
What didn’t, couldn’t, Leonardo da Vinci do? Born in 1452, he was an inventor, a sculptor, a musician, a painter, a scientist, a botanist, an architect and an anatomist. He contributed to the engineering project to divert the course of the River Arno. He built flying machines and put himself on a starvation diet in order to attain the minimalist weight to test it out. (An early anorexic?). He built a steam bath for the Duke of Milan and the world’s first armoured tanks for his battles. He drew plans for hundreds of inventions and kept copious, detailed notebooks: he was, above all, a superb observationist. Little, however, is known of his personal life. As is the case with Shakespeare, most of what we know about Leonardo comes from tax records, legal documents and secondhand sources. An opening, then, for the novelist.

You can understand why, post-Dan Brown, British-French academic Lucille Turner might not have wanted to have had ‘Da Vinci’ in the title of her novel. On the other hand, *Gioconda*? For a fictionalisation of the life of the Renaissance genius in which the subject of his most famous painting makes only occasional appearances? What was wrong with *Leonardo*? Turner tries to justify her title by suggesting that the painter had an obsession with Lisa Gherardini that began when they were both children and culminated in him stealing, or at least failing to deliver, the unfinished portrait of her which had been commissioned by her husband, Francesco del Giocondo, a wealthy Florentine silk merchant, some thirty years later. ‘He is free of time: she is timeless. She will never change: he will grow old.’ Ah, the Mona Lisa, world’s most famous painting. ‘You could try a smile,’ he suggests as he begins to paint her.

Turner had to narrow and refine her scope, which is presumably why she decided to concentrate on the years between Leonardo’s apprenticeship to the Florentine painter Andrea del Verrocchio at age fourteen and when he started the painting of *La Gioconda* in 1503 or thereabouts. (He finished it in Paris some sixteen years later.) The fictional thread of Leonardo’s unrequited feelings for his childhood companion are woven through the dramatic components of his artistic life in Florence. You should put aside, as the author has, the knowledge that Leonardo was probably homosexual; the only urges Turner’s Leonardo has are for art and knowledge. Perhaps just as well: he would never have had time for any relationship.

The opening chapters of *Gioconda* are devoted to the child Leonardo as he roams the hills around Anchiano, exploring nature, and streaks ahead, intellectually, of his tutor. Turner successfully takes us inside the mind of an independent thinker and genius-in-the-making: these are some of the best chapters in the novel. He finds seashells embedded in the geological layers of a mountain cave, and informs his tutor that the story of Noah’s flood makes no sense. Noting his talent for art, his father asks him to draw something on the centrepiece of his shield that will frighten away enemies. The boy arranges body parts harvested from a long-dead dog and other animals:

> He swaps body parts, a tail here, a head there, but in the end it comes down to expression. The dog incites pity more than fear, although the teeth are quite good, if he could just get them out. The lizard’s head is perfect, but the
squirrel’s feet are not as effective as the cockerel’s. Sizes are irrelevant, he thinks. He can change those himself. Within a few hours, his creation is complete ... Now all he has to do is draw it.

Watching him, the girl Lisa is quietly curious, but his mother swoons, either from the stench or the sight of the decomposing body parts. It is the start of Leonardo’s interest in anatomy and what lies beneath the skin of a subject; later, he will conduct secret dissections in hospitals.

In Florence, in del Verrocchio’s studio, he works with Botticelli and other apprentices, and begins to make his name. His talent is recognised by Lorenzo de Medici, who becomes a patron, and he receives his first independent commissions. In 1482 he is sent to Milan to broker peace with Ludovico, Duke of Milan, and lives there for the next seventeen years, employed on different projects, including The Last Supper fresco for the monastery of Santa Maria della Grazie, and a huge equestrian monument to Francesco Sforza. The seventy tons of bronze ordered for its casting is instead used for making cannons for the Duke’s war effort against the invading Charles VIII, and later French troops use the life-sized clay model of the ‘Gran Cavallo’ for target practice. Sforza is overthrown and Leonardo returns to Florence in time to witness Savonarola’s bonfires of the vanities. There is nothing here to detain him but Lisa’s portrait. ... “Which expression would you like?” she says.

This is the life compressed and romanticised, but the novel has its charms, chiefly in the way the author depicts the process of youthful creative thinking. It is, however, woefully short on drama and conflict. Records show that the 24-year-old Leonardo, along with some male companions, was arrested for sodomy with a male prostitute but the charges were later dropped, some suspect because one of the accused was a member of the powerful de Medici family. Now there’s a source of conflict to gladden a novelist’s heart and bring an enigmatic smile to La Gioconda’s lips.

**Ruth Starke**

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**Book reviews:** *Gioconda* by Lucille Turner. Ruth Starke.  
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