Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* offers any number of thought-provoking claims and observations, from symbolism to number theory and from Gnosticism to Opus Dei. Although much of this begs investigation and might be fun to pursue, this course must focus on the ekphrastic dimension. Let’s begin rather simply. Did the setting as described at the beginning of the novel help you visualize the Louvre Museum accurately? In other words, when you compare images on the Internet or other corollary material with the word pictures in the text, such as the paragraph about the parquet floor (at left), you ought to be able to judge Brown’s skill and accuracy at description.

Other passages about art, though not ekphrastic, are still important in helping us gauge the quality of information the author presents. On page 45 of the novel, for example, Brown writes: “*Even Da Vinci’s enormous output of breathtaking Christian art only furthered the artist’s reputation for spiritual hypocrisy. Accepting hundreds of lucrative Vatican commissions, Da Vinci painted Christian themes not as an expression of his own beliefs but rather as a commercial venture—a means of funding a lavish lifestyle.*” This assertion flows from Robert Langdon’s viewpoint, and he is purported to be an expert, having once given a lecture on Leonardo at the National Gallery in London, surely one of the most prestigious museums in the world. How does the phrase “enormous output of [...] Christian art” compare with the results of your own investigation?

Most of us are surprised at how few paintings Leonardo actually left for posterity, especially when we consider an artist of his stature. But he was far more interested in planning than in execution. As we learned in *Theme 1*, he never did finish his *Mona Lisa*, the most famous painting in the world. He carried the portrait with him from Florence to Rome to France and continued to “work” on it until his death, nearly twenty years after he had begun.
Part 2

Before evaluating any ekphrastic text, we should familiarize ourselves with the painted image. It is tempting to do both at once—read the words and look at the picture for the first time. But such a practice tends to help us “find” the words in the picture, regardless of the skill or aims of the writer. As the written text becomes a kind of map of the visual image, our expectations determine what we see. It is far better to confront the pictorial image first on our own, face to face, and then to seek from experts, if necessary, insight into the painting’s origin and the meaning or function of various elements within it. Once we have read the painting and decided what it is, at least provisionally, we can then analyze the effectiveness and purpose of the written text. This is the point behind the following assignment.

Remember, all reading—visual or literary—remains provisional, always subject to refinement or even revision upon re-reading, a process of give-and-take that continues all our lives. Experience changes us.

Another reminder: The assignments in this section include both Discussion Board participation and Journal entries. They are particularly important, since the Leonardo entries count as 40% of the final Discussion Board and Journal grades.