



15 May 2012 | [MP3](#) at voaspecialenglish.com

Leonardo da Vinci: Beyond the Mona Lisa

STEVE EMBER: I'm Steve Ember.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: And I'm Shirley Griffith with EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English. Today, we tell about one of the greatest thinkers in the world, Leonardo da Vinci. He began his career as an artist. But his interest in the world around him drove him to study music, math, science, engineering and building design. Many of his ideas and inventions were centuries ahead of his time.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: We start with one of Leonardo da Vinci's most famous drawings, called "Vitruvian Man." This work is a good example of his ever questioning mind, and his effort to bring together art, math and science.

"Vitruvian Man" is a detailed sketch of a man's body, which is drawn at the center of a square and circle. The man's stretched arms and legs are in two positions, showing the range of his motion. His arms and legs touch the edges of the square and circle.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: With this drawing Leonardo was considering the size of the human body and its relationship to geometry and the writings of the ancient Roman building designer Vitruvius.

Leonardo wrote this about how to develop a complete mind: "Study the science of art. Study the art of science. Develop your senses- especially learn how to see. Realize that everything connects to everything else."

STEVE EMBER: Leonardo da Vinci spent his life studying and observing in order to develop a scientific understanding of the world. He wrote down his thoughts and project ideas in a series of small notebooks. He made drawings and explained them with detailed notes. In these notebooks, he would write the words backwards. Some experts say he wrote this way because he wished to be secretive about his findings. But others say he wrote this way because he was left-handed and writing backwards was easier and helped keep the ink from smearing.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: The notebooks show many very modern ideas. Leonardo designed weapons, machines, engines, robots, and many other kinds of engineering devices.

When disease spread in Milan, Leonardo designed a city that would help resist the spread of infection. He designed devices to help people climb walls, and devices to help people fly. He designed early versions of modern machines such as the tank and helicopter. Few of these designs were built during his lifetime. But they show his extraordinarily forward- thinking mind.

The notebooks also contain details about his daily life. These have helped historians learn more about the personal side of this great thinker.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Very little is known about Leonardo's early life. He was born in fourteen fifty-two in the town of Vinci. His father, Ser Piero da Vinci, was a legal expert. Experts do not know for sure about his mother, Caterina. But they do know that Leonardo's parents were never married to each other. As a boy, Leonardo showed a great interest in drawing, sculpting and observing nature.

However, because Leonardo was born to parents who were not married to each other, he was barred from some studies and professions. He trained as an artist after moving to Florence with his father in the fourteen sixties.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: It was an exciting time to be in Florence, one of the cultural capitals of Europe. Leonardo trained with one of the city's very successful artists, Andrea del Verrocchio. He was a painter, sculptor and gold worker. Verrocchio told his students that they needed to understand the body's bones and muscles when drawing people.

Leonardo took his teacher's advice very seriously. He spent several periods of his life studying the human body by taking apart and examining dead bodies. Experts say his later drawings of the organs and systems of the human body are still unequalled to this day.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: While training as an artist, Leonardo also learned about and improved on relatively new painting methods at the time. One was the use of perspective to show depth. A method called "sfumato" helped to create a cloudy effect to suggest distance. "Chiaroscuro" is a method using light and shade as a painterly effect. The artist also used oil paints instead of the traditional tempura paints used in Italy during this period.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Leonardo's first known portrait now hangs in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. He made this painting of a young woman named Ginevra de'Benci around fourteen seventy-four. The woman has a pale face with dark hair. In the distance, Leonardo painted the Italian countryside.

He soon received attention for his extraordinary artistic skills. Around fourteen seventy-five he was asked to draw an angel in Verrocchio's painting "Baptism of Christ." One story says that when Verrocchio saw Leonardo's addition to the painting, he was so amazed by his student's skill, that he said he would never paint again.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Leonardo once said the following about actively using one's mental abilities: "Iron rusts from disuse, stagnant water loses its purity and in cold weather becomes frozen; even so does inaction sap the vigor of the mind." His mind was so active that he did not often finish his many projects.

One religious painting he never finished was called "Adoration of the Magi". He was hired to make the painting for a religious center. The complex drawing he made to prepare for the painting is very special. It shows how carefully he planned his art works. It shows his deep knowledge of geometry, volume and depth. He drew the many people in the painting without clothes so that he could make sure that their bodies would be physically correct once covered.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Around fourteen eighty-two, Leonardo moved to Milan. There, he worked for the city's ruler, Ludovico Sforza. This ruler invited Leonardo to Milan not as an artist, but as a musician. Historians say Leonardo was one of the most skillful lyre players in all of Italy. But he

also continued his work as a painter. He also designed everything from festivals to weapons and a sculpture for Ludovico Sforza.

STEVE EMBER: One famous work from Leonardo's Milan period is called "Virgin of the Rocks." It shows Jesus as a baby along with his mother, Mary, and John the Baptist also as a baby. They are sitting outside in an unusual environment. Leonardo used his careful observations of nature to paint many kinds of plants. In the background are a series of severe rock formations. This painting helped Leonardo make it clear to the ruler and people of Milan that he was a very inventive and skillful artist.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Leonardo later made his famous painting "The Last Supper" for the dining room of a religious center in Milan. He combined his studies in light, math, psychology, geometry and anatomy for this special work. He designed the painting to look like it was part of the room. The painting shows a story from the Bible in which Jesus eats a meal with his followers for the last time. Jesus announces that one of them will betray him.

The work received wide praise and many artists tried to copy its beauty. One modern art expert described Leonardo's "Last Supper" as the foundation of western art. Unfortunately, Leonardo experimented with a new painting method for this work. The paint has suffered extreme damage over the centuries.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: In addition to the portrait of Ginevra de'Benci that we talked about earlier, Leonardo also painted several other non-religious paintings of women. One painting of Cecilia Gallerani has come to be known as "Lady with an Ermine" because of the small white animal she is holding. This woman was the lover of Milan's ruler, Ludovico Sforza.

However, Leonardo's most famous portrait of a woman is called the "Mona Lisa." It is now in the collection of the Louvre museum in Paris. He painted this image of Lisa Gherardini starting around fifteen-oh-three. She was the wife of a wealthy businessman from Florence named Francesco del Giocondo. It is from him that the painting takes its Italian name, "La Gioconda."

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Lisa Gherardini is sitting down with her hands crossed in her lap. She looks directly at the painter. She seems to be smiling ever so slightly. A great deal of mystery surrounds the painting. Experts are not sure about how or why Leonardo came to paint the work. But they do know that he never gave it to the Giocondo family. He kept the painting with him for the rest of his life, during his travels through France and Italy. Leonardo da Vinci died in France in fifteen nineteen. A friend who was with him at his death said this of the great man's life: "May God Almighty grant him eternal peace. Every one laments the loss of a man, whose like, Nature cannot produce a second time."

STEVE EMBER: This program was written and produced by Dana Demange. I'm Steve Ember.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: And I'm Shirley Griffith. You can see some of Leonardo da Vinci's work at our website voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English.