Theme 1: Word Pictures

Lesson 4: The Most Famous Painting in the World

Part 1

Paradoxically, after Leonardo da Vinci’s masterpiece the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre Museum in Paris in 1911, the painting received more visitors than ever before. Thousands of people filed past the bare space on the wall where the painting had hung. What were they seeing there? According to eye-witness accounts, the somber procession resembled that of a state funeral. Two years later the painting was discovered in a hotel room in Florence, Italy, and was eventually returned to the Louvre.

For the whole time the Mona Lisa went missing, newspapers around the world closely followed the mystery. The art theft had occurred at exactly the right time to maximize public exposure. Innovations in printing, publishing, and mass distribution brought images of the stolen masterpiece day after day and week after week into the most humble of homes. Undeniably, the two years of sensational press added much to the mystique of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa.

During the 19th century the painting had become a genuine masterpiece within the canons of Western art, according to a consensus of successful artists, art historians, curators, professors, cultural illuminati, and other high brows of society. It was during the 20th century, in part thanks to notoriety and mass media, that the Mona Lisa entered popular culture. Ordinary people adopted it as the epitome of unquestioned masterpieces, the paintings done by the Old Masters. High culture and popular culture thus meet in the Mona Lisa.

Part 2

In Becoming Mona Lisa, a cultural history of the painting, Donald Sassoon points out the interconnection between Western aesthetics and the institutions and systems of modern Western societies. “The Western origin of so many masterpieces suggests that they need, for their global development, appropriate political, ideological, and technological support. [...] 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 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” (6–7).
There is no doubt that the fame of the *Mona Lisa* rests on a wider base than the artistic mastery of its composition, impressive as the latter may be. Its fame also sheds light on an aesthetic question about the Old Masters themselves: they are, one and all, male European painters from the Renaissance (the end of the 15th century) to the dawn of Romanticism (the beginning of the 19th century), when the canons of art—what might be viewed as the hierarchy of established taste and opinion—began to set and harden. Why does the list of Old Masters not continue into the 19th and 20th centuries? Obviously, no one still alive and painting could be considered an “Old” Master. The designation was invented long after the painters walked the earth: certainly the Old Masters themselves never spoke or corresponded as one Old Master to another. In fact, some Old Masters competed fiercely in a tight marketplace of patrons and did their best to denigrate each other’s work and genius. A sizable number of Old Masters died in relative obscurity.

The concept of Old Masters must be seen in part as a reaction against the art of one’s own time. Antagonism between a living artist and the establishment is characteristic of a period that began roughly two hundred years ago. It was not always so. Earlier, in one of the first texts of art history, Giorgio Vasari—writing in the middle of the 16th century—refers to the artists of his own time as the “masters,” in the sense that they stand at the pinnacle of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Such artists have passed through the arduous process of apprentice, student, and journeyman, have made their mark in the world, have taken on apprentices and students of their own, and must now be acknowledged as noteworthy masters of their craft. Vasari does not regard earlier artists in his book, such as Cimabue and Giotto, as Old Masters; they are in fact inferior to his own contemporaries, such as the “divine” Michelangelo. His old masters simply prepared the way for the perfection his new masters would eventually achieve.

To a great extent those who followed Vasari accepted his aesthetic framework and passed it along to us, somewhat widening the time period (Vasari died in 1574) and geography (he confined his interest to Italy). Vasari’s contemporary masters thus became the core of our own Old Masters. The common opinion seems to be this: Painting reaches its sublime peak with the Old Masters of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, those working from the late 15th to the late 17th centuries in Europe. Thereafter, painting falls into decline, although the current canon identifies and agrees on significant painters and artworks until the late nineteenth century, after which something “modern” happens and painting goes crazy. Critics and art historians disagree with each other and, more importantly, with the public about modern art. The situation is rarely stated as baldly as here, but the subtext of art criticism in a majority of cases, both academic and popular, is not difficult to interpret.

The Old Masters form a very select club for a very select few. They are the standard against which all other painters, before and after, are measured. Within
this club’s inner circle stands Leonardo da Vinci, and the Mona Lisa remains his signature work.

In May 1999, an article in the online Smithsonian Magazine referred to Leonardo’s masterpiece this way: “The most famous work in the entire 40,000-year history of the visual arts, the Mona Lisa has become part of our collective unconscious. A cross between a cultural archetype and an icon of kitsch, the painting has provoked more crazy reactions, esoteric analyses, addled adulation, scandalous takeoffs and crass commercialization than any other work of art. [...] Along the way, the Mona Lisa has preoccupied critics and historians from Hippolyte Taine to Kenneth Clark to Sigmund Freud. In this century, Leonardo da Vinci’s madonna has been transformed into a marketing tool, the image applied to products as various as liquor, bonbons and socks. In the end, she continues to captivate us. The Mona Lisa, says art historian Roy McMullen, ‘reduces the Venus of Milo and the Sistine Chapel to the level of merely local marvels.’"

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To think about this world-famous icon aesthetically, we must first look at the painting until we really see it. No easy task, considering its superficial familiarity. That is, we mistakenly think we know it well enough already that a cursory glance will suffice to refresh the image in our mind. On the contrary, it is necessary to look and look again. Only by really seeing it can we begin to decide for ourselves whether the painting deserves its lofty reputation.

From the start, of course, we must face facts and admit that most of us cannot speak with authority either way, having never seen the original painting. Instead, we work from reproductions of varying quality. Images on the ordinary computer monitor are incapable of showing a high quality reproduction. Books are usually better. Expensive art prints tend to be the best at approaching the visual experience of an original artwork. We’ll do the best we can with the tools at hand.

First of all, spend some time studying the image. Don’t read anyone else’s description or critique until your own eyes have had time to get to know the painting. You may want to look at more than one image source: the Mona Lisa from two or three web sites, and the Mona Lisa in an art book or fine print, if you can manage it. (Our textbook Great Masters of Western Art has a pretty good reproduction on page 79, while the Depth and Detail companion to The Da Vinci Code offers an interesting comparison, especially when printed out.) Think about composition, color, background, the handling of light and dark, the subject matter and the pose. Ask yourself: What is the one essential feature of this painting, the element that fixes its “Mona-Lisa-ness” in the mind? For instance, although you have seen thousands of portraits of women, this one has something unique to it.

(The title of a recent film with Julia Roberts may well suggest what others consider the essential feature.) Finally, what makes the original Mona Lisa—Leonardo’s version hanging in the Louvre—superior to the countless imitations of it, from T-shirt patches to children’s coloring books?