

## High Renaissance

### **Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519)**

#### **Important Works**

'Adoration of the Magi', c 1470 –Florence

'Virgin of the Rocks', 1483 – Milan

'The Last Supper', 1495-7- Milan

'Madonna, Child and St. Anne', after 1499- Florence

'St. John the Baptist' - Florence

'Mona Lisa', 1503- Florence

#### **The Last Supper (1495-1498)**

- The last supper the refectory of the Milanese monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie – while eating the monks were reminded of what could be described as the most important meal ever.
- The mural is in poor condition, because rather than painting on wet plaster, the traditional technique for a fresco, Leonardo waited until the plaster was dry. He preferred to work slowly.
- Already in 1517- less than 20 years after its completion- the paint was starting to peel. It has been restored many times.
- The painting depicts Christ and his 12 apostles at the moment when Christ says 'One of you will betray me'.
- They are arranged in four groups of three in pyramid arrangements. Bartholomew, James and Andrew on the far left, and Judas, Peter and John closer in- at Jesus' right hand. On the other side are Thomas, James the great and Philip, with Matthew, Thaddeus and Simon Zelotes closing the composition on the right.
- The twelve apostles are arranged as four groups of three and there are also three windows. The number three is often a reference to the Holy Trinity in Catholic art.
- Christ is the focal point of the painting, he is at the vanishing point of the perspective, physically and psychologically separated from the apostles.
- The balanced composition is anchored by an equilateral triangle formed by Christ's body. He sits below an arching pediment that if completed, traces a circle that would perfectly enclose the triangle. These ideal geometric forms refer to the renaissance interest in Neo-Platonism. Geometry, used by the Greeks to express Heavenly perfection, has been used by Leonardo to celebrate Christ as the embodiment of heaven on earth.
- The composition is artificial, 13 people at supper would sit on either side of the

table.

- Christ's hands are reaching for the bread and the wine – two separate moments.
- The lively debate among the apostles represents a third moment. There is tension and contrast. While Christ remains calm and divine.
- You can nearly recognise the figures thoughts from their gestures and expressions.
- Judas is shying away, clutching a bag containing thirty pieces of silver, his fee as a traitor. With his other hand he reaches for the same cup as Jesus, Jesus says "But behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table" (Luke 22.21)
- Leonardo rendered a verdant landscape beyond the windows. Often interpreted as paradise, it has been suggested that this heavenly sanctuary can only be reached through Christ.



*The Last Supper, (1495-1498) Convent of Santa Maria Delle Grazie*

### Stats:

Number of years after its completion that deterioration was noted: 18

Number of bombs that have hit the refectory: 1

Number of years needed to complete the recent conservation project: 22

Number of years that Leonardo needed to complete the painting: 4

Number of research studies produced during conservation project: 60

Number of hours spent on the conservation project: 50,000

Percentage of the surface that is lost: 17.5

Percentage of the surface painted during the seven previous restorations: 40

Percentage of the surface that was painted by Leonardo: 42.5

### Mona Lisa (1503-05)

- This was a portrait of a woman sitting on a chair on a balcony.
- Only the wealthiest people had their likeness captured. A portrait was about more than likeness, it spoke to status and position. In addition, portraits generally took a long time to paint, and the subject would commonly have to sit for hours or days,

while the artist captured their likeness.

- The *Mona Lisa* is likely a portrait of the wife of a Florentine merchant (She is Lisa Gherardini, the wife of a wealthy silk merchant, Francesco del Giocondo.) and so her gaze would have been meant for her husband. For some reason however, the portrait was never delivered to its patron, and Leonardo kept it with him when he went to work for Francis I, the King of France.
- The *Mona Lisa's* mysterious smile has inspired many writers, singers, and painters.
- In the early renaissance portraits were done with the sitter in strict full profile with Leonardo's portrait, the face is nearly frontal, the shoulders are turned three-quarters toward the viewer, and the hands are included in the image. Leonardo uses his characteristic sfumato (Italian word for smoke)—a smokey haziness, to soften outlines and create an atmospheric effect around the figure. He also uses Chiaroscuro with this.
- When a figure is in profile, we have no real sense of who she is, and there is no sense of engagement. With the face turned toward us, however, we get a sense of the personality of the sitter.
- Below there is a landscape depicting hills, a winding road and a bridge. The colours in the background show Leonardo's knowledge of the effect of distance and weather on colours. Here he uses atmospheric perspective.
- Humankind was a subject worthy of study, how they look, feel and react.



*Mona Lisa, (between 1503-1506), Louvre Museum*

### **Later Life**

Leonardo spent his later life studying mathematics and science. Leonardo left Milan when it was invaded by French troops in 1500. He returned to Florence and then Rome in the hope of getting work from the Pope. However the Pope was more interested in Raphael and Michelangelo his old rival. Leonardo's work was seen as anti Christian and was forced to leave Italy. He died in 1519 in the court of the King of France where he found refuge. His influence on Raphael and other artists was decisive in the development of 16<sup>th</sup> century art and continued in the generations of artists that followed.

### Key Words to Use

- Pyramid composition
- Perspective
- Atmospheric perspective
- Sfumato
- Chiaroscuro
- Expressions and gestures

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