

GIORGIO VASARI ON LEONARDO DA VINCI (1550)

Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) was an Italian painter and architect most well known to us as the author of the *Lives of the most Eminent Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors*. Vasari wrote this text because he believed that only an artist could understand and delineate the lives and works of the Renaissance artists. It is said that Vasari was the first to use the word “Renaissance” in print, thus demonstrating that those who lived during this period were more than aware of its unique role in history.

These excerpts from Vasari’s life of Andrea del Verrocchio provide extended descriptions of Leonardo (spelled “Lionardo”), who studied with Andrea in his youth.

Andrea Del Verrocchio was in his time a goldsmith, sculptor, carver in wood, painter, and musician. For, having made a name for himself as a goldsmith, he was sent for to Rome, to work in the Pope’s chapel, and perceiving the great esteem in which the ancient statues which had been found in Rome were held, he determined to apply himself to sculpture, and, entirely abandoning his goldsmith’s trade, he set himself to cast some figures in bronze. These being much praised, he took courage and began to work in marble also. Just at that time the wife of Francesco Tornabuoni died, and the husband, who had loved her much, desired to set up a monument to her honour, and entrusted it to Andrea, who carved upon it the death of the lady and three figures of Virtues, which brought him much praise. So he returned to Florence with money, fame, and honour, and was employed to cast in bronze the ornaments for the tomb of Giovanni and Piero di Cosimo de’ Medici, and other works. But finding that he could not increase his fame in this art, being also a person to whom it was not enough to excel in one thing only, he turned his thoughts to painting, and made some sketches for pictures. He began to work upon them in colour, but from some cause they were left unfinished. There are many drawings by his hand, and among them some heads of women, with the hair arranged in that manner that Lionardo da Vinci always imitated. . . .

Andrea was never at rest, but always working at something, though he often changed from one work to another, growing weary of the same thing. Though he never carried out the sketches for pictures which we mentioned before, he did paint some pictures, and among them was one for the friars of Vallombrosa, of S. John baptizing Christ, in which Lionardo helped him, and which was the cause that Andrea resolved never to touch a brush again. . . .

But the greatest of all Andrea’s pupils was Lionardo 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.

Marvellous and divine, indeed, was Lionardo 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 modelling 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 Lionardo gave himself up to drawing, he would succeed. Andrea was astounded at the great beginning Lionardo had made, and urged Ser Piero to make him apply himself to it. So he arranged with Lionardo that he was to go to Andrea's workshop, which Lionardo did very willingly, and set himself to practice every art in which design has a part. For he had such a marvellous mind that, besides being a good geometrician, he worked at modelling (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 tunnelling 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.

While, as we have said, he was studying art under Andrea del Verrocchio, the latter was painting a picture of S. John baptizing Christ; Lionardo worked upon an angel who was holding the clothes, and although he was so young, he managed it so well that

Lionardo's angel was better than Andrea's figures, which was the cause of Andrea's never touching colours 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 fig-tree, 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 Lionardo where it came from, he asked him to paint something upon it. Lionardo, 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 Lionardo did not feel it from the love he bore to art. When the work was finished, Lionardo 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, Lionardo 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 Lionardo 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 marvellous to Ser Piero, and he praised greatly Lionardo'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 Lionardo'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.

Lionardo 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 gipsies. When Giovan Galeazzo, Duke of Milan, was dead,

and Lodovico Sforza became duke in the year 1494, Lionardo was brought to Milan to play the lute before him, in which he greatly delighted. Lionardo 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 improvisatore of his time. The duke, hearing his marvellous discourse, became enamoured 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 S. Domenic, at S. Maria delle Grazie, a Last Supper, a thing most beautiful and marvellous. 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 Lionardo 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 Lionardo to finish the work, it seeming strange to him to see Lionardo 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 Lionardo and urge him to the work. Lionardo, 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 marvellously to laughter, and he said he was a thousand times right. So

the poor prior, quite confused, left off urging him and left him alone, and Lionardo 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 [remained] with the Milanese.

In the refectory, and while he was working at the Last 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 marvellous 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 Lionardo 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 Lionardo 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 Lionardo, 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 Lionardo written backward with the left hand, treating of painting and methods of drawing and colouring.

In his time the King of France came to Milan, and Lionardo was entreated to make something strange for his reception, upon which he constructed a lion, which advanced some steps and then opened his breast and showed it full of lilies. Having returned to Florence, he found that the Servite monks had entrusted Filippino [Filippo Lippi] with the work of painting an altarpiece; but when Filippino heard that Lionardo had said he should have liked such a piece of work, like the courteous man he was he left off working at it, and the friars brought Lionardo to their convent that he might paint it, providing both for himself and his household. For a long time, however, he did nothing, but at last he made a cartoon of our Lady with S. Anne and the infant Christ, which not only astonished all artists, but when it was finished, for two days his room was filled

with men and women, young and old, going as to a solemn festival to see Lionardo's marvels. This cartoon afterwards went to France. But he gave up the work for the friars, who recalled Filippino, but he was surprised by death before he could finish it.

Lionardo undertook to paint for Francesco del Giocondo a portrait of Mona Lisa his wife, but having spent four years upon it, left it unfinished. This work now belongs to King Francis of France, and whoever wishes to see how art can imitate nature may learn from this head. Mona Lisa being most beautiful, he used, while he was painting her, to have men to sing and play to her and buffoons to amuse her, to take away that look of melancholy which is so often seen in portraits; and in this of Lionardo's there is a peaceful smile more divine than human. By the excellence of the works of this most divine of artists his fame was grown so great that all who delighted in art, and in fact the whole city, desired to have some memorial of it. And the Gonfalonier [an official] and the chief citizens agreed that, the Great Hall of the Council having been rebuilt, Lionardo should be charged to paint some great work there. Therefore, accepting the work, Lionardo began a cartoon representing the story of Nicolò Piccinino, captain of the Duke Filippo of Milan, in which he drew a group of cavalry fighting for a standard, representing vividly the rage and fury both of the men and the horses, two of which, with their fore feet entangled, are making war no less fiercely with their teeth than those who ride them. We cannot describe the variety of the soldiers' garments, with their crests and other ornaments, and the masterly power he showed in the forms of the horses, whose muscular strength and beauty of grace he knew better than any other man. It is said that for drawing this cartoon he erected an ingenious scaffolding that could be raised and lowered. And desiring to paint the wall in oil, he made a composition to cover the wall; but when he began to paint upon it, it proved so unsuccessful that he shortly abandoned it altogether.

There is a story that having gone to the bank for the sum which he was accustomed to receive from the Gonfalonier Piero Soderini every month, the cashier wanted to give him some packets of farthings, but he refused to take them, saying, "I am no farthing painter." As some accused him of having cheated Soderini in not finishing the picture, there arose murmurs against him, upon which Lionardo, by the help of his friends, collected the money and restored it to him, but Piero would not accept it.

When Leo was made Pope, Lionardo went to Rome with Duke Giuliano de' Medici, and knowing the Pope to be fond of philosophy, especially alchemy, he used to make little animals of a wax paste, which as he walked along he would fill with wind by blowing into them, and so make them fly in the air, until the wind being exhausted, they dropped to the ground. The vinedresser of the Belvedere having found a very strange lizard, Lionardo made some wings of the scales of other lizards and fastened them on its back with a mixture of quicksilver, so that they trembled when it walked; and having made

for its eyes, horns, and a beard, he tamed it and kept it in a box, but all his friends to whom he showed it used to run away from fear.

It is said that when the Pope entrusted him with some work for him he immediately began to distil oil for the varnish, upon which Pope Leo said, "Oh, this is a man to do nothing, for he thinks of the end before he begins his work."

There was great ill-feeling between him and Michael Angelo Buonarroti, on which account Michael Angelo left Florence. But when Lionardo heard this, he set out and went into France, where the king, having already some of his works, was well affectioned towards him, and desired that he should colour his cartoon of S. Anne; but he, according to his custom, kept him waiting a long time. At last, having become old, he lay ill for many months, and seeing himself near death, he set himself to study the holy Christian religion, and though he could not stand, desired to leave his bed with the help of his friends and servants to receive the Holy Sacrament. Then the king, who used often and lovingly to visit him, came in, and he, raising himself respectfully to sit up in bed, spoke of his sickness, and how he had offended God and man by not working at his art as he ought. Then there came a paroxysm, a forerunner of death, and the king raised him and lifted his head to help him and lessen the pain, whereupon his spirit, knowing it could have no greater honour, passed away in the king's arms in the seventy-fifth year of his age.

The loss of Lionardo was mourned out of measure by all who had known him, for there was none who had done such honour to painting. The splendour of his great beauty could calm the saddest soul, and his words could move the most obdurate mind. His great strength could restrain the most violent fury, and he could bend an iron knocker or a horseshoe as if it were lead. He was liberal to his friends, rich and poor, if they had talent and worth; and indeed as Florence had the greatest of gifts in his birth, so she suffered an infinite loss in his death.

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Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, vol. IV, trans. Gaston Du C. De Vere (London: Philip Lee Warner, Publishers, 1912–1914).