

AUTHENTICATION

IN ART

AiA Art News-service

NEW YORK POST

The real-life scandal and shame behind Mona Lisa's smile

By [Larry Getlen](#)

August 27, 2017 | 10:26am | [Updated](#)



Mona Lisa was famously unable to conjure up a fully joyous smile for Leonardo da Vinci. Perhaps that's because she was married off to a slave trader at the age of 15.

In "[Mona Lisa: The People and The Painting](#)" (Oxford University Press), authors Martin Kemp and Giuseppe Pallanti reveal the lives of Lisa Gherardini — the painting's real-life Mona Lisa — and others involved in the work. Her husband, they write, was a prominent Florentine businessman named Francesco del Giocondo, who was likely involved in the trading of female slaves.



Leonardo da Vinci

Gherardini was born in Florence in June 1479. At the time, girls were often married off young to older men, and del Giocondo was a wealthy 30-year-old merchant and widower in 1495 when he married the teenage Gherardini.

Throughout his life and for generations before, del Giocondo and his family kept slave girls to serve as maids.

“Since his childhood,” the authors write, “Francesco had lived side by side with some female slaves who had converted to Christianity, bought by his father, and after [his father’s] death it was his responsibility to find new ones. Sometimes he bought more slaves than he needed.”

The authors note that del Giocondo “bought them regularly.” Combined with the sheer number of “converted girls” he associated with, it seems likely, they write, that “he took part in the slave trade.”

The authors reel off a list of young girls del Giocondo had baptized, noting that there were simply too many of them for all to have served in his household. At one point, he baptized three “Moorish women” from North Africa and gave them new names.

“They could not have all remained in his household,” the authors write. “Three were too many and one or all of them would have been sold on.”

That said, Lisa Gherardini went on to live the life of an upper-class woman, albeit one filled with the normal hardships of the time, as well as some scandal.

Gherardini became pregnant for the first time soon after her wedding, eventually giving birth to six children, three sons and three daughters, by 1505. Her second child, a daughter named Piera, died at the age of 2, while another died in infancy.

It is unclear how da Vinci came into contact with Gherardini, but it is known that the artist’s father was a lawyer and Lisa’s husband was one of his clients. In 1503, the master painter started on a portrait of the woman who would be his most famous subject.

Her husband’s riches kept her in “an impressive wardrobe and plenty of jewelry,” although you wouldn’t know it from her portrait, which has her adorned in a bizarre array of conflicting outfits for the time, suggesting that da Vinci took liberties with her clothing in order to enhance the painting’s visual power.

Over the next decade, da Vinci spent time perfecting his portrait while Gherardini went on to lead a colorful life.

While less endowed families at the time often sentenced their daughters to live as nuns in order to avoid paying vast dowries, the wealthy del Giocondos sent their two surviving daughters to the convent, even though they could afford to pay off future husbands.

Camilla, the couple's third child, took the vows at age 12, going by Sister Beatrice in the same nunnery as Gherardini's two sisters, Sister Camilla and Sister Alessandra.

As it happened, Sister Camilla would prove a poor role model for her niece, as a year later, she became involved in scandal. A public accusation alleged that "On 20 April 1512, four men, armed and carrying a ladder, went to the convent of San Domenico, and having climbed the wall, reached certain small windows, where two nuns were waiting for them . . . they touched the breasts of said nuns and fondled other parts of their bodies, not to mention other indecencies."

The accusation against Sister Camilla and another nun — in addition to two others who were supposedly "watching with rapt attention, their eyes filled with similar desire" — went to trial. The men involved were found guilty, and the women were absolved.

Lisa was almost involved in a sex scandal of her own, when two men from the powerful Medici family — of whom del Giocondo was a prominent supporter — supposedly made efforts to "tempt the honor of Gherardini," who rejected them.

As the story made the rounds, instead of being angered that two associates made a play for his wife, del Giocondo was concerned about what her rejection of the men would mean for his relationship with the Medicis. He appealed to them, confirming his support, and they assured him the relationship was sound. Between themselves, however, they mocked del Giocondo's weakness.

Da Vinci died in 1519, and the painting remained unfinished and was never exhibited during his life.

After falling ill in her 60s, Gherardini spent her later years in the convent (which often housed the sick), and died on July 14, 1542. She died in obscurity. The unfinished masterpiece, "Mona Lisa" — or "Madame Lisa" — wouldn't make her an icon until centuries after her passing.

By 1550, the portrait somehow wound up in the collection of King Francis I of France, and was at some point displayed early on in the Louvre, although Napoleon loved the painting so much, he took it from the museum in 1800 to hang in his bedroom. He returned it in 1804.

As the years passed, word about the beauty of the painting spread. In 1857, the legendary novelist, poet and critic Théophile Gautier sang its praises in an essay, stating: “You discover that your melancholy arises from the fact that [Mona Lisa], three hundred years ago, greeted your avowal of love with the same mocking smile which she retains even today on her lips.”

Nowadays, perched high in a room at the Louvre behind bulletproof glass, “Mona Lisa” is the most valued painting in the world, her secretive smile luring millions of visitors to the museum each year. “Eighty percent of the people only want to see the Mona Lisa,” former Louvre director Henri Loyrette told the New York Times. But Lisa Gherardini isn’t giving anything away.