

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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## THE PORTRAIT OF MONA LISA

("LA GIOCONDA")

The "Mona Lisa," the masterpiece of Leonardo da Vinci, is the most precious work of art in the Louvre collection. The mysterious smile of Mona Lisa and her spiritual beauty have made this painting perhaps the most famous in the world.

It is the portrait of a young woman, Mona Lisa, born in 1479 in Florence and married in 1495 to Francesco di Zanobi del Giocondo (hence the name "La Gioconda"). The portrait, perhaps commissioned by Giuliano de' Medici, was painted in Florence around 1503-1506, when Mona Lisa was about 25 years old.

The "Mona Lisa" was purchased by the French King, Francis I, for 4,000 gold ducats, either from da Vinci himself or, after the artist's death, from da Vinci's heir, Francesco Melzi. It is believed that the painting was hung at the Château de Cloux near Amboise, along with da Vinci's "Virgin and St. Anne" and "Saint John the Baptist"--both of which are also at the Louvre--during the last years of da Vinci's life, when he was living in France. The "Mona Lisa" was at Fontainebleau in 1550 and left that palace only to go to Versailles in 1695 and then to the Louvre in 1706.

The portrait has been at the Louvre since the eighteenth century and has left it only twice. The first time was the theft of the "Mona Lisa" from the Louvre in August 1911 by an Italian laborer, V. Peruggia. The painting was found again in Florence in November 1913 by an art collector and returned to France on December 29, 1913. The second occasion was during World War II when, for reasons of safety, the "Mona Lisa" was removed from the Louvre and hidden in various French châteaux until the end of the fighting.

The permanent home of the "Mona Lisa" is the Grande Galerie in the Louvre, which is perhaps the largest exhibition hall for art work in the world and where the masterpieces of the Louvre collection are shown. The portrait is displayed in a golden oak frame from the Renaissance period, against a red velvet background and between two marble columns. Facing the "Mona Lisa" across the hall is a

portrait of King Francis I by Titian.

The portrait of Mona Lisa itself is approximately 30 inches high and 21 inches wide. It is painted on a single panel of Italian poplar wood. It is in a good state of preservation and has not been either retouched or altered. However, the "Mona Lisa" is particularly sensitive to changes in humidity, and the atmosphere of the Grande Galerie is quite constant, with only slow variations in temperature and humidity. The painting is protected by a very thick sheet of glass.

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Leonardo da Vinci was born on April 14, 1452 in the small village of Vinci in Italy to the family of a Florentine lawyer. He was not only a great painter and sculptor, but also an architect, musician, mechanical engineer and natural philosopher.

Da Vinci's first contact with the French Court was in 1494, during the Italian wars. He was then 42 years old. In 1499 the troops of the French King, Louis XII, entered Milan, and da Vinci then went into the service of the Count of Ligny, a French lord, as a military engineer.

Louis XII greatly admired da Vinci's painting, the "Last Supper," and thus the French Secretary of State, Florimond Robertet, commissioned da Vinci to paint a small Madonna with distaff and spindle. The painting has since been lost, but it was greatly praised in France and at the French Court. At that time da Vinci was staying in Florence, and it was during that period that he painted the "Mona Lisa." He had been receiving pensions from Louis XII since 1494.

In 1506 da Vinci returned to Milan, in the service of a lieutenant of the French King, Charles d'Amboise. In 1507 Louis XII met da Vinci and appointed him painter and engineer.

In 1515 Leonardo da Vinci met King Francis I, the successor of Louis XII, and an immediate friendship began. Francis I asked the artist to come to his country, and da Vinci accepted the royal invitation to live in France, where a new home was offered him with every assurance of honor and esteem.

Da Vinci spent his remaining years in France, at the Château de Cloux near Amboise. Two of his pupils, Melzi and Salai, stayed there with him, and they all received pensions from the French King. During that time da Vinci drew designs for several châteaux and for a large canal.

Leonardo da Vinci died in France at Amboise on May 2, 1519, at the age of 67. His body was buried at Amboise, in accordance with his wishes.