Endowed with insatiable curiosity, an “inhumanly sharp eye” and immense talent, Leonardo da Vinci was the quintessential Renaissance man. Two of his paintings — The Last Supper and the Mona Lisa — are among the world’s greatest artistic treasures. And da Vinci’s studies of anatomy, astronomy, optics, fossils, geology, weaponry, musical instruments and flying machines anticipated (often by centuries) the discoveries of scientists and engineers.
In “Leonardo da Vinci,” Walter Isaacson draws on thousands of pages of da Vinci’s notebooks and recent scholarship to illuminate his life and work. Beautifully produced and illustrated, the biography is an ideal match of author and subject. A professor of history at Tulane, Isaacson has been chairman of CNN, editor of Time magazine and CEO of the Aspen Institute. He is the author of “The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution” and biographies of Benjamin Franklin, Henry Kissinger, Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs.

Fascinated by Leonardo’s genius, Isaacson lucidly and lovingly captures his stunning powers of observation that spanned so many disciplines. Again and again, he pauses to marvel as da Vinci intensely watches the motions of a dragonfly’s four wings; the tongue of a woodpecker; stains on walls; strange faces and costumes; the effect of facial muscles on lips, nostrils and eyebrows; the ways in which light strikes the face.

This skill, which Isaacson calls “The Leonardo Effect,” results in anomalies in his paintings, such as uneven dilation of the pupils. It can, he writes, stimulate viewers “to observe the little details in nature, and regain our sense of wonder about them.”

Isaacson is less successful, in my judgment, in accounting for da Vinci’s failure to complete so many of the projects he started. Uncomfortable, apparently, with explanations related to emotional depression, the absence of “rigorous and disciplined collaborators” and an inability to find supportive patrons, Isaacson tries to transform a vice into a virtue. “To be a true visionary,” he writes, “one has to be willing to overreach and fail some of the time.” In his concluding chapter, “Learning from Leonardo,” Isaacson counsels procrastination as a way to allow “ideas to marinate and intuitions to gel.” He suggests as well that there are times in which we should “let the perfect be the enemy of the good” and abandon a work that does not measure up to our standards.

That said, Isaacson’s monumental and magnificent biography does succeed in helping us understand what made da Vinci’s paintings so memorable, and in making Leonardo much more accessible, as a genius, a man of and outside of his times, and as a “quirky, obsessive, playful, and easily distracted” human being. And Isaacson reminds us mortals, who cannot even approach his talents, to be relentlessly curious; to retain a childlike wonder about the world; to be acutely observant, starting with details, making lists, looking for things unseen, indulging our fantasies and “drilling down for pure joy.” And, above all, perhaps, “to be open to mystery. Not everything needs sharp lines.”

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