THE MONA LISA IN THE HISTORY OF TASTE

By George Boas

The search for aesthetic standards by means of which any work of art can be finally judged would seem to presuppose either that every such work is an unchanging entity, or that, regardless of whether it changes or not, it should always be judged in the same way. Neither of these presuppositions appears tenable to the writer of this paper, who holds, on the contrary, that works of art are not the locus of one value, known as "beauty" or something similar, but are rather multivalent, that certain of their values are experienced by some persons, others by others, and that there is no *a priori* method—except that of fiat—of determining which of the many values are properly "aesthetic." One objection usually raised against this position is that there happen to be some works of art which "the judgment of posterity" has always held to be admirable or "great," and that one has only to examine their characteristics to discover what the distinguishing marks of great works of art are. The Parthenon, the *Aeneid*, *Hamlet*, and so on, it is maintained, have always enjoyed a high reputation. They are great by almost universal consent; or, if there have been periods when they were not highly esteemed, that is because the people of those periods had poor taste.

It cannot be denied that there are works of art which have almost always been greatly admired. (For the sake of the argument one may neglect those times when they were not discussed at all, having been overlooked for some reason or other.) But having admitted that, one faces the question whether the name, *Hamlet*, or the Parthenon, or the *Aeneid*, has always meant the same thing. Physically, the words or the shapes of stone in which they are embodied have changed little, though the little is not without some importance; but the physical basis of these and other works of art is only a small part of them. More important is what people have looked for in them and either found or not found. Thus the *Aeneid* as a Roman epic differs from the *Aeneid* as an instrument of magic, and *Hamlet* as a chivalric tragedy of revenge differs from *Hamlet* as a Freudian drama. It may be argued that the work of art as the artist intended it is the real work of art, and that we should suspend judgment until we have recaptured it in its primitive state. In most cases such a
quest is probably futile, for we often have no way of knowing what an artist intended, and in any event we can, for the most part, only reconstruct what he intended from what we ourselves find. And that is to no small extent dependent upon our education and our original nature. Moreover, to recapture through study an artist’s intention is different from reacting directly to a work of art; and the professor of English literature who, having studied Elizabethan language and customs and theatrical practice and the biography of Shakespeare, reads *Hamlet*, is not psychologically identical with the Elizabethan spectator who went to the theater and saw *Hamlet* during what may be called its lifetime. Whatever else Shakespeare may have been up to, he was certainly not producing plays for professors of English to study three hundred years after his death. We may reasonably conclude that to define the work of art as the work intended by the artist gives us only the slenderest clues to appropriate standards for judging it.

The purpose of this paper is to take one of the works of art which have been most admired until recent times, and to examine briefly what critics or commentators of different periods have said about it. From what they said we hope to be able to infer what they were looking for. We are not so much interested in knowing why they admired the work of art as in knowing what they saw in it. It will be found that in at least this one case the work of art was identical with itself throughout history in name only. We have chosen as our example Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*.

I

The *Mona Lisa*, it should be recalled, is usually considered to be a portrait of the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, painted between 1503 and 1506. There is no conclusive evidence that it was intended as an allegory, though the background does not put that beyond the bounds of possibility.¹ No mention is made of it in the artist’s literary remains, so that we do not know at what the artist himself was aiming. We do, however, know what he thought the proper fashion of representing women was, and that will be pointed out later.

¹ Everything about this famous picture has been disputed. We have accepted the traditional name of the sitter, but A. Venturi in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* maintains that she was Costanza d’Avalos and that the misty background did have allegorical significance. See his section in the article on Leonardo. L. Roger-Milès, in his *Léonard de Vinci et les Jocondes*, 1923, pp. 68 ff., maintains that it is not even a portrait.
Leonardo's contemporaries apparently did not consider the *Mona Lisa* his most important work. Several accounts of Italian painting, written during Leonardo's life or a little later, fail even to mention it. This is true of *Il Libro di Antonio Bili* and of an anonymous work written during the forties of the sixteenth century. Paolo Giovio, writing after Leonardo's death, says simply that he painted the portrait of Mona Lisa, "wife of Francesco del Giocondo, which was bought by King Francis I, it is said, for 4000 scudi." In the short *Vita* he mentions the *Last Supper* and tells the story of Louis XII's desire to cut it out of the wall on which it was painted, and the *Virgin and Saint Anne*, but does not mention the *Mona Lisa*. There is nothing here, except the unusually high price, which is of interest. The same may be said of the comment of Raffaeo Borghini, made in 1584, that the portrait was such *che non puo l'arte far davantaggio*. More to the point is the criticism of Lomazzo, who praises it along with portraits by Raphael and Andrea del Sarto as peculiarly adapted to its subject.

The most influential of the earlier comments on the *Mona Lisa* is that of Vasari, which established a tradition. This paragraph is the best known of the classical statements, and it was apparently the source of most of the anecdotes repeated in later times about the picture. It was first published in 1550, some forty-odd years after the portrait was painted. The passage runs as follows:

> Whoever shall desire to see how far art can imitate nature, may do so to perfection in this head, wherein every peculiarity that could be depicted by the utmost subtlety of the pencil has been faithfully reproduced. The eyes have the lustrous brightness and moisture which is seen in life, and around them are those pale, red, and slightly livid circles, also proper to nature, with the lashes, which can only be copied as they are with the greatest difficulty; the eyebrows also are represented with the closest exactitude, where fuller and where more thinly set, with the separate hairs delineated as they issue from the skin, every turn being followed, and all the pores exhibited in a manner that could not be more natural than it is: the nose, with its beautiful and delicately roseate nostrils, might be easily believed to be alive; the mouth, admirable in its outline, has the lips uniting the rose-tints of

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3 Ibid.
their colour with that of the face, in the utmost perfection, and the carna-
tion of the cheek does not appear to be painted, but truly of flesh and blood: he who looks earnestly at the pit of the throat cannot but believe that he sees the beating of the pulses, and it may be truly said that this work is painted in a manner well calculated to make the boldest master tremble, and astonishes all who behold it, however well accustomed to the marvels of art. Mona Lisa was exceedingly beautiful, and while Leonardo was paint-
ing her portrait, he took the precaution of keeping some one constantly near her, to sing or play on instruments, or to jest and otherwise amuse her, to the end that she might continue cheerful, and so that her face might not exhibit the melancholy expression often imparted by painters to the likeness they take. In this portrait of Leonardo’s on the contrary there is so pleasing an expression, and a smile so sweet, that while looking at it one thinks it rather divine than human, and it has ever been esteemed a wonderful work, since life itself could exhibit no other appearance. 7

There are two important features in this criticism: first, it is Leonardo’s skill that is the subject of admiration, rather than the effect of the picture upon the observer, or the “self-expression” of the artist, or a symbol of something called “the times”; second, the painter’s skill is supposed to be directed towards reproducing a natural object as faithfully as possible.

To think of the artist as a craftsman who learns and applies a technique is, of course, not unusual in the history of criticism. Even the most fervent admirer of Croce would admit that some artists are more skillful technicians than others. But to focus one’s appreciation upon this has been by no means a universal practice among critics. Forgetting, for the purposes of this paper, the past history of such an attitude, as seen, for instance, in the elder Pliny, it is not improbable that technical skill became particularly interesting in the Renaissance, when homo faber began experimenting and inventing as he had not done since Alexandrian days.

But one may praise an artist’s skill and yet not believe that it was oriented towards a reproduction of “nature.” One may admire the exquisite technique of an Odilon Redon, for instance, or a Braque, and say nothing whatsoever about the likeness of its result to anything natural. One may admire the technique of a Byzantine fresco

7 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, tr. by Mrs. Jonathan Foster, London, 1876, II, p. 384 f. It is perhaps worth noting that in the eighteenth century Leonardo was to be blamed by at least one writer for too great fidelity to nature, uncorrected by a study of the antique. See [Dezallier d'Argenville,] *Abrégé de la Vie des plus Fameux Peintres*, 1745, p. 74.
in which the "natural" is almost completely recreated and transformed. The idea that "nature" was of interest and importance in her own right belongs to a period in which men seek to observe facts and record them, and think that observation and record are good in themselves. Vasari, who was himself a painter, is perhaps more sensitive to technical excellence than a critic who has no experience in producing works of art. His own paintings are, like those of most of his contemporaries, admirably skillful in perspective and other tricks of illusion. It is therefore possible, though not probable, that he was simply erecting his own type of skill into a standard for all artists.

It would, however, be sheer pedantry to attempt to prove what everyone knows, namely, that the Renaissance in Italy was marked by an almost religious regard for what later became natural science, and by a delight in the arts which helped man understand the things of nature. 8 The whole matter has been clearly and succinctly told by Burekhardt in his The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, and requires no retelling. But it may be said that the Italians of this period were the first men to rediscover natural beauty, to write biographies again, as the Alexandrians did, to describe in detail the human face and form, to collect strange animals and even strange people. It is in keeping with this taste that the sketch-books of Jacopo Bellini, of Leonardo, of Pisanello, and of their contemporaries are filled with drawings of animals, flowers, clouds, mountains, and other natural things.

But "fidelity to nature" is a notoriously equivocal formula. The multiple meanings of "nature" and its derivatives have been discriminated by A. O. Lovejoy and we shall not attempt to expand upon his treatment of the subject. 9 But we must notice what the phrase meant to Vasari and earlier to Leonardo. In the passage

8 As early as 1493 Bellinecioni had written a sonnet on another portrait by Leonardo, that of Cecilia Gallerani, the mistress of Ludovico Sforza. The sonnet plays upon the rivalry between art and nature and begins,

Di chi ti adiri? A chi invidia Natura?
Al Vinci che ha ritratto une tua stella . . .
(For the whole sonnet, see Le Rime di Bernardo Bellinecioni, ed. by Pietro Fanfani, Bologna, 1878.) The idea is, of course, a literary commonplace and for that very reason of peculiar interest. The portrait, it may be added, seems to have disappeared. A similar idea is found in the Latin verses on a portrait of Lucrezia Crivelli in The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, 1935, II, 394.

quoted from the biographer and critic, one observes that the artist is praised for reproducing the likeness of his sitter as Apelles is said to have reproduced the likeness of his grapes. Just as the birds in the classical instance pecked at the painted grapes, so the observer of the Mona Lisa believes the original to be before him, with beating pulses and living eyes. But before the passage is over one finds that Leonardo is praised also for painting the woman with a pleasant and smiling expression, as she appeared when listening to cheerful music or jesting talk; so that "while looking at it one thinks it rather divine than human."

How much literary exaggeration is expressed in these last words and how much they echo a Neoplatonic strain is hard to tell. Even in Leonardo, whose interest in reproducing natural objects led to those amazing anatomical and botanical and geological drawings, there are Neoplatonic elements. If he says, on the one hand, "Wisdom is the daughter of experience," and backs it up with minutely detailed studies of what he observes, he says on the other, "Nature is full of infinite causes which were never set forth in experience." If he says, "O marvellous Necessity, thou with supreme reason constrainest all effects to be the direct result of their causes, and by a supreme and irrevocable law every natural action obeys thee by the shortest possible process," he also says, "Nature being capricious and taking pleasure in creating and producing a continuous succession of lives and forms . . . ." Which of these Natures he saw as he drew his sketches, there is now no saying. But the probability is that most of his contemporaries saw in the sketches after they were drawn the capriciously creative and fertile Nature rather than the mechanistic and purely geometrical.

For a hundred or more years after Vasari there is little or no mention of the Mona Lisa. According to the French historian, Lemonnier, Leonardo and his Italian confrères who were called to France by Francis I "furent traités avec toutes sortes d'égards et reçurent des appointements en rapport avec leur réputation." There was even circulated the old story that Leonardo died in the King's arms, a story now discredited. But although more of his

10 *Notebooks*, I, 85 and 77, respectively.
11 *Ibid.*, I, 253 and 80 respectively. For a denial of the presence of Neoplatonism in Leonardo, see E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 1939, p. 182. The writer of this paper is preparing a study of "nature" and allied terms in Leonardo.
12 In Lavoisier's *Histoire de France*, V, i, 316.
13 See L. Roger-Miles, *op. cit.*, pp. 15 f. The story, as is well known, dates from the time of Vasari.
authentic pictures belonged to the crown—and now to the French Republic—than to any other single collector, most French writings of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and even eighteenth centuries are silent about him.\(^{14}\) He is not mentioned in the letters of Marguerite d’Angoulême,\(^{15}\) in the works of Rabelais, Montaigne—not even in his *Journal de Voyage*—nor the Pleiade; the courtiers, who might have seen at least the *Mona Lisa*, say nothing that we have been able to discover of either the picture or its author; even Louis Leroy, whose *De la Vicissitude ou variété des choses de l’univers* (1579) lists the painters whose works have raised his times to eminence, omits Leonardo’s name. One possible reason for this is that the *Mona Lisa* belonged to the King and therefore not many people had the chance to see it. But the most famous pictures and sculptures of the time were made familiar to the interested public by engravings, and if Leonardo had captured the imagination of Frenchmen, his works would doubtless have been both known and spoken of, as those of Raphael were.\(^{16}\)

In the middle of the seventeenth century, Leonardo’s name and the *Mona Lisa* emerge once more. Père Dan, who made a catalogue of the works of art at Fontainebleau, calls it the *premier en estime, comme une merveille de la peinture*.\(^{17}\) In whose estimation it ranked first and why it was considered a marvel are not revealed. Félibien, somewhat later, continues the Vasari tradition.

This is one of the most finished of his works. It is said that he took so much pleasure in working on it that he spent four months on it, and that

\(^{14}\) Though Poussin drew the illustrations for the edition of the *Trattato* which appeared in the middle of the seventeenth century, Leonardo was not so highly esteemed as Raphael, for instance, or even some of the lesser painters. *Cf.* A. Fontaine, *Les doctrines d’art en France*, 1909, p. 3.

\(^{15}\) The sister of his great French patron, who, according to Roger-Milès, *op. cit.*, p. 65, is portrayed in Leonardo’s (†) *Marriage of Saint Catherine*.

\(^{16}\) The portrait could only have been seen by persons admitted to the “gilt cabinet” at Fontainebleau, which would have required special permission. It was removed to Versailles by Louis XIV, probably after 1694, the last date on which it appears in the inventories of Fontainebleau (See *La Grande Encyclopédie*, XVIII, p. 950). It was not exhibited in the Louvre until after the Revolution. It does not appear to have been engraved until the nineteenth century. For its history in France, see the catalogue of the Louvre by Georges Lafenestre and Eugène Richtenberger, tr. by B. H. Dausseron, p. 56.

while he was painting this lady there was always someone near her who sang or played some musical instrument, so as to keep her joyful and prevent her from assuming that melancholy air which comes over one easily when one is inactive and motionless.

Truly, said Pymandre, if I may give my opinion, the time which he put into it was well spent, for I have never seen anything more finished or more expressive. There is so much grace and so much sweetness in the eyes and features of this face, that it appears to be alive. When one looks at this portrait, one would say it was a real woman who takes pleasure in being seen.

It is true, I replied, that Leonardo appears to have taken particular care to finish it well. And Francis I considered this picture to be one of the most finished products of this painter, wished to own it, and paid four thousand écus for it.\[18\]

The excellence of Leonardo’s artistry is judged in this passage by its “finish” in the representation of a gentle and sweet woman’s face. The time given to the work, four months, becomes a matter of the greatest interest to subsequent critics, who vary it as they will. Vasari had said that Leonardo “loitered” over it for four years—not months—and then had left it unfinished. Lanzi, pointing out the unfinished state of most of Leonardo’s pictures, continues by saying that the impression of lack of finish is attributable to the artist’s having left certain portions of his pictures less perfectly finished than others. This deficiency, he says, cannot be detected always by the best judges. “The portrait, for instance, of Mona Lisa Gioconda, . . . was minutely examined by Mariette in the collection of the king of France, and was declared to be carried to so high a degree of finish that it was impossible to surpass it.”\[19\] Stendhal passes on the story, saying that the artist “never considered it finished.”\[20\] Delecluze reduces the time to three years.\[21\] The story continues to our own day through Houssaye, the American Moses F. Sweetser,\[20\]


\[19\] Luigi Lanzi, The History of Painting in Italy, tr. by Thomas Roscoe, new ed. rev., 1853. The history was first published in 1789 and was considered for many years authoritative. It was translated and revised by the Reverend G. W. D. Evans in 1848. In translation the passage appears, “the labor of four years, and, after all, left unfinished.” Mariette was the author of the Abecedario de Pierre Jean Mariette, which I have not seen.

\[20\] Hist. de la Peinture en Italie, 1817, I, 223 f.

\[21\] Léonard de Vinci, 1841, p. 29.
his contemporary, Mrs. Charles W. Heaton, Gabriel Séailles, Mantz, Edward McCurdy, E. V. Lucas, and even Elbert Hubbard.  

II

For some three hundred years no one appears to have seen anything mysterious about this painting. It was the portrait of a certain merchant’s wife in a cheerful mood, and what was found extraordinary in it was its fidelity to nature. But a merchant’s wife is still a woman, and women began to occupy a curious position in many early nineteenth-century minds. They had previously been cruel, coquettish, vain, deceitful, gentle, fickle, tender, weak, but they had rarely been enigmatic. On the contrary, men knew them only too well. But the early nineteenth century introduced a new woman into the history of ideas—la femme fatale.

The femme fatale emerged with Romanticism. She was all sensation and feeling, as against masculine rationality. She captured men by her apparent passivity, lying in wait like a fascinating serpent for the flitting bird who was the male. Whether the Romanticists knew it or not, she could trace her ancestry back to the Eve of Philo Judaeus. The Romantic critics, whether they were engaged in interpreting paintings or poetry, treated their works of art as if they were hieroglyphs. Each had a hidden “meaning” which only the initiated could uncover. To be one of the initiated, one must have a peculiar kind of sensitivity, an eye that not merely saw the perceptual screen of things but penetrated to something called the reality behind it. Such metaphors in practice meant that the critic was not to record what he saw, but to let his imagination freely play about the work of art and to report what it constructed.

What Vasari was for the pre-nineteenth century critic, Théophile Gautier and Walter Pater became for their contemporaries and successors. Both started a tradition—in apparent independence of


This is, of course, a commonplace, but see Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, 1933, ch. IV, esp. pp. 243 ff. The reader also would do well to complete what follows in our text by pursuing Mr. Berenson’s suggestion of the influence of Lavater and the other physiognomists. See his The Study and Criticism of Italian Art, 1916, p. 24.
each other—which has not died even to-day. Gautier’s paragraph was the earlier published.

Leonardo da Vinci retained the finesse of the Gothic period while animating it with a spirit entirely modern. . . . The faces of Vinci seem to come from the upper spheres to be reflected in a glass or rather in a mirror of tarnished steel, where their image remains eternally fixed by a secret similar to that of the daguerreotype. We have seen these faces before, but not upon this earth: in some previous existence perhaps, which they recall to us vaguely. How explain otherwise the strange, almost magic charm which the portrait of Mona Lisa has for even the least enthusiastic natures? Is it her beauty? Many faces by Raphael and other painters are more correct. She is no longer even young; her age must be that loved by Balzac, thirty years; through the subtle modelling we divine the beginnings of fatigue, and life’s finger has left its imprint on this peachlike cheek. Her costume, because of the darkening of the pigments, has become almost that of a widow; a crêpe veil falls with the hair along her face; but the expression, wise, deep, velvety, full of promise, attracts you irresistibly and intoxicates you, while the sinuous, serpentine mouth, turned up at the corners, in the violet shadows, mocks you with so much gentleness, grace, and superiority, that you feel suddenly intimidated, like a schoolboy before a duchess. The head with its violet shadows, seen as through black gauze, arrests one’s dreams as one leans on the museum railing before her, haunts one’s memory like a symphonic theme. Beneath the form expressed, one feels a thought which is vague, infinite, inexpressible, like a musical idea. One is moved, troubled, images already seen pass before one’s eyes, voices whose note seems familiar whisper languorous secrets in one’s ears; repressed desires, hopes which drive one to despair stir painfully in the shadow shot with sunbeams; and you discover that your melancholy arises from the fact that la Joconde three hundred years ago greeted your avowal of love with this same mocking smile which she retains even to-day on her lips.24

Here simple fidelity to nature has completely disappeared; the eternal feminine has taken its place. The Mona Lisa is not the portrait of a young woman; she has ripened through experience. She recalls past lives, stirs up repressed desires, mocks you with her smile. At once a new strain enters into French criticism. Whereas the earlier critics had seen sweetness and gentleness, the later began to see something more troubling. Even Taine, who was scarcely a

victim of "the Romantic agony," found the famous smile "doubting, licentious, Epicurean, deliciously tender, ardent, sad," and united it to the smiles of the Saint John, the Saint Anne, and other Vincian smiles.\textsuperscript{25} Houssaye, one of the co-authors of Gautier's book, who was interested enough in facts to write a life of Leonardo, also is captivated by the new mystery. He feels it his duty to bring in her "charm, provocative and ineffable, cruel and divine, sybilline and voluptuous."\textsuperscript{26} This diabolical charm appears also, somewhat intensified, in Charles Blanc and Paul Mantz.

Before a painting so wonderful and so admired, the time which was consumed in painting it is explained either by the fact that the artist experienced the fascination which he has so well expressed, and prolonged as far as possible the sweets of conversation with this charming woman, or that he had difficulty in expressing the proud serenity and restrained provocation of this face whose smile, at certain moments, seems satanic and still magnetises us by its long and voluptuous glances. It seems that after having carried the modelling to the point of the most delicate shading, to imperceptible accents, and thus brought it close to us by palpitating truth, the artist may have desired then to withdraw it into the mystery of half-light, to hold it remote from our gaze by shrouding it in a gauze and to make it appear as a dream amid a wild landscape, against an unbelievable background of little mountains, blue, rocky, pointed, cut from crystal, and like stalactites turned upwards towards the skies.\textsuperscript{27}

All that was lacking now was an explanation of the mysterious charm of this face. The explanation must lie, according to romantic procedure, in the life of the painter, and it was not hard to find reasons for believing that the original Lisa was the mistress of the painter.\textsuperscript{28} Charles Clément told the extraordinary story in full. He noticed, he says, that whereas the men's heads by Leonardo were all individualized, those of the women were all identical. On a panel belonging to the Orleans family was discovered a reclining female whose features were those of \textit{La Gioconda}. In the Fesch Collection and in the Hermitage are two half-length nudes with the same face.


\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Hist. des peintres de toutes les écoles. Ecole Florentine}, 1879. See p. 27 ff. for the full account. It is typical of writers of this school that they will say, "stalactites turned upwards towards the skies" rather than "stalagmites."

\textsuperscript{28} Michelangelo, \textit{Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael}, tr. by Louisa Corhan, (n.d.), pp. 201 ff.; French ed. 1861. A poem on the same theme was produced by M. A. Dolfus and may be found in Houssaye, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 335 ff.
The original Lisa was the third wife of Giocondo—so that her husband must have been much older than she. Leonardo was young, witty and handsome when he painted her. The portrait at which "he worked or pretended to work" for four years never became the property of her husband. Finally, it is from the time when he painted the *Mona Lisa* that the other female heads begin to resemble hers.

As a matter of cold fact it requires no deep observation of Leonardo's portrait to see how little it resembles the Saint Anne and the Saint John and the various Madonnas. The one common character is the smile, but the series of thirty or more archaic maidens in the Acropolis museum in Athens have an identical smile, which they share with many other archaic statues of both men and women. Are we to conclude from this anything except that such smiles were the fashion of the times? Leonardo's saints and other supernatural beings do resemble one another; he gave them a certain "ideal" head. But the portraits attributed to him are individualized. The face of the *Mona Lisa* cannot be said to resemble the face of *La Belle Ferronière*, if that portrait be indeed by him. And neither of them closely resembles his saints.

Pater's famous passage on our painting is of course better known to English readers than Gautier's, and was perhaps the source of most later American and English interpretations of it. Pater suggests more than he states, whether from timidity, ignorance, or critical principle, but one may vaguely discern through his poetic prose that, like Clément, he finds a disconcerting similarity running through all the female heads and, like Gautier, a symbol of metempsychosis. The symbolism, he maintains, is not "crude," but the picture has "a subdued and graceful mystery." He believes that the "unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it," plays over all of Leonardo's work. "From childhood we see this image defining itself on the fabric of his dreams; and but for express historical testimony, we might fancy that this was but his ideal lady, embodied and beheld at last." He suggests a fusion of his dream and the real Mona Lisa. And then follows the purple passage which has been reprinted even in anthologies of poetry. In that face "strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions" are "deposited cell by cell" upon the flesh. "All the thoughts and experiences of the world have been etched and moulded there, in that they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle
age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias.'" Mona Lisa becomes the "fancy of perpetual life," a reincarnation of Leda, Helen, Saint Anne. 29

Few art critics of the nineteenth century, capable of reading Pater, resisted his musical style, and we find dozens of imitators of him in the years that followed the publication of The Renaissance. Mrs. Charles W. Heaton, for instance, saw in the portrait, "a sweet but perplexing poem," and a visible embodiment of "the words of the preacher, 'vanitas vanitatum.'" 30 Mr. Frank Preston Stearns, after a passage on the "meaning" of the smile, dwells upon the sense of mystery in Leonardo's character, which is "expressed without reservation" in this picture. 31 Elbert Hubbard, in one of his Little Journeys, brought in the words of the Preacher, as well as those of Walter Pater, added Cleopatra to Leda, Helen, and Saint Anne, and filled three pages with an eloquent description of a smile which he called " ineffable." 32 Mr. George B. Rose expressed the usual thoughts about the "inscrutability" of the smile, "a smile that is only on the lips, while in the eyes there are unsounded depths. Vainly we question her; like the Sphinx her riddle eludes us still." 33 Mr. Edward McCurdy, after an analysis of the details of the portrait, concludes, "Thus, on the very confines of fantasy, and girt

29 Walter Pater, The Renaissance, 1st ed., 1873. The essay itself was first published in the Fortnightly Review, Nov. 1869, pp. 494 ff. Donald A. Stauffer, in an interesting article, Monna Melancholia (Sewanee Review, XI, 89 ff.) gives reasons for believing that Pater had never seen the original of the Mona Lisa and had superimposed Dürer's Melancholy I upon it in his memory. For intimations of an influence of Gautier on Pater through Swinburne, called to my attention by Professor Meyer Schapiro, see Louise Rosenblatt, L'Idée de l'art pour l'art etc., 1931, p. 195.

30 Leonardo da Vinci and his Works, 1874, p. 52.

31 The Midsummer of Italian Art, 1895, p. 60. Though the Notebooks had not as yet been published when Mr. Stearns's book appeared, the Treatise on Painting alone might have shown him that Leonardo was enamored more of precision and clarity than of mystery.

32 Little Journeys to the Homes of Eminent Artists, X, no. 2, pp. 46-50, (Feb. 1902). Hubbard's opinion of the picture may not seem important; but he was considered a great authority on "culture" by the general public of his day. The circulation of his Little Journeys was always large and his writings must have been the source of the aesthetic ideas of many unschooled Americans.

33 The World's Leading Painters, 1912, p. 50. In a similar vein Laura Spencer Porter conveyed to the ladies of America the "meaning" of the Mona Lisa in the Woman's Home Companion, April, 1914, (XLI, p. 54.)
about with suggestions of strange lights and furtive shadows, he has created in this portrait of Madonna Lisa, third wife of a Florentine official, a myth of the embodiment of which men dream as of the eternal enigma of womanhood.” 34

III

From Gautier and Pater, as is clear, runs a tradition which is the very opposite of that started by Vasari. Whereas the Italian biographer and critic chiefly saw in the Mona Lisa a wonderful technical feat, the reproduction of a natural object, the French and English “aesthetes” saw it as a hieroglyph which required not simply contemplation but deciphering. It would appear to have become second nature to think of a picture—at least of this picture—as something of a rebus, a symbol whose meaning could be discovered only by a critic’s intuition. That this school of writers attributed their theory of artistry to the artists whose works interested them need surprise no one. Critics are in the habit of reading an artist’s mind.

This habit became strengthened when the psychology of Sigmund Freud achieved popularity. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been noteworthy, among other things, for a peculiar paradox: a combination of great scientific accomplishment with anti-intellectualism. Early in the former century, Schopenhauer began to argue that the understanding was created by the will to serve its own ends, an argument which he sought to deduce from Kantian principles. These ends, however, were not those of Kant’s Practical Reason; they were, on the contrary, purely biological; and it was easy for Schopenhauer’s successors to identify them with sexual ends. An artist, according to Freud, is a man whose sexual frustrations are released symbolically in pictures or statues or other works of art. Appetites which would never pass the Censor if expressed in their true nature, are permitted to appear in disguise.

As is well known, according to this theory the fundamental appetite of the human male is his love for his mother, known as the Oedipus Complex. Since incest in most Occidental society is not encouraged, the Oedipus Complex can only be released through art,

34 Leonardo da Vinci, 1904, pp. 115 f. It is interesting to observe that James Jackson Jarves, the American collector and critic, who alone of the writers cited—and many others not cited—knew the Italian painters of the Renaissance intimately, was almost unique in his time in continuing the Vasari tradition rather than what we have called the Romantic. See his Art Studies of the Old Masters of Italy, 1861, I, p. 400.
and hence a Freudian critic will be likely to see in a picture a symbol of the artist's passion for his mother. Here, it will be observed, the critic assumes that the artist is not communicating something to the observer—he is really concealing something from the observer—but unconsciously expressing something of himself. When this something is revealed, it does not mean that the picture will be liked any the more; no standard of aesthetic judgment is implied in the psychoanalysis of a work of art. But it is clear that what mainly interests a Freudian, in any such work, will be the discovery of the unconscious motive. Freud’s interpretation follows.

It was quite possible that Leonardo was fascinated by the smile of Mona Lisa because it had awakened something in him which had slumbered in his soul for a long time, in all probability an old memory. This memory was of sufficient importance to stick to him once it had been aroused; he was forced continually to provide it with new expression. The assurance of Pater that we can see an image like that of Mona Lisa defining itself from Leonardo’s childhood on the fabric of his dreams, seems worthy of belief and deserves to be taken literally.

Vasari mentions as Leonardo’s first artistic endeavors, “heads of women who laugh.” The passage, which is beyond suspicion, as it is not meant to prove anything, reads more precisely as follows: “He formed in his youth some laughing feminine heads out of lime, which have been reproduced in plaster, and some heads of children, which were as beautiful as if modeled by the hands of a master. . . .”

Thus we discover that his practice of art began with the representation of two kinds of objects, which would perforce remind us of the two kinds of sexual objects which we have inferred from the analysis of his vulture phantasy. If the beautiful children’s heads were reproductions of his own childish person, then the laughing women were nothing else but reproductions of Caterina, his mother, and we are beginning to have an inkling of the possibility that his mother possessed that mysterious smile which he lost, and which fascinated him so much when he found it again in the Florentine lady. . . .

Not only is Freud able to construct a part of the hidden life of Leonardo from the Mona Lisa, he is also able to build up the life of the artist’s mother. Since she was not married to Piero da Vinci, she was forced to “compensate herself for not having a husband.”

35 According to Vasari, the smile had to be artificially produced and preserved.
36 Sigmund Freud, Leonardo da Vinci, 1916, pp. 85 ff. There is no objective evidence that Caterina resembled Lisa, in smile or otherwise.
In the manner of all ungratified mothers she thus took her little son in place of her husband, and robbed him of a part of his virility by the too early maturing of his eroticism. . . . When in the prime of his life Leonardo re-encountered that blissful and ecstatic smile as it had once encircled his mother's mouth in caressing, he had long been under the ban of an inhibition forbidding him ever again to desire such tenderness from women's lips. But as he had become a painter he endeavored to reproduce this smile with his brush and burnish all his pictures with it, whether he executed them himself or whether they were done by his pupils under his directions, as in Leda, John, and Bacchus. 37

The way was now open for further embroidering on this psychological background, and critics were not slow to follow it. Pictures became clues to the subconscious labyrinths of an artist's mind. Regardless of the fact that this particular picture seemed to have been painted as a portrait, which might lead one to suppose that its appearance was to a large extent determined by the attributes of the woman who sat for it, its main interest was now held to lie in what it could tell us about the man who made it. This shift in critical attention was the kind of reversal of opinion best illustrated in the Hegelian dialectic. Whereas in Vasari the picture was considered with reference to its closeness to the objective world of nature, in Freud it is considered as a disclosure of the most intimately subjective world, the so-called Unconscious. But since the world which it reveals can be known only by means of a theory which is applied to the particular object, rather than one which has been deduced from it, the critic has only to make up his mind what was in the artist's Unconscious and then discover it spread out before him in the picture.

One finds a still more remarkable example of this in the volume written on our artist by Rachel Amann Taylor, Leonardo the Florentine. For her the Mona Lisa is a phase in Leonardo's transition from concealment to avowal of his homosexuality. It is, she says, 38 "as if he were afraid to see his Narcissus except in a disguise." Presumably when he painted his Saint John, he was no longer ashamed to see his Narcissus. But even if he were not, it is hardly likely that he painted the picture in order to inform the world that he had conquered his shame. This becomes doubly true if one accepts the Freudian theory that art is always a symbolical rather than a literal satisfaction of repressions.

37 Ibid., p. 91 ff.
38 Rachel Amann Taylor, Leonardo the Florentine, 1927, esp. pp. 350-354. Only one who has gone through the whole of this book can get its full flavor.
THE MONA LISA IN THE HISTORY OF TASTE

Happily, we are not engaged in an examination of Freudianism. Our purpose is simply to indicate how it reoriented aesthetic comment on this picture in the twentieth century. A writer now feels it possible to assume that a painter is painting for himself rather than for an observer, and that, if an observer should present himself before a picture, he should find in it what the artist himself concealed in it. But since only initiated Freudians know what is concealed in pictures, the uninitiated observer fails to see what the picture really is, or "means." He is in the position of a European ignorant of Chinese looking at Chinese characters and thinking they are merely patterns.

If the *Mona Lisa* at the present time is considered old-fashioned, that is probably to be attributed more to the writings of the Gautier-Pater school than to those of the psycho-analysts. Leonardo himself is far from old-fashioned; but it is now the scientific and philosophical Leonardo rather than the artistic. This paper is not concerned with the decline of interest in the painting, but we may be permitted to suggest that M. Paul Valéry is probably right in saying that the association of "mystery" with the picture has had more influence than any other one thing in disgusting people with it.39

The tendency in the criticism of painting from about 1910 to the beginning of sur-realism has been technical. It has consisted largely in studies of form, color, drawing. Only since Marxian criticism became fashionable has there been much attention paid to subject-matter. But in such criticism little is said of adequacy of representation—fidelity to "nature"; the critic is concerned only with the "social significance" of the work of art. Hence to such critics, the *Mona Lisa* would have no great interest, unless, perhaps, as an illustration of the rise of the middle class, for the lady so carefully portrayed was probably a *bourgeois*.

It may not be inappropriate to terminate with a celebrated passage from the artist's note-books about the portraiture of women.

"Women," Leonardo says, "should be represented in modest attitudes with legs close together, arms folded, and their heads low and bending sideways." The head of La Gioconda is not bending sideways, but otherwise the precept appears to be carried out in the painting. Add to it the memorandum on the importance of painting faces in a nebulous light, and you begin to have a clue to his method of portraiture. This will throw no light on what is "expressed" by the picture, nor is that, fortunately, our affair. We know that Leonardo was attracted by chiaroscuro and busy with the means of utilizing it. We may fittingly leave to psychiatrists the problem why such things interested him.

Our purpose in this paper has been merely to show how a given work of art may in different periods have essentially different content—and therefore be admired for different, if not for contradictory, reasons. If this instance is typical, it would appear that works of art which "withstand the test of time" change their natures as the times change. The work of art becomes thus the locus of a new set of values determined by the preconceptions or the predominant interest of the new critic or observer.

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