

Mona Lisa

by Leonardo Da Vinci

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on poplar panel
- Date Completed: c. 1503-1506 or c. 1519
- Size: 30 1/4 X 22 inches
- Current Location: Musee de Louvre, Paris, France
- Genre: Portrait
- The history of the Mona Lisa is shrouded in mystery. Among the aspects which remain unclear are the exact identity of the sitter, who commissioned the portrait, how long Leonardo worked on the painting, how long he kept it, and how it came to be in the French royal collection.
- It is thought to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, a wealthy Florentine silk merchant. Because many believe it was a portrait of her, this painting is also known as *La Gioconda* or *Portrait of Lisa Gherardini*.
- Mona is a contraction of the word Madonna, meaning "my lady". It is used like the word Mrs., madam or my lady.
- The painting was possibly commissioned for the Gioconco's new home in 1503, or to celebrate the birth of their third child (second son) in 1502 after the death of a daughter in 1499. However, there are no records of a commission for the portrait.
- It seems da Vinci took the painting with him rather than giving it to the person who commissioned it.
- Leonardo began painting this painting sometime in 1503-1504, lingered over it for a while and left it unfinished, a common occurrence for Leonardo.
- It is thought he finally finished the painting by 1506, or some say he didn't complete it until shortly before he died in 1519.
- This painting was not well known until the mid-nineteenth century.
- This portrait was one of the first to depict the subject in front of an imaginary landscape and to use an aerial perspective.
- The Mona Lisa is the earliest Italian portrait to focus so closely on the sitter in a half-length portrait. The painting is generous enough in its dimensions to include the arms and hands without them touching the frame.
- The portrait is painted to a realistic scale.
- The figure is shown in half-length, from the head to the waist, sitting in a chair whose arm is resting on the arm of the chair. This is one of the earliest Italian examples of this kind of pose in a portrait.
- Her smile has often been described as enigmatic (mysterious or puzzling). She seems to have an air of remote calmness.
- Her eyes seem to look straight back at you and to follow you around if you move. Leonardo achieves this by directing the left eye squarely at the viewer, and positioning the right eye slightly to one side.
- It is hard to determine her exact mood from the mouth or eyes alone. The flicker of a smile plays on her lips, yet her eyes show little sign of humor.
- The delicate dark veil that covers Mona Lisa's hair could be considered a mourning veil. Such veils were also commonly worn as a mark of virtue.
- Her clothing is unremarkable and plain. Neither the yellow sleeves of her gown, nor her pleated gown, nor the scarf delicately draped round her shoulders are signs of aristocratic status. Originally the sleeves would have been saffron yellow, but the pigment has faded over many years and the varnish

applied to the surface to conserve the paint has also darkened the color.

- In 2007 a researcher with high resolution scans stated that there were eyelashes and slightly visible eyebrows in the original painting, but that they had faded - probably due to over-cleaning of the painting. It was fashionable at the time to pluck the hairline and eyebrows.
- Mona Lisa's folded arms form the base of a triangle that reaches up from each arm to the head. Leonardo used this compositional technique to place his model within a harmonious space - in a geometrical sense - that is pleasing to the eye.
- She wears neither rings nor bracelets. Her hand and arms look relaxed, as if she is comfortable.
- Just behind the right shoulder, you can make out the arches of a bridge spanning a river. As with other parts of this imaginary landscape, Leonardo has painted it so you look down on it. Mona Lisa's eyes, however, are at the same level as the viewer's.
- Da Vinci uses a winding path or river to lead the viewer's eye into the distance and through the painting. Visually, it appears simply to be part of the landscape, but the device is used very cleverly to give the painting depth and to make the space appear less flat and more three-dimensional.
- The hazy appearance of the landscape helps create the illusion that the background is receding.
- It is considered the most famous painting in the world.
- This painting was stolen on August 21, 1911. The Louvre was closed for a week for investigation and several people were brought in for questioning, including Pablo Picasso. The painting was found 2 years later. An employee had stolen the painting during regular museum hours, hidden in a broom closet until the museum closed, and walked out with the painting under his coat.
- Once the painting was severely damaged when a patron threw acid on it. Another time it was damaged when someone threw a rock at it. Now it sits behind bulletproof glass. This has shielded it from an attack with red spray paint, and a teacup being thrown at it.
- The painting is in remarkable condition and has been well preserved considering it's 500+ years old.
- It is kept at a constant humidity and temperature to keep the poplar wood from warping or cracking further (a small crack occurred and extends from the top to the hairline).
- About 6 million people view this painting at the Louvre every year.
- This painting was evaluated in 1962 to be worth 100 million dollars, \$720 million in current dollars (adjusted for inflation, 2010)

Artist Facts

- Born April 15, 1452 in or near Vinci, close to Florence, Italy.
- Died May 2, 1519 (age 67) in France.
- His father was a notary and his mother a peasant.
- Spent most of his life working between Florence, Italy and Milan, Italy, but his last years he worked for the French monarchy in France.
- Da Vinci was considered a genius of the Renaissance. He was a painter, sculptor, architect, musician, scientist, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, geologist, cartographer, botanist and writer.
- Some consider him to be the greatest painter of all time, and the most diversely talented person to have ever lived.
- It is estimated that only 15 of his paintings have survived
- During his life he conceptualized a helicopter, a tank, solar power and a calculator. Most of his designs were not feasible during his lifetime. Some of the things he studied were anatomy, the flight of birds and insects, the forms of rocks and clouds, and the effects of atmosphere on landscape.
- Da Vinci had a deep respect for life and was a vegetarian and was known to buy caged birds to set them free

- He never married and did not have children
- Da Vinci was known for blurring his outlines

Key Element of Design to Teach

- **Portrait:** A portrait is a likeness of someone but can also tell you something about the subject. Portrait painting is a genre in painting, where the intent is to depict the visual appearance of the subject. Beside human beings, animals, pets and even inanimate objects can be chosen as the subject for a portrait. Portraitists create their work by commission, for public and private persons, or are inspired by admiration or affection for the subject. Portraits are often important state and family records, as well as remembrances. Historically, portrait paintings have primarily memorialized the rich and powerful. Over time, however, it became more common for middle-class patrons to commission portraits of their families and colleagues. Today, the portrait painting is still commissioned by governments, corporations, groups, clubs, and individuals.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach About Portrait

- How is this woman posed? Can you pose like her?
- Da Vinci used a pyramid model in this painting. Can you see a pyramid form? (Her folded hands form the bottom of the pyramid)
- How does the artist draw attention to her face?
- What can you tell about this woman from her portrait?
- What do you think she's thinking?
- What might her personality be like?

Keywords

- Portrait, expression, line, contrast

Other Possible Questions

- How would you describe the expression on her face?
- Where do you see light in this painting?
- Where do you see contrast in this painting?
- What do you see in the background?
- Can you see a bridge in the background? What about paths? Do you think this background was real or imagined? (It was imagined)
- How would you describe the mood of this painting?
- Do you see straight or curvy lines in this painting? Where?
- Are her eyes looking at you? As you walk around your classroom throughout the next week notice if her eyes are always watching you...
- Do you see eyelashes or eyebrows in this painting? Why is this? (see above)
- Use a magnifying glass to show students the crack at the top, the eyebrows and eyelashes, etc.
- Show additional pictures of da Vinci's human anatomy studies in the packet. What are these drawings of? Da Vinci was interested in the anatomy of humans. Why do you think this information would be useful when he painted? (In order to paint the human body correctly and realistically, artists need to understand how the bones look and function underneath the skin. The bones create the body's form.)
- Talk about the Golden Ratio. (See items in packet.)