

CAVITT ART DOCENT PROGRAM

Lesson “C” – 7th Grade

Art of the Italian Renaissance



La Gioconda (aka: Mona Lisa) - wood, circa 1503-1506, Leonardo da Vinci

Art of the Italian Renaissance

- **Overview of Renaissance Art**
- **Who was Leonardo da Vinci?**
- **“Leonardo: Right to Left” Exercise**
- **Presentation of da Vinci artwork**

Renaissance Art

The Renaissance occurred between 1400 A.D. and 1600 A.D. It began in the city states of Italy. Renaissance means "rebirth" in French. The art of this period reflected back to the classical time of Rome and Greece. This reflection back to the Greek and Romans was not limited to the arts, but all fields like literature, science, and architecture began to look back to the ancients for their inspiration.

In the fifteenth century, Italy was not the unified country we know today. At that time the boot-shaped peninsula was divided into many small independent states. Naples in the south was ruled by a series of kings. Popes of the Roman Catholic Church ruled the middle section. To the north different families controlled the largest and wealthiest city-states of Florence, Milan, and Venice. They fought wars against each other and against smaller neighboring states to increase their power.

One of the major influences in the Renaissance was the change in the social structure of Europe at this time. Before the Renaissance, there were primarily three different social levels; the nobility, the churchmen, and the peasants. During the Renaissance Era a merchant class developed. These wealthy merchants would often hire artists to decorate family chapels in the local church or cathedral. Guilds (or groups of craftspeople) would often compete with other guilds in the town by sponsoring large art projects. Later the arts were supported by rich patrician families.

In the Renaissance period, we see the first oil painting on canvas. It was also a time where the paintings took on three dimensions by the use of shadow and light. The subject matter included mythical subjects and nature scenes. Artists tried to show differences in proportions (meaning size and location of one thing compared to another in the painting; perspective) of their subject matter.

The Italian High Renaissance (considered to be the first quarter of the 16th century) is the period when the leading artists had sufficient technical expertise to achieve virtually any naturalistic effect they wished, coupled with a controlling, Classically-based intelligence which imposed visual harmony and compositional balance while eliminating gratuitous detail. It is considered by many to be the defining movement in art history. No other artistic movement has contributed more to development of art as a whole. Previously, artists held the same position in society as any other skilled craftsmen and were given as much respect as carpenters and goldsmiths. But, in the 1400's this all changed. A new revolution in art opened the eyes of the world to the glory of the world itself. Before 1400, the primary subjects of art were religious in nature. Aside from commissioned portraits, most artists made their livings painting biblical scenes and portraits of saints. It was generally assumed that only religious imagery was deserving of reproduction. The painting technique itself was fairly primitive with little respect to correct anatomical form, atmospheric condition, or geometric shape. Paintings appeared flat and lacked luster. The subjects were often showed in profile and a lack of appropriate shading made them level with no real depth or perspective. But, during the Renaissance a new interest in Greek and Roman culture led to an explosion in knowledge about the human form along with innovations in mathematics and science. Suddenly, all creations of God, and the human form in particular became revered as testament to God's great

power and perfection. Beauty became connected to morality and the pursuit of beauty in art became widespread. The nude human form, linear perspective, atmospheric perspective, and a new found interest in observing the natural world hallmark the movement. Artists themselves were elevated in social status and their works were looked upon not as mere crafts, but as miraculous creations that were divinely inspired. While many artists are recognized as having contributed to the body of important work created during the Renaissance, at the forefront of the movement were three prominent artists; **Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael.**

Michelangelo Buonarroti was born in 1475 and died in 1564. In the 89 years that he lived, Michelangelo created many of the works of art that we think of when we think of the Renaissance. A skilled painter who spent many years completing the frescoes that adorn the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo had trained as a sculptor and created two of the world's greatest statues--the enormous David and the emotional Pieta. It took Michelangelo over four years to paint over 6,000 square feet of the Sistine Chapel with scenes from the Old Testament. His renowned sculpture "David" is thought to take its influence from the Greek sculpture "Spear Bearer."

Raphael was born in 1483 and died in 1520. Popular with the popes of the period, Raphael decorated the papal apartments of Julius II, continued to do so under Leo X and, following Bramante, served as architect of St. Peter's. He is credited with revolutionizing portrait painting because of the style he used in the portrait of Julius II. He also designed the "cartoons" that are on the tapestries of the Sistine Chapel. A tour of the Vatican Museums should include the Raphael Rooms where you can see some of the artist's works (though Raphael died suddenly on Good Friday, 1520, before all the work was completed and much of it was finished by his students). In his painting *The School of Athens*, he reflected the classical influence upon Renaissance art, but he also paid tribute to the men who inspired him by using the faces of da Vinci, Bramante and Michelangelo as philosophers participating in the debate between Plato and Aristotle.

Leonardo da Vinci was born 1452 and died in 1519. His most famous works are the *Mona Lisa* and *the Last Supper* which are works in oil. He had a nature that was careful and precise, so that he never hurried to finish a work. He developed what are regarded as technical, manual skills that were so excellent that few artists in history have rivaled his ability. He had an exceptional intellect and fascination with the world around him. Besides his paintings, he left us a legacy of detailed drawings of the human anatomy, plans for a tank, helicopter, ideas on the construction of multi-level canal and road systems. Because he was an artist and a scientist at a time when both art and science, he has come to characterize the ultimate "Renaissance Man." There is so much to learn about this fascinating artist and inventor.

Who was Leonardo da Vinci?

Leonardo da Vinci: Creative Genius

Leonardo da Vinci—one of history’s most imaginative geniuses—was certainly born at the right time and in the right place. He was born in 1452 in the small hill town of Vinci – thus his name “Leonardo from Vinci.” His father was a successful notary and his mother a peasant woman. For a curious boy who loved nature, the area around Vinci must have been a wonderful childhood home. Leonardo was free to explore the woods and streams and to study the insects, animals, and birds which he later sketched in great detail in his notebooks. Leonardo's early fascination with nature clearly inspired the paintings he would create as an adult.

When he was about 12 years old, Leonardo moved to the bustling city of Florence with his father. Because young Leonardo demonstrated a great talent for drawing, his father later made him an apprentice in the studio of Andrea del Verrocchio, a leading artist in Florence.

The Italian Renaissance was an exciting period of discovery and invention, of exploration and creation and Leonardo thrived in that environment. He was a mirror of the age in which he lived. **“Renaissance man” refers to someone who has a mastery of many fields. Artist, scientist, engineer, architect, musician and courtier par excellence, Leonardo embodied what came to be known as the multi-talented Renaissance Man.** Leonardo carefully studied the world around him. He believed that art should clearly reflect the wonders of the natural world. But his works also contained a certain mystery. His *Mona Lisa*, perhaps the world’s most famous painting, is known for her haunting smile. Leonardo was also fascinated by the way things worked. He mused endlessly about cause and effect, filling thousands of pages of his famous notebooks with sketches and commentary dealing with subjects as diverse as the anatomy of a horse and the design of a hydraulic pump.

Leonardo was also intrigued about the possibilities of locomotion, and he designed a number of machines that would enable man to get around faster. Most of all, he was fascinated by the possibilities of human flight. He captured birds and studied their feathers and skeletal systems to puzzle out the secrets of aerodynamics. He studied the flow of water in rivers and streams as well as the effects of tides in order to better understand wind currents. Using what he observed in nature, he designed some very ingenious flying machines. Given the times in which he lived, Leonardo’s designs for flying machines were amazing! Although there were some major flaws, his designs would eventually evolve into the modern airplanes of today.

Leonardo da Vinci was easily swept up with the spirit of his times. Drawn to many arenas of creative activity, he plunged into one project after another, with some amazing results. From boyhood, Leonardo da Vinci was a keen observer of the world around him. As a young man, he began the habit of writing notes about his observations. In 1482 he began a wide variety of scientific research projects ranging from botany and anatomy to military engineering and geography. He jotted down his ideas and theories, accompanied by detailed sketches, in a collection of notebooks. In time, he would fill thousands of pages.

Leonardo's notebooks are not easy reading. The subject matter changes abruptly as a new idea popped into his mind. He also used strange spellings and abbreviations. And most intriguing, the pages are most easily read if they are held up to a mirror!

The next exercise will introduce you to Leonardo's fascinating writing technique and provide insight into the mind of this creative genius.

Lesson Sources:

EDSITEment (<http://edsitement.neh.gov/>) is a partnership among the National Endowment for the Humanities, Verizon Foundation, and the National Trust for the Humanities.

Metropolitan Museum of Art [<http://www.metmuseum.org/>]

Introduction to the Renaissance

[http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/publications/pdfs/renaissance/divided/c_Intro.pdf]

Museum of the History of Science [<http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/>].

- Leonardo Right to Left
[<http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/on-line/leonardo/LeonardoRighttoLeft.asp>]
- Renaissance Man
[<http://www.mos.org/leonardo/bio.html>]
- Turning the Pages on the Web
[<http://www.bl.uk/collections/treasures/digitisation.html>]

Docent Instructions for “Leonardo: Right to Left” Exercise

Begin this exercise by reading the following aloud to the students:

Leonardo wrote in Italian using a special kind of shorthand that he invented himself. People who study his notebooks have long been puzzled by something else, however. He usually used "mirror writing," starting at the right side of the page and moving to the left. Only when he was writing something intended for other people did he write in the normal direction.

People who were contemporaries of Leonardo left records that they saw him write and paint left-handed. He also made sketches showing his own left hand at work. Being a lefty was highly unusual in Leonardo's time. Because people were superstitious, children who naturally started using their left hands to write and draw were forced to use their right hands.

No one knows the true reason Leonardo used mirror writing, though several possibilities have been suggested:

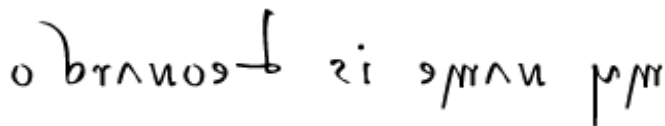
- **He was trying to make it harder for people to read his notes and steal his ideas.**
- **He was hiding his scientific ideas from the powerful Roman Catholic Church, whose teachings sometimes disagreed with what Leonardo observed.**
- **Writing left handed from left to right was messy because the ink just put down would smear as his hand moved across it. Leonardo chose to write in reverse because it prevented smudging.**

Next:

1. **Distribute the “Leonardo: Right to Left” sheet to the students.** Ask them to read through the instructions and then attempt to write their name in cursive from right to left. This is challenging! Make sure they understand what we mean by writing backwards. A sample signature is provided on their sheet if there is confusion.

Example: **My name is Leonardo**

Here is what it might have looked like if Leonardo had written it....



The image shows a handwritten signature in cursive, written from right to left. The signature is 'Leonardo', but it is mirrored and written backwards. The letters are connected and fluid, typical of Leonardo da Vinci's handwriting style. The text is written in black ink on a white background.

2. **If students have trouble forming letters in reverse, suggest that they try the following exercise:**
 - Hold a pencil in each hand.
 - Simultaneously, write backwards with the usual writing hand while writing forwards with the opposite hand.
 - Having the one hand mirror or copy the other hand's action seems to help the brain coordinate the movements.

3. **If some students finish early, have them attempt to write their name again using a pen this time to make comparisons between writing implements.**

Ask: Is one kind of writing tool easier to use one way than another? Note: Leonardo would have used pen and ink in his writing.

4. **Once students have completed the exercise, distribute mirrors and show them how to position the mirrors to one side of their backwards writing to read it normally.** A mirror also lets them check to see if they actually reversed all letters properly.

5. **Once they have completed the exercise, ask the following questions:**
 - Did you find this challenging?
 - Was it frustrating to try to write backwards smoothly without stopping on your first attempt?
 - Why do you think Leonardo wrote in reverse?
 - Did left-handed or right-handed students have an easier time writing backwards?
 - For someone who learns to write backwards as easily as he/she writes forwards, what advantages might there be to backwards writing?

“Leonardo: Right to Left” Exercise

Leonardo wrote in Italian using a special kind of shorthand that he invented himself. People who study his notebooks have long been puzzled by something else, however. He usually used "mirror writing," starting at the right side of the page and moving to the left. Each letter is written backwards so that if you held a mirror up to it, the letter would appear as it does normally in our alphabet.

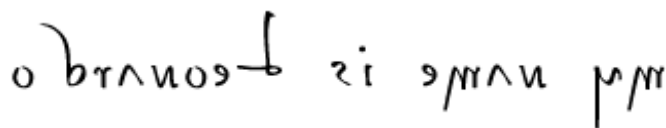
This is your chance to experience the process of mirror writing and decide for yourself how truly extraordinary were his methods and his thinking.

Write: “My name is _____ (insert your first name)” on the line below in cursive using a pencil.

Now write: “My name is _____ (insert your first name)” on the line below in cursive but backwards (right to left) using a pencil. Make your first attempt on the first line without stopping or erasing. Make your second effort, if needed, on the second line, correcting the letters as you go. *An example has been provided at the bottom of page for your reference.*

Example: “My name is Leonardo”

Here is what it might have looked like if Leonardo had written it...



o b r a n u o s i z i e m l a n o m m

Da Vinci's Artwork

Although he was multi-talented, Leonardo is best known today for his drawings and paintings. Painting was for Leonardo the supreme medium for expressing spiritual values. He used warm colors, and the landscapes behind his portraits or in his religious scenes are enveloped in a fine mist. He was the first painter to compose his work using mathematical proportions and the architectural strength of the pyramid as the basis for design. Michelangelo and Raphael later adopted some of his principles and used them in their own works. Through painting, he studied not only anatomy, but the laws of proportion, perspective, and the reflection of light. He believed that the artist must understand the structure of objects – whether it be things or people - in order to paint them successfully. His curiosity and acute observation led him into scientific analysis far beyond the ordinary needs of most painters or sculptors. Let's look at some of these works together.

The Mona Lisa


The *Mona Lisa* was one of Leonardo's favorite paintings, and he carried it with him until he died. Today, it is regarded as the most famous painting in the world, and is visited by many thousands of people every year.

Who is this familiar figure? Many suggestions have been made, but the most likely candidate is Lisa Gherardini, the wife of a Florentine silk merchant.

Another more unlikely - but popular - theory is that the painting was a self portrait. There are certainly similarities between the facial features of the *Mona Lisa* and of the artist's self portrait painted many years later. Could this be why Leonardo gave the subject such an enigmatic smile?

Today, the *Mona Lisa* looks rather sombre, in dull shades of brown and yellow. This is due to a layer of varnish covering the paint, which has yellowed over the years. It is possible that the painting was once brighter and more colourful than it is now.

The *Mona Lisa* was stolen from the Louvre in 1911, by a former employee who believed the painting belonged in Italy. The thief walked out of the gallery with the picture underneath his painter's smock. He was apprehended by police two years later, and the painting was safely returned.

 **Look For** - Leonardo has used a technique known as *Sfumato* - the blurring of sharp edges by blending colours - to leave the corners of the eyes and the mouth in shadow. It is this technique that makes the *Mona Lisa*'s expression ambiguous.

The background of the painting has been made to look more hazy, with fewer distinct outlines than the foreground. This technique is known as aerial perspective, and Leonardo was one of the first painters to use it to give his paintings more depth.



The Annunciation

The Annunciation depicts the moment when the angel Gabriel appears before Mary. The enclosed garden symbolises her virginity.

Two versions of this painting exist. The one in the Uffizi gallery is more likely to be Leonardo's own. A second version, which hangs in the Louvre could well be the work of Lorenzo di Credi, who, like Leonardo was also an apprentice of Verrocchio. However, the Louvre version also contains elements - such as realistic wings on the angel - which we associate with Leonardo's style.

This painting contains technical flaws which we would not expect from a Leonardo work. However, it was painted when Leonardo was still young. These errors may be because he was still learning his craft.



- 👁️ **Look For** - The technical flaws in this painting are easy to spot. Mary has her hands resting on an altar, yet this has been drawn closer to the viewer than Mary is.

The painting also has a horizontally central vanishing point, which is unusual for Renaissance paintings.

The Last Supper

The Last Supper was painted onto the walls of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie near Milan. Leonardo spent three years painting the work, and much of that time was spent searching the streets of Milan for models of Christ and Judas. It is said that only Leonardo's threats to paint the Prior of the convent as Judas bought him the time he needed to finish.

Although it was common to paint directly onto the walls of building, Leonardo was not trained in this 'fresco' technique, and made a poor choice of materials. This, along with the humid conditions in the convent, meant that the painting began deteriorating while Leonardo was still alive. The refectory has also been flooded and used as a stable - but the painting's luckiest escape came during the Second World War, when the refectory was hit by a bomb. Only some carefully placed sandbags saved this masterpiece from destruction.



There have been many attempts to restore *The Last Supper*, most of which have done more harm than good. A full restoration was recently completed. It took twenty years - five times longer than Leonardo took to complete the original. However, virtually none of the original paint remains, and critics claim we can no longer regard this as a Leonardo painting.



Look For - The perspective focuses on the figure of Christ in the centre. The window behind his head looks like a halo. Judas is the only figure in the painting who is leaning away from Christ, and the only figure who is in shadow. In traditional paintings, Judas's halo was black.

Leonardo also played tricks with the perspective in this painting. We can see the table top, even though we shouldn't be able to from where we stand. And why are so many people crowded round a table when there wouldn't be room for them all to sit?

Lady with the Ermine

Like many paintings thought to be by Leonardo, controversy surrounds this picture. Some question whether it was painted by Leonardo at all.

Art historians also disagree over who the subject of the portrait was. One theory suggests it shows a young lady named Cecilia Gallerani, who would have been just seventeen when this picture was painted. Cecilia was the mistress of Ludovico Sforza - the Duke of Milan - until Ludovico settled down and married another woman.

If the model was Cecilia, then the Ermine in the picture may have had a special meaning. The Greek for Ermine is Galee - a pun on the model's name.

Parts of this picture have been painted over at some point in its history. The background has been darkened, and X-rays show a door has been removed. The original painting showed a woman wearing a transparent veil, but this has been retouched to look like hair. The bottom two fingers have also been altered, and look less realistic than the other two.

👁️ **Look For** - This painting is based on curved lines, which lead the eye. From the model's face, the gaze is drawn down the sleeve, across the back of the Ermine, and then up the other arm.

The head of the Ermine in this picture is particularly lifelike. Leonardo placed emphasis on natural accuracy, and may have studied the anatomy of the creature before beginning the painting.

