

SEEKING MONA LISA

Temptress or icon of innocence, cult figure or cultural archetype, Leonardo's mysterious Madonna has intrigued us for 500 years

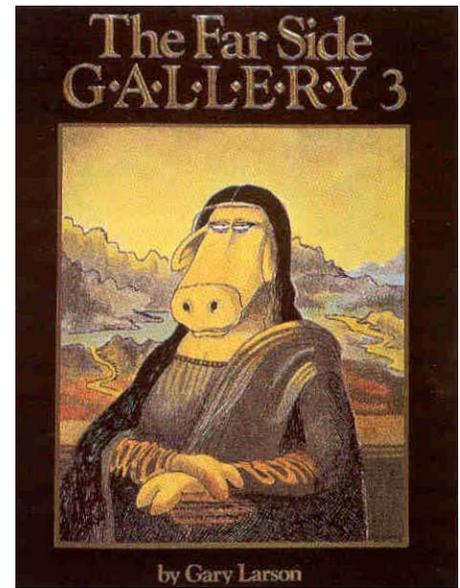
Going with the flow, I follow the body heat from the cavernous crypt beneath the Louvre's glass pyramid up past a dying Italian slave and a nude Greek warrior, a diminutive French general directing troops and a carelessly draped lady with wings. On the second floor, in a room where you could comfortably play tennis, the background murmur grows to a clamor and the air, on this warm August day, is distinctly ripe. Harried tour leaders waving striped sticks or colorful scarves try to corral their polyglot charges. But most of them are busy jockeying and elbowing to get as close as they can to a bullet-proof, air-conditioned showcase for a glimpse of Leonardo da Vinci's 500-year-old portrait of a preternaturally poised Florentine lady.

Largely ignoring the room's other masterpieces of Italian classical painting, its splendid Tintoretts, Veroneses and Titians, the throng aims high-performance cameras at the showcase and lets fly a fusillade of flashes, pinpoints of light bouncing back from its window. Many stand beside it to be photographed, as if they were in front of the Eiffel Tower. It all reminds me of when, as a young reporter, I occasionally had to cover chaotic, shoving, celebrity press conferences. Except here the superstar says nothing. She merely gazes back with a cool, appraising smile.

The Mona Lisa is the most famous work in the entire 40,000-year history of the visual arts. And if you don't agree with that, your argument is not with me but with the respected art historian Roy McMullen, who has studied the phenomenon extensively. "It provokes instant shocks of recognition on every continent from Asia to America," he observes, "reduces the Venus of Milo and the Sistine Chapel to the level of merely local marvels, sells as many postcards as a tropical resort, and stimulates as many amateur detectives as an unsolved international murder mystery." Like many celebrities, the Mona Lisa today is famous for being famous. Louvre officials estimate that most of the museum's first-time visitors come mainly to stare at this cross between a cultural archetype and an icon of kitsch. Undoubtedly, the painting has become part of our collective subconscious. What they are looking for is the picture that has provoked--and been the object of--more crazy reactions, addled adulation, arcane analysis, gross imitations, scandalous takeoffs and crass commercialization than any other work of art in history.

The painting's status as a world-class superstar was confirmed beyond any doubt when, in 1963, the French Minister of Culture, Andre Malraux--who called the painting "the most subtle homage that genius has ever rendered to a living face"--sent it to the United States and, a decade later, to Japan as a sort of itinerant ambassador of French culture, its Italian origins notwithstanding. On arriving in America in January 1963, in its own cabin aboard the SS France, the Mona Lisa was received more like a potentate than a painting. A tuxedoed President John F. Kennedy and an evening-gowned Jacqueline Kennedy formally welcomed it to Washington's National Gallery of Art, where the director, John Walker, hailed it as "the most famous single work of art ever to cross the ocean." White-gloved U.S. marines guarded the painting around the clock. Even though the museum was kept open evenings for the first time in its history, crowds waited for up to two hours to get a look at the famous face; one man asked a guard, in passing, what the grand building was used for when the Mona Lisa wasn't there. It was the same mob scene in February and March at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, with lines down Fifth Avenue for blocks in severe winter weather. In all, more than two million Americans ogled the Mona Lisa.

But Mona mania in America paled beside the frenzy in Japan, to the hand-wringing despair of some French aesthetes who complained that the work was being exhibited like Brigitte Bardot or a Folies Bergere danseuse. When the Mona Lisa arrived at Tokyo's National Museum in April 1974, visitors totaling 1.5 million thronged the building and were hustled



Garv Larson's bovine madonna

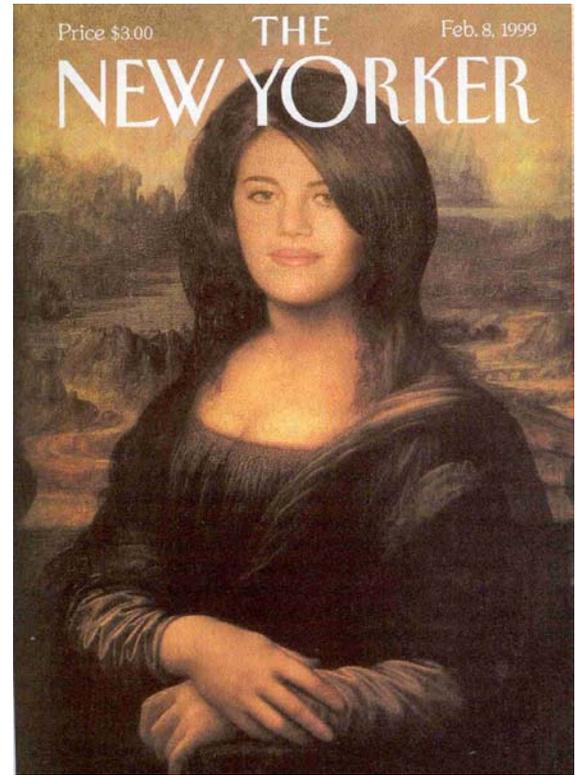


Miss Piggy as Mona Moi

past the painting for a ten-second look. A uniformed guard atop a podium directed the traffic. Outside, the hype approached hysteria. Dozens of bars and nightclubs changed their names to Mona Lisa, one staging a Mona Lisa Nude Revue! A telephone number yielded a recording of the lady saying, in Italian, how happy she was to be in Japan. Japanese girls wore décolleté dark dresses with long sleeves, and parted their hair in the middle; some even resorted to plastic surgery in order to produce a more convincing Lisa Look.

The look that inspires such bizarre behavior is defined by the enigmatic, tight-lipped smile that has launched a thousand learned interpretations, lucid explanations--and loony analyses. Renowned art critic Bernard Berenson set the tone for serious appreciation when he proclaimed that Leonardo's subtle *sfumato* technique of modeling light and shade reached its apex with the Mona Lisa. For centuries many an artist has tried to equal it as a sort of ultimate challenge, the Everest of oil painting. One, the French artist Luc Maspero, threw himself from the fourth-floor window of his Paris hotel in the mid-19th century, leaving a farewell note: "For years I have grappled desperately with her smile. I prefer to die."

Even when not inducing a death wish, the smile has often generated perplexity. Is it "more divine than human," as a 16th-century Italian writer had it, or "worldly, watchful and self-satisfied," according to British art historian Kenneth Clark? The 19th-century French Positivist thinker Hippolyte Taine seemed unable to make up his mind, variously calling it "doubting, licentious, Epicurean, deliciously tender, ardent, sad," while novelist Lawrence Durtell puckishly dubbed it "the smile of a woman who has just eaten her husband." Feminist Camille Paglia went further: "What Mona Lisa is ultimately saying is that males are unnecessary," she opined. Salvador Dali, ever provocative, even attributed the 1956 attack on the painting, when a young Bolivian threw a rock that put a small scar on the left elbow, to the smile. "Subconsciously in love with his mother, ravaged by the Oedipus complex," Dali theorized, the young man was "stupefied to discover a portrait of his own mother, transfigured by the maximum female idealization. His own mother, here! And worse, his mother smiles ambiguously at him. ... Attack is his one possible response to such a smile."



Monica Lewinsky as Mona

In our less poetic age, the trend has been more to physiological explanations for the smile. Was Mona Lisa, whoever she was, asthmatic? Simply a contented pregnant housewife? Some researchers have concluded that she probably smiled with her mouth closed because she was undergoing 16th-century-style mercury treatment for syphilis; the mercury would have turned her teeth an ugly black, and left her with a sorely inflamed mouth. A Danish doctor found that the model had congenital palsy affecting the left side of her face, backing up his theory by pointing out that she had the typically large hands of such patients.

After due study, an orthopedic surgeon in Lyons, France, decided that Mona Lisa's semi-smile resulted from her being half-paralyzed either from birth or as the result of a stroke; one indication of this, he argued, was that her right hand looks relaxed but her left hand is strangely tense.

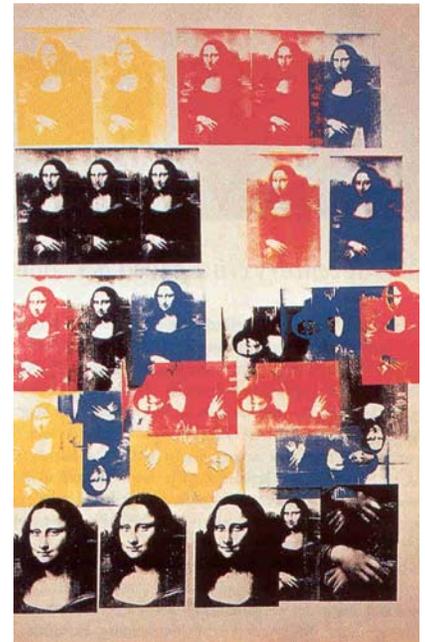
But more intriguing than why the model is smiling is the mystery of exactly who is doing the smiling. An early reference to a woman named Lisa comes from the 16th-century Italian art historian Giorgio Vasari--who himself never actually saw the painting. Writing around 1550, a good 40 years after the work was supposed to have been completed, Vasari says: "Leonardo undertook to paint for Francesco del Giocondo a portrait of Monna [a variation of mona or madonna, "lady"] Lisa his wife." Historians know that a Lisa Gherardini of Florence was married in 1495, at the age of 16, to Francesco di Bartolommeo di Zanobi del Giocondo, a 35-year-old Florentine official already twice a widower. But there's no evidence at all that del Giocondo commissioned the portrait from Leonardo, no sign he paid the artist and, most important, no sign the painting was delivered to him, since Leonardo kept it with him until his death in Amboise, France, in 1519. Nor does Leonardo mention the project anywhere in his voluminous notebooks.

So art historians have had a field day trying to guess whose portrait it is. Some plump for Isabella d'Este, who knew Leonardo well in Milan and whose portrait he did in crayon, perhaps as a study for an oil painting. Others hold for

Costanza d'Avalos, duchess of Francaville, who is mentioned in a contemporary poem as having been painted in mourning by Leonardo "under the lovely black veil." There's even speculation that a second portrait of Mona Lisa may have existed. That painting may have been commissioned by one Guillano de' Medici--perhaps because he was so taken with the original portrait that he requested one for himself. Evidence exists that he asked Leonardo to paint her, leading to the intriguing possibility that the artist did two Mona Lisas, one for her husband, Francesco, and one for Giuliano, who may have been her lover. Now there's something to smile secretly about.

Then there's the high-tech approach. Lillian Schwartz, a computer graphics consultant at the Lucent Technologies Bell Labs in New Jersey, has applied computer-based techniques to the mystery. After reversing Leonardo's self-portrait so the artist is facing to the left, then scaling the image and juxtaposing it with the Mona Lisa (whose subject also faces left) on the computer screen, Schwartz found that the noses, mouths, foreheads, cheekbones, eyes and brows all line up. Conclusion: Leonardo started with an earlier portrait of a woman, then, finding himself without the sitter, used himself as the model--sans beard. She ties it all together with the knotted patterns, resembling basketwork, on the bodice of Mona Lisa's dress. Noting that Leonardo, like many Renaissance poets and artists, loved riddles and puns, she makes the connection between his name, Vinci, and *vinco*, the Italian word for the osier branches used in basketry. Voila, the case is made. "That famous smile, so tantalizing for so many centuries, is the mirrored smile of da Vinci himself," she says confidently.

Not everyone is convinced. But the possibility of a pun lying at the heart of Leonardo's mystery painting is taken seriously at the Louvre. Giocondo, Lisa Gherardini's married name, means, in Italian, cheerful, merry, joyous, as does "jocund" in English. (A variant of the word supplies the French title for the painting, La Joconde). Leonardo had already played with a sitter's name by incorporating a juniper bush in his portrait of Ginevra (similar to "juniper," *ginepro* in Italian) de' Benci that hangs in the National Gallery of Art. "He was punning on Mona Lisa's married name when he gave her a subtle smile in La Joconde," says Cecile Scaillierez, curator of 16th-century French and Italian painting at the Louvre. "He made it emblematic of her. What we really have here is an idea, more than a realistic portrait, the idea of a smile expressed in the form of a painting."



Andy Warhol's silkscreen (1963) pays homage to a visage already famous for rather more than 15 minutes.



For at least the past 150 years, appreciation of the Mona Lisa has veered back and forth between awed Giocondolatry and burlesque Giocondoclasm. The overwrought school of heated, romantic interpretation might have begun, oddly enough, with the Marquis de Sade, who found Mona Lisa full of "seduction and devoted tenderness," and "the very essence of femininity," though given his tastes one wonders exactly what he meant. A bit later the great French historian Jules Michelet admitted, "This painting attracts me, calls me, invades me, absorbs me; I go to it in spite of myself, as the bird goes to the serpent."



French painter Jean Ache has rendered the portrait in the style of artists including (clockwise from top left) Gauguin, Picasso, Modigliani, and

The idea of Mona Lisa as femme fatale was launched. Walter Pater, leader of the 19th-century English Aestheticism movement and ardent advocate of art for art's sake, followed up turgidly. "She is older than the rocks among which she sits," he swooned; "like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave." Not only that; for him this exotic beauty expressed "the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age...the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias." Pater seemed badly in need of a cold shower, as was the French writer of the same period,

Arsene Houssaye, who called her "treacherously and deliciously a woman, with six thousand years of experience, a virgin with an angelic brow who knows more than all the knowing rakes of Boccaccio."

Sigmund Freud, too, pulled out all the stops when trying to figure out the "beautiful Florentine lady." Neatly pigeonholing Leonardo as an obsessive neurotic in his book-length study *Leonardo da Vinci, A Study in Psychosexuality*, Freud decided that Mona Lisa's expression must have resembled the lost, mysterious smile of the artist's mother. As for Mona Lisa herself, he proclaimed her nothing less than "the most perfect representation of the contrasts dominating the love-life of the woman, namely reserve and seduction, most submissive tenderness and the indifferent craving, which confront the man as a strange and consuming sensuality." (On second thought, perhaps we had better not take the kids to the Louvre after all.)



Premier collector of Monalisabilia, Jean Margat prizes his Giocondo-inspired pince-nez and beaded curtain (background).

Twentieth-century ideas on art became more down-to-earth--like, how much is it worth? King Francis I added the Mona Lisa to France's royal collections for 4,000 gold ecus, or about \$105,000. Today Louvre officials say that the Mona Lisa's monetary value is inestimable. In 1911, however, it was somewhere in between: the painting, though precious, was not yet such a superstar on the world art market that it couldn't be sold. That made it worth stealing.

The biggest art heist in history occurred that year, with Parisians waking up on August 23 to screaming headlines like the one in the daily *Excelsior*: "The Louvre's Joconde Stolen: When? How? Who?" The answers were a long time coming, as an army of French, German, Russian, Greek and Italian detectives went on a merry, futile chase for two years. Then, when the public was becoming resigned to the loss of the Mona Lisa, an Italian laborer named Vincenzo Perugia got tired of keeping the original in the false bottom of a trunk.

Perugia, who had worked in the museum, used his knowledge of it to lift the painting. He was put up to it by an Argentine con man named Eduardo de Valfierno, who had a skilled art forger knock off six copies. Valfierno then sold the copies to eager, if unscrupulous, collectors--five in North America, one in Brazil--who thought they were getting the real thing straight from the Louvre. The scam made him the equivalent today of \$67 million. When Valfierno didn't claim the original--ironically, he didn't need it for the operation--Perugia naively offered it for sale to a Florence art dealer and was promptly pinched. The Mona Lisa returned to France on December 31, 1913, ensconced in a special compartment of the Milan-Paris express. Her retinue included an assortment of policemen, politicians, museum bureaucrats and artists. Incredibly, the painting had suffered no physical damage.

The damage was to the blind veneration and respect in which the portrait had been held for centuries. Somehow the caper and its familiar, irreverent press coverage rubbed off some of the Mona Lisa's mystique. The age of Giocondoclasm had begun.

Even Bernard Berenson admitted a change of heart. "To my amazement," he wrote after the theft was announced, "I found myself saying softly: 'If only it were true!' And when the news was confirmed I heaved a sigh of relief... She had simply become an incubus, and I was glad to be rid of her." For this eminent connoisseur of Western art, as surely for many others, all the bowing and scraping over the Mona Lisa had become a pain in the neck.

Suddenly the public couldn't get enough of jokey Giocondiana. One postcard showed a grinning, toothy Mona Lisa thumbing her nose at the public and saying, "I'm off to see my Vinci, thanks and good-bye, all you gawkers."

Another postcard, after the return, showed her holding a baby with Perugia's picture in the background, as if she'd been on a romantic escapade.

With irreverence and reaction against "bourgeois" values the new order of the day, the painting that had been the image of perfect, inaccessible beauty became the ideal target for desperately modern iconoclastic artists, like the Dadaists, who were sick of the very idea of a masterpiece. Marcel Duchamp, unofficial leader of the Dada anti-art movement, summed up the new zeitgeist in 1919 with a few strokes of his brush. Taking a standard portrait of a woman, he brushed in a pointy mustache and goatee on the sacred face, and added a childish prank. But the uptight art establishment, raised on tradition, was shocked, shocked.

Today the Mona Lisa is in the paradoxical situation of being both the symbol of Art and the inspiration for kitsch. Artists vie to see who can do the most outrageous parody; advertising studios labor to come up with the funniest way to use the image to sell everything from aperitifs to airlines, golf clubs to strips that hold your nasal passages open. Collectors of Giocondiana have catalogued nearly 400 advertising uses of the image and counting, along with at least 61 products called Mona Lisa, made in 14 countries.

Want to mock Salvador Dali's commercialism? Do a montage with his eyes and upraised mustache on Mona Lisa's face, then put his hands overflowing with money in place of hers. *Touche!* Want to make light of a weighty public figure, from Stalin to De Gaulle to Prince Charles? Caricature him as Mona Lisa. Funnee! The portrait also has become the favorite of computer-age digitizers of images. In Paris, Jean-Pierre Yvaral has done more than 150 synthesized Mona Lisas composed of hundreds of geometric patterns that look abstract up close but become Herself from afar. Next big project: digital images of her on the tails of British Airways jetliners.



superstar.

Though he's no high-flying art critic or historian, Jean Margat has his own answer to the painting's mythic hold on the imagination. A retired geologist, Margat, from his home near Orleans, France, presides over the Friends of Mona Lisa, a club of serious collectors of Giocondiana, of which Louvre director Pierre Rosenberg is a member, along with a woman in faraway Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Margat and other Friends get together once in a while for a convivial lunch in Paris where they discuss and compare their collections. Margat's takes up a good part of his two-story house and ranges from Mona Lisa T-shirts, posters, ballpoint pens, coffee mugs, drink coasters, condoms, panty hose, clocks, matchbooks and thimbles bearing The Face, to truly rare--and expensive--items like a beaded curtain from Vietnam, a Persian rug and a life-size Mona Lisa sculptured in two kinds of marble that he paid a pretty penny for in Switzerland. His latest enthusiasm is for a bit of kitsch created in Brooklyn and known as the Giggling Mona Lisa Pillow, which squeals with glee when squeezed in the middle. The Friends now are developing an Internet site and hope to advise the planners of a mega-Mona exhibition, tentatively scheduled to open in Paris, to mark the year 2000.

By then the painting may have its own special room at the Louvre, the better to admire it--and keep the crowd away from the other museum goers--thanks to a \$4.1 million grant from a Japanese television network. This biggest-ever act of cultural sponsorship in France leaves Lisa's face, then put his hands overflowing with money in place of hers. *Touche!* Want to make light of a weighty public figure, from Stalin to De Gaulle to Prince Charles? Caricature him as Mona Lisa. Funnee! The portrait also has become the favorite of computer-age digitizers of images. In Paris, Jean-Pierre Yvaral has done more than 150 synthesized Mona Lisas composed of hundreds of geometric patterns that look abstract up close but become Herself from afar. Next big project: digital images of her on the tails of British Airways jetliners.

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By Joseph A. Harriss

Paris-based Joseph A. Harriss, a frequent contributor to Smithsonian, says he is still trying to elucidate Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile.