

April 15, 2022: Leonardo da Vinci's 570th Birthday

Today, April 15, is World Art Day. It is also Leonardo da Vinci's birthday, his 570th. What better way to acknowledge the day than to learn a little bit about one of the most widely recognized names in the world of art.



Self-Portrait, Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1512.¹

Da Vinci was the quintessential Renaissance man: sculptor, painter, inventor, architect and draftsman, and military engineer. Born in 1452 out of wedlock in Tuscany to a well-respected notary and a local peasant woman, da Vinci received little formal education. He was apprenticed to the artist Andrea del Verrocchio in Florence at approximately 14. While the story is no doubt apocryphal, it has been said that del Verrocchio was so in awe of his student's talents that he never picked up a brush again. Under del Verrocchio's tutelage, da Vinci learned carpentry, metalworking, painting, drawing, and sculpting. At 20, he qualified for membership as a master artist in Florence's Guild of Saint Luke.

Despite his prolific talent, fewer than two dozen paintings exist attributed to him, most likely because his interests were so varied.

¹ Created using only red chalk, this self-portrait of da Vinci, completed when he was approximately 60 years old, is housed in the National Gallery in Turin, Italy.

The best known of da Vinci's works of art are *The Last Supper* (c. 1495-1498), *Mona Lisa (Gioconda)* (c. 1503-1506), and *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1487).

The Last Supper was commissioned as part of the renovations to Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Housed in the refectory of the church's convent, it is one of da Vinci's largest works (15 feet by 29 feet). Because da Vinci had an inconsistent painting schedule and made frequent revisions, the artist used materials that allowed for regular alterations: tempera on gesso, pitch, and mastic. But as a result of the methods used, environmental factors, and intentional damage, little of the original painting remains despite numerous restoration efforts.

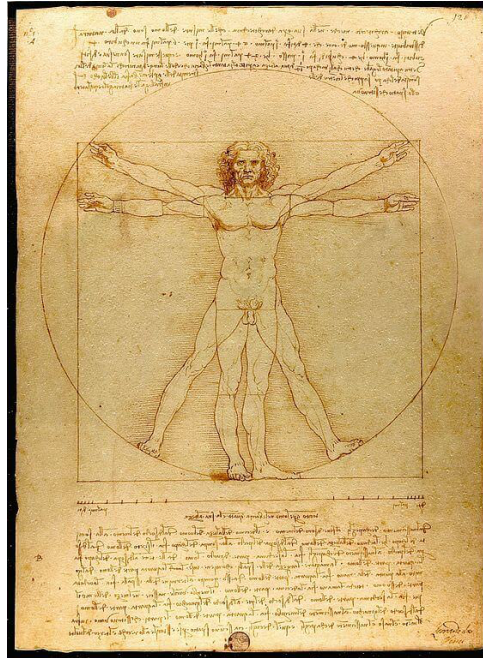
Da Vinci reportedly used the likenesses of people in and around Milan as inspiration for the figures in the painting. The convent's prior complained to da Vinci's patron, Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, of Leonardo's "laziness" as he wandered the streets to find a criminal to base Judas on. Leonardo responded that if he could find no one else, the prior would make a suitable model.



Mona Lisa has been described as "the best known, the most visited, the most written about, the most sung about, the most parodied work of art in the world." The painting is most likely of the Italian noblewoman Lisa del Giocondo (née Gherardini). Da Vinci started the image in 1503, and it was in his studio when he died in 1519. It went on display at the Louvre in 1797 after the French Revolution. In 2011, the painting was stolen from the museum. Two well-known figures were suspected initially, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire and the artist Pablo Picasso. The real culprit was an Italian patriot and Louvre employee, Vincenzo Peruggia, who believed the painting should be returned to Italy. It was recovered when Peruggia attempted to sell it to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Peruggia was hailed as a hero in Italy, and the painting gained considerable additional international attention. The painting has lasted more than 500 years and is in surprisingly good condition, although it has never been completely restored. After several attacks, one of which damaged a spot near the subject's elbow, it was placed under bullet-proof glass, thus surviving several subsequent acts of vandalism.



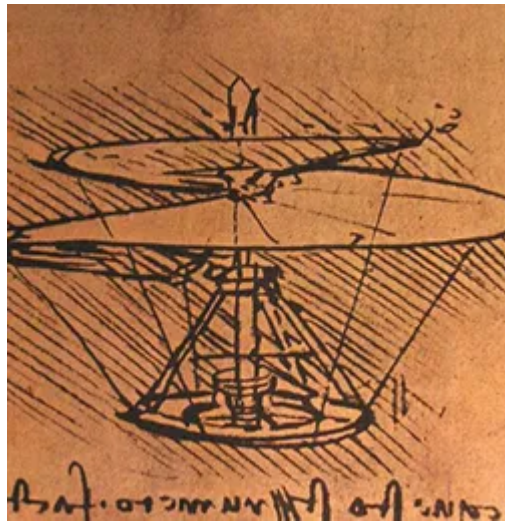
The third of da Vinci's "top three" is *Vitruvian Man*. In the text which accompanied the drawing on paper, da Vinci described it as a study of the ideal proportions of the male human body, drawing on the *Ten Books of Architecture* by the 1st-century Roman architect Vitruvius Pollio. The drawing and text are sometimes called the *Canon of Proportions* or, less often, *Proportions of Man*. It is stored in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, Italy. Like most works on paper, it is displayed only occasionally.



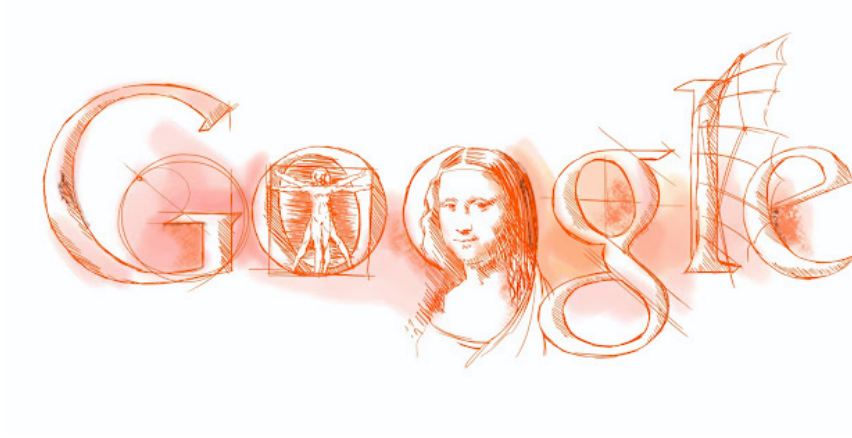
In addition to his paintings, da Vinci is known for his inventions, many intended for military purposes. These include:

- 1) The barreled cannon was a primitive precursor to the automatic machine gun.
- 2) The helical aerial screw is similar to the mechanism used in helicopters.
- 3) The anemometer measures wind speed.
- 4) The winged flying machine, a design for man-powered flight, was conceived after studying the anatomy of bats.
- 5) Diving equipment was designed as sleuth equipment to attack invading ships.
- 6) Self-propelled cart
- 7) Parachute
- 8) The robotic man, an early example of automation, was operated via a series of pulleys and levers that mimicked da Vinci's anatomical observations of the human muscular structure.
- 9) The Revolving bridge is designed to help troops cross rivers quickly; the bridge could be packed up after use and transported.
- 10) The giant crossbow, or catapult, was designed to launch large projectiles such as boulders.

Below are drawings of da Vinci's helicopter, winged flying machine, and crossbow/catapult.



The Biltmore Estate in Asheville, NC, will be featuring the achievements of da Vinci in *Leonardo Da Vinci: 500 Years of Genius* from July 14, 2022, to January 8, 2023, an immersive cinematic experience.



The Google Doodle was created in 2005 for da Vinci's 553rd birthday.