LEADERS & SUCCESS

Leonardo Da Vinci's Brilliance

By MARY O'NEILL, FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY
Posted 08/01/2008 02:58 PM ET

You need a mirror to read his notes.

The cryptic handwriting, from right to left and reversed away from the reader, is only one glimpse into the mind of Leonardo da Vinci, a mind so extraordinary, so nimble and boundless, that it has taken centuries to catch up to it.

Perhaps he intended to be secretive with his strange cursive.

His inventions, bursting out of notebook after notebook, could have been considered blasphemous in Renaissance Italy.

More than a century before Galileo stood accused of heresy, Leonardo wrote: "The sun does not move."

Four centuries before the Wright brothers and Benz invented the mainstays of modern transportation, he sketched flying machines and automotive transmissions in the margins of his pages.

He drafted plans for a parachute, telescope, projector, irrigation system and something close to a modern tank.

He dissected over 30 corpses. He studied engineering — hydraulics, aerodynamics, solar energy and mathematics — as well as all aspects of the natural world, including botany, zoology and geology.

As for the human form, he researched optics, embryology, anatomy and cardiology. He made original contributions in all those fields.

Leonardo da Vinci was the original artist-genius.

"We no longer think of him as a scientist, but as a man who has learned a secret of creation," the eminent art historian Kenneth Clark praised in his book "Leonardo da Vinci."

Leonardo synthesized these pursuits into his art, melding the two in a way that redefined painting.

On The Rise

Despite his unremarkable background — he was marginally educated — Leonardo aspired to take painting beyond its role as a decorative craft. He infused the visual arts with a new power, raising painting to the level of supreme liberal art and creating a benchmark that would challenge even 20th-century painters.

Today we associate Renaissance with art, but at the time of Leonardo's birth in 1452 near a Tuscan village called Vinci, the movement's true luminaries were writers, poets and philosophers.

It was the literati, not artists, who best expressed the new values — a revival of interest in the classical world, rational life, nature and human capability. It was the literati, not artists, who knew Latin, the mark of the educated man and the passport into privileged society.

Artists were considered manual laborers; they worked with their hands, after all. Patronage underscored the difference: Writers and poets enjoyed patrons' summer villas; artists hoped to be paid at all.

To change this order, Leonardo elbowed in on the domain of the philosophers and intellectuals, embarking on a campaign of self-education.

"To elevate painting was a specific ambition of his," David Brown, curator of Italian Renaissance painting at Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art, told IBD. "He was very concerned that the artist's creation should be given intellectual status. The mind is the important thing."

Leonardo taught himself Latin and — while studying classical sources, medieval science and mathematical tracts — relied on his own observations, many times disproving the conventional authorities. He found fossils in the Alps and deduced that the theologians were wrong about the start date of Earth.

He transformed art by weaving those observations into his painting.

"The depth of his empirical observations is what separates him from other artists," said Mary Garrard, professor emeritus of art history at American University in Washington. "Nature is for him the prime entity."

Everything he learned and observed helped him depict a landscape or facial expression or gesture with greater understanding and sensitivity. Only by knowing the physical laws that enabled a bird to take flight, or blood to circulate through the body — only by fully grasping nature — could he depict it truthfully.

And what depictions. Most would agree that his "Mona Lisa" is the world's most famous painting. "The Last Supper" has been analyzed, reproduced and admired for five centuries. His drawing of ideal human proportions, "Vitruvian Man," has become iconic.

His images contain more than intellectual confidence. His predecessors already had applied mathematical principles to create the illusion of three dimensions, but Leonardo's vision went much further.

It wasn't enough to capture optical reality as others had tried. He also had to convey emotional force, the thinking, feeling and reacting central to human drama. That was where he overtook the poets.

"A good painter has two chief objects to paint — man and the intention of his soul," he wrote.

Thus, in "The Last Supper," Leonardo mastered the perspective, plus telegraphed the apostles' shocked reaction to Jesus' prediction of betrayal. They accuse, shrink, shove, question and protest. No one is inert.

"All his depictions feature animation," Brown said. "He saw everything as responding to the force of nature, and above all this means motion."

"The motions of the mind" was Leonardo's term for the full range of complex human reactions.

He accomplished all this by handling paint in a new way.

Oil-based paint had just been introduced to Italy. Instead of drawing precise contours, as others did, Leonardo blended the paint subtly, even using his fingers to merge one form into the next. The result is a dusky, atmospheric effect that makes his figures come alive.

Perhaps it was his notorious perfectionism that kept him from completing more artwork, for despite the hundreds of drawings he executed, Leonardo finished only a dozen or so paintings. Patrons were kept waiting in frustration until he was satisfied. He held onto "Mona Lisa" nearly 20 years.

According to Clark, who translated a contemporary account, Leonardo stood on the scaffolding for "The Last Supper" for days, sometimes without eating, before he would commit one stroke.

Leonardo made his patrons understand the intellectual rigor necessary to create a work of art. He gained the attention of clients in Italy — Florence, Rome, Venice, Milan — and France.

A Big Name

He became, in short, famous. Fame in the Renaissance was not mere celebrity; it signified that a person had fulfilled his potential, his nature as a noble being.

His contemporaries regarded him as "a kind of Magus," said Garrard, because he was so forward-thinking. Through merit, this man who worked with his hands associated with princes, popes and kings.

In time Leonardo was honored with his own residence. Born the illegitimate son of a notary, he died in 1519 in a manor house given to him by France's king.

Artists from the 16th to the 21st century have chased him, trying to match him in even one innovation. Though he began his career as an ordinary apprentice, his mind was so sophisticated that we may still be trying to catch up.

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