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Mr. Comer B2
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Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci was born in 1452 on his father's family estate in Vinci, near Empoli. He was the illegitimate son of Ser Picero, a Florentine notary and landlord. His mother, Caterina, was a young peasant woman who shortly thereafter married an artisan from that region. Leonardo grew up with his father and learned the usual reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Leonardo's artistic inclinations must have appeared early. When he was about 15, his father apprenticed him to Andrea del Verrochio, where he received a many-sided training that included painting, sculpture, and the technical-mechanical arts as well. In 1472 Leonardo was accepted in the painters' guild of Florence, later working independently in Florence until 1481. During this period in Leonardo's life, his keenness of observation and creative imagination became prominent.

In 1482, Leonardo entered the service of the Duke of Milan, spending 17 years there until Ludovico Sforza's fall from power there in 1499. Highly esteemed, Leonardo was listed in the register of the royal household as *pictor et ingeniarius ducalis* (painter and engineer of the duke), and was constantly kept busy as a painter and sculptor and as a designer of court festivals. He was a skilled military engineer, stage designer, architect, musician, and poet. He was the universal man.

In this phase of his life Leonardo's genius unfolded to the max in versatility and creatively powerful artistic and scientific thought, achieving a quality of uniqueness that summoned the awe and astonished admiration of his contemporaries. He worked for four years on the Sistine Chapel mural, contributed seventeen world-renowned paintings, but is perhaps greater known for his passion in science as he is for the visual arts. Wherever Leonardo probed the phenomena of nature, he recognized the existence of primal mechanical forces that govern the shape and function of the universe. He was the prophet of the new age, a man of such intellect that the extent of his achievements is incomprehensible. All his studies and sketches were carefully written down, adding up to thousands of closely written pages abundantly illustrated with sketches--the most voluminous literary legacy any painter has ever left behind. They show that he was interested in everything: the effects of atmosphere, the growth of babies in the womb, the nature of sound, and the motion of waves and currents. His insatiable curiosity led him to explore botany, zoology, anatomy, geology, hydraulics, psychology, physiology, and optics. He also studied the flight of birds and designed a flying machine.

The significance of Leonardo's vision is apparent in his paintings. His "Last Supper" goes far beyond the mere recounting of a Biblical story. It combines perfect harmony, balance, and spatial illusion with a profound knowledge of human nature. It is a model of psychological drama revealed by artistic genius. Leonardo's celebrity soared to an even greater height with his "Mona Lisa," the most famous portrait in the world. Seated quietly, she stares at the viewer with a smile that has both captivated and confused her admirers for nearly 500 years. Her mysterious

expression, sometimes seeming happy, other times sad or even jeering, is the result of *sfumato*--the artistic technique he invented of blurring contours to obscure the transition from one plane to another.

His most renowned attribute has to be that he was a man who lived centuries before his time. Having designed rudimentary plans for the steam engine and helicopter, going as far as to plan and create gliders and other machines that would be invented hundreds of years later, it was as if Leonardo anticipated the future. The aim of Leonardo's unbounded pursuits was the discovery of nature's eternal laws. When he was confronted by a problem, he never turned to the ancients, but used his own mind and eyes to come up with a solution. All of his scientific experiments were conducted as a means of gaining more information about the visible world. To Leonardo, man's eyes were the "windows of his soul." It was only through them that he could find truth.

He died in 1519.

Completed on March 19, 1997.