



ARTIST: Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

PAINTING: *Mona Lisa*, also called *La Gioconda*

PERSONAL

Leonardo da Vinci was born in 1452. He was Leonardo from Vinci – the city where he was born – or, in Italian, Leonardo da Vinci.

He received art training in Florence – a famous art city in Italy. For seventeen years, he worked at the Court of Milan.

Da Vinci was talented in many ways. The King of France once said, “No man knows more than Da Vinci.” Although primarily a painter, he was also a scientist, musician, inventor, engineer, mathematician, architect, and writer.

Today, we call a person who has many abilities a “Renaissance man or woman.” Da Vinci lived during the Renaissance, an age of genius, new ideas, new ways of thinking, and exploration. With his many talents, he really was a Renaissance man.

STYLE

Leonardo da Vinci believed that in order to paint objects or people, an artist had to understand their structure – how they are formed or put together. He was able to study things and understand them clearly. He figured out and drew diagrams to explain how birds fly – several centuries before slow motion cameras showed the same ideas.

Da Vinci believed that an artist could show emotions in portraits. He did this with a technique called *sfumato* (*sfū-mă-tō*, meaning smoke) in which he painted a color that turned slowly from light to dark tones to give off a kind of misty glow or smoky mystery. He tried to paint portraits that showed emotions, not just a blank stare.

IN THIS PAINTING

The *Mona Lisa* is the most famous portrait in the world. In the *Mona Lisa*, Da Vinci painted an elegant woman gazing at you with a strangely calm yet haunting look. The mysterious quality of the portrait is achieved by the use of the technique of *sfumato* (smoke). You can see a 3-D quality that comes from the soft background that makes the horizon look very far away.

Da Vinci was so interested in perfect form that he painted some other woman’s hands to go with the face of the *Mona Lisa*.

Notice the use of portrait and landscape together in the picture. This combination was one of Da Vinci’s artistic inventions.

The smile of the *Mona Lisa* seems to glow from within. Is the smile in her mouth or in her eyes? Cover her mouth. Do you think her eyes are smiling?

Not long ago, some art historians proposed a new theory about the *Mona Lisa*. They believe that the *Mona Lisa* was really based on a self-portrait of Da Vinci. They looked under the paint with a type of x-ray machine and discovered lines and drawings *under* the picture you see. A computer researcher compared a self-portrait by Da Vinci with the painting and found that the eyes, hair, cheeks, nose, and famous smile were very similar. These lines and drawings supported the art historians' theory. Others insist she is Monna Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo, the wife of an Italian nobleman.

The painting is so popular that officials of the Louvre Museum in Paris say that people even write letters and send New Year's greetings to "Madame Mona Lisa." About 3 million people visit the museum to see the Mona Lisa every year.

Some say that the Mona Lisa looks at you wherever you are standing. Test this in class with people who are in different parts of the room. Some people say, "She's very plain." Others say, "She has an interesting face." What do you think?

TYING THIS PRINT TO SOCIAL STUDIES

Columbus and other explorers were conducting their adventures around the world at the same time that Leonardo da Vinci was painting and inventing things in Italy. *Perspective painting* was invented which allowed artists to control their view of the world, much as explorers controlled their travels across oceans. It was an AGE OF EXPLORATION in life and in art.

During the time Da Vinci painted, Italy was a collection of city-states, not a unified nation. A city-state was a small, self-contained political area – something like a big city or small country today. People pledged their allegiances and worked and paid taxes to the city-state in which they lived. Da Vinci's name shows the strong connections between the people and where they lived, as he was from Vinci.

In Da Vinci's time, educated people needed to learn how to read Latin and to understand and appreciate art and literature. Artists and their work became an important part of everyday life during the Renaissance.

A new class called the "middle class" was developing, in addition to the nobles and peasants. The middle class began to earn enough money to purchase art. The increasing amounts of money available for purchasing art created more opportunities for artists.

Geography: Locate Italy and the cities of Milan and Florence.

TYING THIS PRINT TO OTHER SCHOOL SUBJECTS

Math: DaVinci borrowed and used the shape of the pyramid from his knowledge of math to give strength to his paintings. Ask the students where they “see” a pyramid form in the picture (e.g., the shape of the head and shoulders of Mona Lisa).

Advertising: the Mona Lisa has been used as a trademark for Spanish olive oil, Italian hair pins, a restaurant in Berlin, Germany called The Smile, computer companies, and many other businesses.

TYING THIS PRINT TO OTHER PRINTS

Compare with other portraits – for example, Gainsborough’s *Blue Boy*. What does Da Vinci do differently from later artists? How do the different pictures make the viewer feel? Which print conveys deeper emotion? Which print do you like more and why?

WHERE YOU CAN SEE ORIGINAL WORK BY DA VINCI

The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. has a portrait called *Ginevra de Benci*, the only original painting by Da Vinci in a U.S. museum. It was purchased for 5 million dollars in 1967.

The *Mona Lisa* is in the Louvre in Paris, but many galleries in the United States have copies of it.

Check local museums and galleries for original art or reproductions by Leonardo da Vinci.

Art Experiences

Mona Lisa
Leonardo da Vinci

1. Choose one color crayon or pencil and draw a square. Use the crayon to fill the square with color going very slowly from light to dark. Start at the bottom of the square with very, very light color and gradually get darker and darker as you reach the top of the square. Does the color “glow”? This is called *sfumato* (*sfū-mă-tō*, meaning smoke).
2. Da Vinci liked to sketch almost anything he saw in order to learn from his drawings. He sketched buildings, animals, hands, trees, rocks, inventions, and even knots of rope to learn about shape, line, light, and shadow. His notebooks, filled with sketches, became famous. (Students may be able to locate the notebooks or books about them in a public library.) Pick a common object in school, at home, or outside to sketch. Try to sketch the same object 3 or 4 times to see what you learn about its form by drawing it from different angles.
3. Draw a portrait of yourself or another person that shows emotion.

Writing

Across the Curriculum

1. The *Mona Lisa* is probably the world’s best-known and most famous portrait. It may be the most famous painting in the world. Why do you think people like this painting? What does the painting “say” to you?
2. You may see the *Mona Lisa* today. For example, some commercials for modern products have used the *Mona Lisa* in their advertisements. Why would a company do this (e.g., to connect the product with a “masterpiece,” to connect the product with the world’s definition of “beautiful” or “mysterious”)? What product would you link with the *Mona Lisa* and why? Draw your advertisement to show how you would use the *Mona Lisa* to sell a product.
3. Write a paragraph that tells how a portrait that is drawn or painted is different from a photograph.
4. Write a paragraph explaining why you think art is important in your education. Can someone be “educated” without understanding and having an appreciation for art?