

A long-awaited new translation of Giorgio Vasari's *Life of Leonardo da Vinci*, illustrated for the first time, that preserves Vasari's compelling narrative and respects his original writing with a new precision

# The Life of Leonardo da Vinci

*A New Translation*

Giorgio Vasari

Edited and Introduced by Martin Kemp

32 Illustrations

18.5 x 13.5cm

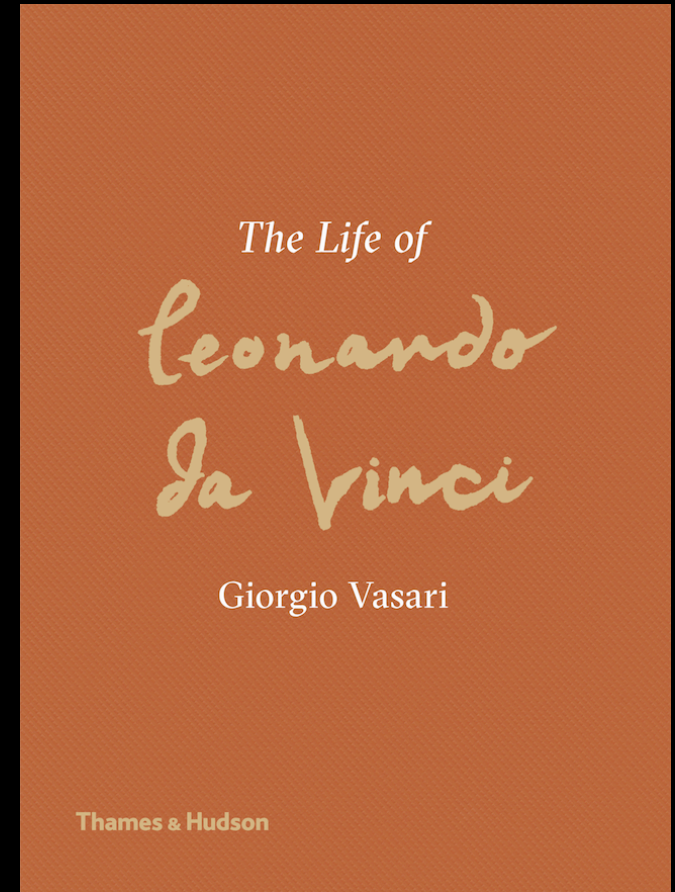
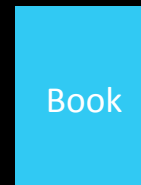
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## Key Sales Points

- Coincides with the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Leonardo's death, with many exhibitions planned to mark this event – including 144 of his drawings from the Royal Collection being shown simultaneously across 12 exhibitions in the UK
- The first stand-alone edition since 1903
- The first ever edition to be illustrated with coloured renditions of da Vinci's artwork
- Edited by the eminent Leonardo scholar, Martin Kemp, and co-translated by editors with expert knowledge of the sources and context, this book offers a literary translation that respects the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian original
- A fascinating read illuminated by succinct notes that shed the light of modern knowledge on Leonardo's career



# THE LIFE OF LEONARDO DA VINCI

BY GIORGIO VASARI

EDITED BY MARTIN KEMP

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN KEMP  
AND LUCY RUSSELL

WITH 40 ILLUSTRATIONS

 Thames & Hudson

Now and then the heavens truly send us those who do not represent humanity alone but the divine itself, so that from the divine in them, we can approach with our talent and the excellence of our intellect the highest spheres of the heavens, imitating the divinity of these exemplars as a model. From experience one sees those who, with some incidental study, turn to follow in the footsteps of these miraculous souls. If they are not helped by nature, since they are not the same as those souls, they at least approach the divine works that participate in their divinity.

\* Thus  
 ° nephew  
 \* who truly  
 was a very  
 good uncle  
 and relative to  
 him, helping  
 him through  
 his youth and  
 especially  
 \* in which

Truly\* miraculous and celestial was Leonardo, son° of Ser Piero da Vinci.\* In learning and in the foundations of literature\* he would have made great profit if he had not been so various and unstable. For he set out to learn many things, and, having made a start, abandoned them. Thus, in the few months that he attended to the abacus, he made such strides that he was led to raise continual doubts and difficulties with the master who was teaching him, very often confounding his teacher.<sup>2</sup> Then he was given to working with music for a time, resolving to play the *lira* [*da braccio*], as one who by nature possessed an elevated spirit and was full of refinement; accordingly, he improvised song in a divine manner.<sup>3</sup>

[FIG. 9]

Nevertheless, although he had attended to so many different things, he never gave up drawing and modelling in relief, as something that appealed to his imagination more than any other thing. Seeing this and considering the level of his talent, Ser Piero one day took some of his drawings to Andrea del Verrocchio, who was a good friend of his, and directly asked him if he could

say whether Leonardo would profit in some way from being set to the art of design. Andrea was astonished to see the very considerable start made by Leonardo, and assured Ser Piero that he should be assigned to such study. Accordingly Ser Piero arranged that Leonardo should enter the workshop of Andrea; Leonardo willingly followed this course. He did not follow just one line of work, but all those involving the art of design. And having an intellect so divine and miraculous, and being such a very good geometer, he not only worked in sculpture and in architecture, but he wanted his profession to be painting.

Nature showed in Leonardo's actions such high talent that in his ability to reason silenced scholars with explanations of a natural kind. He was alert and intelligent, and with perfect art of persuasion showed the complexities of his mind, making calculations of how to transport mountains, pull weights, and, among other things, making in his youth several heads of smiling women in terracotta, which are still cast in plaster, and similarly he made heads of infants, which appeared to have come from the hand of a master, but he also worked in architecture, making many drawings of plans and of various buildings. Although he was still young he engaged in discussions about the river Arno and the making of a canal between Pisa and Florence.<sup>4</sup> He made designs for flour mills and fulling mills and other devices that operate through the power of water.

[FIG. 7]

Because his profession was to be painting, he studied in full measure how to draw from nature.<sup>5</sup> He often made models and figures in clay on which he placed rags infused with clay. Then he set out patiently to portray them on certain fine canvases of

[FIG. 18]

modelling, went so far with dark shadows as to exploit the darkest grounds, seeking blacks to make deep shadows, darker than the other blacks, and by their means to make his highlights seem all the brighter. In the end this method of colouring was such that no light remained there, and his pictures assumed the guise of things represented at night-time, rather than in the brilliance of daylight. All this came from seeking to render things in greater relief, and to achieve the ultimate perfection in this art.

[FIG. 26]

It so pleased him when he saw some bizarre heads, or men with beards or hair growing untamed, that he would follow one that pleased him for a whole day, so fixing him in his mind as an idea that when he arrived back in his house he could draw it as if the man had been present. Of this type of drawing, it is possible to see many heads of women and men, and I have several drawn in pen by his hand in our book of drawings, which I have mentioned before. One is of Amerigo Vespucci, which is a most beautiful elderly head drawn in black chalk, and similarly that of Scaramuccia, captain of the Gypsies, which was subsequently owned by Messer Donato Valdanbrini of Arezzo, canon of San Lorenzo, left to him by Giambullari.<sup>16</sup>

[FIG. 27]

Leonardo began a picture of the Adoration of the Magi, in which there are many beautiful things, especially the heads. This was in the house of Amerigo Benci opposite the Loggia of the Peruzzi, and remained incomplete like other of his things.

[FIG. 28]

When Giovan Galeazzo, Duke of Milan, happened to die, and Ludovico Sforza succeeded to that office in the year 1494, Leonardo, who had a huge reputation, was dispatched to Francesco, the Duke in Milan.<sup>17</sup> The Duke greatly delighted in





27  
*Grotesque Head (Scaramuccia?)*, c. 1505.  
Black chalk on paper, 38.2 × 27.5 cm (15 × 10<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.).



28  
*Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1480–81.  
Oil on panel, 2.46 × 2.43 m (96<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 95<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.).

the sound of the *lira* [*da braccio*] when it was played.<sup>18</sup> Leonardo carried with him an instrument that had been made by his hand largely in silver, in the shape of a horse's cranium, which was extraordinary and new, in order that the harmony might be of greater fullness and more sonorous in tone, in this way surpassing all the other musicians who had come together to play there.<sup>19</sup> In addition to this he was the best reciter of improvised poems in his day. When the Duke listened to Leonardo's miraculous utterances, he became so enamoured of his talents that it was incredible to see. He begged Leonardo to make an altarpiece painted on a panel in which was a Nativity, which was sent by the Duke to the Emperor [Maximilian].<sup>20</sup>

[FIG. 29]

Then he made a Last Supper in Milan for the friars of San Domenico in Santa Maria delle Grazie, something that is very beautiful and marvellous, and the heads of the Apostles were endowed with much majesty and beauty, although that of Christ was left unfinished since he did not think it was possible to convey the celestial divinity required for Christ. This work, left in this final state, is perpetually held in great veneration by the Milanese, and also by visitors from outside, in that Leonardo has imagined and managed to realize the suspicions that assailed the Apostles about who was to betray their master. To this end, their faces bear witness to love, fear and indignation, or rather sorrow, at not being able to embrace the thinking of Christ. This is no less a cause of wonder than our being confronted with the stubbornness, hate and treachery of Judas – without mentioning that every small detail of the work displays an incredible diligence. It thus happens that in the tablecloth he has replicated the work

[FIG. 30]



of weaving in such a way that Rheims linen itself could not be closer to the truth.

It is said that the Prior of that place solicited him very importunately to finish the work, it seeming strange to him how Leonardo sometimes spent half the day immersed in thought. He would have preferred that Leonardo should never put his brush down, like a labourer who hoes soil in a garden. And if this was not enough, he complained to the Duke and stirred things up, so that the Duke was moved to send for Leonardo to expedite matters. He did this tactfully and in such a way as to indicate that all this was happening because of the importunity of the Prior. Leonardo, knowing the mind of the prince to be sharp and discerning, decided to talk at length with him about this matter (which he had never done with the Prior). He provided ample arguments about the nature of art and made him understand that when the greatest geniuses are working less they actually accomplish more. They are searching in their minds for inventions and shaping those perfect ideas that are then expressed and rendered by their hands – having already conceived them in their intellects. And he added that he still had two heads to complete, that of Christ, which he could neither find on earth or even envisage – as if he might presume that in his imagination he could conceive of that beauty and celestial grace demanded by divinity incarnate.

Leonardo was also lacking a head for Judas, which was occasioning him much thought, not thinking that it was possible to imagine a model who would serve as the face of someone so wicked that he would resolve to betray his Lord, the Creator of



30

*The Last Supper*, 1495–98.

Tempera on plaster, 4.6 × 8.8 m (181 × 346 in.).





37

*Mona Lisa*, c. 1503–14.Oil on panel, 77 × 53 cm (30<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 20<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.).

fear in every valiant practitioner of art, whoever he is. He also made use of this strategy: since *Mona Lisa* was very beautiful, while painting her portrait he always retained persons to play or sing and jesters, who continuously made her cheerful, in order to take away that melancholy that painters often tend to give to the portraits that they make. And in this work of Leonardo's there was a smile so pleasing that it was a thing more divine than human to witness; and it was held to be something marvellous, since it was not other than living.

On account of the excellence of the works of this divine practitioner, his fame grew to such an extent that all those persons who delight in art, and also the whole city, wished that he might leave behind him some monument to his talent. They debated how to get him to undertake some notable and grand work that would honour the public and honour the talent, grace and judgment with which they were acquainted in Leonardo's works. Together the Standard-Bearers and the leading citizens were engaged in newly constructing the great hall of the council, the architecture of which was taken in hand with the advice of Giuliano da Sangallo and Simone Pollaiuolo, known as *Il Cronaca*, Michelangelo Buonarroti and Baccio d'Agnolo (as is recounted in the corresponding sections of this book).<sup>35</sup> Having completed the hall with great haste, it was determined by public decree that Leonardo should be set to paint some beautiful thing for it. Thus he received a commission for the hall from Piero Soderini, then the Standard-Bearer of Justice.

Keen to comply, Leonardo began a cartoon in the Room of the Pope, located in Santa Maria Novella. The cartoon contained

\* and they  
wished him

## LEONARDO'S LIFE KEY DATES AND WORKS

Works of art in *bold italics* were known or seemingly known to Vasari.

Works of art in *italics* are not mentioned by Vasari.

Known works are followed by their current location in brackets.

### 1452

On Saturday 15 April, around 10.30 p.m., Leonardo is born in Vinci out of wedlock. Leonardo's father is Ser Piero di Antonio da Vinci (1427–1504), a notary working in Florence, and his mother is a young orphan, Caterina. The baby is publicly baptized on the Sunday, with six prominent god-parents.

### 1457

On 28 February Leonardo is listed in Vinci as a dependent in the tax assessment of his grandfather, Antonio.

### First Florentine Period (c. 1464/69–1481/83)

#### c. 1469

Leonardo moves to Florence at an unknown date and enters the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio. At some point in the next four years he contributes substantially to

Verrocchio's painting of *The Baptism of Christ* (Florence, Uffizi).

### 1472

Leonardo appears in the account book of the painter's confraternity, the Compagnia di San Luca, in Florence.

### 1473

On 5 August Leonardo inscribes a mountainous landscape drawing: 'day of Saint Mary of the Snows / day of 5 August 1473' (Uffizi). He paints *The Madonna and Child with the Vase of Flowers* (Munich, Alte Pinakotek).

### 1476

On 9 April and 7 June Leonardo is among those charged with homosexual activity with a seventeen-year-old apprentice in a goldsmith's workshop. The charge is not followed up.

Leonardo remains in Verrocchio's workshop. Around this time he paints the *Annunciation* (Uffizi).

### 1478

In January Leonardo earns a commission for an altarpiece in the Chapel of San Bernardo in the Palazzo della Signoria of Florence. Leonardo receives a payment on 16 March, but there is no other evidence of work on the commission.

A drawing in the Uffizi is inscribed, '...ber 1478, I began the two Virgin Marys'. One of them may be the *Benois Madonna* (St Petersburg, Hermitage).

Around this time the *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci* was painted.

### 1481

In July Leonardo signs an interim agreement about the *Adoration of the Magi* for the main altar of San Donato in Scopeto, on the outskirts of Florence. Between June and September, payments in money and commodities (including wine) are made for work on the altarpiece.

Before and around this time, he begins to explore aspects of technology (civil and military) and science, including anatomy.

The unfinished *St Jerome* (Rome, Vatican) may date from this time.

### First Milanese Period (1481/3–1499)

#### 1481–1483

Between September 1481 and April 1483, Leonardo leaves Florence for Milan.

#### 1483

On 25 April, with the brothers Evangelista and Giovanni Ambrogio de Predis, Leonardo signs the contract to decorate a large altarpiece for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in their chapel in San

Francesco Grande in Milan. The central painting is to portray the Madonna and Child. The painting he begins is the *Virgin of the Rocks* (Paris, Louvre), which may be the 'Nativity' sent by Ludovico Sforza as a wedding present to Emperor Maximilian I.

### 1483–1490

At some point Leonardo enters the court of Ludovico Sforza, *de facto* ruler of Milan. He writes to Ludovico claiming mastery of a wide range of military engineering. His range of intellectual and practical pursuits widens and deepens, not least in the field of anatomy. A series of skull studies are dated 1489, and we have the first of his surviving series of notebooks, which deals with a diverse range of artistic, technological and scientific subjects, including the flying machine.

He paints the *Portrait of a Musician* (Milan, Bibliotheca Ambrosiana), c. 1483.

### 1487

Leonardo prepares designs and a wooden model for the domed crossing tower (*tiburio*) of Milan Cathedral. Payments are recorded on 30 July, 8 August, 18 August, 27 August, 28 September, 30 September, January 1488 and May 1490. He does not receive the commission.

### 1489

On 22 July the Florentine ambassador to the Sforza court in Milan writes to Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence stating that the Duke has entrusted Leonardo

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