

ON THE TRAIL OF THE MONA LISA

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On August 21, 1911 —115 years ago — a bold thief walked out of the Louvre in Paris with a large, cloth-covered package beneath his arm. Inside that package was perhaps the most famous painting in the world.

Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa would remain missing for 29 months.

A BRAZEN ART HEIST

Aug. 21, 1911, was a Monday. The Louvre was closed on Mondays.

Around 8 a.m., a thief let himself out of an art supply storage room where he had been hiding since the previous day. He pulled the heavily reinforced painting, frame and case — all 200 pounds of it — off the four small hooks holding it on the wall, carried it to a stairwell and broke the case open.



The thief slipped the painting beneath the artist’s smock he had stolen and — with the aid of an unsuspecting maintenance worker who helped with a balky doorknob — departed.

It wasn’t until the Louvre opened for business the next day that anyone realized the Mona Lisa had been stolen.



‘MY LADY’ LISA

Lisa was the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, a wealthy Italian cloth merchant. “Mona” is a contraction that means “my lady” in Italian.

Leonardo began painting her in 1503 but continued working on the project until his death in 1519.

Leonardo painted the Mona Lisa on a plank of poplar wood. The panel — originally 30 inches high and 21 inches wide — has shrunk nearly an inch in width over the centuries.

No brush strokes are apparent anywhere in the painting.

While the sky behind Lisa looks somewhat dingy and yellowed today, Leonardo didn’t paint it that way. He gave it a brilliant shade of blue, using an expensive pigment made from lapis lazuli gemstones.

Lisa also wears a veil that viewers can hardly see today. By using a technique called sfumato — very thin, multiple applications of paint — Leonardo gave it a transparent effect.

An analysis of infrared images of the painting shows Leonardo changed the positions of the index and middle fingers of Lisa’s left hand. The reason: He originally painted her holding a lap blanket.

Although he worked on the painting off-and-on for more than a decade, Leonardo never finished Lisa’s index finger.

THE THIEF

The criminal mastermind behind the theft of the then-400-year-old masterpiece turned out to be Vincenzo Perugia, who claimed to be an Italian patriot named Leonard.

In fact, though, Perugia was a carpenter who had helped build the heavy protective case that had held the painting. He was a short, quick-tempered “madman” who suffered insults and bullying by French construction workers with whom he worked.

According to some accounts, Perugia had two accomplices in the theft, but it’s hard to tell for sure — he changed his story often.



On Nov. 29, 1913, “Leonard” approached Alfredo Geri, an antiques dealer in Florence, Italy, and told Geri he was in possession of the Mona Lisa, requesting a “reward” of 500,000 lira and reassurance the painting would never be returned to France.

On Dec. 11, Geri and an art historian met “Leonard” in his room at the Hotel Tripoli-Italia. The painting had been hidden beneath a false bottom in a steamer trunk.

Geri took the painting to a nearby museum to verify its authenticity. When it checked out, he called the police. Perugia surrendered quietly.

For the next two months, the Mona Lisa toured the major cities of Italy. In Milan, 60,000 Italians reportedly packed the Brera museum to see the painting.

Finally, the Mona Lisa was carefully crated and escorted home to the Louvre by museum officials, politicians ... and, yes, plenty of police officers.

The painting returned to its spot in the Louvre on Jan. 4, 1914.

The next June, Perugia stood trial in Florence. He was given a sentence of one year and 15 days. The next month, the judge reduced the sentence to seven months — essentially, time served.

By then a folk hero, Perugia was met with adoring crowds as he left prison.

THE SAFE RETURN OF THE MONA LISA

It’s true that the Mona Lisa was created in Italy by an Italian, but was legitimately the property of the French: Leonardo da Vinci started the painting in 1503 but continued to work on it after he moved to France in 1516.

When da Vinci died three years later, his assistant, Salai, inherited the Mona Lisa. Salai sold it to King Francois I.

King Louis XIV moved the painting to the Palace of Versailles, but it was placed in the Louvre following the French Revolution. Except for a brief period when Napoleon hung it on the wall of his bedroom, it’s been the property of the Louvre ever since.



The Mona Lisa stares out at an adoring crowd from her perch at the Louvre. A special gallery for the Mona Lisa is currently under construction.

The Mona Lisa has been physically attacked twice — both times in 1956 — once by acid and once by a rock. The painting is now kept behind a thick, bulletproof glass enclosure set into the wall of the Louvre’s Salle des États.

The humidity inside the enclosure is kept between 40% and 60%, and the temperature is kept between 64 and 70 degrees. A 20-watt LED lamp minimizes infrared and ultraviolet radiation.

About 6 million people visit the Mona Lisa every year, the Louvre says.

And the art thief? Perugia served briefly in the Italian army during World War I, married, had three children and eventually moved back to France ... where he opened a paint store.