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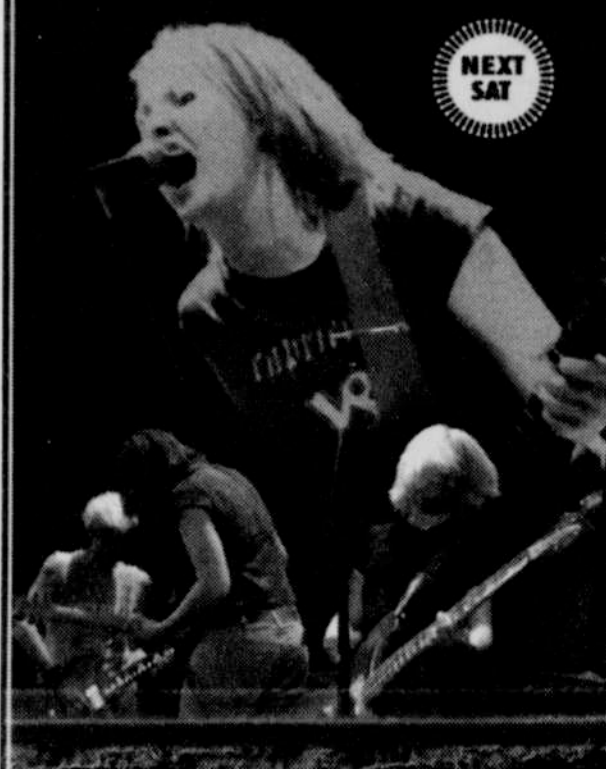
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## film

# Was Leonardo Gay?

As moviegoers try to crack *The Da Vinci Code*, the Renaissance man's sexuality remains the real mystery

by Andy Simon

**D**on't look for red or blue bandannas hanging out the back pockets of the Apostles in "The Last Supper." That's not the sort of code that the title of the movie *The Da Vinci Code* refers to. And yet there is ample evidence that the artist in the title, Leonardo da Vinci, was gay.

Leonardo was a genius. Everyone agrees to that. He was also well-connected: a close, perhaps even intimate, friend of Lorenzo de Medici, more than an acquaintance of Niccolò Machiavelli, an employee of Cesare Borgia. An accomplished artist and sculptor but also a scientist and philosopher whose interests ranged from flying machines to urban planning, the term "Renaissance man" was coined to describe him.

Paradoxes abound in Leonardo's life. His main contribution to the history of Western art lies in his careful, meticulous studies of human anatomy—human flesh. Yet one of the two images he is most remembered for is the deeply spiritual "The Last Supper." The other is, of course, a fully dressed and very modest woman—"Mona Lisa." He had an enduring influence on Renaissance art and all that followed from it. Yet most of his works were destroyed or deteriorated beyond salvation during his lifetime.

But was he gay?

Many of the more straight-laced art historians bristle at the suggestion, as if that factor would contaminate his work and his reputation. But a very strong case can be made for the claim.

There are no back-pocket bandannas, but one can find clues in his work. His sketch books are filled with lovingly rendered front-and-back drawings of male bodies. Unlike Greek and Roman statues of nude men, Leonardo's nudes sport accurately drawn and appropriately proportioned genitalia. In some, those genitalia are fully and unmistakably erect.

Some critics have seen hints of homosexuality even in Leonardo's most famous images. Sister Wendy, BBC's well-known art historian, interprets Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile as evidence that the two of them shared a secret. And what was that secret? According to Sister Wendy, it was that the painter was gay.

Admittedly, that's a bit of a stretch. And a renewed interest in observing and depicting the physical world as it is, including the human form, is a big part of what made the Renaissance the Renaissance. So maybe Leonardo was just a good observer of reality. But several details of his life provide the context that makes these clues plausible evidence of gayness.

For one thing, no record exists—no gossip, no reports, no mention in his many journals and diaries—that he ever had any close relationship with any women. No less an authority than Sigmund Freud says, having studied Leonardo's accounts of his childhood, that it is "doubtful whether he ever embraced a woman with love."

On the other hand, the painter surrounded

himself with the company of men. He had close friends among the wealthy and powerful figures of his age. In addition, young men from throughout Italy flocked to his studios to study art and assist with various artistic endeavors.

Still, all that could be quite innocent. Leonardo and his disciples might have been united in their passion for art rather than their passion for one another. But not all of their Florentine neighbors saw it that way.



Leonardo da Vinci's relationship with Salai (right) lasted for almost 30 years.

Leonardo was twice arrested on charges of sodomy, and while that charge was sometimes used indiscriminately for any sort of out-of-wedlock fornication, at least once the allegation was clear. The artist was accused of a homosexual liaison with a notorious male prostitute who was also reputed to be notoriously beautiful. Though arrested and charged, Leonardo was never convicted because his anonymous accusers failed to show up for his trials.

Leonardo was a young man when he was arrested for sodomy. His last years, too, provide a hint to his sexual nature. He had taken in and raised several protégés, but there was one who clearly had a special place in his heart. Leonardo called him Salai, meaning "offspring of Satan."

The artist sketched Salai many times, so we know he was quite a beauty. His nickname referred to the fact that he wasn't always nice, with a reputation for lying and even stealing. And yet Leonardo kept him on. In fact, they were regarded as inseparable. And not for just a short time: Their relationship lasted for almost 30 years. Some commentators refer to Salai as almost a son to Leonardo. It is easy to imagine, however, that their relationship was close but in a somewhat different way.

So, was Leonardo gay? There's no way to say for sure. But given the evidence, we can be forgiven if, when the question comes up, a slightly sly and knowing smile comes to our lips. **10**

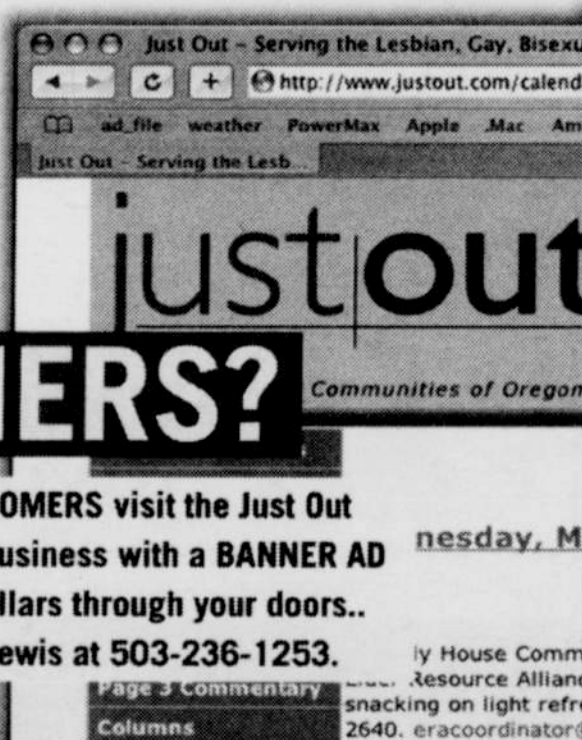
THE DA VINCI SERIES will provide audiences with concise, authoritative explorations of the major themes that helped propel the plot of *The Da Vinci Code* 7:30 p.m. June 14, 21 and 28 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$26-\$44 a lecture from the box office or Ticketmaster after 10 a.m. June 1.

ANDY SIMON is a teacher and theater lover who lives in Southeast Portland.

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