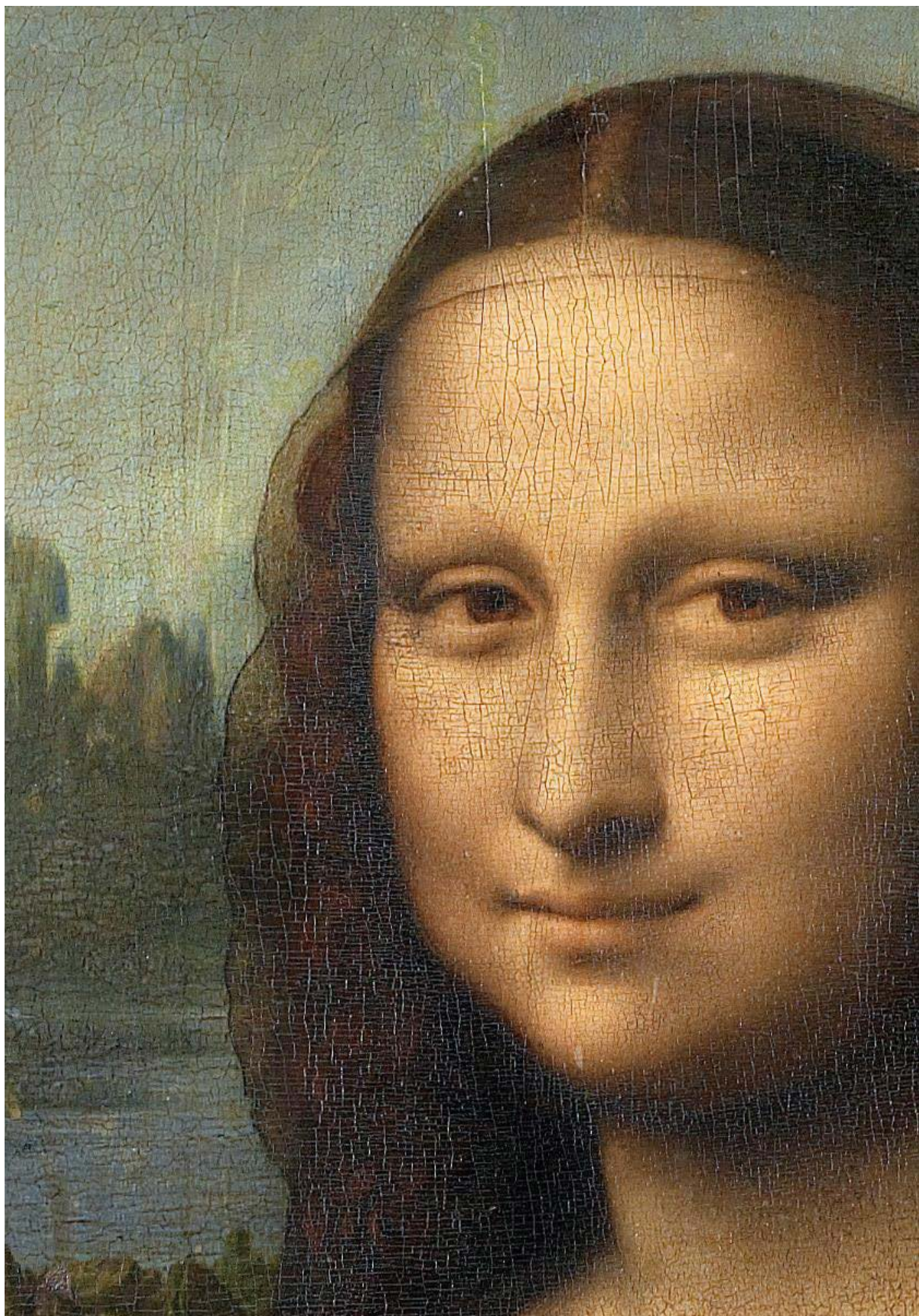


THE MONA LISA

DOCUMENTATION





Mona Lisa (detail). H. 77 x W. 53 cm. Scale: 1 : 1



Leonardo DA VINCI

Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, known as the Mona Lisa, La Gioconda or La Joconde.

C. 1503 and 1506.

Oil on wood (poplar)

H. 77 cm; W. 53 cm

“The eyes had the radiance and moisture seen in life: they were surrounded by rosy and pearly tints, while the lashes were rendered with the greatest subtlety. The eyebrows could not be truer, for they represented the way hair grows – thicker in some places and thinner in others, following the pores of the skin. The nose, with its lovely pink and tender nostrils, was strikingly lifelike [...] In the hollow of the throat, the attentive observer could see the beating of her pulse.”

GIORGIO VASARI (1511-1574),
painter and author, in *The Lives of the Artists*
(*Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*),
Oxford University Press, 1991.

APPROACHING THE WORK

It is difficult to take a fresh look at such a well-known work, which has been endlessly reproduced and subverted. Let us focus on what we see, starting with the pose: a woman sitting on a chair positioned in profile, its armrests and bars almost imperceptible in the shadows. She is represented in a half-body portrait, framed to extend just below the waist, with her arms bent and her hands folded. Her torso is turned slightly to our right, and her face, in an almost frontal pose, gazes at the viewer, with the hint of a smile. The head stands out against a landscape composed of two superimposed parts: in the lower part, paths and a bridge in a warm palette of red ochre; in the upper part, a bluish landscape of jagged rocks and peaks.

The woman seems very close to us, with her hands placed in the **foreground**. Behind her, a parapet and two small columns, of which only the base and the edge of the shafts are visible, define the loggia in which she is sitting. This space articulates two radically opposed viewpoints: that of the figure seen from the front and the landscape seen from the sky. However, a harmony is established between figure and landscape through a play of formal analogies, namely between the winding path and the folds in the sleeve of the robe, or in the alignment of the horizon and the gaze.

The most amazing thing in this painting is the very natural aspect of the light, as if the artist had managed to paint the thickness of the air. How does this magic work? Leonardo only uses light to define volumes, create shapes and suggest distances. The contours are blurred, using a technique known as “**sfumato**” in Italian. The painter eliminates contrasts and limits, imperceptibly combining shade and light, as found in nature. He reduces his palette of colours to the elements: earth, stone, water and air. Finally, he covers his brushstrokes with a succession of coloured glazes that vitrify the painting.

KEY CONCEPTS

Glaze:

In painting, a thin, transparent layer that is spread over already dry colours to harmonise their tints and give them more shine.

Iconography:

In art, the study of various figurative representations of an individual, an era or the symbols of a religion.

Visual plane:

A term referring to the various parallel vertical surfaces that are arranged in such a way as to give an illusion of depth. The part closest to the spectator is called the “foreground”, the intermediate part is called the “middle ground” and the most distant part is called the “background”.

Sfumato:

This word comes from the Italian *sfumo* (smoke) and in painting refers to a vaporous effect that blurs contours. Sfumato contributes to the illusion of depth by softening details and contrasts in the distance. It therefore reproduces the eye's perception of real space. This process was developed during the Renaissance by Leonardo da Vinci.

THE PRODUCTION OF A PAINTING: THE CASE OF AN OIL ON WOOD PORTRAIT

SEVERAL DIFFERENT STEPS ARE INVOLVED IN THE PRODUCTION OF A PAINTING:

1

The choice of the support and its preparation

For this portrait, Leonardo chose to paint on wood, a material in frequent use since Antiquity (canvas did not become popular until the seventeenth century). Although it is inflexible and sensitive to variations in humidity, Renaissance artists appreciated it for its solidity. To minimise warping, they lined their panel with wooden support strips that follow the grain of the wood and then inserted battens perpendicularly to hold them in place: this operation is called cradling.

The artist then applied a coating composed of several layers to isolate the panel from the paint. Here Leonardo uses a coating of mastic, turpentine, white lead and glue. The other two or three preparatory layers consist of alcohol, arsenic and linseed oil. This preparation of the support would take several weeks due the drying time required between each layer.

2

The creation of the painting

The artist produces a first draft on the support in charcoal or graphite, then enriches it in order to define its volumes and contrasts: this is known as a grisaille, which is often composed of yellow ochre, black or green earth diluted in water or an essence.

After leaving time for drying, the artist prepares his pigments – of plant, animal or mineral origin – by finely grinding them and mixing them with a binder – in this case oil, which was appreciated for its stabilising properties, its resistance and its visual effect. The artist first applies the darkest colours, gradually lightening them until the brushstroke becomes invisible. The final layers are very strongly diluted and enhance the shades by heightening the colours: these are the glazes.

Here, Leonardo mixes his pigments with a very fine and very diluted oil. He applies his glazes successively, each producing a different chromatic nuance and allowing for subtle shading effects.

3

The finishes

After several months of drying, which is required to reinforce the pictorial layer, the artist applies a varnish to protect his painting and give it a glossy finish. The varnish is often obtained at this time from a gum or a resin mixed with oil, an essence or alcohol.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORK

A PORTRAIT

The Mona Lisa is a portrait. But who is behind that mysterious smile?

It is Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo. Her name, means “happy” in Italian, which explains where the painting got its nickname (*La Gioconda*). To celebrate the birth of a child and the purchase of a new house, her husband commissioned a portrait from Leonardo da Vinci. But the latter never delivered the painting and it travelled with him to the court of François I in France. The artist constantly reworked the portrait, such that it continued to slowly mature right up to his death.

This portrait had a great influence on artists and was held a model from the very beginning. In fact, in this work, Leonardo condensed the codes relating to the representation of the human figure as well the technical research of his time. For instance, the three-quarter pose, the positioning of the figure in an interior space opening onto a landscape, the framing below the waist and the hands superimposed in the foreground were all motifs very frequently used by Flemish painters, particularly Hans Memling (1435-1494). Furthermore, Italian artists such as Botticelli (1445-1510) or Ghirlandaio (1449-1494) had already experimented with life-size depictions and a model that gazes at the viewer. But in the *Mona Lisa* da Vinci sublimates these codes and achieves a perfect balance. He adds his own touch (the *sfumato*) while infusing vibrancy in the figure’s skin tone and, more singularly, in her smile, literally giving life to his model and establishing a real proximity with the viewer.

There are other ways of composing a portrait: the person can be portrayed in profile, as in the *Portrait of Jean II le Bon* (before 1350), in keeping with a format derived from classical antiquity and more particularly from imperial medals, or in full length, as for example *Charles I, King of England* by Van Dyck (c. 1635); it can appear against a neutral background or in an interior evoking the model’s personality and status. In a group portrait, several people can be represented as in Ingres’ *The Stamaty Family* (1818).

Similarly, while one of the functions of a portrait is to preserve the memory of a person, its purpose varies from one work to another. *The Mona Lisa* was originally intended for an individual’s private home. Conversely, there are official portraits whose purpose is to impose the commissioner’s authority in public places or ceremonial rooms. Furthermore, representations on funeral monuments fix the image of the deceased for all eternity. Before the emergence and development of photography, only people from wealthy backgrounds had the privilege of commissioning their portraits.



1.



2.



3.

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1. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Stamaty Family*
 2. Jean II le Bon (1319-1364), *King of France*, before 1350
 3. Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, *The Woman with the Pearl*, 1868-1870
 4. Antoon van Dyck, *Charles I, King of England* (1600-1649), known as *Charles I at the Hunt*.
 5. Joseph Théodore Richomme, *The Death of Leonardo da Vinci*, early nineteenth century



4.



5.

THE POSTERITY OF THE WORK

Acknowledged as a masterpiece from its creation, the *Mona Lisa* has inspired many artists over the centuries, such as Corot for his *Woman with the Pearl* (c. 1868-1870), right up to the present day. Its theft in 1911 by an Italian, eager to restore his country's cultural heritage, generated massive media attention and reinforced its iconic status. This fascination with the *Mona Lisa* prompted many artists to tarnish her image. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) affixed a moustache to the portrait in 1919 and titled his version with a provocative play on words (*L.H.O.O.Q.*).

Similarly, the mysteries surrounding this work contributed to the creation of a mythology. First and foremost regarding the model's identity: is it a man? A portrait of Leonardo dressed as a woman? Isabelle d'Este? A favourite of Giuliano di Lorenzo de' Medici? Recent sources have proven her identity. Her **iconography** also raises questions: is she in mourning for her child? Or is this the conventional dress of married women? What does the smile mean? Is it a reference to her name? And so on...

LEONARDO, A RENAISSANCE GENIUS

A multidisciplinary artist, a scholar and traveller, he is the very embodiment of the Renaissance genius, who, like Michelangelo and Raphael, mastered the most varied disciplines: painting, literature, philosophy, science, etc. His work was unanimously recognised in Italian courts – Florence, Milan, Mantua, Rome – as well as throughout Europe. His fame was such that the king of France, François I, called on him to enter his service in 1516. As a creator and not merely a virtuoso technician subject to the instructions of his patrons and to conventional modes of representation, he invented flying machines, automats, a submarine, an automobile, a diving suit, etc.

A legend was built up around his personality: for example, his supposed death in the arms of François I inspired many artists (Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Death of Leonardo da Vinci*, 1818, Musée du Petit Palais, Paris; François-Jean Heim, *Leonardo da Vinci on his Deathbed*, which features on the ceiling arch *The Renaissance of the Arts in France*, 1833, Galerie Campana, Musée du Louvre).

NOTICE OF THE WORK

Peintures / Italie / 1500-1600

Léonard de VINCI

Vinci, 1452 - Amboise (France), 1519

Portrait de Lisa Gherardini, épouse de Francesco del Giocondo, *dite* Monna Lisa, la Gioconda ou la Joconde

Huile sur bois, peint vers 1503-1519

Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, known as the *Mona Lisa* or *La Gioconda* (*La Joconde* in French)

Oil on panel, about 1503–1519

Acquis par François I^{er} en 1518. INV. 779

Si l'identité du modèle a été parfois discutée, on s'accorde aujourd'hui sur le nom de Lisa Gherardini (1479-1542). L'historien de l'art italien Vasari (1511-1574) précise que le portrait fut commandé par son époux, Francesco del Giocondo, marchand de soie florentin.

Although the sitter's identity has been debated, it is now agreed that she was Lisa Gherardini (1479–1542). The Italian art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) recorded that the portrait was commissioned by her husband, Francesco del Giocondo, a Florentine silk merchant.

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