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Mona Lisa: A Formal Analysis

Mona Lisa, oil on wood panel by Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1503–19; in the Louvre, Paris.

When you look up or think of famous paintings, usually the first thing that pops up or comes to mind is the Mona Lisa. It is for a reason; The Mona Lisa is THE most famous painting of all time actually. Mona Lisa was painted by one of the greatest artists to do it, Leonardo Da Vinci. The Mona Lisa was painted on a rectangular piece of poplar wood with the long sides being vertical and the short sides being horizontal. The medium for the Mona Lisa was oil, which Da Vinci used to provide a soft and glossy look to the portrait. Leonardo Da Vinci popularized using

oils as a medium for painting as before him the preferred medium was tempera. It is said that Da Vinci would apply 20 to 40 layers of oil on his creation. You can tell in the Mona Lisa that he applied a decent number of layers as you can see cracking all through the painting, especially in the hands. Da Vinci created the Mona Lisa sometime between 1503 and 1519 but he worked on it for years up until his death. The Mona Lisa was created during the Renaissance art movement, and it shows with the use of humanism and realism. When it came to realism, artists could not stress it enough especially when it came to portraits.

The Mona Lisa is a portrait of a woman who is said to be Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, but there are multiple theories of it being someone else as it is not proven to be Lisa Gherardini. Whoever Da Vinci intended for the lady to be; you can see that he made the portrait feature a nearly frontal face, shoulders turned three-quarters toward the viewer, everything from the torso up is visible, and the hands are included in the image. The three-quarters pose is something that Da Vinci also popularized, hence why painters followed the trend and pictures like graduation, yearbook, and portraits in general are taken like that to this day. Leonardo also used his famous characteristic sfumato— when sharp edges are instead blurred by blended colors. This gave the portrait a rich atmospheric effect and a smoky haze. Da Vinci used sfumato to add ambiguity to Mona Lisas expression. Da Vinci also used another characteristic that blurs the background and this in turn adds depth. When you look at the Mona Lisa you can see how Da Vinci played with light. Da Vinci blended light with shade and this allowed him to define the focus of the piece, create depth, and give the painting a polished look. Da Vinci really focused on depth and detail hence how the landscape represents the shift between the space of the sitter and the far distance. The scale of the portrait shows how he intended for it to be

realistic because notice how the figure in the Mona Lise is not touching the edges of the frame. The use of color by Da Vinci really gives the viewers and the picture itself a warm and realistic feeling. I must admit that after analyzing this portrait, I can see why Leonardo Da Vinci was considered as one of the greats as well as the Mona Lisa being one of the most well-known and recognized works of art of all time.