

## UNIT 4 ART

### THE *MONA LISA* (I)

The *Mona Lisa* (also known as *La Gioconda*) is without doubt the most famous work in the entire forty-thousand-year history of the visual arts. It provokes instant shocks of recognition on every continent from Asia to America, 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. It has been famous for a remarkably long, almost uninterrupted period. When it was still in Leonardo's studio in Florence, and very probably not yet finished, it was already inspiring imitations. By the middle of the sixteenth century it was being pronounced divine rather than human in its perfection; by the middle of the nineteenth it was a goal for pilgrimages and the object of a cult that mixed romantic religiosity with eroticism and rhetoric. It might be described as a cross between a universal fetish and a Hollywood-era film star.

#### The Mystery Lady

Based on the mid-sixteenth-century biography of Leonardo da Vinci by Giorgio Vasari, many historians believe the painting to be a portrait of Madam Lisa Giocondo, wife of a wealthy Florentine. It is from Vasari that the painting received the name *Mona Lisa*. Before Vasari, the painting had been referred to as "a certain Florentine lady", and later, in the collection at Fontainebleau, as "a courtesan in a gauze veil". There are many theories, but the panel is unsigned and undated, and although most portraits of the time included something to indicate the sitter's family name or social status, no such emblem can be found in the *Mona Lisa*. Nor is there any record of a commission for the portrait among Leonardo's papers.

It is known that Leonardo worked and reworked the painting for over four years, carrying it with him during his travels and parting with it only at his death. If in fact it was commissioned, why was it not delivered to the patron who had commissioned it?

Some speculate that the *Mona Lisa* may be a portrait of Isabelle of Este, who reigned at Mantua during Leonardo's stay there; a mistress of Giuliano de Medici's or of Leonardo himself. Others speculate that it is not a portrait of one woman, but an artful composite of many, Leonardo's idealisation of womanhood. Others suggest it may have been one of Leonardo's young male models in drag. Some even believe that the *Mona Lisa* is not a portrait at all,

but instead what is known as a 'finzione', an invention of Leonardo's extraordinary imagination or possibly even a self-portrait.

### Description

The painting, which measures 0.77m high and 0.53m wide, is painted in oils on a poplar wooden panel, and dates from c. 1506. The subject is close to the front edge of the picture, and we only see her from the waist up. She is simply dressed, and emerges from the shadows surrounding her from the mid-arm area down. Her folded hands are areas of light that emerge from the blurred shadows of her body and her face emerges from darkly shadowed areas of hair and veiling. She has a slight smile.

Leonardo provided the *Mona Lisa* with a background that is as odd as the famous smile. It is a two-storied structure: below there is a relatively—or formerly—human landscape, with a bridge that spans a partly dry riverbed and a road that winds to a hidden end through reddish brown rocks; above, there is a frosty region with two lakes, or sea inlets, and a mountain range whose jagged spires vary from olive green to light blue and finally become transparent in the flooding light of the distant horizon. One can be reminded of the Italian Alps and of parts of Tuscany, although it seems to be more an assembled landscape. One might imagine that Leonardo considered adding indications of greenery to the background or verifiable emblematic detail, but as it is, the landscape has less to do with the sitter herself than with the artist's desire to elaborate the composition and perhaps enhance the beauty of the figure by way of contrast, such as the welcoming look on the face and the forbidding look of the scenery.

The blue mountains appear to recede into the vaporous distance according to the rules of aerial perspective. The space of the landscape itself, except for the aerial perspective at the top, is astonishingly unsystematic; there are several possible vanishing points, and there is no regular recession to provide clues to the relative sizes of the rocky features.

From: <http://www.cs.tufts.edu/~jmeattle/hepguru/monalisa/monalisa.htm>

### GLOSSARY

**amateur** = dilettante

**goal** = meta

**pilgrimage** = pellegrinaggio

**gauze** = mussolina

**sitter** = modella

**patron** = mecenate

**womanhood** = femminilità

**to be in drag** = travestito

**self-portrait** = autoritratto

**poplar** = pioppo

**blurred** = indistinto, sfocato

**background** = sfondo

**two-storied** = a due livelli

**to span** = attraversare

**to wind (wound, wound)** = snodarsi

**reddish** = rossiccio

**frosty** = glaciale

**jagged spires** = vette seghettate

**greenery** = vegetazione

**to enhance** = esaltare

**welcoming** = accogliente

**forbidding** = ostile

**to recede** = perdersi

**perspective** = prospettiva

**vanishing point** = punto di fuga

**feature** = caratteristica

## NOTES

The word *work* can be used in a number of ways. In this passage it refers to a creation: *The Mona Lisa is without doubt the most famous work in history.* It is a countable noun in this context, and is used with the definite article. *Work* can also be an uncountable noun: *He goes to work by bus.* In this case, the definite article is not used.

When referring to a paid position, the countable noun *job* is used: *He is looking for a new job.*

There are many two-syllable words that exist both as a verb and as a noun or adjective. The stress falls on the **first** syllable of the noun/adjective and on the **second** syllable of the verb. An example from the passage is *record*: *Nor is there any record of a commission.*

*a r̀ecord* (noun)

*to r̀ecord* (verb)

Other examples of this type are: *perfect, rebel, desert, conflict, convict, increase, decrease, import, export, permit, survey, content, produce, progress.*

The word *features* (*the relative sizes of the rocky features*) here refers to something noticeable in a particular geographical area. A *feature* of something can also mean an interesting or important characteristic: *The special feature of the castle is its classical gardens.* Other meanings of *feature* are 'facial aspects': *Her features were strongly defined;* 'special attraction': *The main feature at the circus was the trapeze artist;* 'article': *The feature on Venice was interesting.*

## COMPREHENSION

**Exercise 1** Read the text and answer the following questions.

1. Do we know who the subject of the painting is?
2. Why is the painting also known as *La Gioconda*?
3. Who gave the name *Mona Lisa*?

4. Did Leonardo sign the painting?
5. How long did Leonardo take to complete the painting?

**Exercise 2** Underline the correct alternative.

1. The *Mona Lisa* is a / *self-portrait* / *portrait* / *landscape* /.
2. It is painted on a (an) / *oak* / *cherry* / *poplar* / panel.
3. It is painted in / *tempera* / *oils* / *watercolour* /.
4. The painting dates from the / *15<sup>th</sup>* / *16<sup>th</sup>* / *17<sup>th</sup>* / century.
5. In the background there are / *mountains* / *towns* / *desert* /.
6. 'Reddish' means / *a dirty red* / *a bright red* / *a kind of red* /.
7. The scenery is based on a (an) / *real* / *unreal* / *real and unreal* / landscape.
8. There is some / *similarity* / *contrast* / *interaction* / between the figure and scenery.

### VOCABULARY

**Exercise 3** Complete the following sentences with an appropriate word for picture.

painting	collages	photographs	posters
frescoes	prints	drawing	illustrations

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ for Dante's *Inferno* were done by Gustave Doré.
2. He loves collecting advertising \_\_\_\_\_ of the 1920s.
3. Still-life \_\_\_\_\_ reached its height in 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland.
4. The early Cubists made \_\_\_\_\_ by sticking bits of newspapers on paintings.
5. He did a charcoal \_\_\_\_\_ of her face.
6. Hogarth is famous for his series of \_\_\_\_\_ on the weaknesses and wicked pleasures of his time.
7. I have a large collection of black-and-white \_\_\_\_\_ of the 1940s.
8. Some of the finest \_\_\_\_\_ are by Raphael in the Stanze of the Vatican.

**Exercise 4** The passage refers to an oil painting. Artistic works can use a variety of materials. Underline the correct alternative.

1. A kind of ceramic / *clay* / *plastic* / is porcelain.
2. / *Fibreglass* / *Polyester* / is a light and durable material made of plastic resin.
3. / *Wood* / *Gold* / can be cast, embossed or inlaid.

4. / *Styrofoam* / *Alabaster* / is a cheap and attractive light-weight medium.
5. Fine arts / *pigments* / *papers* / are made of pulped linen and cotton rags.
6. / *Plastic* / *Silver* / can be made highly transparent, translucent or opaque.
7. / *Vinyl* / *Vellum* / is a fine parchment used for manuscripts.
8. In 16<sup>th</sup>-century Mexico, pictures were made of parrot / *leathers* / *feathers* /.

**Exercise 5** In the following sets of words, one word does not belong. Underline the word which is not ...

1. a medium for drawing or painting:
  - a. oils
  - b. watercolour
  - c. charcoal
  - d. trompe l'oeil
2. a physical part of a painting:
  - a. stretcher
  - b. canvas
  - c. brush
  - d. frame
3. connected to religion:
  - a. altarpiece
  - b. background
  - c. triptych
  - d. icon
4. the subject of a painting:
  - a. nude
  - b. foreground
  - c. seascape
  - d. portrait
5. connected to perspective:
  - a. picture plane
  - b. parallel lines
  - c. palette
  - d. vanishing point

**Exercise 6** Translate the following words from the passage into English.

1. arti visive
2. ritratto
3. sfondo
4. prospettiva
5. punto di fuga

### WORD STUDY

**Exercise 7** Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. Leonardo had extraordinary \_\_\_\_\_. (*to imagine*)
2. La Gioconda could be the wife of a \_\_\_\_\_ Florentine. (*wealth*)
3. The *Mona Lisa* is perhaps an \_\_\_\_\_ of womanhood. (*to idealise*)
4. \_\_\_\_\_ have many different theories about the sitter. (*history*)
5. Leonardo wanted to elaborate the \_\_\_\_\_. (*to compose*)