

# Term paper on leonardo da vincis vitruvian man

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Leonardo da Vinci's views on naturalism clearly impacted his art. The "Vitruvian Man" combines the natural and scientific knowledge of da Vinci to create a stunning piece of art that has inspired artists, scientists, mathematicians, and naturalists for centuries. By looking at both the aesthetic value and the educational value of Da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" I endeavor to explore why this drawing is considered such an important work.

## **Background of Renaissance Thought**

A combination of political, social, economic, religious, and cultural factors all affected changes occurring in art during the Renaissance (Kleiner). During this time social, economic, and religious discord, came a new interest in humanity and the natural world. There was a particular interest in religious study this time period leading to the development of Renaissance style. Painting also began to change the medieval style where compositions were stiff and posed. Most paintings were still for religious purposes but began to have less posed more realistic forms. (Kleiner). The "Vitruvian Man" gives a very insightful look at what influences Renaissance art depicts. Overall, I find this style to illustrate the beginning of a new era of art. Da Vinci's work proves that there is now to art than religious iconography, art could also be used as a learning tool in other areas of life. These pieces give an insight into how society was during this time period. The influence of the Church was instrumental, yet we see artists are beginning to implement their own styles and techniques into the traditional subject matters (Gombrich) Da Vinci uses line and form to emphasize the most important aspects of this work. Lines converge to distinguish the focal points.

Da Vinci's art shows how art evolved from the medieval depictions that were

anatomically incorrect. Da Vinci was a master at making his religious figures both anatomically correct and relatable. How so many ideas can come from one subject, the human body, is what makes every work of art so different and interesting. Each artist has a different idea of what the human body means to them (Stokstad & Cothren). This fascination with the natural world is why the idea of beauty continues to appear in art and why no two paintings of the same subject are ever the same (Stokstad & Cothren).

### **The Purpose of “ Vitruvian Man”**

This drawing was completed in 1490 and is unique in that its circles, squares and lines all overlaid on one another create an image. This technique allowed Leonardo to carefully measure proportions and create a set of ideal dimensions for the human body. Leonardo states about this drawing ‘ If you open the legs so as to reduce the stature by one-fourteenth and open and raise your arms so that your middle fingers touch the line through the top of the head, know that the center of the extremities of the outspread limbs will be the umbilicus, and the space between the legs will make an equilateral triangle’ (Lester). The vertical line bisecting the body symbolizes the two centers of the body: magnitude and gravity.

This drawing is in essence a study of proportion, and a way to make man a subject of nature and study. Da Vinci had a great interest in anatomy and naturalism, both displayed in this piece. Shifts of human thinking were leading away from medieval art.

Often we think that art should convey factual knowledge about when a piece of art was made and the context it was created. We may also think that the role of art is to discover meaning within a visual image and explore how we

respond emotionally to them. Form and content should contain a message. However, there is no true definition of art. Da Vinci wants to prove that art has a purpose for more than aesthetic purposes, his work on the “ Vitruvian Man” is meant to educate.

## **The Rule of Proportions**

With this drawing Leonardo Da Vinci created his rule of proportions.

Mathematically Da Vinci divided the human body up to determine the most aesthetically pleasing proportions. Mathematics may be one way to go to determine is a piece is a work of art but it should not be a driving force, after all expression and emotion is at the heart of true art. He used the theories of Pythagoras to help refine his rules or proportion, becoming the first to illustrate this concept. Many other artists had tired or have tried similar concepts of placing a human figure within a perfect circle or square, however Da Vinci was the first to perfect it. Most of the other drawing show very distorted proportions. The idea that perfect proportions equals’ beauty, is a concept that still exists to this day. A set of idealized proportions is what society feels is the perfect definition of beauty. It is ironic that this drawing was not made for beauty but for understanding of the world. Aesthetic beauty also seems to be the farthest thing from the mind of da Vinci in this particular peace. As opposed to art of the past; beauty is of little concern instead endeavoring to focus on scientific learning.

Da Vinci tries to find images that demand our attention; this can be an everyday object or something extraordinary. He challenges us to look at the world around us and find something brilliant within it. He considers hid work

to be images of “ truth”. Da Vinci teaches a new visual process in which to view the world around us.

## **The Background History of the “ Vitruvian Man”**

Leonardo’s inspiration came from the Roman imperial age. Vitruvius was an architect of that time period who felt that a human body could fit within a circle. To him a circle stood for the divine. The square was symbolic of being earthly and godly. Leonardo’s devotion to Vitruvius’ works lead him to further develop this idea to match his own interests and schools of thought. In “ Da Vinci’s Ghost”, Lester states, “ At a superficial level, [Vitruvian Man] is simply a study of individual proportions. But it’s also something far more subtle and complex. It’s a profound act of philosophical speculation. It’s an idealized portrait in which Leonardo, stripped down to his essence, takes his own measure and, in doing so, embodies a timeless human hope: that we just might have the power of mind to figure out how we fit into the grand scheme of things.”(Lester)

Throughout his entire work, Da Vinci remains very critical of other artists and naturalist as a whole. He doesn’t feel that much can be taken at face value; we wanted to take an unbiased look at history. He worked to gather evidence to support his data, usually on a first hand basis or an eye witness. Vitruvius determined that the human body has different proportions that is rudimentarily similar for each individual.(Lester) For example the width of the face is usually three eye lengths. By relating some body parts to another, he was able to see that human’s have the same basic proportions. Da Vinci took into account the teachings of others, but most of all wanted to develop

his own methods to improve upon them. The “ Vitruvian Man” is a result of this mindset.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, The “ Vitruvian Man” has become one of the world’s most famous drawings because of being synonymous with learning and science. Based on the works of the architect, Vitruvius, and the mathematician, Pythagoras, Da Vinci developed his theories about proportion with this work being the result. Da Vinci endeavored to show that humans are a part of nature and that scientists should study them as they would the rest of the world. This work embodies the Renaissance spirit because it is all about the use of art to pursue learning and understanding of the world. The study of nature was very important during this time period. By looking at the “ Vitruvian Man” we can gain a better understanding of human fits within the world both in a natural and spiritual sense. Da Vinci merges science and art into one form.

## **Works Cited:**

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