# Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo

## Slide 1

Today we’re going to look at the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, two great Renaissance artists. First we’ll start with Leonardo who was a true Renaissance man. He was an artist, inventor, scientist, engineer, musician, and town planner. By all accounts, Leonardo was a well-dressed, wise gentleman, who was very strong; reportedly he could bend a horseshoe with his bare hands. Da Vinci was an illegitimate child and so his name reflects that: Leonardo da Vinci means Leonardo of Vinci referring to the town he was born in. His father was rather wealthy while his mother was a simple peasant girl and they never married. Leonardo only had an elementary education, never married, and had no children; but left a lasting legacy nonetheless. Our first image shows a statue of Leonardo that stands in Milan, Italy.

## Slide 2

Our next image is “The Virgin of the Rocks” by Leonardo da Vinci from 1503-1506. The Renaissance was a rebirth of the classic and you’ll see order, geometry, and symbolism in the works. They are often anchored by a triangular composition as in this example. The Virgin Mary acts as the apex of the triangle and you can follow the line of her left arm to the angel and baby Jesus who then point to the praying John the Baptist; thereby forming the base of the triangle. From Mary’s hand and John’s head, the viewer follows the line of her cloak to complete the triangle. This work also reflects da Vinci’s personal style. One recognizes the other worldly background as typical of Leonardo’s works. While the landscape does contain actual elements such as rock formations and plants, the location is not identifiable as an actual place and gives the scene a sacred background. The rather sweet faces, especially Mary’s, are also characteristic as are the hand gestures: John’s prayer clasped hands, Jesus’ blessing, and the angel’s pointed finger.

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The same sweet faces and dreamy background are found in the “Virgin and Child with St. Anne” from 1503-1506. This work shows Leonardo’s predilection for choosing unusual moments to depict; for instance, his famous “Last Supper” doesn’t show the typical scene of blessing the meal but rather depicts when Jesus announces that one will betray him. Likewise, the subject of this work is the Christ Child on Mary’s lap who is herself seated on her mother, St. Anne’s, lap. While it might seem strange to viewers today, it is actually showing a line of succession, a sort of family tree. Even the lamb in Jesus’ hands alludes to his role later in life when he is crucified. While the work seems faded, it was actually unfinished with only very thin, transparent paint layers completed.

## Slide 4

Our last image of Leonardo da Vinci’s is the Mona Lisa from 1503-1505, probably the most famous portrait in the world. Leonardo was commissioned by a wealthy merchant to paint his wife. Da Vinci must have seen something in this work as he reneged on the deal and kept the work with him for the rest of his life. He even took it to France, where he died, and it became part of the Louvre’s collection. This portrait has some of the hallmarks of da Vinci’s best work. He invented the sfumato technique where he blurs the transition lines between hair and skin or garments and skin. It is also an unusual ¾ length pose and features the otherworldly backgrounds that Leonardo was famous for. Recent reports indicate that Mona Lisa may have been pregnant or had just delivered a child. Perhaps that’s what her enigmatic smile means.

# Michelangelo

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Now we’ll focus on Michelangelo, probably my favorite artist if you forced me to choose. We even share the same birth date, March 6th, albeit almost 500 years apart. Michelangelo was born to a family that had been very rich, but whose wealth had waned. His mother died when he was six and his father sent him to live with his wet nurse and her stone cutter husband. It was there that Michelangelo started to develop his sculpting skills. Like Leonardo, Michelangelo was a true Renaissance man, and considered himself a poet, an architect, a town planner, a painter, and a sculptor. He never married, had no children, and lived to be almost 90 years old. By all accounts, he was arrogant, crabby, insulting, and unclean. He often wore his boots for weeks at a time, even sleeping in them. When he took them off, his skin peeled like a snake’s. This first image shows the very elaborate tomb of Michelangelo in the church of Santa Croche in Florence, Italy.

## Slide 6

Michelangelo was already an accomplished sculptor in his teens and receiving important commissions in his twenties. This image shows the “Pieta” from 1498-1500, his sculpture of Mary holding and grieving the over the body of Christ after he’s been taken down from the cross. Pieta means pity or compassion in Italian. Notice how large Mary is as she cradles the adult body of Christ like a small child. Michelangelo makes this look natural by hiding Mary’s enormous lap under numerous folds of her garment. The result is an affecting scene of a mother and her child. This is the only work Michelangelo ever signed. He overheard some viewers speculating on the identity of the artist so he snuck in one night and carved his name on Mary’s sash.

Every muscle and vein looks realistic. Michelangelo knew how every muscle and tendon should look under the skin and was famous for his accuracy in carving the human form. Michelangelo claimed he could see the finished piece in a block of marble and simply chipped away the excess stone to reveal the work. This work is located in St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican at Rome. Unfortunately, a crazed man attacked it with a hammer, but it has since been restored.

## Slide 7

Next, we’ll examine Michelangelo’s statue of “David” from 1501-1504. David is a figure from the Old Testament that relates how he killed the giant Goliath with only a slingshot. The block of marble from which David was carved had a deep gouge in it from a previous artist’s attempt to sculpt. Michelangelo studied the block for a long time before finding a way to carve around it. Michelangelo chose to depict David before the fight. He appears relaxed yet ready, looking out past the viewers, sizing up the competition, and holding the slingshot in one hand, the rock in the other. This statue became a symbol of independence for all of Florence, who considered themselves the little guy, or underdog in the political battles of the time. Also note the accurately carved muscles and the tree trunk behind David’s leg. The Renaissance is a rebirth of the Classical period, referring to the Greek and Roman eras. Early Greek sculptors often used a tree, spear, or other device as a reinforcing brace for their statues since they were unsure of their technical prowess. Michelangelo includes it merely as a tribute to Greek art. This image actually shows a copy in the statue’s original setting of a Florentine piazza. The original was moved indoors to protect it from the elements.

## Slide 8

Next is St. Peter’s Basilica. This church, home of the Pope, is located in Vatican City - which is a country in the center of Rome, Italy. Michelangelo designed the 300 foot tall dome, shown here from the exterior followed by an interior view. It’s an architectural masterpiece because it compensated for the stunted façade or front of the building that was shorter than the original design called for. Michelangelo was a master at solving problems.

Thanks for joining me on this examination of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo’s works.

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