Lovereading.co.uk

The Da Vinci Notebooks

Leonardo Da Vinci

Published by Profile Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

14 *Allegorical representations* 97
15 *Mottoes and emblems* 101
16 *Notes on sculpture* 105
17 *Observations on architecture* 111
18 *Anatomy* 119
19 *Man compared with animals* 131
20 *Physiology and medicine* 133
21 *On astronomy* 143
22 *Geography* 147
23 *Notes on the natural world* 155
24 *Machines and warfare* 159
25 *Number tricks* 167
26 *Philosophical maxims* 169
27 *Moral sayings* 175
28 *Polemics* 185
29 *Studies on the life and habits of animals* 197
30 *Fables* 203
31 *Jests and tales* 207
32 *Prophecies* 211

INTRODUCTION

The genius of Leonardo da Vinci



Where to begin with Leonardo da Vinci? We have seen the list before: painter, sculptor, architect, inventor, anatomist. To that we might add botanist, zoologist, physicist, physical geographer, set designer, costume maker. Most recently we have heard his name in connection with Dan Brown's blockbuster novel *The Da Vinci Code*, in which da Vinci comes across as an intriguing, shadowy figure more interested in heading secret sects and writing codes than in the sometimes mundane business of making paintings.

In fact da Vinci is intriguing and shadowy partly because the fifteenth century is so far away – he was born more than five hundred and fifty years ago. His refined, sophisticated drawings make us claim him as a man of our times, but the life he knew was at the end of the medieval era. As this selection

of fascinating, varied and intriguing extracts from da Vinci's copious notebooks shows, he was a man who made things and showed us how to use them, rather than sharing his inner emotional life with us. Some of his writings here are detailed instructions or discussions – others are more hurried notes, and others again are downright cryptic and mysterious. This, too, contributes to the shadowy image we have of him. But the remarkable range of topics covered here is fascinating in itself. He was an old-fashioned grafter – famous for the phenomenal ways in which he applied himself.

It is inevitable that da Vinci should be described as a genius, but that label both puts him out of our reach and pins him down somehow. If we remember that he was just a man, then we can be properly astonished by his accomplishments; his intellectual and creative range can never cease to impress us. Just when we think we have got the hang of him, we find out that there is a sweetness there too: that he adored animals and was a vegetarian, that he was tremendously eager to please, but that he was no pushover. He was serious but playful – he loved punning. We learn that he had something of a reputation for unreliability, but that he inspired devotion in the King of France. In his sheer humanity, his

human-ness, he is terrifying. By freeing him of the dehumanising label of 'genius', we are able to realise that he embodies the potential scope of a human being. He makes us confront what we have the potential to be.

Early life

'1452. There was born to me a grandson, the son of Ser Piero my son, on the 15 day of April, a Saturday, at the third hour of the night. He bears the name Lionardo.'

So reads a momentous entry in the notebook of Leonardo da Vinci's grandfather Antonio. According to Charles Nicholl in his wonderful recent biography *Leonardo Da Vinci – The Flights of the Mind*, the event is likely to have occurred in the small hamlet of Anchiano, around two miles from Vinci in Tuscany, Italy.

Antonio and his son were both notaries, professional keepers of business records. Leonardo's mother, Caterina, who was not married to Ser Piero, has always been portrayed as a serving girl, although one of her son's early biographers described her as being 'of good blood'. Not good enough for the

ambitious da Vinci family, however. Within a year Leonardo's parents were both married to other people: Ser Piero to Albiera, a rich notary's daughter; Caterina to Accattabriga, a furnace worker.

That Leonardo was a 'love child' does not seem to have counted against him initially. At his christening, ten godparents greeted his arrival. Then he probably moved with his mother and her husband to Campo Zeppi, the Accattabrigas' patch just west of Vinci. Although Ser Piero appears to have been something of an absent father, Leonardo was devoted to his uncle Francesco, who was only fifteen when he was born and was cut from softer cloth than many of the da Vincis. Leonardo's mother went on to have five more children.

As a child Leonardo immersed himself in the countryside. He loved animals and had an enquiring mind from the outset. Giorgio Vasari, the sixteenth-century artist and biographer, portrays him as a brilliant pupil with flamboyant 'mirror' handwriting who often stumped his teacher and had a restless mind – constantly picking up subjects only to drop them again. The writing went on to change later in his life to a more sober and workmanlike hand, but he always wrote in mirror script – in all likelihood because he was left-handed and it was easier for him.

He also had troubling dreams. Puzzlingly, his earliest memory was of a kite flying into his crib and putting its tail between his lips. Surely this is one of those vivid dreams which persist in the memory more clearly than real events.

Florence (1466–82)

And he always drew and sculpted. So his father, sensing that he would not make a notary of his teenage son, showed some of the boy's sketches to his friend Andrea del Verrocchio, a Florentine sculptor. Verrocchio was immediately struck by the work and offered him an apprenticeship. He took this up in 1467, at the age of fifteen.

The Florence that greeted Leonardo was in a state of flux: ostentatious buildings were replacing unremarkable medieval architecture; the mighty Medici dynasty ruled the roost, challenged by rivals at regular intervals. Yet for all their cultivation and patronage, it was not the Medicis that first turned Leonardo's head, but Leon Battista Alberti, a graceful, stylish polymath – who was among other things an

architect, scholar, set designer and town planner.

But despite the distractions of Florence and its leading figures, there was work to be done back at Verrocchio's studio or 'bottega'. Training an apprentice was a serious, formal business. At first the emphasis would have been on draughtsmanship. Verrocchio himself was an accomplished draughtsman who would have given Leonardo an appreciation of perspective and texture by overseeing his studies of drapery and flowers and his clay modelling.

The maestro's protégés doubled as models, and there is some speculation that new arrival Leonardo posed for Verrocchio's beautiful bronze *David* of 1466. There is also speculation that Verrocchio launched Leonardo on the path to his now widely accepted homosexuality, although Vasari says that Verrocchio 'loved' another of his pupils, Lorenzo di Credi, the most.

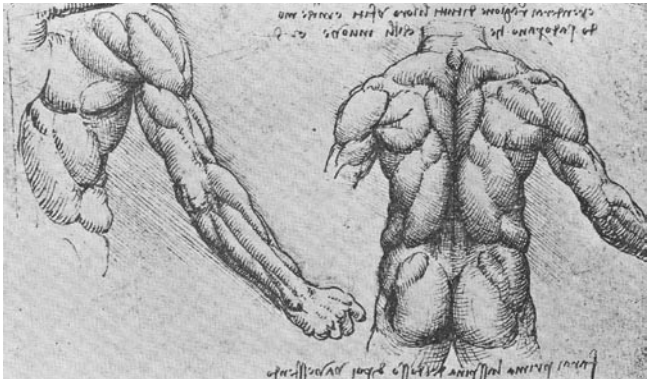
Once Verrocchio's pupils were judged to be competent draughtsmen, the painting could begin – at first using traditional 'tempura' paints (colours mixed with egg white) and then moving on to work with the new-fangled oil paints, which Leonardo seized with an enthusiasm that he never lost. Around 1468–70 Verrocchio's bottega turned out a small painting called *Tobias and the Angel*, and

art historians agree that the small dog and fish that appear in it are by the hand of a young Leonardo da Vinci. By the early 1470s, at about the age of twenty, it is thought that he was producing work of the calibre of the *Madonna of the Carnation*, which certainly came out of Verrocchio's studio.

In addition, Verrocchio and his entourage would have been hired by the Medicis to design and make all sorts of props for the flamboyant pageants that were a regular feature of Florentine life. The impact that such theatricality had on Leonardo became clear years later. He also had an early brush with architecture when Verrocchio was hired to complete the cathedral by putting an orb on the top of the dome.

Meanwhile, Leonardo's relationship with his father seems to have been patchy and difficult. Then, in 1475, his father married for a third time and had a legitimate son, which meant that Leonardo was disinherited. At around the same time, melancholic little phrases about wasting time and losing friends begin to appear on his drawings. He is fired up, he seems to be saying, but has not yet found love.

Or has he? In 1476, via an anonymous note posted in the system of 'drums' which were placed around the city in order to collect information and



keep tabs on its citizens, a set of scandalous charges was levelled against four men, one of whom was Leonardo da Vinci. It was claimed that seventeen-year-old Jacopo Saltarelli, who 'pursues many immoral activities and consents to satisfy those persons who request such sinful things from him', had been sodomised by all four men at different times. The anonymous note did not say whether or not he was paid for this service.

Although Saltarelli may have been paid to model for Leonardo, an activity which in no way precludes sodomy, we do not know for sure about Leonardo's sexuality. We do know that he painted sexy pictures of young men and we suspect he was gay, but the nameless gossip's charges were dropped eventually

and Leonardo was judged to be 'above suspicion'.

Leonardo's artistic talent was beyond question. Vasari's story is that the angel contributed by Leonardo to Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ* was so much better than the rest of the painting that the master was overwhelmed and gave up painting, but it was an early work, and Charles Nicholl for one doesn't think it that good. Certainly the story itself has an over-egged, apocryphal feel to it.

And Vasari in no sense under-eggs his physical description of Leonardo either. He is like a school-girl with a crush. It is generally accepted that Leonardo was a very beautiful man, but Vasari saw him as the possessor of 'infinite grace' at the same time as being 'so strong he could withstand any violence'. Leonardo was also quite particular about his appearance, and was a sharp dresser. His boots were made of the finest leather; he wore a rose-coloured tunic.

Not long after the legitimate son of Ser Piero was born, Leonardo set up shop on his own. One of the pupils he took on was even more controversial than he. Paolo had actually done time – six months in prison – for his 'wicked life', which probably meant 'homosexuality'. Another of Leonardo's number was Zoroastro, an exotic servant cum colour grinder



cum alchemist, who remained a loyal support and friend for the rest of his life.

As far as is known, the first commission worked on by Leonardo's studio was an altarpiece, commissioned on 10 January 1478, when Leonardo was twenty-five. Other paintings started to show the fondness for rocky, wild landscape which his later, more famous work displayed, and one of his trademark animals makes an appearance in *Virgin and Child with a Cat* (1478–81). He was also starting to make technological drawings and to show an interest in water and in flying machines. Later in 1478 he sketched the hanged Bernardo di Bandino, who had dared to stab Giuliano Medici. Leonardo may have been pitching for work from the Medicis at the time.

It looks as if Leonardo is establishing himself in a reasonably conventional way. He is an artist of note building up a client base of Florentine patrons. He has outside interests, but they all seem to relate in some way to his art. Yet just as it seems we are pinning him down, he slips out of our grasp – he leaves Florence for Milan. And what does he introduce himself as when he arrives there? As a musician.