

# Leonardo da Vinci

ALEX RAYNHAM

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## LEONARDO DA VINCI

In the 1460s, Florence (a city in what is now Italy) was one of the most important places in Europe, and the rich men of the city had money to spend. It was a good place for an artist, because rich men wanted paintings and sculptures for their great new homes.

In the workshop of the artist Andrea del Verrocchio, the apprentices worked hard, making paint, cutting stone, drawing and finishing paintings. One young apprentice was different from the others. He studied things carefully and asked questions about them. He learned from Verrocchio, from the other apprentices, and from the world around him. And soon the world would know the name of Leonardo da Vinci – one of the greatest painters and thinkers of all time.

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# 1 Leonardo da Vinci

It is a winter afternoon in 1467, and the artist Andrea del Verrocchio is walking along a busy street in Florence. On both sides of the road, people in workshops are making glass, pictures, beautiful clothes, and many other things. From an open door he hears the sounds of people at work, cutting stone and hitting metal.

Andrea stops and goes through a door into his workshop. It is noisy inside, and it smells of smoke and chickens. A big fire is burning and everyone is busy. At one end of the room, he sees Leonardo – a tall, good-looking boy with long hair. He is the son of Andrea's friend, Ser Piero da Vinci.

Leonardo is fourteen years old. He has only been in the workshop for about a year, but Andrea is very happy with him. He is a clever boy: he works hard and he learns fast. What is he doing when Andrea comes in? Perhaps he is breaking eggs to make paint. Does he turn around and smile?

Today we remember Leonardo as a famous painter and a great thinker. We are still studying his work and learning new things 500 years after his death. Surprisingly, the great Leonardo da Vinci did not come from a rich family, and he did not spend much time at school. So how did he become one of the cleverest and most famous people in history?

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## 2

## Early life

Leonardo was born on 15 April 1452 near a small town called Vinci. The family name ‘da Vinci’ just means ‘from Vinci’. The town is built on a hill about 35 kilometres from Florence, but in 1452, that was a long day’s ride by horse. Vinci was a quiet town, far away from the great buildings, money, and important people of Florence.

Leonardo’s mother and father both married different people after he was born. His father, Ser Piero da Vinci, lived and worked in Florence, but his mother, Caterina, stayed in Vinci. Leonardo probably spent most of his early life around Vinci.



The town of Vinci

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Leonardo knew a lot about life in the country. He played in the fields around the town, and he loved animals. Leonardo watched the workers and he learned how people built and made things. He was interested in everything, and he soon began to draw.

Leonardo could not go to school with the children of important families because his father and mother were not married. At the time, many books were in Latin, but because Leonardo did not learn this language at school, he could not read them. Years later, he finally taught himself to read Latin.

When he was young, Leonardo had to teach himself other things too, like how to write. Leonardo wrote with his left hand, and he used mirror writing, which is very difficult to read. When you put a mirror next to his writing, you can read it. He learned to draw with his left hand too.



Mirror writing

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When Leonardo was about thirteen, his father took some of his drawings to a friend in Florence – the artist Andrea del Verrocchio. Verrocchio liked the drawings, and in about 1466, Leonardo became an apprentice – someone who learns new things while he works – in Verrocchio’s workshop. Leonardo enjoyed drawing, so he was very happy!

Verrocchio’s workshop was like a small factory, and lots of people worked there. The workshop made many different things, like beautiful paintings and sculptures, and clothes for important days of the year. Leonardo probably started with small jobs, like making paint or cleaning the workshop. Later, he learned to draw, work with stone, design clothes, and do many other things.

The apprentices lived above Verrocchio’s workshop. They ate, laughed, and played music together. The boys became great friends, and sometimes they fought. For Leonardo, it was like a new family.

In workshops like Verrocchio’s, lots of people worked on the paintings. Verrocchio did the most important work, and then his best apprentices finished it. Leonardo was a fast learner, and he soon became a talented painter. Before long, he was helping Verrocchio to finish important paintings.

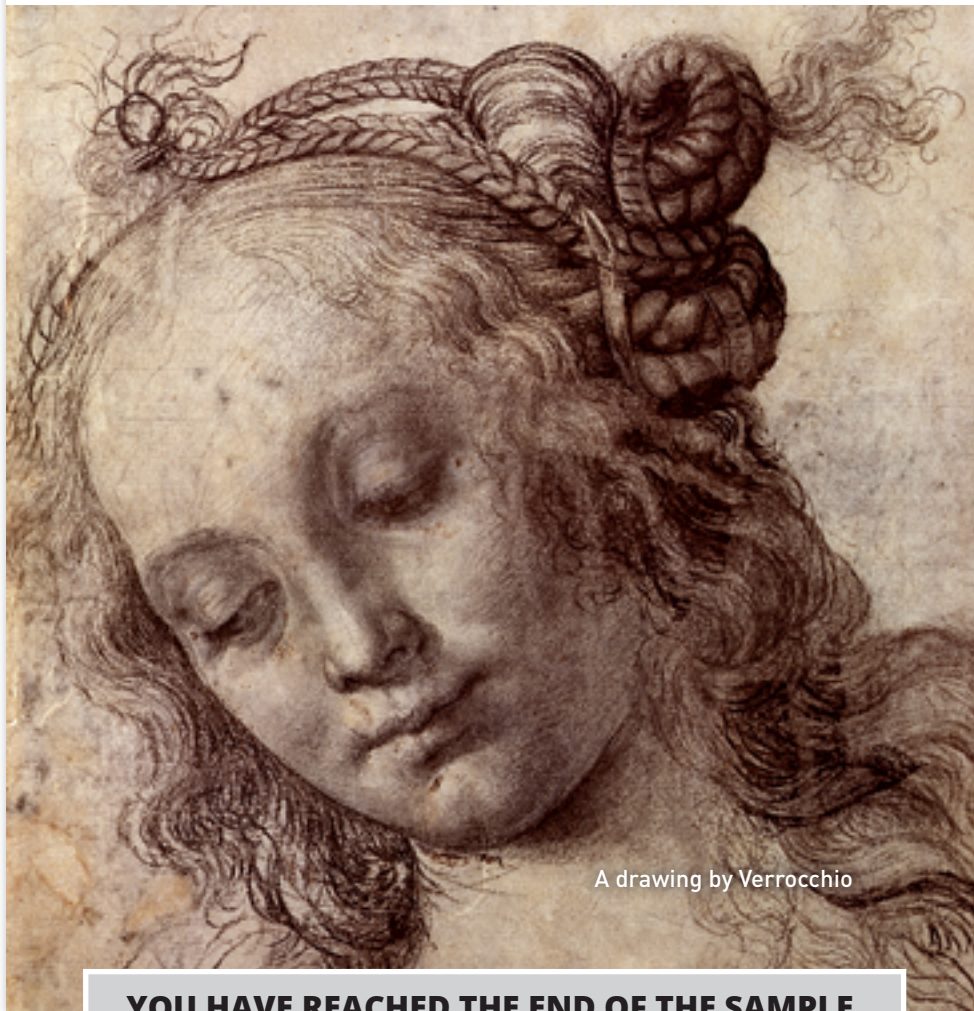
At the time, Italy was made of lots of different small countries. Florence was the biggest city of one of these countries. It was also one of the biggest and richest cities in Europe. People were building churches and great houses all over the city, and they needed paintings and sculptures to put in them. It was a time of new ideas about painting,

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science, and many other things. Today, we call this time ‘the Renaissance’.

Because Florence was a very rich and important city, it was home to many of the greatest thinkers and artists of the time. Some of these great men visited Verrocchio’s workshop, and the young Leonardo met them. He probably dreamed that he could be like them too. Florence in the 1460s was a great place for talented people – and nobody was more talented than Leonardo.



A drawing by Verrocchio

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