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Did Leonardo give 'Mona Lisa' a younger sister?

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She has the most-photographed, most-reproduced, and the most-parodied face in the world. And yet, when many of the six million people who go to visit her each year get to see her “in the flesh”, they find they are strangely disappointed. Her smile is famous, and her eyes are said to follow you around the room, but the best the former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev could say about her was that she was “a plain, sensible-looking woman”. So what is so appealing about the Mona Lisa? And what might happen if it were discovered that she has a little sister?



The Mona Lisa that currently hangs in the Louvre in Paris vs the Isleworth or Earlier Version Mona Lisa

The Mona Lisa that hangs in the Louvre in Paris was painted by Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci between 1503 and 1519, in oil paint on a panel of poplar wood – or was it? The histories, myths and speculations that wrap around the relatively small (just 77cm by 53cm) painting are enough to fill a Dan Brown novel. Is it a portrait of Lisa Gherardini, the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, or of Isabella of Naples, Caterina Sforza, or even da Vinci himself? Some say the Louvre painting is a fake, a substitution made following the theft of the Mona Lisa by Louvre employee and house painter Vincenzo Peruggia, in 1911. After she disappeared, crowds queued to see the empty space where the painting had hung. Still others say that the painting was not begun in 1503 and that there are in fact two paintings. The earlier version, known as the Isleworth Mona Lisa (it was in the Isleworth home of art collector Hugh Blaker) was painted on canvas, and now resides in Geneva. It is owned by an anonymous consortium, and in the care of a foundation vice-chaired by Irishman David Feldman, a graduate of Trinity College Dublin.

You might think the idea of a second Mona Lisa would be exciting for the art world, and the putative earlier version is undeniably beautiful, showing a figure in the same pose, but perhaps 20 years younger than the one that hangs in Paris. And yet the Isleworth painting has received an at times hostile and derisive reception.

The Huffington Post’s Simon Hewitt chose to focus on how the chair of the foundation, Markus Frey, was “chomping on a fat cigar” at a recent press conference, and Martin Kemp, emeritus professor of art history at Oxford University, issued statements dismissing the foundation’s claims.

There is a strong sense that the earlier version might be better received if it was to have come fresh from some magnificent English stately home (in fact it did, back in 1913), or if the advisers to the foundation didn’t consist of an unconventional crew, including the Russian chess grandmaster Anatoly Karpov and the world traveller and writer Kildare Dobbs. Feldman describes the foundation and its advisers as a group of friends and like-minded people willing to take the project on. The foundation itself is not-for-profit, although overshadowing this spirit of adventure is the fact that if the painting were to be authenticated, its value would be astronomical.

David Feldman’s background is in stamp collecting, and he left Ireland “when I married a Swiss . . . Why stamps? Because I was always interested in small things of big value. But I could never have dreamed of this. This is the absolute epitome.”

Feldman’s interest in stamps grew into a business, which made him the third-largest auctioneer of stamps in the world, although he also handled paintings, and made record prices in the late 1980s for works by Chagall and Picasso.



There had been previous attempts to launch the earlier version of the Mona Lisa, notably in the 1960s, when Henry F Pulitzer sold his Kensington home and its contents in order to buy the painting. But art authentication is an inexact science, and even works of a far more recent vintage have been causing problems. The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation, which authenticates and certifies works attributed to the Californian artist, who died in 1993, has had to increase its liability insurance after legal writs were issued by three owners of paintings that had been refused authentication.

The once-mighty Andy Warhol Foundation dissolved its authentication board last year, following a \$7 million (€5.1m) bill over a lawsuit regarding an authentication refusal. The estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Keith Haring Foundation have also ceased certifying paintings.

The art world is just as susceptible to the cult of celebrity as those of fashion, TV and tabloid media. “Who” has overtaken “what” when it comes to making judgments of value and aesthetics. So, when it comes to the earlier version of the Mona Lisa, and given the 500-year gap in history, what can we know?

The supporting evidence

Contemporaneous accounts appear to point to two distinct commissions of portraits of the Mona Lisa: one ordered by del Giocondo, and described by Renaissance art chronicler Giorgio Vasari; and another by Giuliano de' Medici, alluded to in a letter from Pietro da Novellara to Isabella d'Este in 1515. Da Vinci is known to have painted multiple versions of some works – The Virgin of the Rocks, and The Virgin and the Child with St Anne, for example. There are otherwise no known examples existing of Leonardo painting on canvas. A Raphael sketch, clearly drawn from the Mona Lisa, and dated 1504, has more in common with the earlier version in composition than with the Louvre Mona Lisa.

All this is outlined in an exceptionally glossy book, published by the foundation, and written half in the style of scientific analysis, and half as a rather pacy historical thriller. “Nasty comments” fly around the Florentine courts, while Michelangelo and Raphael steal the “plum artistic commissions”. Da Vinci's friend Niccolò Machiavelli sums up the atmosphere with his insight on how to get ahead in politics: “For sometime now I have never said what I believe nor ever believed what I said; and if indeed I do sometimes tell the truth, I hide it behind so many lies that it is hard to find.”

David Feldman, frustrated by responses to the scientific and academic studies, has decided to try the painting in the court of public opinion. After all, the Louvre Mona Lisa only achieved its full fame following its theft – in the 19th century, the museum's star attraction was Raphael's La Fornarina. “How could we ever get it authenticated?” wonders Feldman, considering the suspicion surrounding their efforts, and also what is at stake.

There may be another reason why there is such a reluctance to embrace a second Mona Lisa, one which is hinted at by Andy Warhol's 1963 *Thirty Are Better Than One*, and explored more fully by psychoanalyst Darian Leader in his 2002 book *Stealing the Mona Lisa*.

Warhol's multiple portrait shows how in art it is uniqueness that matters, and how less is most definitely more. Leader goes on to explore how, following its theft and subsequent recovery two years later, the Mona Lisa took on the ultimate role of mythic, unattainable symbol, “sublime and inaccessible”. The mysterious La Gioconda would be somehow diminished by the discovery that there are, in fact, two of her.

Part of what is so interesting about this other version is that we cannot know for sure. Is the painting beautiful? Undeniably. Is it from the right period? Yes. Has any reason been discovered why it definitively is not by Leonardo da Vinci? No. Can it have the aura, the mythological status of the Louvre Mona Lisa? Well, perhaps it needs to go on a few adventures first.