



# THE MONA LISA

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ACTIVITIES WITH PUPILS





Leonardo da Vinci,  
*Portrait of Isabella d'Este*,  
1499-1500



Leonardo da Vinci,  
*Portrait of a Woman*,  
known as *La Belle Ferronnière*,  
c. 1495-1499

# DISCOVERING THE WORK

**Objectives:**

to learn how to look at a well-known work of art and formulate hypotheses about its fame.

**Duration:**

about one hour divided into five stages

**Materials:**

tracing paper and pencil, images of the Mona Lisa to be found on the internet: in the museum with visitors present, full-scale details and the notice of the work.



web



various materials  
(pencil, scissors, etc.)



computer



music



document



image



word processing

**First, the teacher develops strategies to use in discussing a work that is highly publicised but little known to the pupils.**

**With the whole class**

- Ask the pupils to say everything they know about the painting and point out how little information we have about it: its name (but on the notice several names are stated), its fame (but we don't know why), the name of its creator.
- Propose that the class do a visual investigation of the painting to understand what makes it so famous.

## COVER MONA LISA AND OBSERVE THE LANDSCAPE: WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT IT?



Images of  
details of  
the *Mona Lisa*

Has anyone ever seen a landscape like this before? What materials or shapes do we recognise?

**With the whole class**

- Look for and name traces of human activity in the landscape (bridges, paths, etc.).
- Associate the sensations of coldness and warmth with the landscape and identify both, one in the warm brown tones and the other in the bluish tones.
- Express the sensations evoked by the landscape: imaginary world, mystery, dream... and study the visual means used by the painter to elicit these sensations: the range of blues, the fluffy aspect of the forms, etc.

## A CLOSER LOOK AT MONA LISA: THE QUESTION OF THE MODEL

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Images of details of the *Mona Lisa*



Pencil and tracing paper

Is she surprisingly beautiful? Is she very well dressed? Is she wearing precious jewellery? The questioning and observation of the model should lead the pupils to look for the work's fame in the painting itself: a painting that does not show everything and leaves areas of mystery, the technique of *sfumato*, colours close to the natural elements.

### In groups

- Describe the details that can be seen precisely (a hair, the embroidery on the top of the dress, the line of the veil on the forehead...), aspects that are blurred or difficult to see (the hands...), things you can make out but not fully perceive (the chair in which she is sitting...), things you can't see at all (her eyelashes, her nails, etc.).
- Trace the contours of the *Mona Lisa*'s face on a tracing paper placed over the image of the work. An impossible task because the shapes are not defined by sharp contours, but blurred, as if smoky: this is the *sfumato* technique.
- Attempt to name the colours and see how difficult it is to characterise them because there are no clear and bright colours.

## THE MONA LISA: COMPOSITION OF A PORTRAIT

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The *Mona Lisa*



Frame with the dimensions of the *Mona Lisa* cut out of cardboard

Does she have a particular attitude? A special bond with the viewer?

The experiments below make pupils aware that beyond the model, the painting is a portrait deliberately composed to touch the viewer.

### In groups

- Compare the dimensions of the *Mona Lisa*'s face with those of the pupils and point out that they are at the same scale (either by projecting the work so that it is at the right scale, or by calculating the ratio of reduction of a printout of the actual work).
- Imitate her pose and analyse its position in a frame so that they understand that her hands are at the very edge of the painting.
- Move around and see that she is looking at us and follows our movement while smiling slightly.

## SUMMARY

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The *Mona Lisa* with visitors present

From this purely visual discovery, do a recap of all the hypotheses formulated to explain the success of the *Mona Lisa*: the perfection of the pictorial technique, the mysterious shadowy areas of the painting, the imaginary landscape, and the close proximity the portrait establishes with the viewer. The investigation remains open and will be pursued with analyses in various disciplines.

Compare the reproduction of the work with the reality of its display conditions in the museum: the painting is small and difficult to see because it is protected by armoured glass, which alters its colours, and it is hidden by a crowd of visitors.

# ACTIVITIES

## 1

Written composition

### THE MONA LISA HAS BEEN STOLEN!



Map of the museum:  
<https://www.louvre.fr/en/plan>

Tales of the Museum, three-minute video on the theft of the *Mona Lisa*

**Objective: to produce two types of text, a description and an article.**

Let's go back in time, it's 1911. The *Mona Lisa* has been stolen from the Louvre! By a strange and mysterious phenomenon, all the photographs, reproductions and even the drawings of the *Mona Lisa* were erased at the same time. How can the real painting be found again and identified without having a picture of it?

<https://www.louvre.fr/en/tales-of-the-museum/theft-mona-lisa>

#### Group 1

To conduct the investigation, the apprentice detectives will have to use their memory and reconstruct the description of the painting: they will have to come up with a written "police sketch" of the *Mona Lisa* that will be transmitted to the four corners of the world... and why not in as many languages as possible!

#### Group 2

What happened? Who did it? How and by whom was the painting found? All theories are possible as the apprentice journalists vie with each other to come up with imaginative explanations, using the clues contained in the media (photograph of the room where the theft took place, map of the Louvre).

And to find out the true story of the *Mona Lisa*'s theft, visit the Louvre's website in the company of Vivant Denon (the animated character who appears on the notices of works; his role is to give fun explanations: on the home page of the Louvre's website, click on the Learning about Art / Tales of the Museum section.)

#### Expanded exercise

Produce an actual police sketch of Mona Lisa from the texts written by Group 1.

## 2

History

### THE MODEL'S GAZE, A HISTORY OF PORTRAITS



Louvre website  
Art museum websites



Art books  
Schoolbook

**Objective: to make aesthetic choices and argue your opinion**

Consult a book on art, the Louvre's Atlas database or other museum sites and select ten portraits that are contemporary with the *Mona Lisa*. The works of these artists for example: Master of the Legend of the Magdalen (*Margaret of Austria*), Hans Memling (*Portrait of an Old Woman*), Lucas Cranach (*Magdalena Luther*), Jacob Claesz van Utrecht (*Portrait of a Woman Holding a Carnation*), Jan Gossaert known as Mabuse (*Portrait of a 40-Year-Old Monk*), Giovanni Francesco Caroto (*Portrait of a Woman*), Raphael (*Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*), Jean Clouet (*Portrait of François I, King of France*), etc.

Ask pupils to choose, individually or in groups, the portrait they prefer and the one they like least, specifying the one or ones they would keep or reject for a study on Renaissance portraiture, and the one they would use on an invitation card for an exhibition on the Renaissance, for an advertisement or a spin-off product.

The exercise is based, first, on aesthetic argumentation supported by an analysis that draws on precise vocabulary (composition, colour, light, pictorial technique, support, etc.). Second, it serves to establish a chronology of the birth of the modern portrait, based on writing up a precise identity card for each work (featuring the name of the artist, the person represented, the date, techniques used, etc.), which can be linked to pupils' study of the Renaissance and the relevant chapter in their history textbook.

### 3

#### History and Visual Arts FAMILIES OF PORTRAITS



Louvre website  
Art museum  
websites



Word processing

**Objective:** to recognise the evolution of the portrait (with regard to history programmes) and its different modes of representation, to be able to attribute a portrait to a historical period; to format a text and insert an image into text using word processing software; to understand the concept of copyright

Guide the pupils in a simple search for portraits of all kinds – painted, engraved, sculpted, on medallions and in photography – on the Louvre’s Atlas database and on the websites of other museums.

In small groups, each taking charge of a historical period, use word processing software to create seven sets of six cards, following the principle of the Happy Families card game. Following a fixed template (size, layout and font), the back of each card will feature the reproduction of a portrait (don’t forget to mention the website address, the place of conservation, the photographer and the copyright) along with its notice. The name of the family is given by the period being studied in class (Egypt, Greco-Roman antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, modern times, nineteenth century, twentieth-twenty-first centuries), while the name of the card is given by the title of the work and the artist (for example “Fayum Portrait of a Woman”, or “Jean de la Fontaine by Pierre Julien”).

##### Variant for younger pupils

Creation of a memory game on the same principle, by gluing portraits on Bristol cards the size of a playing cards.

### 4

#### History and Visual Arts THREE-QUARTER VIEW OR PROFILE



Louvre website  
Art museum  
websites



*La Belle Ferronnière*  
*Portrait of Isabella d'Este*



Word processing

**Objective:** recognise the works of an artist and compare them; write a summary and format it with word processing software

The *Mona Lisa*’s fame has partially eclipsed the other portraits by Leonardo da Vinci. Look for reproductions of the portraits of *La Belle Ferronnière*, *Isabella d’Este* and *Ginevra de’ Benci* on the websites of the Louvre and the National Gallery of Art in Washington. For each portrait, create a notice specifying the title given to the work, its approximate date of execution, the support, the technique, the dimensions of the work and the place of conservation. In a dialogue with the class (making notes on the board or having a pupil or group of pupils write up the information beforehand), compare the pose, details of the face, the hands, clothes, architecture, background, the rendering of the shapes, shadows and light, etc. of one or more of these portraits with the *Mona Lisa*. Write a summary and format it on a document, with or without a reproduction of the portrait.

### 5

#### History and Visual Arts OFF-BEAT INTERPRETATIONS



Magazines  
Children’s books



Word processing

**Objective:** to understand the notion of a heritage work, to understand and differentiate the notions of citation and subversion; to do an exhibition; to understand the concept of copyright

Show the pupils several subversive takes on the *Mona Lisa*, for e.g. those by Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger, Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol, Robert Filliou, Fernando Botero, Robert Rauschenberg, Peter Saul, Jean-Michel Basquiat or Peter Klasen, as well as various children’s books by Anthony Browne. Create an exhibition in the classroom or a slideshow, having pupils defend, orally or in writing, their hanging choices: the place the reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* will receive in the exhibition, the relative positioning of works (proximity, distance), presentation formats (framed, unframed, relationships of scale).

Concurrently, make an invitation card for the exhibition opening as well as a press kit, while mentioning copyright.

## 6

### Visual Arts SPIN-OFF OBJECTS



Open search



Colour  
photocopies

scissors  
and glue

Various objects:  
pencils, pens,  
paper plates and  
glasses

#### Objective: to open up practices and approaches to design

The pupil reflects on the practices involved in the manufacture of spin-off objects: homage, borrowing, citation, subversion.

First, pupils look for spin-off objects inspired by works of art. They identify the types of media that can be used, pencil, pen, plate, glass, etc.

In the second phase of the exercise, provide pupils with paper tableware, everyday objects and several photocopies of the *Mona Lisa*, which they cut out and glue onto the objects. Comparing what the pupils have made reveals several patterns (use of The *Mona Lisa* in its entirety, partially, repeatedly) and effects (comic, ironic, etc.). The resumption of the activity after a general discussion further advances the visual research. The production of a series using the same medium can give rise to discussions between pupils.

## 7

### Visual arts JUDGE THE LOOK BY THE LANDSCAPE



Black and white  
photocopies  
Gouaches, inks  
and brushes



Image editing  
software

#### Objective: to appropriate the codes of representation identified in a work

First, pupils are asked to modify the landscape and then the *Mona Lisa*'s clothing in order to preserve a unity of treatment between the background and the figure, as is the case in the portrait.

Each pupil is given a low-contrast black and white photocopy, on which they work with gouache or coloured inks. They choose the medium depending on whether they wish to cover the underlying image (strong covering ability of the gouache) or to use it (transparency of the inks).

When the work is shared with the group, the pupils question and justify the pictorial choices that appear in the finished pieces, the adaptation of the clothing to the painted setting, discrepancies left between the clothing and the landscape to create an effect (comical, surprising, etc.).

In a second stage of the exercise, the pupils modify the *Mona Lisa*'s face if the transformations in the landscape trigger a change (for example, the *Mona Lisa* is looking towards a character added in the background).

This part of the exercise can be done using image editing software (e.g. The GIMP, PhotoFiltre, etc.).



Black and white  
photocopies  
Black pencil

**Linguistic objectives:** to identify; to introduce someone; to introduce oneself; to use the present tense of the indicative, declarative and interrogative sentences, the vocabulary of the portrait, the vocabulary of colour, gender and number..

As a preamble, the teacher asks the pupils if they know the title of the painting. Does it have the same name in English and in the foreign language(s) they are learning at school?

### Role-play I

The teacher covers the reproduction of the painting. Mona Lisa is going to visit the class. One pupil plays the role of Mona Lisa’s friend and must describe her to the others who ask her: “What is she like?”, “Is she beautiful?”, “How old is she?”, “What colour is her hair?”, etc.

### Role-play II

One pupil is a guide at the Louvre; the rest of the class are foreign tourists asking questions. “Who painted the picture?”, “What period does it date from?”, “Who is the model?”, etc.

### Oral Interaction Activity

A prankster broke into the museum at night and replaced the *Mona Lisa* with a dozen close copies, hiding the real one is among them... Experts from all over the world are trying to identify the original among the copies. To prepare this activity, the pupils do a visual arts exercise in which photocopies of the portrait are distributed and each pupil carries out a modification. The experts argue to identify the real painting among the fakes.

# 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<sup>er</sup> 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.

#### Musée du Louvre

Anne-Laure Béatrix, External Relations  
Frédérique Leseur, Visitor Outreach Development and Arts and Cultural Education  
Cyrille Gouyette, Education and Training  
Editorial coordination: Noémie Breen  
Graphic coordination: Isabel Lou-Bonafonte  
Editorial supervision and proofreading: Anne Caquetoux  
Graphic design: Guénola Six

#### Authors:

Jean-Marie Baldner, Agnès Benoit, Laurence Brosse, Maryvonne Cassan, Benoit Dercy, Sylvie Drivaud, Anne Gavarret, Daniel Guyot, Isabelle Jacquot, Régis Labourdette, Anne-Laure Mayer, Thérèse de Paulis, Sylvia Pramotton, Barbara Samuel, Magali Simon, Laura Solaro, Nathalie Steffen, Guenèvre Tandonnet, Pascale Tardif, Xavier Testot, Delphine Vanhove.

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