Leonardo da Vinci was one of the most brilliant geniuses the world has ever known. Born the illegitimate son of a 25-year-old notary and a peasant woman on April 15, 1452 in Vinci, Italy (just outside Florence), da Vinci had humble beginnings. As a child out of wedlock, he did not take his father’s last name and was therefore known as Leonardo “from Vinci,” *da Vinci* in Italian. The young Leonardo displayed an enormous interest in the world around him and loved to observe nature. He also showed a talent for drawing, and when he was 15, his father arranged an apprenticeship for him in the Florentine studio of the acclaimed painter Andrea del Verrochio. It was there that Leonardo’s amazing aptitude for art blossomed.

By 1482, Leonardo was in the service of the Duke of Milan, not simply for his artistic talents, but also for his clear engineering prowess and scientific genius. He designed weaponry, buildings and machinery and produced studies on nature, mechanics, anatomy, architecture, and much, much more.

As his scientific work progressed, Leonardo documented it in notebooks. He left behind thousands of pages of notes filled with designs, ideas and discoveries. Most of what he wrote has been lost to history, but the notebooks that remain are tantalizing clues in a detective story that has obsessed scholars, engineers and artists for centuries. Written in strange backwards handwriting, they hold a mirror up to the mind of Leonardo and reveal a man who was as much a dreamer as a doer – a man whose insights live on today.

Some other intriguing facts about this Renaissance man:

- Leonardo often marked his paintings with his fingerprint as a signature.
- Leonardo was left-handed. In the time of the Renaissance, left-handedness was considered a mark of impurity. Children were forced to use their right hands, but Leonardo continued to favor his left hand throughout his life.
- Some say that this is why he wrote from right to left – so as not to smudge the ink with his left hand.
- Leonardo performed autopsies to gain more knowledge about human anatomy for his painting and scientific studies.
- For at least a part of his life, Leonardo was a vegetarian and a great lover of animals. He was known to buy caged birds simply to release them.
- Leonardo was a talented musician. He played the lyre, sang, and is believed to have composed music, though his compositions have not been found.
- When drawing the plans for an invention, Leonardo would often purposely leave out a necessary element or instruction, presumably so that no one could copy his ideas.