

Not just another Mona Lisa Story

It's just the Mona Lisa!

Mona Lisa, Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of a young woman the identification of the subject as Lisa del Giocondo, the wife of the Florentine merchant Francesco del Giocondo, is based upon accounts by Giorgio Vasari (1511-74). Leonardo himself makes no mention of the Mona Lisa in his sketches and notice books.

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The big deal is the documentation and stories behind the Mona Lisa. Giorgio Vasari's accounts of this painting and others by da Vinci are the only resources available to date and some of Vasari's accounts have been put into question over the centuries.

Historians have sited the Mona Lisa as one of the best-preserved paintings by da Vinci in spite of it being vandalized twice and stolen once.

The facts are that even with our technologies today, experts still don't know for sure how da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa.

Having never written about it, da Vinci may have seen this painting as a labored commission that he could not finish rather than a work of art. It makes sense that as prolific as he was his commissions were still essential to him making a living.

This painting and others have been shrouded in mystery over the past 5 centuries and are still gathering momentum. Once you get rid of the hype there is no more story and people forget about it so that's why the French keep making it a BIG DEAL.

Why is there so much hype around this painting

There are some great stories from the inception of the Mona Lisa right up to present day. The painting was stolen and found, vandalized, and vandalized again. The French press publicized and exploited the fact that it had been vandalized and stolen with bylines like "The Mona Lisa is gone"; as if it were France's national identity. I guess it is! The French government, press and the Louvre have managed to create a sort of self-perpetuated interest in the Mona Lisa while it continues to attract new generations of curious on-lookers from around the world. I think da Vinci is rolling over in his grave.

What is this Mona Lisa? Really!

Art History depicts this painting as one of the finest of all time. I on the other hand would suggest it's an idealistic rendition of a rich merchant's wife. Mona Lisa was not a historical figure but a person made famous by having her picture painted by da Vinci.

da Vinci's execution of this painting is a one in a million, which he never had the chance to appreciate because of his death in 1519.

The 16th Century was a time when painters and artisans were the only available means of documentation.

It wasn't until the mid to late 19th century that photography started being used as a more accurate and accountable way of documenting events. Photography was the crossroad that changed painting forever.

I don't wish to contradict the genius of Leonardo De Vinci and yet the Mona Lisa has lost its context due to commercial interest and the huge mystique that surrounds it. There is no chance of reconciling most of what has been written about the Mona Lisa because it has become the most publicized and reproduced image in the world. da Vinci's lack of reference to this painting has only fueled speculation. We are therefore at the mercy of second hand accounts concerning the why's and what's of this work. Many of the conclusions drawn were arrived at based on accounts by Giorgio Vasari and not directly associated with the Mona Lisa. When all is said and done anyone can have an informed opinion and most everyone has. So! I leave it to you!

The Theorists?

There are theorists that believe the Mona Lisa to be da Vinci's self-portrait. Is that absurd or what?

The fact is, because there are no other images of the Mona Lisa, anything is possible!

It is also said that portrait painters subconsciously paint their own features into non-biographical portraits. I don't know to what degree that is true but I would encourage you to take a close look at Rembrandt's work, he was known for his *chiaroscuro* portraits of people with little or no previous visual reference. Art Historians have been arguing for years over the origins of some of the people Rembrandt painted. Again, I think any one's guess is gold.

How much did da Vinci get paid for the Mona Lisa?

da Vinci took the painting from Italy to France in 1516 and sold it to King François I for 4,000 écus.

I'm not sure of the relative value of that currency but you can bet it wasn't close to its value in 2009.

What's is it worth now?

100 million in 1962

700 million in 2009

I can't help thinking, if the price tag on the Mona Lisa is the reciprocated value of tourism for France, then just having this painting in their possession is a big deal. I guess 700 Million Dollars is a pretty Big Deal!

When did De Vinci paint the Mona Lisa?

He began in 1503 and left it unfinished for several years, painting on it from time to time then finishing it in 1519 just before he died. 16 years of going back and forth then selling the painting before it was completed. Interesting!

Size, materials and techniques used

The Mona Lisa is 77cm x 53cm, or 31 inches x 21 inches. and is oil on poplar wood. The painting technique used by da Vinci is called sfumato (the Italian word for smoke). Basically this involves using several translucent layers of colour to produce visual depth. Still unknown it is thought that Leonardo may have applied the paint with fine silk or goose down scrubbers.(1) Apparently there is no obvious evidence of brush strokes. da Vinci was an inventor so I wouldn't be surprised if he experimented with combinations of various techniques to arrive at a satisfactory result. Art History ascribes to traditionalist values when it comes to the techniques of the masters. It should not be assumed that there is a code of standards for painters and painting that the masters adhered to. Art has always been about experimentation and pushing the parameters of technique and da Vinci was no exception. Apparently da Vinci had formulas for making pigment, which he found pain-staking and very limiting to his colour palette. It was said that he found this very confining and that is why he became so prolific as a scientist and inventor. In any case da Vinci was an innovator of technique, which has allowed artists today the freedom to leave the technical complexities behind to focus on their creativity.

(1) (An un-official painting technique where a very delicate fabric or feathers are used to scrub paint into a surface.) This unspecific technique resembles an eighth century oriental style of painting but does not originate from it.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/wonderlane/3883689406>

Was the Mona Lisa da Vinci's Greatest Painting?

There are many schools of thought and some say "The Last Supper" was his greatest. The Mona Lisa was one of his smallest paintings and "The Last Supper" was one of the largest at (15 x 29 ft). Even with our society's preoccupation with "bigger is better", I think each painting has qualities that preclude a decision for the greatest. When you take a look at both you'll discover da Vinci's mastery of handling the human figure and the dynamics of each that he expresses. The strength of "The Last Supper" is in its composition, which is natural and not overworked. da Vinci's anchor in all of his work is his ability to draw, based on a strong understanding of human anatomy and bio-mechanics. A closer analysis of his work would disclose the addition of extra muscles in people and animals to create a desired effect. (Artistic license) Mona Lisa's subtle expression is truly a masterful effect that could easily have been vulgar if handled by a lesser artist.

Check out this link and you tell me!

http://images.google.ca/images?source=ig&hl=en&rlz=1G1GGLQ_ENCA339&q=leonardo+da+vinci%27s+paintings&lr=&um=1&ie=UTF-8&ei=DO6RS_rDE4yCsgOU7PH8Aw&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CBkQsAQwAA

What would I choose?

I wouldn't choose either! I made a trip to Florence a few years ago with the idea that I would have an opportunity to finally see the art that I had only seen in books. WOW! I should have been careful what I asked for because I was flogged with medieval architecture and the Italian Renaissance not to speak of Michael Angelo's David. To make a long story short I went to the Uffizi Gallery which has 20-30 smaller galleries in it. I was disappointed when I went to see de Vinci's work because there was a line-up around the top floor of the building. I have a problem with lines so I decided to leave.

All I wanted to see was one painting by da Vinci called the "Adoration of the Magi". As I was walking out of the building I made a wrong turn and found myself face to face with Leonardo da Vinci's "Adoration of the Magi". Well I was gob smacked to say the least because this painting was 8ft x 8ft and I could walk right up to it. The thing about this painting is it wasn't finished, which gives the viewer a unique opportunity to see de Vinci's under-drawings. You can see his thought process, how he would change his mind concerning the placement of a figure or the expression on a persons face.

I sat in front of that painting analyzing every inch of it for 2 hours.

I left the museum satisfied , educated and inspired.

da Vinci's purpose as an artist

I wouldn't ask him face to face even if I could because the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the word "discovery". his quest as with most artists was to challenge the way he saw things. He possessed the curiosity of an inventor and the inspiration of an artist, which left the world open to his discovery. If he lived today I don't think he would be an artist, he would be an innovator of technology or medicine, which he saw as creative pursuits.

What I think

The Mona Lisa was derived from a real woman but the final painting was a compilation of many people maybe even De Vinci himself. Having been a painter for many years I understand when projects are left undone for long periods time and their context begins to fade. I think da Vinci completed this painting based on his accountability for it's sale to King Francois and over the years either lost or destroyed his drawings. Maybe someone else finished the Mona Lisa.

He knew that his subject's identity would be based on his depiction of her, so he could have painted her as an ideal rather than the real person. This is not a sinister development of a sensational story but an expression of da Vinci's artistic license.

What I think da Vinci did manage to do was create a metaphor for Italian culture. Whether he intended to or not the Mona Lisa has become an international representation of the beauty and vitality of the Italian people.

I think da Vinci would agree that the mystery around his work has created curiosity, which is essential to discovery. He is the quintessential example of that school of thought

To have a complete picture of what da Vinci did, one must look at all of his work. It is amazing how prolific he was and the Mona Lisa is just the tip.

Where can you see the Mona Lisa

In the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

Here are some additional resources.

Painting Restoration

The Last Supper

“Adoration of the Magi” an incomplete painting by da Vinci

da Vinci’s Inventions

The Theft and Vandalism of the Mona Lisa

da Vinci's stroke by stroke