

# THE ART OF PAINTING

*from*

## NOTEBOOKS

about 1508

---

*Leonardo da Vinci*

---

Perhaps better than anyone else, Leonardo da Vinci represents the Renaissance ideal of pursuing excellence in many areas. He was not only one of the greatest painters of his age—his genius also extended to sculpture, architecture, engineering, mathematics, and invention. Da Vinci's scientific mind is revealed in his famous notebooks, where he described and sketched his many ideas. The following excerpts show the importance he placed on keen observation and the study of human anatomy.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Clarifying**

According to da Vinci, why is it important for artists to know human anatomy?

---

### **The Painter's Need for Alertness**

The mind of the painter should be like a mirror which always takes the color of the thing that it reflects, and which is filled by as many images as there are things placed before it. Knowing therefore that you cannot be a good master unless you have a universal power of representing by your art all the varieties of the forms which nature produces—which indeed you will not know how to do unless you see them and retain them in your mind—look to it, O Painter, that when you go into the fields you give your attention to the various objects, and look carefully in turn first at one thing and then at another, making a bundle of different things selected and chosen from among those of less value. And do not after the manner of some painters who when tired by imaginative work, lay aside their task and take exercise by walking, in order to find relaxation, keeping, however, such weariness of mind as prevents them either seeing or being conscious of different objects.

### **Of the Way to Fix in Your Mind the Form of a Face**

If you desire to acquire facility in keeping in your mind the expression of a face, first learn by heart the various different kinds of heads, eyes, noses, mouths, chins, throats, and also necks and shoulders. Take as an instance noses: they are of ten types: straight, bulbous, hollow, prominent either above or below the centre, aquiline, regular, simian, round, and pointed. These divisions hold good as regards

profile. Seen from in front, noses are of twelve types: thick in the middle, thin in the middle, with the tip broad, and narrow at the base, and narrow at the tip, and broad at the base, with nostrils broad or narrow, or high or low, and with the openings either visible or hidden by the tip. And similarly you will find variety in the other features; of which things you ought to make studies from nature and so fix them in your mind. Or when you have to draw a face from memory, carry with you a small note-book in which you have noted down such features, and then when you have cast a glance at the face of the person whom you wish to draw you can look privately and see which nose or mouth has a resemblance to it, and make a tiny mark against it in order to recognise it again at home. Of abnormal faces I here say nothing, for they are kept in mind without difficulty.

### **How It Is Necessary for the Painter to Know the Inner Structure of Man**

The painter who has acquired a knowledge of the nature of the sinews, muscles, and tendons will know exactly in the movement of any limb how many and which of the sinews are the cause of it, and which muscle by its swelling is the cause of this sinew's contracting, and which sinews having been changed into most delicate cartilage surround and contain the said muscle. So he will be able in divers ways and universally to indicate the various muscles by means of the different attitudes of his figures; and he will not do like many who in different actions always make the same things appear in the arm, the back, the breast, and the legs; for such things as these ought not to rank in the category of minor faults.

### **Of the Conformity of Limbs**

Further I remind you to pay great attention in giving limbs to your figures, so that they may not merely appear to harmonize with the size of the body but also with its age. So the limbs of youths should have few muscles and veins, and have a soft surface and be rounded and pleasing in color; in men they should be sinewy and full of muscles; in old men the surface should be wrinkled, and rough, and covered with veins, and with the sinews greatly protruding.

**Source:** *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, Volume 2, edited by Edward MacCurdy (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1938).