

The Da Vinci Code



Despite her monumental reputation, the *Mona Lisa* was a mere thirty-one inches by twenty-one inches — smaller even than the posters of her sold in the Louvre gift shop. Painted on a poplar wood panel, her ethereal, mist-filled atmosphere was attributed to Da Vinci's mastery of the *sfumato* style, in which forms appear to evaporate into one another.

Since taking up residence in the Louvre, the *Mona Lisa* or *La Joconde* had been stolen twice, most recently in 1911. Parisians wept in the streets and wrote newspaper articles begging the thieves for the painting's return. Two years later, the *Mona Lisa* was discovered hidden in the false bottom of a trunk in a Florence hotel room.

The *Mona Lisa's* status as the most famous piece of art in the world, Langdon knew, had nothing to do with her enigmatic smile. Nor was it due to the mysterious interpretations attributed her by many art historians. Quite simply, the *Mona Lisa* was famous because Leonardo da Vinci claimed she was his finest accomplishment. He carried the painting with him whenever he travelled and, if asked why, would reply that he found it hard to part with his most sublime expression of female beauty.

Even so, many art historians suspected Da Vinci's reverence for the *Mona Lisa* had nothing to do with its artistic mastery. In actuality, the painting was a surprisingly ordinary *sfumato* portrait. Da Vinci's veneration for this work, many claimed, stemmed from something far deeper: a hidden message in the layers of paint. The *Mona Lisa* was, in fact, one of the world's most documented inside jokes. The painting's playful allusions had been revealed in most art history tomes, and yet, incredibly, the public at large still considered her smile a great mystery. *No mystery at all*, Langdon thought, moving forward and watching as the faint outline of the painting began to take shape. *No mystery at all*.

Most recently Langdon had shared the *Mona Lisa's* secret with a rather unlikely group—a dozen inmates at the Essex County Penitentiary. Langdon's jail seminar was part of a Harvard program attempting to bring education into the prison system—*Culture for Convicts*, as Langdon's colleagues liked to call it.

Standing at an overhead projector in a darkened penitentiary library, Langdon had shared the *Mona Lisa's* secret with the prisoners attending class, men whom he found surprisingly engaged—rough, but sharp. "You may notice," Langdon told them, walking up to the projected image of the *Mona Lisa* on the

library wall, "that the background behind her face is uneven." Langdon motioned to the glaring discrepancy. "Da Vinci painted the horizon line on the left significantly lower than the right. This is a little trick Da Vinci played. By lowering the countryside on the left, Da Vinci made Mona Lisa look much larger from the left side than from the right side. A little Da Vinci inside joke. Historically, the concepts of male and female have assigned sides—left is female, and right is male. Because Da Vinci was a big fan of feminine principles, he made Mona Lisa look more majestic from the *left* than the right."

"I heard he was a fag," said a small man with a goatee.

Langdon winced. "Historians don't generally put it quite that way, but yes, Da Vinci was a homosexual."

"Is that why he was into that whole feminine thing?"

"Actually, Da Vinci was in tune with the *balance* between male and female. He believed that a human soul could not be enlightened unless it had both male and female elements."

"Hey, Mr. Langford," a muscle-bound man said. "Is it true that the *Mona Lisa* is a picture of Da Vinci in drag? I heard that was true."

"It's quite possible," Langdon said. "Da Vinci was a prankster, and computerized analysis of the *Mona Lisa* and Da Vinci's self-portraits confirm some startling points of congruency in their faces. Whatever Da Vinci was up to," Langdon said, "his Mona Lisa is neither male nor female. It is a fusing of both. Da Vinci left a big clue that the painting was supposed to be androgynous. Has anyone here ever heard of an Egyptian god named Amon?"

"Hell yes!" the big guy said. "God of masculine fertility!"

"Well done. And do you know who Amon's counterpart was? The Egyptian *goddess* of fertility?"

The question met with several seconds of silence.

"It was Isis," Langdon told them, grabbing a grease pen. "So we have the male god, Amon." He wrote it down. "And the female goddess, Isis, whose ancient pictogram was once called L'ISA."

Langdon finished writing and stepped back from the projector.

"MONA LISA"

"Mona Lisa..." somebody gasped.

Langdon nodded. "Gentlemen, not only does the face of Mona Lisa look androgynous, but her name is an anagram of the divine union of male and female. And *that*, my friends, is Da Vinci's little secret, and the reason for Mona Lisa's knowing smile."

After Dan Brown

EXERCISES

1. Match the words with their definitions.

1. Androgynous	a) a person or thing that has the same purpose or does the same job as another in a different system;
2. Congruency	b) a thing having the same size and shape as another;
3. Counterpart	c) a person who plays pranks;
4. Drag	d) having both male and female characteristics;
5. Goatee	e) a prison, especially in the US;
6. Penitentiary	f) the clothing of one sex worn by the other;
7. Prankster	g) a little pointed beard on the bottom of the chin, like the hair on a male goat's chin.

2. Find the sentences with similar meanings in the text. Put the sentences into the correct order according to the text.

- 1) Da Vinci said that the *Mona Lisa* was his best work.
- 2) Da Vinci tried to find the balance between male and female.
- 3) The *Mona Lisa* is a portrait of Da Vinci in a dress.
- 4) The *Mona Lisa's* face is androgynous.
- 5) The painting has a mysterious smile.
- 6) Da Vinci said it was difficult for him to part with the *Mona Lisa*.

3. Read and say if the statements are true or false.

- 1) The *Mona Lisa* is not very large in size.
- 2) It is painted on a canvas.
- 3) Da Vinci's reverence for the *Mona Lisa* is connected with the artist's mastery.
- 4) Langdon gave the prisoners a lecture on the *Mona Lisa's* secret.
- 5) Da Vinci thought that a human soul could not be enlightened unless it had both male and female characteristics.
- 6) The *Mona Lisa* and Da Vinci's self-portraits don't show the congruency in their faces.

4. Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- 1) Why did Da Vinci carry the painting with him whenever he travelled?
- 2) Why did Da Vinci paint the horizon line on the left significantly lower than the right?
- 3) What is the main idea of Da Vinci's principles?
- 4) What new information did you get from the text?

TedTalk: XDRTB by James Nachtwey

I WATCH THE VIDEO at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0B2q-7jSJI>

II WATCH THE VIDEO AGAIN. RETELL THE VIDEO STORY TO A PERSON WHO HAS NEVER SEEN THE VIDEO.

III WRITE A 150-WORD COMPOSITION AS AN ANSWER TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

How can I use my art to draw people's attention to some of the most concerning world issues (e.g. poverty, diseases, violence, terrorism, wars, inequality, human trafficking, child molestation, animal abuse, climate change, pollution, etc.)?