



# More Than Its Timeless Beauty

## -Exploring the Legacy of *Mona Lisa* Through Its Possibility

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**Abstract.** Nearly 100 years ago, Leonardo da Vinci innovated against iconography and built sensual connections through portraits, setting the work apart from the portrait's antecedents. Centuries later, *Mona Lisa* remains its symbol of mastery, desire, and mystery, never stopping adding to the repertoire of humankind. As the most famous portrait worldwide, *Mona Lisa* dominates its commanding place in various forms, including art, writings, fashions, advertising, cartoons, parodies, and even popular culture of memes. This research explores the significance of emotional expressiveness generated by the *Mona Lisa* and how its psychological symbolism evolved and transformed into narrative drama in other formats. This research adopts a series of case studies from Leonardo's interiority and dexterity during creation, Sigmund Freud's reveal of myth under the soul, Marcel Duchamp's readymade art, today's popular culture of Meme, the vehicle in the music industry towards identity politics, and muse in fashion industry. Those results indicate a significant sensitivity to the psychology and emotion expressed in the work of *Mona Lisa*, which marks a critical threshold in the global content that never ceases to inspire generations.

**Keywords:** Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, Marcel Duchamp, Psychological Symbolism, Freud

## 1 Introduction

The Renaissance period can be described as a time when the interest in man's relationship to man popped up, the concentration of individual development, the pursuit of objective scientific inquiry, the belief in the processes of democracy, the idea of humanism beyond superstition all contributed to the greatness of the Renaissance. Beyond that, producing artwork is not merely one thing but a culmination of the soul-exploring journey. Artists use strategies to create bridges that reflect the complexity of human emotions and thoughts. Generally, ideas concerning the making meaning in art emanate from viewing art as manifestations of artists' mental processes, inner thoughts, and motivations for actions in establishing the meaning of political or social context or windows of a particular period in which the artwork was made. Undoubtedly, psychology and humanism mark a strong foundation of every art form. Every thought or emotion generated through the process of creating art impacts its content and form, influencing

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the audience's perceptions and appealing to different audiences. As art holds different meanings for different people, the significance of psychological impact in art stems from its potential to spark numerous interpretations. Humanism, which highlights the value and potential of human beings, serves as a vehicle to capture the beauty and complexity of the human experience. The combination of psychology and humanism in Renaissance art led to a transformation of the art world, allowing the work to be more accessible, realistic, and personal. This research analyzes Leonardo da Vinci's work *Mona Lisa* and its legacy through the realm of elite and popular cultures. Artwork like *Mona Lisa* has made a tremendous impact on both societal and historical development. Its dominant historical narrative continues to inspire new possibilities worldwide.

## 2 Mona Lisa

Leonardo da Vinci, the man of foresight, applied artful science and scientific art throughout his life. His world-famous masterpiece *Mona Lisa* infuses his specialties such as Sfumato and Aerial Perspective, which marked a critical threshold in global art history and inspired countless generations.

### 2.1 Artful Science and Scientific Art

**The Technique of Sfumato.** The technique of Sfumato and the infiniteness of art makes Leonardo's work different from others. On the one hand, Leonardo is fascinated with creating the visual between seen and unseen by avoiding visible strokes in his work, aiming to achieve the effect when the human sight is unaware of the boundaries and lines. His works usually contain few colors but emphasize creating depth. According to Alexander Nagel, Sfumato separates the work itself to its artist which grants the work a self-existent feature during its creation <sup>[1]</sup>. The imperceptible transitions Leonardo mastered in creating the contrast between light and shade, allowing the light to appear on and refract back out of instead of bouncing off the surface. Hence, he successfully adds more sweetness and tenderness to his work portrait. His grasp of Sfumato also helps him to draw the smoky and hazy effect where everything is unified in the background.

**The Aerial Perspective.** On the other hand, Leonardo adopts the aerial perspective in his artwork to achieve the illusion of depth. In order to portray the landscape behind the figure more naturally and realistically, Leonardo came up with the idea of aerial perspective to make the mountain softer and lighter as it receded into the distance. Leonardo divides the perspective into three parts, specifically emphasizes the toning down of colors when the objects fade away <sup>[2]</sup>. As Leonardo's optical studies also point out, the air in the atmosphere affects the perception of objects far away, and the dust and humidity in the environment influence the dispersion of luminosity.

## 2.2 Beyond Physical Dimension

However, as portraiture in Renaissance, *Mona Lisa* shows a fruition of combining inner and outer essence that comes from the greatness of technique and the human spirit. Comparing the *Mona Lisa* to another portrait in the same era is the philosophical basis and the way Leonardo goes against iconography, which transforms into psychology and narrative drama, that helps *Mona Lisa* to transcend to the level beyond its physical dimension. Its hypnotic imitation of life, known as psychological symbolism, teases viewers out of thought and fixates to a conspicuous degree on its allure. Leonardo values facial movements to be the vehicle to convey invisible emotional states. Furthermore, he insists that making the proper signification builds a bridge to empathy, which helps the audience to echo the specific emotion the creator represents, evoking an appropriate response. In 1854, Alfred Dumesnil stated that the smile of the *Mona Lisa* imparted a "treacherous attraction" [3]. Theophile Gautier mentioned the "mocking lips" and "gaze promising unknown pleasure" [4]. The psychological symbolism marks a decisive moment in Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* that makes it iconic, devoted to revealing the figure's soul to the viewer. However, the psychological impact is personal; that is, art holds a different meaning for different people. The introspective and objective thoughts of the viewer can be ignited unconsciously to examine another layer of meaning. The psychophysical theory forms a relationship between an individual's internal (psychic) and external (physical) worlds, implying an orderly correspondence of the cross-over dominance between external stimuli and inner emotions.

## 2.3 Smile

In Leonardo's case, the artist pays extra attention to the interiority and dexterity during his creation process; through the cross-model of comparing *Mona Lisa*'s iconic portraiture elements, such as the smile, the audience acquires their interpretations while examining the society or the time in its mirror. However, the audience's understanding of historical emotions appearing in an art form like portraits should consider a wide range of elements in terms of the historical period. For example, as Flanigan stated, the social background, environment, class, gender of the viewer [5]. To understand a smile, one must understand smiles as socially constructed and culturally determined. Flanigan stated that the increase in human portraiture had been regarded as the people's improvement of self-awareness and identity. Throughout history, women have been expected to smile properly in public without showing their teeth, as the teeth are seen as a more intimate body region. Plus, women are expected to smile more as a proper way of showing respect and politeness. The proper smile would help women fit into social expectations and standards. In contrast, the absence of proper female facial movement would be regarded as rude or unattractive regardless of their genuine emotions [5]. The meaning of smiling depends on the social construction and its dominant population of gender. In this light, the popularity of the *Mona Lisa*'s smile reflects the character as an allegorical figure or an ideal woman at that time. The viewer plays a vital role in decoding *Mona Lisa*'s significance. The artist gives the privilege to the audience by

refraining from the usual clues as they appear in typical portraiture. The mysterious feature of the *Mona Lisa* empowers the viewer.

## 2.4 Psychological Symbolism

In Leonardo's case, in addition, some research illustrates that Leonardo uses psychological symbolism to unconsciously link the mind and memory, making people aware of what existed in the past. Leonardo mentioned in his notebooks that he often obtains his insights or is inspired by past memories. This, in turn, pushed Leonardo to invent a method of exploring his unconscious mind, which we know as chain association <sup>[6]</sup>. According to the previous research done by art historians, many believe that the portrait created by Leonardo, specifically *Mona Lisa*, utilizes the figure as a product of “an object of desire” or “a representation of a desiring subject <sup>[7]</sup>.” Dmitri Merejkowski describes the significance of a smile as a symbol of narcissistic fulfillment in Leonardo's work of art, arguing that Leonardo's motivation for creating art corresponds to the motivation of proving his charm <sup>[8]</sup>. Ultimately Leonardo creates the *Mona Lisa* as his feminine double, allowing the artist to maintain his charm and even reach a state of immortality and eternity <sup>[5]</sup>.

## 3 The Soul of Myth

By the end of the 19th century, many critics, art historians, or even neurologists like Sigmund Freud applied more anti-romantics to *Mona Lisa*, trying to explore more the soul of myth beneath the artwork rather than continue to overlay romantic comments.

### 3.1 Freud

Thus, Freud researches the pathography of a globally-recognized versatile artist to understand his personality. The Psychoanalysis made by Freud also provides a point of view that the smiling woman shows the repressed feeling of his homosexuality <sup>[9]</sup>. Freud analyzed the smile as a repetitive representation of Leonardo's mother, Caterina <sup>[9]</sup>. Later Leonardo transfers his lingering for his mother's love to a version of homosexual narcissism or self-love that make himself in line with his mother, interpret himself as an inversion of his mother <sup>[10]</sup>. According to Freud, a male infant usually fantasizes his mother having a genital like his own <sup>[11]</sup>. On this ground, Freud recognized that Leonardo created the *Mona Lisa* as a representation or another version of his childhood memories, fantasies, and sexual desires. The artwork of *Mona Lisa* also provides a platform that allows Freud to seek the development of Leonardo's libidinal desires. Hence, the production of the *Mona Lisa* can be seen as more than an ultimate amalgamation of one's memory but one of the ways that reaches the possibility to obtain the human happiness <sup>[7]</sup>.

Furthermore, the analysis made by Freud highlights that the charisma in Leonardo's work relies on a theory of art that is not strictly constrained by imitation or reproduction. As Freud points out, the artwork is not framed or limited by time and space <sup>[7]</sup>. Instead,

Freud believes that art implies a free spirit and state that offers a transcendental experience without being limited by time and space, which can be considered the core of the creative process and what arms the artwork's symbolic power.

### 3.2 Marcel Duchamp

However, besides the psychological and humanistic aspects, in some senses, all art takes a stand concerning the dominant values of its era. Leonardo would never expect his work to become a certain type of self-conscious political product in commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death and the dawn of the Great War. Artists at that time have become particularly conscious of the political resonances of their art, shifting their concentration from aesthetic to sociopolitical concerns. They absorb the art piece into a domain of theory that serves its revolutionary impulse. The psychological chain in the artwork that links the audience and the artist functions to revalue the art creation process ingrained in the collective consciousness of modern culture. Armed with motivation from experience, people in different eras started to construct new art pieces to indict the social issues they encountered, arousing social conscience.

During the twentieth century, a revolutionary movement of Dadaism announces the European avant-garde stage of defending new ideas and questioning the pure aesthetic of the definition of art. Marcel Duchamp is a French artist who excels at Readymade art, which means that the artist has autonomy in choosing an existing art piece already created by others. By doing so, Duchamp weakens its original meaning and function, re-altering its meaning with new concepts, context, and construction. This transition allows the position of the artist to change from an art maker to an art selector—for instance, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) is a readymade artwork that uses a postcard to represent the Mona Lisa. Duchamp weakens the preconceptions surrounding art by questioning the humanism of *Mona Lisa*, including its aesthetic quality and the psychological sensibility of the creator. At the same time, Duchamp attacks the mass-produced tourist icon of the Mona Lisa in terms of its egalitarianism that would intimidate social and aesthetic hierarchy<sup>[12]</sup>. Duchamp felt the war called into question every aspect of society, and its traumatic impact made people often link Dadaism to Nihilism. Duchamp ascribed such development of art to an impact of sensibility traumatizing from people's fear to death and the loss of their beloved ones, which arouses people's awareness that all established values, principles, and aesthetic standards have become meaningless under the destruction of war<sup>[13]</sup>. The war robbed people's sensibility of death by taking the amount of time that prepared for mourning<sup>[13]</sup>. On this ground, *Mona Lisa*'s popularity results in an aggressive perspective which brings an attack aimed to break the traditional understandings of aesthetics and challenge long-held beliefs about the art creation process. Duchamp drew a mustache and goatee on the Mona Lisa's face, adding the sexual expression of masculinity that implies the reference to bisexuality<sup>[14]</sup>. A new aspect of the Mona Lisa's underlying sexual ambivalence that links to the notion of Leonardo's homosexuality discussion made by Freud, even though his works were published in 1920. The psychological symbolism of intimacy and love, as appeared in her eye contact and smile, become a new satirical version of critique in response to the rise of capitalist culture, the war, the societal and political system, and the degradation

of art. Adding the letters “L. H.O.O.Q.” below the *Mona Lisa*, which in French “Elle a Chaud au Cul” and translated in French roughly as “her ass is on fire”; the artist narrated with a uniquely French language of the vernacular, not only allows the society to rebuild the role of imagism in art; but also offers the savage but humorous perspective to evokes some human compassion regarding the war. The mixture of literal meanings pushes to represent the figure of the *Mona Lisa* further with humor and whimsy, even tends towards the absurd. Since the artist adopts a rude way of emphasizing the figure’s sexual allure, Duchamp’s work was considered highly controversial when the masses were not used to the exacerbation of high art, as some pointed out that the satirical element is a lack of humanity. However, some consider that Duchamp creates a touch-tone that illustrates unsettling power, creating a strong contrast between the peaceful smile and the chaotic social environment.

### 3.3 Today’s Popular Culture

Duchamp’s bold action of creating such a new *Mona Lisa* marks a milestone in world art history and leads the world to enter a new era of postmodernism. However, no matter how or in what ways *Mona Lisa* has been praised or belittled, both Freud and Duchamp bring the world’s most renowned work of art to the spotlight. They cut through the famous mystery and make bold or even offensive arguments for introducing the profound impact of Psychoanalysis and Dadaism. Their points of agreement elaborate on the gender orientation of concealed bisexuality of the figure *Mona Lisa* <sup>[14]</sup>. Freud’s Psychoanalysis is still relevant today as it opens up a new way for people to better dig into the unique phenomenology of individuals. Duchamp’s creation of art influence is replicated in popular culture later today. For instance, Meme culture has become a popular artistic expression that produces content similar to Duchamp’s work. The internet Meme culture, mainly occupied by the millennial generation, incorporates quirky elements edited in recycled pictures to produce a sense of absurdity and disillusionment. Just like Dadaism, Meme culture can overturn the grassroots aesthetic of the bourgeois, sparking activism, reinforcing a particular ideology, and even contesting the status quo.

### 3.4 Vehicle towards Identity Politics

*Mona Lisa* also makes it a focal point of many innovative inspirations, including the music industry. Beyonce and Jay-Z’s *Apesh-t* video, filmed at the Louvre, features Eurocentric artworks, including *Mona Lisa*, *The Coronation of Napoleon*, and *Venus de Milo*. *Mona Lisa* appears on the stage showcasing black people’s performance and embodiment. Standing in front of *Mona Lisa*, which represents the most iconic white culture product, the couple encounters, navigates, and challenges whiteness while aiming to promote the visibility of black art. By dipping into the music video concept, *Mona Lisa* becomes an effective pedagogical form against the dominant Western art and cultural hegemony. Specifically, the moment when the couple’s glance encounter with the *Mona Lisa* at the close of the video conveys a sense of self-reflection while expressing black pride. In this regard, *Mona Lisa* provides a means to engage with the beauty of

culture and identity. It reflects people of color challenging mainstream Western modernism and re-contextualize its heterogeneity.

### 3.5 Muse in Fashion

The Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile renders a concept associated with the femme fatale in the fashion world, which adds thoughts to the fashion rulebook as styles of rebellion. As a monumental muse, *Mona Lisa* appears in the fashion industry from designer brands such as Jean Paul Gaultier's tattoo top and Maison Margiela's dyed print sweat-shirt. As for the fashion marketing strategy, Yves Saint Laurent's Spring/Summer 1999 Ad Campaign, shot by photographer Mario Sorrenti transfers the essence of *Mona Lisa* into fashion photography. Simply put, the model is invited to imitate the Mona Lisa. The model sits with her arms folded, smiling and gazing. Instead of sitting alone, a man appears on the side to be the second figure as an observer. Chanel also infuses the idea to create a campaign telling a story that a woman steals the Renaissance masterpiece and escapes in chic. In a modern life dominated by social media, the impact on the fashion industry equals the way to the wardrobe of world influencers from singer Lady Gaga to actress Phoebe Buffay to the quick selfies by models like Kendall Jenner and Natalia Vodianova.

## 4 Conclusion

*Mona Lisa's* psychological impact leaves lasting effects, including returning pleasant memories, initiating consumer society, sparking revolution, and increasing productivity. It is the constant exploration of possibility. In the contemporary world, psychological symbolism is often associated with art therapy, including depression, anxiety, stress, and trauma. *Mona Lisa*, in turn, helped to usher in a new era of art that emphasized the significance of psychological impact and complexity of the human experience, setting the stage for the artistic developments of subsequent centuries.

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