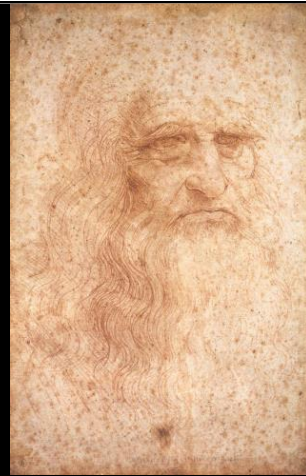


Slide 1

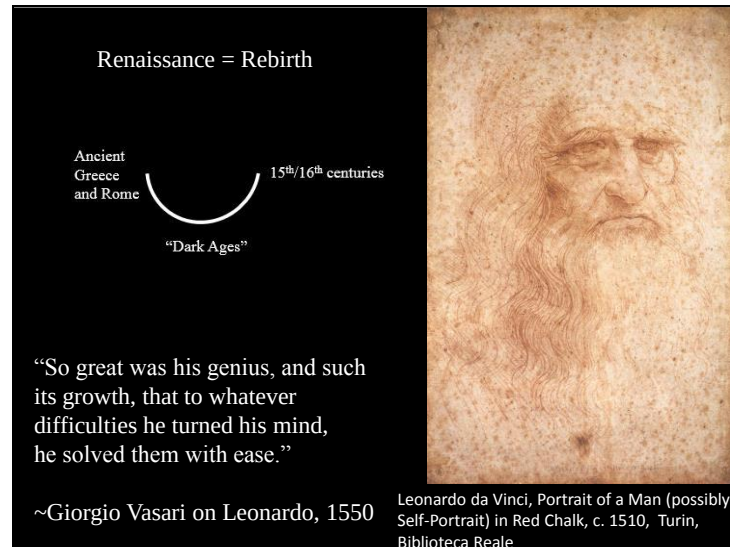
The Renaissance Man and
the Humanist Ideal: A Case
Study of Leonardo da Vinci
(1452-1519)

by
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Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of a Man (possibly
Self-Portrait) in Red Chalk, c. 1510, Turin,
Biblioteca Reale

Today we are going to explore the sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance as an expression of humanist preoccupations, using the example of quintessential Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci.



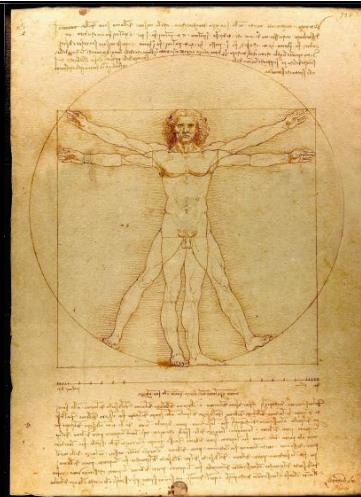
"Renaissance" means "rebirth." Rebirth of what, exactly? According to contemporary humanist scholars, it is a "rebirth" of interest in learning after what sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari calls the "disastrous decline" of the "Dark Ages."

It's important to keep in mind that the traditional assumption that classical antiquity (that is, ancient Greece and Rome) represented a high point in civilization that was followed by a period of stagnation dubbed the "Dark Ages," then reborn during the fifteenth- and sixteenth centuries, is a **construct**—in other words, an artificial notion of historical evolution. This myth has been debunked, as historians have come to appreciate the interest in learning, developments in civilization, and artistic invention characteristic of the Medieval period. Still, to understand the phenomenon of the Renaissance, it's important to establish this foundational framework.

Vasari, who wrote the first collection of artist biographies in the history of art, had this to say about Leonardo da Vinci: "So great was his genius, and such its growth, that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease."

Leonardo's oeuvre may serve as a touchstone for understanding Renaissance ideals.

- “rebirth” of interest in classical antiquity
- new spirit of scientific inquiry
- rising interest in the individual



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Vitruvian Man*, c. 1492, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia

Specifically, we are going to look at how the following three characteristics of the Italian Renaissance are expressed in Leonardo's art:

1. When we speak of **humanism** in the context of the Renaissance, we are referring to the renewed interest in ancient Greek and Roman art, philosophy and literature that defined the Renaissance mindset. Humanists looked to classical antiquity for inspiration.

For example, Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* is based on the writing of ancient Roman architect Vitruvius, who determined that if a man stands inside a circle of square with his hands and feet extended to the perimeter, his navel should fall at the center. Like Vitruvius, Leonardo is interested in the ideal representation of human form, and employs geometry to achieve “perfect” proportions.

- c. 15th-16th century
“rebirth” of interest in
classical antiquity
- new spirit of scientific
inquiry
- rising interest in the
individual



Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of the Fetus in the Womb*, c. 1510-12, London, Royal Collection

2. Renaissance scholars pursued a new spirit of scientific inquiry and observation of the natural world. They tried to observe the world around them carefully, completely, and without preconceived ideas such as those tied to the traditions and tenets of the Church.

Leonardo possessed an exceptional capacity to record what his eye saw, which is at the heart of his innovativeness as an artist and scientist.

To this end, he studied with notable detachment a fetus in its mother's womb...

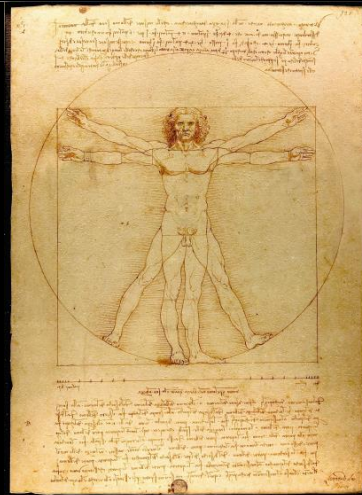
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Leonardo da Vinci, *Hanging of Bernardo di Bandino Baroncelli*, 1479, Bayonne, Musée Bonnat

...and a hanged criminal, which he records in exacting detail in his drawings, both based on observation.

- “rebirth” of interest in classical antiquity
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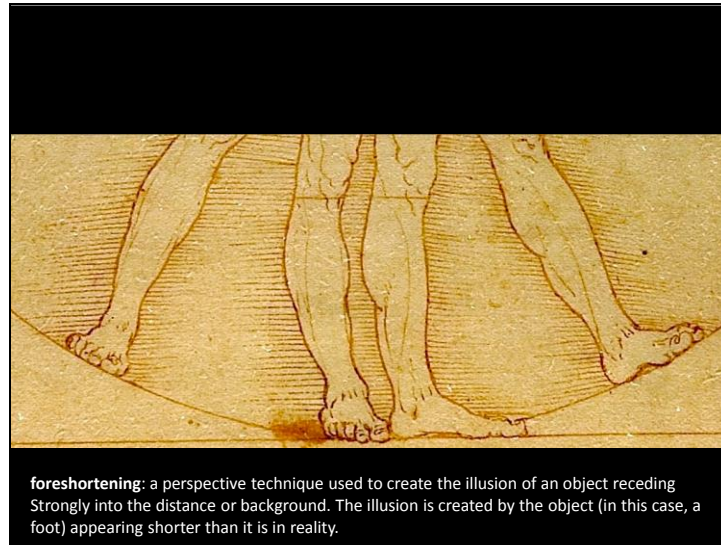


Leonardo da Vinci, *The Vitruvian Man*, c. 1492, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia

Taking the example of *The Vitruvian Man*, we can tell Leonardo is closely observing nature because the figure is nude, physically fit and anatomically correct, with delicate lines and shading defining his musculature.

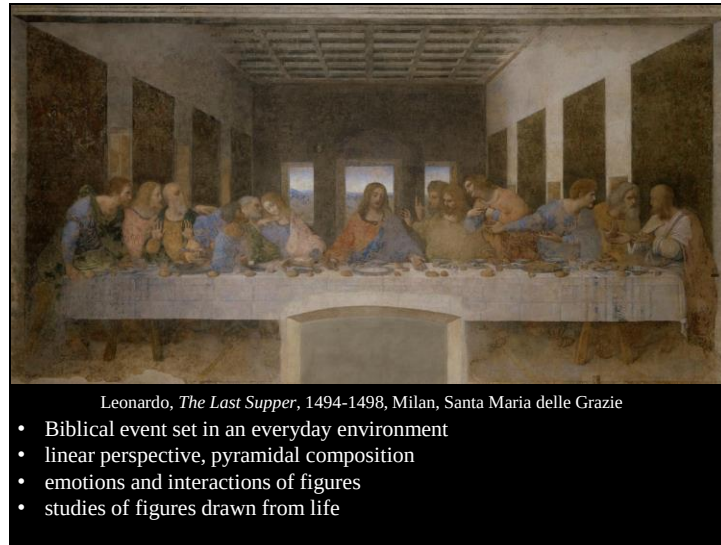
3. Humanists were interested in the individual. This classical philosophy of “man as the measure of all things” is celebrated in Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man*, which conceives of Man as the literal and conceptual center of study. Although *The Vitruvian Man* is, in a sense, confined within the square and circle, he simultaneously defies them.

Slide 7



Look closely at the figure's feet. Notice that Leonardo employs a technique called **foreshortening** to create the illusion that they project outward toward the viewer. Especially in the case of the second foot from the left, the toes appear to curl around the line where the circle and square converge. The adjacent foot, shown in profile, stands wholly outside of the circle and overlaps with the square.

Shapes do not define the Man; the Man determines the shapes.



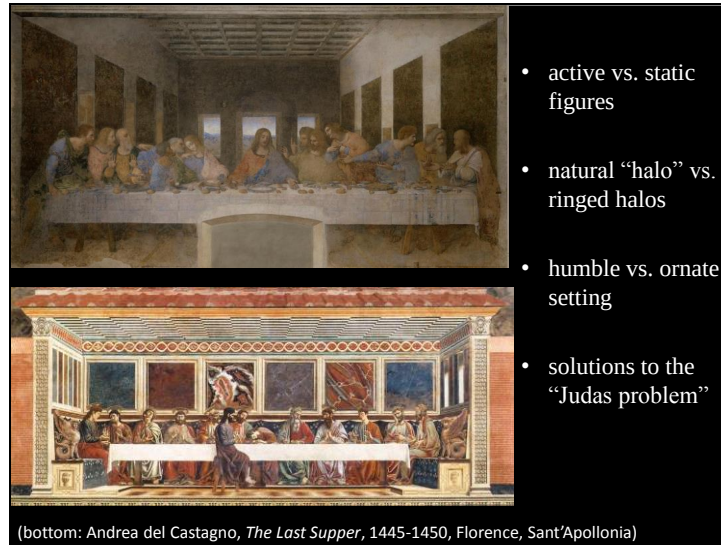
Leonardo's *The Last Supper* demonstrates Renaissance preoccupations with observation and imitation of the natural world and the new interest in the individual. Leonardo translates a Biblical narrative into an everyday scene that could be taking place in an observable environment. The figures are situated in an undecorated interior with a view to the outside. Leonardo creates the illusion that they occupy three-dimensional space by using **linear perspective**, which is a converging of diagonal lines on an imaginary vanishing point (in this case, behind the head of Christ) located on the horizon line in the background of the composition.

Leonardo communicates the **narrative**—the story being told—through the emotions and interactions of the figures. He simultaneously depicts the reactions of the disciples to Christ's announcement that two will betray him, and shows Christ blessing the bread and wine that signify his body and blood, establishing the sacrament of the Eucharist. Christ, situated at the center of the painting, forms a pyramid with his outstretched arms, which guide attention to the groups of disciples at left and right. There are four clusters of men, each of which form their own pyramidal compositions. For example, immediately to the left of Christ, John's arm leads up to the apex of the pyramid at the top of his head; from here, our attention travels to Peter, who is looking over John's shoulder. The head of Judas is in close proximity to these two, and his arm creates a diagonal line down to the table.



If we look more closely at the figure of Judas (left), we can see that he is grasping the bag of silver that he accepted for betrayal of Christ. Leonardo also casts Judas in shadow to subtly indicate his identity. Although the painting today is in poor condition, we can see from the preparatory drawing (right) that Leonardo pays close attention to the sinews of Judas's twisting neck—a reference to Judas's suicide by hanging.

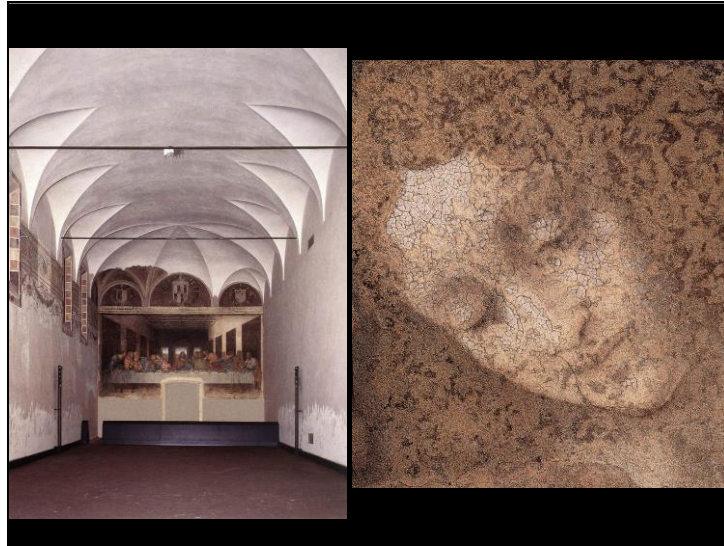
The study for Judas demonstrates that Leonardo enhances the individuality and lifelikeness of the figures by basing them on drawings made from observing live models. Leonardo is thinking about narrative realism and making the scene accessible to the viewer.



- active vs. static figures
- natural “halo” vs. ringed halos
- humble vs. ornate setting
- solutions to the “Judas problem”

(bottom: Andrea del Castagno, *The Last Supper*, 1445-1450, Florence, Sant'Apollonia)

The contrast between Leonardo's rendering of *The Last Supper* and that of Andrea del Castagno, created just fifty years earlier, shows the thought Leonardo has devoted to making the scene naturalistic. Whereas the figures in Leonardo's painting look at and gesture toward each other and Christ, those in Andrea's work are relatively static. Andrea uses the conventional ringed haloes to signify the holiness of Christ and his apostles; Leonardo employs a sort of natural “halo” in framing Christ's head with the door behind him. Leonardo's choice of a plain setting allows for focus on the narrative action; Andrea's figures appear to exist in an ornately decorated box. And whereas Andrea follows tradition in identifying Judas by placing him on the opposite side of the table as everyone else, Leonardo, as we have seen, uses a more subtle approach that anchors the scene in the natural world.



The Last Supper is located in the **refectory**, or dining hall, of a monastery, making it a fitting subject matter for its location. The painting presents unique problems of interpretation because of its poor and deteriorated condition. Instead of painting in **fresco** (mixing the pigment into wet plaster), Leonardo devised an experimental technique: hoping to achieve the freedom and flexibility of oil painting on panel or canvas, he used a mix of oil-and-tempera on dry plaster, with a disastrous result.

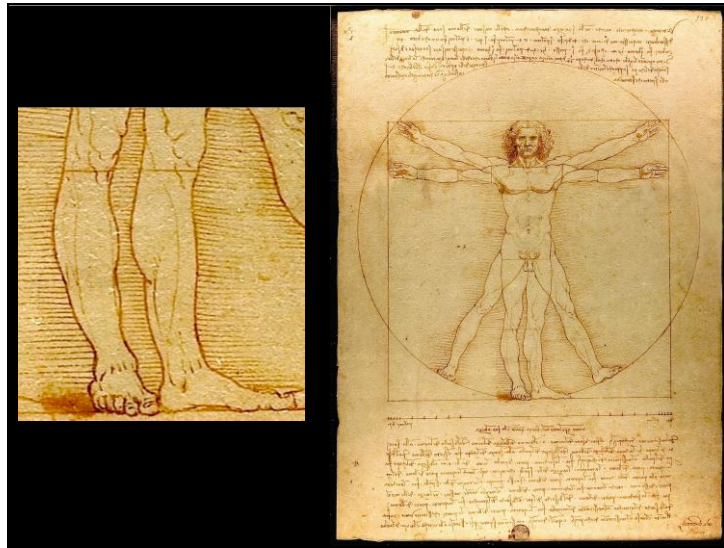
Within twenty years, the painting had begun to deteriorate. In the detail of John's head at right, you can see the extent to which the paint has flaked off of the wall.

In the seventeenth century, monks cut a hole through the composition for a doorway!

During WWII, the wall with the painting was the only one left standing when the rest of the monastery was bombed and turned to rubble. If you have seen the movie *The Monuments Men* (2014), you may recall the efforts of soldiers and citizens to pile sandbags around this wall to preserve the painting.

Despite the failed technique of Leonardo, his interest in experimentation is perfectly in keeping with Renaissance ideals...

Slide 12



...and demonstrates his keen fascination with thinking, so to speak, “outside the square.”