Leonardo, as the textbook tells us, was “an architect, mathematician, physicist, inventor, musician, and painter,” in other words, the very definition of a Renaissance man.¹ (Given European social structures and cultural patterns in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the lack of a “Renaissance woman” should not surprise us.) Until the age of specialization, the epitome of an educated individual was someone with depth and breadth in arts and sciences, a fund of knowledge he could draw from and build upon. Every educated person was something of an expert with an opinion on everything, which may be one reason authors of the time sound so snooty to us.

With Leonardo da Vinci we enter the High Renaissance in Italy, a period that gave us giants in painting, sculpture, and architecture. Among painters we find—in addition to Leonardo—Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and Giorgione, as well as many lesser known but accomplished masters. Thanks at least in part to a new “cult of genius,” as Janson calls it, “the works of the great High Renaissance masters immediately became classics in their own right, their authority equal to that of the most renowned monuments of antiquity.”² This confluence of genius established an aesthetic standard that still holds considerable sway in our own time, some five hundred years later.

Part 2

The illegitimate son of a minor noble, Leonardo was also beautiful of face and figure and a wonderful conversationalist, which helps explain how he got by in the world with very little work; he made friends and patrons easily. His curiosity was insatiable, and he went to extraordinary lengths to expand his skill and knowledge, such as cutting open corpses to see how bodies worked, an illegal and dangerous practice. Even a cursory glance at his biography shows that Leonardo moved frequently, working for powerful people in Florence, Milan, Rome, and finally France. He was restless in art as well, experimenting with techniques that resulted in failures such as the famous Last Supper almost as often as successes like the modern scientific illustration (at left).

More to the point of this course, Leonardo was also interested in ekphrasis, the relationship between visual text and literary text. He once wrote: “Painting is poetry that is seen rather than heard, and poetry is painting that is heard rather than seen.” Given the ambiguity of the Italian verb, “heard” may also be translated as “felt,” which is often the case in online quotations; however, Leonardo knew that painting is as powerfully felt as poetry, and was obviously paraphrasing our old friend Simonides of Keos (see Theme 1 under the heading Ut pictura poësis). Despite being a Renaissance man, Leonardo did not compose particularly good verse, and it comes as no surprise that he upheld the superiority of painting over poetry. He was simply better with a paintbrush. Fortunately, we do not have to choose between picture and word. In this part of the course, we get to enjoy Leonardo’s paintings and drawings and to dig into ekphrastic descriptions of them; at the same time, we match wits with a huge bestseller full of speculation and intrigue, The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown.

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Part 3
By now students possess the tools needed to confront the ekphrastic aspect of this novel. Leonardo is one of the most written-about artists of the Renaissance, and there is no dearth of information about him and his work. He is therefore the perfect candidate for self-directed exploration and analysis. It is time for students to teach each other, an important step on their path to becoming Renaissance men and women. In order to complete the assignments successfully, I recommend the following steps:

- Get to know Leonardo da Vinci. Read the short section on him in our textbook *Great Masters of Western Art* as an introduction, and then go to a first-rate encyclopedia like the Britannica or an art history book. Most Internet sites are suspect, so beware. Although we have not worried too much about the lives of other artists, the case of Leonardo is different. The novel makes a number of claims you will be in no position to judge without some serious research.

- Get to know Leonardo’s art and thought. Go online to view the paintings and notebooks. Check art books at the UNCG or local library. Find an analysis of more problematic works like the *Madonna of the Rocks*.

- Read the novel. Give yourself time to think about what you have read. Mark pages with ekphrastic text so you can find them again.

- As stated on the syllabus, I recommend *The Da Vinci Code* corollary material by Betty Eble, though you may certainly do the same research on your own. Many such materials are available and will help you visualize art works, museums, and monuments to which the novel refers.

- Some students may be interested in a writer who challenges the more controversial claims of the novel. There are many to choose from, including books by both Catholics and Protestants:
  - *Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide to the Mysteries Behind The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Burstein (Editor)
  - *Da Vinci Code Decoded: The Truth Behind the New York Times #1 Bestseller* by Martin Lunn
  - *De-Coding Da Vinci: The Facts Behind the Fiction of The Da Vinci Code* by Amy Welborn
  - *Fact and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* by Steve Kellmeyer
  - *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* by Darrel L. Bock

The Internet also has a number of interesting sites, most of them critical. Feel free to explore, but be skeptical.

Remember that Discussion Board and Journal assignments in Theme 3 count as 40% of the final Discussion Board and Journal grades.