

Discussion Questions: Leonardo da Vinci, Part One

1. What did you know about Leonardo da Vinci prior to reading this book? What new things did you learn about him? If you knew of him before, did anything you read change your previous opinions of him?
2. How would you describe Leonardo da Vinci as presented by Walter Isaacson in this biography? Does the author do an adequate job of making da Vinci accessible to 21st century readers? Does he bring him to life as a living, breathing human being?
3. Isaacson says that “Leonardo had the good luck to be born out of wedlock.” Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? How did being born during the Renaissance affect Leonard’s life?
4. Would you have liked to live during Leonardo’s time in 15th century Italy? Comment.
5. According to Isaacson, da Vinci was self-taught and “willed his way to his genius.” What does he mean by that statement? What are some of the factors Isaacson identifies as key to da Vinci’s developing path to genius.
6. Isaacson also says that DaVinci was “a genius undisciplined by diligence”. Was this attitude reinforced by the society in which he lived? By his upbringing and family?. Comment.
7. Isaacson believes “genius” is too easily applied to people, but that Leonardo was “one of the few people in history who deserved (or earned)” it. Do you agree with Isaacson about our overuse of the term “genius”? How is genius defined” Can you think of someone, in either today’s word or in history, who would qualify for genius?
8. In chapter 6, Isaacson describes many facets of Leonardo’s life in the Storza court. Among them were being a producer of pageants and plays, being a musician, making allegorical drawings, making drawings of the “grotesque” and doing literary amusements (tales, riddles, etc). Which of these things were a surprise to you and how does it fit with your definition of Genius? Comment
9. Isaacson is particularly insightful in writing about da Vinci’s great paintings. Does the author enable you to better understand the significance of those works and how they furthered the development of art? Comment
10. Vitruvian Man is about perfect proportion, harmony and order. Are these our definitions of beauty? Is there beauty to be found in asymmetry or imperfection, in disorder or chaos?
11. If Vitruvian Man is the male ideal, who is the female ideal? Is there an image, painting, sculpture, or even a description in literature that is the female equivalent of Vitruvian Man?
12. Looking at the illustrations of Da Vinci’s notebooks, what surprised you and/or interested you? What does it tell you about Da Vinci?

Sources: New York Times Book Review, Lit Lovers Discussion Questions, Da Vinci’s Ghost: Reading Group Guide, Biography Discussion Questions, What to Look for When You Read a Biography for History Makers.