

Becoming Mona Lisa

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CHAPTER ONE - Mona Lisa, the Smile and Lisa

A young woman is seated her right hand upon her wrist, her left hand on the wooden arm of the chair, gripping its edge. The arm of the chair is parallel to the picture plane, as is the unseen lower part of her body. If she sat straight, we would see only her profile. But she turns towards us, presenting three-quarters of her upper torso. Her white visage faces us almost directly. Her brown eyes glance towards the right. Her missing eyebrows enhance her broad forehead. Her cheeks are full. Her hair, shoulder-length, is wrapped in a translucent veil. She wears a sober, dark dress. Her left shoulder is adorned by a thickly pleated mantle. Her neckline reveals the inception of her breasts.

She wears no jewels.

She smiles.

The loggia or balcony supporting her appears to be suspended on the edge of a chasm. Immediately behind her, at the back of the parapet surges a complex, strange and distant landscape: rocky formations, mountain peaks, hills and valleys; on the left a lake and a winding path; on the right a river crossed by a bridge, the forlorn sign of human existence in a barren landscape.

This is what is represented by means of oil paint on a piece of poplar wood. It is small: seventy-seven centimetres high and fifty-three centimetres wide. The Louvre identifies it by the inventory number 779, one of the six thousand paintings the museum currently holds. Only this one, however, is in a special

container, set in concrete and protected by two sheets of bulletproof triple-laminated glass, separated from each other by twenty-five centimetres. The painting has been in this box since 1974.

It is inspected annually; the silica gel used to maintain the temperature is changed; the wood, is checked to establish whether it has contracted or expanded.

In 2003, in time for its presumed five hundredth anniversary, painting number 779 will have a room of its own. Until then it will be kept with the Venetian paintings, which comprise ten Titians, eight Veroneses including his gigantic *Marriage at Cana*, and five Tintoretos. Just outside, along the walls of the Grande Galerie, reputedly the longest corridor in Europe, are five paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, various Raphaels, Bronzinos, Correggios, Fra Angelicos and a marvellous Caravaggio. Further along, visitors can find Velázquez, Durer, Van Eyck, Vermeer - not to speak of Rubens, Poussin, Rembrandt and Goya.

These works - among the most celebrated of Western art - can all be contemplated at leisure, even in the summer months when the season is at its peak, by any of the five and a half million people who visit the Louvre every year. All except number 779, known in France as La Joconde, in Italy as *La Gioconda* and everywhere else as the *Mona Lisa*. This is, allegedly, the portrait of a Florentine lady, Lisa Gherardini, the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, a wealthy merchant. She would have been addressed as "Monna" Lisa, Monna being a contraction for Madonna (*mia donna*), or my lady. The spelling "Mona" is erroneous, but has become established in English and I shall use it throughout.

The obstacle to anything remotely resembling a contemplative viewing of this portrait is the constantly shifting crowd (fifty and more during the summer) trying to catch a glimpse of it, and to photograph it. The reflection from the flashes of the cameras bouncing continually from the glass makes an examination of the work even more difficult. The unprepared visitor, upon entering the room and seeing the crowd, may well assume that the object of such commotion is not a painting at all, but some celebrity, a renowned personality from the world of the cinema, television, fashion or music, or a member of a major royal family. The museum rule that there should be no more than thirty people before a single painting is disregarded. For other paintings, it is hardly necessary. Tourists, who are otherwise well-behaved and somewhat in awe of the museum, also disregard the prohibition to use flash photography. It is almost as if taking a picture of the *Mona Lisa* was one of the main purposes of their visit to Paris. This makes them prepared to defy the guards, who in most instances have given up trying to stop them.

No other painting receives this treatment. No other artifact in the Louvre is subject to such adoration and curiosity, not even the Greek statues known as the Venus de Milo and the Victory of Samothrace though these share with the *Mona Lisa* the privilege, if that is the word, of having their position identified on all tourists' maps of the museum and being signposted throughout. No other major museum in the world possesses an exhibit that so overwhelms in popularity all others. Even Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* at the Uffizi in Florence, Rembrandt's *Night Watch* at the Rijkmuseum in Amsterdam, or Velázquez's *Las Meninas* at the Prado in Madrid do not have such status. Even the vault of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, Michelangelo's complex and grandiose work depicting the Creation, the Great Flood and the Last Judgement, does not outdo in the popular imagination the portrait of this soberly dressed and unknown woman.

Why is the *Mona Lisa* the best-known painting in the entire world? A simple glimpse at even some of her features - her silhouette, her eyes, perhaps just her hands, brings instant recognition even to those who have no taste or passion for painting. Its commercial use in advertising far exceeds that of any other work of art.

Art historians, poets and admirers have tried to explain the commanding place that the *Mona Lisa* has in our cultural life with reference to criteria intrinsic to the work. There is something, they argue, *inside* the painting that speaks to us all, that unleashes feelings, emotions and recognition. This idea originated with the Romantics at the beginning of the nineteenth century, though it had precedents. It is still the position of many modern and even "post-modern" art critics.

The art historian Kenneth Clark, writing in 1973, could not accept that the *Mona Lisa* was famous for reasons other than its inner qualities. There are millions of people, he explained, who know the name of only one picture - the *Mona Lisa*. This, he argued, is not simply due to an accident of accumulated publicity. It means that this strange image strikes at the subconscious with a force that is extremely rare in an individual work of art. Ancient symbols come from the subconscious and continue to touch it. *Mona Lisa* is a comparatively recent creation that has the magical power of a very ancient one.

Clark's conception of art history is now regarded as somewhat old-fashioned. This is not the case with the "post-modern" Paul Barolsky, who in 1994, seeking to explain what it is about the *Mona Lisa* that "holds us in thrall," pointed to Leonardo's remarkable technique, which creates a sense of texture and depth. The painter, he added, rendered the "inwardness of the

sitter, the sense ... of her mind or soul, her animus.” This was achieved by the power of her smile and her glance. Her serene smile places her in a position superior to that of the viewer. We look up to her. Her superiority is intensified by her position with respect to the landscape. Although the hills and the mountains are much larger than she is, Mona Lisa appears to be in a commanding position. Though small, it is, as has often been remarked, a monumental picture. For Barolsky, as for many nineteenth century commentators, “her gaze is as intense as that of a divine personage. No wonder the *Mona Lisa* has on occasion been called a secular *Madonna*. The dominant position of this particular painting in our culture is thus explained in a simple yet highly suggestive way: Mona Lisa is dominate because she dominates the viewer. She gazes at us more than we gaze at her. We are more the subject of her attention the she is of ours.

Anyone who has spent several hours looking at the crowd looking at the *Mona Lisa* might be tempted to agree. Inside her box, protected by glass and bodyguards, she appears to have a serenely ironic detachment from the strange behaviour of her visitors, and their scrambling for a better viewing position.

I think one should avoid succumbing to the charm of a myth, to the idea that inside every masterpiece that has remained alive for centuries something imponderable speaks to us as it has spoken to the previous generations. It is of course intensely pleasurable to imagine that, as we face the products of Leonardo, Raphael and other great artists of bygone ages, armed with nothing but our “innate” artistic sensibility, or as we sit in a concert hall, alone though in a crowd, and listen to the notes of the “divine” Mozart, a mysterious yet almost palpable contact is established. The dead Master is alive, and speaks to us, to me, directly, unmediated, his greatness confirmed once

again because I, so different, so distant, separated by class, race, language, and above all by time, communicate directly with this great creator.

However, many of those who stand before the *Mona Lisa* or other famous artifacts are left a little disconcerted. By the conventions of the twentieth century, she is neither beautiful nor sexy. The painting is not grandiose, or politically inspiring, like Delacroix’s *Liberté guidant le peuple*, for example. There is no gore, no violence. It does not tell a story. Just a plain woman smiling, perhaps.

The remarks one hears by observing, over a period of weeks, those who observe her (or it) reveal a deep frustration. While they accept that a special skill has been deployed to produce the famous portrait of the Florentine lady, denied the intellectual and cultural means of contextualising it, deprived of reference points that would make the experience more interesting, they may wonder, “Why her?” Why should such an incredible fuss be made over such a comparatively tiny painting?

There are works of art that appear to be universal, in the sense that they are still loved, enjoyed, and consumed centuries after their conception. They awake, instant recognition in millions throughout the world. They speak not only to their own time - the relatively small audience for whom they were originally conceived - but to worlds beyond, to future generations, to a mass society connected by international communications that their creators could not suspect would ever come into being.

It is precisely because such universal appeal cannot be separated from the system that amplifies great works and gives them resonance that one should question the idea that the success of artistic works lies only, or mainly, within

the work itself. The Western origin of so many masterpieces suggests that they need, for their global development, appropriate political, ideological and technological support.

These views are unexceptional. Mozart was, we know, revered not only in Vienna, but also in Paris, London and Prague. He would not be as widely known as he is today without the invention of recording equipment, film music, advertising jingles, and plays and films about his life. Mozart would not be “Mozart,” the great universal artist, without adequate technical and marketing support.

Resistance to the idea that masterpieces need marketing is understandable. The word, unpleasant as it is, suggests a kind of conspiracy. It conjures up a group of individuals who, for financial or political gain, decide to make products or persons better known and admired than they would otherwise have been. It suggests that people can be manipulated, their taste determined, and that the most banal artifact can be transformed into a world masterpiece.

I don't believe it. Marketing people take what is already famous, and may make it more famous still.. They consolidate, but seldom innovate. Like most historians, I start with the assumption that the renown of masterpieces rests on a complex, historically determined sequence of events, the participation of various historical agencies (people, institutions, processes) working in a largely unplanned or unconscious manner for different ends. I propose to explain how such forces have turned the *Mona Lisa* into the best-known painting in the world. This book tries to answer the question of how one work wins the competition for artistic fame.

Whether the *Mona Lisa* “deserves” this position is a judgement I happily leave to the reader. My task is to explain why certain things occur, and others don't. It is not my business to establish whether some things are better than others, and why.

By the nineteenth century, the *Mona Lisa* was already part of an artistic canon established by a cultural elite. In the twentieth century what had been known and seen by a few became the property of millions. The development of the mass media, magazines, cinema, radio, television, and the concomitant expansion of the advertising industry have diffused to an unprecedented extent this high culture - and, in so doing, have changed it. The cinema and television have relentlessly plundered the repertoire of fiction - especially nineteenth-century fiction - either directly, by adapting Victor Hugo and Balzac, Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, Manzoni and Melville, Tolstoy and Goethe, or by borrowing their plots and narrative structures.

Advertising provided a new audience for many of the great masterpieces of the Renaissance, the impressionists and the post-impressionists, modern art from Picasso to Dali and Warhol, and, duly transformed into advertising jingles, snatches from Mozart, Bach, Verdi, Rossini and Beethoven.

The worldwide renown of the *Mona Lisa* makes it part of popular culture. Yet it is, unquestionably, the product of high culture: painted by one of the great masters of the Renaissance, bought by the King of France, held in the most famous museum in the world in one of the great cities of the world.

It has stood the test of time. In 1568 it was regarded as a masterpiece by Leonardo's near contemporary, the painter and historian Giorgio Vasari:

"Looking at this face, anyone who wanted to know how far nature can be imitated by art would understand immediately ... all will acknowledge that the execution of this painting is enough to make the strongest artist tremble with fear." Four and half centuries later it was hailed by the art historian Ernst Gombrich: "Like a living being she seems to change before our eyes and to look a little different every time we come back to her... All this sounds rather mysterious, and so it is; that is so often the effect of a great work of art."

Those who bewail the forthcoming end of civilisation and high culture should take some comfort here. A work of art with impeccable cultural credentials winds up also being the most popular. For it is the most popular. A survey conducted in Italy for this book by the Istituto per gli Studi sulla Pubblica Opinione in February 2000 revealed an even higher degree of popularity than anticipated-and in a population surrounded by some of the greatest and best-known works of art in the world.' To the 'open,' i.e. unprompted, question "What do you think is the best known painting in the world?," a staggering 85.8 per cent of those who answered (i.e. excluding the don't knows) said the *Mona Lisa*. Second, with 3.6 per cent, was Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*; third, Botticelli's *Spring* (2.1 per cent); fourth, Munch's *Scream* (2.01 per cent).

A survey conducted among art students in France in 1974, asked them to choose 'the best' out of ten selected paintings. The *Mona Lisa* had been excluded to avoid distorting the response. This time, without Leonardo, Van Gogh made it to the top, followed by Picasso and Goya."

In 1984 the magazine *Paris-Match* asked its readers to select their favourite Louvre painting from a list prepared by the personnel of the museum. The *Joronde* topped it, followed by Raphael's *Baldissare Castiglione* (whose pose was inspired by that of the *Mona Lisa*). In 1989 the Hamburg daily the

Hamburger Abendblatt commissioned a survey of people's favourite painting: 32 per cent of respondents put the *Mona Lisa* first, followed by Carl Spitzweg's *Der arme Poet* (The Poor Poet, 1839), a funny picture of a man in bed with an umbrella protecting him from a leak in the ceiling (27 per cent) and Durer's *Feldhase* (The Hare, 1502).

"Where is the *Jocond*?" is the most frequently asked question at the information desks of the Louvre, according to a survey conducted on 6 February 2000. The question was asked seventy-six times. It was followed by the existential "Where am I?" (fifty-three times). "Where is the Venus de Milo?" was asked once. No other enquiries were received for a specific painting or sculpture.

The renown of the *Mona Lisa* has brought great prestige to a museum that already has enormous status. This global craze-whose origins and development I will map out-confers upon the Louvre some advantages, but also poses some problems. The advantages are obvious. The fame of the *Mona Lisa* attracts to the Louvre people who would otherwise never go to a museum. Once inside, having paid the substantial entrance fee, the hope is that they will look at other exhibits.

The problem for the Louvre is that the transformation of the *Mona Lisa* into an icon of popular culture forces the museum to devise appropriate strategies and responses. To have a painting whose fame outstrips all the others to such an extent vexes the professionalism of curators. While they may think that some works are better than others, they do not like the idea that there is such a thing as the 'best' painting, as if art history were a tournament like the World Cup. What also irks them is that they have lost control of the *Mona Lisa*. Modern museums, usually heavily subsidised

institutions, are accountable to politicians. In practice, the politicians are quite happy to delegate this kind of power to experts; they do not interfere with decisions on where to hang a Vermeer or a Rubens, or how to spend money on new acquisitions. But when it comes to the *Mona Lisa*, things are different. The painting, though extremely fragile, was sent, for political reasons, to the United States in 1963 and to Japan in 1974, against the wishes of all the Louvre's experts. The French government won the day only on the condition that it would never be taken away again (there is also an international agreement not to send abroad works painted on wood). But what can be done can be undone. The *Mona Lisa* may have been around for five hundred years, but democratic politics is short-termist.

The *Mona Lisa* cannot be treated like a "normal" masterpiece. It is exhibited in a special box. All the normal maintenance work which is carried out on a painting must be done, in this case, in such a way as never to remove it from public view. Tuesday is the Louvre's closing day, so any work on the *Mona Lisa* has to be carried out between Monday evening and early on Wednesday morning. The risk of upsetting tourists who have come to see it from distant places is too great.

The *Mona Lisa* cannot be restored. It looks as if it cannot even be cleaned. It is actually quite dirty, partly due to age and partly to the darkening of a varnish applied in the sixteenth century. In 1988 the art critic Federico Zeri urged a thorough cleaning of the painting. The enigma of the *Mona Lisa*, he claimed, was due to its dark tints. With the colours restored, the enigma would dissolve. However, no curator-so far-has wanted to run the risk of ending up in history as the person who wiped the smile off the *Mona Lisa*'s face.

The crowds are such that it has become necessary for the *Mona Lisa* to have her own room. Those curators who wanted the painting to be placed alongside the other works of the Italian Renaissance as if it were a 'normal' masterpiece lost out, as have those who had hoped for a Leonardo room. Lisa's room has been funded by the Japanese network Nippon Television (NTV), sponsor of the 1982-85 restoration of the Sistine Chapel, to the tune of £2.5 million: a further sign, should one be required, that the charms of the *Mona Lisa* are truly global.

The idea is not new. On 29 December 1938, during a parliamentary debate on the French arts budget, Senator Jean Bosch suggested that the *Mona Lisa* should have its own separate room. He pointed out that the painting attracted foreigners like a magnet, and that all the Cook's tours took them to see it. The idea was examined again after 1991. The scheme that finally prevailed was to reduce the size of the Salle des États, leave the Venetian works there and create a new room behind Veronese's *The Marriage at Cana*. Visitors will be able to proceed from the lifts to Lisa and back again without ever walking down the Grande Galerie, or ever seeing the five other Leonardos.

The Louvre and the French Ministry of Culture have played an integral role in the development of the *Mona Lisa* industry. The excellent database of all paintings in state museums is called *Joconde*; as is the Louvre's magazine. On the museum's website the icon you are asked to double click for information on the picture galleries' collections is an effigy of the *Mona Lisa*. Even the Café Muffin, under the Louvre Pyramid, has a poster of *Mona Lisa* holding a muffin.

The visitors who jostle before the painting know that they are there because

it is the most famous work of art in the world. Few of them know why. Many think it has something to do with the mystery of the *Mona Lisa's* smile.

This “mystery” originated in the nineteenth century. Previously, the almost imperceptible smile attracted little attention. It was not regarded as enigmatic or mysterious. Giorgio Vasari, author of the first commentary on the *Mona Lisa* (in *Le Vite de' piu eccelenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, 1550) noticed it, but provided a prosaic explanation in the form of a much-quoted anecdote: musicians, clowns and other performers had entertained the sitter while Leonardo painted her. Lisa smiled because she was amused. In any case, smiles are not infrequent in Renaissance paintings, and they also abound in Greek statues. The works of Leonardo's own teacher, Verrocchio, often represent smiling faces of great subtlety. Donatello produced such smiles decades before Leonardo, and Antonello da Messina, who allegedly introduced the Italians to the use of oil, painted a beautiful portrait of a smiling man who looks directly to wards the spectator.

We do not know the origin of his mischievous smile, and few appear to care. Is this because Antonello da Messina is not as renowned as Leonardo? Is it because (usually male) commentators are not intrigued by a man's smile? Is it because the portrait of the “unknown man” hangs at the Museo Mandralisca in Cefalù, in far-away and peripheral Sicily, and not in the heart of Paris? And if artist and place are determinant, why has attention not been directed towards other Leonardesque smiles? These are far from rare. At the Louvre, Leonardo's *La Belle Ferronniere* may be unsmiling, but his *Bacchus*, his *St John* and his *St Anne* glow happily a few feet away from the *Mona Lisa*, and the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (a mistress of Leonardo's patron Lodovico Sforza) smiles from the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow.

What is really unusual in Renaissance paintings is a sad face. Leonardo did paint one of those: the *Ginevra de' Benci* (c.1475), whose dejected face can be seen in Washington. Yet what saddens the beautiful Ginevra has not generated a fraction of the interest that there has been in Lisa's smile.

By the very artifice of its origin, the mystery of the smile is open-ended. There is no way of satisfactorily resolving it. It may endure for as long as there is interest in the painting. Smiling, after all, is a mundane way of presenting oneself to the world. We smile when we meet someone, when we wave at somebody we know. We smile to our children, friends and loved ones. Politicians smile when campaigning, singers when singing. Variety dancers grin broadly, as do television presenters. Smiles are virtually mandatory whenever a snapshot is taken.

Any visual representation of an emotion necessarily leaves open the question of its cause, unless it is included in the representation. There is no mystery in the countenance of a woman in tears if the artist represents her holding a dead child. But, almost by definition, the illustration of an emotion separated from its cause enables the viewers, if they so desire, to speculate freely. It is what is called an ‘open’ work, that is a painting (or a text, or a piece of music) that allows the recipient/interpreter (the viewer, reader or listener) to determine its meaning. Although viewers have considerable leeway in deciding what is being represented, this freedom can be restricted by the author's contextualisation of the work. In other words, no work is ever totally open (or totally closed). A painting called - say - *Portrait of an Unknown Mother* is far more “open” than one labelled *Virgin Mary with Child*. Viewers aware of a work's symbolic and iconographic contents will find their interpretative freedom restricted: they would not be able to avoid accepting that what is being represented is not just any woman with her

child, but the mother of the incarnation of the Christian God. Western art has moved away from such relatively closed texts towards so-called “polysemic” works, works open to a plurality of meanings. A Jackson Pollock, for example, gives us more freedom of interpretation than does the Annigoni portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. The *Mona Lisa* can be regarded as one stage in the development of Western art towards the emancipation of the artist - and hence of the viewer.

Viewers facing a relatively open text confront two possibilities. They can utilise to the full their freedom to decide their own interpretations. Alternatively, if faced with too great a range of possible meanings, or simply unwilling or unable to make the effort, they can abdicate their freedom of decision in favour of a meaning established by a recognised elite of decoders (or art critics) who do the work for them.

The *Mona Lisa* “smile” is produced by barely raising the left corner of the mouth. Leonardo himself, in his *Treatise on Painting*, says that the “person who laughs raises the corners of his mouth” - as every child who has drawn a beaming face knows. Laughs - as opposed to smiles - are rare in Renaissance paintings, and are never used when depicting the aristocracy and the upper classes. *Mona Lisa* does not laugh; she exercises restraint and decorum. A smile can be regarded as an understated laugh, as the French word, *sou-rire* - “under-laugh” - and its Latin etymological root, *subridere*, suggest. In the highly codified world of fifteenth-century Italian court life, smiles were not left to personal initiative. Numerous books were available for those who wished to be instructed in the proper code of behaviour. The most significant was Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortigiano* (The Courtier), published in 1528 and - as Italian manners were regarded as a universal model to be followed - later translated into English (1561).

Castiglione advised his readers to steer away from:

affectation at all costs, as if it were a jagged and dangerous reef, and to practise in all things a certain - to use a novel expression - *sprezzatura* in order to conceal all artistry and make what one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless.

Sprezzatura means, literally, disdain and detachment. It is the art of refraining from the appearance of trying to present oneself in a particular way. In reality, of course, tremendous exertion went into pretending not to bother or care. Such celebration of the understated did not last long (it reappeared much later, and briefly, too briefly, among the English bourgeoisie), but it was still being promoted in the middle of the sixteenth century by the Italian writer Agnolo Firenzuola (1493 - 1553). His treatise on feminine beauty and behaviour, *Della perfetta bellezza d'una donna* (On the Perfect Beauty of Woman, 1541), was well known even three centuries later: the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, whose *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) provided the decisive interpretation of that period, devoted more space to Firenzuola than to Leonardo or Michelangelo. Firenzuola suggested that the art of restraint and understatement should include smiles. One should never display, he wrote, more than six upper teeth (which should allow for a fairly broad smile). Ladies should close the right side of the mouth while suavely and briskly opening the left, as if smiling secretly. This is so close to what the *Mona Lisa* appears to be doing that it is possible that Firenzuola had this portrait in mind when he proffered his advice.

The *Mona Lisa*'s smile is now so famous that it is almost impossible not to see it. As Ernst Gombrich wrote, “descriptions can be adhesive. Once we have read and remembered them, we cannot help finding the picture subtly

changed.”

Twentieth-century art historians, in spite of the continuing popular interest in the matter, left the business of the *Mona Lisa's* smile to amateurs and concentrated on the pose, which produces the idea of movement; on the technique, which provides a sense of depth; on the history of the painting; and, in particular, on the identity of the sitter. The smile, though the most remarked and famous feature of the *Mona Lisa*, is never seriously discussed by art historians today.

The first serious analysis of the smile, as opposed to a simple signalling of its presence (Vasari) or a definition of it as enigmatic, is a 1933 study by Raymond Bayer, *Léonard de Vinci: La Grâce*. A smile, Bayer points out, can light up a whole face. It is a play of cheeks, chin, eyes. It is a question of light. The smile of the *Mona Lisa* is a half-smile, *un sourire atténué*. Cover the top of the face, suggests Bayer, and the smile of the mouth is more in evidence. Cover everything except the eyes and the smile is present in them, but only by taking the eyes as a whole. The pupils do not smile. The look has no spark. It is mournful, meditative. Concentrating on individual parts of the face, he points out that the lower lip protrudes a little, taking the light, while the mouth remains closed; hence the hint of disdain. Thus, he suggests, a multiplicity of readings is made available, perhaps the basis for the painting's success with posterity.

The mystery of the smile is a manufactured one. Other mysteries are not. When and where did Leonardo paint the *Mona Lisa*? Who is she? Who commissioned it? Why did Leonardo keep the painting? How did it end up in the collection of the French king, François I - and hence of the French state?

It is equally perplexing that among the thousands of preparatory sketches, studies and drawings Leonardo left behind, there is not a single study for the *Mona Lisa* - though the ever-hopeful pretend to discern in a drawing of a pair of feminine hands in the Windsor collection of Leonardo's drawings those of the *Mona Lisa*.

This uncertainty contributes to the enigma and the magic surrounding the *Mona Lisa*, and hence to its popularity. Since the development of art history and art appreciation as distinctive fields of study - that is, since the nineteenth century - scholars and writers have tried to find answers to questions surrounding the *Mona Lisa*. In the twentieth century, when the celebrity of the *Mona Lisa* reached global dimensions, novel hypotheses concerning the history of the painting (including old, forgotten ideas recycled as new) received a greater share of media coverage than similar historical debates over other important Renaissance paintings. Each 'solution,' widely reported, encouraged others to join the fray. Mysteries sell. Yet those pertaining to the *Mona Lisa* are far from unique or unusual. A considerable number of Renaissance paintings have equally recondite origins. At least, in the case of the *Mona Lisa*, it has never been seriously doubted that the Louvre portrait was painted by Leonardo. This is hardly the case with the other Leonardos of the Louvre. The Baedeker guide to Paris of 1914, reflecting conventional views of the time, thought that the *St Anne with Virgin and Child* and the *St John* were painted with the help of pupils, that the *Belle Ferronnière* may have been by Boltraffio, and that the *Bacchus* was a copy of a lost painting. The *Mona Lisa* alone has always received an uncontested attribution.

The identity of the sitter did not perturb nineteenth-century writers. They assumed that Giorgio Vasari's account was correct. He identified her as Lisa, daughter of Antonmaria di Noldo Gherardini and wife of Francesco di

Bartolomeo di Zanobi del Giocondo, hence the designation of “*Gioconda*” (“*Joconde*” in French). This account came under question only in the twentieth century. One of the first to challenge it was Andre-Charles Coppier, a distinguished engraver of the *joconde* (his print is still being sold at the Louvre) who thought the sitter could not be an ordinary Florentine wife, but was in fact an idealised person.²⁶

The identity of a sitter matters to art historians in so far as the reconstruction of the history of any work of art is central to their discipline. From the point of view of aesthetic appreciation it matters *very* little. A new identification has no impact on the beauty of the *Mona Lisa*, the originality of its setting, the ingenuity of the technique used, the innovative pose, the intriguing connection between the human figure and the landscape behind. Public interest would not be modified significantly if it were to be discovered that Lisa Gherardini was not the model for *Mona Lisa*, though the persistence of the quest for the “real” *Gioconda* helps to keep the painting in the public eye.

The more we probe into the past, particularly the distant past, the less we can be certain about questions of identity and attribution. The *Mona Lisa* is no exception. When the sitter for a portrait is a powerful person—a sovereign, an aristocrat or a wealthy patron—identification is relatively easy. Besides, painters were usually hired for a particular purpose. Contracts were signed, archives were preserved, records kept. Those who commissioned the painting retained the finished product. It became part of the family possessions, recorded, listed in wills and, when sold, the subject of written contracts. In most instances it is perfectly possible to produce an account of the vicissitudes of artistic products: when *they* were painted, by whom and for whom. Problems of identification occur when the

sitter is not well known and, above all, when the artist keeps the portrait—which is what Leonardo did with the *Mona Lisa*, thus unwittingly facilitating the development of a mystery.

It was unusual for a painter to keep a portrait, but then Leonardo was an unusual painter. While he drew a great deal, he painted very little, and kept for himself a disproportionate amount of his own production, unlike his Renaissance rivals Raphael and Michelangelo.

Much of what was known about Leonardo in the nineteenth century was based on the main source on the life of Renaissance painters and artists, Vasari's *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* (1550; a larger edition was published in 1568). Born in 1511, Vasari was eight when Leonardo died, and started his *magnum opus* around 1540. This monumental work, 800,000 words long, is the most important book on the history of art ever written, providing a biographical account of the lives of some 160 artists. Vasari gave pride of place to his Tuscan countrymen. Beginning with the “childhood of Italian art” (Cimabue and Giotto), he proceeded to cover the fifteenth century (Brunelleschi, Donatello, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca) before reaching what he regarded as the apogee, the era of Leonardo, of Raphael and above all, of the “divine” Michelangelo, “he who ranks above all the living and all the dead and transcends and surpasses them all.” Accordingly, Michelangelo is dealt with in seventy-five pages, Raphael twenty-two, and Giotto fourteen. Leonardo ranked fourth, with ten pages.

Vasari's description of the *Mona Lisa* was probably written in 1547. Leonardo had been dead for twenty-eight years, Francesco il Giocondo for eight. Lisa Gherardini was still alive. Vasari lived in Florence on and off between 1524 and 1550 and stayed at the Medici palace, not far from the home of

Francesco and Lisa. It is possible that he knew them both, and that they were the source of some of his information. Given the paucity of solid evidence concerning the identity of the painting's sitter, Vasari's version is the least unreliable. This short passage is almost the entire body of sixteenth-century evidence we have on the *Mona Lisa*. Here it is, in full:

Leonardo undertook to paint the portrait of the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, Monna Lisa. He worked on this for four years, but did not finish it. The work is now at Fontanableau with King Francesco of France. Looking at this face, anyone who wanted to know how far nature can be imitated by art would understand. Immediately, for here even tiny details were reproduced with artistic subtlety. The eyes were sparkling and moist as they always are in real life. Around them were reddish specks and hairs that could only be depicted with immense subtlety. The brows could not be more natural: the hair grows thickly in one place and lightly in another following the pores of the skin. The nose and its beautiful pinkish and tender nostrils seem alive. The mouth, united to the flesh-coloured tints of the face by the red of the parting lips, seems of real flesh and not paint. Examining very intently the hollow of the throat, you can feel its pulsation. All will acknowledge that the execution of this painting is enough to make the strongest artist tremble with fear. He also used an ingenious expedient: while he was painting Monna Lisa, who was a very beautiful woman, he had her constantly entertained by singers, musicians and jesters so that she would be merry and not look melancholic as portraits often do. As a result, in this painting of Leonardo's there was a smile so enchanting that it was more divine than human; and those who saw it marvelled to find it so similar to that of the living original.

This description is fairly accurate, considering that Vasari had never seen the painting, but there are mistakes and omissions. He did not mention two features which were unusual at the time: the strange landscape in the background; and the hands, seldom used in portraiture. He describes the eyebrows, although they are clearly missing—perhaps removed by subsequent restoration—and states firmly that the painting was unfinished. These errors have led some historians to question the rest of Vasari's account. He may have seen only an unfinished copy of the portrait or, more plausibly, have obtained his description from an informant who had either seen it unfinished or who reported it as unfinished. Vasari also provides us with information on the date of the composition, claiming that Leonardo had started working on it after his return to Florence from Milan (1500) and that it took him four years to complete.

Leonardo had originally left Florence in 1481 to work in Milan under the patronage of Lodovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, known as "Il Moro." After the French had defeated Lodovico in December 1499, Leonardo returned to Florence. Between 1506 and 1513 he was frequently travelling between Florence and Milan (by then under French control). In 1513 he went to Rome and placed himself under the patronage of the Florentine Giuliano de' Medici, brother of the new Pope Leo X. When Giuliano died (March 1516), Leonardo left Italy and went to Amboise (on the Loire) at the Court of the King of France, François I, where he died in 1519.

Leonardo went to Amboise because he was unable to find patrons worthy of his stature in Italy, which had not yet been supplanted by France as Europe's major artistic centre. The competition was overwhelming. In Venice, then the richest and most vibrant commercial city in Europe, Titian ruled supreme. In Rome, the Pope found Leonardo unreliable because he did not finish any paintings, and preferred Raphael who, at the age of

thirty, was the rising star. After the feat of the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo, now forty, was widely regarded as the supreme artist in Italy, unparalleled in both sculpture and painting. In other words, Leonardo went to France because, after the death of his protector Giuliano de' Medici, François I's was the best offer he could get. It was a generous one: an ample annuity and a comfortable manor house, Clos-Lucé, linked to the royal residency, the castle of Amboise, by a narrow passage. There the now elderly man basked in the admiration of a powerful king besotted with all things Italian, and had the peace and quiet he required for his research and writings. He became a court decoration for the greater glory of François, organising parties, drawing, and devising mechanical toys, and lost interest in painting. He had no French assistants, left no French followers, and had little impact on the subsequent course of French painting. Perhaps Leonardo too was the best François could get, having tried unsuccessfully to convince the very prolific and active Titian and Michelangelo to come to France. Neither king nor artist could have been aware that their association would provide the *Mona Lisa* with the best possible setting for its global success five centuries later, and the Louvre with the jewel in its crown.

When did Leonardo actually paint the *Mona Lisa*? The claim by Vasari that it was painted during his second Florentine stay (i.e. between 1500 and 1506) has been largely vindicated by the most meticulous and evidence-based account we have - that of Frank Zollner in 1993 – which proposes March 1503 as the most likely starting date for the work. Completion would have occurred around June 1506, when Leonardo left Florence for his second Milanese period (although he might of course have continued working on the *Mona Lisa* later). Zollner's dating is unavoidably circumstantial, but it rests on more than speculation.

In the spring and summer of 1503 Leonardo was earning little or nothing at all. He was withdrawing money from his bank account and nothing was coming in. He must thus have been available for work. He could not have started the *Mona Lisa* before 1500, because he was still in Milan, and we know everything he did there.

After short stays in Mantua and Venice he returned to Florence in April 1500. He could not have accepted a commission to portray the *Mona Lisa* before June 1502, because he had plenty of work. There are detailed accounts of Leonardo's work in progress in 1501, but none mentions the *Mona Lisa*.

For most of 1502 until March 1503 he was the architect and engineer-in-chief of Cesare Borgia, the famous - or infamous - son of Pope Alexander VI. His military work for Cesare took him to Urbino, Pesaro, Cesena and Porto Cesenatico. He was thus far too busy to start painting the portrait of a Florentine lady.

It is unlikely he would have started it after October 1503, because by then he had been offered an important government commission (and money): painting a mural representing *The Battle of Anghiari* (soon completely ruined because Leonardo had used unsuitable materials).

This leaves a blank: the period between March and October 1503, and this is the most likely starting date. There is some corroborating evidence: various works by Raphael clearly allude to the *Mona Lisa*). Raphael must have seen the portrait, probably not yet finished. Vasari may have been right after all.

There is, however, no consensus. In 1939 Kenneth Clark had accepted 1503 as the start date, but by 1973 he had become convinced that Leonardo drew Lisa Gherardini in 1504 and painted the portrait later, between 1506 and 1510, idealising it in the process. It is perfectly possible that during the composition, as Leonardo was becoming increasingly involved with it, he altered the original traits of Lisa, and that the result turned out quite dissimilar to the original drawing, and hence no longer a portrait. This would also explain why he could not give it to Francesco il Giocondo; and it leaves open the possibility that Leonardo painted most of the picture in 1503-06 and continued to work at it, sporadically, well after that.

The idea that the *Mona Lisa* may have started life as the portrait of Lisa and ended as someone else's opens up further possibilities. There is a "two Lisas" hypothesis: Leonardo first painted Lisa and handed the portrait over to her husband, and this is the portrait described by Vasari; but he had made a copy, then altered its features, idealising them, and took that with him to France. The first portrait was lost. The second survives and is the one we know and love." There is no real evidence for any of this, but the theory has its charm: perhaps the first portrait was not irretrievably lost, in which case it could be anywhere, perhaps in someone's attic. When we are not sure of something, anything is possible.

Who was Lisa Gherardini? The registry of the Battistero di San Giovanni confirms she was born in Florence, on Tuesday, 15 June 1479. Her family, though not rich, belonged to the petty nobility. Her father Antonmaria, legally required like all residents to declare the amount of her eventual dowry, replied that she had none. At sixteen Lisa was married to a man nineteen years older and twice widowed: Francesco di

Bartolomeo di Zanobi del Giocondo, a Florentine notable. By then her father had managed to assemble a reasonable dowry, 170 florins. This was only one-eighth that of Maddalena Strozzi Doni (celebrated in a similar pose by Raphael in 1506)-but Maddalena came from one of the richest families in Florence, the Strozzi, and was marrying into an equally grand family, the Doni. Lisa's dowry, then, was probably average for one of her social standing. By the time Leonardo had started painting her she had already had three children, one of whom, a girl, had died in 1499.

In 1503 Francesco del Giocondo moved with his young family into a new house. As Zollner points out, a prosperous merchant would have taken this opportunity to ask a leading artist to portray his young wife. Lisa had already given him two male children, the second just born (December 1502), thus providing a further cause of celebration. Then as now, the upwardly mobile *nouveaux riches* took their lead on how to behave from those of more established wealth. Buying art from prominent local painters was the done thing, and Francesco could afford to pay the going rate. So *why* should not Lisa smile? She had a wealthy and loving husband, two boys, and a bright new home. Had Leonardo delivered the finished portrait, Francesco and Lisa would have hung it on the wall, and the *Mona Lisa* might not be in the Louvre.

In our democratic age, it may be somewhat appealing that the countenance of the daughter of the middle-class Gherardinis, the loyal (I presume) wife of an ordinary merchant, the devoted (ditto) mother of Piero and Andrea, should have become the best-known icon in the world, used in advertising, on mugs, ashtrays, calendars, folders, T-shirts and computer mousepads. In so far as we can ascertain, Lisa did nothing exceptional during her entire life except sitting still while Leonardo drew her. Andy Warhol famously wrote that in the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. Lisa has been famous for five centuries, without having done anything at all.

There is, perhaps, an unconscious wish on the part of some commentators to establish that the sitter was of nobler birth, or at least of a standing proportionate to that of her painter. It may be baffling to some that Leonardo never painted a king, a queen, a pope, irksome that his patron, Duke Lodovico Sforza, who had Leonardo with him for nearly twenty years, never asked him to paint his portrait. Indeed, some have claimed that the real sitter was one of the outstanding women of the Renaissance, the rich and powerful Isabella d'Este, Marquise of Mantua, who it is known implored Leonardo to paint her portrait. In fact, in February 1500 he had gone to Mantua and drawn her portrait, now in the Louvre.

Isabella d'Este would have been eminently suitable as a subject for Leonardo. In 1899 Eugene Muntz, one of Leonardo's first biographers, hugely praised her: she was a wonderful wife, a "tender yet firm mother," the most accomplished woman of the Renaissance, and a lady of great taste and exceptional moral qualities.

There is no doubt that Isabella wanted Leonardo to paint her portrait. In 1498 she had written to Cecilia Gallerani asking to be shown the portrait Leonardo had made of her - the one we know as *Lady with an Ermine*. Cecilia complied, pointing out that the picture no longer looked like her - not because of any faults of the painter, "a master who has no equal," but because she was no longer as young. Isabella pursued Leonardo for nearly eight years, receiving only vague promises from him, and he did not go further than the drawing of 1500. Unless, of course, the *Mona Lisa* is really Isabella d'Este, as claimed in 1946 by Raymond Stites and, more recently, by Hidemichi Tanaka.

But there are other distinguished candidates. In the late nineteenth century, writers such as Séailles, Dmitri Merezhkovski and Tristan Klingsor claimed

that the real Lisa was a Neapolitan aristocrat, Costanza d'Avalos, Duchess of Francavilla. This hypothesis was popular in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century. It was advanced by Adolfo Venturi, supported by Benedetto Croce and enshrined in the entry for Leonardo in the 1933 *Enciclopedia Italiana*. Costanza was an aristocrat, wife of Federico del Balzo, who attempted to regain Naples from the French at the end of the fifteenth century. To Italian patriots, she was a better choice than Lisa del Giocondo. There is a problem: Costanza was forty at the time the portrait was painted, too old to be the Gioconda.

Carlo Vecce, author of a recent biography of Leonardo, has claimed that "Lisa" was Isabella Gualanda, a Neapolitan lady, friend of the famous poetess Vittoria Colonna. His theory is that Leonardo started the portrait of Lisa Gherardini in 1504, worked on it for four years, but never finished it - as Vasari had claimed. When Leonardo was in Rome (1513-16) as part of the entourage of Giuliano de' Medici, he was asked to paint the portrait of Isabella Gualanda. He had to agree, and simply recycled the unfinished portrait he had brought with him, providing it with the features of Isabella. When Vecce first suggested this hypothesis, it was reported thus in the *Birmingham Express & Star* (1 February 1991): "Mona Lisa was a highly-paid tart, says Professor Carlo Vecce of Naples University. He says she was a beauty who took the Vatican by storm." The story is of course appealing, but there is no contemporary record of Leonardo painting anything of note in Rome. Indeed, as Vasari reported, Pope Leo X (Giuliano's brother) complained that Leonardo never finished anything because he thought too much about the end product. In an earlier article, Vecce declared that "we can only be sure that the *Mona Lisa* is not the portrait of Monna Lisa." But human beings don't like uncertainty: in his Leonardo biography (1998) Vecce says he is sure that it

is Isabella Gualanda's portrait that hangs in the Louvre. The leading Italian Leonardo scholar Carlo Pedretti concurred. The catalogue of the exhibition *Leonardo scomparso e ritrovato*, held in Florence between 28 July and 15 October 1988, is equally categorical: the *Mona Lisa* is described as *Ritratto di Isabella Gualanda detto Monna Lisa*, and dated 1513-1515 the period when Leonardo was in Rome. In 1956, however, Pedretti thought it possible that the lady in question might have been Pacifica Brandano, Giuliano's mistress. And in 1953 he was reported as being convinced that she was not the mistress but the wife of Giuliano, Filiberta di Savoia." Though a minority view among art historians, Pedretti's and Vecce's dating has been incorporated, unquestioningly, into the cultural database of RAI, Italy's state television.

All those arguing against the identification of the *Mona Lisa* with Lisa Gherardini base their theories on the only available source that *may* have seen the *Mona Lisa* in Leonardo's lifetime. This is not Vasari, who as we know never saw the portrait or met Leonardo, and who thought the painting had never been completed. Perhaps Vasari's informant had seen the incomplete painting, with the background barely sketched (which would explain *why* Vasari did not mention it). Perhaps - and this seems to me the most likely explanation - Leonardo, never satisfied, regarded it himself as unfinished, as was hinted, perceptively, by Stendhal in his *His Histoire de la peinture en Italie* (1817).

The only contemporary of Leonardo's who actually claimed to have seen the *Mona Lisa* and who left a document was Antonio de Beatis, the faithful secretary of Cardinal Luigi d'Aragona, a Neapolitan prince related to both Lucrezia Borgia and Isabella d'Este. D'Aragona, a keen traveller, had instructed de Beatis to keep a detailed diary of their journeys, and the

pair were probably the first "tourists" to see the *Mona Lisa*. They left Italy in May 1517, and visited the Tyrol, Switzerland, Bavaria, Cologne and Holland. By August they had reached Calais, intending to visit Henry VIII in England. Dissuaded by the news, possibly false, that an epidemic was devastating London, they proceeded towards Rouen to pay homage to François I, the 'Most Christian King,' then went on to Amboise, by the banks of the Loire, to visit their famous countryman Leonardo.

In what became subsequently a much-commented-upon and debated account, de Beatis wrote that Leonardo, the "most famous painter of our time," and seventy years old (in fact he was sixty-five), no longer painted because he could not use his right arm (he was, in fact, left-handed)." They were shown three paintings – "*tucti perfectissinii*." One was a young St John, the other the *St Anne with Virgin and Child* - both now at the Louvre. The third painting, reported de Beatis, was the portrait of a "Florentine lady" commissioned by the late Giuliano de' Medici. If de Beatis had written simply "a Florentine lady," then it could only have been Lisa Gherardini, the *Mona Lisa*. But "commissioned by Giuliano"? Giuliano would not have commissioned Lisa's portrait. Was it Isabella Gualanda? Or Costanza d'Avalos? But neither was from Florence. Perhaps it was the so-called "Colombine" *Gioconda*, now hanging at the Hermitage in St Petersburg. This, now attributed to Leonardo's pupil Francesco Melzi, would have been regarded by Leonardo as his, and hence worthy to be shown to the Cardinal of Aragon. Perhaps de Beatis misunderstood what Leonardo was saying, and in so doing started an endless debate.

To complicate matters for historians, de Beatis wrote that on the day after the meeting with Leonardo, the Cardinal, visiting the nearby Château de Blois, stopped by a portrait of a woman and noted that she "was not as

pretty as the Lady Gualanda. "Isabella Gualanda had not been mentioned in the account. Was she the 'Florentine lady' whose portrait had been seen the previous day? But how could that be? She was not from Florence ...

It is possible that Leonardo failed to deliver the portrait of Lisa del Giocondo to her husband, but it is scarcely credible that he would have kept for himself a portrait commissioned by a powerful man like Giuliano de' Medici, his protector and brother to the Pope.

The balance of probabilities is that the portrait Leonardo showed Beatis and the Cardinal d'Aragon was indeed that of Lisa Gherardini, who could adequately be described as a Florentine lady. This assumption is strengthened by another much-cited source, Cassiano del Pozzo, who visited Fontainebleau in 1625. He clearly described the painting that now hangs in the Louvre, which he found highly damaged because the varnish had altered the colours. Nevertheless, Cassiano, an admirer of Leonardo and a patron of the arts, was impressed, calling it "*la piu coimpuita opera che di quest'autore si veda, perche dalla parola in poi altro non gli manca*" ("the best-known work of this painter, because she lacks only the power of speech"). Cassiano referred to this painting as "*la Gioconda*," and described it so: a woman in her mid-twenties, the face a little puffy, simply dressed, the hands beautifully drawn and the eyebrows missing. Of course, he may have simply read his Vasari, but his mention of the "beautiful" hands and the missing eyebrows, not remarked upon by Vasari, suggest otherwise. Finally, Pierre Dan, the Father Superior of the monastery of Fontainebleau, in his *Le Trésor des merveilles de la maison royale de Fontainebleau*, wrote that he had seen there in 1642 the portrait of a virtuous Italian lady, whose name was "Mona Lissa" (sic), commonly known as "*La Joconde*." This may be significant,

because it firmly connects "Mona Lissa" to the "*Gioconda*."

The evidence around which these portentous debates centre is extremely slim. This is why they could go on indefinitely. All we have is a paragraph from Vasari (who never saw the portrait), a few lines from the diary of a traveller reporting on a few of Leonardo's words and the mutterings of the Cardinal. The rest is hearsay. The prudent course of action for historians is to admit that, though the weight of evidence suggests that the *Mona Lisa* is the portrait of Mona Lisa, it is rather light. No wonder the art historian Martin Kemp cautiously decided in 1981 to call the picture *Portrait of a Lady on a Balcony*.

In 1991 two scholars, Janice Shell and Grazioso Sironi, advanced a new hypothesis based on their discovery of the inventory of Andrea Salaì (whose real name was Gian Giacomo Caprotti), Leonardo's assistant, adoptive son, perhaps lover. They claim that this find confirms the identification of the *Mona Lisa* with Lisa Gherardini and the date of its creation. They suggest that the *Mona Lisa* did not remain in France after Leonardo's death, but returned to Italy and was subsequently brought back to France. This scholarly essay, like most things concerned with the *Mona Lisa*, made press headlines, including one in the *Observer* of 27 January 1991: "Smile on, Gioconda, it really was you." As the two authors point out, what happened to the *Mona Lisa* after Leonardo's death is uncertain. It was assumed that Francesco Melzi had inherited it. According to Leonardo's will (of which we have only a nineteenth-century transcription), Melzi was to be Leonardo's executor and receive his books and effects. Salaì, who had subsequently married, was killed by French soldiers in Milan on 19 January 1524, perhaps after a brawl. He left no will, so an inventory of his personal effects was made on 21 April 1525, when a dispute arose over the

property. The inventory included a surprisingly large number of pictures: a Leda with Swan, a St Jerome, a St Anne, a Virgin with Child, a “*Joconda*” and many others. Were these Leonardo's works? Leonardo was not mentioned, but the generous values given to the paintings suggest that perhaps they were not thought to be mere copies: the Leda was estimated to be worth 1,010 lire, nearly as much as Salaì's house; the “*Joconda*” was worth 505 lire, as was the St Anne. It could be a precious clutch of Leonardos. Perhaps Leonardo had given them to Salaì before his death.

If Shell and Sironi are right, and the “*Joconda*” mentioned in the inventory is in fact the *Mona Lisa*, it could mean that the portrait was taken back to Italy by Salaì and was later bought by agents sent by François to scour Italy in the 1530s and 1540s for artwork to buy. Of course, it is equally possible that Salaì made copies of paintings by Leonardo, and that these were taken to be authentic by those who made the inventory in Milan.

The first implication is that, contrary to general opinion, François I may not have bought the *Mona Lisa* from Melzi or from Leonardo. Later accounts simply say that the King paid a considerable sum for it. The second is that the term “*Gioconda*” was already used to designate the portrait of a woman in what was becoming a classic pose. Does the inventory confirm Vasari's account? Not unequivocally, but it seems more likely that the portrait described as “*Joconda*” was that of the wife of Francesco del Gioconda than Isabella d'Este or Isabella Gualanda. It shows that a painting called “*Gioconda*” was associated with Leonardo and with the other works that became part of the French royal collection. This is the comforting implication Louvre experts like Sylvie Béguin have drawn, because it appears to confirm the identity of their famous exhibit.

The paucity of the evidence available, though, keeps the experts divided and, as a consequence, leaves the door open for others, with fewer scholarly qualifications or professional expertise, to intervene with unsubstantiated claims. The revelation that the “real” *Mona Lisa* is X and not Y never fails to attract press attention.

There is nothing extraordinary about uncertainties regarding attributions, particularly of Renaissance paintings. The records are sparse. Titles were not given. Works were rarely signed. As a consequence much traditional art history deals less with the aesthetics of the works examined than with identifying who painted them, when and where. The scholarship devoted to the problem of the *Mona Lisa* is a result of its popularity. Far less time has been spent on another equally “mysterious” portrait, also by Leonardo, that of a beautiful and slightly brooding woman – “charming and cruel,” to use the words of one of Leonardo's first biographers, Gabriel Séailles, in 1892. In the seventeenth century it was erroneously identified as *La Belle Ferronnière*, the mistress of François I. It was actually painted in Milan, probably in 1490. The sitter was a lady of the Milanese court, probably Lucrezia Crivelli, a mistress of Lodovico il Moro. Some have identified her as Beatrice d'Este, others as Isabella of Aragon, wife of the Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Sforza (ousted by his brother Lodovico).

The mysteries surrounding the *Mona Lisa* do not by themselves explain the popularity of the painting, but they play an important role in the creation of the *Mona Lisa* story, and reinforce the view that the *Mona Lisa* is a special kind of painting. A “secret” smile holds a secret story. Why does she smile, and who is she? As in all quests, there is a prize. For historians, it is the celebrity bestowed on those who resolve famous mysteries about famous paintings. A competitive field is established, and with it a mechanism of continual

reinforcement. Each “solution” is contested, thus augmenting the interest generated.

Does the *Mona Lisa* possess intrinsic qualities as a work of art, qualities necessary to its subsequent transformation into a global icon? In Leonardo's own lifetime the painting was regarded as a masterpiece because of the originality of the technique used, the innovative pose adopted by the sitter, and because it was “true to life” (Vasari). It was a revolutionary painting.