



Da Vinci

& THE CODE HE LIVED BY
STUDY GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION

Born into obscurity in a tiny Italian village in 1452, young Leonardo da Vinci seemed destined for a life of peasantry. But early mastery of art and a personal code of success catapulted him to the highest levels of Italian society and ultimately made him one of the most important figures of the Renaissance era. A fierce intellect made Leonardo the master of whatever he set his mind to, and his ability to see far beyond the limits and violence of his time continues to feed his popularity to this day. This two-hour documentary program highlights Leonardo's artistic and scientific accomplishments in the context of the political, cultural and social changes of the Italian Renaissance.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Da Vinci and the Code He Lived By would be useful for European history, world history, art history and physical science classes. It is appropriate for middle and high school students.

VOCABULARY

Definitions for the following vocabulary words were found at www.m-w.com.

amalgam – *n.* a mixture of different elements
apocalyptic – *a.* foreboding imminent disaster or final doom
avaricious – *a.* greedy
colossus – *n.* a statue of gigantic size and proportions
commission – *n.* a formal written warrant granting the power to perform various acts or duties
excommunicate – *v.* to deprive a person of the rights of church membership
fresco – *n.* the art of painting on freshly spread moist lime plaster with water-based pigments
gibbet – *n.* an upright post with a projecting arm for hanging the bodies of executed criminals as a warning; gallows
guild – *n.* a medieval association of merchants or craftsmen
heretic – *n.* a dissenter from established church dogma
humanism – *n.* the revival of classical letters, individualistic

NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

This program fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education: Civilization, Cultural Diffusion and Innovation; Human Interaction with the Environment; Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas and Institutions; and Conflict and Cooperation.

and critical spirit, and emphasis on secular concerns characteristic of the Renaissance

impervious – *a.* not capable of being damaged or harmed
incarnation – *n.* the embodiment of a deity or spirit in some earthly form
mercenary – *n.* a soldier hired into foreign service
militaristic – *a.* exaltation of military virtues and ideals
overture – *n.* an initiative toward agreement or action
patron – *n.* a wealthy or influential supporter of an artist or writer
Renaissance – *n.* the transitional movement in Europe between medieval and modern times beginning in the 14th century in Italy, lasting into the 17th century, and marked by a humanistic revival of classical influence expressed in a flowering of the arts
retribution – *n.* the dispensing or receiving of reward or punishment especially in the hereafter
sfumato – *n.* the definition of form in painting without abrupt outline by the blending of one tone into another

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is humanism? When did this philosophy arise? Why were Leonardo's innovations able to flourish during this era?
2. Describe Leonardo's childhood. Which specific aspects of his childhood do you think might have had the greatest impact on his life?
3. Many Renaissance artists and craftsman began their careers as apprentices in the workshops of masters. In which studio did Leonardo work? What was his master's reputation? How do you think this apprenticeship shaped his career?
4. How did Leonardo contribute to "The Baptism of Christ"? Why did his work on this painting stand out? What was the impact of his work on this painting?
5. Leonardo wrote, "Only through experimentation can we truly know anything." Give specific examples that illustrate how Leonardo followed this philosophy.
6. During the Renaissance, the Medici family dominated political life in Florence. How did Lorenzo Medici come to power? How did the Pazzi family threaten his power? How might Leonardo have been influenced by the political situation that surrounded him?
7. How did Florence escape "annihilation" in 1479? What role did Lorenzo play in preserving Florence? Why was his tactic dangerous?
8. Leonardo was commissioned to paint a traditional scene in the "Adoration of the Magi" for the monastery at San Donato a Scopeto. How did his painting differ from traditional renditions of this scene? Why didn't he finish this work?
9. Why did Leonardo move to Milan? What were some of the military ideas that he presented to Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan? Why might Leonardo's military engineering skills appeal to Sforza?



10. Compare and contrast Leonardo's portraits "Lady with the Ermine" and "Mona Lisa." What are their similarities and differences? How did Leonardo show emotion in the faces of these women?
11. Why didn't Leonardo complete the great bronze horse that he spent so much time on? What eventually became of the clay model that he sculpted?
12. Describe the scene of "The Last Supper" painted by Leonardo in the church of Santa Maria Della Grazie in Milan. How did Leonardo incorporate his scientific studies into this painting? Why did the painting deteriorate so quickly?
13. Why were Leonardo and Michelangelo such fierce rivals? How does Leonardo describe Michelangelo? Why did he describe him this way? Do you think that this is an accurate description? Why or why not?
14. Historian Kelly Devries says of Leonardo, "He seems to know the political winds and he seems to blow quite nicely with them." What specific examples from Leonardo's life support this idea?
15. How did Leonardo use the technique of sfumato in the "Mona Lisa"? What did this technique allow Leonardo to convey in this mysterious work?
16. In your opinion, what was Leonardo's greatest scientific accomplishment? Describe this accomplishment and explain why you think that it had the greatest impact on our knowledge and understanding of science.
17. Describe the "code" that Leonardo lived by. How was it played out in painting? Science? Engineering? Use specific examples. How did this code contribute to his legacy?



EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. This program highlights the most important events in Leonardo da Vinci's life. To organize and contextualize this information, create a timeline of these events from Leonardo's life using the timeframe featured in the program, 1453 to 1519. For each date, record a major event in Leonardo's life. Illustrate your timeline with symbols or images that represent each event. For an additional challenge, you can also include significant political and cultural events of the Renaissance in the timelines.
2. Leonardo is said to have filled over 15,000 pages in his notebooks with sketches, diagrams, thoughts and other personal information. For this activity, create an original page in Leonardo's notebook. This page will include sketches of at least one of his military engineering projects and one of his major paintings. Label and describe each sketch. Also, incorporate at least one significant quotation from his original notebooks. Include an explanation for why you included each item on the notebook page. The pages of students in a class or group can be compiled into a notebook

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that reflects Leonardo's intellect, artistic skill, scientific knowledge and military genius.

3. Plan a trip to walk in Leonardo's footsteps. To see the places in which he lived and worked as well as the locations where his works are currently displayed, where would you have to go? After planning the locations that you would want to visit, create an itinerary for the trip and an explanation for what would be seen at each stop and why you think that the location is important. The information can be compiled into a brochure that can advertise this trip in Leonardo's footsteps.
4. Write a short biography about one of the characters that played an important role in Leonardo's life. Choose from the following: Verrocchio, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Michelangelo, Cesare Borgia or Salai, Leonardo's assistant. In describing the life of this person, incorporate the role that he played in Leonardo's life.

PRIMARY SOURCE ACTIVITY

The following excerpt is from Giorgio Vasari's "Life of Leonardo da Vinci," in *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* and can be found at www.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/Vasari_daVinci.htm. Read the document carefully and then answer the questions that follow:

But the greatest of all Andrea's pupils was Leonardo da Vinci, in whom, besides a beauty of person never sufficiently admired and a wonderful grace in all his actions, there was such a power of intellect that whatever he turned his mind to he made himself master of with ease.

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 S. 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.

He delighted much in horses and also in all other animals, and often when passing by the places where they sold birds he would take them out of their cages, and paying the price that was asked for them, would let them fly away into the air, restoring to them their lost liberty.

PRIMARY SOURCE QUESTIONS

1. Vasari wrote that Leonardo possessed a “power of intellect that whatever he turned his mind to he made himself master with ease.” Find examples from this passage that reflect this remarkable ability.
2. What does Vasari believe to be one of Leonardo’s shortcomings? How is this manifested throughout his life?
3. How did Leonardo come to work in Andrea del Verrocchio’s workshop?
4. Do you consider Leonardo’s accomplishments in the arts or the sciences to be more significant? Use specific examples to support your position.
5. Vasari recounts that Leonardo would purchase birds in cages and set them free. Why do you think that he did this? What does this tell you about his personality?
6. Giorgio Vasari was the primary biographer of the most famous Renaissance artists. Research and write a short biography about Vasari’s life including how he conducted his research and the significance of his biographies.

ONLINE RESOURCES

The Boston Museum of Science:
www.mos.org/leonardo/

The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Timeline of Art History:
www.metmuseum.org/toah/splash.htm