

**30 LESSONS LEONARDO DA VINCI HAS TAUGHT ME
ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY, ART, AND LIFE**

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Leonardo da Vinci was the ultimate 'autodictat' (someone who taught himself everything).

He had no formal schooling, yet he didn't let that get in his way. He was the world's keenest observer— he would just look around himself, take notes, and followed his curiosity. He stayed like a child his entire life— never stopping learning, writing notes, or sketching.

He is one of the most celebrated artists of all-time, and for good reason. He was one of the first to fuse mathematics, science, and art all together. Many of his anatomical drawings of the human body were used in medical schools for hundreds of years.

I think if Leonardo da Vinci would be around today, he would be a keen user of the camera. He even used a 'camera obscura' (a contraption that essentially is like a big camera) to study perspective.

When I was reading the Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, I was amazed by how many parallels I was able to draw between his writings, and my personal thoughts on photography and art.

I consider him one of my masters, and I hope to study more of his art, philosophy, in order to better inform my photography. Here are some lessons I've learned from him, which uplifted me:

1. Painting x Poetry

'Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen.'

Painting is poetry that is seen (before it is felt). Poetry is painting that is felt — in terms of when you read the lines, it affects how you feel. But of course, you cannot see what is being described in a poem; except in your mind's eye.

In practical terms, poetry was seen as the ultimate art. People looked down on painting. It seemed that our buddy Leonardo had a chip on his shoulder. He was a bit insecure about being a painter.

I feel that as photographers, we also feel insecure. We feel inadequate compared to painters (ironically enough).

In a modern way, we can think of the following:

Photography is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is photography that is felt rather than seen.

Or in another way:

Photography is painting with a camera.

The camera is our paint brush. **“Photography” actually means painting with light (in Greek/Latin)**. Photo (photon, light) and graphy (graph, drawing, sketching, painting, etc).

Ultimately it doesn't matter what tool you use. As long as you create art and images that give you a feeling or an emotion.

In practical terms, I find the biggest inspiration in my photography through poetry and painting, and other forms of art. I find inspiration in music, sculpture, and film.

But the ultimate is to create **feeling** in your photos. Because a photograph without emotion is dead.

2. Start with a black canvas

'A painter should begin every canvas with a wash of black, because all things in nature are dark except where exposed by the light.'

I wrote a bit about starting with a black canvas in photography (instead of starting with a white canvas).

In art, we are always told to start with a blank white sheet or paper or canvas. But strangely enough; Leonardo advises us to do the opposite— to start with black, because all objects are naturally dark unless there is light.

Which makes sense to me. **White objects have stronger contrast against a black background (when compared to black objects against a white background).**

So if you want your subject to really pop out from the background, start with a black background— and add a light subject. You can lighten up your subject by shooting with a flash, by having them stand in direct sunlight and lowering your exposure compensation, or just having your subject wear white clothing.

I also think this is a good philosophy in life: starting with all black everything.

When in doubt, just start with black.

Black clothes, black car, black phone, black coffee. Then figure out what to add afterwards.

3. Soar to the heavens

Sky is the limit:

'Once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return.'

Leonardo was fascinated with flight. He sketched some of the first flying machines.

We have always been fascinated with flight. Humans have long dreamed of flying above the earth on wings.

Now we have flight, and we take it for granted. I remember when I was a kid and I first got on a plane— I was so amazed to see the world from above. To see human civilization like tiny ants. Or like the video game ‘Simcity.’

But now, alas, I have become used to it. I just read a book, close my eyes, or play some games on my phone. I have taken flight for granted.

Our buddy Leonardo tells us— once we taste flight, we will always keep walking on earth, looking to the heavens. We will always long to climb the heights again.

The way I think of this is the following:

Once we have tasted flight (grandeur in life), we can never live a normal life again.

Which means, seek personal greatness in your life. Fly to the highest limit possible. The sky is the limit. Then take it further than the skies.

4. Go out and seize your destiny

‘People of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.’

You cannot expect to accomplish anything in life without doing anything. All matter is inert, unless an outside force is set upon it.

Your potential is untapped. You need to go out and seize your destiny. You need to go out, and do things.

The sad thing is that I feel a lot of us live lives where we are just swept along with the current and sea of life. We wake up, brush our teeth, have coffee, go to work, mindlessly push keys for a few hours, scroll through social media feeds, eat, shit,

commute back home, watch a few hours of Netflix, then go to sleep — just to repeat the cycle.

No matter your situation in life, you can seize the best of your personal circumstances. Do you have a boring commute to work in your car? Listen to some podcasts which can empower you.

Do you commute to work via subway or bus? Use that time to write blog posts on your smartphone (I've done this in Evernote and IA writer). Or use that time to make some street photos.

Do you want to be a great photographer, yet you live a pretty domestic life? Take great photos of your children, and your partner, and of yourself.

Do you live in a boring city? Find inspiration from the internet. From the masters of the past. Creativity isn't just limited to photography — you can be creative by writing, singing, dancing, painting, sketching, or through the art of conversation (something we can learn from the Italians).

Go out and do cool shit.

5. Art is always work in progress

'Art is never finished, only abandoned.'

One of the things that hurt me a lot in life is thinking that art had to be perfect. Perfectionism prevented me from creating more art.

For me, the *act or process* of making art is often more enjoyable than the end product.

Which means, the process of walking on the streets, looking, and taking photos is actually more enjoyable than looking at my photos afterwards.

So realize, your art and projects will always be in a state of flux. The great thing with the internet is that everything is flexible, just like water. You can upload photos to this stream of water whenever, delete whenever, remix whenever, or adjust whenever. Even with my photo series, I constantly change them — change the edit, change the amount of images in the series, as well as remove/add certain photos.

Your life is constantly a work-in-progress. We will be constantly working on the art of our lives, until the day we die.

6. Spend each day well

'As a well spent day brings happy sleep, so life well used brings happy death.'

I don't know what it means to live a good life, but I know what it means to live a good day.

My personal philosophy: I try to live each day like a complete life. I treat each day like a pearl. I'm trying to make each day a perfect pearl. And hopefully at the end of my life, I can 'string together my pearls' to make a beautiful pearl necklace.

What is a day well spent? For me, it includes gratitude (saying what you are grateful for, or thinking about it), it includes some physical movement (exercise), it includes some creative work (making photos, writing, reading, etc), it includes some sort of spiritual gratitude, time with friends and loved ones.

Of course it is different for you. But you know the best.

So whenever you go to sleep, ask yourself:

Did I spend today well?

If you don't think you did, think to yourself:

*What can I do differently tomorrow? What can I do **less** of, and what can I do **more** of?*

7. Spend more time alone

'If you are alone you belong entirely to yourself. If you are accompanied by even one companion you belong only half to yourself or even less in proportion to the thoughtlessness of his conduct and if you have more than one companion you will fall more deeply into the same plight.'

I get my best creative work when I am alone. Even as I write these lines, I'm enjoying my nice Vietnamese coffee in Hanoi, while Cindy is at the archives. I just have some hip hop beats on my headphones, and I'm in the zone. No distractions.

If you want to really get in the zone of creative work, you need to belong to yourself. You cannot split your focus.

The analogy is like a beam of light. A beam of light is focused. But when you put a piece of glass in front of it (distractions), your focus disperses.

You want to be like a laser. Focused on one point. Then you can burn holes through steel.

8. Never stop learning

'Learning never exhausts the mind.'

I learned from my buddy Seneca:

As long as you live, keep learning how to live.

Living without learning is death.

We need to keep learning. That is what makes a child grow up to be a useful human being. That is what helps us have a zest for living, and waking up in the morning.

For me, I love to learn, because I feel I am making forward progress in life. I love learning because it makes me less anxious, stressed, and fearful in my life. I thank studying Stoic philosophy for helping kill a lot of my fears in life.

It still blows my mind how amazing the internet is. You can learn anything with the internet.

Even for me, I've been learning a lot of Leonardo da Vinci just through Google Images, Wikipedia, and all these free resources online. Thank God for Project Gutenberg (freely download texts online), and Google for archiving all this great art from the past.

So if you're bored at work, use that time to learn.

I remember when I was bored at my old 9-5 job, I used that chance to learn. I learned in my own time how to blog, and use social media.

If I were back in a 9-5 job, I would have text documents open with philosophy, or read anything related to art. This way, my boss couldn't yell at me.

Also, I would use each moment of my time to learn on my smartphone. We are all addicted to our phones; so why not use it in a positive way? I used to read a lot of ebooks on my phone via the Kindle app, and later on, I started to just download text files and sync them on Evernote. I've read the Gospels of Jesus (Jefferson Bible) as text documents, I've read the Fables of Aesop as a text file, I've re-read all the works of Seneca as text files, and I had a lot of fun. Reading things as text files are great because you can write notes as you read, and you can add new paragraphs, delete text, and move things around.

Sorry for the digression, but just know you can be creative to learn in any situation.

9. Study science and art

*'Principles for the Development of a Complete Mind: Study the science of art. Study the art of science. Develop your senses— especially **learn how to see**. Realize everything connects to everything else.'*

Our buddy Leonardo advises us to study the science of art. What are the mathematical principles which makes great art? This is where studying composition helps. Studying diagonals, triangles, angles, curves, and other

principles from math to make good compositions.

He also tells us to study the art of science. What makes science beautiful? When you look at a molecule or an atom— how do we see the universe in it?

Develop our senses (our sense of touch, smell, hearing). And he especially tells us to *learn how to see*.

As photographers, we need to learn how to see. How do we learn how to see?

For me, I learn to see by turning off my phone, and not getting distracted. I learn to see by letting myself get bored. I learn to see by walking slowly, looking up at the trees and the buildings, and by looking down at the street. I learn to see by looking at the faces of strangers, and if they look back at me, smiling gently at them.

Everything is connected, in art, and life.

10. Be a doer; not a knower.

'I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do.'

Knowledge is useless. We need to learn how to do; to apply what we have learned in real life.

What is the point of sitting in a cubicle, reading how to start a business, if you don't actually go out, setup a lemonade stand, and start selling?

What is the point of studying how to make better photos, if you don't go out with your smartphone and just take photos?

What is the point of learning how to live a better life— if you still allow yourself to get angry, to feel jealousy, and to feel envy?

I also feel we need to not be addicted to learning for the sake of it. I used to be. I spent too much time in books and learning, instead of going out in the real world and doing.

So whatever you learn, try to do, to apply your learnings in real life.

11. Want what you can do

'Want what you can do.'

We all have abilities, skills, and talents in life.

Want what you can do. That means, desire to do what is in your ability.

For me, I can blog. Therefore, I desire to blog.

I have the ability to see. I have the faculty of sight. Therefore, I make photographs, to make sense of the world.

I have the ability to walk. Therefore I enjoy walking. I have no serious injuries, so I deadlift at the gym.

I have a heart, so I use my heart to love others. I have a mouth, so I try to say kind things to others.

I have skin, so I don't let the hate from others penetrate my diamond-plated armor.

Whatever you possess in life; use it.

12. Relax

'Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgement will be surer. Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken at a glance and a lack of harmony and proportion is more readily seen.'

Relax every once in a while. When I get burnt out from coffee, and get headaches, I turn off my computer, and go for a walk. I don't do anything else. I walk slowly. I stretch. I take a nap.

When I am relaxing my mind, I go back to my work with re-invigorated passion. Not only that, but I often get some of my most creative ideas when I'm taking a nap.

Relax, if you want to achieve the max.

13. Philosophy is learning how to die, not live

'I thought I was learning to live; I was only learning to die.'

It is one thing to know how to live; it is another to know how to die.

I treat each day like it were my last. Of course I am still scared of dying. But at the same time, if we treat like death was tapping us on our shoulder, we wouldn't waste our time downloading apps, pursuing pointless pleasures, or wasting our lives.

The only thing I hope is that before I die, I have no regrets. I wish to have squeezed my heart dry — to give as much love as I was able to give. I wish to have hustled as hard as I can, not wasting a single moment — to create beautiful art, in order to uplift others.

If today were your last day on earth, what would you *not* do, and what would you *do*?

14. Don't lose your keen edge

'Minds which in lieu of exercise give themselves up to sloth; for these like the razor lose their keen edge, and the rest of ignorance destroys their form.'

I want to be like a samurai blade. Sharp. To cut through flesh like butter.

To keep our samurai blade sharp, we need to keep sharpening it. We cannot make our edge dull. We need to constantly practice.

For me, if I go a few days without writing, the words flow out a bit slower from my fingertips. There is more resistance.

In photography, if I go a few days without making a photo, holding the camera feels awkward. I don't see as well.

If I go a few weeks without deadlifting, holding the bar feels foreign.

Keep your blade sharp through constant practice. Through building good habits.

15. Never give up

'For constancy the phoenix serves as a type; for understanding by nature its renewal it is steadfast to endure the burning flames that consume it, and then it is reborn anew.'

When you kill a phoenix, it is reborn from the ashes, and soars to even higher heights.

When someone slays you in life, know that you are reborn. But this time, stronger than before.

So let us be like the Phoenix. Or the Hydra— when someone cuts off one of your heads, you regrow 2.

16. Avoid sweet deceivers

'The bee might be likened to deceit, for it has honey in its mouth and poison behind.'

Leonardo also wrote some deep fables/stories. One was about the bee— that it has honey in the front, and poison behind.

We can interpret this in different ways. Watch out for people who sweet-talk you; but secretly want to poison you.

Watch out for eating dessert, it tastes sweet at first, but causes you to get diabetes down the line.

Don't be deceived by wanting a fancy car. You own a fancy car (sweet in front), and then down the line, it costs you thousands of maintenance bills, and stress.

Everything that looks sweet in front, often has some hidden poison behind. Beware, and don't be a sucker.

17. On being useful

'Movement will cease before we are weary of being useful. Movement will fail sooner than usefulness. Death sooner than weariness. In serving others I cannot do enough. No labor is sufficient to tire me.'

Let us be useful for our entire lives. Let us keep being useful, even though we are bed-ridden. Let us never weary; even if Death is on our shoulder.

In serving others, know you can never do enough. As you give others benefits, keep giving them benefits, even if they are ungrateful.

Don't tire from labor. Know that your duty in life is to be useful to your fellow humans— your fellow brothers and sisters.

18. Life as a river

'The water you touch in a river is the last of that which has passed, and the first of that which is coming. Thus it is with time present. Life, if well spent, is long.'

I like thinking of water-analogies in life.

Life is a stream of water. It is a river. When you touch a point of the water, it will pass. But more will come. It is a constant stream— a flow. It is constantly in flux.

The present moment in time is like the moment you touch the river. The second you touch it, it is gone.

So relish the present moment— know that a lot of time has already passed, and some time is going to also come. But the problem is; we don't know when we will die (when the river stops flowing).

So if you were in the desert, without food and water for 3 days, and you saw a stream of water in the Oasis— wouldn't you drink as much of it as possible? Because you have no idea when the water will stop flowing.

That water is our life. We have no idea when it will stop flowing. So let us drink up while we can.

19. Poetry vs painting

Leonardo da Vinci (obviously) thought painting was superior to poetry. Some of his thoughts:

'If you, O poet, tell a story with your pen, the painter with his brush can tell it more easily, with simpler completeness and less tedious to be understood.'

I think the same is with photos. A photo can often tell a better story than both a painting or a poem. We are visual creatures; we prefer images over text.

Apparently in the times of Leonardo (500 years ago) people didn't respect painting as much as poetry. Leonardo defends himself:

'If you all painting dumb poetry, the painter may call poetry blind painting. Now which is the worse defect? To be blind or dumb?'

A lot of people make fun of us photographers. But let us not take any of their insults seriously.

Even 500+ years ago, people preferred looking at images, instead of reading words:

'Though the poet is as free as the painter in the invention of his fictions, they are not so satisfactory to men as paintings; for, though poetry is able to describe forms, actions, and places in words, the painter deals with the actual similitude of the forms, in order to represent them.'

Another interesting point from Leonardo: words and concepts change depending on your language. But images are always the same:

'Now tell me which is the nearer to the actual man; the name of man or the image of the man? The name of man differs in different countries, but his form is never changed but by death.'

This little pep talk from Leonardo helped empower me, to realize how great photography is. To depict the real world, instantly, and easily.

So let us not have low self esteem because we are photographers, not painters. If anything, photography is the superior tool.

20. Don't have too many figures in your frame

'Historical pictures ought not to be crowded and confused with too many figures.'

Just a practical tip: don't over-crowd your photos with too many figures. When looking at the work of Leonardo, he doesn't crowd his frames. Nor does he overlap his figures too much.

So for me, I just want to have simple photos; with fewer subjects/figures.

21. Don't copy the past

What is better— to learn from nature, or to learn from past artists?

First of all, Leonardo says it is better to imitate the old-school ancient artists, not the ‘modern’ artists:

‘Which is best, to draw from nature or from the antique? It is better to imitate the antique than modern work.’

But the problem of copying the past is this: as time goes on, art gets worse and worse. Why? Because everyone is copying one another.

Just like a photo copier: each time you photo copy something, it loses resolution, detail, and beauty:

‘Painting declines and deteriorates from age to age, when painters have no other standard than painting already done.’

Therefore if you want to be a great artist, don’t just copy the past. Don’t take the past work (already) done in the past as a barometer for your own work.

If anything, look at the past art for inspiration— but seek to excel your masters:

‘The painter will produce pictures of small merit if he takes for his standard the pictures of others as was seen in the painters after the Romans who always imitated each other and so their art constantly declined from age to age.’

To sum up, Leonardo tells us to go back to the source of nature for the best inspiration:

‘If he will study natural objects and nature, he will bear good fruit.’

For me, I gain great inspiration from past art. But nowadays, I’m just trying to appreciate nature more. Looking at trees, the faces and behavior of children, and the faces of my fellow humans.

Find inspiration from the masters of photography, yet don’t seek to copy them. Or else your photo copies will be of a worse resolution and sharpness. Use their work as a blueprint, but then seek to make better photos than them.

Like Leonardo says, excel your master:

'He is a poor disciple who does not excel his master.'

22. Don't specialize

Us modern people like to specialize. We think it is the secret to success.

What made Leonardo great is that he didn't specialize; he generalized.

He studied everything. Botany, sculpture, architecture, the human body, painting, drawing, light, math; the whole world was his oyster.

So don't devote yourself to just one thing in life:

'Nor is the painter praiseworthy who does but one thing well, as the nude figure, heads, draperies, animals, landscapes or other such details, irrespective of other work; for there can be no mind so inept, that after devoting itself to one single thing and doing it constantly, it should fail to do it well.'

As a photographer, don't limit yourself. Take photos of anything. Make art out of anything. No limits.

And as a photographer, don't just make photos. Make other forms of art. Make art with your voice, with the movements of your body, through sketching, drawing, making music, whatever.

For myself, I have been making more art for fun, by making my own music, by writing poetry, and even making my own raps.

So how can you generalize more in your photography and art? Don't specialize. Seek universality in your art:

'A painter is not admirable unless he is universal. Some may distinctly assert that those persons are under a delusion who call that painter a good master who can do nothing well but a head or a figure. Certainly this is no great

achievement; after studying one single thing for a lifetime who would not have attained some perfection in it?'

23. Show passion in your subjects

'That figure is most admirable which by its actions best expresses the passion that animates it.'

If you photograph your subject; make sure their expression shows some emotion and soul.

24. Triangles

'The space between the legs will be an equilateral triangle.'

Simple idea: if you photograph someone walking with their legs in a “V” shape— it makes an equilateral triangle. I will try to do this more.

25. What to show in a human

If we want to make better photos, we need to create an image in which the viewer understands the mind of the subject:

'A picture or representation of human figures ought to be done in such a way that the spectator may easily recognize, by means of their attitudes, the purpose in their minds.'

For example, if you want to make a photograph that feels sad, you need to make the subject of your photo look sad. And therefore, you need to make your viewer feel sad.

Leonardo continues, by saying we need to **show gestures** (through body or hand gestures) to show the emotions and mental state:

'Thus, if you have to represent a man of noble character in the act of speaking, let his gestures be such as naturally accompany good words; and, in the same way, if you wish to depict a man of a brutal nature, give him fierce movements; as with his arms flung out towards the listener, and his head and breast thrust forward beyond his feet, as if following the speaker's hands.'

We need to make photos that people can understand, without having to write out the story. By showing the attitudes and gestures of the subjects:

*'Thus it is with a deaf and dumb person who when he sees two men in conversation — although he is deprived of hear— can nevertheless understand, from the attitudes and **gestures** of the speakers, the nature of their discussion.'*

Simple tips:

- Photograph hand gestures and body language
- Photograph eye contact: either looking you, looking up, down, or to the side
- Paint a mood in the photo — monochrome and gritty for sad, and color for bright and happy

26. To be human is to move

'Sinews are created for the purpose of movement. As the world is perpetually stable within itself no movement ever takes place there, and in the absence of any movement the sinews are not necessary.'

An interesting random thought from Leonardo— we have muscles and sinews in order to move. Otherwise— why would we have them?

The problem is today, we don't move anymore. We sit all day.

So practical tip on living: **try to move more.**

I try to move more by doing yoga, by stretching, by walking more, or lifting heavy stuff at the gym.

I also read something that the purpose of the brain is to coordinate movement. So **if you live a life without movement; why do you need a brain?** Apparently the only organisms that have brains are the organisms that move.

Practical tip: if you sit at a chair all day (I do), get up every 30 minutes or so, go get a sip of water, drink more coffee, stretch, or walk around the corridors of your office.

Whenever possible, take the stairs, and try to move.

27. Nothing can be achieved without force

'Force is the child of physical motion and the grandchild of spiritual motion, and the mother and origin of gravity.'

We cannot make change, or have a force in life— without physical motion. We also need spiritual motion. Gravity (a law) is inter-connected with spirituality, movement, and force.

To create art, you need force and movement.

To create gratitude, you need to stir your heart, emotions, and soul.

28. Be like gravity

*'Gravity is limited to the elements of water and earth; but this force is **unlimited**, and by it infinite worlds might be moved if instruments could be made by which the force could be generated.'*

I like this idea that gravity is an unlimited force. What if we could be like gravity; and live a life unlimited? With unlimited force?

29. What do we depend on?

'Force, with physical motion, and gravity, with resistance are the four external powers on which all actions of mortals depend.'

As human beings, Leonardo tells us that we depend on:

1. Force
2. Physical motion
3. Gravity
4. Resistance
5. Force: to make changes in our life
6. Motion: we need to move to make those changes in our life
7. Gravity: whenever we want to make a change in life or move, we will always fight against the force of gravity
8. Resistance: and of course, whenever we want to move or fight gravity, we will fight resistance

So essentially, you need to work hard, to fight the laws of gravity and resistance, in order to become the best version of yourself. To make the most beautiful art. To stir your creativity, and put your creative works into the real world.

30. Become a renaissance person

Become a renaissance person. Learn everything. Do everything.

Don't limit yourself. Study science, art, architecture, painting, drawing, math, music, the human body. Know that everything is inter-connected.

Never stop learning, being curious, and making art.

Always, Eric

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