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Walter Isaacson on Leonardo da Vinci, the prophetic polymath

- Tina Allen
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Work titled 'The Last Supper' by artist Leonardo da Vinci circa 1495.

Imagine travelling back to Italy 500 years ago and meeting a man who could accurately describe the four chambers of your heart and how vortexes of blood cause the valves in each of them to close.

He is not only an anatomist but also an engineer, architect, cartographer, musician, pageant impresario and artist. To complete the mental picture, he has flowing golden curls, a muscular build and wears elegant rose-coloured tunics and cloaks. He is also gay, vegetarian, left-handed, non-religious and known simply as “Leonardo from Vinci”.

Despite living so long ago, Leonardo da Vinci’s name and iconic images appear everywhere, from book covers to billboards and business names.

His popularity is enduring because the scientific discoveries in his notebooks were centuries ahead of their time and his 15 surviving paintings include two of the most celebrated in art

history. When a rediscovered painting of Christ holding a crystal orb was auctioned a couple of months ago, it fetched a record-shattering \$US450 million (\$586m).

With the 500th anniversary of his death only 18 months away, a new examination of da Vinci is timely, and who better to put him under the microscope than Walter Isaacson, the former *Time* magazine editor turned Aspen Institute chief executive.

Isaacson has earned a reputation over the past 25 years for his comprehensive, highly readable biographies of Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs. Their ghosts linger on in this new book, which is as much a biography of Leonardo as a meditation on the type of genius capable of making connections across the humanities and sciences.

Da Vinci was not a “divine recipient” like Einstein but instead willed his way to genius through his driving passion to know “everything there was to know about the world, including how we fit into it”.

His quirky, playful and obsessive nature led him to make mistakes, go off on tangents and abandon projects. Isaacson asserts that these “lapses and oddities” allow us to relate to Leonardo, to appreciate his moments of triumph even more and to feel that we might learn life lessons from him.

In this meticulously researched volume, Isaacson obeys Leonardo’s injunction to begin any investigation at the source, with extensive travels to the US, Europe and Britain to view Leonardo’s art and the originals of his notebook codices. Of all the scholars and museum curators he interviews along the way, Isaacson seems particularly indebted to the Leonardo expert of our age, Oxford’s Martin Kemp.

At times Isaacson shows a dog-with-a-bone determination in his quest to add details to the shadowy outline of Leonardo’s life: from the site of his birth in Tuscany in 1452 to the scene of his death at the Loire Valley chateau of French king Francis I in 1519.

The reader is compensated for a lack of narrative drive in places with Isaacson’s insightful analysis of the sources. His excitement is palpable at Kemp’s confirmation this year of Caterina Lippi as the full name of the impoverished and orphaned 16-year-old who relinquished her infant son to his father’s family.

Of the early biographers, Isaacson trusts and often quotes the near contemporary Giorgio Vasari, who is revealing about Leonardo’s “striking” looks and his kind, gentle nature; he nonetheless describes Vasari’s anecdotes — such as Leonardo’s teacher in Florence, Verrocchio, “throwing down his own brush” in awe of his apprentice — as “picturesque”.

Isaacson uses the notebooks Leonardo began when he moved to Milan around the age of 30 as the foundation for his book, because they offer a window into his subject’s fevered, elated and sometimes troubled mind.

On a page with a drawing of a water clock and sundial, Leonardo scribbled a lament repeatedly that touches on the sadness of unfinished work: “Tell me if anything was ever done ... Tell me ... Tell me ...”

He describes the notebooks, of which 7200 pages miraculously survive today, as the greatest existing record of curiosity, because his “cross-disciplinary brilliance whirls across every page, providing a delightful display of a mind dancing with nature”. Leonardo delighted in seeing patterns in nature, so he would juxtapose a drawing of the branching arteries of the heart with the roots of a sprouting seed.

A sample notebook page includes geometric studies for squaring the circle, octagonal church designs, a passage of his mirror-script writing and a preparatory sketch for the world’s most famous fresco, *The Last Supper*.

Leonardo’s experience mounting the theatrical productions of patrons, including the powerful Medicis, Sforzas and Borgias, made him a master of conveying a sense of drama and movement in the reaction of the disciples to Jesus’s proclamation, while his studies on optics and perspective ensured the scene appeared realistic from different vantage points.

To all the scholars and critics who thought Leonardo should have spent more time at the easel and less immersed in his studies of optics, anatomy and the patterns of the cosmos, Isaacson believes that his portrait of the *Mona Lisa* provides the answer, as she is the culmination of everything he learned about art and science.

Leonardo began his most famous psychological portrait in 1503, when he had already started drawing the muscles that pull the lips upwards into her subtle smile.

Over the next 16 years he added 30 thin layers of translucent oil glaze to a poplar panel to create his trademark sfumato smoky outlines of this young Florentine mother so she appeared three-dimensional and lifelike. The same infra-red and other imaging techniques used to authenticate Leonardo’s recently discovered artwork, *Salvator Mundi*, are now providing evidence of him adding details to paintings up to 30 years later.

His constant striving for perfection is the reason he sometimes abandoned or failed to deliver commissions, such as the *Mona Lisa*, which was by his bedside when he died — an antique sage with flowing white beard, as depicted on the cover of this biography. Likewise, Leonardo kept tinkering on his treatises about art theory, anatomy, the mechanical arts and how humans might achieve flight.

By “skirting the edge of fantasy”, as Isaacson puts it, Leonardo envisioned what would only be discovered in relatively recent times. It was not until the 1960s that a team in Oxford confirmed his theory about what causes the aortic valve to close properly, which was then proven conclusively in 2014 by real-time magnetic resonance imaging.

Leonardo da Vinci is long but not dense, because of the clarity of Isaacson’s writing. The 600 pages of art-quality paper include hundreds of beautiful illustrations, conveniently placed near the relevant discussions.

Readers hoping for a page-turner or expecting to be immersed in the grain and substance of Renaissance Italy will be disappointed.

However, for anyone who, like me, is fascinated to learn about the minutiae of Leonardo’s life and creative output, this book will change the way you appreciate great art, the natural world and scientific discovery.

Isaacson reminds us not to view Leonardo da Vinci through the lens of modern sensibilities but rather to marvel at a man capable of gazing 500 years into the future.

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Leonardo da Vinci

By Walter Isaacson

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