



THE YOUNG LEONARDO

ART AND LIFE IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE

LARRY J. FEINBERG

CAMBRIDGE

The Young Leonardo

ART AND LIFE IN
FIFTEENTH-CENTURY
FLORENCE

LARRY J. FEINBERG



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107688223

© Larry J. Feinberg 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

Reprinted 2012

First paperback edition 2014

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Feinberg, Larry J.

The young Leonardo : art and life in fifteenth-century Florence / Larry J. Feinberg.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-00239-5 (hardback)

1. Leonardo, da Vinci, 1452-1519. 2. Artists - Italy - Biography. 3. Florence (Italy) - Civilization. 4. Florence (Italy) - History - 1421-1737. I. Title.

N6923.L33F45 2011

709.2-dc22 [B] 2011011501

ISBN 978-1-107-00239-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-68822-3 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

The Young Leonardo

ART AND LIFE IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE

Leonardo da Vinci is often presented as the “Transcendent Genius,” removed from or ahead of his time. This book, however, attempts to understand him in the context of Renaissance Florence. Larry J. Feinberg explores Leonardo’s origins and the beginning of his career as an artist. While celebrating his many artistic achievements, the book illuminates his debt to other artists’ works and his struggles to gain and retain patronage, as well as his career and personal difficulties. Feinberg examines the range of Leonardo’s interests – including aerodynamics, anatomy, astronomy, botany, geology, hydraulics, optics, and warfare technology – to clarify how the artist’s broad intellectual curiosity informed his art. Situating the artist within the political, social, cultural, and artistic context of mid- and late-fifteenth-century Florence, Feinberg shows how this environment influenced Leonardo’s artistic output and laid the groundwork for the achievements of his mature works.

Larry J. Feinberg is the Director and CEO of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. He is the editor of two reference volumes on the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, *Italian Paintings before 1600 in the Art Institute of Chicago* and *French and English Paintings from 1600 to 1800 in the Art Institute of Chicago*. He has also been the co-organizer and catalog author for several major exhibitions, including *The Medici*, *Michelangelo*, and *the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*; *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream*; and *From Studio to Studiolo: Florentine Draftsmanship under the First Medici Grand Dukes*.

Figures

1 View of the town of Vinci	page 4
2 Filippo Lippi, <i>Adoration of the Christ Child</i>	19
3 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study of the Virgin Nursing with St. John the Baptist, Figure and Head Studies, Heads of a Lion and Dragon</i>	21
4 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Optical Studies and Resting Dog</i>	31
5 Workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio (including Leonardo da Vinci), <i>Tobias and the Angel</i>	35
6 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>View of the Arno Valley</i>	36
7 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Devices for Raising Water (including the Archimedes' Screw) and Other Studies</i>	41
8 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Devices for a Diver, for Walking on Water, and Various Studies for Machines</i>	43
9 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Cross-Section of a Man's Head, Showing Three Chambers for Reception, Processing, and Storage (Memory) of Sensory Impressions</i>	44
10 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Bust of a Warrior in Profile</i>	48
11 After Andrea del Verrocchio, <i>Darius</i>	48
12 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Bust of a Man</i>	49
13 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Bust of a Man</i>	50
14 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Head of an Old Man</i>	51
15 Workshop of Verrocchio, <i>Portrait of Tomás Valdéz</i>	52
16 Andrea del Verrocchio and Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study for a Joust Standard for Giuliano de' Medici</i>	57
17 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Aristotle and Phyllis</i>	61
18 Francesco Melzi (?), <i>Profile Portrait of Leonardo da Vinci</i>	62
19 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Portrait of an Old Man</i>	63
20 Leonardo da Vinci, <i>St. John the Baptist</i>	68

21	Lorenzo di Credi, <i>Virgin and Child with Saints John and Donato</i>	69
22	Andrea del Verrocchio and Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Baptism of Christ</i>	70
23	Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, <i>Shooting of Saint Sebastian</i>	71
24	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Annunciation</i>	75
25	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Drapery Study</i>	76
26	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study of a Female Head</i>	77
27	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Virgin and Child with a Carnation</i>	81
28	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Virgin and Child with Flowers (Benois Madonna)</i>	84
29	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Virgin and Child, Profile Studies, Technical Sketches, and Schematic Studies of Eyes with Visual Rays</i>	85
30	Detail of Schematic Studies of Eyes with Visual Rays in fig. 29	86
31	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies of Machines</i> (verso of fig. 32)	87
32	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies of Heads and Machines</i>	88
33	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Sketches of a Child Holding and Playing with a Cat</i>	90
34	Andrea del Verrocchio, <i>Boy with Dolphin</i>	91
35	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study for a Virgin and Child with a Cat</i>	92
36	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies for a Virgin and Child with a Cat</i>	93
37	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies for a Virgin and Child with a Cat</i>	94
38	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study for a Virgin and Child with a Cat</i>	95
39	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study for a Virgin and Child with a Cat</i> (verso of fig. 38)	96
40	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Virgin and Child with a Cat</i>	97
41	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies of the Hanged Bernardo di Bandino Baroncelli</i>	101
42	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci</i>	106
43	Reverse of <i>Ginevra de' Benci</i> , fig. 42	107
44	Lorenzo di Credi (attributed to), <i>Portrait of a Lady</i> (Ginevra de' Benci?)	109
45	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study of a Lady with a Unicorn</i>	111

46	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (Lady with an Ermine)</i>	114
47	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Rebuses</i>	115
48	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Madonna of the Yarnwinder</i>	116
49	Detail of "Yarnwinder" rebus at upper left of fig. 47 (reversed for legibility)	117
50	Leonardo da Vinci (attributed to), <i>Bust of the Young Christ</i>	122
51	Andrea del Verrocchio, Detail of Head of Christ in <i>Crucifixion</i>	123
52	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study for the Head of the Virgin</i>	126
53	Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio (with Leonardo da Vinci), <i>Nursing Virgin with Goldfinch (Madonna Litta)</i>	126
54	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Adoration of the Magi</i>	131
55	Detail of Figures to the Right of the Virgin and Child in the <i>Adoration of the Magi</i> , fig. 54	132
56	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies for the Adoration of the Magi</i>	133
57	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Figure Studies for the Adoration of the Magi</i>	134
58	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies of Hands for the Adoration of the Magi</i>	135
59	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Perspective Study for Background of the Adoration of the Magi</i>	136
60	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Adoration of the Magi</i>	137
61	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Design for a Colossal Crossbow</i>	141
62	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Allegory with Fortune and Death</i>	146
63	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies of Figures of Fortune and Fame, Shields around a Flaming Tree Stump</i>	147
64	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study for an Adoration of the Christ Child</i>	152
65	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Designs for an Adoration of the Christ Child</i>	153
66	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies of Four Male Figures, Half-Length Studies of Christ and St. John, Studies of Figures in Conversation at a Table</i>	154
67	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Head of Judas</i>	155
68	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies for the Last Supper</i>	156
69	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>St. Sebastian</i>	160
70	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>St. Sebastian Tied to a Tree</i>	161

71	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Saint Jerome in the Wilderness</i>	165
72	Workshop Assistant, after Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Study of a Studio Model for Saint Jerome</i>	168
73	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Detail of Sheet of Sketches with a Nativity</i>	172
74	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Virgin of the Rocks</i>	173
75	Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Studies of Saint Mary Magdalene</i>	175
76	Francesco Melzi, <i>Flora</i>	177

Acknowledgments

The origin of this book lies in the engaging lectures delivered by Professor Olan A. Rand, Jr., at Northwestern University in the mid-1970s. In those, Mr. Rand, as he preferred to be called, insightfully pointed out how Leonardo's powers of observation and keen curiosity were manifest even in his earliest Madonnas. From Professors Sydney J. Freedberg and Konrad Oberhuber, at Harvard University, I gained an understanding of Leonardo's formal innovations and the ways in which such elements of style profoundly contributed to expression and meaning in his works. In effect, the teachings of these three scholars provided both the grounding and impetus for my research into the works of Leonardo and into Renaissance art in general. I am greatly indebted to them.

Several colleagues were kind enough to read through my manuscript and offer astute suggestions and useful criticisms. I am most grateful, above all, to Patricia C. Bruckmann, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Toronto; scholar and author Steven Naifeh; psychoanalyst Dr. John E. Gedo; Michael Hall, former Editor in Chief of *Apollo Magazine*; and Gloria Groom, curator of European Painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, for their thoughtful advice. At the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, fellow staff members have helped me to obtain images and reproduction rights for this book and assisted with the preparation of the manuscript; I am most grateful to Tracy Owens, Joseph Price, Michelle Sullivan, and Patricia Lee for their valuable and uncomplaining aid. Cambridge University Press deftly and sensitively edited my manuscript and has provided expert guidance throughout the publication process. I wish to thank Publishing

Director Beatrice Rehl as well as project managers Brigitte Coulton and Barbara Walthall of Aptara, Inc.

Finally and foremost, I am grateful to my wife, Starr Siegele, for her unstinting and sustaining support. It is to her that I dedicate this book.

Contents

<i>Figures</i>	page vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1. Childhood	5
2. Florence and Cosimo the Elder	13
3. The Cultural Climate of Florence	17
4. First Years in Florence and the Verrocchio Workshop	25
5. First Works in Florence and the Artistic Milieu	33
6. Early Pursuits in Engineering – Hydraulics and the Movement of Water	39
7. The <i>Bust of a Warrior</i> and Leonardo’s Creative Method	47
8. Early Participation in the Medici Court	55
9. Leonardo’s Personality and Place in Florentine Society	59
10. Important Productions and Collaborations in the Verrocchio Shop	67
11. Leonardo’s Colleagues in the Workshop	73
12. Leonardo’s <i>Madonna of the Carnation</i> and the Exploration of Optics	79

13. The <i>Benois Madonna</i> and Continued Meditations on the Theme of Sight.	83
14. The <i>Madonna of the Cat</i>	89
15. Leonardo, the Medici, and Public Executions.	99
16. Leonardo and Ginevra de' Benci	105
17. Leonardo as Portraitist and Master of the Visual Pun . . .	113
18. The Young Sculptor	121
19. The <i>Madonna Litta</i>	125
20. The <i>Adoration of the Magi</i> and Invention of the High Renaissance Style	129
21. The <i>Adoration</i> and Leonardo's Military Interests	139
22. Leonardo and Allegorical Conceits for the Medici Court	145
23. Early Ideas for the <i>Last Supper</i>	151
24. Leonardo and the <i>Saint Sebastian</i>	159
25. <i>Saint Jerome</i>	163
26. First Thoughts for the <i>Virgin of the Rocks</i> and the Invention of the Mary Magdalene-Courtesan Genre . . .	171
27. Milan	179
28. Leonardo and the Sforza Court	185
 <i>Bibliography with Endnotes</i>	 189
<i>Index</i>	201

Introduction

SINCE HIS OWN TIME AND FOR THE NEXT FIVE HUNDRED YEARS the name Leonardo da Vinci has been synonymous with “genius.” Others who have shared that title – Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein, for example – usually excelled in one particular field or area of science. Leonardo has seemed to loom above them all in his range of interests and apparent expertise, which included art, aerodynamics, anatomy, astronomy, botany, geology, hydraulics, optics, physics, and numerous technologies of warfare. However, our admiration for this omnivorous curiosity has led to some misconceptions about his legacy. The truth of the matter is that Leonardo’s scientific contributions, unlike those of Darwin and Einstein, were negligible, and many of his inventions, although clever and even prophetic, could not have actually functioned. Of his many scientific and industrial interests, he appears to have mastered only certain, basic aspects of engineering, and only in the practice of art did he exceed the accomplishments of most of his contemporaries. Only in art was he truly a successful innovator.

In pointing out this reality, our intention is not to “explode” the “mythology of Leonardo” – certainly, his brilliance and inspiring creativity should not and cannot be diminished. Rather, we are attempting to reconcile traditional accounts of the “Transcendent Genius,” who purportedly received his ideas from on high, with the life of a man who had more than his share of struggles with his world, his family, and, occasionally, with himself. Leonardo’s genius rested primarily in his powers of observation, in his ability to discern the subtle complexities of nature and to study with keen comprehension the works of others, making instant and optimal use of their contributions. More often than not, his artistic and mechanical inventions were reactions – to

natural phenomena that he found particularly inexplicable and intriguing or to those paintings and sculptures that he considered to be novel in some respect. Generally speaking, he responded much better to challenges than he did to contractual obligations and timetables. He rarely displayed the patient attitude and methodical approach of a scientist; it has been noted that he hardly ever devoted more than a page or two in his notebooks to the investigation of any particular problem or question.

Although Leonardo did little to advance the scientific fields in which he was engaged, the knowledge he gained through his research profoundly informed his artworks. His investigations into light and optics resulted in his creation of the evocative, smoky pictorial effect called *sfumato*. His study of the movement of water not only lent authenticity to his landscapes but also invigorated his renderings of hair, garments, and flora. His investigations of the cardiovascular system contributed to the physiological accuracy of his portrayals of human emotion.

Often exaggerating for expressive effect, he applied the underlying processes he perceived in nature to the world that he portrayed in microcosm in his art. There, rocky outcroppings seem to form, expand, and erode before our eyes. So exquisitely sensitive are his renderings of sky and skin that Leonardo suggests their molecular excitation. Such aesthetic manipulation also produced the controlled dynamism of his groundbreaking *Adoration of the Magi* and the timeless suspension of the *Mona Lisa*. Centuries before Darwin, Leonardo presented a natural world in evolution. And, believing in the divine design of that world, he sought, long before Einstein, a Renaissance equivalent to the modern, unified-field concept – the ultimate reconciliation of all contrasting forces and ideas. Leonardo tirelessly (and literally) drew analogies between the seemingly disparate phenomena of the visible realm.

In Florence, under the rule of the shrewd, mercantile Medici family, the young Leonardo found a life much at odds with the idealized existence that he imagined and painted. Then as now, politics tended to trump talent, and so the youth's obvious gifts did not guarantee a career or survival. Fortunately, his father's respected position as a Medici notary compensated to some degree for Leonardo's illegitimate birth and, consequently, inferior social status, and there are reasons to believe that he always enjoyed the support and encouragement

of his father as well as of his extended family and stepfamily. Although some of his early homosexual activities created problems for him in his adopted town, with time, Leonardo seems to have developed close, enduring relationships that sustained him.

Even in the most civilized of Renaissance cities, daily life was brutal and precarious. Violence and disease were ubiquitous. Power and allegiances continually shifted. The rurally raised Leonardo must have learned a few lessons of diplomacy and politics during his first period in Florence, but not enough to sustain a career or, more to the point, to ingratiate himself sufficiently with the Medici clan. His intellect, sharp wit, and charm only carried him so far. For him, those years were marked by valuable experience and training, small personal triumphs, and continual frustrations. Yet for his contemporaries, those years provided, in Leonardo's paintings and drawings, the germs of the exalted High Renaissance style and tenors of expression completely new to art. For us, his early years produced myriad beautiful artworks, which offer insight into a singularly fertile mind and the culture it would forever transform.



FIGURE 1.
View of the town of Vinci. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

I. *Childhood*

FEW KNEW AND FEWER CARED TO KNOW ABOUT THE BOY'S BIRTH in a farmhouse in the tiny hamlet of Anchiano. The mother, an unwed rural girl, bore the oddly sentient child on a quiet Tuscan night in the spring of 1452 and then vanished into obscurity. Little more than her name, Caterina, has survived the centuries, part of the curious and marvelous legacy of her gifted son, Leonardo. Unlettered daughter of a nameless tenant farmer, vestige of medieval feudalism, she gave life to the most salient intellect of the Renaissance. What instincts or grace she imparted to him one cannot say. It is reasonable to believe, however, that she, as much as his notary father, Ser Piero di Antonio, was responsible for his naturally buoyant and restless spirit. Because of the circumstances, the boy was not given a patronymic or traditional family name. Instead, Ser Piero seems to have named him in honor of – or given him a similar name inspired by – Saint Leo, a fifth-century pope venerated for his repulse of Attila the Hun and for his potent sermons. Leo's feast day happened to be celebrated during the week of Leonardo's birth.

Caterina probably nursed the infant for many months, because her social stature – and Leonardo's – would not have merited a wet nurse. Any joy shared between mother and child was short-lived, however. She soon relinquished him to Ser Piero, who, in the next year, married Albiera di Giovanni Amadori, a young lady of adequate public standing, and established a proper family. To mitigate the scandal of the illegitimate baby, Ser Piero's parents seem to have arranged, within a year of the birth, for Caterina to wed another peasant, a farm-hand and kiln worker of good repute. Issues of love and compatibility never entered into such affairs. However, in accord with contemporary mores, Leonardo's honorable family would have provided her with a sufficient dowry.