

Book Links

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS:
THE GENIUS OF LEONARDO DA VINCI
BY JEANETTE LARSON

This article originally appeared in the November 2012 issue of *Book Links* magazine.



The term *Renaissance man* is based on the idea that a person's capacity for personal development is without limitation. It also implies that the attainment of knowledge is key to personal development. Both of these concepts are good descriptors of Leonardo da Vinci, an artist, scholar, inventor, and scientist—the quintessential Renaissance man. He lived during a time of amazing cultural change; thanks to Gutenberg's invention of movable type, the number of books available skyrocketed by an astonishing 25,000 percent by the time da Vinci was middle-aged, yet few of his own writings were published during his lifetime. Famous for his art long before his scientific and engineering genius was recognized, da Vinci's life and work have intrigued others for centuries.

Although born into a family of peasants on April 15, 1452, in Vinci, a town near Florence, Italy, he was educated, like others of his time, to be a Renaissance man. Raised by his landowner father, he was exposed as a child to Vinci's long-standing art traditions and was expected to have a wide range of interests. Apprenticed to the artist Verrocchio, da Vinci mastered a variety of technical skills, and by the age of 30, he was not only painting and sculpting but also designing weapons, machinery, and buildings.

His curiosity was boundless. He contributed to virtually every field of human knowledge during his lifetime, and it is difficult to catalog all of his accomplishments. Although he designed many inventions, including a flying machine and a parachute, few of his projects were actually built, in part because his ideas were centuries ahead of the available technology. He kept extensive journals—some written in his code-like, mirror-writing style—which, along with his drawings, provide concrete evidence of his genius and of the impact of his work on science, engineering, art, and medicine.

A versatile artist, da Vinci experimented with artistic techniques designed to affect viewers, drawing them into the painting and evoking emotional reactions. The *Mona Lisa*, perhaps the best-known piece of art in the world, uses perspective, light, and shadow, for example, to make it appear that the subject's eyes are eerily following the viewer. Reproductions of this masterpiece have become so ubiquitous that they even show up in unusual places. For example, Maurice Sendak paid homage to the painting by including his own reproduction of it in *Higglety Pigglety Pop* (1967), and

multiple episodes of *The Simpsons* make reference to the iconic work.

Although many nonfiction books and biographies have been written about da Vinci, his life and work have gaps and unsolved mysteries, and much of his art and many of his notebooks were lost. These gaps provide space from which fiction writers pull clues to create stories about what might have been. Fiction or nonfiction, the books suggested here provide insight into the mind of a master and may inspire new genius.

Picture Books

Fly, Kite, Fly! A Story of Leonardo and a Bird Catcher. By John Winch. Illus. by the author. 2008. 40p. Little Hare, \$15.95 (9781921049811). PreS–Gr. 2.

In this beautifully illustrated story, Giacomo dreams of being a bird catcher, like his father. Given the chance to catch two elusive red-tailed kites for the palace, the boy sets out nets only to stumble upon da Vinci in his studio working on a man-made flying machine. Instead of following in his father's footsteps, Giacomo becomes a servant and companion in the inventor's household.

Leonardo and the Flying Boy: A Story about Leonardo da Vinci. By Laurence Anholt. Illus. by the author. 2000. 32p. Barron's, \$16.99 (9780764152252); paper, \$8.99 (9780764138515). Gr. 2–4.

Imagining what it might have been like to be an apprentice to da Vinci, Anholt offers a fictionalized account told by Zoro, one of Leonardo's real apprentices, as he attempts a test flight with the inventor's flying machine. Colorful illustrations highlight Zoro's escapades and da Vinci's work.

The Mona Lisa Caper. By Rick Jacobson. Illus. by Laura Fernandez and Rick Jacobson. 2005. 24p. Tundra, \$15.95 (9780887767265). PreS–Gr. 2.

Vincenzo Peruggia, a worker at the Louvre, didn't consider himself to be a thief when he stole the *Mona Lisa*; he only wanted to return it to the people of Italy. This picture book tells the story of the 1911 theft from the perspective of the painting. The playful, soft-edged illustrations are executed in the sfumato style often used by da Vinci and seen in the famous portrait.

Steal Back the Mona Lisa! By Meghan McCarthy. Illus. by the author. 2006. 40p. Harcourt, \$16 (9780152053680). PreS–Gr. 2.

Drawing inspiration from spy stories and old-time radio shows, special agent Jack dreams that he has been sent to Paris to find the crooks who stole the *Mona Lisa*. Cartoon-style illustrations add to the action-packed text, which is very loosely based on the 1911 crime.

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The Stolen Smile. By J. Patrick Lewis. Illus. by Gary Kelley. 2004. 40p. Creative, \$18.95 (9781568461922). Gr. 3–6.

This story chronicles the theft of the *Mona Lisa* by an Italian patriot who wanted the painting returned to his homeland. For older readers, the story offers illustrations with a cubist feel and provides an interesting contrast between Old World Italy and early twentieth-century Paris.

Uh-oh, Leonardo! By Robert Sabuda. Illus. by the author. 2002. 48p. Aladdin, paper, \$12.99 (9781416961642). Gr. 2–4.

Providence Traveler is a great fan of Leonardo da Vinci, so when she and her friends accidentally build a time machine, they head to Florence, Italy, for a mouse's-eye view of the Renaissance. To return to the present, they must find a specific key that will wind up the giant machine. Busy illustrations, none of which are Sabuda's trademark pop-ups, enhance the sense of the location and times.

Who Stole Mona Lisa? By Ruthie Knapp. Illus. by Jill McElmurry. 2010. 40p. Bloomsbury, \$17.99 (9781599900582). Gr. 1–3.

Like Rick Jacobson's *The Mona Lisa Caper*, this version of the 1911 theft is told from the point of view of the painting. Although the title implies that the book focuses on the crime, the rhythmic story actually traces the history of the *Mona Lisa*, from its creation through its restoration at the Louvre. Fanciful art matches the droll yet reverent tone of the text.

Novels

Da Wild, da Crazy, da Vinci. By Jon Scieszka. Illus. by Adam McCauley. 2004. 80p. Viking, \$14.99 (9780670059263); paper, \$4.99 (9780142404652). Gr. 3–6.

Sam, Fred, and Joe—the Time Warp Trio—travel back to fifteenth-century Italy to learn who invented the Book, the magic object that allows them to travel through time. There, they meet da Vinci, who turns out to be something of a practical joker, while he is on a deadline to complete several weapons, including the helicopter and the military tank. Typical Scieszka humor and cartoonish illustrations add to the appeal.

Leonardo's Shadow; or, My Astonishing Life as Leonardo da Vinci's Servant. By Christopher Grey. 2006. 400p. Atheneum, paper, \$9.99 (9781416905448). Gr. 7–10.

Giacomo, the teenage narrator in this story, is a servant in da Vinci's home, and his duties include fending off creditors and making excuses to the people who have commissioned work from the master artist. Da Vinci is more interested in his notebooks and documenting his inventions than he is in painting, but he must finish the commissioned *Last Supper*

before doing anything else.

Monday with a Mad Genius. By Mary Pope Osborne. Illus. by Sal Murdocca. 2009. 128p. Random, \$11.99 (9780375837296); paper, \$4.99 (9780375837302); lib. ed., \$14.99 (9780375937293); e-book, \$4.99 (9780375894602). Gr. 3–6.

Jack and Annie use magic to travel back to Renaissance Italy in hopes that Leonardo da Vinci can help them find one of the answers to the secrets of happiness. They spend the day as apprentices, learning about painting and Leonardo's inventions, but they also show him how he can fly with the help of their magic wand.

The Second Mrs. Gioconda. By E. L. Konigsburg. 1975. 160p. Atheneum, paper, \$6.99 (9780689821219); e-book, \$7.99 (9781442439726). Gr. 6–9.

Told from the point of view of a young apprentice, a former street urchin and thief, this story explains da Vinci's decision to turn down other commissions in order to paint a portrait of the second wife of an unknown Florentine merchant, the *Mona Lisa*.

The Smile. By Donna Jo Napoli. 2008. 272p. Penguin/Speak, paper, \$7.99 (9780142414927); e-book, \$7.99 (9781436258531). Gr. 8–11.

One theory speculates that the woman who posed for the *Mona Lisa* was Mona Elisabetta, the 13-year-old daughter of a silk merchant. Through this fictionalized history, readers experience a lively look at life in Renaissance Florence and its intriguing art and history.

Who Stole the Mona Lisa? By Geronimo Stilton. 2010. 56p. illus. Papercutz, \$9 (9781597072212). Gr. 2–4.

Stilton, a Rattus Emeritus of Mousomorphic Literature and of Neo-Ratonic Comparative Philosophy, uncovers a plot by the Pirate Cats to go back in time to Renaissance Italy to steal the *Mona Lisa*. The graphic-novel format provides a humorous look at the time and place.

Informational Books

Amazing Leonardo da Vinci Inventions You Can Build Yourself. By Maxine Anderson. 2006. 128p. illus. Nomad, paper, \$15.95 (9780974934426). 709.2. Gr. 3–6.

Although a few of the projects include some art techniques, the emphasis in this Build It Yourself book is on mechanical items, and readers are encouraged to learn about da Vinci by building working models of his inventions. Biographical information for influential people in da Vinci's life, brief overviews of the Renaissance, and important events of that time period are also provided.

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Da Vinci. By Mike Venezia. Illus. by the author. 1989. 32p. Children's Press, paper, \$6.95 (9780516422756); lib. ed., \$28 (9780516022758). 709. Gr. 2–4.

This entry in the popular *Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists* series focuses entirely on da Vinci's career as an artist and includes a number of reproductions of his work. Biographical information, as well as some basic discussion of artistic techniques, is supported by humorous cartoon illustrations.

In Renaissance Florence with Leonardo. By Renzo Rossi. Illus. by Alessandro Baldanzi. 2009. 48p. Marshall Cavendish, \$28.50 (9780761443292). 945.5. Gr. 3–6.

In this *Come See My City* series title, Andy and Frannie go back in time while touring Florence and end up with Leonardo da Vinci as their tour guide. Factual material is interspersed in the fictional story and dialogue, while sidebars provide snippets of information and biographical details, a map, and a chronology of Renaissance Florence.

Leonardo, Beautiful Dreamer. By Robert Byrd. Illus. by the author. 2003. 40p. Dutton, \$17.99 (9780525470335). 709. Gr. 4–6.

This beautifully illustrated book allows readers to dip into da Vinci's greatest achievements, while the large format saturates readers with information. Sidebars add anecdotes, quotations, and small illustrations to explain his theories, highlight his insatiable curiosity, and offer further insights into the man.

Leonardo da Vinci. By Diane Stanley. Illus. by the author. 1996. 48p. HarperCollins, paper, \$6.99 (9780688161552). 709. Gr. 3–7.

The illustrations in this quintessential picture-book biography were inspired by da Vinci's work and bring the Renaissance to life. Couple it with Stanley's biography of Michelangelo for a more complete look at the era.

Leonardo da Vinci. By Kathleen Krull. Illus. by Boris Kulikov. 2005. 128p. Viking, \$15.99 (9780670059201); paper, \$5.99 (9780142408216); e-book, \$5.99 (9781101083840). 509.2. Gr. 5–8.

Beginning with da Vinci's apprenticeship, this biography focuses primarily on da Vinci's interest in the natural world and the notebooks in which he recorded his observations and theories. The book's discussion of da Vinci's sexuality elevates the grade level for the biography.

Leonardo da Vinci. By Steve Augarde. Illus. by Leo J. Brown. 2011. 64p. Kingfisher, paper, \$9.99 (9780753466742). 709.2. Gr. 4–6.

Blurring the lines between fact and fiction, a fictionalized

diary, written by an imagined 10-year-old apprentice, is used to describe the details of what life was like with the brilliant artist and inventor. The highly visual book includes reproductions of da Vinci's drawings and paintings, photographs, and maps.

Leonardo da Vinci: The Genius Who Defined the Renaissance. By John Phillips. 2006. 64p. illus. National Geographic, \$17.95 (9780792253853); paper, \$6.95 (9781426302480); lib. ed., \$27.90 (9780792253860). 709.2. Gr. 3–7.

This complete, richly illustrated biography includes a lot of detail about da Vinci's life and the times in which he lived. A time line runs across the bottom of each page, making it easy to follow da Vinci's life benchmarked against other events of the period.

Leonardo da Vinci for Kids: His Life and Ideas. By Janis Herbert. 1998. 92p. illus. Chicago Review, paper, \$17.95 (9781556522987). 709. Gr. 4–8.

Biography, art techniques, history, and science are combined in 21 crafts and activities that provide insight into da Vinci's talents. Illustrations, drawings, photographs, and diagrams ensure that readers clearly understand the project while they learn about da Vinci and his work through text, a glossary, a time line, and biographical information.

Leonardo's Horse. By Jean Fritz. Illus. by Hudson Talbott. 2001. 48p. Putnam, \$21.99 (9780399235764). 730. Gr. 4–7.

Commissioned to create a mammoth sculpture of a horse, da Vinci died before casting the bronze statue, and the work was never completed. Centuries later, in 1977, an American art lover had the statue finished as a gift for the people of Milan, Italy. Mixed-media illustrations fill the dome-shaped book and include many additional examples of da Vinci's other work.

Leonardo's Monster. By Jane Sutcliffe. Illus. by Herb Leonhard. 2010. 32p. Pelican, \$16.99 (9781589808386). 709.2. PreS–Gr. 2.

An unproven legend says that young da Vinci created a creature so horrifying that it scared the wits out of his father. Facts about the artist's life and illustrations of the young boy at work are incorporated into this retelling of the legend.

Neo Leo: The Ageless Ideas of Leonardo da Vinci. By Gene Barretta. Illus. by the author. 2009. 40p. Holt/Christy Ottaviano, \$16.99 (9780805087031). 609.2. Gr. 1–3.

In this title, re-creations of the sketches of machines Leonardo designed and engineered are juxtaposed with modern inventions to demonstrate how visionary his ideas were and how close his prototypes had been to functioning models.

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Bits of additional information are included, reproduced in da Vinci's mirror-writing style.

The Stories of the Mona Lisa: An Imaginary Museum Tale about the History of Modern Art. By Piotr Barsony. Illus. by the author. 2012. 56p. Skyhorse, \$19.95 (9781620872284). 759.06. Gr. 3–6.

Barsony takes readers on a tour through an imaginary art museum where each art movement, and its most important artists are depicted through variations of the *Mona Lisa* created in the appropriate style. By keeping the subject consistent, this is a clever way to clearly and simply delineate the different art styles and movements.

Jeanette Larson is a library and literature consultant and an author. Her latest title is *Hummingbirds: Facts and Folklore from the Americas* (2011).

Common Core Connections

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with recommended books about Leonardo da Vinci. You can find more information about the standards at www.corestandards.org.

In the Classroom: Read *Da Vinci*, by Mike Venezia, and discuss—having students use the text for support—how Leonardo had to make his own paints, like most artists of his day. Talk about da Vinci's process for grinding up pigments and adding them to egg whites or another binding agent. Then have the class make their own paints: mix one-fourth cup of condensed milk with food coloring, adding drops until you reach the desired shade. Use a brush to apply a thin coating to paper as you paint. Craft books and websites like Planetpals, www.planetpals.com/craft-non-toxic-craft-supply-recipes.html, provide recipes for various other nontoxic paints.

Common Core Connections

- **RI.3.1.** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- **RI.3.5.** Use text features and search tools (e.g., keywords, sidebars, hyperlinks) to locate information relevant to a given topic efficiently.

In the Classroom: Using *Monday with a Mad Genius*, by Mary Pope Osborne, and *Uh-oh, Leonardo!*, by Robert Sabuda, for support, discuss with students how Leonardo used mirror, or backward, writing to keep his journal entries private. Then, try writing backward and from right to left. Then have students use backward writing or some other code system to write out facts about da Vinci, based on passages in Osborne's and Sabuda's texts. Swap papers with another student or a friend to see if he or she can break the code.

Common Core Connections

- **RL.4.3.** Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

In the Classroom: Mona Lisa's smile has inspired hundreds of songs and poems. Share an image of the painting while listening to "Mona Lisa," sung by Nat King Cole. After reading the lyrics out loud, share *The Mona Lisa Caper*, by Rick Jacobson, and discuss how the illustrations add to the students' understanding of the story—and the painting. Then encourage students to write their own story, poem, or song lyrics inspired by the painting.

Common Core Connections

- **RL.3.7.** Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).
- **W.3.3.** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

In the Classroom: As a class, explore *Amazing Leonardo da Vinci*

Inventions You Can Build Yourself, by Maxine Anderson, and discuss how da Vinci solved problems with his invented machines, referring back to both the text and illustrations. Brainstorm as a group to create a list of problems that need solving or tasks that might benefit from a machine's help. After a list is created, talk about which invention or machine could help solve the problem. Narrow the choices down to a reasonable number of options. Have students work in teams of two or three to design an invention or machine and sketch out what it might look like.

Common Core Connections

- **RI.4.3.** Explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text, including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text.
- **RI.5.2.** Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.

In the Classroom: Read Gene Barretta's *Neo Leo* and talk about how Leonardo spent a lot of time measuring the human body and determining proportions for many of his inventions. Look at pictures of his Vitruvian Man and review the calculations that da Vinci made for the human figure. Have students use measuring tapes to measure their arms or those of a friend, ensuring that students are using accurate numbers down to a quarter of an inch. Sixth-graders could extend the exercise by filling in the data on a worksheet (one is available at Math Connections' website: <https://mathconnections.wikispaces.com/Vitruvian+Man+Gallery>) and then computing the ratios of, for example, height to arm span, as da Vinci did. Do the students' body measurements match those of da Vinci's Vitruvian Man?

Common Core Connections

- **3.MD.4.** Generate measurement data by measuring lengths using rulers marked with halves and fourths of an inch. Show the data by making a line plot, where the horizontal scale is marked off in appropriate units—whole numbers, halves, or quarters.
- **6.RP.3.** Use ratio and rate reasoning to solve real-world and mathematical problems (e.g., by reasoning about tables of equivalent ratios, tape diagrams, double number line diagrams, or equations).

In the Classroom: Read Piotr Barsony's *The Stories of the Mona Lisa* and ask students to use examples from the book in a class discussion about how and why artists might copy great works of art. Show students examples of Leonardo's paintings, including *The Last Supper*, the *Mona Lisa*, and *Portrait of a Musician*. Distribute art supplies, and let each student create his or her own version of one of the masterpieces. Frame each piece with paper or cardboard frames and display as if in a gallery. You might even host a gallery opening and invite parents and other students and teachers to view the works.

Common Core Connections

- **RL.3.7.** Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).