

On Representing da Vinci in Popular Film

Nate Siegel

Introduction:

When one thinks of the Renaissance, one of the first artists that come to mind is Leonardo da Vinci, and for good reasons. The embodiment of the “Renaissance man,” da Vinci was an incredibly skilled painter, sculptor, and engineer. He is also renowned for his notebooks, in which he made great strides in his studies of anatomy and the human body. Although he lived many years ago, his legacy lives on through the multiple representations of him in film today. Depictions of da Vinci in popular film range from dramatic interpretations that chronicle his life, to more elaborate discussions of his inventions and his notebooks. Although both *Inside the Mind of Leonardo* and *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci* can deceive viewers into believing the information presented is not factually correct, the facts from both films are correct in relation to Charles Nicholl’s text *Leonardo da Vinci: Flights of the Mind* and Giorgio Vasari’s writings about da Vinci in his work *The Lives of the Artist*. Since both films are intended to be viewed by the general public rather than an academic audience, it is important that viewers receive the same information, regardless of the environment the film would be viewed in.

Both films offer insight into da Vinci’s life and works in drastically different ways. Since viewers’ taste changed drastically over the years between two films came out, the pacing of the two films engage the viewer’s attention differently. *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci* was intended to be viewed episodically; the Italian-produced miniseries was aired in the United States on CBS over the course of five weeks in 1971. The information is relayed using dramatic interpretations of the events of da Vinci’s life. Since the runtime of the series is longer than four hours, many details of his life are presented. Facts and specific details such as dates are added by a narrator who intervenes either before or after each scene. For example, while Leonardo is a child, he is shown spending a lot of time with his uncle, who introduces him to anatomy. This gives the viewer an origin for one of many of da Vinci’s passions, something *Inside the Mind of Leonardo* does not. Although it would seem that *Inside the Mind* is not as accurate in terms of details, the movie does not contain any information that is falsified or exaggerated.

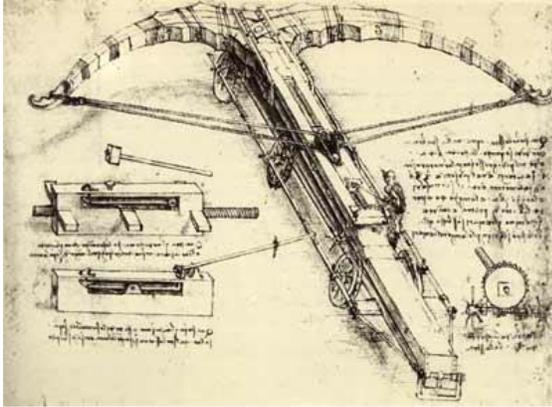


Fig. 1: Leonardo da Vinci, *Siege weapon*. Sketch. Personal notebook.

Inside the Mind of Leonardo offers smaller insight on many of the details in da Vinci's life, but elaborates further on the impact he had as an engineer. The 2013 made-for-television film translates many of the sketches drawn in da Vinci's notebooks into three-dimensional models, including weaponry and flight concepts, to show how they would have been used had the inventions been built. An example from the film is what is referred to as the "siege weapon," a giant crossbow-shaped weapon that would have been used to destroy otherwise fortified walls (fig. 1). The film presents its information in a less dramatic fashion. Interviews with experts on da Vinci help guide the viewer into more in-depth discussions about the topics presented. The film also pays little tribute to many of his important works, such as the *Mona Lisa*, which only has a small mention at the end, as the painting is the result of the many new ideas da Vinci contributed to the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci is played by Peter Capaldi, in short monologues spread throughout the movie. The monologues are taken directly from da Vinci's notebooks, but often focus on small details, or facts that are not relevant to the rest of his research. One such monologue features Capaldi reading off a grocery list written by da Vinci. Since the intended audience of this film is much broader than an academic audience, such passages may have been included to entertain the viewer. These monologues are performed in a room that does not reflect the time in which da Vinci was alive; the room is furnished with many file cabinets, desk lamps, and other modern furniture. Capaldi's dress is also more contemporary than what da Vinci would have worn. The addition of this may confuse the viewer as to how accurate the monologues are. Such inclusions may also lead the viewer to question the validity of the statements made throughout the rest of the film.

With dramatic interpretations aside, the knowledge one can gain from *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci* is equal to that of a more scholarly source. Although the series is intended for a broader audience than those in an academic setting, the events told are truthful to how they actually happened. For instance, the documentary tackles the accusations of da Vinci sodomizing a young boy. Charles Nicholl writes a similar account in his book *Leonardo da Vinci: Flights of the Mind*. He writes that this incident may hint towards da Vinci's homosexuality, something that *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci* does not bring up. *Inside the Mind of Leonardo* does allude to this, but only briefly, and does not talk about the impact that the accusations had on homosexuality in Florence in the 1470s as Nicholl did.

The sources mentioned in *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci* include da Vinci's own notebooks and drawings, in addition to Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*. However, the narrator does mention that the details of Vasari's account may not be entirely factual. Vasari writes that

da Vinci had died in the arms of the king. Considering the lack of primary sources from the time Leonardo da Vinci was alive, readers have no choice but to assume that Vasari is the most accurate source of information. The narrator states that, in the fifty years that Leonardo had passed since Vasari wrote about him, he had already achieved much fame. Vasari's writings, he concludes, are purely fictitious; "some myths die hard," he says. The miniseries offers no further explanation as to how this was determined, or why it was necessary to discredit one of the film's own sources. Due to the intended audience of this film, the inclusion of this might lead the viewer to discredit the film's reliability in terms of historical accuracy. However, given the acknowledged reputation Vasari has received, the viewer can trust the statements made by him, which does not invalidate the statements the series makes based on his writings.



Fig. 2: Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*. ca. 1503-1575. Oil on canvas. 77 cm × 53 cm. Louvre. Paris, France

Discussion of *Mona Lisa*:

Although both movies discuss roughly the same works, the attention given differs greatly between the two. The *Mona Lisa* (fig. 2), for example, is talked about in two distinct ways. *Inside the Mind of Leonardo* places its discussion of the painting at the very end of the movie, to give the viewer a sense of what progress had been made throughout da Vinci's life, and how that all combined into one painting. Many points the film makes are about more popular aspects of the work, such as the figure's mysterious smile, and the vast geographical landscape behind her. The narrator tells us that the model used for the *Mona Lisa* may have been a merchant's wife, but leaves out details that Nicholl wrote about in *Flights of the Mind*. Nicholl wrote that the figure is the wife of Francesco del Giocondo.¹ Vasari also mentions the name of the figure in the portrait, but whether or not that account is accurate is questioned by Nicholl, as well as *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci*. The inclusion of such questioning may have a negative impact on the viewer, leading one to question the validity of the statements made in *The Life of Leonardo*.

¹ Charles Nicholl, *Leonardo da Vinci: Flights of the Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 361.

The Life of Leonardo has a broader discussion of the piece and its biographical nature. The narrator in this movie suggests that the model used for the *Mona Lisa* may not be the most important influence for how the figure was rendered. Rather, according to the narrator, it could have been possible for another woman to pose. The film suggests that da Vinci may have originally wanted the painting to be a self portrait of his mind and soul. By using a woman to represent himself, he was able to paint a mask onto this figure that more accurately represents his soul and his passions. The background is of the Lombardy countryside, which is more representative of Milan than of Florence, where the model is supposedly from. This aspect, the miniseries suggests, creates a more personalized image than just a portrait of a merchant's wife. Moreover, Vasari writes about the process of painting the *Mona Lisa* more than any other work. He writes that da Vinci brought musicians and clowns to entertain Giocondo's wife while he painted, so that any melancholy thought she may have been vanquished.² Vasari also mentions the allusive smile on the figure's face, noting that the smile is so pleasing to the eye, it is more divine than human. The piece is so beautiful that, according to Vasari, it will "cause every great artist to tremble and fear, whoever he might be".³ This corroboration informs the viewer of the accuracy of both accounts.



Fig. 3: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*. 1494-1499. Mural. 460 cm × 880 cm. Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

Discussion of *The Last Supper*:

The Last Supper (fig. 3) is another famous painting by da Vinci that both films discuss. In *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci*, the narrator briefly mentions some of the history that was involved with the work. He mentions, for instance, that monks removed a portion of the piece in 1652 to install a door. In the early 19th century, Napoleon used the room containing *The Last Supper* as a horse stable. These events are corroborated by Nicholl, where he also writes of the piece almost being destroyed by the Allied forces in 1943; "it is a miracle that it has survived at all."⁴ *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci* also considers this piece to be one of the wonders of the world, given its history. The can then rest assured that the information from *The Life of Leonardo* is accurate.

Inside the Mind of Leonardo focuses more on the pictorial qualities of the work rather than its history. The film introduces the piece by telling the audience it was commissioned by the Duke of Milan, something *The Life of Leonardo* had not mentioned. The tapestries on the walls

² Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists* (New York: Oxford, 1991), 294.

³ Vasari, *Lives*, 294.

⁴ Nicholl, *Flights of the Mind*, 302.

of the room depicted in the painting are also analyzed in the film. The film suggests the piece emphasises proportions, according to an interview the movie conducted with Professor Martin Kemp. Kemp claims that the proportions of the tapestry are related to one another. The first set has a ratio of 1/1, followed subsequently by a tapestry that is one half that width, followed by one that is one third the original width, and finally a fourth tapestry that is only a quarter of the width of the first tapestry. There is also a heightened sense of color, linear perspective, and atmospheric distance that give the piece more naturalism. He claims that the painting was considered so lifelike, the monks felt as though they were actually dining with Christ.

In Vasari's discussion of the piece, he refers to it as a "confused blur" due to the condition it was in when he first wrote about it. Vasari writes that this piece, too, was unfinished for quite some time. Accordingly, da Vinci was hesitant to render the face of Christ, since he did not believe he could find a model on Earth that would match the celestial divinity the figure deserves.⁵ He places the majority of the emphasis on the gestures of the figures, which was much celebrated for giving the work a sense of realism that had not been achieved in many paintings previous to *The Last Supper*.⁶ The facial expressions made by the figures express a multitude of emotions, says Vasari, ranging from love, to fear and sorrow. In addition, he acknowledges the contrast between the different figures and da Vinci's representation of the Judas figure, who displays stubbornness, treachery, and hatred.⁷ The movie *Inside the Mind of Leonardo* also discusses the importance of the gestures in the painting. The event depicted in the piece is the moment Christ tells his disciples that one of them will betray him, and the gestures the characters make alone are enough to tell a narrative of conflict without having to have knowledge about biblical stories. This helps a casual viewer in understanding the significance of the painting.

Conclusion:

Despite both films' historical accuracy, most people today are not likely to see films like *The Life of Leonardo*. Viewers' taste has changed greatly in the 40 years since the miniseries aired. People now are more accustomed to quick-paced films like *Inside the Mind of Leonardo*, and as such, many people may not watch *The Life of Leonardo* for that reason. Likewise, people who watch *Inside the Mind* may feel the movie does not elaborate on many of its subjects, due to its short runtime and the large number of topics it includes. Both films offer insight in an entertaining fashion, pleasing anyone who wants to learn more about Leonardo da Vinci, or anyone who wants to just watch a movie. Regardless, the information one can receive from the films is equal to that of a more academic source.

⁵ Vasari, *Lives*, 289

⁶ Vasari, *Lives*, 289-290.

⁷ Vasari, *Lives*, 290.

Works Cited

Castellani, Renato dir. *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci*. RAI, 1971.

This 1971 miniseries focuses on the biographical aspect of da Vinci's life. The film discusses details such as when Leonardo became interested in anatomy, and the process that went into creating certain works.

da Vinci, Leonardo. *Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks*. ca. 1478-1519

Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks are the principles of anatomy and invention. Things discussed in his notebooks include unrivaled information about the how the human body works, as well as plans for weapons and urban developments such as advanced roadways.

Jones, Julian dir. *Inside the Mind of Leonardo*. Submarine Deluxe, 2013.

The 2013 movie focuses on the notebooks and other writings of da Vinci. The film also elaborates on practical aspects of many models of structures and weapons he designed.

Nicholl, Charles. 2004. *Leonardo da Vinci: Flights of the Mind*. New York.

Nicholl's book gives great insight into many pieces by da Vinci, including formal analyses. Nicholl also gives the reader interpretations of events, and the significance and impact it had in society.

Vasari, Giorgio. 1991. *The Lives of the Artists*. New York.

Originally published in 1550, Vasari's *Lives* gives the reader accounts of many artists from Vasari, who had access to many of the works, and more first-hand accounts of artists. His discussion of da Vinci gives the reader insight on not only da Vinci's process, but also the intentions behind many of his works.