

## My Lady, Lisa

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Yeah, she's smiling a bit. Three-quarter view pose, plain clothes, no jewellery, hair down. It's casual. Artists didn't portray people like that, at least not until she arrived. And then they all did. She is well painted too, if that matters, and I could proffer proof in pretty Italian words, chant *sfumato* and *chiaroscuro* as I peel back the many layers of soft glaze. But what would we learn? That it's a painting? We knew that, people know nothing else. It didn't get so famous by just being a painting - for how it looks. In fact I don't think anyone's really looked at it since 1911.

Harry and I were standing in the college's smoking area - the art student's de facto common room - when he told me his little theory about the Mona Lisa. Our class was set to visit the Louvre in two weeks and so, naturally, that painting had become of particular interest and, according to Harry, that painting wasn't the original. No, his theory was thus: the actual Mona Lisa is much larger and locked away in some back-Louvre store room, the one everyone sees is a mere copy. Transparently ridiculous I thought, but no one else in the smoking area objected or seemed to even be hiding an objection - this only made my teenage-*intellectualism* itch all the more. I couldn't stop

from spluttering my way through a series of rebuttals, half-remembering facts from the one documentary about the Mona Lisa I'd watched. Harry was silent. Nearly fifteen years on I can still precisely picture how heavily my remonstrations hung on his face. He was only trying to be interesting. I regret being such a twat... but fuck me, people don't half talk some shit about the Mona Lisa.

***Her eyes follow you around the room.***

Of course they do. It's a two-dimensional image of someone looking directly out at the viewer. It doesn't stop being that just because you've stood to one side. Were you expecting to see the back of her head if you kept walking?

***Da Vinci forgot to paint her eyebrows.***

Oh, still in the eye-department are we? No. Scans of the painting, as well as contemporaneous copies of it by other artists, confirm that the Mona Lisa once had eyebrows. They were likely lost in a botched restoration attempt.

***The person in the painting is really da Vinci.***

Why? Why would he do that? Even if he did, very smooth skin for a fifty-something year old man - nice breasts too.

***Okay then, it's actually his apprentice and secret lover Salai.***

Jesus. Look, I get it. We're all told by people that the Mona Lisa is the greatest painting ever - the greatest work of art ever. And those people don't ever

explain why. And the painting, good as it is, can't explain it either. On top of all that, no one really cares that much anyway - at least not enough to find the real answer. All of this results in the above folk-theories. We have to endow it with more intrigue, more meaning, or why else would it be so famous?

Art these days is such a *meaningful* enterprise. Since cameras came and made imaging real-life trivial. Since AI has come and made imaging the unreal trivial. The artist has been crammed into the narrow gap where such thin things as *intention* and *profundity* live. We have, in turn, gotten quite used to talking about art in such terms. *Why was it painted this way? What are the continuations of this brushstroke?* But these correct presuppositions of depth which we might apply to Picasso or Bacon have become a prevailing rhetoric which is then 'grandsonned' into historic works and, if we are looking at the renaissance, this is entirely the wrong lens; something more microscopic is needed.

Everyone tells me it's small - the Mona Lisa. Everyone's disappointed by it - the Monsa Lisa. I have to wonder if these people have ever seen portraits before. Greyscale grandparents, gurning children, a dead dog? They're not big are they? It'd be impractical if they were. They're just for covering ugly wallpaper and for houseguests to feign an interest in. Sure, in this century, a portrait would be a photograph taken by an over-charging photographer but, in the 16th century, painters were your only option. Da Vinci was commissioned by a wealthy merchant to paint his wife - the

merchant's wife, that is - a painting meant to hang in a domestic corridor. It was never intended to go on a gallery wall, so lonely and so crowded. There is a world wherein it simply belonged to that Florentine family, gathered dust in their hallway, more dust in generations of lofts and cellars, and was inevitably sold at an auction for maybe a few million. But in our world the Mona Lisa is worth much more than that, billions, because, in our world, she never made it home.

Da Vinci was well known for not delivering works on time, or at all, preoccupied as he often was. Lisa del Giocondo and her husband never got their portrait. Instead it went with da Vinci to France and, upon his death, was left to the royalty there. It moved through century and palace, surviving a sudden change in governance and finding itself in Napoleon's bedroom. Painted by the most famous European of the 15th century, chamber-mates with the most famous of the 18th century, the Mona Lisa was always going to be somewhat well known by association. But it wasn't until the 20th century, when it was stolen by a European few can name, that it began to become the most famous painting of all time.

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*Any sleep Vincenzo could find was startled by the ringing of church bells from across the city. He'd been in the museum's cupboard for ten hours since his shift had ended the day before. In that darkness the smell of wood and turps painted memories of his childhood home so many*

*miles away. It was an old building in blue, a colourful step in a staircase of houses on the hillside. Not like the Parisian apartment he lived in now, repetitions of flat beige trim like a line of tired infantrymen. He yearned for Italy. He thought the painting must do as well. For a moment he dreamt that it was there, smiling in the sunlight, until the church bells came again. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven o'clock in the morning. Monday the 21st of August. 1911.*

*The museum was closed to the public. No visitors, less security, less staff. Putting on a smock from the cupboard, Vincenzo was able to blend in with the few workers that had begun their shifts. He checked the stairwell. Good, there was still a bundle of student pieces not far from the exit. Everything was in order.*

*Da Vinci's masterpiece was kept in the nearby Salon Carré just a little way down the wing. As worried as he was about the workman, it was the passing paintings which watched Vincenzo most; varnished glares glinting through scenes of war, execution, and betrayal. That is until a kinder face appeared. Her autumn smile cooed from across the room but Vincenzo couldn't reciprocate. Some cleaners were lingering in the salon, attending to their trolley. Vincenzo paced, trying to mime an interest in the other paintings. Surely at some point the cleaners would notice that he wasn't doing anything, that he wasn't meant to be there.*

*He practiced excuses in his head. Maybe it was best to take a lap of the museum and try again later. Yes, that was the thing to do. Vincenzo turned away from the Rubens he was pretending to look at but, as he did, saw the cleaners' heels cornering out of the salon. There was no time to consider. Vincenzo took the Mona Lisa down and made for the stairwell.*

*Walk firmly, not too fast, head to the ground; this was Vincenzo's plan and it was working well. Stepping through the door and into the stairwell, he set the Mona Lisa down and unmounted it. The stack of student artworks became a hiding place for her frame. He removed his smock and hastily wrapped it around the portrait itself. As he headed down towards the exit door he could hear, from the other side, a bustling of Parisian streets seemingly cheering for his near victory. Vincenzo pressed on the handle and imagined the cool air. But the door was locked.*

*"You okay there?" asked a passing workman. Vincenzo couldn't reply, his thoughts were a collage of plans and contingencies and he couldn't quite focus on any of them. "I said, are you okay there?"*

*"Yes, thank you. Just trying to get out. Locked."*

*"Ah, yeah, it's normally shut on Mondays." The workman eyed the wrapped Mona Lisa, "what's that?" Vincenzo remembered what to say now but the adrenaline made it hard to vocalise.*

*"Student-- a student wants their piece returned. Académie des Beaux-Arts. I'm going there now. It's not far-- I'll be okay. I'll be back to finish my work, my other work."*

*"Everything alright, friend? You sound distressed," replied the workman.*

*"Yes, sorry. My French isn't very good."*

*"Ah, no need to apologise, my Italian's non-existent. Here, I've got the keys."*

*"Thank you." Vincenzo nodded with genuine appreciation.*

*"My old hands aren't very good - arthritis. Do you mind? Here, it's this one, the silver one. I'll hold that for you." Vincenzo traded da Vinci's Mona Lisa for an ill-arranged bundle of keys and turned his back on her. The action of the door was stiff, the dangling keychain made audible his quivering. "Keep at it, just needs a little jiggle." Fresh air suddenly ran over the sweat in Vincenzo's brow. "That's it, there you go. Right, you can have this back," Vincenzo did well, repressing his urge to snatch the portrait back, but couldn't stop himself from pressing it into his chest, like a missing dog found. "How do you folks say goodbye? Arrivederci?"*

*"Yes, that's right," Vincenzo replied.*

*"Well, arrivederci friend."*

*“Grazie mille e arrivederci.”*

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Vincenzo imagined himself a hero, the patriot saviour of the Mona Lisa, escorting her to where she belonged, where she began, Florence. He took the painting to a local gallery owner by the name of Mario Fratelli. Mario was stunned. He'd just been handed a masterwork, mastered masterfully by the greatest of the old masters. A painting which would be the pride of any small gallery owner. A painting known to have been stolen. A painting no one could put on display without the legal owners being very much aware. Mario called the police, Vincenzo went to prison, and the Mona Lisa was returned to France. Obviously. But it's what happened before that which is less obvious and more fateful.

Two years passed before Vincenzo actually took the painting to Florence. From 1911 to 1913 the Mona Lisa withered in a box in his Paris apartment. Perhaps he hoped that interest in the theft would also wither enough that he could pass it on without suspicion. If so, it was silly to suppose that the art-world would ever forget a missing da Vinci. What's interesting though is that the general public didn't either. News of the painting's theft hit the press like a hammer and it struck repeatedly in a way that would not have been possible even a mere decade earlier. Newfangled printers and great leagues of submerged wire whirred with information. Publishers fought. Advertisers won. News media had changed. The Mona

Lisa was the first painting to be projected, bright and beaming, upon the globe. Everyone could read about it and see its likeness, if they wanted to. And they did want to.

By the standards of the Euro-Anglo-Sphere in the first half of the 20th century, 1911 was quite boring. The story of the Mona Lisa theft didn't have to compete for public attention with the likes of 'Titanic Sunk!', 'World War!', 'Prohibition!', 'Depression!', 'World War, Again!'. It was also a story well suited to the 1911 sensibility given the time's fondness for mystery literature. In France alone tales of detectives Arsène Lupin and Fantomas were the reader's fashion although, of course, Sherlock Holmes is the more obvious example. This is all to say that the general public became enthralled by the theft. It gave folks a real life mystery to natter about.

*I reckon Guillaume Apollinaire had it stolen.*

Firstly, he's been cleared by the police. And, anyway, what would a writer and art critic do with the Mona Lisa? Doesn't even strike me as the sort of painting he'd like.

*It might have been an inside job, to claim the insurance money.*

Both the painting and the museum are state-owned, they don't have insurance.

*The Germans orchestrated it to embarrass France.*

By crudely stealing an Italian portrait rather than, say, something French?

*Well, I don't think the painting ever existed anyway. The theft was just an excuse to get The Louvre's poor copy off the scene.*

Christ. People don't change, do they?

This is why the Mona Lisa is so famous, this theft. Or, at least, it is the ancestral event which allowed it to become as popular as it is now, for something quite curious happened after Vincenzo took the Mona Lisa. That exposed piece of ugly wallpaper that Vincenzo left, between Correggio and Titian, where the da Vinci used to be, people flocked to see it. People visited The Louvre to *not* see the painting, rather wanting to be a part of the unfolding story about it. And, after two years, when it was returned to the Louvre, people reflocked to be a part of that story's continuation. By that time the painting didn't go back between any other artworks, it was no longer just another step along the gallery promenade.

A snowball of notoriety, is what The Mona Lisa became. It went on world tours, JFK and Warhol. It became the subject of vandals, historians, and awfully successful authors. All the while, copies upon copies, parodies and prints were made, each adding to the snowball as it went. It's still rolling in the same manner to this day but it has since gotten so large and travelled so far down the hill that it is no longer clear where it came from. And so people have come to guess, quite incorrectly, that initial event in 1911 which set the snowball rolling a forgotten fact.

Paris was frozen on that January morning, 2011. All the tourists and most of the locals had gone into hibernation for the season. But we were students, we were obligated to shiver and stare at the unsympathetic clock which barred our entry into the Louvre.

I knew the place was large but I didn't anticipate the sheer amount of stuff crammed into it. You'd need a couple days to fully appreciate the lot, we had a couple of hours. Fortunately all the signs lead to the very thing everyone wanted to see, the Mona Lisa. As we walked, Harry and I argued about what tasted worse, tequila or vodka, while ignoring entire halls of, presumably, very significant artworks. I remember the turn into the Salle de Etats, the room where the painting then resided, being modest - at least, I remember being surprised by the sudden confrontation with the painting. Paris really was cold that day, the painting was practically ours, we were able to freely walk up to it. I barely remember it after that. If I savoured the moment, or tried to, I didn't do it well enough. Perhaps I was too distracted by the odd gymnastics display in my periphery.

Harry had turned his back on the painting, contorting himself and his phone to try and get a picture which included both his and her awkward smiles. Nowadays we'd call that a 'selfie'. Back then, prior to being the normalised behaviour it has since become, I just called it being a tosser. Harry reviewed his photographic work. "It is small, innit," he said.

"It's a portrait," I replied.

Of course, these days, Mona Lisa selfies are expected behaviour. They all turn away from it, cameras ready. They all go to *not* see the painting, rather wanting to be a part of the long forgotten story about it.

There was a time, before August the 21st, 1911, when one could look at the Mona Lisa and appreciate it for what it materially was, a painting. Da Vinci's preeminent use of sfumato, soft gradations in tone which better replicated the complexities of skin. Chiaroscuro, literally 'light-dark', giving the image an enticing depth. People could admire things like this and move on. No longer. We've crossed the threshold. It's too familiar now, too encumbered with expectations of some kind or another. It's wearing a mask of itself that we can't see beyond even if we try to. And, when we stand in front of the portrait, many of us don't try to at all. But you know the truth now, the real story of how something so small got so big.