



Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519) lived during an exciting period known as the Renaissance (French for “rebirth”), which was marked for its renewed interest in knowledge, the arts, and science. He was not only an artist, but also an inventor, architect, engineer, musician, mathematician, astronomer, and scientist. In many ways, his curiosity, careful observation of nature, and creativity characterized the Renaissance.

The National Gallery of Art is home to the only painting by Leonardo in the Western Hemisphere: his double-sided portrait of Ginevra de' Benci is located in the West Building's Main Floor gallery 6.

Leonardo da Vinci, *Ginevra de' Benci* (detail), c. 1474/1478, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund



1

Who was Ginevra?

Ginevra d'Amerigo de' Benci (1457–c. 1520) lived in Florence, Italy, five hundred years ago. The daughter of a wealthy banker, she was the second of seven children. Her nickname, *La Bencina* (meaning “little Benci”), was likely an endearing reference to her delicate physical appearance and gentle spirit. Ginevra was a poet (although only a single line of her work survives), and she was praised by her contemporaries for her intellect and virtuous character. She married in 1474, and around that time, Leonardo painted her portrait.

Ginevra was about sixteen years old in this portrait. It presents her as a refined young woman with a porcelain complexion. She wears a modest brown dress with elegant details: blue ribbon lacing, gold edges, and a sheer white blouse fastened with a delicate gold button, or pin. A black scarf, a stylish accessory at the time, is gently draped over her slender shoulders and neck. Her golden hair is styled simply—parted in the middle and pulled back in a bun—leaving ringlets to frame her face. Without the distractions of luxurious fabrics and gems, Ginevra herself captures our attention. Her brown eyes gaze steadily from under almond-shaped lids, and her lips are drawn together in a quiet line. Unlike the profile portraits more typical of the time, Leonardo's shows her face in three-quarters view, revealing more about her.

Describe Ginevra's expression.

Consider: How do you think she feels? What might she be thinking about? What aspects of Ginevra's personality does the portrait convey?

“A face is not well done unless it expresses a state of mind.” **Leonardo da Vinci**

2

How did Leonardo come to paint this portrait?

Leonardo was born in the small town of Vinci, outside Florence. At age twelve he moved into the city to train in the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, a leading artist of the time. Leonardo was just twenty-two years old when he painted Ginevra de' Benci. It is the first of only three known portraits Leonardo painted in his career. Probably the portrait was commissioned by Ginevra's older brother Giovanni on the occasion of her engagement.

Throughout his life, Leonardo embraced the opportunity to explore materials and artistic approaches. Ginevra's portrait was among his earliest experiments with the medium of oil paint. Leonardo used his fingers and the palm of his hand to mix the wet paint, which enabled him to blend colors and create soft, delicate edges that allowed for subtle transitions from light to shadow. Evidence of Leonardo's innovative technique remains on the painting: his fingerprint is visible on the surface, where the sky meets the juniper bush above Ginevra's left shoulder.

3

A landscape painting too?!

This was the first portrait created in Florence that showed a sitter outdoors. In fact, Leonardo gave almost as much attention to the landscape as he did to Ginevra. Behind her is a tranquil scene with small trees lining the banks of a pool of water and a town nestled in the hills under a misty sky.

Rendered with accuracy, the large plant behind Ginevra's head is a juniper bush, an evergreen with sharp, spiky leaves. It is a witty pun on Ginevra's name: *ginepro* is the Italian word for juniper.

Both the figure and the landscape have been praised for their lifelikeness, and the painting demonstrates Leonardo's careful observation of the natural world that would continue throughout his career and come to transform Renaissance painting.



4

Something's missing!

Leonardo's original portrait probably included Ginevra's waist and hands. It was painted on a wood panel that was originally larger than the one you see today (it was rectangular instead of square-shaped). At some point—possibly because of water damage—about six inches of the panel were cut off along the bottom and right edges.

Imagine how the portrait might have looked. How might Ginevra's hands have been posed? What did the rest of her dress look like? Draw your ideas in the white space below.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Ginevra de' Benci*, c. 1474/1478, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

Dashed line shows the portion of the panel that was cut off, possibly because of water damage.

book nook

These books about Leonardo da Vinci can be found at your local library or bookstore.

Leonardo's ABC: Sharing Leonardo da Vinci with Children

By Carolyn Cinami DeCristofano
ages 3 and up

The Genius of Leonardo

By Guido Visconti, illustrated by
Bimba Landmann | ages 5 and up

Leonardo da Vinci for Kids: His Life and Ideas, 21 Activities

By Janis Herbert | ages 5 and up

Leonardo, The Beautiful Dreamer

By Robert Byrd | ages 7 and up

Leonardo da Vinci

By Diane Stanley | ages 7 and up

Eyewitness: Leonardo & His Times

By Andrew Langley | ages 7 and up

Leonardo da Vinci: The Genius Who Defined the Renaissance

By John Phillips | ages 9 and up

Leonardo da Vinci

By Karen Ball and Rosie Dickens,
illustrated by Christa Unzner
ages 9 and up

Leonardo da Vinci: Artist and Scientist

By Laura Layton Strom
ages 9 and up

Amazing Leonardo da Vinci Inven- tions You Can Build Yourself

By Maxine Anderson | ages 9 and up

there's more!

activity



Leonardo da Vinci, *Wreath of Laurel, Palm, and Juniper* (reverse of *Ginevra de' Benci*), c. 1474/1478, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

It is believed that this painting was purchased by Prince Carl Eusebius of Liechtenstein after 1611, and the red wax seal that is affixed to the upper-right corner of the panel was added in 1733, when the painting was inventoried as part of the collection of Prince Joseph Wenzel of Liechtenstein. In 1967, *Ginevra de' Benci* was purchased from Prince Franz Joseph II of Liechtenstein for the National Gallery's collection.

A Double-Sided Portrait

Several years after finishing the portrait, Leonardo was asked to create an image on its reverse. On this “verso” side, Leonardo painted a scroll entwined around a wreath of laurel and palm branches, with a sprig of juniper in the center. While the front of the painting is a physical portrait of Ginevra, the reverse is an emblematic portrait that uses symbols to characterize her inner personality. The juniper sprig identifies Ginevra by her name, and the laurel and palm branches represent two of her attributes: intelligence and strong moral values. The scroll bears a Latin inscription: *VIRTYTEM FORMA DECORAT*. This translates as *Beauty Adorns Virtue*, Ginevra’s motto.

Originally, this painting might have hung from a ring on a wall or piece of furniture so that it could be turned to either side. Today the painting is displayed in a free-standing case that shows both sides of the panel. It is thought to be Leonardo’s only double-sided painting.

Imagine what your own emblematic portrait might include (words, symbols, etc.).

Think about what you would want to illustrate about yourself. What personality traits do you want people to remember about you? What characteristics make you unique?

Share these ideas with a family member or friend.