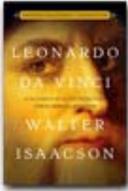


***Leonardo da Vinci* by Walter Isaacson. ISBN-13: 978-1501139154.**



Walter Isaacson's latest biography is an intimate venture into the life of Leonardo da Vinci: artist, sculptor, engineer, inventor, and even, one might argue, amateur coroner.

Isaacson includes some helpful guides for the reader at the beginning of the book. This includes, but is not limited to: a cast of characters with brief biographies; information about Italian currency circa 1500 and how it compares to the modern-day U.S. dollar; and, most importantly, a detailed timeline of Leonardo's life and work (complete with color images) juxtaposed with a timeline of important events around the world for context.

Leonardo, thanks to his painted masterpieces, namely *The Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa*, is first and foremost remembered as an artist. And Isaacson's *da Vinci* feels like an art history textbook, complete with thick, glossy pages and high-resolution color images of Leonardo's work (painted, sketched, and otherwise).

But despite textbook appearances, Isaacson's book is a true biography of the man—and an interesting, compelling one at that. Even if you think you know everything there is to know about *da Vinci*, you will definitely learn at least one new thing, if not more.

Isaacson starts with Leonardo's childhood in the small Italian town of Vinci, outside Florence. As an illegitimate child, Leonardo split his childhood between his mother's home and his father's parents. His illegitimacy was a blessing in disguise: it meant he could pursue his passions as a young man instead of following in his father's footsteps as a notary. It also meant Leonardo was never formally educated. Even in his old age, he considered himself a man of experience rather than a man of books.

When Leonardo was 12, he moved to Florence with his father. The city, then under the control of the Medici family, was a cultural center—a nexus for artists, architects, and sculptors. By the time Leonardo was 14, his father had arranged an apprenticeship for him in the workshop of a master artist: Andrea del Verrocchio. Some scholars even suspect that Leonardo was the model for Verrocchio's *David* (as in *David and Goliath*). Under Verrocchio's tutelage, Leonardo developed two techniques that he would continue to use for the rest of his career: chiaroscuro and sfumato. Da Vinci also contributed to several of Verrocchio's painted works, such as *Tobias and the Angel* and *Baptism of the Christ*.

By the time Leonardo was twenty-four, he had moved out of Verrocchio's workshop and started his own. During this time, he only had three commissioned works—he never started one of them and left the other two unfinished—one of which was *Adoration of the Magi*.

Following his essential failure in Florence, at age thirty, da Vinci packed up and moved to Milan—he would stay there for seventeen years. In Milan, da Vinci was something of a cultural envoy. He worked on a tremendous number of inventions, such as the crossbow; acted as a court entertainer; and even perfected *The Vitruvian Man*.

Though not often remembered or regarded as a sculptor (unlike his slightly younger contemporary Michelangelo), Leonardo actually spent five of his years in Milan on a massive horse sculpture for the Duke. The horse was never completed though, due to a series of unfortunate events that culminated in French invaders essentially melting his massive clay model down with flaming arrows.*

Despite the horse setback, da Vinci persevered. He conducted numerous experiments of scientific inquiry, seeking to understand why the sky is blue and how birds fly (spoiler alert: he figured both of these things out hundreds of years before modern particle physics or mechanical engineering). He drew incredible polyhedral figures for his friend Luca Pacioli's book *On Divine Proportion*. The skillful shading makes the illustrations seeming to leap off the page—they seem truly three-dimensional. He completed a series of commissioned portraits, such as *Lady with an Ermine*. And then he worked on one of his most famous pieces: *The Last Supper*.

The death of Leonardo's mother brought him back to Florence, where he worked on numerous projects, including a failed attempt to redirect the Arno river. He also developed a rivalry with Michelangelo. Da Vinci eventually returned to Milan, where he continued his work dissecting corpses and studying human anatomy. He then spent some time in Rome before leaving the country for France, where he was widely revered as a master artist. It was there that he eventually died.

Isaacson ends the book with *Mona Lisa*, choosing to discuss the work out of chronological order. His point seems to be that the weight of this particular piece would overwhelm any discussion of any other work either before or after it.

One of the interesting segues in the book concerns modern efforts to authenticate works of Renaissance art that some seek to attribute to Leonardo. In da Vinci's time, artists often did not sign their work. Collectors have often sought a windfall from recognizing a work as da Vinci's that was not previously recognized as such—and naturally, chaos ensues. These anecdotes remind us that there is still quite a bit about Leonardo we cannot possibly know—the man lived 500 years ago after all. But it's quite thrilling to think maybe, just maybe, there is an unsigned masterpiece out there, hiding in plain sight, waiting for the right person to stumble upon it.

*Jean Fritz wrote a beautifully illustrated children's book, *Leonardo's Horse*, about the unfinished statue, and how an American airline pilot worked to help "finish" the piece. You can now see "Leonardo's Horse" in Milan.

Review by Jeanette S. Ferrara, MA