

**RENAISSANCE EUROPE:  
LEONARDO DA VINCI:  
MONA LISA**



# RENAISSANCE EUROPE: LEONARDO DA VINCI: MONA LISA

## Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind Leonardo's most famous oil painting the Mona Lisa, how and why the painting was created, how the painting ended up in the Louvre and why it continues to be studied by scholars and artists to this day.

## Subjects

Art / Art History, European History, World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Louvre Museum, Paris
- Prado Museum, Madrid
- St. Ursula Convent, Florence

## Essential Questions

- Who was Leonardo da Vinci?
- What was Leonardo da Vinci's place in 15th century Renaissance Europe?
- When, where and why did da Vinci paint the Mona Lisa? Who was the subject?
- Why was the Mona Lisa a revolutionary painting when it was done in the early 16th century?
- What attempts have been done over the years to help preserve and protect the painting? Have these attempts been successful?
- Why is the painting so famous today?

## Academic Summary

### Excerpt from Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists, 16th century Life of Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo undertook to execute, for Francesco del Giocondo, the portrait of Mona Lisa, his wife; and after toiling over it for four years, he left it unfinished; and the work is now in the collection of King Frances of France, at Fontainebleau. In this head, whoever wished to see how closely art could imitate nature, was able to comprehend it with ease; for in it were counterfeited all the minuteness that with subtlety are able to be painted, seeing that the eyes had that luster and watery sheen which are always seen in life, and around them were all those rosy and pearly tints, as well as the lashes, which cannot be represented without the greatest subtlety. The eyebrows, through his having shown the manner in which the hairs spring from the flesh, here more close and here more scanty, and curve according to the pores of the skin, could not be more natural. The nose, with its beautiful nostrils, rosy and tender, appeared to be alive. The mouth, with its opening, and with its ends united by the red of the lips to the flesh-tints of the face, seemed, in truth, to be not colors but flesh. In the pit of the throat, if one gazed upon it intently, could be seen the beating of the pulse. And, indeed, it may be said that it was painted in such a manner as to make every valiant craftsman, be he who he may, tremble and lose heart. He made use, also, of this device: Mona Lisa being very beautiful, he always employed, while he was painting her portrait, persons to play or sing, and jesters, who might make her remain merry, in order to take away that melancholy which painters are often wont to give to the portraits that they paint.

### The Mona Lisa ...

Today it is arguably the most famous painting in the world, seen by millions of visitors every year. It occupies a special position in the Louvre Museum in Paris, protected from the elements and tourists. Since 2005, the painting has been encased and sealed in a bulletproof case, in which constant temperature and humidity levels are maintained. Although without question one of the most recognizable paintings in world history, there are many questions about the Mona Lisa. Who was the subject? Why did Leonardo paint the work? When was it painted? Artistically, why was the painting revolutionary for its time? Why is it now so famous?

Born Leonardo di ser Piero in Vinci (about 40 km east of Florence) in 1452, Leonardo da Vinci was the illegitimate son of Piero Fruosino di Antonio. Like many people of the period, the man who would come to be known worldwide as “da Vinci” did not have a legal surname (di ser Piero refers to his father). Little is known about his early life, but by his early teens the would-be artist was a student apprentice to the famed Florentine artist Verrocchio, in whose workshop he would learn a vast set of skills ranging from drafting and metal working to leather making and painting. It is even possible that the young Leonardo served as a model for Verrocchio’s famous bronze statue David, now housed in the Bargello in Florence.

Tradition holds that the Mona Lisa was probably painted for a wealthy Florentine

merchant and politician, Francesco del Giocondo. Lisa, the merchant's wife, is the supposed subject (although some scholars claim that the face is a female version of Leonardo himself). The word "mona" refers not to her name, but instead to the lady's title. In the Italian of the 16th century, "Mona" would have been synonymous with the English titles of "Ma'am", "Madam", or "My Lady". Little is known about Lisa, other than the fact that she lived a comfortable upper-bourgeois lifestyle. Tax records for the family show that she married young, had five children, outlived her husband and probably died in Florence sometime in the middle of the 16th century. It is believed that she was buried in the St. Ursula Convent in Florence, where she spent the last few years of her life.

The *Mona Lisa* was probably commissioned in 1503 or 1504, although it is difficult to date the painting with any certainty. Da Vinci probably worked on it off and on for at least three years, but no one knows why he failed to deliver it to del Giocondo. Some have speculated that the painting sitting in the Louvre was actually a second copy of a painting that was delivered and is now lost, but no one knows for sure. What is known is that Leonardo kept today's painting in his possession when he traveled to France at the behest of the French monarch, King Francis I. He may have even continued to work on it occasionally over the last few years of his life. When Leonardo died in 1519, the French monarchy gained possession of the painting after purchasing it from one of Leonardo's apprentices. It originally hung in the Palace of Fontainebleau and later was moved to the Palace of Versailles. During the French Revolution, the painting was moved to Paris and placed in the Louvre Museum along with many other royal pieces of art. With the exception of occasional brief exhibitions around the world and because of times when it had to be moved during wartime, the *Mona Lisa* has been on permanent display in the Louvre for over two centuries. Today it is arguably the most famous and recognizable painting in the world.

Over the centuries, various attempts have been undertaken to restore and preserve the masterpiece. One of the painting's biggest issues stems from the fact that it was painted on a poplar wood panel rather than on a traditional canvas. Although the panel was of exceptional quality when Leonardo worked on it in the 16th century, changes in humidity over time caused it to develop hairline cracks as a result of warping in the wood itself. A number of efforts over the last two centuries achieved varying degrees of success in stabilizing the painting, including the placement of wooden cross beams on the back of the painting in the 20th century. Not all attempts at conservation have helped the painting, however. Over the years, different artists have tried to clean it with various chemicals and solvents. An insect infestation appeared in the poplar panel in the 1970s, probably as a result of the cross-pieces used to stabilize it. Artists have tried in vain to touch-up the *Mona Lisa* with both oils and watercolors. Today no one knows for sure how many coats of varnish have been applied to the painting. What is known is that the varnish from centuries past has darkened the painting. The masterpiece today sits encased in a space where the temperature and humidity are controlled. As long as the electricity holds out, the painting should as well.

Leonardo's fame during his lifetime that grew to the point that he was known around the continent. Legend says that when he died in France in 1519 at the age of 67, it was with his head in the arms of his good friend King Francis I. His reputation and legacy as

the ultimate “Renaissance Man” has only increased over the last four centuries. Today he is as well respected and revered as ever. Perhaps Giorgio Vasari said it best in 1568 when he wrote the following words about da Vinci.

In the normal course of events many men and women are born with remarkable talents; but occasionally, in a way that transcends nature, a single person is marvelously endowed by Heaven with beauty, grace and talent in such abundance that he leaves other men far behind, all his actions seem inspired and indeed everything he does clearly comes from God rather than from human skill. Everyone acknowledged that this was true of Leonardo da Vinci, an artist of outstanding physical beauty, who displayed infinite grace in everything that he did and who cultivated his genius so brilliantly that all problems he studied he solved with ease.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind Leonardo’s most famous oil painting the Mona Lisa, how and why the painting was created, how the painting ended up in the Louvre and why it continues to be studied by scholars and artists to this day.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the story behind Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting the *Mona Lisa*.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why the painting was created.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the painting ended up in the Louvre Museum in Paris.
4. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why the painting continues to be studied by scholars and artists and art historians.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What is the most famous painting of all time? Why? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Leonardo da Vinci and the Mona Lisa (20 min)
- Video – Leonardo da Vinci Mona Lisa (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Leonardo da Vinci and the Mona Lisa (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: *The Mona Lisa* (20 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the story behind Leonardo's most famous oil painting the Mona Lisa, how and why the painting was created, how the painting ended up in the Louvre and why it continues to be studied by scholars and artists to this day.
- Alternate Assessment – Students should theorize as to why the Mona Lisa has become such a pop icon, used on everything from t-shirts to fridge magnets, and then debate as to whether that is appropriate.

## Extension

### On tour: Louvre Museum, Paris

Students on tour in Paris will visit the Louvre Museum, where they can see for themselves the Mona Lisa. The museum, originally a 12th century fortress and palace, was opened in Aug 1793 during the French Revolution. Its collection has expanded over the years and now contains over 350,000 objects and 35,000 works of art. There are eight separate departments in the Louvre based on different regions and artistic mediums. The Egyptian antiquities collection, with over 50,000 pieces, is the most impressive such collection in any museum on the planet. Look for the museum's website in the links section below.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- <http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariLeo.html>  
Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Leonardo da Vinci (primary source)
- <http://musee.louvre.fr/oal/joconde/indexEN.html>  
The Mona Lisa (website) – from the Louvre Museum in Paris
- <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/leonardo-mona-lisa.html>  
Leonardo's "Mona Lisa" (website) – from Khan Academy, this website also includes a well done 10 minute video on the famous painting.
- <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/leonardo-da-vinci-creative-genius>  
Leonardo da Vinci: Creative Genius (website) – from the National Endowment for the Humanities
- [www.leonardoda-vinci.org/](http://www.leonardoda-vinci.org/)  
Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Works (website) – this website contains almost 300 images of Leonardo's works, drawings and sketches. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- <http://monalisa.org/>  
The Mona Lisa Foundation (website) – this site, a product of the Mona Lisa Foundation in Switzerland, has extensive information on the world's most famous painting. Highly recommended for all teachers.
- [www.museoleonardiano.it/eng/](http://www.museoleonardiano.it/eng/)  
Museo Leonardiano Vinci (website) – official website from the Leonardo museum in Vinci
- <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/93>  
Church and Dominican Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie (website) – from UNESCO
- [www.slideshare.net/guest6c27ff/leonardo-da-vinci-ppt](http://www.slideshare.net/guest6c27ff/leonardo-da-vinci-ppt)  
Leonardo da Vinci (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TckJwAV81k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TckJwAV81k)  
Leonardo da Vinci "Mona Lisa" (video) – This 1 hour long video, produced by the BBC, is probably too long for most classes, but it's well worth it for anyone looking to know the full story of what may be the world's most famous painting. Highly recommended for AP / Advanced students.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=litbJsZd1kM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=litbJsZd1kM)  
Mona Lisa – Why So Famous? (video) – This 4 ½ minute video is appropriate for all classes.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnV4bkPkZQM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnV4bkPkZQM)  
Leonardo da Vinci (video) – from the History Channel, this 45-minute video might be long for some classes, but it is worth showing if possible.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjT4hQNRCCQg>

Leonardo da Vinci – The Mona Lisa – Every Picture Tells a Story (video)

### **Background Information**

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo\\_da\\_Vinci](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo_da_Vinci)  
Leonardo da Vinci – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona\\_Lisa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona_Lisa)  
Mona Lisa – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lisa\\_del\\_Giocondo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lisa_del_Giocondo)  
Lisa del Giocondo – Wikipedia article on the woman believed by most scholars to be the “Mona Lisa”
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculation\\_about\\_Mona\\_Lisa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculation_about_Mona_Lisa)  
Speculations about Mona Lisa – Wikipedia article
- [http://www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/france/louvre](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/france/louvre)  
On the Road: Louvre – from Passports Educational Travel

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus)  
Renaissance Florence – Botticelli: Birth of Venus
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo)  
Renaissance Florence – Brunelleschi: Dome of the Florence Duomo
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello)  
Renaissance Florence – Donatello
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art)  
Renaissance Florence – Giotto
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince)  
Renaissance Florence – Machiavelli: The Prince
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family)  
Renaissance Florence – Medici Family
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david)  
Renaissance Florence – Michelangelo: The David
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio)  
Renaissance Florence -- Verrocchio
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview)  
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa)  
Renaissance Europe – Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper)  
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last)



judgment

Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Last Judgment

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling)

Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta)

Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: The Pieta

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens)

Renaissance Rome – Raphael: School of Athens

### **Key Terms**

- Florentine
- Leonardo
- Louvre Museum
- Mona Lisa
- Renaissance

