

The Mona Lisa

“So, what’s the big deal?” That’s what I invariably get from my students when I show them a slide of DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa* hanging on a wall in the Louvre, in Paris. Well, just why *is it* considered the world’s greatest painting?

Leonardo da Vinci began painting the Mona Lisa in 1503, during the Italian Renaissance and, according to Vasari, "after he had lingered over it four years, left it unfinished...." He is thought to have continued to work on it for three years after he moved to France and to have finished it shortly before he died in 1519. Leonardo took the painting from Italy to France in 1516. Most likely through the heirs of Leonardo's assistant Salai, the French king bought the painting for 4,000 écus and kept it at Château Fontainebleau, where it remained until given to Louis XIV. Louis XIV moved the painting to the Palace of Versailles. After the French Revolution, it was moved to the Louvre. Napoleon had it moved to his bedroom in the Tuileries Palace; later it was returned to the Louvre. During the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) it was moved from the Louvre to a hiding place elsewhere in France.

The Mona Lisa painting now hangs in the Musée du Louvre in Paris, France. The painting's increasing fame was further emphasized when it was stolen in 1911. The Louvre was closed for an entire week to aid in investigation of the theft. It would be two years before the real thief was discovered. Louvre employee Vincenzo Peruggia stole it by entering the building during regular hours, hiding in a broom closet and walking out with it hidden under his coat after the museum had closed. Peruggia was an Italian patriot who believed Leonardo's painting should be returned to Italy. Peruggia was hailed for his patriotism in Italy and only served a few months in jail for the crime.

During World War II, the painting was again removed from the Louvre for safety. In 1956, the lower part of the painting was severely damaged when a vandal doused the painting with acid. On December 30 of that same year a young Bolivian damaged the painting by throwing a rock at it. This resulted in the loss of a speck of pigment near the left elbow, which was later painted over. Still, the Mona Lisa has been well-cared for throughout its history, and the 2004-05 conservation team was optimistic about the future of the work. Before the 1962–3 tour, the painting was assessed, for insurance purposes, as valued at \$100 million. That is approximately \$700 million in 2009, when adjusted for inflation using the US Consumer Price Index. Today, it remains the most famous painting in the world. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona_Lisa]

So, why is this painting the greatest? I have no idea! I could give you the stock answers about her winsome smile, the brush strokes, colors and shading, the false background, etc...but I gather we’d have to be art experts to really understand why.

