



Leonardo da Vinci: Flights of the Mind

By Charles Nicholl

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In this engaging and thoroughly researched biography, Charles Nicholl uncovers the man behind the myth of the great Renaissance master. At times a painter, sculptor, inventor, draftsman, and anatomist, Leonardo's life cannot easily be summarized. And yet, Nicholl skillfully traces the artist's early days as an illegitimate child in Tuscany; his apprenticeship with Verrocchio in Florence; his service with some of the most powerful Renaissance families; his relationships with Michelangelo and Machiavelli; and his final days at the French royal court. In addition, Nicholl looks beyond the well-known stories of Leonardo's famous masterpieces, and gives us a glimpse into the artist's everyday life. We learn of Leonardo's penchant for jokes, his fascination with flight, his obsessive note making, and even what he ate. Nicholl weaves these details together in a fascinating portrait that goes far towards revealing the enigmatic figure who continues to fascinate present-day readers.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Nicholl aims for the man behind the myth in this penetrating, highly detailed biography, which recognizes da Vinci's "mysterious greatness as an artist, scientist and philosopher" but avoids hagiography (and nearly steers clear of the word "genius"). The illegitimate child of a Tuscan peasant girl and a local notary, da Vinci (1452–1519) was apprenticed as a teen to Florence sculptor Andrea del Verrocchio. Nicholl (*Somebody Else: Arthur Rimbaud in Africa*) conjectures convincingly about Leonardo's early career, though he tends to dwell overlong on technical aspects of Renaissance art production. Leonardo established a Florentine studio in 1477, but it was not until he moved to Milan five years later that he began to produce his iconic works: the painting *Virgin of the Rocks*, the famous Vitruvian Man drawing. Nicholl chronicles the production of *The Last Supper* and makes a firm statement about the *Mona Lisa*'s identity. Numerous questions about Leonardo's life remain, unavoidably, unanswered, but Nicholl fills in the gaps with insight into the artist's cultural milieu, offering tidbits about Leonardo's sexuality, the sordid goings-on at the Borgia court and the multifarious fruits of the artist's astonishingly fertile curiosity and imagination. Nicholl's attention to da Vinci's polymathic pursuits, as well as his own translations from the artist's numerous notebooks, are some of this dense but readable volume's most compelling aspects. Illus.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Forget Dan Brown's fictional *Da Vinci Code* (**** May/June 2003); here's the real deal. Award-winning author Nicholl draws on Leonardo's notebooks to delve deep inside the mind of the beloved Renaissance icon. Celebrating Leonardo's life and projects with contagious excitement and putting his achievements in the context of the Italian Renaissance as a whole, Nicholl considers Leonardo's inspirations and influences. If we learn little new about Leonardo's most famous works or his competition with Michelangelo, we gain valuable insight into the "cool, interior, ungraspable" creative process that raised Leonardo head and shoulders above his peers in most fields. Even with the spate of recent books on this master, *Leonardo da Vinci* stands out. It "isn't merely a lovely book; it's Leonardesque" (*New York Times Book Review*).

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From [Booklist](#)

Award-winning biographer Nicholl takes a marvelously fresh and human approach to the fascinating life of Leonardo. Evincing delight in the vicissitudes of scholarly sleuthing and a love of literature, Nicholl, who has a gift for spotting overlooked gems, offers a unique focus on the language in Leonardo's famous notebooks. He is also unusually eloquent in his recognition of the importance of Leonardo's country boyhood and the resulting visual lexicon and "ecologically compassionate view of nature" (he eventually became a vegetarian) that underlie all of his work, from his finely detailed drawings and paintings to his fascination with flight. Nicholl carefully explicates Leonardo's musicality, habit of inquisitiveness, love of technology, and artistic practices and renowned works. He also happily extracts evidence of Leonardo's affection for various boyfriends, particularly a man whose nickname, Salai, translates as "Little Devil," and argues convincingly that Leonardo enjoyed a liaison with one of his beautiful female models. In sum, Nicholl portrays a far more complex and appealing man than the chilly word *genius* usually suggests. *Donna Seaman*
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Users Review

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Leonie Blazek:

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