More than any other person, one man symbolizes the Italian Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) was a painter, sculptor, poet, engineer, scientist, and inventor. We know him chiefly from two sources - his paintings and his notebooks. Both reveal him to have been a man of extraordinary talent and imagination.

Paintings like "The Last Supper" are so familiar to us that it is easy to forget how strange and new they were to the Renaissance viewer. During the Middle Ages artists had painted scenes from the Bible, but their work had an outwardly, spiritual quality. In Leonardo's "The Last Supper," the Apostles are real men, sketched on the model of people the artist encountered in the streets of Florence. Leonardo used perspective, the technique of showing three dimensions through the use of diagonal lines seeming to come together at one point in the painting. He captured human drama, the crucial moment when Christ says that Judas will betray him to the Romans.

Leonardo wrote the notebooks backwards in mirror writing to preserve secrecy. They contain thousands of preliminary sketches for paintings. Even more interesting are Leonardo's drawings of his own inventions: a tank, a submarine, a new kind of gear, and many more. He was fascinated by flight. He made endless examinations of the structure of the wings of various birds. He actually fashioned wings for humans with which he himself attempted flight - unsuccessfully.

Leonardo was able to represent the human figure realistically in paintings. Behind this ability lay thousands of hours of anatomical dissection and highly detailed and accurate drawings of muscle systems. These two are recorded in The Notebook.

It appears that Leonardo was interested in everything that concerned people and the world. He was the ideal "Renaissance Man," a term that has come to describe someone interested in and able to do many different things.

Questions for Understanding:

1. If someone living in the 21st century described a friend as a "Renaissance Person," what would be meant?

2. Do you know of anyone who you would consider to be a "Renaissance Person?" If so, describe that person. If not, why do you suppose such people are not more common?
3. Is well-roundedness something that you admire? Why or why not?

Activities for Understanding:

a. Standing straight up, without shoes, extend your arms straight out at right angles to your torso. According to Leonardo, ideally one's arm span (the distance between extended hands) should be equal to one's height. Therefore, drawing vertical lines at your fingertips and horizontal lines at the floor and the top of your head should enclose you in a perfect square. Try it!

b. Assume a “jumping jack” position with arms extended diagonally up and out, legs straight, and feet apart. The tips of your fingers and your feet should become four points of a perfect circle with your naval at the center. Measure and check!

c. Perspective is often used in Renaissance art. Study the following photograph of Leonardo’s “The Last Supper.”

- With a ruler and pencil draw a line from the upper right-hand corner across the tops of the openings to the middle of the picture. Find and draw the corresponding line on the other side of the painting.
- Look for and draw other lines suggested by the placement of arms, feet, ceiling tiles, shoulder position, etc. All of these lines should meet at the same point.

What figure is painted where all of the “disappearing lines” meet?

Why do you suppose that Leonardo organized the painting this way?