

Putting a Masterpiece into Words

By Dennis Payton Knight

It has been described as “the best known, the most visited, the most written about, the most sung about, the most parodied work of art in the world.”

Leonardo da Vinci’s masterpiece in oils was painted between 1503 and 1506. He may have continued to work on it as late as 1517. It is a portrait of Lisa Gherardini, the wife of a wealthy Florentine silk merchant, Francesco del Giocondo. Leonardo asked his permission to paint her portrait.

She sits erectly, her right hand resting easily on her left, her brunette tresses flowing to her broad, confident shoulders, her dark eyes gazing deeply into yours. Unadorned of jewelry, she is dressed in the European style of her day featuring rich silk fabrics, likely the wares of her husband. A thin line high on her forehead hints at the presence of a veil that would have been fashionable then, but it seems otherwise lost in the depiction.

She is posed before a landscape of winding paths, a distant bridge, and waters descending from icy mountains, painted in a muted, impressionist style. The soft horizon brings your focus into a line with penetrating, absorbing eyes that seem to peer into your soul.

But beyond her captivating gaze, you are even more enchanted by her enigmatic smile, the one that inspired the songwriters Ray Evans and Jay Livingston to ask in their 1950 song, “Do you smile to tempt a lover, Mona Lisa?”

Upon Leonardo’s death, the first King Francis bought the painting and brought it to his palace in France. It subsequently moved about until Louis XIV hung it in the Palace of Versailles. After the French Revolution, it went to the Louvre Museum in Paris, but is also said to have spent a brief period in Napoleon’s bedroom.

The Mona Lisa suffered rough times in the last century, beginning in 1911 when it was stolen from the Louvre. The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who had once called for the museum to be burned down, was implicated, and he in turn pointed to his friend, the artist Pablo Picasso. Both were later exonerated. Then, after two years, a museum employee revealed himself as the thief. He was an Italian patriot who wanted the painting returned to Italy. He had smuggled it out under his coat after closing time.

In 1956, the Mona Lisa was partially damaged by a vandal with acid, and that same year a thrown rock dislodged a speck of pigment. The painting was later restored. Since 1974, bulletproof glass has protected the Mona Lisa, preventing damage when a woman sprayed red paint at it later that year, and again in 2009, when a woman threw a teacup harmlessly against the glass shield.

Through it all, Lisa has kept her enigmatic smile, inspiring the lyrics of Evans and Livingston, “Are you warm, are you real, Mona Lisa? Or just a cold and lonely lovely work of art?”

Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa.