

Leonardo  
da Vinci

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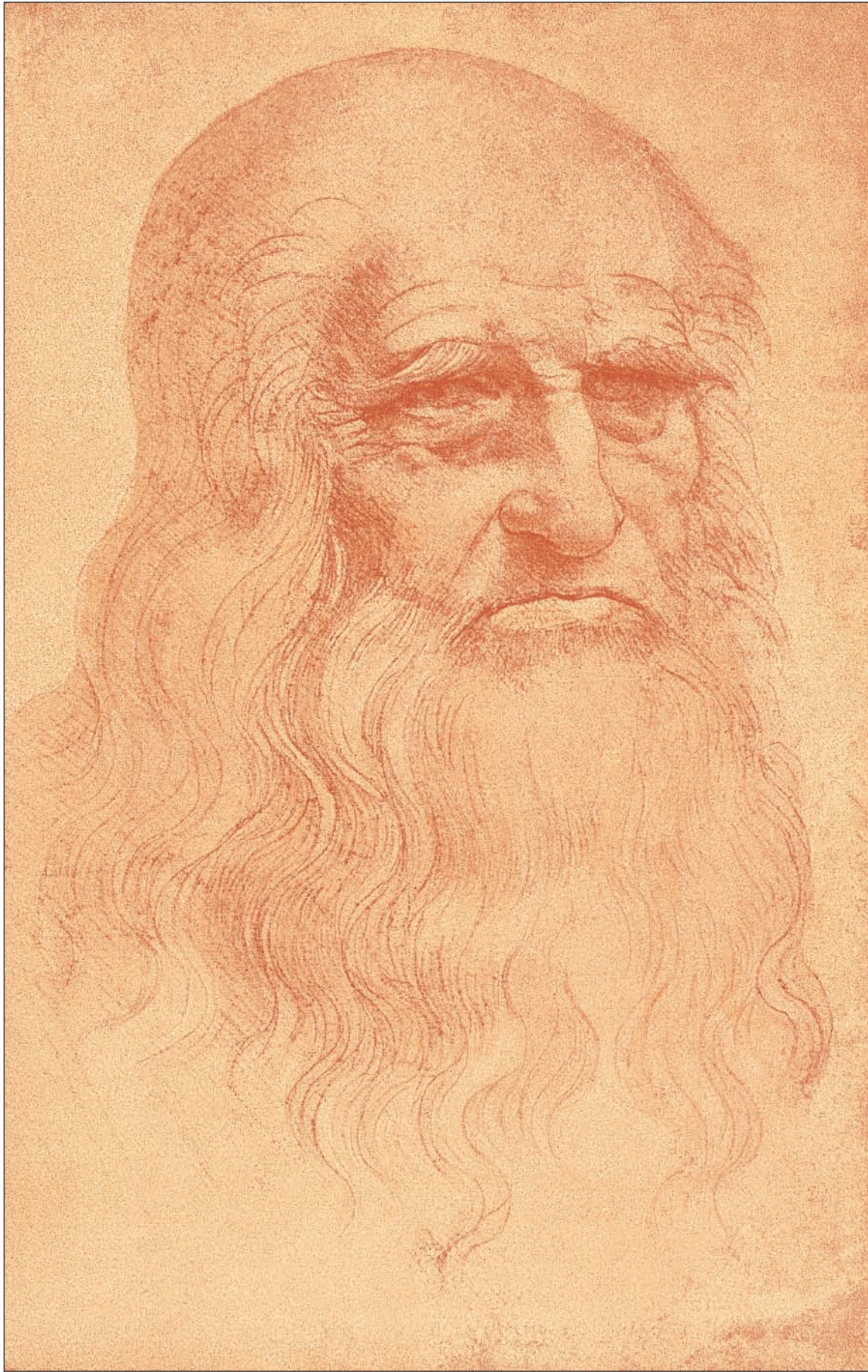
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# PREFACE

There is no name more illustrious in the annals of art and of science than that of Leonardo da Vinci. Yet this pre-eminent genius still lacks a biography that shall make him known in all his infinite variety. The great majority of his drawings has never been reproduced. No critic has even attempted to catalogue and classify these masterpieces of taste and sentiment. It was to this part of my task that I first applied myself. Among other results, I now offer the public the first descriptive and critical catalogue of the incomparable collection of drawings at Windsor Castle, belonging to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II.

Among the many previous volumes dedicated to Leonardo, students will seek in vain for details as to the genesis of his pictures, and the process through which each of them passed from primordial sketch to final touch. Leonardo, as is conclusively shown by my research, achieved perfection only by dint of infinite labour. It was because the groundwork was laid with such minute care, with such a consuming desire for perfection, that the *Virgin of the Rocks* (p. 166), the *Mona Lisa* (see Vol. II, p. 163), and the *St Anne* are so full of life and eloquence.

Above all, a summary and analysis was required of the scientific, literary, and artistic manuscripts, the complete publication of which was first begun in our own generation by students such as Richter, Charles Ravaisson-Mollien, Beltrami, Ludwig, Sabachnikoff and Rouveyre, and the members of the Roman Academy of the "Lincei".

Thanks to a methodical examination of these monographs on the master, I think I have been able to penetrate more profoundly than my predecessors into the inner life of my hero. I may call the special attention of my readers to the chapters dealing with Leonardo's attitude towards the occult sciences, his importance in the field of literature, his religious beliefs and moral principles, his studies of antique models – studies hitherto disputed, as will be seen. I have further endeavoured to reconstitute the society in which the master lived and worked, especially the court of Lodovico il Moro in Milan, that interesting and suggestive centre, to which the supreme evolution of the Italian Renaissance may be referred.

A long course of reading has enabled me to show a new significance in more than one picture and drawing, to point out the true application of more than one manuscript note. I do not, indeed, flatter myself that I have been able to solve all problems. An enterprise such as this to which I have devoted myself demands the collaboration of a whole generation of students. Individual effort could not suffice. At least I may claim to have discussed opinions I cannot share with moderation and with courtesy, and this should give me some title to the indulgence of my readers.

The pleasant duty remains to me of thanking the numerous friends and correspondents who have been good enough to help me in the course of my long and laborious investigations. They are too many to mention here individually, but I have been careful to record my indebtedness to them, as far as possible, in the body of the volume.

EUGÈNE MÜNTZ  
PARIS, October, 1898.

1. *Self Portrait*, c. 1512.  
Red chalk on paper, 33.3 x 21.3 cm.  
Biblioteca Reale, Turin.



# LEONARDO'S CHILDHOOD AND HIS FIRST WORKS

In Leonardo da Vinci we have the perfect embodiment of the modern intellect, the highest expression of the marriage of art and science: the thinker, the poet, the wizard whose fascination is unrivalled. Studying his art, in its incomparable variety, we find in his very caprices, to use Edgar Quinet's happy phrase with a slight modification, "the laws of the Italian Renaissance, and the geometry of universal beauty".

It is true, unhappily, that setting aside his few completed works – the *Virgin of the Rocks*, the *Last Supper* (p. 194-195), the *Saint Anne*, and the *Mona Lisa* – Leonardo's achievements as painter and sculptor are mainly presented to us in marvellous fragments. It is to his drawings we must turn to understand all the tenderness of his heart, all the wealth of his imagination. To his drawings therefore, we must first call attention.

Two periods of human life seem to have specially fixed Leonardo's attention: adolescence and old age; childhood and maturity had less interest for him. He has left us a whole series of adolescent types, some dreamy, some ardent.

In all modern art, I can think of no creations so free, superb, spontaneous, in a word, divine, to oppose to the marvels of antiquity. Thanks to the genius of Leonardo, these figures, winged, diaphanous, yet true in the highest sense, evoke a region of perfection to which it is their mission to transport us. Let us take two heads that make a pair in the Louvre; unless I am mistaken, they illustrate Classic Beauty, and the Beauty of the Renaissance period. The first represents a youth with a profile pure and correct as that of a Greek cameo, his neck bare, his long, artistically curled hair bound with a wreath of laurel. The second has the same type, but it is treated in the Italian manner, with greater vigour and animation; the hair is covered by a small cap, set daintily on the head; about the shoulders there are indications of a doublet, buttoned to the throat; the curls fall in natural, untrained locks. Who cannot see in these two heads the contrast between classic art, an art essentially ideal and devoted to form, and modern art, freer, more spontaneous, more living.

When he depicted maturity, Leonardo displayed vigour, energy, an implacable determination; his ideal was a man like an oak tree. Such is the person in profile in the Royal Library at Windsor, whose massive features are so firmly modelled. This drawing should be compared with the other of the same head, at an earlier age.

Old age in its turn passes before us in all its diverse aspects of majesty or decrepitude. Some faces are reduced to the mere bony substructure; in others, we note the deterioration of the features; the hooked nose, the chin drawn up to the mouth, the relaxed muscles, the bald head. Foremost among these types is the master's self-portrait; a powerful head with piercing eyes under puckered eyelids, a mocking mouth, almost bitter in expression, a delicate, well-proportioned nose, long hair, and a long disordered beard; the whole suggestive of the magus, not to say the magician.

If we turn to his evocations of the feminine ideal, the same freshness and variety delight us here. His women are now candid, now enigmatic, now proud, now tender, their eyes misty with languor, or brilliant with indefinable smiles. Yet, like Donatello, he was one of those exceptionally great artists in whose life the love of woman seems to have played no part. While Eros showered his arrows all around the master in the epicurean world of the Renaissance; while Giorgione and Raphael died victims of passions too fervently reciprocated; while Andrea del Sarto sacrificed his honour for the love of his capricious wife, Lucrezia Fedi; while Michelangelo, the sombre misanthrope, cherished an affection no less ardent than respectful for

2. *The Madonna with a Flower*  
(*The Madonna Benois*), 1475-1478.  
Oil on canvas transferred from wood, 49.5 x 33 cm.  
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



3. Cimabue, *Madonna in Majesty with Eight Angels and Four Prophets*, c. 1280.

Tempera on wood panel,  
385 x 223 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

4. Giotto di Bondone, *The Madonna Enthroned with the Child, Angels and Saints*, 1310.

Tempera on wood panel,  
325 x 204 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.





Vittoria Colonna, Leonardo, in contrast, consecrated himself without reserve to art and science, and soared above all human weaknesses, the delights of the mind sufficing him. He proclaimed it in plain terms: "Fair humanity passes, but art endures" (*Cosa bella mortal passa e non arte*).

No artist was ever so absorbed as he, on the one hand by the search after truth, on the other, by the pursuit of an ideal that should satisfy the exquisite delicacy of his taste. No one ever made fewer sacrifices to perishable emotions. In the five thousand sheets of manuscript he left us, never once does he mention a woman's name, except to note, with the dryness of a professed naturalist, some trait that has struck him in her person: "Giovannina has a fantastic face; she is in the hospital, at Santa Catarina." This is typical of his tantalising brevity.

From the very first, we are struck by the care with which Leonardo chose his models. He was no advocate for the frank acceptance of nature as such, beautiful or ugly, interesting or insignificant. For months together he applied himself to the discovery of some remarkable specimen of humanity. When once he had laid hands on this Phoenix, we know from the portrait of the *Gioconda* with what tenacity he set to work to reproduce it. It is regrettable that he should not have shown the same ardour in the pursuit of feminine types, really beautiful and sympathetic, seductive or radiant, that he showed in that of types of youths and old men, or of types verging on caricature. It would have been so interesting to have had, even in a series of sketches, a whole iconography by his hand, in addition to the three or four masterpieces on which he concentrated his powers; the unknown *Princess of the Ambrosiana*, *Isabella d'Este*, the *Belle Ferronnière*, and the *Gioconda*. How was it that all the great women of the Italian Renaissance did not aspire to be immortalised by that magic brush? Leonardo's subtlety and penetration marked him out as the interpreter *par excellence* of woman; no other could have fixed her features and analysed her character with a like comeliness of delicacy and distinction.

Yet, strange to say, by some curious and violent revulsion, the artist who had celebrated woman in such exquisite transcriptions took pleasure in noting the extremes of deformity in the sex whose most precious apanage is beauty. In a word, the man of science came into conflict with the artist; to types delicious in their youthful freshness, he opposes the heads of shrews and imbeciles, every variety of repulsive distortion. It would almost seem – to borrow an idea from Champfleury – as if he sought to indemnify himself for having idealised so much in his pictures. "The Italian master," adds Champfleury, "has treated womankind more harshly than the professed caricaturists, for most of these, while pursuing man with their sarcasms, seem to protest their love for the beautiful by respecting woman."

As a sculptor, Leonardo distinguished himself by the revival and the recreation – after Verrocchio and after Donatello – of the monumental treatment of the horse.

Painter and sculptor, Leonardo was also a poet, and not among the least of these. He is, indeed, pre-eminently a poet; first of all, in his pictures, which evoke a whole world of delicious impressions; and secondly, in his prose writings, notably in his *Trattato della Pittura*, which has only lately been given to the world in its integrity. When he consented to silence the analytic faculty so strongly developed in him, his imagination took flight with incomparable freedom and exuberance. In default of that professional skill, which degenerates too easily into routine, we find emotion, fancy, wealth, and originality of images – qualities that also count for much. If Leonardo knows nothing of current formulae, of winged and striking words, of the art of condensation, he acts upon us by some indwelling charm, by some magic outburst of genius.

The thinker and the moralist are allied to the poet. Leonardo's aphorisms and maxims form a veritable treasury of Italian wisdom at the time of the Renaissance. They are instinctive with an evangelic gentleness, an infinite sweetness and serenity. At one time, he advises us to neglect studies, the results of which die with us; at another, he declares that he who wishes to become rich in a day, runs the risk

5. Leonardo da Vinci and Andrea del Verrocchio, *The Madonna with the Child and Angels*, c. 1470.  
Tempera on wood panel,  
96.5 x 70.5 cm.  
The National Gallery, London.
6. Jacopo Bellini, *The Madonna of Humility Adored by Leonello d'Este*, c. 1440.  
Oil on wood panel, 60 x 40 cm.  
Musée du Louvre, Paris.
7. *The Madonna of the Carnation*, c. 1470.  
Oil on wood panel, 62 x 47.5 cm.  
Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

of being hanged in a year. The eloquence of certain other thoughts is only equalled by their profundity: "Where there is most feeling, there will also be most suffering", and "Tears come from the heart, not from the brain." It is the physiologist who speaks, but what thinker would not have been proud of this admirable definition?

The man of science, in his turn, demands our homage. It is no longer a secret to anyone that Leonardo was a *savant* of the highest order; that he discovered twenty laws, a single one of which has sufficed for the glory of his successors. What am I saying? He invented the very method of modern science, and his latest biographer, Séailles<sup>1</sup>, has justly shown in him to be the true precursor of Bacon.

The names of certain men of genius, Archimedes, Christopher Columbus, Copernicus, Galileo, Harvey, Pascal, Newton, Lavoisier, and Cuvier are associated with discoveries of greater renown. Nevertheless, is there one who united such a multitude of innate gifts, who brought a curiosity so passionate, an ardour so penetrating to bear on such various branches of knowledge? Or who had such illuminating flashes of genius, and such an intuition of the unknown links connecting things capable of being harmonised? Had his writings been published, they would have advanced the march of science by a whole century. We cannot sufficiently deplore his modesty, or the sort of horror he had of printing. Whereas a scribbler like his friend Fra Luca Pacioli comes before the public with several volumes in fine type, Leonardo, either by pride or timidity, never published a single line.

In this brief sketch, we have some of the traits that made Leonardo the equal of Michelangelo and Raphael, one of the sovereign masters of sentiment, of thought, and of beauty.

It is time to make a methodical analysis of so many marvels – I might say, of so many *tours de force*, were not Leonardo's art so essentially healthy and normal, so profoundly vital.

We will begin by inquiring into the origin and early life of the magician. The painter of the *Last Supper* and the *Gioconda*, the sculptor of the equestrian statue of Francesco Sforza, the scientific genius who forestalled so many of our modern discoveries and inventions, was born in 1452 in the neighbourhood of Empoli, on the right bank of the Arno, between Florence and Pisa. The little town of Vinci, in which he first saw the light, lies hidden away among the multitudinous folds of Monte Albano. On one side, the plain with its river – now almost dry, now rushing in a noisy yellow torrent: on the other, the most broken of landscapes; endless

hillocks scattered over with villas, and here and there at intervals, a more imposing height, whose bare summit is bathed in violet light at sundown.

Leonardo's native country was such then as we see it today; austere in character rather than laughing or exuberant, a rocky territory intersected by interminable walls, over which, in the vicinity of the houses, some straggling branch of rosebush may clamber; the nucleus of the vegetation being vines and olive trees. Here and there, one catches a glimpse of villa, cottage or farm; in the distance, the dwelling has a smiling air, with its yellow walls and green shutters; however, penetrate the interior and







you will find nakedness and poverty. The walls have a simple coating of rough plaster, and mortar or brick for flooring. Very little furniture adorns, and then it is that of the humblest, neither carpets nor wall papers; nothing to give an impression of comfort, not to speak of luxury; finally, no precautions whatever against the cold, which is severe in this part of the country during the long winter months.

On these stern heights a race has grown up, frugal, industrious, alert, untouched by the nonchalance of the Roman, by the mysticism of the Umbrian, or the nervous excitability of the Neapolitan. The majority of the natives are employed in agricultural pursuits, the few artisans being merely for local use. As for the more ambitious spirits, for whom the horizon of their villages is too restricted, it is to Florence, to Pisa, or to Siena they go to seek their fortunes.

Certain modern biographers tell us of the castle in which Leonardo first saw the light; over and above this, they conjure up for us a tutor attached to the family, a library wherein the child first found food for his curiosity, and much besides. All this – let it be said at once – is legend and not history.

There was, it is true, a castle at Vinci, but it was a fortress, a stronghold held by Florence. As to Leonardo's parents, they can only have occupied a house, and a very modest one at that, nor do we even know for certain if this house was situated within the walls of Vinci itself, or a little beyond it, in the village of Anchiano. The domestic service consisted of one *fante*, that is, a woman servant, at a wage of eight florins per annum.

If there ever was a family to whom the culture of the arts was foreign, it was that of Leonardo. Of five forbears of the painter on his father's side, four had filled the position of notary, from which these worthy officials derived their title of "Ser" corresponding to the French "Maitre": these were the father of the artist, his grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather. We need not be surprised to find his independent spirit *par excellence* developing in the midst of musty law books. The Italian notary in no way resembled the pompous scrivener of modern playwrights. In the thirteenth century, Brunette Latini, Dante's master, was essentially wanting in the pedantic gravity customarily associated with his profession. In the following century, another notary, Ser Lappo Mazzei de Prato, made himself famous by his letters, rich in traits of contemporary manners, and written in the purest Tuscan. Finally, in the fifteenth century, the notary of Nantiporta created a chronicle, occasionally far from edifying, of the Roman court. Here too, we may recall the fact that Brunellesco and Masaccio were the sons of notaries.

One point of capital interest in retracing the origin of Leonardo and his family connections is the strange freak of fate in bringing forth this artistic phenomenon from the union of a notary and a peasant girl, and in the midst of the most commonplace and practical surroundings. It is very well in speaking of



8. Andrea Mantegna, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1500-1505.  
Tempera on canvas, 228 x 175 cm.  
Church of Sant'Andrea, Mantua.
9. Piero della Francesca, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1440-1445.  
Tempera on wood panel,  
167 x 116 cm.  
The National Gallery, London.
10. Workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, *Study of the Angel of The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1470.  
Metalpoint and ochre,  
23 x 17 cm.  
Biblioteca Reale, Turin.
11. Leonardo da Vinci and Andrea del Verrocchio, *The Baptism of Christ* (detail), 1470-1476.  
Oil and tempera on wood panel,  
177 x 151 cm.  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Raphael, for instance, to talk of race selection, of hereditary predisposition, of educational incitements. The truth is, that with the vast majority of our famous artists the aptitudes and special faculties of the parents count for nothing, and that the personal vocation, the mysterious gift, is everything. Oh, vain theories of Darwin and of Lombroso, does not the unaccountable apparition of great talents and genius perpetually set your theories at naught? Just as nothing in the profession of Leonardo's forefathers gave

any promise of developing an artistic vocation, so the nephew and grandnephews of the great man sank to simple tillers of the soil. Thus does nature mock our speculations! Could the disciples of Darwin carry out their scheme of crossbreeding on the human species, there is every chance that the result would be a race of monsters rather than of superior beings.

However, if it were not in the power of Leonardo's parents to transmit genius to him, they at least were able to provide him with robust health and a generous heart.

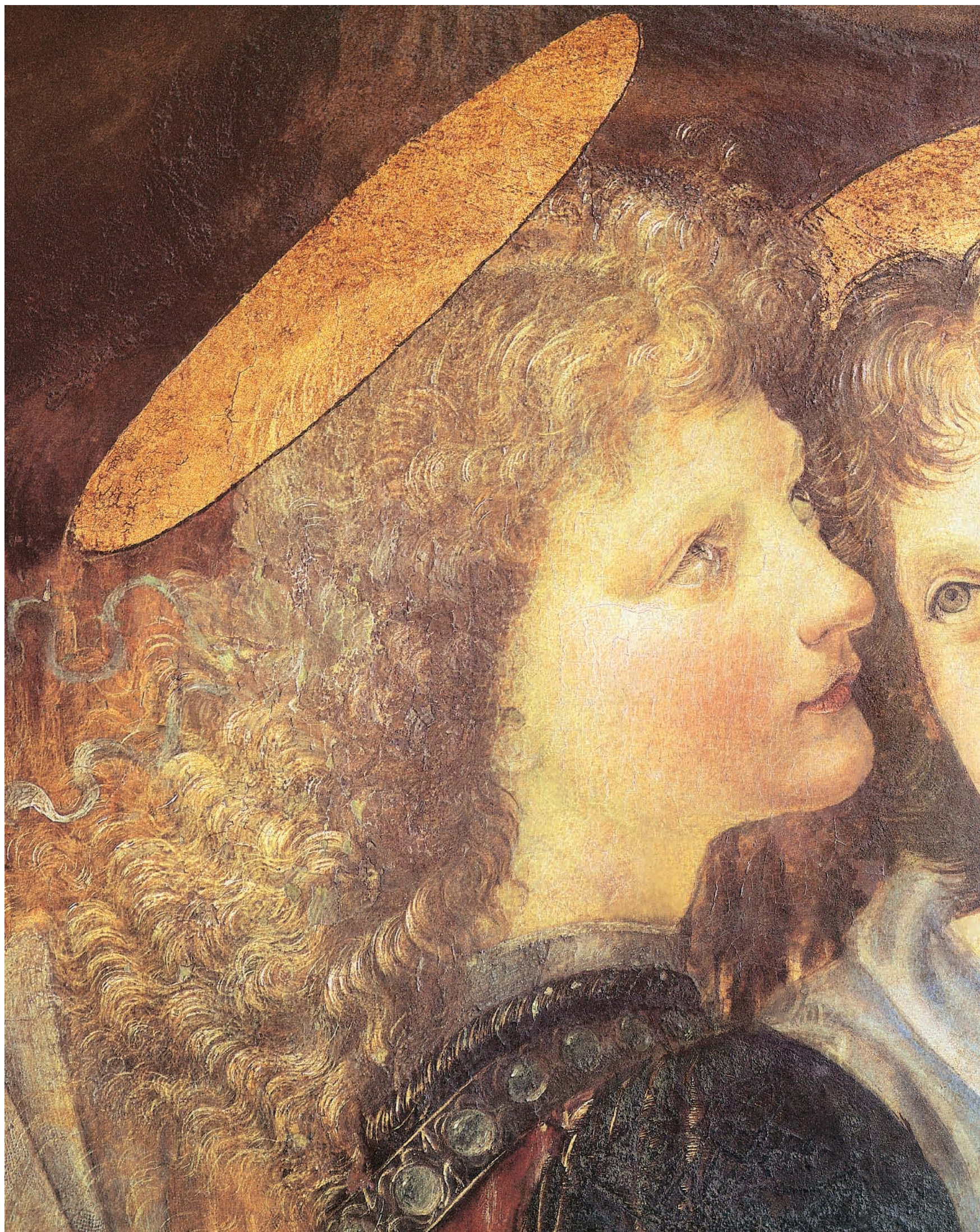
As a child, Leonardo must have known his paternal grandfather, Antonio di Ser Piero, who was eighty-four years of age when the boy was five; also his grandmother, who was twenty-one years younger than her husband. Further details as to these two are wanting, and I confess frankly that I shall not attempt to pierce the obscurity that surrounds them. Nevertheless, it would be inexcusable of me not to employ every means in my power to follow up at least some characteristic traits of their son, the father of Leonardo.

Ser Piero was twenty-two or twenty-three years of age at the time of Leonardo's birth. He was – and, despite their apparent dryness, existing documents testify to this – an active, intelligent, and enterprising man, the veritable builder-up of the family fortunes. Starting from the smallest beginnings, he rapidly extended his practice and acquired piece after piece of landed property; in short, from a poor village notary he rose to be a wealthy and much respected person. In 1498, for instance, we find him owner of several houses and various pieces of land. Judging by the brilliant impulse he gave to his fortunes, by his four marriages, preceded by an irregular connection, and also by his

numerous progeny, his was assuredly of a vivid and exuberant nature, one of those patriarchal figures Benozzo Gozzoli painted with so much spirit on the walls of the Campo I Santo at Pisa.

While yet very young, Ser Piero formed a connection with she who, though never his wife, became the mother of his eldest son. This was a certain Catarina, in all probability a simple peasant girl of Vinci or the neighbourhood. (An anonymous writer of the sixteenth century affirms, nevertheless, that Leonardo was "*per madre nato di bon sangue.*") The liaison was of short duration. Ser Piero married in the year of Leonardo's birth, while Catarina, in her turn, married a man of her own standing, who answered to the not very euphonious name of Chartabriga or Accartabriga di Piero del Vaccha, a







peasant too, most likely – indeed, what was there to turn to in Vinci for a living, except the soil! Contrary to modern custom and the civil code, the father undertook the rearing of the child.

In the beginning, Leonardo's position was, relatively speaking, enviable, his first two stepmothers having no children – a circumstance which has not been taken into account hitherto, and which goes far to explain how they came to adopt the little intruder: he usurped no one's birthright.

Leonardo was twenty-three when his father – who made up so well for lost time afterwards – was still waiting for legitimate offspring. With the arrival of the first brother, however, the young man's happiness fled, and there was no more peace for him under his father's roof. He realised that nothing remained for him but to seek his fortune elsewhere, and did not wait to be told twice. From this moment, too, his name vanishes from the family list in the official records.

On more than one occasion, Leonardo mentions his parents, notably his father, whom he designates by his title of "Ser" Piero, but without one word by which one may judge of his feelings towards them. One might be tempted to tax him with want of heart, if such an absence of sentiment were not a characteristic feature of the times. Both parents and children made a virtue of repressing their emotions, guarding themselves especially against the slightest manifestation of sentimentality. No period ever exhibited a more marked aversion for the emotional or the pathetic. Only here and there, in letters – for example, in the admirable letters of a Florentine patrician, Alessandra Strozzi, mother of the famous banker – escapes some irrepressible cry of the heart.

This notwithstanding, Leonardo's impassibility exceeds all bounds, and constitutes a veritable psychological problem. The master registers without one word of regret, of anger, or of emotion, the petty thefts of his pupil, the fall of his patron, Lodovico il Moro, and the death of his father.

Yet we know what a wealth of kindness and affection was stored up in him; how he was indulgent, even to weakness, towards his servants, deferred to their caprices, tended them in sickness, and provided marriage portions for their sisters.

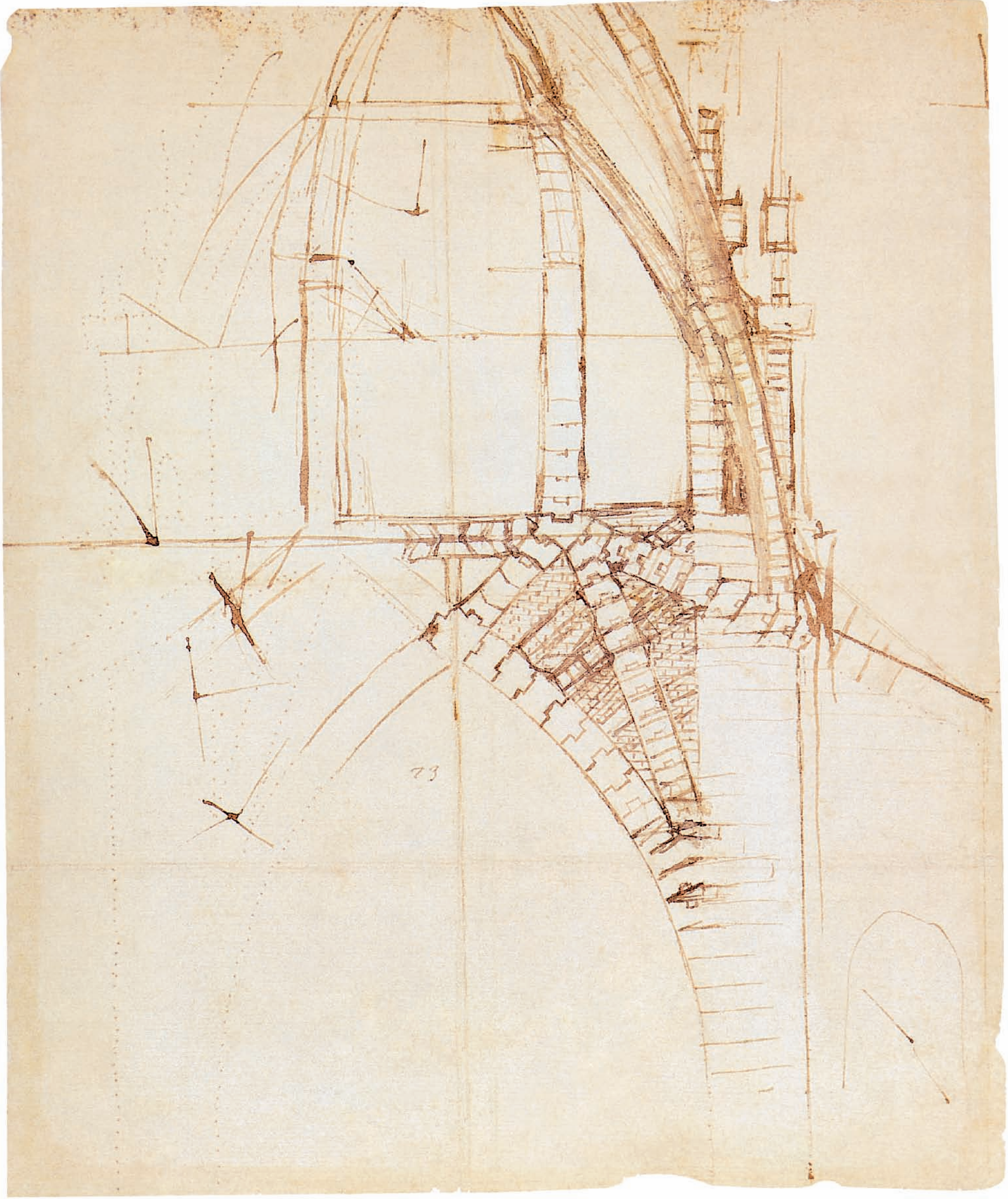
Let us forthwith conclude the story of Leonardo's connection with his natural family, which was very far from being his adoptive one. Ser Piero died 9 July 1504, at the age of seventy-seven, and not eighty, as Leonardo reports when registering his death in laconic terms. Of his four stepmothers, the last only, Lucrezia, who was still alive in 1520, is mentioned in terms of praise by a poet-friend of Leonardo, Bellincioni. As to the nine sons and two daughters, all the issue of the two last marriages of his father, they seem to have been the adversaries rather than the friends of their natural brother. After the death of their uncle in 1507, more especially, they raised financial difficulties.

By his will of 12 August 1504, Francesco da Vinci had left a few acres to Leonardo – hence a lawsuit. Later, however, reconciliation was effected. In 1513, during Leonardo's residence in Rome, one of his sisters-in-law charged her husband to remember her to the artist, then at the height of his glory. In his will, Leonardo left his brothers, in token of his regard, the 400 florins he had deposited at the Hospital of Santa Maria Novella in Florence.

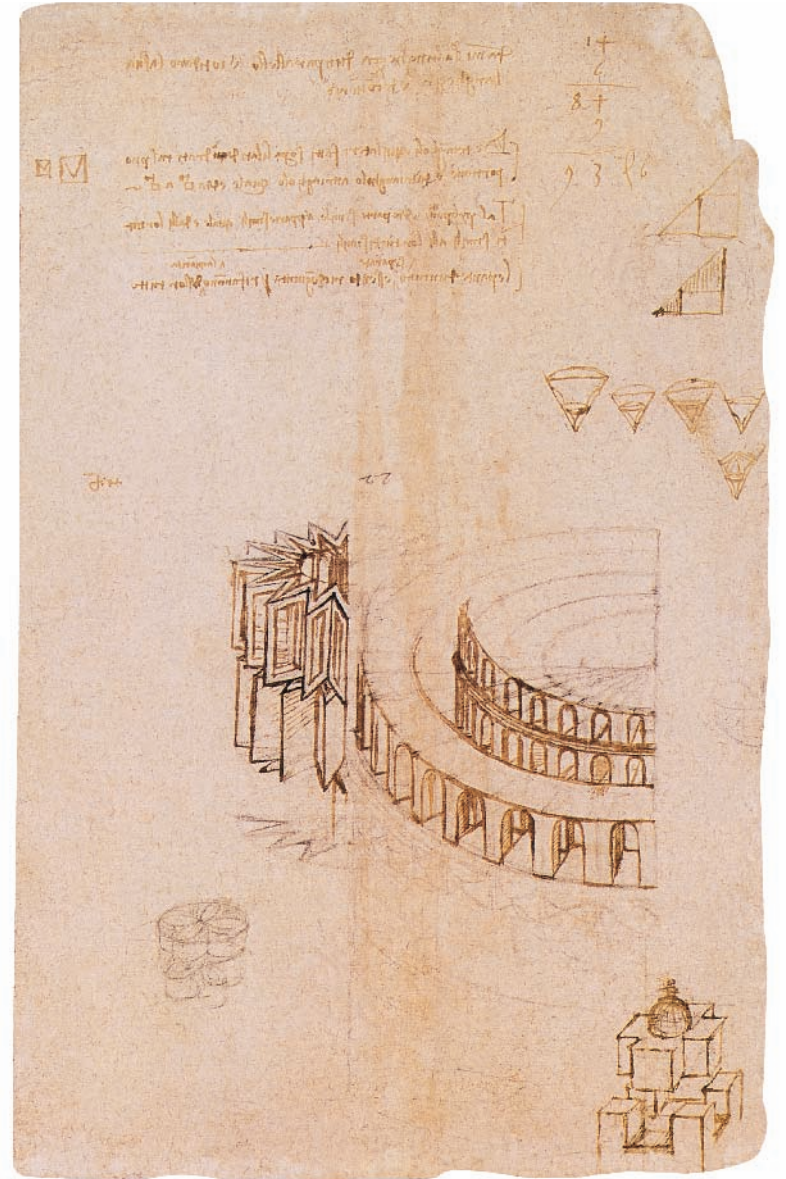
Finally, his beloved disciple, Melzi, in his letter to Leonardo's brothers informing them of the master's death, adds that he has bequeathed them his little property at Fiesole. The will, however, is silent on this point. Besides all this, one of his youthful productions, the cartoon of *Adam and Eve*, remained in the possession of one of his kin (Vasari says his uncle), who afterwards presented it to Ottavio de' Medici.

No other member of the da Vinci family made his mark in history, with the exception of a nephew of Leonardo, Pierino, an able sculptor, who died in Pisa towards the middle of the sixteenth century at the early age of thirty-three. The sole trait that the Vinci seem to have inherited from their common ancestor is a rare vitality. Ser Piero's stock has survived even to our own times.

12. Leonardo da Vinci and Andrea del Verrocchio, *The Baptism of Christ*, 1470-1476.  
Oil and tempera on wood panel, 177 x 151 cm.  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



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In 1869, Uzielli, a most lucky investigator, discovered a peasant named Tommaso Vinci, near Montespertoli, at a place called Bottinaccio. After due verification, this peasant who had family papers in his possession and who, like his ancestor, Ser Piero, was blessed with numerous progeny, was found to be a descendant of Domenico, one of Leonardo's brothers. A pathetic touch in a family so cruelly fallen from its high estate is the fact that Tommaso da Vinci gave his eldest son the glorious name of Leonardo.

Nothing can equal the vital force of Italian families. That of Michelangelo still exists, like that of Leonardo. But how sadly fallen! When on the occasion of the centenary festivals in 1875, any possible remaining members of the Buonarroti family were searched for, it came to light that the head of the family, Count Buonarroti, had been condemned to the galleys for forgery; another Buonarroti was a cabdriver in Siena, and yet another a common soldier. Let us hope that in honour of his glorious ancestor he advanced to the rank of general! If the latest scions of Leonardo's house do not occupy a brilliant position, at least there is no stain upon the honour of their name.

Having acquainted ourselves with the family of Leonardo da Vinci, it is time to analyse the qualities of this child of genius, this splendidly endowed nature, this accomplished cavalier, this Proteus, Hermes, Prometheus; appellations which recur every moment under the pens of his dazzled contemporaries. "We see how Providence," exclaims one of these, "rains down the most precious gifts on certain men, often

13. *Project for the Tiburio, Duomo of Milan, c. 1450-1500.*  
Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.
14. *Studies of Churches with Central Nave Plans, 1485-1490.*  
Pen and ink, 23.3 x 16.2 cm.  
Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Paris.
15. *Study of Antiques, Arenas and Churches with Nave Plans.*  
Pen and ink.  
Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.

“with regularity, sometimes in profusion. We see it combine unstintingly in the same being beauty, grace, talent, bringing each of these qualities to such perfection that whichever way the privileged one turns, his every action is divine, and, excelling those of all other men, his qualities appear what, in reality, they are: accorded by God, and not acquired by human industry.” Thus it was with Leonardo da Vinci, in whom were united physical beauty beyond all praise, and infinite grace in all his actions; as for his talent, it was such that, no matter what difficulty presented itself, he solved it without effort. In him dexterity was allied to exceeding great strength; his spirit and his courage showed something kingly and magnanimous.

Finally, his reputation assumed such dimensions that, widespread as it was during his lifetime, it extended still further after his death. Vasari, to whom we owe this eloquent appreciation, concludes

with a phrase untranslatable in its power of rendering the majesty of the person described: “*Lo splendor dell’ aria sua, che bellissimo era, rissereneva ogni animo mesto.*” (“The splendour of his aspect, which was beautiful beyond measure, rejoiced the most sorrowful souls.”)

Leonardo was gifted by nature with most unusual muscular strength: he could twist the clapper of a bell or a horse shoe as if it were made of lead. A species of infirmity, however, was mingled with this extraordinary aptitude: the artist was left-handed – his biographers assert this formally – and in his old age, paralysis finally deprived him of the use of his right hand.

The Renaissance had already produced one of these exceptional organisms, combining the rarest intellectual aptitudes with every physical perfection, beauty, dexterity, and strength. At once mathematician, poet, musician, philosopher, architect, sculptor, an ardent disciple of the ancients, and a daring innovator, Leone Battista Alberti, the great Florentine thinker and artist, excelled in all physical exercises.

The fieriest horses trembled before him; he could leap over the shoulders of a grown man with his feet touching each other; in the cathedral at Florence he would throw a coin into the air with such force that it was heard to ring against the vaulted roof of the gigantic edifice. The temple of St Francis at Rimini, the Rucellai palace in Florence, the invention of the *camera lucida*, the earliest

use of free verse in the Italian language, the reorganisation of the Italian theatre, treatises on painting, on sculpture, and many other works of the highest merit – such are Alberti’s titles to the admiration and oration of posterity. The Renaissance, on approaching maturity, was to endow another son of Florence with yet greater power, a still wider range. Compared with Leonardo how pedantic, how narrow, nay, how timorous Alberti appears!

These faculties of the mind in no way prejudiced the qualities of the heart. Like Raphael, Leonardo was distinguished for his infinite kindness, like him he lavished interest and affection even upon dumb animals. Leonardo, Vasari tells us, had so much charm of manner and conversation that he won all hearts. Though, in a certain sense, he had nothing of his own and worked little, he always found means to keep servants and horses, the latter of which he was very fond, as indeed of all animals; he reared and trained them with as much love as patience. Often, passing the places where they sold birds, he would buy some, and taking them out of their cages with his own hand, restore them to liberty. A



16. *Duomo of Florence*, 1418-1436.  
Florence.

17. *Santa Maria della Consolazione*,  
after a project of Bramante, 1508.  
Todi.





contemporary of Leonardo, Andrea Corsali, writes from India in 1515 to Giuliano de' Medici, that like "*il nostro Leonardo da Vinci*" the inhabitants of these regions permit no harm to be done to any living creature.<sup>2</sup> This longing for affection, this liberality, this habit of looking upon their pupils as their family, are traits which the two great painters have in common, but are the very traits that distinguish them from Michelangelo, the misanthropic, solitary artist, the sworn foe of feasting and pleasure. In his manner of shaping his career, however, Raphael approaches far nearer to Michelangelo than to Leonardo, who was proverbially easy-going and carefree. Raphael, on the contrary, prepared his future with extreme care; not only gifted but industrious, he occupied himself early in the foundation of his fortune; whereas Leonardo lived from hand to mouth, and subordinated his own interests to the exigencies of science.

From the very beginning – and on this point we do not hesitate to accept Vasari's testimony – the child showed an immoderate, at times even extravagant, thirst for knowledge of every description; he would have made extraordinary progress, had it not been for his marked instability of purpose. He threw himself ardently into the study of one science after another, went at a bound to the very root of questions, but abandoned work as readily as he had begun it. During the few months he devoted to arithmetic, or rather to mathematics, he acquired such knowledge of the subject that he nonplussed his master every moment, and put him to the blush. Music had no less attraction for him; he excelled particularly on the lute, the instrument he used later for the accompaniment of the songs he improvised. In short, like another Faust, he desired to traverse the vast cycle of human knowledge and, not content



to have assimilated the discoveries of his contemporaries, to address himself directly to nature in order to extend the field of science.

We have now pointed out the rare capacities of the young genius, the variety of his tastes and acquirements; his pre-eminence in all bodily exercises and all intellectual contests; it is time to consider the use he made of such exceptional gifts. Despite his precocious versatility, one ruling faculty soon showed itself conspicuously in him, and that was a strong, an irresistible vocation for the arts of design. In studying his first original productions, we discover that, to a far greater degree than Raphael, Leonardo was a prodigy. The latest research has proven how slow and toilsome was the development of the artist of Urbino, through what arduous labour he had to pass before he could give free play to his originality. There was nothing of this with Leonardo. From the first, he declares himself with admirable authority and originality. Not that he was a facile worker – no artist produced more slowly – but from the very outset, his vision was so personal, that from being the pupil of his masters, he became their initiator.

Leonardo's father seems to have resided more often in Florence than in Vinci, and it was undoubtedly in the capital of Tuscany, and not in the obscure little town of Vinci, that the brilliant faculties of the child unfolded. The site of the house occupied by the family has recently been determined; it stood in the *Piazza* in San Firenze, on the spot where the Gondi palace now stands, and disappeared towards the end of the fifteenth century when Giuliano Gondi pulled it down to make room for the palace to which he gave his name.

18. School of Piero della Francesca (Laurana or Giuliano da Sangallo?), *Ideal City*, c. 1460. Oil on wood panel, 60 x 200 cm. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.

Questo è primo ponte che si fa  
Conduca per la bottega a l'alto con a l'ho ponte a l'ho  
di 12 incise

