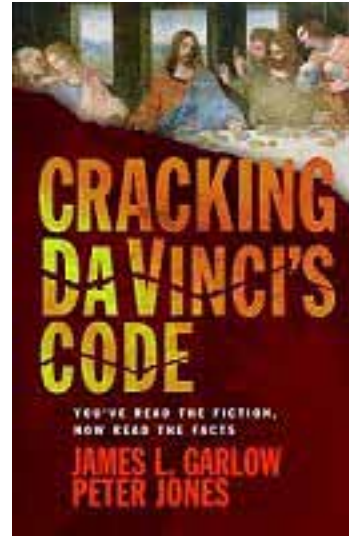


Cracking DaVinci's Code—Appendix B

Leonardo da Vinci—The True Story?

Volumes have been written about Leonardo da Vinci the artist. Book after book examines his paintings, drawings, and sculptures in great detail, and rightly so. After all, while apprenticed to Andrea del Verrocchio he was assigned a portion of a painting (many apprentices painted the background and smaller items for their masters) of the baptism of Christ. Leonardo painted an angel holding clothing. His figure was so superior that Verrocchio vowed never again to paint, declaring the young da Vinci to be the master.



Biographies of Leonardo da Vinci agree on the basics of his life. Born in April 1452 in the Tuscan village of Vinci, just outside of Florence, he was welcomed even though he was illegitimate. His father, Piero Fruosino di Antonio da Vinci (better known as Ser Piero), was twenty-five when Leonardo was born. He was a notary in both Pisa and Florence. He married, not Leonardo's mother, but three other women in his lifetime, and had five children with another mistress. Leonardo's mother, Caterina, married and had five more children of her own. Leonardo remained close to both his mother and father throughout his life. Some have even speculated (most likely incorrectly) that Caterina was the model for the *Mona Lisa*.

We can follow Leonardo through his early years of schooling (where he would oftentimes confound his math teachers by presenting problems that they could not solve), to his apprenticeship with Verrocchio, to his artistic work in Italy and France. But that tells us little of the man.

Coming to our rescue is Giorgio Vasari. Vasari, born just eight years before Leonardo died, was an average painter. He made a much larger contribution to our love and knowledge of art when he began to catalog the lives and works of famous artists. Vasari's result was *The Lives of Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. It was first published in 1550, with a substantial update in 1568.

Vasari's chronicle of Leonardo's life, being so close in time to the artist, is considered the most accurate and reliable by most historians. In Vasari's work we begin to see inside the heart

of the great master, something that other biographers cannot show us. Leonardo himself, though he filled thousands of pages in his notebooks with sketches and essays on numerous topics, seldom wrote of his feelings or motives. Thus, the writings of Vasari are a rare glimpse at what made Leonardo the way he was.

Vasari does not hold back in his praise for Leonardo.

[set as excerpt] [S]ometimes beauty, grace, and talent are united beyond measure in a single person, in such a manner that to whatever he turns his attention, his every action is so divine, that, surpassing all other men, it makes itself clearly known as a thing divine and not acquired by human endeavor. This was seen by all in Leonardo da Vinci. [Leonardo on Art and the Artist, Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 2002, p. 6]

We see marvelous facial and head drawings in Leonardo's notebooks that show human expression never before displayed in two dimensions. From Vasari we find out that Leonardo, upon seeing a face that fascinated him, would follow the person around the rest of the day until he would return to his studio, where he could then draw the face from memory as if the person were modeling in front of him.

Leonardo's masterpiece, *The Last Supper*, was a frustrating work for him to complete. He reached a point where there remained two heads to be done: Christ and Judas. Vasari said Leonardo had given up hope of finding a model for Jesus as he "thought it impossible to conceive in the imagination with the beauty and divine grace befitting God incarnate" [p. 15]. For Judas, "he could not imagine a face capable of expressing the lowness and cruelty of one who, after so many benefits received, had a soul so ignoble as to betray his Lord, the Creator of the world" [p. 15].

Vasari takes us on Leonardo's journeys in and out of Italy and France. He shows us a man who, though a genius, often stopped working on a project he had been paid to complete so that he could start something else that had caught his fancy. His drawings of inventions were marvelous and centuries ahead of their time; but when it came to actually assembling machines, he would use his efforts to make toys, such as a lion whose belly opened to reveal lilies.

Upon his death bed, Leonardo "with many tears, confessed and repented" [p. 23]. The King of France, who was very fond of Leonardo, came to pay a last visit to his dear friend. Struggling, Leonardo raised himself up and told the king "how much he had offended God and

mankind in not working at his art as he ought to have done” [p. 23]. Leonardo then breathed his last, dying in the arms of the King.

This picture painted by a man but one generation removed from Leonardo shows us a different side of the master than most others. We see an artist who also has, if not a personal relationship with his Creator, at least a deep and lasting respect. This is not the same man we see portrayed in *The Da Vinci Code*. It is a deeper look, a look into the heart of Leonardo da Vinci.

—John DeSimone
Author of *Leonardo's Chair* (RiverOak—to be released in 2005)