

HOW TO HYPE A PAINTING

EVERY DAY, thousands of tourists visit the Louvre in Paris. Of the 6000 paintings on view, only one is exhibited in a bullet-proof glass case. The subject, a simple smiling woman, is known as La Joconde in France, La Gioconda in Italy and Mona Lisa everywhere else.

The first view of the painting is a disappointment: the woman is not beautiful, sexy, dramatic or unique. Yet no painting has achieved the name and fame of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, who celebrated her 500th anniversary in 2003. Every visitor insists on seeing it. It is the media's greatest creation.

What sets Mona Lisa apart is her famous smile. But this too was not unique. Da Vinci's teacher Verrocchio painted faces with subtle smiles, Donatello painted them long before da Vinci, while Antonello da Messina's 'Portrait of an Unknown Man' in the Museo Mandralisca in Sicily bears the same beautiful and mysterious smile. Da Vinci's other paintings, many of Christian saints and the Virgin, have the same smile, the shadow play and the blurred smoky look which characterise Mona Lisa. The mysterious smile was the recommended 'look' for the aristocracy in the fifteenth century!

The subject is also a mystery. Giorgio Vasari, the first commentator on Mona (from Madonna) Lisa, identified her as Lisa, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, hence La Gioconda, but there were several other claimants, supported by various art historians. The painting was probably purchased by Francois I of France and entered the Louvre after the French Revolution.

Napoleon placed the painting in his bedroom in Tuileries, returning it to the Louvre when he became Emperor of France.

Da Vinci was a man of many histories: architect and engineer of Cesare Borgia, the infamous son of Pope Alexander VI, artist in the court of Francois I, King of France, and even a musician. There is the possibility that the painting started out as one person and ended up as another. While the identity of the sitter is not important, it contributed to the hype that was built around the painting, adding to its mystery.

Among the innovations that set apart the painting are da Vinci's use of the pyramid, of which he was very fond, starting from a broad base and tapering away at the top. The second was the use of the *contrapposto*, where the subject sits in three-quarter position while the face looks in a different direction, directly at the viewer, breaking the Renaissance and da Vinci's rule that women should sit demurely, 'their heads lowered and inclined to one side'. The translucent effect of the drapery adds depth to the painting, while the background is asymmetrical, one side higher than the other. Da Vinci was also among the early users of oil paint in place of tempera. He built up layers of paint from dark to light, achieving a play of light and shadow.

In the nineteenth century, the painting's value was far less than those of other Renaissance painters. It was in this period that the cult of da Vinci began. As a scientist, engineer, architect, mathematician and artist, he was hailed as a sort of folk invention. Specialisation being a twentieth century



western invention, his universalism was much appreciated. Even as Italy was vilified as a land of bandits, France adopted him for the years he spent at the French court. He was at the centre of religious controversy too — was he a good Catholic, as the Church claimed, or was he a free-thinker who did not hesitate to cut up corpses? The latter image suited the post-revolutionaries. Thus the French began marketing da Vinci, who had lived and died in France and of whose paintings the Louvre had the largest and best collection. Several artists painted deathbed scenes of the artist or of the artist painting, with La Gioconda in view. It was

Thomas Moore, Flaubert and Théophile Gautier who discovered the *femme fatale* in Mona Lisa. These nineteenth century romantics discovered sensuality in her smile and the serenity of eternal beauty, which, coupled with her mysterious origins, fit the female archetype of the age. Da Vinci had kept the painting till his death — was he in love with her? Now poets and writers flattered the image, and found messages that Da Vinci had never intended. But it needed more than poetry to give it instant fame.

This was provided in 1911 by Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian painter-decorator, who removed Mona Lisa from her frame, stuffed it under his coat and went away. The Louvre remained closed for a week, the Director and head-guard were sacked and the French press went to town, mourning the loss and hyping the painting. The speculations about the possible thief were many: an art lover, a lunatic in love with Mona Lisa or a millionaire collector. Anecdotes true and false about the painting and the painter were rehashed in the Press. When the Louvre finally reopened, hawkers were selling her prints outside, while the Press was lampooning the security at the Museum. The anti-Semites blamed the Jewish Director, while the Left attacked the government of the day.

Finally, in 1913, an antique dealer in Florence received a letter signed 'Leonardo' claiming to want to 'return' the painting to Italy in exchange for 500,000 lire. He met Peruggia at a hotel in Florence, ascertained that it was the Louvre original and called the police. Italians praised the arrested Peruggia as a nationalist, but their government

agreed to return the painting to France after exhibition in Florence, Rome and Milan. The exhibitions were greeted by rapturous crowds. The media hype had succeeded in making the painting into an icon. In 1914, the Baedeker guide to Paris called it 'the best-known female portrait in the world'.

The theft was exploited by several writers and poets. Gabriele D'Annunzio fictionalised the theft. Several theories were floated about international gangs using Peruggia as a tool. Several copies turned up, claiming to be the real painting.

Meanwhile the avant-garde used Mona Lisa as a tool to make fun of high culture. In 1887, Sapeck produced a pipe-smoking Mona Lisa, aiming at the 'fumistes', while Duchamp added a moustache and goatee. Philippe Halsman responded to Salvadoré Dali's desire to look like Mona Lisa by adding the artist's 'surreal' moustache to her face. She became the subject of cartoons, political statements and advertisements, now a universally recognised figure.

From time to time the Louvre still lets out interesting snippets of information, such as 'the paint is gradually cracking up' or 'the canvas is fraying'. This keeps the subject in the news, even as editorials debate whether the painting will survive the century. This merely ensures that more people visit the Louvre to say 'I saw Mona Lisa'. The painting is neither the greatest nor the artist's best. It is the successful creation of the media, who hyped a work of art and, thereby, the Museum. The Louvre and Paris depend on her for their tourist trade.

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