

MONA LISA



Fig. 1. My wife Helen with the Nike of Samothrace in the background, Louvre Museum, Paris, France (March 2008).

Fig. 2. *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* (220-190 BC) - Nike, the victorious lady in more ways than one; she must have been very elegant; note how the garment frills naturally and grips the voluptuous thigh, knee and chin below... Moreover, the ancients used live models for their works of art—she must have been a beauty in real life.

Modern excavations suggest that the *Victory* occupied a niche in an open-air amphitheater which served as an altar, within view of Demetrius I Poliorcetes (337-283 BC) ship monument. It stood on a rostral pedestal of gray marble from Lartos representing the prow of a ship, and represents the goddess as she descends from the skies to the triumphant fleet. Rendered in white Parian marble, the figure originally formed part of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods.



Fig. 3. The Daru staircase leads to the Samothrace statue.



Fig. 4. Helen of Troy--so the tradition and the author Homer claims--was such a beauty that "launched a thousand ships"; this ship surely ferried one subject -- the *Nike of Samothrace*, while Mona Lisa, on the poster (right) is in the offing on the Louvre steps, but she is more mysterious (that smile) than beautiful. Amazingly, the husband of the lady who commissioned the work refused to pay for it, while the author (De Vinci) never parted with the original until after his death. It has been said, how the smile hides a secret: either jealousy or truth, whichever, but this creative act of Leonardo has captured the admiration of planetary meridians. Without the elusive smile the painting might never have fired the imagination and adoration of the ages, dashed and forgotten in private collections or a dusty museum basement storage of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg (R), suffering the fate of the Egyptian sculptures therein abandoned... Indeed, one never knows the real secrets of the *creative act* until it's tested by time and place, i.e. in this case vertical WesternCiv's creative veracity where plasticity of textile and composition of form have produced real wonders of modern cultural space, science and technology almost exclusively continental European, though monumental art *per se* has belonged more to the ancients...



Fig. 5-11. Leonardo De Vinci - Mona Lisa

Mona Lisa, or *La Gioconda* (pron. *la dʒokon'da*) (*La Joconde*) is a 16th-century portrait painted in oil on a poplar panel by Leonardo De Vinci during the Italian Renaissance. It is arguably the most famous painting in the world, and few other works of art have been subject to as much scrutiny, study, mythologizing, and parody. The work is owned by the French government and hangs in the Musée du Louvre in Paris, France with the title *Portrait of Lisa Gherardini*, wife of Francesco del Giocondo.

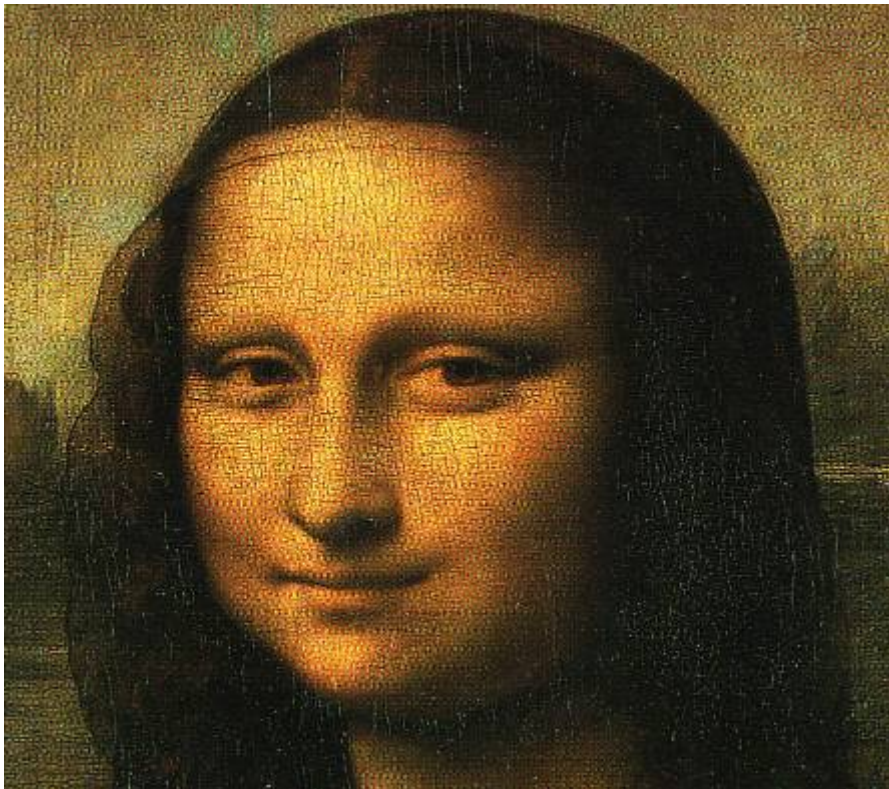
This portrait was doubtless painted in Florence between 1503 and 1506. It is thought to be of Lisa Gherardini, wife of a Florentine cloth merchant named Francesco del Giocondo - hence the alternative title, *La Gioconda*. However, Leonardo seems to have taken the completed portrait to France rather than giving it to the person who commissioned it. It was eventually returned to Italy by Leonardo's student and heir Salai. [See below, how the painting came to be in François' collection, the King of France.]

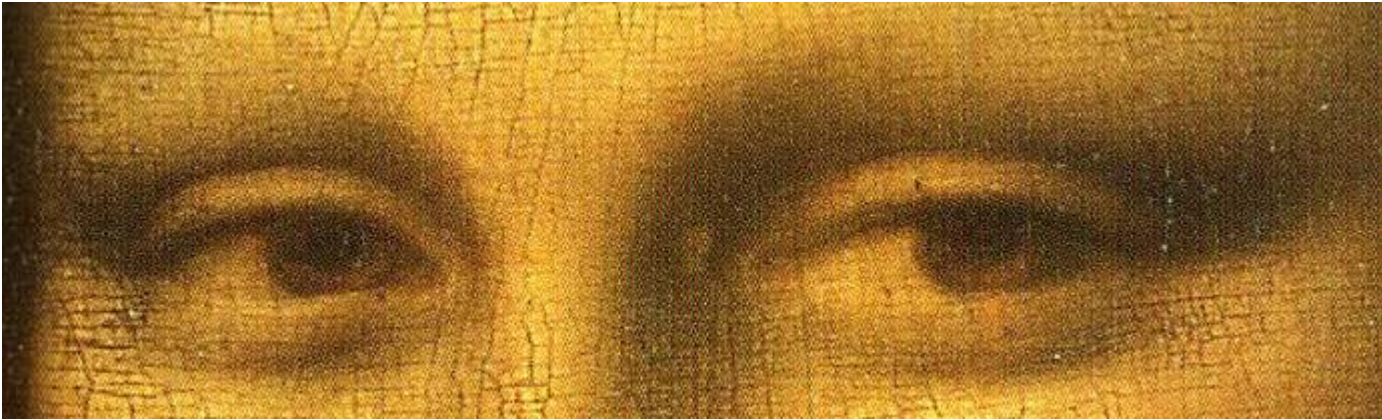
Mona Lisa, 1503-1506, Oil on wood 77 x 53 cm (30 x 20 7/8 in.) Louvre, Paris, France

The portrait may have been painted to mark one of two events - either when Francesco del Giocondo and his wife bought their own house in 1503, or when their second son, Andrea, was born in December 1502 after the death of a daughter in 1499. The delicate dark veil that covers Mona Lisa's hair is sometimes considered a mourning veil. In fact, such veils were commonly worn as a mark of virtue. Yet her clothing is unremarkable. Neither the yellow sleeves of her gown, nor her pleated style, nor the scarf delicately draped round her shoulders are signs of aristocratic status. The shadowy quality for which the work is renowned came to be called "sfumato" or Leonardo's smoke, profiling the talent of the master of the form, which survived the ages. No doubt about it—it's the most famous and iconic painting in the world lauded by almost every art critic and laymen alike.



Leonardo de Vinci, *Mona Lisa* (detail)





Leonardo de Vinci

Hand Study

1490

Mona's famous smile has inspired almost every possible interpretation by experts and laymen alike, and yet it may not express a particular emotion at all. Perhaps it denotes an attempt to disguise feelings that would otherwise seem too obvious by presenting a balance between different emotional extremes. If so, it is a sign of emotional and physical restraint, like her hands, whose pose suggests a state at once relaxed and at peace with herself, but for the enigmatic smile which tells the real story, yet to be deciphered.

Mona Lisa is named for Lisa del Giocondo, a member of the Gherardini family of Florence and Tuscany and the wife of the wealthy Florentine silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo, who failed to pay the contracted commission to the famous master of the form, true circumstances unknown to this very day, causing the cavalcade of conjecture...

Giorgio Vasari, the famous Italian classical art critic, generally thought to have known the painting only by repute, said that "the smile was so pleasing that it seemed divine rather than human; and those who saw it were amazed to find that it was as alive as the original". Frankly, I don't believe the astute Vasari said it because Mona is not all that alive; she's in fact more metaphysical because of that elusive, enigmatic smile, the icon type pose and stylized background...

Mona Lisa was not well known until the mid-19th century when artists of the emerging continental Symbolist movement began to appreciate it, and associated it with their ideas about feminine mystique. Then the avant-garde art world made note of the undeniable fact of *Mona Lisa's* popularity.

Because of the painting's overwhelming stature,

Dadaists and Surrealists often produced modifications and caricatures. The 'smiling' lady's fame was in fact created in the 19th century avant-garde world overlapping into the explosive 20th century of creation, lack of form, content and bedlam in the arts, copied by Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol and others. ... In fact, prior to that Mona never enjoyed the current overriding popularity, valuing the painting today, if it went on the market, at over \$1 billion...





Fig. 12. Despite the massive tourism lined up to get a glimpse and photo of the famous lady, perhaps the most popular in all the world – Mona Lisa – Helen and I managed somehow to move the crowds back to get these close-ups. The painting now has a full wall all to itself, while years past it had gone through various stages of protection, bulletproof glass, etc. Before all those measures, I once touched it to feel the texture – the *tactile values* touch clichéd by Bernard Berenson, the Jewish Diaspora American from Boston, whose family emigrated from Vitebsk, Belarus century before last, when they became Boston Catholics. Now it occupies a private wall hung flat on it with bullet proof glass or plastic, or so we were told by the museum staff... I have carefully studied the painting from the early 1960s and even in the 1980's when my daughter was studying at the Sorbonne University and, of course, several times in recent years. In my opinion the work is impressive for its age, composition of the portrait and the stylized almost El Greco type background of nature (the staged rivulet and the small arched bridge below), but it hardly deserves all this fame, yet icons of eminence that mark the ages have always been important to civilization so let it be I say...



Fig. 13. Here I zoomed in and focused on Mona Lisa instead of Helen... My thought was then that it was a computer-generated copy; but, then, I may be wrong, although a closer analysis of the hands *vis a vis* the original, the copy has fatter fingers if not the hands, Ok you experts, connoisseurs and laymen out there... Of course, it's a copy, the original stored in deep mountain vaults way out of harms way and destruction by TNT or nuclear holocaust, mark my words for it!

The great master of the art form Leonardo De Vinci took the painting from Italy to France in 1516 when King François I invited the painter to work at the Clos Lucé near the king's castle in Amboise. Most likely through the heirs of da Vinci's assistant Salai, the king bought the painting for 4,000 *écus* and kept it at Château Fontainebleau, where it remained until given to Louis XIV, who moved the painting to the exquisite and famous Versailles Palace outside of Paris. After the French Revolution, it was transferred to the Louvre, where it finally rests today, surviving a tumultuous past, paid homage annually by 6 million visitors of all creeds and national origin... Not surprisingly, Napoleon I had it installed in his bedroom in the Tuileries Palace; later it was returned to the Louvre. That event too perhaps gave the first real rise to fame of Mona.



Fig. 14. Then the focus was fixed on a subject closer to my heart; Helen aging too but soon becoming mother for the first time at age 42 of our Alexander of Macedon, named by my teenage granddaughter, while the boy's godfather, a Russian diplomat, called him Alexander Nevsky, with a befitting title, though little Alex is an American with even his own personal passport before one year of age, while we trust he will become more a citizen of the world in a new, much more peaceful community of nations, the emerging new *Laissez-faire* world order of local functional autonomy commonwealth of nations.



Fig. 15. With Helen on the bridge over the Seine by Place de la Concorde, Paris.



Fig. 16. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, which deserves more attention than I have managed to plan out over the years though I have been in Paris hundreds of times since the early 1960's.



Fig. 17. Peugeot auto show on *Champs Elysee*, futuristic auto behind Helen.

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