

Leonardo Da Vinci 1452-1519

In 1503, the two greatest figures of the Renaissance, Michelangelo and Leonardo, were working on opposite walls of the Great Council Chamber in Florence. These geniuses were rivals and diametrically opposite. Michelangelo was a physically unattractive, neoplatonic philosopher, whose personality was brooding and gloomy. On the other hand, Leonardo was physically handsome and scientific, and had a dynamic personality. A chance encounter was recorded by Gadding, which illustrated their rivalry,

“ Leonardo, in the company of Giovanni da Gavina of Santa Trinita, passed the benches of the Palazzo Spini one day, where a group of gentlemen were disputing over a passage in Dante. They appealed to Leonardo to explain the lines to them. Exactly at that moment Michelangelo (apparently alone as usual) passed by and Leonardo replied to the questioners, “Michelangelo will explain it to you”. Michelangelo responded with anger, since it seemed to him that Leonardo was making mock of him, “You made a design for a horse to be cast in bronze, and, unable to cast it, have in your shame abandoned it.” And saying this, he turned his heels to them and left the street. And Leonardo remained at these words and blushed. And to annoy Leonardo, Michelangelo called after him: “And those Milanese idiots did believe in you!”⁸⁷

Ironically, in this case, Michelangelo never finished his wall, The Battle of Cascina, which showed the point when the bathing Florentine men fell victim to a sneak attack. Leonardo's Battle of Angham ran do to his use of an experimental medium and thus was ruined.

Leonardo's career began approximately eight years before Michelangelo's birth, in Verrocchio's botteghe. Verrocchio's pursuit of diversity culminated in Leonardo's successful career that defined “Renaissance man”. When he turned thirty, he joined Ludovico Sforza's court that lead “those Milanese idiots”. His letter of introduction to Sforza summarized his diverse abilities. For example, he wrote, as a military engineer able to “...make big guns,

mortars,...contrive catapults, magonels, trabocchi, and other machines of marvelous efficacy...” , [as an architect] “...I can give perfect satisfaction and to the equal of any other in architecture and the composition of buildings public and prove; and in guiding water from one place to another.” and almost incidentally added the creator of the Mona Lisa and Last Supper. “I can carry out sculpture in marble, bronze, or clay, and I can do in painting whatever may be done, as well as any other, be he who he may.”⁸⁸

Like Michelangelo, some scholars criticize him for not completing the majority of his projects, such as the huge equestrian monument to Sforza. Many consider the memorial a challenge to Donatello's Gattamelata and Verrocchio's Colleoni. None can seriously deny Leonardo's creativity and diverse skills. For example, he served with Machiavelli under Cesare Borgia who considered him to be a competent military engineer. Leonardo revolutionized painting in such works as the Virgin of the Rocks and St. John the Baptist. He was peerless in the study of human anatomy and, like Verrocchio, was an accomplished musician. Upon his arrival at Sforza's court, he reportedly played a lute shaped like a horse head.

Demographic Evidence

Leonardo apprenticed and then became a partner at Verrocchio's botteghe. He was the most talented painter and lived in the studio for at least twelve years (1467-1479).⁸⁹ His skills prompted Verrocchio to give up painting when he saw Leonardo's ability.⁹⁰ More likely, Verrocchio was relieved at having such a talented assistant/partner who could pick up the slack as Verrocchio's main concern was his Colleoni Monument and left Leonardo to collaborate with Lorenzo Di Credi on the many projects which the botteghe was flooded.

Again, Verrocchio and Company was located on the Via dell' Agnolo where Donatello

and Bertoldo had once lived. The shop was located behind the Duomo adjacent to San Lorenzo Parish, the center for sodomite activity. In short, the botteghe offered ample opportunity for sodomitical activity to occur. Also, the close working relationship between Leonardo and Verrocchio has prompted some historians to speculate that they might have had a physical relationship. Although that would be a possibility, it seems unlikely. Verrocchio probably would not fulfill Leonardo's desires as the legal evidence from this time period implies.

Legal Evidence Early years

On April 8, 1476, Leonardo, the leader of the Tornabuoni family, a promenade Florentine house,⁹¹ and others were denounced as sodomites. They were accused of sodomizing Jacopo Saltarelli, a beautiful young model. Most likely, Jacopo Salterelli was a sodomite for he was mentioned by a self-denounced man who claimed to have sodomized Jacopo.⁹² As mentioned earlier, self-confessions are the most reliable evidence for a true charge. They were dismissed due to a lack of evidence, but the case was left open for further investigation.

On June 7, 1476, they were denounced again, this time in Latin and probably by a priest. Again, they were dismissed with no findings. This is not surprising for a number of reasons. Firstly, perhaps the accuser did not have the requested two or four witnesses to come forth in court. Secondly, Leonardo's association with Verrocchio could have offered some protection. Most likely, however, is the presence of the head of the Toruneburni family. As Dr. Fumagalli suggested in 1952, and Roche's subsequently work has shown, Officers of the Night were hesitant to prosecute any members of Florence's promenade families. One would imagine that local witnesses might be reluctant to come forth against a Toruneburni during a politically unstable period. Even then, a majority of the Officers would have to vote for a conviction.

If the charges were true, Jacopo would have most likely taken the passive role. Then, Leonardo, would be attracted to beautiful teens as an active member; which would weigh against a sexual relationship with Verrocchio who was much older.

Artist's Writings/Younger Years

Shortly after Leonardo's court debut, he revealed his sexuality in a notebook (c1478). On a torn piece of parchment, Studies of Heads and Machines, two males appear to be about to kiss.⁹³ Leonardo wrote on the side, "Fieravanti, Domenico's son, in Florence who showed himself as extraordinarily affectionate towards me as a maiden, I could love."⁹⁴ Again, this passage was incorrectly translated as "Fieravanti di Domenico at Florence is my most beloved friend, as though he were my brother". I believe this passage is an admission of his homosexuality. When taken in context with the unfound hearing, two years earlier, can there be much doubt?

Life Style

Although Leonardo never had a wife, girlfriend, or female lover. Far from the sage image many people hold, Leonardo was dashing, well groomed and handsome. Dr. Richard Turner shows that the sage-like "self portraits" of Leonardo were nothing more than frauds created by scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries in his work, Inventing Leonardo. In addition to Vasari's testament, the contemporary Anonimo Gaddiano wrote,

"Beautiful in person and aspect, Leonardo was well-proportioned and graceful. He wore a rose colored cloak, which came only to his knees, although at the time long vestments were the custom. His beard came to the middle of his breast and was well-dressed and curled."⁹⁵

Leonardo had found his own apartment by 1479, but was still associated with Verrocchio and Company until 1481 (Verrocchio was mainly concerned with his Colleoni monument in Venice). Leonardo was irreligious and perhaps did not relish the idea of working with the pious Lorenzo di Credi. Furthermore, Leonardo, being too scientific, never fit in with the neoplatonists of Lorenzo's orbit. The neoplatonists considered Leonardo to be particularly under educated and

lacking in intellect due to his lack of classical training. In 1482, Leonardo moved to Milan (ironically, later that same year, Savonarola moved into the convent of St. Mark). On the way to Milan, Leonardo met his first, long time companion, Giani di' Jacomo Caprotti.

The androgynous Giani was a boy when he met Leonardo, but was with the artist for at least 25 years and corresponded with him until his death. Leonardo nicknamed Giani, "Salai", or little devil, who apparently lived up to the name. Traditionally represented as an "apprentice" to Leonardo, Salai was simply not an artist or servant. He was apparently just a "scamp". He stole items from Leonardo's patrons, but Leonardo enjoyed his antics and supported Salai's extravagant tastes. Leonardo's notes are full of the lavish gifts and presents that he bought for the youth. For example, in the first year of their relationship, Leonardo bought Salai, six shirts, four pairs of hose, three doublets, a cap, a cloak, a belt, a lined doublet, and twenty-four pairs of shoes!⁹⁶

Leonardo also surrounded himself with other talented and unmarried youths throughout his life, including Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, Giovanni Ambrogio de Predis, and the faithful Marco da Ogiono. Leonardo had the reputation of choosing these followers on the basis of looks, not talent.⁹⁷ However, Salai remained to be his undisputed favorite follower and model of androgynous beauty.

Homoerotic Art

Quite opposite to Michelangelo's infatuation with muscular men, Leonardo's ideal was "smoothly modeled flesh with delicate sfumato, oval face, long ringlets, mysterious unfocused gaze, and slightly parted lips".⁹⁸ Also, unlike Michelangelo, he only completed a small body of art. There are no documented statues (although many believe that he worked in collaboration on

a few) and only a dozen undisputed paintings by his hands. Of his twelve existing major paintings, two are partial male nudes and none are female nudes. He reportedly painted a female nude, Leda, but the painting is lost; furthermore, scholars cannot even be sure if the pose is erotic. Of these two male nudes, The St. John the Baptists is a celebration of androgyny which Michelangelo would have probably found unappealing.

St. John the Baptist was Leonardo's last masterpiece, most likely to be executed in France and is quite different from the conventional portrayal. Firstly, he created the illusion of space in the group by using chiaroscuro (the use of light and shadow) instead of the mechanical perspective achieved with architectural or outdoor elements. Secondly, the androgynous youth who emerges from the shadows is a stark contrast to the traditional "caveman like" Baptist figures. Long, well groomed, curly hair frames a womanly face whose tilted head and smile mimic that Mona Lisa's. As early as the 19th century, critics posed the question of whether the youth was a man or woman? The exquisite fur draped over the left shoulder reveals a smooth chest whose nipple is hidden by a likewise smooth arm. Overall, the impact is highly androgynous and playful.

Moreover, Leonardo's interest in androgyny can be documented from the time he met Salai. For example, two drawings, dated around 1490, are of hermaphroditic beings. The first is the Allegory of Virtue and Envy in which two upper bodies emerge from a single pair of legs. They are combating each other, the right figure gripping the neck of the left's while the left figure is lighting the long curly hair of the right's on fire. Inscribed below is "No sooner is virtue born than envy comes into the world to attack it and sooner will there be a body without a shadow than Virtue without Envy". The other is the Allegory of Pleasure and Pain in which a younger and older men torsos emerge from a common nude male lower body. The drawing is inscribed

with, "Pleasure and Pain are represented as twins, as though they were joined together, for there is never the one without the other; and they turn their backs because they are contrary to each other".⁹⁹ James Saslow concludes that "Leonardo's solution to this conflict was to sublimate his erotic longings through his art-specifically, in the lifelong search for a beauty that could fuse opposing experiences into one self-contained and undifferentiated whole." Thus, I believe Leonardo was simply infatuated with androgynous males.

Contemporary Sources

People always gossiped about Leonardo's sodomitical relationship with Salai. They became the subject for many writers. For example, in Gian Paolo Lomasso's Book of Dreams, they are portrayed as the champions of sodomy in a Socratic dialogue:

LEONARDO These achieved true fame, Marco Da Oglono, Andrea del Gobbo, Bartolomeo Clemento, together with Salai, whom in life I loved more than all the others, who were several.

PHIDIAS Did you perhaps play the game in the behind, which the Florentines find so agreeable?

LEONARDO And how many times ! Remember that he was a very beautiful boy, especially when he was fifteen years old.

PHIDIAS You are not ashamed to say this?

LEONARDO Why ashamed? There is nothing more praiseworthy among the virtuosi than this, and that this is true I can demonstrate by means of most excellent arguments. And so he does (saying that) homosexual love was more spiritual than heterosexual love.

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Legal Evidence/the latter years

As in the case of Donatello and Verrocchio, Leonardo left everything to the men of whom he surrounded himself. His paintings, notebooks, and tools went to Melzi. Salai received most of Leonardo's money, clothes and property. Leonardo left a small amount of money that was kept in the treasury of Santa Maria Nuova to his half-brother. This was inherited money that the two had fought over for years.

Leonardo and Asceticism

Historians have long questioned Leonardo's heterosexuality and many say he was an ascetic. Freud concluded the same when he analyzed Leonardo's notes and dreams. For example, Leonardo wrote that he imagined his mouth had been violated by a kite, thrusting in and out. A bad sexual encounter led him to live a life of chastity according to Freud. However, Leonardo also wrote tales which glorifying sex, such as "on his rod."

Concerning the Rod.

"It holds conference with the human intelligence and sometimes has intelligence of itself. When the human will desires to stimulate it, it remains obstinate and follows its own way, sometimes moving of itself without the permission of the many or of any mental impetus. Whether he is awake or sleeping, it does what it desires. And often the man is asleep and it is awake, and often the man is awake while it sleeps, and often when the man wishes to use it, it desires otherwise, and often it wishes to be used and the man forbids it.

Therefore, it appears that this creature possesses a life and an intelligence alien from the man, and it seems that men are wrong to be ashamed of giving it a name"

This passage implies that he was not particularly ashamed of his sex organ and might run against an ascetic disposition.

Summary Leonardo

Leonardo was probably a sodomite. There is legal evidence from his younger days where he grew up in a particularly sodomitical neighborhood. Although the charges were dropped, much evidence comes from his own hands. His ideal of beauty can be in the homoerotic St. John the Baptist and in his long term companion Salai. Their age difference would at least fit into the norms that Rocke has established for Renaissance Florence. Leonardo has been described as an ascetic, but probably was not.