Art History Legends
Series: Leonardo da Vinci

Synopsis
The very name da Vinci brings to mind the ultimate genius: artist, scientist, designer, inventor, the true “Renaissance man.” Yet da Vinci, born into poverty, was almost entirely self-taught, disciplining himself to write in mirror image, and studying anatomy on medical cadavers. But under the patronage of both the infamous Lorenzo de Medici and Duke Lodovica Sforza, he not only painted in perfect, complexly realized symmetry, but designed a waterwheel, catapults, and even a helicopter. Artists and scientists contemplate his works to this day. Da Vinci’s painting of The Last Supper has not aged well, because the experimental paint Leonardo used never fully dried and deteriorated quickly. But his well-preserved masterwork, the Mona Lisa has been the subject of study and scholarship for five hundred years. Who is she and why is she smiling? Only the great Leonardo knows.

Questions to ask before viewing
1. What is the meaning of the phrase “Renaissance man”? In what way was Leonardo da Vinci the original Renaissance man?
2. View a selection of works by da Vinci either in print or on a screen. What do you notice about them? In what way are they the same? In what way different?

Questions to ask after viewing
1. As an apprentice, Leonardo worked on a number of paintings with others. How do experts recognize his work in “Tobias and the Angel”? (the portrayal of nature, the fact that the angel’s wings are aerodynamically correct)
2. What is “chiaroscuro”? (using contrast between light and shadow in painting)
3. What is the only work of da Vinci’s in an American museum? (Ginevra) Who was she? (a banker’s daughter renowned for her beauty)
4. What is wrong with da Vinci’s painting of The Last Supper? (He used a combination of oil and water in his paint. It never fully dried, causing the painting to deteriorate quickly.)
5. What did Leonardo do for Duke Lodovica Sforza, besides painting? (As “munitions inventor,” he designed siege works, catapults and other war materiel.)
6. What is the great power of the Medici? (The Pope hired an assassin to kill the Medici brothers. The assassin failed and fled to Constantinople. The Turks sent him back to Florence, where the Medici had him executed.)
7. How did Leonardo write most of his journals and notebooks? (in “mirror script,” that is backwards.) Why do you think he did this? (Answers will vary.)
8. What is an example of asymmetry in the Mona Lisa? (her eyes, her mouth, the background) Why do you think Leonardo painted it this way? (Answers will vary.)
9. Activity: Both da Vinci and Michelangelo had an excellent knowledge of anatomy. In what way does this show in their work? Compare paintings of the same subject matter (a man or woman) by da Vinci and Michelangelo. How are they the same? How different? (Answers will vary.)
10. Activity: Reproduce the painting of Mona Lisa’s face, making two copies. Keep one intact. Cut the remaining picture right up the center of the face. Hold a flat, square mirror along the cut line of the right side of the face to see what the face looks like if both sides are identical. Repeat with the left side of the face. Do the same exercise with a photo of your own face.
Annotation

The very name da Vinci brings to mind the ultimate genius. Yet da Vinci, born into poverty, was almost entirely self-taught. Under the patronage of Italian nobility, he not only painted in perfect, complexly realized symmetry, but designed a waterwheel, catapults, and even a helicopter. His masterwork, the Mona Lisa has been the subject of study and scholarship for five hundred years.

Length
18 Minutes

Subject Areas
Art, Art History, Humanities

Audience Level
Grades 6-12

Catalog Number
2971-EN-VIDP

Related titles in the AIMS collection
2970-EN-VIDP Art History Legends Series: Salvador Dali
2976-EN-VIDP The Mysteries of Cave Art
2972-EN-VIDP Art History Legends Series: Michelangelo
8593-EN-VIDP The Tomb of Tutankhamun

Objectives
• To describe the High Renaissance and name some of its prominent historical figures
• To identify major works by da Vinci.
• To discuss the contributions of da Vinci to the world of visual arts and sciences.