Leonardo Da Vinci  (1452 – 1519)

Early Life

- Lived with his father who wanted him to become a lawyer. He had about 17 half brothers and sisters.
- At around 15 he was apprenticed to Andrea del Verrocchio in Florence after his father saw one of his paintings of a monster on a block of wood.
- When his master, Verrochio, painted the ‘Baptism of Christ’ he let his apprentice paint an angel. Apparently after seeing this his master said he’d never paint again as he realised his talent was tiny compared with Leonardo’s.

His Development As An Artist and as the ideal ‘Renaissance Man’ – His Time In Milan

- He went out on his own after a few years. He then moved to Milan to work for the Duke, Ludovico Sforza.

Letter of Application to Sforza from Leonardo

“I can build covered wagons, safe and unassailable to penetrate with their artillery among the enemy… I have plans for destroying every fortress or other stronghold… for making cannon... covered chariots, catapults”

Why do you think he kept going on about his ability to make war machines? Why would this interest the Duke of Milan?

- Leonardo wasn’t just a painter for the Duke. He designed fancy festivals, weapons, building and machinery also. Despite designing such weapons as missiles, multi-barrelled machine guns, grenades etc. he refused to help design an underwater breathing device saying that men would likely use it for “evil in war”.
- He also started writing in his notebooks. He used mirror writing. He probably did this because he was left handed and he would have smudged the ink otherwise.
- His notebooks include drawings of aeroplanes, catapults, a tank and a type of submarine. These are worth a lot of money nowadays with one set of notebooks being sold for nearly $50 million dollars!
- Leonardo also became very interested in anatomy – studying bodies to figure out the way muscles moved etc. This helped him to create more realistic paintings. Paolo Giovi, Leonardo’s first biographer (1520) said that “in the medical faculty he learned to dissect the cadavers of criminals under inhuman disgusting conditions… because he wanted to examine and to draw the different deflections and reflections of limbs and their dependence upon the nerves and joints. This is why he paid attention to the forms of even very small organs, capillaries and hidden parts of the skeleton”
- Sometimes he got so interested in other subjects that he didn’t always finish what he was doing. In 17 years he only produced 6 finished works of art, including ‘The Last Supper’. He was meant to carve a giant bronze sculpture of Sforza’s father (23 feet and 80 tonnes) but he took too long about it and ran out of time.
• **Back to Florence, then Rome and the France**

Sforza was kicked out of Milan. Leonardo went back to Florence. Over the rest of his life he would travel to different regions working for different patrons such as King Francis I of France and the de Medicis.

**Leonardo’s Style and His Paintings.**

- He used perspective such as in The Last Supper
- He did not just concentrate on religious pictures and any religious figures he drew looked very human instead of having halos etc.
- He used ‘sfumato’ which means ‘smokiness’ in Italian. This meant that the figures were blended into the background to make it more realistic. The Mona Lisa is a good example of this.
- The Last Supper was painted using an experimental technique and the mural (a painting done on a wall — think of Ancient Rome) started to flake even before he died. It has had to be restored and repainted several times.
- For inspiration for this painting Leonardo is said to have walked Milan looking for interesting faces to put on the apostles. Notice how Judas is lower and darker than the rest of the apostles.

**Achievements**

- He is seen as the father of modern science. He studied anatomy, zoology, botany, geology etc in a methodical and modern way. He did not base his beliefs on superstition. He observed, tested and came up with well studied results.
- He was the ultimate/best example of a ‘Renaissanse Man’ — someone who was a master of many areas of expertise.

Leonardo on Art:

> “The sculptor as he creates his work employs the strength of his arm by which he carves the marble or other hard material that encloses his subject...normally accompanied by a lot of sweat which mixes with the marble dust and forms a mud smeared all over his face. The marble dust flourishes him all over so that he looks like a miller, his back is covered with a snowstream of chips and his house is filthy with the flakes and dust of the marble. The exact opposite is true of the painter...for the painter sits before his work, perfectly at east and well dressed, and uses light brushes dipped in fine colours; and his place is clean and filled with lovely objects; and often he works to the accompaniment of music or of reading of various and beautiful literary works that, since they are not mixed with the din of the hammer or other disturbing noises, provide great pleasure to the ear”

(1) Give three reasons why he disliked sculpting statues.

(2) Give three reasons why he much preferred painting.