he had not been variable and unstable. For he set himself to learn many things, and when he had begun them gave them up. In arithmetic, during the few months that he applied himself to it, he made such progress that he often perplexed his master by the doubts and difficulties that he propounded. He gave some time to the study of music, and learnt to play on the lute, improvising songs most divinely. But though he applied himself to such various subjects, he never laid aside drawing and modeling in relief, to which his fancy inclined him more than to anything else; which Ser Piero perceiving, he took some of his drawings one day and carried them to Andrea del Verrocchio, with whom he was in close friendship, and prayed him to say whether he thought, if Leonardo gave himself up to drawing, he would succeed. Andrea was astounded at the great beginning Leonardo had made, and urged Ser Piero to make him apply himself to it. So he arranged with Leonardo that he was to go to Andrea's workshop, which Leonardo did very willingly, and set himself to practice every art in which design has a part. For he had such a marvelous mind that, besides being a good geometrician, he worked at modeling (making while a boy some laughing women's heads, and some heads of children which seem to have come from a master's hand), and also made many designs for architecture; and he was the first, while he was still quite young, to discuss the question of making a channel for the river Arno from Pisa to Florence. He made models of mills and presses, and machines to be worked by water, and designs for tunneling through mountains, and levers and cranes for raising great weights, so that it seemed that his brain never ceased inventing; and many of these drawings are still scattered about. Among them was one drawn for some of the citizens when governing Florence, to show how it would be possible to lift up the church of [Saint] Giovanni, and put steps under it without throwing it down; and he supported his scheme with such strong reasons as made it appear possible, though as soon as he was gone every one felt in his mind how impossible it really was. ...

Vinci is a village near Florence; basically, he is described as the son of Mr. Piero of Vinci.

Verrocchio (1435-1488) was a major Florentine sculptor who also painted

“arranged” in 1468?

While, as we have said, he was studying art under Andrea del Verrocchio, the latter was painting a picture of [Saint] John baptizing Christ. Leonardo worked upon an angel who was holding the clothes, and although he was so young, he managed it so well that Leonardo's angel was better than Andrea's figures, which was the cause of Andrea's

This painting was completed in 1475, and Verrocchio did stop painting about that time

never touching colors again, being angry that a boy should know more than he.

There is a story that Ser Piero, being at his country house, was asked by one of the country people to get a round piece of wood, which he had cut from a figtree, painted for him in Florence, which he very willingly undertook to do, as the man was skilled in catching birds and fishing, and was very serviceable to Ser Piero in these sports. So having it brought to Florence without telling Leonardo where it came from, he asked him to paint something upon it. Leonardo, finding it crooked and rough, straightened it by means of fire, and gave it to a turner that it might be made smooth and even. Then having prepared it for painting, he began to think what he could paint upon it that would frighten every one that saw it, having the effect of the head of Medusa. So he brought for this purpose to his room, which no one entered but himself, lizards, grasshoppers, serpents, butterflies, locusts, bats, and other strange animals of the kind, and from them all he produced a great animal so horrible and fearful that it seemed to poison the air with its fiery breath. This he represented coming out of some dark broken rocks, with venom issuing from its open jaws, fire from its eyes, and smoke from its nostrils, a monstrous and horrible thing indeed. And he suffered much in doing it, for the smell in the room of these dead animals was very bad, though Leonardo did not feel it from the love he bore to art. When the work was finished, Leonardo told his father that he could send for it when he liked. And Ser Piero going one morning to the room for it, when he knocked at the door, Leonardo opened it, and telling him to wait a little, turned back into the room, placed the picture in the light, and arranged the window so as to darken the room a little, and then brought him in to see it. Ser Piero at the first sight started back, not perceiving that the creature that he saw was painted, and was turning to go, when Leonardo stopped him saying, "The work answers the purpose for which it was made. Take it then, for that was the effect I wanted to produce." The thing seemed marvelous to Ser Piero, and he praised greatly Leonardo's whimsical idea. And secretly buying from a merchant another circular piece of wood, painted with a heart pierced with a dart, he gave it to the countryman, who remained grateful to him as long as he lived. But Leonardo's Ser Piero sold to some merchants in Florence for a hundred ducats, and it soon came into the hands of the Duke of Milan, who bought it of them for three hundred ducats. ...

In Greek mythology, Medusa had snakes for hair. Looking at her would turn viewers into stone.

The painting is being praised for being so realistic that it does not look like a painting

Ducats are gold coins

Leonardo was so pleased whenever he saw a strange head or beard or hair of unusual appearance that he would follow such a person a whole day, and so learn him by heart, that when he reached home he could draw him as if he were present. There are many of these heads to be seen, both of men and women, such as the head of Americo Vespucci, which is the head of an old man most beautifully drawn in chalk; and also of Scaramuccia, captain of the gypsies. When Giovan Galeazzo, Duke of Milan, was dead, and Lodovico Sforza became duke in the year 1494,

A mapmaker, Vespucci's first name eventually gave the names to two continents!

Leonardo was brought to Milan to play the lute before him, in which he greatly delighted. Leonardo brought an instrument which he had made himself, a new and strange thing made mostly of silver, in the form of a horse's head, that the tube might be larger and the sound more sonorous, by which he surpassed all the other musicians who were assembled there. Besides, he was the best improvisator of his time. The duke, hearing his marvelous discourse, became enamored of his talents to an incredible degree, and prayed him to paint an altarpiece of the Nativity, which he sent to the emperor.

He also painted in Milan for the friars of [Saint] Domenic, at S. Maria delle Grazie, a Last Supper, a thing most beautiful and marvelous. He gave to the heads of the apostles great majesty and beauty, but left that of Christ imperfect, not thinking it possible to give that celestial divinity which is required for the representation of Christ. The work, finished after this sort, has always been held by the Milanese in the greatest veneration, and by strangers also, because Leonardo imagined, and has succeeded in expressing, the desire that has entered the minds of the apostles to know who is betraying their Master. So in the face of each one may be seen love, fear, indignation, or grief at not being able to understand the meaning of Christ; and this excites no less astonishment than the obstinate hatred and treachery to be seen in Judas. Besides this, every lesser part of the work shows an incredible diligence; even in the tablecloth the weaver's work is imitated in a way that could not be better in the thing itself.

It is said that the prior of the place was very importunate in urging Leonardo to finish the work, it seeming strange to him to see Leonardo standing half a day lost in thought; and he would have liked him never to have put down his pencil, as if it were a work like digging the garden. And this not being enough, he complained to the duke, and was so hot about it that he was constrained to send for Leonardo and urge him to the work. Leonardo, knowing the prince to be acute and intelligent, was ready to discuss the matter with him, which he would not do with the prior. He reasoned about art, and showed him that men of genius may be working when they seem to be doing the least, working out inventions in their minds, and forming those perfect ideas which afterwards they express with their hands. He added that he still had two heads to do; that of Christ, which he would not seek for in the world, and which he could not hope that his imagination would be able to conceive of such beauty and celestial grace as was fit for the incarnate divinity. Besides this, that of Judas was wanting, which he was considering, not thinking himself capable of imagining a form to express the face of him who after receiving so many benefits had a soul so evil that he was resolved to betray his Lord and the creator of the world; but this second he was looking for, and if he could find no better there was always the head of this importunate and foolish prior. This moved the duke marvelously to laughter, and he said he was a thousand times right. So the poor prior, quite confused, left

The Last Supper was painted between 1495 and 1498, in Milan. It is tempura on a plaster wall.

Again, notice why it is praised: "could not be better in the thing itself."

The prior would be the leader of the local Dominican friars

Why did Leonardo supposedly leave the head of Christ imperfect?

According to Vasari, what is the role of imagination in artistic creation?

off urging him and left him alone, and Leonardo finished Judas's head, which is a true portrait of treachery and cruelty. But that of Christ, as we have said, he left imperfect. The excellence of this picture, both in composition and incomparable finish of execution, made the King of France desire to carry it into his kingdom, and he tried every way to find architects who could bring it safely, not considering the expense, so much he desired to have it. But as it was painted on the wall his Majesty could not have his will, and it with the Milanese refectory.

While he was working at Supper, he painted Lodovico with his eldest son, Massimiliano, and on the other side the Duchess Beatrice with Francesco her other son, both afterwards Dukes of Milan. While he was employed upon this work he proposed to the duke that he should make a bronze equestrian statue of marvelous size to perpetuate the memory of the Duke [Francesco Sforza]. He began it, but made the model of such a size that it could never be completed. There are some who say that Leonardo began it so large because he did not mean to finish it, as with many of his other things. But in truth his mind, being so surpassingly great, was often brought to a stand because it was too adventuresome, and the cause of his leaving so many things imperfect was his search for excellence after excellence, and perfection after perfection. And those who saw the clay model that Leonardo made, said they had never seen anything more beautiful or more superb, and this was in existence until the French came to Milan with Louis, King of France, when they broke it to pieces. There was also a small model in wax, which is lost, which was considered perfect, and a book of the anatomy of the horse which he made in his studies. ... Afterwards with greater care he gave himself to the study of human anatomy, aided by, and in his turn aiding, that Messer Marc Antonio della Torre who was one of the first to shed light upon anatomy, which up to that time had been lost in the shades of ignorance. In this he was much helped by Leonardo, who made a book with drawings in red chalk, outlined with a pen, of the bones and muscles which he had dissected with his own hand. There are also some writings of Leonardo written backward with the left hand, treating of painting and methods of drawing and coloring. ...

In mentioning anatomical studies, Vasari again emphasizes representational fidelity