

THE PENALTIES OF GREATNESS'

A STUDY OF LEONARDO DA VINCI

THERE are few more personally instructive and interesting pursuits than the study of great men. A genius is, by definition, superhuman, and yet he can, at the same time, be almost inhuman. The greatest genius, of course, and the most instructive, is he who is a genius at doing the ordinary human things, who is a genius at making his whole life one of balanced perfection. But so often, the genius, however great his talents in some respects, fails to integrate his whole life in that way. His nature is a clash of over-development and under-development. Such a man was Leonardo da Vinci.

Leonardo was a genius in the visual arts, drawing, painting and sculpture. His influence has been criticized: 'Ever since Leonardo, academic painting has had the sore limitation of regarding shadow as the negation of colour', says Mather. But if the implications of his practice are harmful, at least Leonardo's own work did not suffer from them. His shadows are never the drab things of Poussin. Again, it has been said that he painted melodramatically: that the apostles at the Last Supper are like actors playing to the gallery. But painting after all cannot make use of sound, and Leonardo's own humanist idea that the attitudes of figures should convey their feelings is surely true both in theory and practice. Against these objections one has, first, his pure skill as a draughtsman, a perfectionist; then his development of perspective; his realism, his 'sfumato' shading, his expression of relief, his use of chiaroscuro in colour—in fact all the qualities which make him a figure of enormous importance, technically, in the history of art. These are the things which contributed to make his pictures among the greatest in the world. Finally, in considering his genius, one should remember his manysidedness, his skill and intense interest in the reproduction or re-creation of every part of life, music and anatomy, poetry and mathematics. In fact his inventiveness as a scientist and his anatomical studies and discoveries are high in his claims to fame.

Leonardo's work embodies a message intelligible to all of us. And it is not because it is common or popular (in the derogatory sense) or simple and cheap. It is because his greatness is so fundamental, so deeply based, that he speaks a universal language. There is, in the first place, his idea of perfection: the ideal of human bodies, of buildings, of face or figure. There is that sense of the dignity of man, the superiority of spirit, which comes through his pictures of human figures. Then there is the symmetry, the proportion, the geometrical delicacy and balance of his work. His aims in art seem to have been Beauty and Accuracy.

¹ The substance of this article formed a paper read to the Leonardo Society on

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174. The precision of his rendering nature is apparent by all things in most ways, the specific external to Leonardo's paintings and yet he

...the opposite extreme to a romantic painter, and yet he had that sense of mystery which strikes one's feelings so forcibly.

Here, then, is a man with this enormous achievement. One cannot hope to understand fully the promptings of his actions. But he is a fascinating person to study. Freud wrote a long, elaborate, and perhaps rather fanciful treatise on Leonardo. One can be too speculative, and he has been the subject and stimulus of many reflections. Yet there are certain obvious and interesting questions which can be answered on the evidence of his life which is common knowledge. It is always interesting to discover whether a genius is conscious of his greatness; how far curiosity, or the love of beauty, overpowered religion; whether he is a realist or an idealist, and why. It is, again, fascinating to enquire into the friendships of great men, and to find out whether they are simple or sophisticated. The more one broods on the puzzle of the character of Leonardo da Vinci, the more bizarre he appears. He is not expected to be ordinary; but even among great men he is odd. Even if oddness is the norm of great men, he is at the extreme.

Let us first consider Leonardo as he would seem to meet. He was imposing and handsome, with rugged, intolerant features; strong enough to crush horseshoes in one fist; intelligent and independent, with great strength of will. He was noted, in youth, for his charm of manner, in age more for his superior aloofness. He was born an illegitimate son of Ser Piero, a gentleman, and the beautiful but elusive peasant girl Katarina. An intensely proud man: but too superior to be forceful, or to persuade others of his opinions. His most striking characteristic was probably his vast intellectual curiosity and ingenuity. He was a dilettante in his interests, but not in the derogatory sense of the word. He was uninterested in politics, unsympathetic, and a vegetarian.

The problem remains then, of what there was in his make-up which drove him to paint, and placed him among the greatest painters of history. He had no philosophy of art. In the fifteenth century it was unnecessary to find a theory to justify art; and even Leonardo's own reflections on the subject are not prompted by the need for self-justification. In the ages before photography, pictures which could please the eye, and preserve people or memorable experiences, or suggest devotional themes, were taken for granted. Leonardo painted purely to please the eye, and through it the mind: that was the medieval conception of beauty. In fact he developed this purpose, and his idea of the expression of the feelings of the soul through the postures of the body is both true and very deep. But it is not an aesthetic system in the modern sense.

The motive of Leonardo's work was not a sense of the mission or purpose of art. It was one which applies to nearly all painters: for he was an artist to satisfy an internal need. He had no aim to give beauty

to the world, no idea of pleasing his employers. He painted, he drew, he speculated because he wanted to. Leonardo was utterly self centered. ↗

...he speculated because he wanted to. Leonardo was utterly self-centered. But this internal urge to express himself was not an ordinary feeling. Like van Gogh, Leonardo was escaping from life to take refuge in art. Here he could console himself in the ideal world where dreams came true. His love of beauty was predominantly escapist. That was why he idealized faces. It was not the prevailing Platonism which influenced Michelangelo to paint the perfect man. Leonardo was seeking what he could not find in life. For he was embittered, anti-social, repulsed by living, by eating, by meat, by anatomy, by sex, and by people. The great cynic, perhaps; but one who had faith at least in dreams. Perhaps—although there is no conclusive proof for this suggestion—his preoccupation with motherhood, and his many studies of the ideal mother and child, were an attempt to relieve his own feelings; for he had been taken away young from his mother, and, like so many natural sons, was hardened against love or kindness. With infinite care and skill he could suggest all the tenderness of a mother in a drawing, the tenderness which he had never known, and for which, at times, he almost longed. But at other times, when he could find no relief in beauty, he would exact his vicious revenge on life by showing it at its worst, in grotesques, in caricatures, in dissection. Even his beauty 'fascinates more often than it delights' in his pictures. Leonardo was too subtle for a simple beauty or an unsophisticated joy in line or shape, for its own sake—it is rarely that his drawings afford that delight which makes no demands on one's concentration.

All great artists are interested in the things they represent. Leonardo had an unlimited and restless curiosity in everything. His mind was never satisfied, and, beyond art and the medieval field of learning, the seven liberal arts, he turned his enquiries especially to science. To him the world of nature was a large laboratory of the applied principles of mathematics. To sketch a wave Leonardo would first draw it with trigonometrical accuracy and balance. He was always creative and ingenious. His inventions, torpedoes, or mortars, or the machinery for raising buildings, were only equalled by his discoveries. How nearly he anticipated Newton in formulating the law of gravity is a matter of a fine distinction. 'The sun does not move' he scrawled impiously across a page of notes. Considering the conditions, he was probably one of the greatest anatomists in history, for it was he who first realized something of the system of the flow of blood. This fastidious man was curious enough to dissect at least thirty bodies. If his search for beauty was the first, his intellectual curiosity was the second predominant strain in his character.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this scientific trend is its relation to his age. 'Leonardo anticipated the future by turning from art to science', says Clifford Bax. There were many threads in the

176. Renaissance, which was by no means a homogeneous movement, a predominant one was the interest in science. It has ever been suggested.

that art was not fundamentally stimulated by the Renaissance: it was only made more scientific. This is too exclusive a view: yet there is certainly some support for it. Leonardo, however he may have symbolized the future, was in the main very typical of the characteristics of the time. His contribution to art was chiefly on the technical side: relief, perspective and chiaroscuro. Ultimately, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, science came to supersede art. Then artists turned against Leonardo: and it is now frequently held that perspective, for instance, is no essential improvement in art, and that pictures can be aesthetically as good without it. It is significant to note Leonardo's increasing preoccupation with science in later life, and his boredom with painting—it seemed to become almost too childish for him.

Leonardo as an artist completely overshadowed Leonardo as a person. He lived without vitality or expansiveness, for both had been sapped by his work as an artist. Fundamentally he was an introvert, and a person who lived exclusively on his own standards. 'Remember, O Painter, your strength is in solitude', he wrote. His character as a person was negative—all his positive energies were elsewhere. He was no philanthropist: his kindness was a duty performed to satisfy himself: and though kind he was cold. He had no real religious conviction as far as is known. He had no loyalty, in politics, to Italy or Vinci or Florence, or to his employers, or to friends. He had, in fact, no friends, like too many great men; and he had few human feelings, which were about himself or his ideas alone, but never, as far as is known, for other people. It is difficult to imagine him laughing, but if he lacked a sense of humour it was compensated for by his intense passion for beauty, which gave him strength where a sense of humour normally comforts and stimulates ordinary people. To the world he must have appeared to have a heart of rock. Though with little respect for the Church, he was intelligent—or perhaps conventional—enough to admit God into his system as a reasonable proposition. He had no lack of decision or purpose.

There are two facts about Leonardo which seem to need explaining according to this idea of his character. The first is that he rarely completed his works, and seemed to lack persistence. But from what is known of him, the reason for this is not weakness or laziness, but the fact that his curiosity and interest were of the sort that grow in vigour and determination in proportion to the amount of difficulties. Once a problem was solved—the composition worked out or the expression gained—he would more often than not lose interest in any further developments. It was not lack of determination so much as lack of interest which made him complete so little.

The second fact is the paradox of his coldness towards individuals and his intense appreciation of human qualities. ~~where~~ there is most where

capacity for feeling, there you will find the greatest martyr', he wrote; for, in spite of his aloofness, he could not help being fascinated by men and human nature. 'I cannot conceive how the head would appear of one who could betray his master after receiving so much', he said of Judas. Yet the explanation of this curious detached interest is simply that Leonardo was not interested in people for their own, real, individual sake. They fascinated him only insofar as they provided the occasion or the subject of a reflection, a chance to moralize. Leonardo was more interested in his ideas about people than in the flesh and blood men themselves.

Leonardo was too much a man of this world to find his feet in the supernatural sphere. His humanism was profound and great, but it left him little room to see anything above the natural qualities and capabilities of man. That is why his religious pictures, especially the Last Supper, have so little touch of the divine about them. Leonardo approached closer to the supernatural in later life. His attitude was unmedieval and sceptical, and when he grated on supernatural truths he tended to lose himself in mysticism: 'Whilst I thought that I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die.' But he had to learn for himself. He was not the person to learn or take advice from anyone. He was cynical, not in a hostile way, but in frank disbelief. A French critic once said, 'Leonardo can do everything except make us believe that he believed'.

Yet Leonardo's defences against reality began to break down in later life. His fear of his ideals being untrue grew as he made contact with deeper supernatural truths. As man and artist, he became more of a unity. His disgust with life, his ideals, and his curiosity were all part of a profound self-consciousness, which grew deeper and became more insistent in its dissatisfaction with ideals, with sophistication, as he grew to old age. Bright colours never satisfied Leonardo. He was trying to express in art that deep sense of the failures and tragedies of life. That consciousness of one's own unreality is a peculiar characteristic of his later paintings: the Mona Lisa seems to realize the futility of the things around her, the strivings of ambition and the energies of life. Leonardo was trying to break through the limits of his system of values. In the Mona Lisa he almost pierced that superficial blaze of humanist glory, and that yearning idealism. It is his greatest picture because in her he so nearly recovered a normal, balanced perspective of man. The greatness of the picture was that she is a real woman, yet with the unrealities and twisted aspirations and hidden fears of Leonardo lying, conquered, within her. That is his triumph—he succeeded in art where he failed in life. She represents Leonardo in many ways. The Mona Lisa symbolizes what he might almost have become: a natural man, as well as a superhuman artist.

C. MIDDLETON-STEWART.
A Cousin of Yours, I wish I were.

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