

Leonardo da Vinci was born on April 15, 1452 in central Italy. Not much is known about his boyhood, except that he was raised by his grandparents, and he was the son of a peasant woman and a law clerk. Leonardo seemed to be very talented in many areas with being noted as a:

**musician, an inventor, and, of course, a loved artist**

At the early age of 14, Leonardo's father, Ser Piero, recognized what great talent he had with painting. In fact, Leonardo had painted the picture of a dragon that looked so real that it actually scared his father when looking at it. Father and son made a journey to visit Andrea del Verrocchio, a well-known artist, where Leonardo became an apprentice under Verrocchio. This job kept Leonardo very busy.

By the age of 30, Leonardo began sketching and writing daily into notebooks. His sketches were of inventions that were not even created. One of the forms of writing that Leonardo took liked to do was mirror writing (whereby you write backwards, so that you can only read a message by holding it up to a mirror). Some scholars believe Leonardo did this to keep his thoughts private, while others attributed it to the fact that he was left-handed and it was easier for him to write this way.

As far as being an artist, Leonardo has been called "a genius," "unmatched," and "divinely inspired." You would think, based on these comments that Leonardo was very disciplined in his work, but this is not the case. In fact, most of his major works of art have not been completed. Scholars believe this is because he was never satisfied with what he did, while others think that his mind was constantly racing with new thoughts and ideas, and he wanted to get them going before he lost his train of thought. Both make sense, but no one really knows why.

# The Mona Lisa

The Mona Lisa is without a doubt the most famous painting in the world. The Mona Lisa's smile has made the portrait famous. It was created by **Leonardo Da Vinci** in the years 1503-1506 using oil paint on wood, and measures 77 x 53 cm (smaller than most of the art works we study). It is currently on display at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.



Mona Lisa is thought to have been the portrait of La Gioconda, a young Florentine woman who was the wife of Francesco del Giocondo. La Gioconda was 24 years old when the portrait was begun. She sits, dressed in the fashion of her day, in front of a mountainous landscape. The painting is a wonderful example of Leonardo's *sfumato* technique of soft, heavy shading.

He used his finger to erase outlines and create an impression of fuzziness.

Have a look at a larger image of Mona Lisa.



In any portrait, the expression is created mainly in two features: the mouth and the eyes. Leonardo deliberately made the corners of the eyes and mouth on the



Mona Lisa indistinct, merging them into soft shadow. When we look at her, *we are not quite sure what her mood is.*

Da Vinci also did something else unusual when he painted Mona. Look carefully at the picture; you will see that the two sides of the background do not quite match. The horizon on the left side seems much lower than the one on the right. The result is that when you look at the left side of the picture, Mona Lisa seems taller than when you look at the right side.

Da Vinci was also a master at painting details, especially flesh, with oil. Look at the hand, and the sleeves with their detailed folds. Going against the tradition of the time of outlining the painted image, Leonardo uses

the technique known as *sfumato*, (in Italian, 'vanished or evaporated'). He created imperceptible transitions between light and dark, and sometimes between colors. He blended everything; his brush strokes are almost invisible.



Leonardo was also a master at illuminating his work with light by applying thin layers of paint. The luminescent appearance of Mona Lisa's skin was created with layers of transparent color, each very thin, making her face seem to glow.

Leonardo Da Vinci loved the portrait so much that he never gave it to the person who commissioned it. In fact, he carried it with him for years after it was completed. There is also some dispute about the real subject of the painting. A few art historians believe that the portrait may actually have been a composite of several sketches that Leonardo had already made, possibly even of a male model. There is also the suggestion that he painted over a portrait he had made of himself, since the proportions of the facial features seem to match his own.

Mona Lisa is actually sitting on a terrace, but because parts of the painting showing the columns were at one time removed, this is no longer so obvious. Also, some parts of the painting have been damaged and painted over. The

painting was stolen in 1911 and wasn't recovered for two years. In 1956, someone threw acid at the painting; the restoration took several years. In the 1960's and 1970's Mona Lisa was placed on exhibit in New York, Tokyo and Moscow. Today, however, the painting is behind bullet-proof glass in Paris in the Louvre, and international agreements prohibit her display elsewhere.

## MONA FAQ

### **Who Was She?**

She is believed to be Lisa Gherardini, born Tuesday, (the only day the Louvre is closed) June 15th 1479. She married Francesco di Bartolomeo di Zanobi del Giocondo, a wealthy Florentine merchant, when she was 16. At the time of the painting she was 24 and had 2 sons.

### **What other names does she go by?**

Monna Lisa was her original title. Monna is a contraction for Madonna, Mia Donna (Madam or My Lady). It became Mona Lisa, in English, due to a spelling error. She is La Joconde in French, La Gioconda in Italian, "the merry one," referring to the smile but also possibly a play on her name, Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo.

### **How long did it take Leonardo to paint it?**

It was believed to have been painted from 1503 to 1506, four years.

### **Where is the signature?**

The panel is unsigned and undated.

### **Where does it hang?**

It took four years, almost the same length of time it took Leonardo to paint her, but now Mona Lisa has a \$7.5 million dollar room of her own at the Louvre in Paris, France. It now hangs in the Salle de Etats. It gives the millions who come to see the painting more room and a better view.

### **Why is this Italian painting hanging in a French Museum?**

In the 16th century, The Mona Lisa became the property of the French King, Francois I who was an acquaintance and admirer of Leonardo da Vinci. Except for brief tours in Italy in 1913, to the US in the 60's to Japan and Moscow in the 70's it has remained in the Louvre since 1797.

### **What size is the painting? SMALL**

It is 30" in high by 20 7/8" wide (77cm by 53 cm)

### **What is it painted on?**

Oil on a poplar wood panel.

### **How much is the painting worth?**

It has no assigned monetary value. It is priceless.

### **Why doesn't she have any eyebrows?**

Her eyebrows may have been inadvertently removed during an early cleaning and restoration. There is also the possibility that she may have shaved or plucked them as was the fashion in her day.

### **Is it true that the Mona Lisa is really a self portrait of Leonardo da Vinci?**

That he would have painted himself as a woman is one of many theories. It is widely accepted that the portrait is of Lisa Gherardini.

### **Who Stole The Mona Lisa?**

On August 21, 1911, Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian carpenter employed at the Louvre stole the painting from the wall of the Salon Carré where it hung between Correggio's Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine and Titian's Allegory of Alfonso d' Avalos leaving only the 4 iron pegs to which it was attached. It was recovered 2 years later in 1913 when he attempted to sell it to Alfredo Geri, a Florentine antique dealer.

### **Is it true someone tried to damage her?**

On December 30th, 1956, a Bolivian named Ugo Ungaza Villegas, stared at the Mona Lisa for awhile, then threw a rock at it, damaging a speck of pigment near her left elbow.

### **Why Is She Famous?**

Briefly, there are a variety of reasons:

**a)** It was painted by a much admired genius who possessed as much mystique as his subject. It was a revolutionary painting using innovative techniques *contrapposto*, *sfumato*, *chiaroscuro* and a pyramidal composition. It was admired as a masterful work, regarded as such even in his lifetime.

**b)** It was purchased by the King of France who kept it in his chateau, The Fontainebleau, where it dazzled dignitaries and members of the upper class. By the 1800's it was hanging in Napoleon's bedroom in Tuileries until 1797 when it was moved to the Louvre. France was the center of art and culture and in the Louvre it became accessible to the masses for viewing.

**c)** With the advent of the printing press in the late 1800's, images of the painting were reproduced and circulated all over as it made news. When it was stolen from the Louvre in 1911, there was a barrage of world wide media attention which brought unprecedented familiarity to all levels of society. When it was recovered in 1913 it made stops in Italy for viewing with celebration, adulation and more media.

**d)** During the 19th century it was subject of poetry, plays and songs. She was called a *femme fatale* adding intrigue and mystery to the meaning of her smile.

**e)** In 1919, Dadaist, Marcel Duchamp painted a mustache and goatee on a postcard to mock the painting. This too, received a great deal of attention and became Duchamp's most famous work of art. The Mona Lisa became famous for being famous.

**f)** It toured the US in 1963 where a million and a half people rushed to view it, toured Japan and Moscow in 1974 where over 2 million came. Viewers left poems and flowers in front of the painting as if it were a religious icon.

**g)** It became an image of universal culture in advertising and has inspired kitsch and admiration that is even more far reaching today with the Internet. (Read Donald Sassoon's *Becoming Mona Lisa*, New York: Harcourt, 2001).

**What About The Smile?**

There are a million theories--- pick one!

My favorite to tell to the kids is that Leonardo hired musicians, clowns and entertainers to tell jokes, dance and sing behind him to make Mona Lisa laugh.

## Art project

Draw a Portrait

We are dealing with Kindergartners so they may start drawing Mona Lisa and end up with a Mommy or Daddy Lisa or vice versa. I like to do a little body math.

### Measuring Up

**Point to your eyes, eyebrows, ears, neck, etc. – We all have these features, but it is the details that make us different. Have a volunteer smile, another a sad face, another a mad face. Point out the eyes, mouth and eyebrows – that is what show the emotion.**

As he measured and drew human bodies, Leonardo da Vinci noticed that we generally have standard proportions. He noted that "the span of a man's outstretched arms is equal to his height." Other observations he noted about human proportions:

- The face is divided into three equal parts—from the chin to the nostrils, from the nostrils to the eyebrows, and from the eyebrows to the hairline.
- Your hand is as big as your face.
- You can fit 5 eyes across your face (temple to temple)
- The distance across the face from one ear to another is the same as that from the eyebrows to the chin.
- The ear is as long as the nose.
- Eyes are halfway between top of the head and chin
- Upper lip is halfway between eyes and chin
- Corners of mouth line up with centers of eyes (pupils)
- Top of ears line up above the eyes, on eyebrows
- Bottom of ears line up with bottom of nose.

I would have the oval drawn for the kids before they begin. There is a stencil in the file.

I would have them use pencil then add crayon, marker or whatever you like.

I would use the white board to draw with them.

