Playing Tricks on the Mona Lisa

Quick: What's the most famous painting in the world? You might have answered the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci. But just how did a rather small (30 x 21 inches) painting get to be so well known? What makes it so special?

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was an Italian artist and scientist who experimented with many new painting methods. He invented sfumato (pronounced sfoomahto), a kind of shading technique that allows tones and colors to melt softly into one another, creating hazy forms. Sfumato gives the Mona Lisa an almost magical look. Leonardo also painted her smile in such a way that it's hard to know exactly what she is thinking. Is she smiling at you, at a private joke or just because she is in a good mood? And then, her eyes seem to follow you wherever you go. All of these would be great answers, but the Mona Lisa became famous for a different reason.

The Mona Lisa had been on display at the Louvre—France's most important art museum—for over a hundred years before it was stolen on August 21, 1911. An Italian carpenter named Vincenzo Peruggia, who had been working at the museum, took it right off the wall and slipped it under his coat! Peruggia thought that an Italian masterwork belonged in Italy and not in France. The painting had been missing for over a day before anyone missed it. Then people started to ask: Who could have taken it and why? The police wondered if perhaps Picasso had stolen it for a publicity stunt.

Detectives all over the world tried to find the Mona Lisa, and people were fascinated, but the trail was cold. Meanwhile, Peruggia was keeping the painting safe in his apartment. Over two years later, he tried to sell the Mona Lisa to an art dealer in Italy, hoping it would remain there, but the dealer returned it to the Louvre, where it still hangs today, and Peruggia went to prison (but not for too long).

The Louvre owns over 35,000 works of art, but none is as popular as the Mona Lisa. People still come from all over the world to see it.

Crowds trying to get close to the Mona Lisa
Owen Franken for The New York Times, 2019

After the Mona Lisa became everybody's favorite painting, artists started to copy it. Then, they started to have fun with it. Here are a few examples:

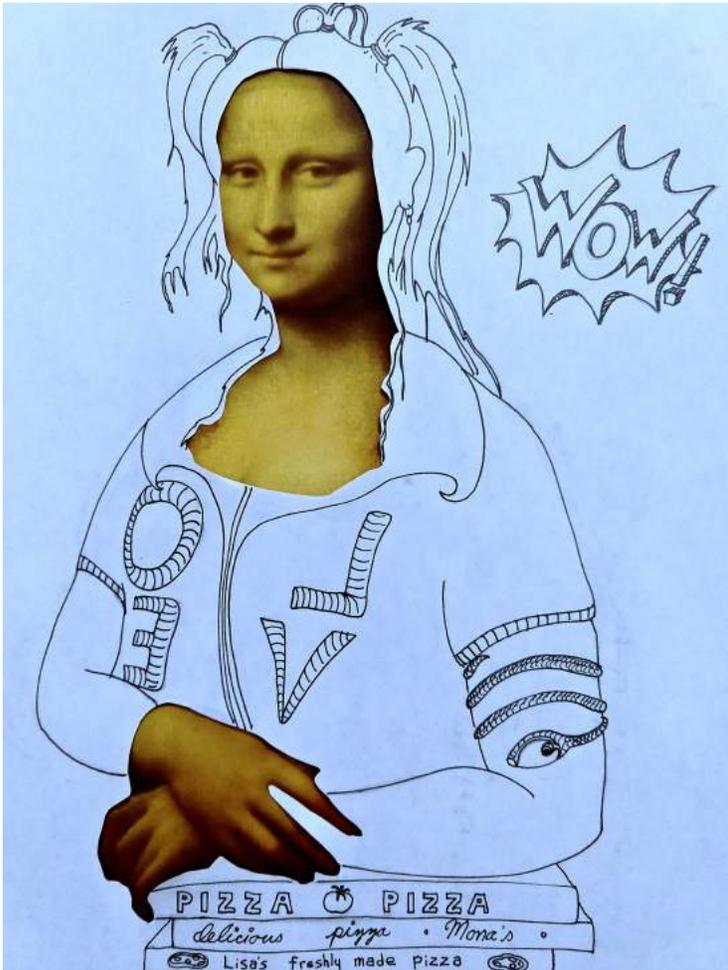Marcel Duchamp   Fernando Botero   Art Pics TV

This week, we will add to the Mona Lisa mania by creating our own mix-ups. There are two ways to do this:

1) Print out the reproduction of the Mona Lisa on the next page and collage or draw on top of it. A few examples follow:

2) The image on the next page shows the Mona Lisa's face and hands with the rest whited out. Print this out and have fun creating your background. You can keep your background in black and white or color it in. Experiment with Mona Lisa's hair, clothing and accessories.

Supplies: White paper or card stock, printer, pencil, eraser, pen and/or markers.

Procedure: Draw a new world for the Mona Lisa with your pencil. When you have a drawing you like, go over your lines in pen. Color it in if you want. Share your picture with the Museum for a chance to win art supplies! Email it to cdelnero@academyartmuseum.org.