

Leonardo da Vinci

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Clark writes as a connoisseur and art-dealer, no wonder being a disciple of Berenson. He is mainly interested in keeping track of the works done by Leonardo and to address questions of authenticity. Leonardo was much more than a painter of pretty pictures, much to the embarrassment of the author, he was what we nowadays refer to a Renaissance man, nothing under the sun should be unfamiliar to him. He was guided by an obsessive curiosity, almost a mania, which his notebooks testify to. Clark does not dwell on their contents, being content to pass a general judgment on them. What strikes the observer is their unstructured nature, Leonardo did indeed jot down what came into his mind, allowing himself little time to reflect and organize, other more pressing issues claiming his attention. In fact Leonardo was notorious in not finishing his commissions. To plan a painting and solve the problems as to its execution absorbed him, not the tedious finishing of them, which he found tedious and more often than not left to his students, and as with really great minds, none of them really amounted to anything once they left his orbit. Thus the notebooks provide a real *Køkkenmødding* in which the scraps of his mind have been discarded to provide future manure. Much of it is not original, Clark assures us, but simply the notes of his readings, scribbled down without any preparatory editing or digestion. Although Leonardo may have fancied himself a scientist, or even a mathematicians, he fell short of both. Not that he did not try, but he simply did not have the patience to follow through ideas to the bitter end. Thus if e.g. the circulatory system was almost within his reach, he did after all perform many an autopsy in his anatomical quests, he never reached the conclusion, later to be discovered by Descartes, who unlike Harvey, did get some crucial things wrong. And even more damning when it came to mathematics he really did not do anything beyond mere doodling (at least according to Clark), although he held mathematics in high regard and thought that nothing not based on mathematics, meaning exact measurement and logical reasoning, had no real basis. But it seems clear that his passion, as opposed to real talent, was for his curious eye, and that he did disdain his paintings. It does not mean that he was a mere dilettante, in retrospect one can see that he did anticipate much that would later materialize, on the other hand it is much easier to have such tendencies in your work retroactively interpreted, than to actually influence your contemporaries and put your mark. Thus it is as a painter he survived into posterity, and for which he was greatly admired by his contemporaries, as well as profoundly influencing them.

The book is written in the late thirties and revived twenty years later, when the author has matured and changed his opinions on a few issues. He refers to Freud's psychoanalysis of Leonardo, finds it charming and inspiring, yet in the end dismisses it as a piece of unfounded speculation. Leonardo was born in 1452 as an illegitimate child to a successful father than later married and a peasant woman. He grew up in the Tuscan countryside but followed his father to Florence in his late teens, where he would be discovered and

become a student of Verrocchio, a second rate painter and artisan, who was probably relieved to find in Leonardo a young man of extraordinary competence taking over his painting commissions, freeing him to devote himself to more congenial occupations. Of course not much is known about the young Leonardo, who like many other highly talented young men was biding his time undecided on what trajectory to follow. He was handsome, always well-dressed, and a committed homosexual. As Clark notes, his homosexuality was documented, in fact charges were made against him, but there is no need to rely on such sordid sources, as his whole life and attitude only makes sense when looked at from that perspective. In particular he had a young assistant who was not only incompetent but a liar and a thief, yet earned his master's lasting forbearance. According to the author there can only be one explanation for such indulgence.

Eventually Florence became too restricted and restlessly he sought out other patrons heading to Milan and becoming attached to the court of Sforza. In fact he did that already as a thirty year old and would stay on in Milan for almost twenty years, He sold himself as an engineer, in particular a military engineer, and a little bit like Archimedes, he strove to distinguish himself as a master of weapons of mass-destruction, at least according to the standards of the times. He painted of course, but also played the lute competently enough to perform in public, a skill far more socially useful than painting. As to his paintings his were in addition to being exquisite to a degree never before to have been witnessed as well as being innovative and, as already noted, exerting a deep influence on future painters, such as Raphael. It is noteworthy that he has to this day, five hundred years later, no rival. There is to painting an element that is wedded to the individual talent and cannot, as in science, transcend the individual and be absorbed by a wider community. One can speculate as to the nature of Leonardo's individual mastery. One explanation readily presents itself, namely his power of observation, aided by his ready hand. As I have noted elsewhere¹ a drawing is often much more instructive than the ostensibly objective photograph, because it represents an active and inquiring observation, highlighting the crucial elements by being interpreted by a discerning intellect. Clark, somewhat embarrassingly, suggests that Leonardo possessed superhuman sensory capabilities, that he was able to discern such rapid movements in the fluttering of a bird's wing, that only modern slow-motion photography has been able to confirm. If taken literally this is biological nonsense. He contrasts Leonardo's instinctive qualities as a painter with his intellectualism, meaning I assume, his scientific approach. As a painter he was famed for his chiaroscuro, meaning building up volumes by the subtle effects of lightening, in particular dispensing with contours. But what intrigues posterity, as well his contemporaries the most, was his ability to endow human faces with subtle emotions. Clark expresses surprise that somebody who was so estranged from common humanity would possess such intuitive understanding of human emotions. It only goes to show the complexity of the human psyche of a genius.

One remarkable fact about Leonardo is that so many of his major works were done in comparatively late age. 'The Last Supper' was painted in his mid-forties, and the most iconic of all his images - 'Mona Lisa' - when he had turned fifty. He was already in his forties when he decided to teach himself Latin so he among other things could read Archimedes. This shows of course incidentally, that he must have received little formal schooling as a

¹ In 'Karl Popper, falsifieringens profet', CKM Förlag (2014)

young boy. His paintings are few, and as we have already suggested, all more or less of iconic stature, many of them are disfigured by later restorations by far more inept hands. Some of them have been lost altogether and remains only as tantalizing copies. The most famous case being the fresco of 'The Last Supper' which in spite of crude restoration (the original painting faded quickly as Vasari noted already at the end of the 16th century), still is compelling, mostly because of its masterly composition. It engaged its painter deeply and he was reported to be constantly working on it, but sadly his efforts eventually were wasted. To fully appreciate the achievement one needs to see the details of the faces, not just the bodily composition. It has been reported that so lively and engaging were the poses and facial expressions that looking at the painting was tantamount to watching a theatrical performance.

Leonardo would eventually flee Milan due to French military intervention and the ousting of the Sforzas. Leonardo showed no loyalty which may have saved his life as he was able later to have working relations with the new men in power. Eventually he was lured away to France, to Ambois in fact, where his duties, except to provide stimulating conversations, were non-existent. That was, according to the author, a misfortune as it encouraged his habits of procrastination. His tenure in France would not be very long though, ending in his death at age 67 in 1519. A few red-chalked self-portraits survive, and they reveal nothing more exciting than a generic old man in the fashion of a Darwin or other Victorian notable, Clark laments. In fact in old age Leonardo appeared older than he actually was and was thought of well into his seventies, which indicates that even in those ages when longevity was a rare blessing, aging was not that different from what it is today, being biologically determined.

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