

More Than a Pretty Face: The *Mona Lisa*

THE PORTRAIT OF *MONA Lisa* is often described as an example of the timeless facial beauty and is arguably the most famous and readily recognized painting in history. It is owned by the French government and is hung in the Louvre Museum. It may also be the most frequently reproduced, and perhaps parodied, painting in the world as well. Throughout the years, the image has appeared in multiple forms, including clothing, advertising, cups, and calendars. It was even notably parodied by the well-known Dada period artist Marcel Duchamp. His 1919 version, which shows the *Mona Lisa* with a mustache irreverently inscribed with the letters *LHOOQ*, which, when read phonetically in French, can be translated as “she has a hot ass” (*Elle à chaud au cul*). Recently, the original received notable attention when it appeared on the cover for Dan Brown’s popular novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Although the painting is mentioned in the book, it does not play an overtly significant role in the novel and presumably was used on the cover as a highly recognized marketing device.

The *Mona Lisa* is known by other names, including *La Gioconda* (light-hearted woman in Italian). Painted, of course, by the Italian Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci, it was begun in 1503 and completed in 1507. Last year (2007), it enjoyed significant additional notoriety because of its 500th anniversary. Leonardo (*da Vinci* refers to his home town and is not his last name) painted his subject using oil paint on poplar wood. The painting measures 77×53 cm. The subject of the woman with the mysterious, enigmatic smile that has generated discussion for 500 years was Lisa Gheradini, who was born in 1479 and raised in Tuscany, Italy. In 1495, she married a wealthy silk merchant from Florence named Fran-

cisco del Giocondo. Thirty-one years after Leonardo’s death, a contemporary named Giorgio Vasari wrote his biography, which confirmed Lisa Gheradini’s identity.

Leonardo’s procrastination in finishing what would become the world’s best known painting began a fascinating history of events involving the masterpiece. Francisco del Giocondo commissioned the portrait of his wife, Lisa, to celebrate the birth of their child (there had been several previous unsuccessful pregnancies). He was building a house for his wife and new family, and the painting was to be hung in the new home. For unknown reasons, Leonardo did not finish the painting for 4 years. By that time, Francisco had lost interest in the painting and perhaps Lisa had moved on to another decorating scheme for their house. Francisco refused to accept or pay for the painting, and it remained in Leonardo’s studio.

In January of 1516, Leonardo accepted an invitation from King Francois I of France to join him, and the painting traveled to France. After Leonardo’s death, King Francois purchased the painting for 4000 ecus (ecus were the French coin of the time and equal to about 20 euros in today’s currency). Today, that sum would equal only 80 000 euros, or 106 872.60 US dollars: an excellent investment in what would become a genuinely priceless work of art. The French king kept the painting in his chateau, the Fontainebleau, for several years, and then moved it to the Palace of Versailles. Napoleon came into possession of the painting and hung it in his bedroom in the Tuileries. Napoleon moved on, of course, and in 1797 the *Mona Lisa* was moved to the Louvre, which did not prove to be a safe or permanent site for the painting. Perhaps the biggest art “heist” in history occurred in 1911, when Vincenzo Puruggia stole the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre.

He found himself in a sad ironic state when he realized just how difficult it would be to sell the world’s most famous stolen item. He was caught in 1913, when he attempted to sell the painting to a Florence art dealer. The *Mona Lisa* was recovered and returned to the Louvre.

The Louvre’s security measures came into question again in 1956, when Bolivian Ugo Ungazza Villegas, who was reportedly responding to a message from God, threw a rock at the painting. Fortunately, his aim was as misguided as his thought process. The stone damaged a speck of pigment near *Mona Lisa*’s left elbow. The painting is now protected behind bulletproof glass, but the tiny damaged area is still evident.

So what is it about the *Mona Lisa* smile that has been so intriguing through the centuries and that is of such intuitive interest to the facial plastic surgeon? Look at her one moment, and she has a faint smile. A moment later, the smile seems to fade, only to return again, creating the often-described sense of enigma. The answer lies in a technique that was used by Leonardo called *sfumato*, meaning to blur or shadow the image, giving it an ambiguous appearance that is to some degree left up to the imagination of the observer.

Margaret Livingstone, PhD, a Harvard neuroscientist, has a more clinical explanation and one to which most facial plastic surgeons will relate. In a *New York Times* interview,¹ she described how the smile seems to come and go based on how the human visual system works. Most observers first look to *Mona Lisa*’s eyes, and their center of gaze is focused there. At that moment, the observer’s peripheral vision, which is less accurate, sees the mouth. Being less accurate in detail, the peripheral vision picks up shadowed areas of the cheekbones. There, cheek shadows enhance and widen the curvature of the smile.

When the observer subsequently focuses on the mouth, his or her central vision does not see the shadows, and the smile seems to fade. As the observer's eyes tend to naturally move around Mona Lisa's face, the smile seems to come and go.¹ Leonardo figured out 500 years ago, as most of today's facial plastic surgeons also realize, that strong cheek bones make the face look more pleasant.

What do that enigmatic expression and changing smile imply through the centuries? Using software developed by my own institution, collaborators at the University of Illinois and researchers from the University of Amsterdam created an "emotion recognition" program based on facial expression. In a media report released recently, using the technology to evaluate Mona Lisa, they said that she is 83% happy, 9% disgusted, 6% fearful, and 2% angry. It is likely that Lisa Gheradini Giocondo would be happy to know that her face has been the subject of such fame, contemplation, and admiration for 500 years. A perhaps bemused Leonardo would probably be similarly pleased to know that one of his pieces, one that he could not sell during his lifetime, has achieved such incredibly unique status and recognition.

Facial analysis, a knowledge and appreciation for facial relationships, and natural-appearing surgical enhancements are concepts that

the wise facial plastic surgeon should espouse. Leonardo da Vinci, as exhibited by his masterpiece *Portrait of Mona Lisa*, would likely concur, as he stated in his writing on beauty in his *Treatise on Painting*: "Do you not see that among human beauties, it is a very beautiful face not rich ornaments that stop the passerby?"² Does the *Mona Lisa* have the world's most beautiful face? Certainly, historically and through tradition she maintains that status. In reality, however, although the painting is fascinating, by modern standards most people would find Mona Lisa pleasant looking but not among today's most elite beauties. Granted, if she were depicted in a more stylish hairstyle, with fashionable clothing and modern makeup, she might look more attractive by current standards. Still, she would not likely be designated as one of the most beautiful faces in the world.

My view is that the appeal of the *Mona Lisa* has transcended the centuries for 2 key reasons. First, she exhibits the symmetry and anatomical proportions that Leonardo so insightfully recognized and that we continue to value today: we are all aware of the rules of "horizontal thirds," "vertical fifths," and "symmetrical facial harmony." Second, she appears natural and unaltered. That seeming artlessness was important to Leonardo and should remain an important goal for facial plastic surgeons. Imagine the *Mona*

Lisa with an overrotated nasal tip, an overly lowered nasal dorsum, an exaggerated brow position, or a mid-face that is artificially repositioned and tightened. Indeed, the surgical result that looks surgically altered, contrived, and unnatural does not follow Leonardo's example. Even when the result is rationalized by such statements as "that's what they want now" or "that's what they like in our area," it is not something that is likely to be viewed as beautiful through the ages.

Happy 500th birthday *Mona Lisa*. We continue to be intrigued by your enigmatic smile and to admire your timeless natural beauty. Thank you, Leonardo, for documenting a face in a manner that no doubt will be appreciated throughout the centuries to come.

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