Leonardo da vinci: the indefatigable lighthouse of civilization

Art & Culture, Artists

Even as the current state of civilization boasts of its high levels of science and arts, it cannot deny the fact that a relentless endeavor of the humans through centuries to refine their thinking and ability has done all the spadework. This fact is corroborated by the evidences of numerous experiments in the fields of science and arts, where some humans stand larger than life in the pages of history by virtue of their colossal contribution to the development of the same.

However, out of this group of talented humans, very few eventually achieve the status of a legend by showing extraordinary insight, vision and application. Perhaps at this point anyone would first recall the name Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519), the multitalented human being who was the live wire of renaissance period and is considered as the unending source of inspiration to anyone who wants to unearth a dream in the sphere of science and arts. This study too seeks inspiration from this great legend by exploring some nuances of his paintings that are correlated with his life-events, and by guessing what he intended to communicate with fellow human beings.

Leonardo's Artistic Intentions

It might occur to someone that painter Leonardo was someone obsessed with perfection and his penchant to depict reality in a best possible manner drove him to include even the minutest details available in a subject. Researchers, however, hold a completely different view, and suggest that Leonardo purposefully wanted to align art with science and vice versa. According to Vasari (Mena, 2004) Leonardo practiced not only a branch of art, but also studied virtually anything in which drawing plays a part. Modern

researchers have already substantiated Vasari's observation by detecting quite a few “ codes” positioned in Leonardo’s paintings and deciphering his intentions behind incorporating such codes.

Some of such findings provide startling revelations about how Leonardo applied all his knowledge and vision in the making of his painting to connect with future generations by presenting

a) The problems civilization faced in his times, such as the diseases or lack of tools to improve life conditions;

b) The clues towards developing the civilization, such as the devices that could improve life conditions.

Analysis of Mona Lisa

A classic example of the first point mentioned above can be drawn from Ose's (60) research, who clinically observed some details in Mona Lisa and categorically explained the them to substantiate how Leonardo aligned both science and art in his paintings with an intention to create more developmental solutions for society in any direction.

Ose (60) underpins that

1. There is a yellow, irregular, and leather-like spot at the inner end of the left eye lid of Mona Lisa (Figure 1);

2. There is a soft, bumpy, well-defined swelling on the dorsum of the right hand, below he index finger, which is about 3 cm long (Figure 2);

Ose (60) claims that the yellow, leather-like spot at the inner end of the left eye carries the symptom of xanthelasma, a skin lesion found in people suffering from inherited type of hyperlipidemia, while the bumpy, well-defined swelling on the dorsum of the right hand of Mona Lisa corroborates the existence of xanthelasma, since tumors on such regions are commonplace in the case of xanthelasma.

Ose (61) substantiates the validity of his argument by citing medical evidences that the occurrence of xanthelasma lipoma in a woman of 25-30 years is not coincidental, especially considering the fact that the model of Mona Lisa, Maria de Gherardini died at the age of 37, where xanthelasma may have a role in it (60) by virtue of its characteristics.

From this perspective one may conclude that Leonardo perhaps wanted to depict the occurrence of familial hypercholesteromia (FH) in his painting of Mona Lisa as a query to the posterity for its solution. Eventually scientists like Muller (675-700) and Akira Endo (1569-82) defined the disease.

Mona Lisa had been a part of Leonardo's life. He took four years (1503-1507) to create this oil portrait on Poplar wood that featured a middle class housewife, but it was never finished for him, as he kept on adding touches to this painting for the last 12 years of his life. He made this portrait his travel companion too. Basically this portrait contains a package of visual effects comprising of overflowing and unstable background scenery, erotic stance of a woman with loose hair and no adornment, a mystic smile of the woman, and a pair of eyes that appear as if following the viewers, thanks to the optical technique employed by Leonardo.

Another element that is conspicuous in its absence is the stamp of time; there is no element that can be identified in plain eyes as the period element, like clothes or hairstyle, or even the wedding ring of the period. Perhaps, Leonardo chose to pack the period detail in those symptoms of xanthelasma!

However, this prized possession of the Louvre museum (painting no. 779), which attracts 8 million visitors per year, does contain typical Da Vincian enigma. If someone overlaps this portrait with the self-portrait of Da Vinci, one would find an absolute similarity between the smiling lips of Mona Lisa and Leonardo (Figure 3), save the unknown x-factor, the intrinsic effect of which can be realized but cannot be explained. All these elements are still intact in the portrait, even after shuttling from place to place for umpteenth times, adorning royal bathrooms to bedrooms, before making its way to Louvre Museum.

From a technical angle too, Mona Lisa commands a review as the researcher have underpinned the application of T-Junctions and chiaroscuro technique in it, where the former was used to determine the relative depth when one object is closer than another object and occludes parts of the farther object (Howard and Rogers, 2002), while the later, a fine technique of using light and shade in pictorial representation, was used to create a percept of a 3D shape in the subject. Together these techniques have successfully created the impression of a background at a greater distance (Grossberg 476). It would be Leonardoesque to conclude the discussion on Mona Lisa with two more startling facts:

1. Anagramming the letters in Mona Lisa one would fetch a set of words like Mon Salai, which means " My Salai," which can be linked to Salaimon, who was Leonardo's disciple-cum-lover of 25 years;

2. The portrait of Salai closely resembles with Mona Lisa (Parsons, 2006).

Enigmatic Last Supper

There is no dearth of " codes" in his Last Supper painting too, which he created between 1495-1498 under the patronage of Ludovico Sforza. The theme contains the moment when Jesus Christ was about to reveal the fact to his disciples regarding the impending betrayal of one of his followers that would lead to his execution. From the perspective of painting technique this portrait contains an improvised method of tempera painting as well as T-junction and optical viewing technique.

However, a closer inspection would fetch startling details that are linked with myth, speculation and foreshadow of an event, which were created by deliberate incorporation and elimination of certain elements.

The absence of the halo around Christ's head and the chalice (used to drink the blood of Christ and is known as the Holy Grail) that are synonymous with the tale of last supper would raise the questions in the mind of the viewers. Alongside, the depiction of St Peter in a womanly figure, the intimate positioning of St Peter with Christ, and a large gap shaped as a 'V' on Jesus’ right hand side between himself and the feminine figure, all would also raise questions in the minds of the viewers.

Some researchers have found a correlation between Leonardo's version of Last Supper and the second version of the Biblical event that believed Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus.

If that is not enough, one could check the placements of the loafs in the painting and imagine a dotted existence of them to discover that each loaf of bread in the picture actually represents a musical note and culminate into a musical composition, and that too to the tune of a 40-second requiem (Figure 4) (Crystalinks, 2010)!

Shaping Intrinsic Desires

From another angle it can be said that Leonardo wanted to shape the intrinsic desires of humans, such as to enhance their ability and to posses more power and control. The research of Wade et al. (231) can be cited in favor of the above proposition. According to Wade et al., Leonardo wanted to eliminate the differences between the perception of a scene and its interpretation on canvas, i. e. producing an equivalent configuration through painting. This dream of his was so advanced from his time that it took another 300 years after his death to become a reality with Wheatstone's stereoscope. The researchers also cite Leonardo's own explanation from his Treatise of Painting in support of their claim:

" A painting, though conducted with the greatest art and finished to the last perfections, both with regard to its contours, its lights, its shadows and its colors, can never show a Relievo equal to that of normal objects, unless these be viewed at a distance and with a single eye" (178).

Critics and Leonardo

Though he was charged with homosexuality, even his early biographers considered him as a man of high integrity and sensitive to moral issues. His first known biographer was Giorgion Vasari, who published Vite de' piu eccelenti architettori, pittori e scultori italiani (The lives of the most excellent Italian architects, painters and sculptors) in 1550. Vasari collected many first-hand accounts from Leonardo's contemporaries and he took no time to be fascinated by the genius of Leonardo. It was mainly Vasari's focus on the multifarious activities that gradually overpowered the raunchy stories about Leonardo's homosexual escapades that took wings all across Latin America (Crystalinks, 2010).

While there can be no denying to the fact that the knowledge development has helped humans to realize the multidimensional appeal of Leonardo's artworks, it also appears true that 20th century critics in all probability suffered from a dilemma regarding how to evaluate all areas of Leonardo's activities at a go, without having specialization on the subjects he worked on. Thus art historians like Gombrich hesitated to judge Leonardo's scientific explorations, while science historians too fell short to evaluate his art. Freud investigated Leonardo's psyche like a detective and focused more on the narcissistic traits of Leonardo (Farago 16), while suggesting that Leonardo was a kind of magician who investigated virtually every branch of natural science (Carrier 36).

However, Leonardo too received his share of negative criticism, where Valery pointed at the disorganized state of Leonardo's notes while suggesting that

Leonardo cannot be taken seriously as a guiding philosopher, or for that matter, Maelsaeke found a fair amount of destructive qualities Leonardo's natural philosophy. However, most of the critics talked about the high volume of his unfinished works, and his little output in the sphere of painting (Trudeau, 2006). His conflict with his patron Sforza regarding the delay in completing the Last Supper too was put forth as a proof of his nature to procrastinate over a task. However, it is also difficult to reason how the critics estimated Leonardo by virtue of his finished outputs, ignoring the potential of the huge amount futuristic clues he left in his unfinished works

Modern researchers accommodate the fact that Leonardo was deprived of the appropriate facilities to manifest his talent and to carry forward most of his researches and experiments. From this perspective they find his art and scientific investigations as intrinsically fascinating, which also evoke their interest to know how his fascination with the relationship of art and science can contribute to their present understanding (Carrier 38).

Final Reflection

It is impossible to be content by discussing only the painting acumen of a man who made substantial contributions in the domains of physics, mechanics, optics, perspective and medicine. And if one considers the possible social barrier he faced for being an illegitimate child, one would realize the magnitude of his achievement. He even spent two months in jail under the charge of sodomy.

Unfortunately, in spite of being an unparallel genius and a fighter, he was initially labeled as an artist-engineer who could not finish most of the works

he undertook. Arguably, the greatest genius of the civilization till date, Leonardo had collected his sparks mainly from three sources, such as classical and medieval elements, traditional artist-engineers of Brunelleschi, and contemporary artist-engineers such as Francesco di Giorgio Martini (Veltman 386).

In the process Leonardo stood out from all other talented individuals of his time mostly because of two reasons – one, he developed a systematic method in his drawing of both the natural and man-made world, and two, he methodically approached the world of science, where he focused more on the underlying mechanical and physical principles of the machines, instead of focusing on how the machines operate. The potential of such a visionary approach was amply reflected three centuries later, when Reuleaux created a catalogue of various types of machines and found that Leonardo had already thought about 21 of 23 machines that featured in the catalogue (Reti 88).

Leonardo's achievements can be a lifetime source of inspiration to anyone who wants to probe and define anything with an open mind that accommodates and utilizes the relationships among all elements. It was that modest, simple vegetarian who suggested the posterity to tap the immense potential in each of them, besides cautioning them that " inaction saps the vigor of mind," and " One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself" (Da Vinci, 2010). Therefore, this archetypal " Renaissance Man" and the indefatigable lighthouse of human civilization is

very much among us, ready to guide anyone who has the spirit to leave a mark of achievement on earth.