

Missing Smile

Tuesday Morning, August 22, 1911, The Louvre Museum opened as usual. August had always been a quiet month in Paris, with the intense summer heat, and so many on vacation, and attendance had been down from the usual several hundred visitors who came daily. In those days, things were more casual at the Louvre. Unlike most other museums, the paintings were not bolted to the wall, they hung on hooks. They were not protected in glass frames, they were just hanging there. Only after a canvas by Jean-August Dominique Ingres had been slashed, did they begin protecting the paintings in glass boxes. A team of glaziers had recently been brought in and the Mona Lisa was the first painting to be so protected. In addition, The Louvre welcomed amateur painters, encouraging them to copy the works of the great masters which hung on its walls, even providing closets for them to store their paints and easels. The only stipulation was that the copies not be of original size, to decrease the chance of forgeries. That Tuesday morning, (the museum is closed on Mondays,) one of the amateur artists, who had come to copy the Mona Lisa, noticed that she was gone. At her place on the wall of the Salon Carree, were four empty iron hooks.

The amateur artist reported the missing painting to the guard on duty, who assumed the painting had been taken over the weekend for cleaning or photography. The entire collection was in the process of being catalogued, but no, she was not in the photo laboratory. After a quick search of the building, the unthinkable became clear. The Mona Lisa had vanished! Not trusting the telephone, the director of the museum rushed in person to the Palais de Justice

to inform the chief of police who quickly arrived at the museum with an army of gendarmes and began a search of the premises.

Here were the known facts. The Mona Lisa was last seen Sunday evening, August 20, at 4:00 PM, when the museum closed. In a service stairway, a few yards from the Salon Carree, was found a three dimensional glass box of the type used to protect the paintings. Next to the box was an ornate antique wooden frame which bore the label: Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519, Ecole Florentine, La Joconde. Both were intact, the glass unbroken, the wood, undamaged. Bits of discolored paper, from the packing that had been stuffed between the painting and the frame, littered the floor. The painting, on panel, had been meticulously lifted from its case. The doorway out of that stairwell into courtyard was missing a doorknob. Police discovered the knob in the bushes next to the door. Inspection of the glass revealed a smudge. Using a new technique, the smudge was dusted with graphite revealing a perfect thumb print. The thief had left his calling card and shown his way out.

Immediately every exit door to the Louvre was locked. The museum was closed to the public. France's international borders were sealed, where all trains and automobiles leaving the country were searched. Every ship which had departed France in the past 3 days was designated for search when it arrived at its destination.

By Wednesday, August 23, the entire world had been stunned by the news. From Le Figaro in Paris: "Le Louvre a perdu La Joconde." Said the New York Times: "The entire world sat back aghast." La Correire della Sera in Milan wrote; "Come sia stato possibile l'impossibile." And the Times of London, stated: "What is perhaps the most famous picture in the Louvre has been selected for extraction."

Meanwhile back at the Louvre, the investigation was full on. In the Salon Carree, the theft was restaged. Another painting was fitted into the two frames and rehung on the wall. When the gendarmes tried to take it down, it took over 5 minutes. Then they did it again with experienced museum workers, and it took only moments. It was clearly an inside job. Every guard, custodian, cleaner, and workman who had access to the museum between Sunday afternoon and Tuesday morning was fingerprinted and interrogated. The guard on duty on Sunday seemed to recall the last visitors in the Salon Carree: a group of 3 swarthy men with dark hair. They looked Italian, they were well dressed and well behaved. There was also a young man with fair hair, perhaps German or Austrian, who came every Sunday, and always brought a red rose for Mona Lisa. Could his devotion have lead to theft? For certain the guard saw no one carrying anything out.

Meanwhile, it took 6 days, but every nook and cranny of the Louvre had been searched. Mona Lisa had left the building!

The investigation became international in scope, particularly targeting Americans. This was the "Gilded Age," and newly minted American millionaires were racing around Europe, buying up all the great works of art they could get their hands on. (Think the Cloisters at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.) Many art dealers, art forgers, and art thieves were only too happy to meet that demand. Most American collectors knew little about the objects in their collections. One American robber baron, paid a small fortune for the bronze doors of Bologna's Duomo de San Pietro, although that Cathedral in fact did not have bronze doors. The first person of interest was J. P. Morgan, the financier, who was vacationing in Northern Italy at the time of the theft. Morgan had recently bought a gold and silk

vestment worn by Pope Nicholas IV called the Cope of Ascoli. When it turned out it had been stolen and this was disclosed to Morgan, he expressed contrition and donated it back to the Italian government. After relentless questioning from the police and the press, he was cleared.

Suddenly, a new person of interest came on the scene, Pablo Picasso. Yes Picasso, that wild man of Montmartre. A modernist and cubist, he was shaking up the art world with his bohemian band of iconoclasts, decrying traditional art. Among his coterie was the poet and critic, Guillaume Apollinaire. An associate of Apollinaire visited the office of the Paris-Journal Newspaper and told them he had lifted art from the Louvre in the past and had given them to some friends. In fact Picasso had purchased two Iberian sculptures from this Louvre thief and used them as models for his painting "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)." Apollinaire also had a similar piece on his mantle. When the Paris-Journal broke the story, Picasso and Apollinaire realized they were in big trouble. They packed the sculptures in a suitcase and took off under cover of darkness, down to the banks of the Seine, intending to drown the evidence, but in the end they just couldn't go through with it. Instead, Apollinaire took the statues to the newspaper office, and even though he requested anonymity, the police were on it. Apollinaire was detained for 3 days and Picasso was also called in for questioning. Although both men were in possession of stolen art, the judge decided that the "affaire des statuettes" had nothing to do with the Mona Lisa and all charges were dismissed.

Now let's take a break from our mystery, and find out how the Mona Lisa came to be painted, and how she found her home in the Louvre.

On April 15, 1452, in the town of Vinci in Tuscany, a peasant girl gave birth to a baby boy as a result of a roll in the hay with her employer, Piero da Vinci. They

named the baby Leonardo. Illegitimacy had no stigma in those days, there were bastard princes, cardinals, and even the Medici Pope Clement VII. Leonardo was part of the family when they moved to Florence where Piero took up the practice of law. Leonardo was a true polymath, the original Renaissance Man, gifted in every aspect of art and science, and possessed of an eclectic, curious mind. He apprenticed in Florence with the painter and sculptor Andrea della Verrochio. Renaissance painters were like itinerant salesmen, traveling from city-state to city-state, brushes and chisels for hire, competing for commissions. Leonardo set off for Milan, where he was hired as the *ingeniarius ducalis*, the court inventor, for the ruling Sforza family. His career in Milan was cut short in 1499 when France invaded Milan and the Sforzas were forced from power. Leonardo hastily finished his fresco, *The Last Supper*, at the Convent of Santa Maria della Grazie, and returned to live with his father in Florence. The Medici had been driven from Florence and patronage of the arts moved to Rome under the patronage of Pope Julius II with a new set of artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael rising in prominence. Leonardo was an unemployed painter looking for work.

On June 15, 1479, a baby girl was born to Antonmaria di Noldo Gherardini and his third wife in the town of Vignamaggio, in Chianti. His first two wives had died in childbirth so this was truly a blessed event. He named the baby Lisa. She grew up in a comfortable home but had a leap up the social ladder when, just before her 16th birthday, she married Francesco del Giocondo, a 35 year old widower and successful merchant, with an infant son. Lisa and Francesco also moved to Florence and had three children. When Messer Giocondo had a financial dispute in Florence he was represented in the matter by Ser Piero da Vinci. After their

business dealings were complete, Piero wrangled a commission for his unemployed son to paint the merchant's wife, Lisa.

Leonardo began painting Mona Lisa in the winter of 1503. She sits on a balcony in a contrapposto position, her body angled and her face turned out. Behind her, a desolate landscape framed by columns. Considering she is the wife of a successful merchant, her dress is nondescript, and she is stripped of all adornments. He painted her in oil, using a technique called sfumato, fine silk brushes to eliminate any trace of individual strokes. It took Leonardo four years to complete the painting, as long as it took Michelangelo to fresco the Sistine Chapel Ceiling.

Leonardo carried Mona Lisa with him for the rest of his life, taking her to Milan with him in 1515 where he met Francois I of France. Like his friend and contemporary, Henry VIII of England, Francois I lived fast and hard and died spent. He loved all things Italian. When he saw the Last Supper in Milan, he wanted to move the entire wall to his palace at Fontainebleau. When that proved impractical, he offered to move its creator instead. Francois offered Leonardo a generous patronage, royal protection, and a chateau in the Loire Valley. After a year of consideration, Leonardo accepted and moved to France in 1516.

Leonardo died in Amboise in 1519, in the arms of Francois I. In his last will and testament Leonardo bequeathed all his art work and writings to two men who were his students, assistants and companions. They took everything to Italy after his death and Francois I purchased la Joconda, as it was called from their family sometime after 1531. He paid 4,000 gold crowns, the equivalent of \$9.7 million for the work he called "premier en estime, comme une merveille de la peinture," the most esteemed work in the royal collection. He then promptly took her to the

Palace of Fontainebleau, where he installed her in his bathroom. Don't get this wrong, this was more than a functional water closet. It was a 6 room suite with a bathing pool, steam room, gambling room and lounge, all elegantly frescoed.

After 50 years it was realized that steam and oil don't mix, and Mona Lisa was moved upstairs to the Cabinet des Tableaux. She unfortunately received a coat of lacquer in the early 1600s which dulled the colors. There she sat for another 50 years until another king, Louis XIV, moved her from Fontainebleau to his new palace at Versailles. She lived in the Royal bedroom until Louis's death, when she was moved to a darkened back room at the palace. This turned out to be fortunate as she missed the frenzy of the French Revolution. Neglect may have saved her head.

One of the other accomplishments of Louis XIV was the commissioning of the Palace of the Louvre, by the Italian architect Gianlorenzo Bernini. It was initially a royal residence, and served as the last palace where Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette would live before meeting their unfortunate demise. After the Revolution, the populist government converted the Louvre from a Royal Palace to a museum, to allow all citizens to view the Royal art collections. Mona Lisa went along to the Louvre residing in the Salon Carree. When Napoleon married his second wife, Marie Louise, Duchess of Parma in that room, he took Mona Lisa along with his new bride to his bedroom in the Tuileries Palace. She remained there until Waterloo in 1815.

Napoleon Bonaparte was the most notorious art thief in history. Lord Elgin and Hermann Goering had nothing on him. As he conquered his way across Europe, he brought along Dominique Denon, an architect and artist. Denon and his team selected the finest art and antiquities to send to Paris. He ransacked the Vatican

Museum, the Basilica of St. Marks in Venice, and all of Leonardo's notebooks from Milan. His booty was carefully packed and transported by land and sea back to Paris in a huge procession. All of these treasures found their way to the Louvre.

Mona Lisa also returned to the Louvre after Napoleon was exiled to St. Helena, where she reposed in the Salon Carree until 1911.

And now, back to the crime. The trail for the thief had grown cold. There was no new evidence. There were no new suspects, no new leads. When the new Louvre catalogue was published in 1913, la Joconde was not listed.

Alfredo Geri was a dealer in Art and Antiques with a gallery in Florence. November 29, 1913 he received a letter in the mail posted from Paris with the following message, "The stolen work of Leonardo da Vinci is in my possession. It seems to belong to Italy since the painter was Italian. My dream is to give back this masterpiece to the land from which it came and to the country that inspired it." He chose to sign the name Leonardo. Geri was not surprised to receive this letter. In the two years since Mona Lisa vanished, she had been sighted in numerous locations all over the world, but all proved to be copies. Geri showed the letter to the director of the Uffizi gallery who advised him to arrange to see the painting. After back and forth negotiations, Geri and the thief calling himself Leonardo agreed to a meeting in Milan on December 22. Imagine Geri's surprise when, on December 10, a small, swarthy man with a black moustache appeared at his gallery in Florence and announced he was "Leonardo" of the letter and that he had the painting at his hotel, a few blocks away. Geri contacted the director of the Uffizi who joined them at a third floor walk up in a shabby hotel near the Borgo San Lorenzo, where Lisa Gioconda sat for Leonardo da Vinci 410 years earlier. On the way to the hotel, a ransom price of 500,000 lira, equivalent to

about \$2.15 million, was negotiated. In the hotel room, “Leonardo” took out a suitcase and emptied the contents, mostly his dirty clothes, on the floor. He then lifted out a false bottom, took out a package bundled in red silk, and unwrapped the Mona Lisa. It was the real thing! The Louvre catalogue number on the back matched the number sent from the museum. The thief allowed the art dealer and curator to carry the painting back to the Uffizi for more study. They immediately contacted the carabinieri who arrested the ersatz “Leonardo” without incident. La Gioconda had come full circle back to Florence, where her life began.

So who was this new “Leonardo?” He was Vincenzo Perrugia, a 32 year old from Como, who worked as a glazier at the Louvre. He was the one who put her in the frame and he was the one who took her out. His stated motive for the theft was to avenge Napoleon’s pillaging of Italian art. (He missed the part about the purchase by Francois I.) For two years, while French police scoured the world looking for her, Mona Lisa had been holed up in a cheap room in a cheap boarding house less than 2 miles from the Louvre.

Perrugia expected to be hailed as an Italian hero, but was put on trial in Italy, was convicted, but only served about one year in prison. The court appointed psychiatrist reported that Perrugia was “exceedingly dumb and intellectually deficient” but he was dumb like a fox. When police searched Perrugia’s rooms, they found notes that he had tried to contact J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and a host of other international art collectors and dealers.

So what went wrong in the investigation? When Perrugia didn’t show up for his interview after the theft, the police visited his apartment but didn’t search under his bed. They didn’t realize he had prior convictions. They fingerprinted only his right hand but the incriminating print was from his left.

After he was discharged from prison, he married, had a family, and moved to France again where he opened a paint store.

Italy honored their most famous lady with a tour where she stayed at the Uffizi in Florence, at the Borghese in Rome, and and at the Brera in Milan before departing for home on the Milan-Paris Express in her own first class carriage, under police guard. On New Years Day, she arrived at the Gare de Lyon, where, like any other returning prisoner of war, she was sent for debriefing. At the Ecole de Beaux Arts she was X rayed, photographed, and carefully examined. Finally, January 4, 1914, her true identity ascertained, she returned to the Louvre, the one masterpiece legally purchased from Italy rejoining Napoleon's plunder. Today she sits in the Salon Carre, where Napoleon first laid eyes on her at his marriage ceremony.

2019 marked the 500th anniversary of the death of Leonardo da Vinci and the Louvre put on a stunning retrospective. 2019 also marked the somewhat more recent anniversary of the birth of Gloria Peerless, and so we set off to Paris that November to pay homage to both.

As one walks into the Denon Wing and down the Grand Gallery toward the Salon Carree, the din gets louder and louder. Once in the Salon, one gets into a queue reminiscent of the TSA line at the airport. Armed with smart phones, selfie sticks, and cameras, 30,000 people per day snake back and forth through the line until they get to the Mona Lisa viewing pen, where they have less than one minute at a distance of fifteen feet, to take their selfies, smiling like the subject they have come to see, before the guard shoos them away. As the New York Times stated, "Mona Lisa has ceased to exist as an original work of art, it has become a photo opportunity."

But gentlemen, after our visit, I can tell you today that I have discerned the source of Mona Lisa's serene smile. Because every day, when the museum closes, and the crowds are gone, she gets to stare eternally across the salon and see what everyone who comes to see her unfortunately overlooks, Paolo Veronese's magnificent 22 by 32 foot oil painting, "The Wedding Feast at Cana."