As you have read, beginning in the Renaissance, humanism encouraged people to question their world, experiment with new ideas, and consider their own potential as individuals.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), born in Florence, Italy, had great intellect and an amazing curiosity. He worked to dispel many medieval views. Da Vinci has been called the most relentlessly curious man in history. He questioned everything.

He had a mastery of engineering, biology, painting, sculpture, botany, music, philosophy, architecture, science, mechanics, invention, and anatomy. The term Renaissance person refers to an individual who is not only curious about many things, but also has a deep understanding of many subject areas and the ability to accomplish feats in many disciplines. Leonardo da Vinci is considered by many to be the ultimate Renaissance Man.

Leonardo’s Accomplishments

Painting: Mona Lisa and The Last Supper are da Vinci’s most famous works. Leonardo da Vinci was perhaps the greatest Renaissance painter, introducing new techniques. Many of his paintings, though, were left unfinished or have not survived. One project he did complete and that has survived is the Mona Lisa. It is among the finest paintings produced during the Renaissance.

Although da Vinci finished only a few paintings, he had a significant influence on other Renaissance painters. Many Renaissance painters studied and copied his techniques. When he was invited to visit the French court, he carried the Mona Lisa with him. Today, the Mona Lisa is still housed in the Louvre in Paris.

Da Vinci was a vegetarian, which was unusual at that time, and loved animals so much that he would buy caged animals just so he could set them free.

The Mona Lisa is so popular that every year, more than 5 000 000 people visit the Louvre to view it.
Architecture: Da Vinci designed domes, buildings, and bridges.

Inventions: Leonardo da Vinci is famous for his inventions. He was very interested in movement and machines; among his inventions were a bicycle, an airplane, a helicopter, and a parachute. He drew plans for tanks, submarines, and diving suits. Many of these inventions were 500 years ahead of their time. He kept detailed notes and diagrams. Today, the only remains of his inventions are thousands of pages of these notes and diagrams. Working models of some of da Vinci’s inventions have been built based on his designs.

Anatomy: He kept meticulous notes on human anatomy as he completed dissections of cadavers.

Think how easy it is today to search for answers to any questions you may have. Perhaps you want to answer this question: How does the human body work? You can find answers in books and other printed materials, by viewing multimedia presentations, by exploring libraries, by using the Internet, and perhaps even by travelling to other countries, getting there in a matter of hours, to meet with world-renowned specialists.

Think of what people living at the time of Leonardo da Vinci had to do to find answers to their questions. Imagine the courage and conviction of those individuals who dared to question their world in a time when such questioning was contrary to the values of the time. Questioning was often considered to be against religious beliefs and could lead to severe punishments. How did their convictions help shape the Renaissance worldview?

Reflect and Respond

1. Working together as a class, list reasons why da Vinci could be categorized as a Renaissance Man.

2. Can you think of individuals today who might be considered Renaissance Men or Renaissance Women — those who are known for their work in more than one discipline? Name as many as you can. Choose one and explain what impact he or she has had on our world. Did his or her thinking affect our worldview?

3. How does the study of great thinkers such as Leonardo da Vinci impact our worldview today?