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*William Perkins*

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Leonardo da Vinci was born on 15 April 1452 in the town of Vinci, the illegitimate son of the notary Ser Piero da Vinci and a peasant woman called Caterina. His childhood spent in the Tuscan countryside inspired in him a life-long passion for the observation and depiction of nature.

When he was seventeen, he moved to Florence, where his talent for drawing impressed the great master Verrocchio who took him on as a pupil.

Leonardo da Vinci worked for such powerful patrons as Ludovico da Sforza, Duke of Milan; Cesare Borgia; Cardinal Giuliano de Medici, brother of Leon X; and for the French king Francois I at Amboise, where he died in 1519.

It has become fashionable to speak of 'Leonardo the artist' and 'Leonardo the scientist' as if he had been some schizophrenic genius torn between two disparate pursuits and therefore rarely, if ever, able to accomplish anything in either. But Leonardo's own contemporaries, though impatient of his volatility, master himself such a dichotomy would have been incomprehensible. To say that as 'a man of the Renaissance' he believed that a painter needed the aid of anatomy, perspective, optics and so forth is not a proper answer. In fact, these alleged 'scientific' studies of Renaissance artists were a fashion confined to a small circle. In any case, Michelangelo and Raphael to name only two outstanding examples - did not share these interests but were great artists nonetheless. Leonardo's inquiries were rooted in his personality, not in some tendency of the age, and many of his notes and drawings having nothing to do with the tasks awaiting painters of his time. They are not a vast store from which to draw raw materials for his art, nor was his art simply a finely distilled compound of observations and imagination.

In fact, many of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings are different from those of his contemporaries and those by artists from any other period. Of course, there are among them rapid sketches from life, portraits, quick notes for compositions, elaborate cartoons, drapery studies, designs for machines, buildings, drawings of plants and animals, anatomical and proportion studies. But it is their nature which is so often peculiar. The plans of buildings grow before our eyes like the cells of some organism, plants appear on the same sheet both in bud and in flower, trees are drawn schematically to demonstrate the principle of growth, there is a drawing of the peaceful Arno valley, and there are the cataclysmic visions of utter physical destruction of the world. The grotesque heads - to call them caricatures is a misnomer - are combinations and variations of human forms creating a morphological sequence of types. The anatomical drawings demonstrate not only the position of muscles and tendons or the bone structure, they also show the embryo in its mother's womb and a bare skull, - the beginning and end of life. All these drawings are concerned not just with the collection of visual data useful to the painter but with the processes of life, with growth and decay, whether in plants, beast, man, or the world at large. The same is true of Leonardo's designs for his various mechanical contrivances which are

so often engines of construction or destruction.

Leonardo da Vinci's notes should be considered in the same context. It is perhaps a pity that we have got used to thinking of them as if they had been written in preparation for some comprehensive treatise on painting. But it should be remembered that the huge manuscript known as Trattato della Pittura is not an autograph. It was compiled in the sixteenth century, probably by Francesco Melzi, from no less than eighteen of the original notebooks. The result certainly is a labor of love, but nevertheless this gathering divided into eight chapters is too rigid, too much like a textbook to reveal Leonardo da Vinci's truly dynamic nature...

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