



LEONARDO DA VINCI



DIANE STANLEY



In the spring of 1452 Antonio da Vinci, aged eighty, took out a leather-bound volume. In it were recorded all the important events in the life of his family, going back to his grandfather's time. Antonio opened the book to the last page. He had not written anything in it for sixteen years, and he saw that there was room at the bottom for only one more entry. This is what he wrote:

1452

*There was born to me a grandson, son of Ser Piero my son, on 15 April, a Saturday,
at the third hour of the night. He bears the name Leonardo.*

Antonio then wrote about the priest who had baptized the child and all the witnesses present for the occasion. But there was one person he did not mention—Leonardo's mother.

Her name was Caterina, and she was a peasant. Though Ser Piero may have been very fond of Caterina, he did not marry her. After all, he was an important man, a leading citizen of Vinci. Like his grandfather and great-grandfather before him, he had studied at the university to become a notary, someone who prepared contracts and other legal documents. He expected to marry a young woman with money who came from a good family, someone just like him. And indeed, a few months later Ser Piero married just such a girl, the sixteen-year-old Albiera di Giovanni Amadori.

Leonardo probably lived with his mother at first. But a couple of years later Caterina also got married—to a man of her class who was known by the nickname the Quarreler. Perhaps this is when Leonardo moved in with his father.



We know that by the time he was five, Leonardo was living in his grandfather's house near the village of Vinci, twenty miles from Florence. Whether he was happy there is another question. His father, stern and businesslike, saved his affection for his young wife. And Albiera, who must have looked after Leonardo, died childless when he was only twelve. A year later the practical Ser Piero replaced her with a new wife who was not much older than Leonardo. She too would die—only eight years later—without children.

But fortunately for Leonardo, he found a loving friend in his young uncle Francesco. Antonio described Francesco as "my son who lives at home and does nothing." In fact, he ran the farm, where wheat and buckwheat grew; the vineyards, where grapes were cultivated to make wine; and the olive groves. He was a gentle and independent man, not ambitious like his older brother. It was probably with Francesco that Leonardo explored the countryside and began his lifelong fascination with nature.

Leonardo had a country childhood and a country education. What little schooling he got probably came from the parish priest and was limited to reading, writing, and simple arithmetic. He later described himself as an *omo senza lettere*, a "man without education." Of course, if he had been legitimate—born to married parents—he would have been taught Latin and geometry and sent to the University of Florence. There he would probably have studied to be a notary, like his father. But because he was illegitimate, the guild of magistrates and notaries would not accept him. For the same reason he could not be a doctor or a pharmacist or a banker. He could not even attend the university. Ser Piero probably thought that education would be wasted on the boy.



Since the noble professions were closed to Leonardo, he would have to do something else. The boy did show a definite talent for drawing. So Ser Piero took him to Florence and apprenticed him to the famous artist Andrea del Verrocchio. It turned out to be a happy choice. Not only was Verrocchio a great teacher, but he came to love and understand his remarkable pupil.

Leonardo moved into Verrocchio's workshop, where he was to live with the other apprentices for the next six to ten years. These were not boys from well-to-do families like Leonardo's. Artists were usually the sons of such tradesmen as butchers, tanners, or stonemasons.

At first, Leonardo helped out around the workshop by running errands and sweeping floors. Later he learned to grind colors and make brushes. But the apprentices were there to learn a trade, and Verrocchio made them practice drawing every day, often by copying plaster models of hands, feet, or drapery. When they mastered drawing, they moved on to painting in the new Flemish technique, in which powdered colors were mixed with oil instead of water. They also studied architecture and made sculptures in clay, bronze, and marble.

Besides all that, artists made patterns for tapestries and carpets, painted banners for festivals, and produced the sets and costumes for pageants. They weren't expected to develop individual styles, as artists do today. At that time they were thought of as mere craftsmen who worked for hire. They never even signed their paintings, which were often the combined efforts of the master and his older apprentices.

There is a story that when Leonardo had been studying with Verrocchio for quite some time, he helped paint a picture of St. John baptizing Jesus. Verrocchio had already finished most of it. Leonardo painted one of the angels and completed the background. It is said that when Verrocchio saw Leonardo's angel, he was struck by how much finer it was than anything else in the picture—and never picked up a paintbrush again.

An unwanted child. A brilliant genius.



BORN IN 1452 TO A PEASANT WOMAN and a country gentleman, Leonardo da Vinci was one of the most amazing people who ever lived. He grew up to be a great painter, sculptor, architect, scientist, and inventor.

As a boy, Leonardo was apprenticed to a famous artist. But he quickly became more skillful than his teacher, and his passionate interests went far beyond art. Fascinated with the human body, he carried out his own experiments in secret. He filled thousands of pages with plans for incredible inventions including a submarine, an air-cooling system, "glasses to see the moon large," and even a flying machine!

In this magnificent addition to a distinguished series that includes *CLEOPATRA*, *JOAN OF ARC*, and *BARD OF AVON: The Story of William Shakespeare*, award-winning author-artist Diane Stanley blends wonderful storytelling with gorgeous illustrations to convey the stunning scope of Leonardo's genius.

"A virtuosic work." (Starred review)—*Publishers Weekly*

"A stunning account. A first class production in every way."—*The New York Times Book Review*

"This is the best of the many children's books on Leonardo." (Starred review)—*ALA Booklist*



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A 1996 Publishers Weekly Best Books Award

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