

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today's episode is a very special one, because it's the one hundredth episode of English Learning for Curious Minds.

[00:00:32] So as a mini celebration of this, the subject of the episode is going to be the man after whom Leonardo English is named, Leonardo Da Vinci.

[00:00:46] He is debatably the most curious mind in history, a painter, a sculptor, an engineer, an anatomist, a mathematician, a futurist and much more.

[00:01:00] So today we are going to learn all about this fantastic man, and his wonderful life. And it really is quite something.

[00:01:09] Before we get right into that though, let me quickly remind you that you can get all of the bonus episodes, plus the subtitles, the transcript, and the key vocabulary for this episode and all of our other ones over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:27] This is where you can check out becoming a member of Leonardo English, and join a community of curious minds from all over the world, doing meetups, exchanging ideas, and generally, improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:01:43] Again, the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:48] Ok then, let's get started and talk about Leonardo Da Vinci, the world's greatest polymath, probably the greatest painter in history, and someone who perfectly embodies the concept of the Renaissance man.

[00:02:04] He was born on the 15th April 1452 in the small town of Vinci, just outside Florence, in Tuscany, Italy.

[00:02:15] His father was a wealthy Florentine legal notary, and his mother was thought to be a peasant.

[00:02:23] They weren't married, so he was born out of wedlock, he was illegitimate.

[00:02:30] This meant, amongst other things, that he wasn't given a surname. He was just Leonardo Da Vinci, Da Vinci means 'of Vinci'; in Italian.

[00:02:41] Not a huge amount is known about Leonardo's early life.

[00:02:46] Because he was illegitimate, he couldn't follow in his father's footsteps and become a legal notary.

[00:02:53] Instead, he was sent to Florence to do an apprenticeship in the workshop of a leading Florentine painter and sculptor called Verrocchio.

[00:03:04] Now, those of you that have listened to the episode on the Medici will know all about Florence in the 15th century. It was a hub, a centre of creativity, and had already produced such great artists as Donatello and Botticelli.

[00:03:23] Leonardo joined the workshop when he was 17 years old, and stayed for around 7 years, quite a bit longer than one might have expected.

[00:03:34] His talents soon became apparent, and there's a story of his master, Verrocchio, a great painter himself, seeing Leonardo's work on a Baptism of Christ, a painting that they were doing together; it was so beautiful that Verrocchio put down his paintbrush, vowing never to paint again because he could never create something so beautiful as Leonardo.

[00:04:02] Now, that may be apocryphal, it might not actually be true, but it is undeniable that Leonardo's talents were there for everyone to see.

[00:04:14] He started winning commissions all over Florence, but developed a bit of a reputation for taking on big projects that he would get bored of and not finish.

[00:04:27] His mind would wander, and he would get distracted by a new, exciting project or problem to solve. This actually got him in some legal trouble, as his clients understandably were frustrated when Leonardo's attentions turned to something new.

[00:04:48] Although he didn't keep a traditional diary, so we don't know a huge amount about his day to day movements, he did keep meticulous notebooks, very detailed notes about everything he was thinking about, and these are a fascinating insight into how his mind worked, and also help explain why he was so easily distracted.

[00:05:16] Leonardo, quite simply, wanted to understand everything.

[00:05:23] He observed the natural world, tried to understand why certain things happen, and tried to test his assumptions.

[00:05:33] He has been called the most relentlessly curious man in history. From asking himself why clouds form to how birds can fly, from asking himself what function different organs in the body play to how to calculate the size of Milan, he wanted to understand everything.

[00:05:57] We love to put labels on people, to say what people are or what they do, and indeed at the start of this episode I described Leonardo as a painter, an engineer, a mathematician, and more.

[00:06:13] But Leonardo Da Vinci wouldn't have considered himself as any of these, or rather, he wouldn't have seen a difference between a painter and an engineer.

[00:06:25] The natural world was all interconnected, and so one needed an understanding of mathematics to create great art, one needed to know how birds fly to be a master engineer. There was no dividing line between these different disciplines, and Leonardo sought to understand how everything worked, how it was all connected.

[00:06:51] It goes without saying that when Leonardo was alive our understanding of the way the world works was considerably less developed.

[00:07:00] You or I might have these thoughts, we might think "I wonder what features of birds actually mean they can fly", but we have the advantage of being able to look up the answer on Google or read a book.

[00:07:15] Leonardo obviously didn't have this advantage, or perhaps he might have thought it a disadvantage, and he took everything from first principles - he sought to understand and explain the world for himself.

[00:07:30] In 1481, when he was 29 years old, and had already got quite a name for himself in Florence as an artist, he decided to try his luck in Milan, and sent a letter to the Duke of Milan asking for employment.

[00:07:49] Despite being one of Florence's most famous painters, when Leonardo wrote his letter of introduction to the Duke of Milan explaining how he could help him, he didn't even really mention the fact that he was a painter, instead focussing on his talents as a military engineer, writing about how he could build bridges, guns, and weapons of war.

[00:08:16] Only right at the end of his letter did he say "I can carry out sculpture in marble, bronze or clay, and also in painting whatever may be done, and as well as any other, be he whom he may".

[00:08:31] His application was successful, and he stayed in Milan for 17 years, creating some of his most famous works, including The Last Supper, which you can still visit in Santa Maria Delle Grazie, a church in Milan. It was soon clear that although he had remarkable talents as an engineer, his talents as a painter were really without equal.

[00:08:58] He left Milan in 1500 after it was invaded by the French, going first to Venice, Cesena, then back to Florence, and then ending up in the service of King Francis of France in 1516, and moving to the Château Royal d'Amboise,

the King's residence in the Loire valley, to the south west of Paris, where he remained until his death in 1519, aged 67.

[00:09:27] Now, that's a whirlwind tour, it's a very quick tour, through some of the key events of his life, but let's get into the more interesting stuff.

[00:09:38] Firstly, although this life of Leonardo that we've just whizzed through might sound quite idyllic, and a tale of a genius just rising to the top, he was in many ways an outcast, and a misfit, someone who didn't fit in properly, in Florentine Renaissance society.

[00:10:02] He was illegitimate, to start with, which although it might not sound so terrible to us today, it meant that he always had this mark on him.

[00:10:13] He was left handed, which, again, it might not seem like such a handicap at all now, in the days of writing with pen and ink it meant that if you weren't careful you would smudge the ink, you would mess the ink. So reportedly he developed a technique of writing each letter backwards on the page.

[00:10:35] He didn't seem to care about fame and fortune, at least when he was young, shown by the fact that he stayed with Verrocchio for much longer than would be expected, and was much more interested in expanding his mind than his bank balance, which although admirable, wasn't entirely predictable.

[00:10:57] It's also quite clear that he was gay. He was arrested in Florence for sodomy, for being found with a male prostitute, he never married, and his notebooks suggest that he was involved in a long term relationship with his pupil, a man he gave the nickname of Salai, or 'little devil'.

[00:11:19] And finally, he was a vegetarian, which was pretty unusual for someone 500 years ago.

[00:11:26] His vegetarianism actually brings us on to our next interesting part of his life, and way of thinking, which was a deep interest in, and love for animals.

[00:11:39] He is most famous for his work as a painter and engineer, but he was also a fantastic anatomist, and developed a great interest in understanding how bodies of animals, both humans and others, worked.

[00:11:57] He would reportedly buy birds from merchants in Florence, only to set them free from their cages and see how they flew.

[00:12:07] Given his status as a well known artist, he was allowed to dissect human corpses, to cut up dead bodies, in order for him to understand how our bodies worked.

[00:12:21] He was the first person to realise that our spines, the central big collection of bones in our back is actually curved, it's not straight.

[00:12:33] His drawings of things like our muscles, sexual organs, and heart are amazingly detailed. He observed how blood flows through our bodies, the function our heart plays, and how bodies work.

[00:12:49] He did all this not out of some wish for fame or fortune, he did it because he wanted to understand. Indeed his notes on anatomy weren't published and it was a few hundred years until a lot of what Leonardo Da Vinci had figured out in the early 16th century was then 'discovered' by anatomists.

[00:13:14] It was the same anatomical approach, of observing how something worked, then looking at it very closely, and trying to recreate it, that he used as an engineer.

[00:13:26] For Leonardo, there wasn't a difference between the natural world and the mechanical world. It was just the world, and he could take what he saw in the natural world, for example with how birds could fly, and apply that to his own creations.

[00:13:46] This didn't mean that he'd just try to recreate a bird, but rather he would observe what properties allowed a bird to fly and use that information when devising his own creation, when creating his own flying machines.

[00:14:04] Indeed, he is often credited with being the first person to design the helicopter, the parachute, or even the aeroplane.

[00:14:14] His designs look a little different to modern planes of course, but the point is that he understood a lot of the fundamental principles of what allows something to fly. He had observed it in the natural world, and tried to apply that to the mechanical world.

[00:14:33] Now, this wouldn't be a real episode on Leonardo Da Vinci if we didn't mention his most famous work, The Mona Lisa, or La Gioconda, as it's called in Italian.

[00:14:45] The Mona Lisa needs no introduction, you've heard of it, and you know what it looks like.

[00:14:51] It could be considered the epitome of Leonardo's work. He started it around 1503, kept it with him, and it's believed that he continued to work on it for the rest of his life.

[00:15:06] There are few paintings that have elicited so many questions, with which there are so many unknowns, but here are a few that might be interesting specifically related to the life of Leonardo Da Vinci.

[00:15:22] So, the identity of the woman in the painting is debated. It's thought to be the wife of a Florentine silk merchant, a woman called Lisa Gherardini, but the nose, forehead and smile are very similar to that of Salai, the man thought to be Leonardo's lover.

[00:15:44] So is the Mona Lisa really a painting of, or at least a tribute to, his male lover?

[00:15:52] Also, why did Leonardo take a commission from someone who was only a silk merchant?

[00:16:00] He had requests from the richest and most famous people in Italy, so why did he accept a commission from someone who was a comparative nobody.

[00:16:11] And why did Leonardo never deliver the painting to the man who commissioned it?

[00:16:17] It's an enduring mystery that Leonardo left us, and I'm sure will baffle art historians, it will confuse art historians, for years to come.

[00:16:28] So, the life of Leonardo Da Vinci is as fascinating as it is mysterious.

[00:16:33] We can piece together our own ideas about the real Leonardo Da Vinci, but the understanding that we have is formed pretty much only through his own notebooks, which are full of his unanswered questions about how the world works, and his ideas about how it might work.

[00:16:55] Certainly, we can still be inspired by the relentless curiosity of the man, his thirst for knowledge, and his desire to understand everything.

[00:17:06] Leonardo was clearly a case of the more you know, the more you know you don't know, and even in his final years he thought he hadn't achieved enough, that he hadn't managed to learn or create enough.

[00:17:24] After having produced the most famous painting in the world, probably the most famous drawings in the world, and made countless discoveries in the fields of mathematics, engineering and anatomy, if he died thinking that he hadn't achieved enough, then I don't know what hope there is for the rest of us.

[00:17:47] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Leonardo Da Vinci, our 100th episode.

[00:17:54] I hope you enjoyed it.

[00:17:57] And just as a final reminder, if you want to get access to the transcript, the subtitles and the key vocabulary as well as get access to our

community, and come to our member only sessions then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com

[00:18:12] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:18:18] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.