Leonardo da Vinci
(Lay-oh-nahr-doc da vin-chee)
(1452-1519)

Leonardo Da Vinci was born on April 15, 1452 in Vinci, a small town outside of Florence, the capital of Tuscany, Italy. He was the son of a wealthy Florence notary and a peasant woman who had 12 children. When he was about 14 he went to work as an apprentice studio boy. Throughout his career, Leonardo began many projects like sculptures, paintings and buildings, most of which were either never finished or were destroyed.

At the age of 17 or so, largely self-taught, Leonardo went to Florence, securing a position as apprentice to a prominent designer and sculptor, Andrea del Verrocchio, whose patron was Tuscany's ruling family, the Medicis. Over the next eight years, Leonardo learned every aspect of the artist's craft—from costume and set design to architecture and mechanics, to metallurgy for goldsmithing and sculpture, to the myriad aspects of painting. (By all accounts a young man of extraordinary handsomeness, he may also have served as one of his mentor's models.) In 1472, Leonardo officially graduated from apprentice to master, but, strangely, he showed no impatience to make a name for himself. Finally, with Verrocchio's encouragement and blessing, he struck out on his own in 1478 with his first personal commission, a painting for the chapel in Signoria.

For all his exceptional skills and imaginative power, it is said that Leonardo liked nothing better than to lie in bed and daydream. Ideas seemed to excite him more than their execution; he displayed a mystifying inability to complete projects. He kept notebooks in which he wrote down every idea that came into his mind. For example; things like how birds fly, how water runs, the structure of rocks, how plants grow, and how the body works! He created over 7,000 pages of drawings alone. Many of his drawings were anticipations of modern devices that would not be invented for hundreds of years like the automobile, helicopter, submarine, and airplane. These sketches were accompanied by many notes, written backwards so they could only be read when held up to mirror.

Leonardo da Vinci was not only a great inventor but a famous artist. Leonardo sought a universal language in painting. Mastering perspective and other realistic elements, Leonardo tried to create faithful renditions of life. In a culture previously dominated by highly figurative and downright strange religious paintings, Leonardo's desire to paint things realistically was bold and fresh. This call to objectivity became the standard for painters who followed in the 16th century.
Relatively few works indisputably attributed to the da Vinci have survived and fewer still were ever completed. Among the ten paintings he completed are two of the most famous paintings in history: the Last Supper and the Mona Lisa. The Mona Lisa, also called La Gioconda, was completed in 1503 (after 4 years of work!) and is undoubtedly the most famous portrait in the world. Although originally much larger, the Mona Lisa now measures 30 1/4" x 20 7/8". The painting depicts a lady sitting with her hands gently folded, and is set against a distant Alpine landscape. Notice how daVinci utilized perspective techniques to give the illusion of depth in the portrait. The mysterious smile of the ‘Mona Lisa’ has intrigued audiences for centuries and held special significance for Leonardo; he never parted with the painting, and it was listed among his effects when he died in 1519. (you may want to talk about some of the myth’s of the Mona Lisa here.)

Regarded as the founder of the High Renaissance, Leonardo’s works have stood the test of time, transforming the nature of art and inspiring artists and viewers alike for over five centuries. He died on May 2, 1519 at Cloux. Legend has it that King Francis was at his side when he died, cradling Leonardo’s head in his arms. In his will, Leonardo remembered an apprentice name Melzi, leaving him, among other things, all of his notebooks, which numbered some 13,000 pages. Unfortunately, more than two-thirds of these precious artifacts of genius have yet to be found.