

## ***Leonardo's Mona Lisa***

### **Smart History**

Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503–1506) is perhaps the most famous painting in the world. Her strange smile and the mysterious identity of the sitter have inspired writers and artists for centuries.

Remember that *only wealthy people* would have had their portrait painted—and they would only have a portrait painted once in their lives. So a portrait was supposed to be very much about status and position. And remember, too, that portraits took a very long time to paint, so the person having their portrait painted would have to sit for hours, for several days, while the artist captured their likeness.

The *Mona Lisa* is a portrait of the wife of a Florentine merchant, and so her gaze would have been meant for her husband. For some reason however, the portrait was never delivered to its patron, and ended up in the collection of King Francis I of France.

Her mysterious smile has inspired many writers. Here's a beautiful passage on the *Mona*

*Lisa*, written by the Victorian-era writer Walter Pater:

*We all know the face and hands of the figure, set in its marble chair, in that circle of fantastic rocks, as in some faint light under sea. Perhaps of all ancient pictures time has chilled it least.*

*The presence that thus rose so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned*

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Page 1 of 3

*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.*

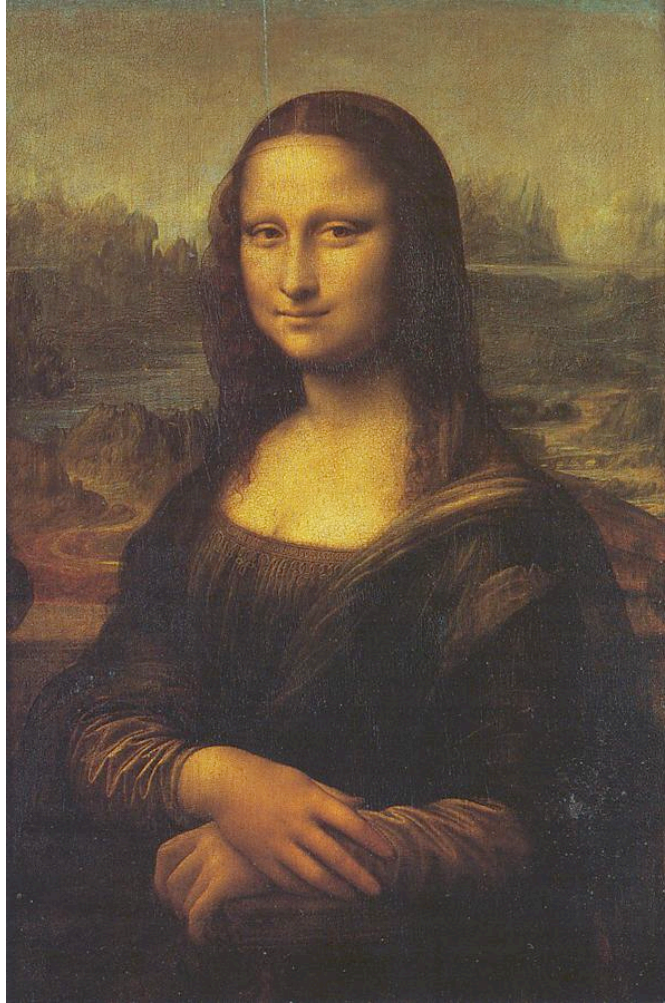


Early Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca's *Portrait of Battista Sforza* (ca. 1465-66) is what portraits looked like (for the most part) in the Early Renaissance: figures were painted in strict profile, and cut off at the bust.

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### **A new formula**

With the *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo invented an entirely new formula for a portrait. The face is frontal, the shoulders are turned three-quarters toward the viewer, and the hands are included in the image. This "formula" for a portrait is still used today. Remember when you had a photo portrait taken of you in grade school? Can you remember how you sat? You sat like the Mona Lisa! Also, when a figure is in profile, we have no real sense of who she is. With the face frontal, however, we get a sense of the personality of the sitter.

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