

Leonardo da Vinci
The Complete Paintings and Drawings

Frank Zöllner

TASCHEN

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Indeed, the great Leonardo remained like a child for the whole of his life in more than one way; it is said that all great men are bound to retain some infantile part. Even as an adult he continued to play, and this was another reason why he often appeared uncanny and incomprehensible to his contemporaries.

SIGMUND FREUD, 1910

I The young artist in Florence 1469–1480



It seems at first sight odd that, even when invited to paint a subject of his own choosing and entirely in his own time, Leonardo should not want to work for the Marchioness of Mantua, the most distinguished patroness of the arts in the Renaissance era. Yet during this same period, it has been shown, Leonardo was living on the savings he had transferred to his Florence account before leaving Milan. The artist today known above all as a painter evidently preferred to pursue the "scientific" studies, which brought him in no money and which, indeed, were rather looked down on by his contemporaries. Against this backdrop, it is all the more astonishing that Leonardo should accept, in the spring of 1503, a commission from Francesco del Giocondo (1460-1530) to paint his wife Lisa Gherardini (1479-1511). It is possible that the commission for the *Mona Lisa* (Cat. XXV/II, p. 153), as the portrait would become known, resulted from personal contacts similar to those that gave rise to other of Leonardo's works, such as the *Portrait of Ginepro de' Benci* and the *Adoration of the Magi*. The Giocondo family belonged to the same social class as Leonardo himself and Ser Piero da Vinci, Leonardo's father, was acquainted with members of Francesco del Giocondo's close circle. In addition, the Giocondo family chapel was located in SS Annunziata in Florence, the same church, in other words, for which Leonardo had begun the cartoon of the Virgin and Child with St Anne at the start of his second Florentine period.

We are relatively well informed about the genesis of the *Mona Lisa*. Lisa del Giocondo, born in 1479, was the daughter of Antonmaria Gherardini. On 3 March 1495 she married Francesco del Giocondo, born in 1460, the son of a wealthy family of Florentine silk merchants. We can assume that, unlike Marchioness Isabella d'Este (see above), a man like Francesco del Giocondo did not commission paintings simply on a whim and regardless of their subject. As a rule, members of the urban middle classes had specific reasons for commissioning works of art, and this is also true of the portrait of the *Mona Lisa*. In

the spring of 1503 Francesco del Giocondo had purchased a new house for his young family, while Lisa had given birth to her second son, Andrea, a few months previously – reason enough, in the Florence of the 15th and 16th centuries, to commission a portrait. In the case of the Giocondo family, moreover, Andrea's safe delivery must have carried particular significance. Levels of infant mortality and death in childbirth were in those days very high, something of which both Francesco and Lisa del Giocondo would have been painfully aware. Francesco had already lost two wives prior to Lisa, on each occasion after about a year of marriage. One of these wives is known to have died shortly after the birth of a child, and it seems likely that both of Francesco's previous wives died either in childbirth or in the weeks immediately following their confinements. Francesco's third wife, Lisa, had evidently survived the birth of her first son Piero (1496), but in 1499 lost a daughter at birth. Childbirth was thus an occasion overshadowed by tragedy for the del Giocondo family. When, in the spring of 1503, some four months after Andrea's birth, mother and son were still doing well, Francesco could allow himself to assume that both would safely survive the happy event. It was this confidence that which in all probability prompted Francesco to commission a portrait of his wife to adorn their new home. The portrait of Lisa del Giocondo would never hang in the house for which it was intended, however, since Leonardo did not complete the painting until several years later, probably towards 1510, by which time he was no longer living in Florence.

Leonardo clearly draws in the *Mona Lisa* upon the formal vocabulary of Florentine portraiture of the late 15th century. The half-length figure is turned two-thirds towards the viewer, and a balustrade carried on slender pillars provides the point of transition between the foreground and the background landscape. Formally similar half-length portraits of young women from the period before 1500 include those by the so-called Master of Santo Spirito and Lorenzo di

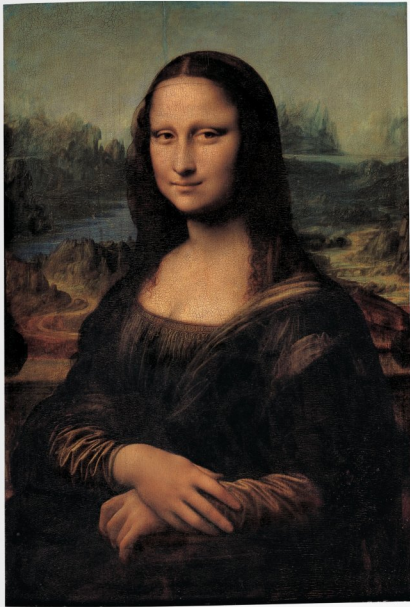


Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua
Copy of the Portrait of Isabella of Portugal by Jan van Eyck
The drawing with which Leonardo indicates

Isabella's sister (Shakespeare)
Virgin and Child
Bologna, Pinacoteca
Milan, Private Collection,
Gibson & M.N.



Portrait of Lisa del Giocondo (Mona Lisa), 1504-10
and later (1510)
Oil on poplar, 77 x 48 cm
Paris, Musée de Louvre, Inv. 791





188 Anatomical Studies of the Muscles of the Shoulder and Arm, c. 1570-75
From one study of human skin and one from black skulls, 1887-88, see Windsor Castle, Royal Library (MS. 10920)

189 The Skeletal Structure of the Lower Limb and the Muscles of the Foot and Knee, 1604-10
From one study of human skin and one from black skulls, 1887-88, see Windsor Castle, Royal Library (MS. 10920)

190 Anatomical Studies of the Muscles of the Neck, Shoulder, Chest and Arm, 1570-75
From one study of human skin and one from black skulls, 1887-88, see Windsor Castle, Royal Library (MS. 10920)

191 Anatomical Drawings of the Muscles and Veins of the Arm and Chest, and the Hand of an Old Man, c. 1570-75
From one study of human skin and one from black skulls, 1887-88, see Windsor Castle, Royal Library (MS. 10920)





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