Tips for Talking about da Vinci

While your impulse may be to immediately begin “teaching”, more is gained in the long run if you take the time to help the children establish an emotional connection with the art. The questions below help kids find their own relevance in works of art, and thereby learn to value art as having something to do with their own lives.

What’s going on in this picture?
What do you see that makes you say that?
These simple questions work particularly well with artworks that have a narrative thread. You’ll notice this question is different than, “What do you see?” Instead of eliciting a list of things in the picture, “What's going on?” invites a consideration of relationships and interactions and taps into children’s natural interest in stories. The question, “What do you see that makes you say that?” focuses comments on the evidence at hand and helps kids explain their assumptions.

How would you feel if you were “in” this work of art?
What would-you-hear? How would something feel to touch? What path would you take through the picture? What do you see that makes you say that? Imagining the picture as an environment engages all the senses. The expressive qualities of a work become more concrete, easier to relate to.

Painting #1: Describe the person sitting there and guess at her mood. This will provide a baseline from which to teach them about the mysterious smile, the painting techniques, the era, debates over Mona Lisa's true identity and Da Vinci's own life.

The Mona Lisa sparked a revolution in portraits by perfecting the sfumato and chiaroscuro techniques. Sfumato, meaning “vanished,” is seen in the absence of lines; everything in the Mona Lisa blends together without borders, and brush-strokes disappear. Chiaroscuro is the technique of giving shape to images through shadow and light.

Painting #2: How big do you think this painting is?
It's huge, really – 15 x 29 feet.
The technical perspective in "The Last Supper" is incredible. You can see that every single element of the painting directs one's attention straight to the midpoint of the composition, Christ's head. It's arguably the greatest example of one point perspective ever created.

Painting #4: Look at the writing on the top – da Vinci used to write in code
Leonardo wrote in Italian using a special kind of shorthand that he invented himself. People who study his notebooks have long been puzzled by something else, however. He usually used "mirror writing", starting at the right side of the page and moving to the left. Only when he was writing something intended for other people did he write in the normal direction.