

# The Mona Lisa

The French Government has made an enduring gesture of friendship in lending Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* to the President of the United States for exhibition in America. Through the good offices of André Malraux, Minister of State for Cultural Affairs, and of Hervé Alphand, the Ambassador of France to the United States, this world-famous picture will be shown at The Metropolitan Museum of Art from February 7 through March 4.

Giorgio Vasari, the sixteenth century historian and artist who has given us so many vivid accounts of Renaissance artists and their works, writes of the painting: "For Francesco del Giocondo, Leonardo undertook to paint the portrait of *Mona Lisa*, his wife; but, after struggling with it for four years, he finally left it unfinished. *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."

Hers is undoubtedly the most familiar portrait of all time. It has been a point of pilgrimage for visitors to the Louvre, transmitting to millions some idea of Leonardo's searching genius. Now, after four weeks at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the painting will be on display in a special setting in our Medieval Sculpture Hall. We are deeply aware of the honor and the responsibility of receiving it into our care, and on behalf of the Museum and the people who will have the opportunity to see the *Mona Lisa* here, we wish to thank those envoys who have worked out the many practical details of this historic event.

James J. Rorimer, *Director*

To enjoy the *Mona Lisa*, a man of the twentieth century must be capable of putting out of his mind everything that he has ever read or heard about it. He must try not to admire it just because so many have admired it before him, and for the same reason he must prevent himself from becoming antagonized by its formidable reputation. Needless to say, this is a difficult thing to do.

It is nonetheless necessary to make one's first approach to this painting—as to all great works of art—in terms of feeling rather than of understanding. Once one's feelings are touched, and contact is made with the picture, only then, by examining these feelings, can one begin to comprehend the many aspects of the work. This is an essentially personal, intimate experience.

In looking at the *Mona Lisa*, one is immediately aware of her physical presence. Her personality is strong and insistent. As she sits before us, she almost seems to emerge from the panel, and this is emphasized by the cool rocky landscape stretching out limitlessly behind her. (The effect must have been even more striking orig-

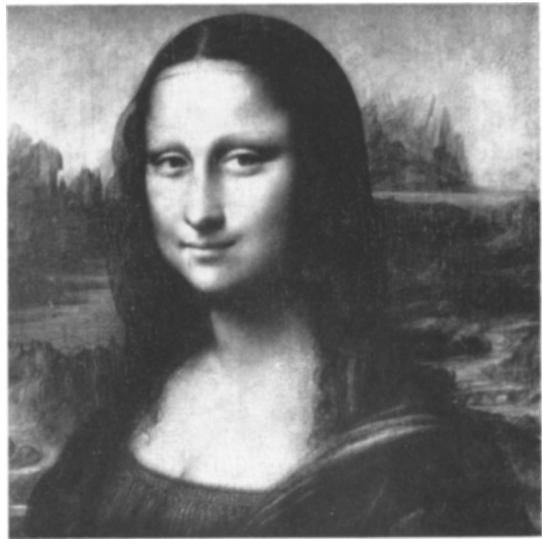
inally, when she sat framed between two dark columns, which have long since been cut off the panel, with only a fraction of the bases remaining on the parapet.) The picture gives the impression of a vivid, arresting person, and yet just exactly what her personality is cannot be easily defined. Like her smile, it is ambiguous, combining a suggestion of sensuality with intelligence and thought. The eyes, which play a highly important role in the portrait, are gentle but reserved; their gaze caresses—but also measures and appraises. They seem to hold some secret knowledge. Her crossed hands, relaxed and quiet, complete the composition and add a note of tenderness and serenity, but beneath this serenity there is a hint of a strange, controlled tension. Altogether the picture is mysterious, and leaves many of its admirers uneasy.

This ambiguity, this underlying tension, is reflected in the way Leonardo painted the picture. One is very much aware of his sure and accurate draughtsmanship, but one cannot actually see it. None of the outlines are sharp; they merge into

shadow with extraordinary subtlety. The artist has used repeated, very thin glazes to conceal as well as to reveal the details of the figure. They create within the picture the illusion of natural atmosphere—of air. The color harmony, made up of alternating passages of warm and cool tones, and of gently lighted forms set against deep, velvety shadows, brings out the very round and solid body against the hazy, fantastic mountain landscape and gives the whole an undercurrent of softly pulsating life. There is, however, nothing spontaneous or uncontrolled about any detail. Throughout, in every stroke of the brush, is the evidence of deliberate and highly intelligent action. Vasari's statement that Leonardo left the portrait unfinished after working on it four years seems at first astonishing and unlikely, but closer study makes one realize that he could have continued painting in this manner almost indefinitely. Just as Mona Lisa's personality seems to reveal itself, yet remains unfathomable, so the picture's execution, though it seems complete, might nevertheless be just one stage of an infinitely complex and almost endless development. This corresponds to what we know of Leonardo himself and of the wide scope and prophetic power of his restless mind.

There have been many theories as to who the model was. The most convincing identification is, again, Vasari's, and it goes back almost to Leonardo's lifetime. Since the lady was otherwise comparatively unknown, there would be no reason for attaching her name to the picture if it were not she. Mona Lisa, La Gioconda, was a young Florentine, born in 1479, the wife of a city official who was already twice a widower when he married her as a girl of sixteen. When Leonardo painted her she was probably about twenty-four. In this portrait, however, the identity of the sitter is secondary. This is in fact more than a portrait. One has only to compare it with the works of other great painters—or with Leonardo's other portraits—to see at once that it goes far beyond human individuality. This is poetry in the fullest sense of the word. Its universality is confirmed by the way in which successive generations during the last four hundred and fifty years have been fascinated by the picture, each seeing something different, each discovering something of its own.

Although we must depend upon Vasari for the name of the subject, we know the complete history of the painting. It was purchased by Francis I of France, who invited the artist to come to his country, where Leonardo spent the last years of his life. The Mona Lisa became a treasure of the royal collections and was shown with the most precious works of art at Versailles. At one time it adorned Napoleon's bedroom in the Tuileries. When the state collections were opened to the public, it was given a place of honor in the Louvre, where it has attracted thousands of visitors ever since. Through the centuries countless copies have been made of it, more than sixty of which exist today. In modern



*Photograph: Laboratoire du Musée du Louvre*

times, by means of countless reproductions, it has become better known than any picture ever painted. Perhaps the most significant modern tribute to its fame was the attack made upon it in the 1920s by the dadaists, who ridiculed it as the greatest symbol of the traditional Western culture they wished to destroy. Their attack was, needless to say, unsuccessful, but their appraisal was just, for, as the interest generated by its unprecedented and epoch-making visit to this country confirms, to the people of the world this painting is one of the finest achievements of our civilization.

Theodore Rousseau, *Curator of European Paintings*