



ART BRIDGES: Lesson Plans for Enrichment, Growth and Healing

Mona Lisa Fact or Fiction

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www.teachkidsart.net**

Objectives:

The participants will be introduced to interesting facts surrounding the painting of the Mona Lisa

Audiences:

This lesson is perfect for anyone, regardless of age, who is interested in learning more about art and history. Use Cheryl's wonderful plan with your group and consider using her format to explore other art, traditions, cultures, artists and subjects. We are all enriched when we are life-long learners.



My students became experts on all things ***Mona Lisa*** the year we ‘adopted’ the ***Mona Lisa*** as our ***Art Class Mascot!*** For generations, the *Mona Lisa* has captivated the imaginations of young and old alike. Her mysterious smile hints that there is much we don’t know about this painting, and the woman in it. But there is also a lot we **do** know... *or at least we think we know!*

I was inspired (and quite frankly, *amazed*) by how well my students responded to Scott Russell’s “Mona! Lisa!” Call & Response Attention Signal--it worked like magic every time, with every class. So, I decided to *run with this* format and adopt a *Mona Lisa* theme for the entire year. My *Mona Lisa* print kept watch at the front of the classroom as I began each of my classes with a fun ‘fact’ or two about the *Mona Lisa*. I found that by sharing only a little bit of the *Mona Lisa*’s story each week, my students were more intrigued than if I had given them the whole account all at once.

Our *Mona Lisa* “talks” became the highlight of Art class. If I forgot to start with a *Mona Lisa* fact at the beginning of class, someone would *always* raise a hand and say, “But Mrs. Trowbridge, ***what about the Mona Lisa???!!***” Students would even stop me in the hallway and ask what their *Mona Lisa* fact was going to be that week!

Sometimes I wondered how much of these little bits of information my students were retaining, so occasionally I’d ask, “Who can tell me something about the *Mona Lisa*?” To my surprise, every hand would shoot up. I’d call on kids one by one until nearly every ‘fact’ I had shared with them had been repeated. Not only is this a great way to reinforce learning, it is *fun*, too! And by the end of the year, my students were experts!

(Disclaimer: While most of these statements are factual, some may be partly legend and some a bit subjective, but they all play a part in the fabulous mystique of the one and only Mona Lisa!)

Here’s my list of ‘50 Fantastic Things to Know About the *Mona Lisa*’:

1. The *Mona Lisa* was painted by Italian artist, Leonardo Da Vinci (1452–1519). He was about 51 years old when he began this painting.
2. In addition to being a painter and sculptor, Leonardo was also an architect, engineer, mathematician, scientist, inventor, and anatomist. He taught himself about anatomy and the human form by studying cadavers. This

'hands-on' research helped him to make his painting of the *Mona Lisa* so lifelike.

3. The *Mona Lisa* is probably the most famous, most widely recognized, most studied, and most visited painting in the world. Most scholars consider it the greatest masterpiece of all time.
4. In all of Leonardo's many sketchbooks and writings, there is no mention of the *Mona Lisa*, nor any preliminary sketches of this painting.
5. Leonardo never signed, dated, or gave a name to this painting.
6. No one knows the exact year that Da Vinci completed the *Mona Lisa*, but most agree that he started painting it in 1503 or 1504 and worked on it for several years, maybe as much as a decade, carrying it with him wherever he went. Some say he died without ever finishing it. The *Mona Lisa* is now over 500 years old!
7. The *Mona Lisa* was painted with oil paint on a poplar wood panel, using a technique that left no visible brush marks.
8. The *Mona Lisa* measures only 30" x 21". Most people who see it in person are surprised that it's not bigger.
9. The *Mona Lisa* is a 'half-length portrait'--meaning from the waist up.
10. No one knows *for certain* who the woman in this painting was, but most think it was Lisa Gherardini, the wife of wealthy Italian silk merchant, Francesco del Giocondo. She would have been about 25 years old when she modeled for this painting. It has also been suggested that this painting may have been an idealized portrait of the Virgin Mary, a composite of many women Leonardo had known, a combination of *both a man and a woman*, a depiction of his mother, or even a *self-portrait!*
11. Assuming that Lisa Gherardini modeled for this painting, she would have been pregnant with her second child at the time Leonardo painted her.
12. It has been said that Leonardo hired musicians and jesters to perform during the long portrait sittings in order to make the young woman smile.
13. Scientists believe they may have discovered the bones of the woman who posed for the painting, buried beneath an altar in the convent of St. Ursula in Italy.
14. The title '*Mona Lisa*' means '*My Lady Lisa*' in English. '*Mona*' is a short form of '*Madonna*', similar to how we use the title '*Ma'am*' or '*Madam*' to be polite. Some say the name '*Mona Lisa*' was the result of a spelling error... that when shortening '*Mia Donna Lisa*' ('*My Lady Lisa*') to '*Monna Lisa*' one of the 'n's was dropped off by mistake.

15. The Italian name for the *Mona Lisa* is '*La Gioconda*', and in French it's '*La Joconde*'.
16. The *Mona Lisa*'s most famous feature is her mysterious smile. In 2005, the painting was analyzed at the University of Amsterdam using "emotion recognition software". Based on comparing her features (primarily her eyes and lips) to a 'neutral' expression, it was concluded that the subject of the *Mona Lisa* is 83% happy, 9% disgusted, 6% fearful, and 2% angry.
17. Leonardo spent years perfecting this painting. He began the painting in Italy and finally finished it while living in France. X-rays and other tests with lasers and infrared light have revealed three earlier versions beneath the surface, which Leonardo painted over. In one of these earlier versions, the woman is wearing a bonnet.
18. If you look closely, you'll notice that the *Mona Lisa* has no eyebrows or eyelashes! This was the style in the early 1500's, when it was fashionable for women to pluck their facial hair, as they believed a pronounced forehead made them look more intelligent. One researcher claims that high resolution scans of the *Mona Lisa* show evidence of eyelashes and eyebrows that may have worn off over time due to age and over-cleaning of the painting. Still others believe that Leonardo never finished the painting, and that's why the eyebrows are missing.
19. A Sicilian professor of anatomy has suggested that the woman who posed for the *Mona Lisa* may have suffered from xanthelasma, or the accumulation of cholesterol just under her skin, as well as a tumor on her right hand. Because Leonardo was also a scientist, it's conceivable that he would have been interested in carefully rendering any visible physical ailments.
20. Leonardo blurred the corners of *Mona Lisa*'s eyes and mouth using a technique called 'sfumato' (in Italian, 'sfumare' means 'to shade', 'vanish', or 'fade away'), to help create her mysterious expression.
21. The hazy, blue background shows Leonardo's use of 'aerial perspective' to create a feeling of depth in his painting.
22. The location of the landscape in the background is a mystery. It may have been imaginary, and was possibly influenced by Chinese landscape paintings.
23. When Leonardo died in 1519, the *Mona Lisa* was inherited by his student/assistant Salai.
24. King Francois I of France is believed to have purchased the painting from Salai, and hung it in his bathroom in the palace at Fontainebleau. (*Note: The*

King's bathroom was nothing like our bathrooms today. It was very large and opulent, and was home to many beautiful paintings. In fact, it's been said that "the Louvre museum was born in the French king's bathroom!") From there, Louis XIV moved it to the Palace of Versailles and after the French Revolution Napoleon Bonaparte hung it in his bedroom for a while. The *Mona Lisa* remains the property of the French government today.

25. You can now see the *Mona Lisa* at the *Musee du Louvre* in Paris, France, where it has a room of its own and has been on permanent display since 1797. Over 6 million people visit the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre each year. They spend an average of only 15 seconds looking at her.
26. The fame of the *Mona Lisa* grew when it was stolen from the Louvre in 1911. Prior to this, it wasn't well known outside the art world. But world-wide media coverage drew attention to the painting.
27. The guards who first noticed it missing assumed the *Mona Lisa* had been removed to be photographed and didn't even realize it had been stolen until the next day!
28. The museum was shut down for nine days, the French border was closed, and all the departing ships and trains were searched.
29. When the museum finally reopened, thousands of people lined up to see the empty spot on the wall where the painting once hung.... more people than had ever come to see the painting when it was there! *Can you imagine all those people lined up to see an empty spot on the wall??!*
30. Pablo Picasso was a suspect in the theft and was brought in for questioning. *(Do you think he did it??)* Picasso was found innocent and was later released, but they still hadn't caught the thief!
31. While the painting was missing, six wealthy Americans were tricked into paying up to \$300,000 each for fake *Mona Lisa* paintings. It is thought that this may have been part of the plan when it was stolen.
32. It took 2 years for the real thief to be caught. The thief turned out to be Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian carpenter who had been working at the Louvre and knew all the exits and escape routes.
33. How did he steal it?? Peruggia had helped build the glass case that the *Mona Lisa* was displayed in, so he knew how to get the painting out *fast!* He hid with it in a broom closet and then walked out holding it under his coat after the museum was closed.

34. Peruggia was finally caught trying to sell the painting to an art dealer in Florence, Italy. The art dealer notified the police and Peruggia was arrested.
35. So what happened to Peruggia?? He convinced the authorities that he was an Italian patriot and that his plan was to return the painting to Italy, where he believed it belonged. He got off with a sentence of only 6 months and the *Mona Lisa* went on tour throughout Italy before returning to the *Louvre*.
36. When the painting was recovered, experts examined the pattern of thousands of tiny cracks in the varnish, to make sure it was the real *Mona Lisa* and not a fake.
37. The *Mona Lisa* traveled to New York City and Washington, D.C. where it was on display from December 1962 to March 1963. Ten years later, it was exhibited in Tokyo and Moscow.
38. The *Mona Lisa* has been attacked by vandals several times. In 1956, it was damaged when a man threw acid on it. Later that same year it was damaged again when a woman threw a rock at it. When the *Mona Lisa* was on display in Tokyo in 1974, a woman sprayed red paint on it because she was upset over the museum's policy for disabled people. Then in 2009, a Russian woman who was upset over being denied French citizenship threw a teacup (purchased in the museum gift shop!) at the *Mona Lisa*.
39. Nature itself has also taken its toll on the *Mona Lisa*. Changes in humidity once caused the painting's wood panel to warp, which then caused a vertical crack, from the top of the painting down to the woman's hairline.
40. In 1977, insects infested the back of the wood panel, but the area was quickly treated. The *Mona Lisa* remains remarkably well preserved for its age, in spite of these issues.
41. The painting is now enclosed in climate-controlled, bulletproof glass.
42. The *Mona Lisa* is probably the most parodied work of art in the world.
43. In 1919, modern artist Marcel Duchamp added a mustache and beard to a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and it became one of Duchamp's most famous artworks.
44. In author Dan Brown's bestseller, "*The Da Vinci Code*", it's suggested that the *Mona Lisa* contains hidden clues to the location of the *Holy Grail*. When this novel was published in 2003, the *Mona Lisa* experienced yet another surge of popularity and interest.
45. In 2010, art historians magnified high resolution images and discovered tiny letters and numbers painted inside the *Mona Lisa's* pupils. In the pupil of

the right eye appear to be the letters 'LV' (possibly Leonardo's initials) and in the left eye may be the letters 'CE' or 'CB'. Marks resembling the number '72' (or possibly the letter 'L' and number '2') also appear in the arch of the bridge in the background. Some say these images were randomly formed as a result of the many tiny cracks in the painting's varnish. Others think they were intentional and have a hidden meaning.

46. During World War II, the *Mona Lisa* (along with most of the works of art in the *Louvre*) was boxed up and shipped off by train for safe keeping until after the war.
47. Leonardo was such a gifted painter that legend has it his teacher (Renaissance painter, sculptor, and goldsmith Andrea del Verrocchio) is said to have stopped painting altogether to focus on sculpture when he realized that his student had surpassed him!
48. The *Mona Lisa* gets so much 'fan mail' that it's the only painting to have its own mailbox at the Louvre!
49. The *Mona Lisa* has the highest insurance value of any painting in history. It was assessed in 1962 at 100 million dollars. Adjusted for inflation, its value today would be over 780 million dollars. But since the French government isn't likely to sell the *Mona Lisa* for *any amount*, and it could never be replaced, I think we can safely say this masterpiece is 'priceless'!
50. For a close-up view of the *Mona Lisa*, visit the Musée du Louvre website (<http://www.louvre.fr/en>) where you can zoom in for more detail than you could even see in person, and also compare the results of scientific tests done with infrared, x-radiography, and UVF scans.

To see this lesson in its entirety, please visit <http://www.teachkidsart.net/mona-lisa-fact-or-fiction-50-fantastic-things-to-know/>.

*Special thanks to **Cheryl Trowbridge** for sharing a wealth of information and resources and ideas on her excellent website www.teachkidsart.net ! Cheryl has her art education credentials and has been teaching art to kids for over 20 years. She is inspired by watching children of all ages discover their ability to be creative. Her passion is to make successful art lessons accessible to help share the joy of art with all the kids in our lives. Visit Cheryl's on-line store <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Teach-Kids-Art> to purchase a variety of resources for helping kids create art.*

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