

## **My Italian Cousin**

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The City of Light was bathed in gold as the sun rose above the rooftops of the historic Marais district. The low angle of the morning light was lustrous, without heat or glare, and it painted the Louvre in honey colored gilt. Those brief moments of golden glow on this Monday, August 21, 1911, would soon enough give way to a scorching sun and the unrelenting 90 degree temperatures that had been oppressing Paris for more than a month. Many Parisians had abandoned the city for their annual August holiday in the country.

At 7:30 that morning, a plumber named Sauvet, who worked at the Louvre descended a darkened service stairway and encountered another museum employee. He was identifiable by his white coat-like smock worn by the Louvre staff and was standing in front of a ground floor exit door. The man explained that he couldn't get out because the door knob was missing, and the helpful Monsieur Sauvet opened the door with his key, and continued down the steps. The other man picked up a package hidden in the shadows, and slipped out into the sparkle of the morning light.

Under his arm, wrapped in the white smock he had been wearing, 29 year old Italian immigrant, Vincenzo Peruggia, formerly employed in the framing department at the Louvre, carried the 20"x30" panel of poplar wood on which Leonardo da Vinci had painted the Mona Lisa. He made his way east along the Quai de Louvre, then left on the Rue de Louvre, then through the morning squalor of the Les Halles market, then north into the 10<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement and finally to his one room, third storey walk-up in a rundown apartment building at 196 Rue Saint Maur, 2 miles from the Louvre. There he

stashed the painting in the back of a cupboard, and later in a false bottom of a trunk under his bed. Although several witnesses later reported to the police that they had seen a man rushing along this route, carrying a bulky package, he hadn't raised particular suspicions. No one recognized him; no one stopped him. Vincenzo Peruggia simply faded into the background that was his anonymous life. A perfect crime had been committed.

Back at the Louvre, the museum was closed as usual, since it was Monday. A skeleton crew of maintenance workers and a few guards went about their routines. No one noticed anything out of the ordinary. No one took particular note of the empty hooks on a wall of the Salon Carre. Paintings were regularly removed by the museum photographers. The new museum director, Jean Theophile Homolle, had begun a project to photograph the entire collection to ensure there would be accurate records of each painting in case of loss or damage or need for future resoration.

On the following day, Tuesday, August 22, the Louvre opened to the public as usual at 9 am. A regular visitor and one of many amateur painters who frequented the museum named Louis Beroud walked into the Salon Carre shortly after 9. As he set up his easel and opened his paints to resume his copy of the Mona Lisa, he noticed the painting was not in its usual spot. When he questioned the guard and was told that the photographers probably had her, Monsieur Beroud requested that the guard check to find when they planned to bring her back. The guard soon discovered that the photo studio didn't have the Mona Lisa and rushed to the Director's office. The Director, Monsieur Homolle was vacationing in Mexico, and acting in his place was the curator of Egyptian Antiquities, Georges Benedite, who was skeptical of the guard's panicked message that the Mona Lisa was gone. After spending several hours visiting the Salon Carre and the

photo studio and quizzing staff, the Acting Director walked to the Palais de Justice and informed the Paris Chief of Police, Louis Lepine that the Louvre's most valuable masterpiece was missing.

Chief Lepine acted swiftly and decisively. By 1 pm, a small army of gendarmes descended on the Louvre. The building was surrounded; every exit was sealed and no one was allowed to enter or leave. His men swept through the building and within a few hours, the police had made their first discovery. On a landing in a service stairway near the Salon Carre they found an antique, carved wooden frame that bore the label: Portrait of Mona Lisa, Florentine School, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). With the wood frame was a three dimensional glass box that had recently been installed over the painting. After a painting by Ingres had been slashed at the Louvre a few years earlier, the Director, Monsieur Homolle, had made the unpopular decision to add protective glass frames over many of the museum's most valuable paintings to protect them from vandals and irresponsible visitors. The Mona Lisa was the first to be so protected.

The Louvre building itself was originally constructed as a fortress in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was expanded and embellished over the centuries. It became a royal palace in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and it was only in 1797, after the French Revolution that it became a public museum. In the beginning of its life as a museum, the Louvre was named the Musee des Artes and briefly became the Musee Napoleon in 1803. It is reputed to be the largest museum in the world, covering 49 acres, and so the search of the entire complex by police was a time consuming and tedious process. Every gallery, storage room, stairwell and closet as well as the vast underground vaults were combed. The entire museum staff was questioned without producing any leads. The plumber, Sauvet, who

had opened the stairway door for the unidentified Louvre employee the previous morning was grilled at length, but he insisted he had not recognized the man and had not noticed him carrying anything out that could have been the Mona Lisa painting. He spent days going through mug shots of Louvre employees and then of Parisian underworld characters, trying to find the face from the stairway. The search was fruitless.

Once word of the disappearance leaked out of the museum, the story began to dominate headlines not only in Paris but around the world. The New York Times reported, "The entire world is aghast. Nothing like the theft of the Mona Lisa has ever been perpetrated before in the history of the world." The Corriere della Sera in Milan headlined, "How the impossible became possible!" With stiff upper lip The London Times reported, "What is perhaps the most famous picture in the Louvre has been selected for abstraction." The coverage in the Paris papers was less obtuse and far more provocative. The press charged that porous security at the Louvre had been an open secret for years and that the administration had only come up with bizarre solutions such as training the elderly and arthritic guards in judo. It was reported that the Louvre lacked the simplest precautions against theft that had been adapted by other major European museums decades earlier. Since 1853 the Uffizi Gallery had been using safety hooks that locked the paintings in place. The explanation given by the Louvre Director was that he wanted the staff to be able to quickly remove paintings from the galleries in case of fire.

More shocking than the casual security was the lack of any system of accountability within the Louvre. There was no specified security protocol for taking a painting to the photo studio; no one supervised the photographers, and incredibly, the Louvre required no approval or authorization for a painting to be removed from a gallery

for any purpose. The Paris papers reported that there was “anarchy at the Louvre” and that “chaos reigned supreme.” The Paris Revue Bleue charged that “the Director, on account of political constraints could not direct; the Trustees neglected their trust, and a totally inadequate number of ill paid, unruly and shiftless guards were entirely incompetent to watch over the priceless treasures entrusted to them.” The Director, Jean Homolle, was mercilessly tried in the press, and then called before a meeting of Government Ministers where he was denounced as “a savant, devoid of administrative ability and was charged with failure to safeguard the national treasure.” Poor Homolle, who, while he was off digging through the lost world of the Maya in the Yucatan, had had no idea that his own world was disintegrating back in Paris. He was one of the last to learn of the theft of the Mona Lisa, but he was the first to pay for her disappearance with his job and his career.

Meanwhile the trail of the Mona Lisa and her abductor was not just cold; it did not even exist. Police Inspector Lepine, was convinced that the crime had been planned and executed by an international gang of art thieves whose motive was to blackmail the government into paying a large ransom, but he had no evidence of this with neither clues nor leads. Everyone it seemed had a theory. The press delighted in stories about motives and possible perpetrators. The New York Times reported from Paris, “The feelings here about the [Mona Lisa] affair are intense. An extraordinary number of absurd theories are being advanced.”

One of the more colorful theories was that the Mona Lisa had been spirited away by a mad lover or worse. A Sorbonne psychology professor warned that “the thief might be a sexual psychopath who would treat the Mona Lisa with sadistic violence and

fetishistic tenderness and take pleasure in mutilating, stabbing and defiling her, only to return her when he was through with her.” It was true the Mona Lisa had often made men do strange things. Of the more than one million works of art in the Louvre collection, only Mona Lisa received her own mail. Many were love letters, and some were so ardent that for a while she had been put under special police protection. Only the year before in 1910, an admirer, “facing a lifetime of unrequited love,” had shot himself in front of her.

This fatal attraction theory appealed to the French emotions. If Mona Lisa were gone, at least she had been stolen for love. The Chicago Tribune suggested that “Mona Lisa’s innumerable lovers should unite to offer a reward that would bring her back to the place that the world looks upon as her home.” “No one man,” the Tribune exclaimed, “should have the exclusive right to feed upon that mysterious loveliness.” The sustained attention to the theft had made Mona Lisa a masterpiece of the masses. When the Louvre finally reopened to the public on August 29, thousands lined up to view the empty hooks on the wall in the Salon Carre where the painting had hung. There had never been a wait to enter the Louvre. Now lines of mourners, many bearing flowers and notes, others weeping, stretched for blocks and set new attendance records.

Another theory being discussed in Paris was that the police were looking to America. Vast fortunes were being made in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, and the names of tycoons like Carnegie, Mellon, Frick, Huntington and Morgan were well known in Paris. These new multi millionaires were buying up collections of European art with the same vigor that had driven them as they amassed their fortunes. Their acquisitions formed the foundation for many of today’s great American museums.

collections. The New York Times reported at the time that there was very general belief in Paris that the Mona Lisa had already been smuggled to America.. Attention in Europe soon focused on J.P.Morgan, who was perceived as the archetype of American millionaire collectors. Morgan was known to have been vacationing in Italy at the time Mona Lisa was stolen, and the rumors were that the thief had brought the stolen treasure to him there. When the press tracked him down in Italy, Morgan was outraged and told reporters, “I have not been offered the Mona Lisa, but if it had been offered, I should have bought it immediately and given it back to France.”

Back in Paris, the investigation took a stunning and unexpected twist. Pablo Picasso, then the 29 year old leader of the so called “Picasso Gang,” an informal collection of anti-establishment artists and writers, was arrested in connection with the theft of the Mona Lisa. Although the Picasso Gang had been acclaimed in art circles as romantic renegades, “breaking the rules to free art from art history,” Police Inspector Lepine was speculating this “gang” might really be an “international ring of swindlers and thieves who had come to France to plunder its treasures.”

The Picasso Gang was a diverse group and one member was Picasso’s close friend and the then well known young French writer, Guillaume Apollinaire, born in Italy of a Polish mother. Apollinaire introduced his friend, Joseph Gery to the gang. Gery was a charming and polished Belgian vagabond who lived by his wits and had few scruples. One of his peculiar pastimes was that he enjoyed stealing small artifacts from the Louvre as a lark. For a brief time Gery stayed at the apartment of Picasso and his mistress, Fernandre. He is reputed to have often joked as he left the apartment, “I’m on my way to the Louvre. Anything I can pick up for you?”

Sometime in late August after Gery had moved out and returned to Belgium, and after the theft of the Mona Lisa, Picasso discovered two small prehistoric stone statuettes in the back of a cupboard in his apartment. The bottom of each statue bore the stamp: Property of the Musee du Louvre. A panicked Picasso called his friend, Apollinaire, and that night they went out to toss the statuettes into the Seine, but they couldn't bring themselves to do it. The next morning Picasso brought them to a friend at the Paris-Journal newspaper which published a headline story saying statues stolen from the Louvre had been turned over to the newspaper by an unnamed amateur artist. The police pounced, believing this may be a critical clue leading to the gang who had taken the Mona Lisa. Despite promises of anonymity given by the newspaper to Picasso, he was soon identified. Picasso and Apollinaire were arrested and jailed, but within days, their case was dismissed by the judge as there was really no credible evidence tying them to the theft of the statuettes or the Mona Lisa.

Back at police headquarters the mood was dour. Months passed with no credible leads, no fresh evidence, no new suspects. The Mona Lisa story was finally displaced in the newspapers eight months later by the tragedy of the sinking of the Titanic on April 14, 1912. In November, 1912, the French Minister of Fine Arts reported to the Chamber of Deputies: "There is no ground to hope that Mona Lisa will ever resume her place in the Louvre." Fifteen months after her disappearance, France formally closed the Mona Lisa case. When the new Louvre catalogue was published in January, 1913, Mona Lisa was no longer listed. She was missing and presumed dead.

On November 29, 1913, a letter arrived at the shop of Alfredo Geri, an art and antiques dealer, located in the historic center of Florence, Italy. The envelope was

postmarked Place de la Republique, Paris. The message was short and direct. It read: “The stolen work of Leonardo da Vinci is in my possession. It seems to belong to Italy since its painter was Italian. My dream is to give back this masterpiece to the land from which it came and the country that inspired it.” The letter was signed, “Leonardo.”

Geri brought the letter to his friend, Giovanni Poggi, the Chief Curator of the Uffizi Gallery. Poggi was quite skeptical but advised Geri to write back to “Leonardo” and tell him he would need to see the painting in Florence in order to make an offer. Letters were exchanged trying to tie down an acceptable date, but “Leonardo” was impatient, and on Wednesday, December 10, he showed up unannounced at the Florence antique shop of Alfredo Geri. He introduced himself as “Leonardo” and said he had brought Mona Lisa back to Florence. The surprised and flustered Geri asked “Leonardo” to return the next day when he could have his friend from the Uffizi there to examine the painting and verify its authenticity. Without hesitation, “Leonardo” agreed.

The following afternoon, “Leonardo” reappeared at the shop where Alfredo Geri and Giovanni Poggi were waiting. After awkward introductions, “Leonardo” announced that the painting was in his hotel room, but before he showed it to them, he thought they should discuss payment. “I did not take the picture,” he explained, “because of a desire for money but I wished to accomplish a good and holy work by returning to my country one of the many treasures stolen from it.” He went on to say that he naturally expected the Italian government to compensate him for his “great service” and the price he had in mind was 500,000 lire, equivalent to about \$2.5 million today. Poggi and Geri told him they thought that was a reasonable request. The three men then walked together along the Via del Moro to the Hotel Tripoli-Italia, later renamed the Hotel La Gioconda.

Arriving at the one-star establishment, the three climbed the stairs to a third floor room that was barely large enough for a bed and an armoire. With the door locked, “Leonardo” slid a wooden trunk out from under the bed and carefully lifted the heavy box onto the bed and opened it. After removing a layer of socks and underwear, a pair of shoes and some tools, he opened a secret compartment at the bottom and removed a rectangular object wrapped in a red silk cloth. From beneath the red cloth appeared the face of the Mona Lisa. Speechless, Geri and Poggi held the precious 400 year old masterpiece in their hands. They examined it closely and noted the distinctive pattern of fine cracks on the surface of the paint caused by old age and the effect of layers of varnishes applied over time. They turned it over and saw the Louvre name stamp and catalogue number on the back. They had no doubt that the painting was authentic but expressed reservations to “Leonardo.” Poggi said, quite truthfully, that he would need to bring it back to the Uffizi where it could be examined by museum experts. “Leonardo” readily agreed.

With the painting still wrapped in the red silk cloth, Poggi and Geri raced back to the Uffizi where Poggi immediately called the carabinieri. Within the hour, Francisco Tarantelli , Chief of the Florence police, was at the Hotel Tripoli Italia where he arrested “Leonardo.” He put up no resistance, sure that the arrest was merely a formality and that he would soon be hailed as a national hero. “Leonardo” cooperated fully with the police and admitted that his real name was Vincenzo Peruggia, originally from a small town near Lake Como, and that he had recently been living in Paris. He told the police that after working at the Louvre for several years, he had come to the decision that he had the right and the duty to take the Mona Lisa from France and return her to Italy. He

confessed that being familiar with the Louvre and the minimal security in the building, he had hid himself in a closet the night of August 20, two years earlier, and that in the early morning hours of August 21, he had sneaked from the closet and taken the Mona Lisa from the wall to a staircase where he pulled the painting from its frame and walked out a back door of the museum. He said he then carried it to his apartment where it rested in a box under his bed for the past two years.

Meanwhile back at the Uffizi, careful study confirmed that the recovered painting was indeed the original painted by Leonardo da Vinci. The Italian Minister of Culture, Corrado Ricci, immediately put out calls to King Victor Emmanuel, Pope Pius X, and the French Ambassador to give them the astonishing news. Within hours, Italy was in a state of euphoria. Florence was jubilant. France was embarrassed and incredulous. “The most famous face in the world, unseen for more than two years, had been living quietly in Paris and now had miraculously reappeared only a few blocks from the house where Leonardo had painted her.”

The recovery of the Mona Lisa by the Italians was a public embarrassment and a blow to the pride of France. Police investigators in Paris realized that Vincenzo Peruggia should have been a prime suspect. He had been employed by the Louvre until just a few months before the painting was stolen and had in fact been one of the glaziers who had constructed the Mona Lisa’s new protective glass frame. Having built the frame, he would know better than anyone else how to remove her. Peruggia had been on a list of present and past employees given to the police and had been questioned briefly by detectives. He told them that he had been at this new job on the morning of the theft, but if they had checked his alibi, the police could have learned the truth that he had been late

for his job that morning and had told his boss that he had over slept. Almost from the beginning the police had fixated on the theory that the theft of the Mona Lisa was the work of a sophisticated international gang of art thieves. As a result, an obvious suspect who should have been thoroughly vetted was allowed to fade away, almost unnoticed, into the unremarkable panorama of his workaday Paris life.

At his trial in Florence, Peruggia basked in the role he had created for himself as a hero who had rescued Mona Lisa and brought her home. He told the court, “I spent many hours at the Louvre enjoying the masterpieces of Italy that should have been in my country. I was ashamed that...no Italian had thought of avenging the spoliation committed by Frenchmen under Napoleon when they carried off from Italian museums and galleries pictures and statues and treasures of all kinds by the wagon loads. Many times while working at the Louvre, I stopped before da Vinci’s picture and was humiliated to see it on foreign soil. I thought it would be a great thing for Italy if I were to present this wonderful masterpiece to her, so I planned the theft.” Despite his bravado, Peruggia was a pathetic figure. His case briefly generated sympathy in Italy, but by the time of his trial six months later, the public had generally lost interest. His court appointed psychiatrist testified that he was “intellectually deficient” and therefore not fully responsible for his actions. After all the testimony was heard, the jury deliberated less than two hours and found him guilty. The judge sentenced Peruggia to a year and fifteen days in jail. With his arrest and conviction the mystery of the disappearance of Mona Lisa was solved to the satisfaction of the public. Peruggia remained in Italy and served in the First World War, after which he moved back to Paris where he opened a paint store. He died there in 1925 at the age of forty four.

While Peruggia had been concocting his scheme for kidnapping Mona Lisa and justifying his motivation for the crime, he might better have spent a little time studying history. It is true that Napoleon may have the dubious distinction of being the biggest and most notorious art thief in history. As he swept through Italy he looted every city along the way, stripping the museums of their priceless treasures. When Pope Pius VI protested, he not only emptied the Vatican museums and libraries, but he took the Pope prisoner as well. By 1798 Napoleon had filled the half empty galleries of the Louvre with his newly acquired plunder, but the Mona Lisa was not part of Napoleon's loot. By 1798 she had already been in France for 272 years, having been brought there by Leonardo da Vinci himself when he moved from Milan to France in 1516 at the invitation of the young French king, Francois I. By this point, Leonardo was nearing the end of his work and the end of his life, and when he died in France three years later, Francois bought the Mona Lisa from Leonardo's heirs. According to Father Pierre Dan, a Jesuit who catalogued the royal collection in the seventeenth century, Francois paid four thousand gold crowns for what he described as "the premier work in the royal collection, a miracle of painting."

The mystery of the disappearance of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre in 1911 captivated the world for 842 days until she turned up suddenly and unexpectedly back in her home town of Florence on December 11, 1913. Even after her recovery many questions remained. How had this simple and unprepossessing man, Vincente Peruggia, masterminded the world's most famous art heist? Was he the patriotic idealist he claimed to be? Why had he taken the painting to an art dealer rather than the museum? Did he have accomplices? Was he acting on behalf of others? From the very beginning an often

repeated theory was that the theft was part of a carefully conceived master plan that included secretly selling expert forgeries of the Mona Lisa to different collectors in various parts of the world, with each buyer thinking he had the original and none willing to admit publicly to possessing the stolen masterpiece. These theories and other questions have never been resolved to the satisfaction of everyone.

Another paradox that continues to intrigue many is the enduring and virtually universal attraction of this painting from the time it was painted until the present. It continues to be called the most famous painting in the world. In 1550, Giorgio Vasari, Renaissance painter and biographer of da Vinci wrote that “the Mona Lisa was always considered a masterpiece – a divine work – a painting that made every artist tremble and lose heart.” As recently as the year 2000, in a survey asking people to name the most famous painting in the world, a staggering 85.5% answered, the Mona Lisa. Remarkably, the Mona Lisa continues to remain a pop icon around the world. Her name or face have appeared in popular songs and movies, on bottles of wine and olive oil, on packages of coffee, black olives, oranges, cheese, chocolate and bottled water. And on soap, hand cream, corsets, stockings, condoms and wigs. Hotels, bars, bakeries, bookshops and pizzerias bear her name. At the Louvre Mona Lisa is the only painting that has her own private room. There are crowds and much commotion in that room every day, and the unprepared visitor would assume that a celebrity like Angelina Jolie or Bill Clinton is in the room. There is a celebrity present, but it’s a 508 year old painting of a young woman named Lisa!

“Art historians, poets and admirers have tried to explain the commanding place that the Mona Lisa has in our cultural life.” Kenneth Clark has said there is something

inside the painting that speaks to us all.. The French writer, Gautier, says that her gaze intimates unknown pleasures and her smile is wise, deep, velvety and full of promises. He goes on to say that “her mouth, turned up at the corners, mocks the viewer with such sweetness, grace and superiority that we feel timid, like schoolboys in the presence of a duchess.” Much has been written about Mona Lisa’s smile and it has been variously described as enigmatic, knowing, mischievous, seductive, perplexing and serene. The real explanation for the smile that has puzzled so many may in fact be quite simple. Vassari wrote in 1550 that it was reported that while Leonardo “was painting Mona Lisa, he employed persons to play and sing and jesters who might make her remain merry and not look melancholic as portraits often do.” Whatever the reason, the timeless smile and the relentless gaze of her warm, brown inescapable eyes that seem to peer only at the viewer continue to captivate us to this day. Leonardo himself wrote, “paintings keep alive the fleeting beauty of mortals and give them more permanence than the works of nature that are continually altered by time which inevitably leads to old age.”

Da Vinci, for all his fame, is also in many ways a man of mystery himself. For the past 500 years he has been recognized as a universal genius and the quintessential Renaissance man. He is hailed as an inventor, engineer, architect, hydrologist, anatomist and, of course, a painter. Not to take anything away from his status as a genius, the reality is, however, that his role in science and technology has really been marginal. He never discovered a scientific law, and although he was a visionary, and his drawings presaged future technological developments, he never actually invented anything of note. He did architectural sketches of buildings and bridges, but none was ever built. A recent

book by on the artistic duel between Leonardo and Michelangelo describes da Vinci as the most famous multi-tasker and dilly-dallier in the Europe of his time.

His most tangible realized works are his paintings, and there are no more than 20 surviving ones attributed to him. Besides the Mona Lisa, his next most famous painting is probably the Last Supper painted on the refectory wall of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan in 1495. Leonardo liked to experiment with new painting techniques, but sometimes, as with the case of the Last Supper, with disastrous results. Rather than paint this mural on wet plaster as was the standard practice, Leonardo used tempore over a dry plaster wall, and moisture in the wall caused the painting to begin to deteriorate almost immediately. By 1556, Vasari described the painting as ruined and so deteriorated that the figures were almost unrecognizable. Even when it came to the Mona Lisa, for some unknown reason, he decided to paint it on a slab of poplar wood rather than on walnut as he had advised other painters in his treatise on painting. In addition he did not prime the back side of the wood, and as a result, the slab developed a slight concave shape and a split that thankfully stopped just above the head of Mona Lisa. Fortunately the slab stabilized and there has been no further deterioration.

But regardless of these technical issues, for unknowable reasons, the painting of Mona Lisa seemed to engage and grip Leonardo more than anything else he produced. He began the painting in 1502 and spent four years working on it – the same time it took Michelangelo to paint the entire ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He seemed to have become obsessed with this portrait. Strangely and for unexplained reasons, he never turned the painting over to Francesco del Giocondo who had commissioned it. He kept it with him as he moved from Florence to Rome to Milan and finally to France where it was

in his possessions when he died in 1519, seventeen years after he began the painting.

Why, is a question that no one has ever been able to satisfactorily answer.

And the final questions have to be about Mona Lisa herself. Who exactly was she? Was she an historical person? In 1550 Giorgio Vasari first christened this painting the “Mona Lisa” or literally Madam Lisa or Mrs. Lisa. Vasari goes on to identify the subject as Lisa de Giocondo, the wife of a wealthy Florentine silk merchant. This is why the painting is called, interchangeably, Mona Lisa or La Gioconda, that is, “the Giocondo lady.”

What is known is that Lisa was born in 1479 in a farmhouse, now a country inn, in the village of Vignamaggio in the vineyards of Chianti. Her father was Antonio di Noldo Gherardini, who never could have dreamed on the day she was born that the face of his little girl would someday be immortal. Sixteen years later Lisa Gherardini was in Florence where she married the wealthy Marquese Francesco di Bartolommeo di Zanobi del Giocondo in about 1495. When Leonardo da Vinci received the commission and began painting her in 1502, Lisa would have been 23 years old. After 1503 when records show Francesco and his young wife, Lisa, moved into a new house in Florence, which may have been the occasion for commissioning the painting, very little more is known of Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo other than that she died in 1542 at the age of 63.

Much has been written over the past 500 years about Leonardo da Vinci himself and about his famous painting of Mona Lisa, but there has never been a biography of Lisa Gherardini. As I searched to learn more about this woman made famous by her portrait, I came across some surprising and intriguing information. According to a website, I discovered, called Geraldini.com, Mona Lisa’s family name, Gherardini, is said to be

perpetuated in the surname Fitzgerald.: Fitz, being a prefix derived from the French Norman word “fils”, meaning son, and Gerald, being the Normanized form of Gherardini. The historic family connection is said to be made through one Dominus Otho Gherardini, a member of the Florentine family of Gherardinis, who traveled to Normandy in 1056. There he is said to have made friends with influential Norman families and went with them to England to the Court of King Edward the Confessor. He returned to Normandy, but after the death of Edward in 1066, he joined the army of William the Conqueror in the Norman conquest of England later that year. After the battle of Hastings he was given land in England where he settled, and his property holdings at Windsor were recorded in the Domesday Book in 1086.

About a century later in 1169, his Norman descendants, known as the Geraldines or Fitzgeralds, acting on behalf of King Henry II, joined Strongbow in the Norman invasion of Ireland where they lead in the conquest of the native Irish population and finally settled down for good. Although initially perceived as invading foreigners, the Fitzgeralds quickly put down roots, intermarried with the local population and were soon said to be “more Irish than the Irish themselves.” But apparently they never forgot their origins in Florence. Correspondence from the 1500’s between the Fitzgeralds of Ireland and the Gherardinis of Florence has been found in a book of memoirs of the Gherardini family. Among these memoirs is a copy of a letter from Gerald Fitzgerald, Earl of Kildare written in 1506 “to all the family of the Gherardini, noble in fame and virtue, our beloved brethren, dwelling in Florence.” He goes on to thank them for their past correspondence and signs himself as “Gerald, Chief in Ireland of the family of Gherardini, Earl of Kildare, Viceroy of the most serene Kings of England in Ireland.

So then, what is so fascinating to me is that this letter was written in 1506. In that year Lisa Gherardini would have been 27 years old, and da Vinci would have just been completing her portrait. Of course, what I will never know is this: was Lisa aware of her connections to the Fitzgeralds of Ireland? But is it possible—might I imagine--- that Lisa Gherardini, the immortal Mona Lisa, could really be my long lost, 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian cousin?

Cousin Lisa, fair and still,

Why do you so slyly smile?

Are you only just recalling,

The latest blarney from Hibernia land?