Theme 1: Word Pictures

Lesson 5: The Most Famous Painting in the World (continued)

Part 1

No element of the painting can be ignored or removed without destroying the wondrous effect of the whole. With that said, by far the feature mentioned most often is the smile. Most viewers would argue still, as they have argued historically, that the smile is her essence, her very “Mona-Lisa-ness.”

In 1910 Sigmund Freud, the pioneer psychoanalyst, published a self-styled “psychosexual” study of Leonardo da Vinci. His analysis rested on a brief excerpt written by Leonardo himself in a notebook some 400 years beforehand, in which the artist described a strange event: “It comes to mind as a very early memory, when I was still in the cradle, a vulture came down to me, opened my mouth with his tail and struck me many times with his tail against my lips” (Freud 52). Based almost entirely on the excerpt, Freud determined not only that Leonardo was homosexual, but that the homosexuality could be traced to Leonardo’s overly affectionate mother.

The Mona Lisa gave further evidence in support of his theory, the key being found—where else?—in her smile:

He who thinks of Leonardo’s paintings will recall the remarkably fascinating and puzzling smile which he enchanted on the lips of all his feminine figures. It is a fixed smile on elongated sinuous lips, which is considered characteristic of him and is preferentially designated as “Leonardesque.” In the singular and beautiful visage of the Florentine, Mona Lisa del Gioconda [sic.], it has produced the greatest effect on the spectators and even perplexed them. This smile was in need of an interpretation, and received many of the most varied kinds, but none of them was considered satisfactory. (Freud 85)

None, that is, before Freud’s interpretation. Peering through the hypersensitive lens of Leonardo’s mother-warped psyche, Freud claims that Mona Lisa’s smile reveals the ambivalence at the core of male perception of the desired female:

The idea that two diverse elements were united in the smile of Mona Lisa has been felt by many critics. They therefore recognize in the play of features of the beautiful Florentine lady the most perfect representation of the contrasts dominating the love-life of the woman, namely, reserve and seduction, most submissive tenderness and the indifferent craving, which confront the man as a strange and consuming sensuality. (Freud 86)

Part 2
Before we get carried away by the smile, it may be instructive to look at the earliest known description of the painting, that of Giorgio Vasari, whom we met earlier. Writing some thirty years after Leonardo’s death, Vasari tells us:

For Francesco del Giocondo, Leonardo undertook to paint the portrait of Mona Lisa, his wife, but, after loitering over it for four years, he finally left it unfinished. This work is now in the possession of King Francis of France, and is at Fontainebleau. Whoever shall desire to see how far art can imitate nature, may do so to perfection in this head, wherein every peculiarity that could be depicted by the utmost subtlety of the pencil has been faithfully reproduced. The eyes have the lustrous brightness and moisture which is seen in life, and around them are those pale, red, and slightly livid circles, also proper to nature, with the lashes, which can only be copied, as these are, with the greatest difficulty; the eyebrows also are represented with the closest exactitude, where fuller and where more thinly set, with the separate hairs delineated as they issue from the skin, every turn being followed, and all the pores exhibited in a manner that could not be more natural than it is: the nose, with beautiful and delicately roseate nostrils, might be easily believed to be alive; the mouth, admirable in its outline, has the lips uniting the rose-tints of their color with that of the face, in the utmost perfection, and the carnation of the cheek does not appear to be painted, but truly of flesh and blood: he who looks earnestly at the pit of the throat cannot but believe that he sees the beating of the pulses, and it may be truly said that this work is painted in a manner well calculated to make the boldest master tremble, and astonishes all who behold it, however well accustomed to the marvels of art. Mona Lisa was exceedingly beautiful, and while Leonardo was painting her portrait, he took the precaution of keeping someone constantly near her, to sing or play on instruments, or to jest and otherwise amuse her, to the end that she might continue cheerful, and so that her face might not exhibit the melancholy expression often imparted by painters to the likenesses they take. In this portrait of Leonardo’s, on the contrary, there is so pleasing an expression, and a smile so sweet, that while looking at it one thinks it rather divine than human, and it has ever been esteemed a wonderful work, since life itself could exhibit no other appearance. (Vasari 2 395-397).

Even as Vasari attempts to give us the details or—his term—“peculiarities” of the Mona Lisa, he returns again and again to the whole: “this work,” he says, “[makes] the boldest master tremble” and “astonishes all who behold it”; the painting “has ever been esteemed a wonderful work.” It is always a good idea to remember the totality of an image, even as we seek its essence. Here I would draw attention to the fact that Vasari never fixates on the smile. “The mouth,” he says, “admirable in its outline, has the lips uniting the rose-tints of their color with

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that of the face, in the utmost perfection." At the end of the passage, he speaks of a "smile so sweet," rather than enigmatic or fascinating. He attributes the smile not to some mysterious technique or psychological vision, but to the use of jesters and musicians to keep the sitter cheerful. In other words, the smile is painted from life and means nothing beyond itself. As a matter of fact, Vasari pays far more attention to the rendering of the eyes—and even the eyebrows, which may have existed once, but have since faded or been stripped away during cleaning.

In all probability, Vasari himself never saw the original painting, which had long been in France. The best guess is that he based his vivid description on copies, reports, and hearsay. This suggests that if Leonardo's near contemporaries had perceived the Mona Lisa's smile as puzzling or unfathomable or special in any way, Vasari would have dwelt on it. Instead, the weight of the passage tells us that the eyes, not the smile, constituted the most famous feature in its day.

In a footnote by E.H. and E.W. Blashfield and A.A. Hopkins, translators and editors of Vasari at the end of the 19th century, we see how the critical focus has shifted from Mona Lisa's eyes to her "Leonardesque" smile:

"Probably the most famous portrait in the world is that called the Mona Lisa (Madonna Lisa) and also La Gioconda of Leonardo da Vinci. It is in the Louvre, and is the portrait of Lisa di Anton Maria di Noldo Gherardini, married in 1495, as third wife of Francesco di Bartolommeo di Zanobi del Giocondo. Leonardo is said to have worked upon this picture four years (1500 to 1504). Evidently he found in the Gioconda exactly that type which was most sympathetic and interesting to him, for the Lisa is the incarnation of the Leonardesque smile, a smile of eyes and mouth, and first set upon canvas in all its subtlety by Leonardo after other painters had been content to make a portrait simply grave and lifelike, that is to say, to record the abiding where Leonardo strove to perpetuate the evanescent. We must not forget, however, that though this is a supersubtle rendering of it, the Leonardesque smile, which meets us throughout the north of Italy upon the canvases of a whole school, is found also upon the features of the statue of David [at left], sculptured by Leonardo's master, [Andrea del] Verocchio. The portrait in the Pitti Gallery, of Florence, called La Monaca [Ginevra de' Benci, at right], has been endlessly discussed. (Vasari 2 395-396)

Let's concede that a smile involves the entire face rather than the mouth alone. The small smile on Verocchio's David is indeed similar to the smile on Leonardo's Mona Lisa, a work begun at least twenty years later. However, the comparison between Mona Lisa's smile and that of Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci (or La Monaca) reveals an entirely different expression in each woman's face. To make a point, I have flipped Ginevra's face and superimposed it upon the Mona Lisa. The result is revealing. For one thing, the Mona Lisa's gaze tantalizes because it is impossible to tell precisely where that gaze rests. At times it seems to return our own gaze; at other times it seems to look past us at a view over our right
shoulder. Ginevra is clearly avoiding our gaze altogether by staring blankly off to the side and down. The eyes are humorless, even glum. The same may be said of the lips, which almost quiver in a pout. Furthermore, if at times the smile is portrayed in works by other artists and not always in works by Leonardo, it may not be a terribly "Leonardesque" smile at all. We will return to the smile when discussing Leonardo’s works as a whole in Theme 2.

Significant as the smile may be, other elements of the composition demand attention. The cropping of the image above shows what the Mona Lisa would look like without the bottom portion of the picture. The Ginevra de’ Bernici painting is far more square than the Mona Lisa; the square composition focuses attention on the bright face area. The cropped composition also raises questions. Is Ginevra sitting or standing? Is she in a garden, on a balcony, or at a large window? In the full original version, Mona Lisa is clearly sitting in a chair with one hand on an armrest and the other arm across her lap. In their own way, these wonderful hands seem as expressive as the face. Rather than posed, the hands seem captured in mid motion, the right hand sliding over the left wrist, and the fingers of the left hand just letting go the armrest. If we study Mona Lisa’s posture carefully, we find that the entire body is in motion. The chair is rendered in profile, which means Mona Lisa is twisting to look our way. She is not resting sedately at all. Has someone just walked in? Is she leaning towards us about to speak? The way she smiles at the viewer while inclining forward creates a powerful sense of contact, or potential contact—of expectancy—that neither the smile nor the posture would have on its own.
Part 3
It is in fact the position of the hands and the twisting of the shoulders, not the famous smile, that apparently made the deepest impression on Leonardo’s contemporaries, as suggested by a series of portraits done by Raphael (1483–1520), compositions obviously inspired by admiration for the Mona Lisa. In the 1506 portrait of Maddalena Doni (at left), the hands and shoulders may remind us of the Mona Lisa, but the eyes glare rather than gaze at us. The mouth is set in anything but a smile. The companion portrait of Agnolo Doni (at right) is no more charming as he stares at us without the flicker of a smile. He too twists his shoulders, and his hands mirror the hands in the Mona Lisa, although less gracefully. However, the pose of both husband and wife seems far more contrived and staged than the more naturally elegant posture of the Mona Lisa. The latter not only twists; she tips toward us invitingly. Agnolo, on the other hand, tips away from the viewer, reserved and wary.

The Raphael portraits suggest another element in the Mona Lisa that bears study: the lofty, wide-open vantage point. The background of Leonardo’s portrait is an eerie otherworldly landscape. Where exactly are we? Rock formations, the deep purple lake or sea, trails snaking through peaks and valleys, the atmospheric twilight, and a mottled gray-green sky form an unlikely backdrop for a young Florentine lady. Nor does the scene draw on traditional symbolism; it apparently means nothing. It exists to play with and against the form of the sitter, in the way photographers of our day choose a paint-splotched backdrop to place behind their subjects. That backdrop is not meant so much to be seen, as to set off what is placed in front of it. In the case of the Mona Lisa, however, the singular strangeness of the background is impossible not to notice. A distant bridge or aqueduct—the lone and lonely sign of civilization on that mysterious planet—straddles a dry riverbed that meanders past the huge mouth of a tunnel or cave before losing itself in the steep climb of rock to a decidedly slanted horizon. Does this wall of rock represent perhaps the dam that Leonard wanted to build across the Arno River? If so, the imagined benefits of his engineering project seem few and far between.
Is the odd scenery such an essential element that it embodies some of that “Mona-Lisa-ness” we have spoken of? Consider the sitter against a lovely but entirely different background. The change of tone and our response to it becomes even more evident with the lower portion cropped out (at left). We see a Mona Lisa on vacation, relaxed and slightly tanned. When the background is virtually eliminated, as in Richard Morrison’s mugshot (at right), Mona Lisa looks at us with a bit of insolence, like a co-conspirator caught red-handed, revealing more chagrin than shame. We laugh at finding the sitter placed in one of the most preposterous, incongruous situations possible. Yet what do we really know about her? Could she not be a criminal mastermind?

In other words, does what we know (or think we know) about the sitter and the painting affect our perception of the image? The answer is obviously yes. You already know far more about this artwork than you did before embarking on **Theme 1**. The citations from Freud, Vasari, and Vasari’s editor-translators have added greatly to your store of knowledge, but it is nearly impossible to come to the Mona Lisa without passing through a number of cultural filters; in other words, it is nearly impossible to see the image with unprejudiced eyes. Perhaps it was a teacher who introduced us to it, using words like “masterpiece” and talking about a “portrait of a lady who lived a long, long time ago”; or perhaps it was the caption in a book or magazine, announcing the artist’s name and assuring us that he is justly famous and praised. Either way, we came to the Mona Lisa believing it a great work of art, if somewhat strange and unique, and the product of a great artist. The painting and the painter validated each other’s importance: Leonardo must be a genius because he painted the Mona Lisa, and the Mona Lisa must be a masterpiece because it was painted by a genius.

The Mona Lisa does divulge some secrets on its own. The painting looks old, doesn’t it? The clothes are certainly old fashioned, aren’t they? To judge by the background, this woman does not live down the road from us; she must foreign, right?

**Part 4**

If the portrait belongs to Madonna (Italian for *my lady*) Lisa Gherardini, third wife of Francesco di Bartolommeo di Zanobi del Giocondo (thus her name La Gioconda, or La Joconde in French), she must have been around twenty-one years old when Leonardo began to paint her in Florence, Italy. She had already borne her husband two or three children. Of course, this is an assertion impossible to prove at this date. But if it is a portrait of Madonna Lisa Gherardini, as Vasari maintained at the outset, we still know very little. The rest is pure conjecture.
In the portrait she appears to be pregnant again. Was the portrait intended as a surprise announcement to her husband? That would account for the mysterious smile. On the other hand, Leonardo worked on the painting at least four years, long after the term of any pregnancy, and in fact never handed the portrait over to the husband.

If we bear in mind diet and hygiene in the 16th century, it is unlikely Mona Lisa had all her teeth. Washing hands before eating and brushing teeth after eating are relatively recent routines in Western culture, which means that a lot of nasty things got into the mouth and rotted there, causing gum disease and tooth decay, as well as spreading epidemics like cholera throughout the general population. Gaps in her teeth or perhaps no teeth at all might also account for the mysterious smile.

Another theory, based on computer-enhanced composites by Lillian Schwartz and others, holds that the Mona Lisa is either an outright self-portrait by Leonardo da Vinci or else evolved into a one as he worked on it over the years far from his model. It is said that a self-portrait of Leonardo as an old man, when flipped and then sized to the proportions of the Mona Lisa, lines up perfectly (at left). A significant problem with the theory is that we have only the flimsiest evidence to support the authenticity of the so-called self-portrait of Leonardo as an old man. It may very well be Leonardo, as tradition says, or it may be someone else. Furthermore, our ability to recognize different works as belonging to one and the same painter points to the fact that painters have a personal style and vision; in other words, their works inevitably resemble each other. Even more problematic, the manipulation of images is not a reliable method for seeing truth. I have taken the portrait of another and younger Leonardo—Leonardo di Caprio—and flipped it before lining it up in the same proportion as the Mona Lisa (at right). The results are similar to the fusion of the Mona Lisa with the so-called self-portrait. Did Leonardo da Vinci foresee the coming of Leonardo di Caprio and immortalize him in a painting? Probably not.

The origin of the Mona Lisa will undoubtedly remain a mystery forever, barring the unforeseen discovery of a five-hundred-year-old document. Yet our very ignorance allows us to project meaning onto the artwork through interpretation and conjecture, to add layers of significance for ourselves if not for others. Having considered the smile, the pose, and the background, we have also stepped outside the frame to think about the context, cultural and historical, and have stepped back even further to let our imagination loose. All this activity plays into our aesthetic response to the Mona Lisa and is part of our capacity to enjoy the experience. Now it is time to return to the image as a visual text.

Consider a commentary by the aesthetic critic Walter Pater, whom we met previously, written in 1869. This is neither the time nor the place to delve into his theory of impressions; suffice it to say that Pater believes a sympathetic correspondence must develop between the viewer and the object being viewed,
which in some way incites or evokes a response in the sensitive mind. Pater’s response to the Mona Lisa is the following:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.

Denis Donoghue, in an article appearing in Ideas, rightly classifies this text not as a commentary, but as a reverie. The Irish poet William Butler Yeats actually broke the paragraph into a free verse poem. Pater has unleashed the poetic powers of fantasy and marshaled his figures of speech in a dreamlike sequence of heady imagery. He is after something far grander than the straightforward description of a painting. For him the Mona Lisa is not the image of a particular woman from a particular place and time. She presents an archetype, “the embodiment of the old fancy” of a “perpetual life,” a female figure—demonic (vampire) or divine (Helen, St. Anne, St. Mary) above and beyond the mere human. Pater cleverly weaves into his reverie references to other works by Leonardo: the various compositions of Leda and the Swan (at left), which shows Helen of Troy, her semi-divine daughter, hatching from one of the eggs; and the famous grouping in which St. Mary sits on the lap of her mother St. Anne (at right). Other references bring to mind Leonardo’s anatomical drawings based on cadavers (“the secrets of the grave,” below left) and his drawings of futuristic devices and engineering marvels like the diving suit (“a diver in deep seas,” below right). We actually learn very little about what the Mona Lisa looks like. Does she truly sit among the rocks, or is this an allusion to the Virgin of the Rocks and Madonna of the Rocks, two other paintings by Leonardo? At least Pater informs us that Mona Lisa is presented in a sitting pose, although the phrase “certainly Lady Lisa might stand,” in the final sentence, is unfortunate in this regard. Other than mentioning the pose and perhaps the background, Pater’s text ignores the painting as a painting and focuses instead on his own inward vision of the image.

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Part 5

Compare Pater’s rather refined response to a longer description by Donald Sassoon, author of *Becoming Mona 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 her only in 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. (1)

Here we learn a great deal about what the painting looks like. Even so, much is still left out: its size (the portrait is relatively small), its surface (the entire painting is crackled), its style (Leonardo smudges outlines in a technique called sfumato), all of which are important. What Sassoon does give us here is a fairly meticulous account of what we would see as our eyes darted over the composition. There is no discernible order to the description in the first paragraph, but the text seems to capture everything that is part of the image and even something that is not (jewels).

What is Sassoon’s response to the *Mona Lisa*? Unlike Pater, he tries to stick to the facts. This does not mean the commentary is objective or neutral. Note his word choice: the hand is “gripping” the chair, implying tension; the sitter has a “visage” rather than a face; the dress is not only dark, but “sober”; the landscape is “strange,” with a “forlorn” token of humanity. The use of “loggia” implies Italy, clearly, as the portrait’s setting. By isolating the smile into a one-sentence paragraph of its own, Sassoon underscores its importance today, although he

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refuses to characterize the smile as puzzling, mysterious, enigmatic, etc., as most modern writers feel compelled to do. Paragraph structure also highlights the lack of jewelry. If we look back at Rafael’s portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Doni, we find jewelry in both; a quick examination of other portraits from Leonardo’s time, even his own (such as the portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci), suggest that the absence of such adornment is indeed worth pointing out as unique to the Mona Lisa.

When we compare Pater’s elegant but fanciful text with Sassoon’s, it becomes obvious that they have little in common. Yet both texts are inextricably bound to the same visual text, namely the Mona Lisa. Each in its own way deals with the aesthetic experience of seeing the painted image or a reproduction of it. The writers are composing word pictures about a picture. This is called ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis can be as direct and meticulous as Sassoon’s text or the description in an art book. It can be as indirect and allusive as Pater’s reverie. For the purposes of this course we may define it in shorthand as the vivid description of a painting meant to evoke something of the experience of that image or part of that image in the reader or listener.

The opposite process—a visual image attempting to capture the experience of reading a written text—is called an illustration. There are illustrations that attempt to reproduce visually as many details of a scene as possible, and there are other illustrations that use the written scene as a point of departure for more imaginative explorations. We find the same range and diversity in ekphrastic texts about paintings. Some of the most diverse texts of all, as we shall see, are poems.