

Five Centuries Old, Mona Lisa Still Captivates Us

By Irv Sternberg

What is the most famous painting in the world?

If you said the *Mona Lisa*, most people would agree with you. I raise the subject now because the man who painted that masterpiece, Leonardo daVinci, died on May 2, 1519. That means a year from now, the world will mark the 500th anniversary of his death after an incredible life as a painter, engineer, scientist, architect, inventor and city planner during which he established himself as the foremost figure of the Italian Renaissance. To say he was a genius hardly describes his talents and achievements.

When daVinci died at the age of 67, he left behind an incredible collection of works, most notably the *Mona Lisa*. The project began as a commission from a silk merchant who wanted daVinci to paint his young wife. He worked on it for fifteen years, until his death, carrying it with him every time he moved from Florence to Milan and back again, even to France where he died. He never delivered it to the silk merchant whom history has long forgotten. However, his young wife has achieved artistic immortality.

As Walter Isaacson describes the portrait in his monumental biography, the *Mona Lisa* “became the most famous painting in the world ... because viewers were able to feel an emotional engagement with her. She provokes a complex series of psychological reaction...”

The two most distinctive features of the painting are her eyes and her smile. Called “the *Mona Lisa* effect,” her eyes seem to follow you around the room no matter where you are standing. Other artists have learned to achieve that effect, but daVinci was the first.

And then there is her smile. Isaacson says it is the “most mystical and engaging element of all.” He says there is “a mystery to her smile. As we stare, it flickers. What is she thinking? Our eyes move a bit and her smile seems to change. The mystery compounds. We look away, and the smile lingers in our minds, as it does in the collective mind of humanity. Never in a painting have motion and emotion, the paired touchstones of Leonardo’s art, been so intertwined.”

A contemporary of daVinci, Giorgio Vasari, wrote that Leonardo kept the real Lisa smiling during the portrait sessions “by employing people to play and sing for her, and jesters to keep her merry, to put an end to the melancholy that painters often succeed in giving to their portraits.”

During the fifteen years he kept the painting, daVinci would continue to add strokes of multiple layers of light oil glazes. “What began as a portrait of a silk merchant’s young wife became a quest to portray the complexities of human emotion made memorable through the mysteries of a hinted smile,” Isaacson writes. As Vasari described the work, “It was painted in a way to make every brave artist tremble and lose heart.” I suspect it may have the same effect on artists today.

Despite being an acknowledged genius, daVinci was also human as demonstrated by his habit of procrastination. He frequently started projects—paintings, buildings, statues and other commissions—without completing them. And, of course, there are the incredible things he

envisioned that never came to fruition but indicated the breadth of his imagination, such as a machine that would enable man to fly like a bird.

His life offered a wealth of lessons: Be curious. See things unseen. Think visually. Indulge fantasy. Be open to mystery. And, of course, procrastinate.