

26 Leonardo da Vinci. La Gioconda.

Begun approx. 1503.

Oil on poplar wood. 53 cm.

Louvre Museum, Paris.

When Leonardo painted the Gioconda, he was already up to date with the innovations of Flemish painting (previous to Leonardo, the results of this juicy and luminous pictorial technique can be seen in the last works of Giovanni Bellini, in those of Perugino or some of the painters of the Ferrara school such as Cosmè Tura). Leonardo applied his universal curiosity to experiment above all with oils. Because of this many of his works have suffered greatly (the cavalry suffered by the Last Supper in Milan is more than well known, owed to his “invenzioni” so criticized by his peers, especially by those who had commissioned the work and feared they would not live to see it finished*, a deterioration begun during the life of the same Leonardo) and have wrinkled as consequence of too much oil and the abuse of Verdi Gris (a copper oxide rust produced from vapours of vinegar which was mixed with linseed oil at very high temperatures, until the mixture turned reddish-brown), in the shadows.

This work is not only a portrait, but it could be said that it is a painted autobiography (almost a manifesto) of Leonardo, a mirror of his wisdom in so many fields, of his genius and his impossible dreams (nowadays Leonardo is made responsible for almost everything, from the submarine, the parachute or the aqualung to the espresso coffee machine and the pressure cooker. And because of his interest in compiling cooking recipes, some consider him to be the author of the brunelleschiana dome of the panettone – a popular Italian cake with divine taste and proportion-). That Leonardo was a precursor of the union of art and science**, which in the period of Romanticism united Goethe and Humboldt in admiring friendship and which nowadays is one of the most stimulating and promising creative ways, can be appreciated very clearly in his beautiful statement: “Love is more fervent when knowledge is more perfect”.

The Gioconda is one of the most famous paintings in the world, on which Duchamp put a somewhat Dalinian moustache*** (the ironic Frenchman said that the Gioconda had deteriorated because of all the eyes that had looked at her in the Louvre and, a few years before his death, he sent his friends a postcard of the celebrated work, this time without the moustache, with a handwritten text saying: “Rasée”- shaved-). Andy Warhol serialised it, in a very democratic gesture.

A high degree of idealisation is shown in her figure, a reflection of Leonardo’s world in the mysterious smile which has given rise to so many interpretations (from that of archaic Greek sculpture to that of Androgynous,****, and the so frequent esoteric interpretations of his work), together with a very “leonardesque” naturalist perfection (the sfumato, which envelopes everything creating mystery, dissolving the shapes and masterly expressing the atmospheric perspective which he investigated so thoroughly). The Lombardy landscape with Alpine type mountains which appear in the background resemble a Chinese landscape, which only in part can justify the strange fascination the Japanese feel for this work (one of the places where more Japanese can be found out of Japan, together with the Holy Family by Gaudí, in Barcelona, is the place occupied by this painting in the Louvre). In my opinion, the hieratic expression without eyebrows, practically identical to a female No theatrical mask, or to these female ghosts which join death and sensuality which appear in some films by Kurosawa or Mizoguchi..

Apart from the six copies painted by the French restorer Yves Chaudron, which were commissioned by the Argentinean Valfierno, the instigator of its robbery in 1911, many more versions of the famous work exist. In fact, in the Salon des Fauxs organised in Paris in 1955, almost seventy versions of the image of the enigmatic lady were exhibited. Recently, an Italian

“professor” has discovered that the initials of the Christian and Surname of the enigmatic model who posed for the immortal work are written, in tiny letters, nothing less than in her left pupil (Leonardo had selected the eyes for his coded message because they are the mirror of the soul, as well as being a very efficient means of communication). It does not suffice, that this same professor (who is no other than Silvano Vinceti, was also responsible for the mess concerning the location of the bones of Caravaggio) has found in some corner of the surface of the board the numbers 2 and 7, which together add up to 9, a number which according the Kabala symbolises “initiation”. Leonardo would have represented in this, his immortal work, the reality created by God in the most complete way possible. On one hand he would have represented it through the painting, with unsurpassable “realism” and subtlety, and on the other, he would have expressed it through its numeric formula, abstract and symbolic (or conceptual, if you wish): the perfect fusion of the celestial with the earthly, of the exterior and the interior eye. Nothing more can be asked from a work or art!

* Vasari comments that a young Michelangelo, during a clash with Leonardo in the streets of Florence, reproached the already ancient master for never finishing his works. Before which “The Magician” kept silent, leaving it to time itself to punish the arrogance of the great sculptor, as he would also find himself unable to finish his most ambitious projects, which provoked him great suffering and heartache.

*** Dalí considered the Gioconda to be immoral. According to him, she represents the exaltation of the Oedipus complex (odd destiny of Leonardo, spoken of by everyone, victim of all types of theories and condemned to the strangest literary and cinematographic companions, such as Masons, Templar Knights, Rosicrucian or Catars), the erotic-incestuous charge emanating from it being perceived with greater intensity by those suffering from the above mentioned complex, always according to the interpretation of the “Illustrious illustrator” of the theories of Freud.

From this could come the numerous attempts (such as the stone thrown by the Bolivian Hugo Unzaga Villegas, in 1956, which produced a small defect in its elbow) and robberies (in 1911, the painter Vincenzo Peruggia stole it, contracted by the Argentinean Eduardo de Valfierno) which the celebrated painting has suffered, and has made it necessary to literary bury it, like a spectral “Sleeping Beauty of the Museum”, inside a bulletproof glass box.

When the person in question is in front of it, he believes he can see his mother’s smile in the ambiguous one of the painting, which, with the added grievance that the painting is in a museum, the most similar place to a brothel (the museums also drove Paul Valéry mad, who did not suffer from the Oedipus complex, but on the other hand could not bear to find himself “alone against so much art”), provokes in him a sudden violent reaction which ends, if not caught in time, in an attack on the painting trying to destroy it or, at least, mutilate it.

This mental modus operandi, with a complex and farfetched symbolic burden is in the origin of the demonstrations of Hippies carrying banners against the Gioconda, organised by Dalí on the occasion of the transfer of the suggestive work from the Louvre to the Metropolitan Museum in New York (it was treated with the honours of a Chief of State), and not only the simple and coarse desire to get attention and to provoke, that many of the detractors of the controversial “universal Catalan” see in the origin of his crazy public interventions.

***Sigmund Freud (for whom even jokes were related to the sexual drive – maybe because of this there are so many dirty jokes -), in his studies about Leonardo, he attributed his insatiable thirst for knowledge to a sublimation of repressed sexuality (when in reality it is about the ideal of life of the wise man of ancient times, exclusively dedicated to knowledge, an ideal the Church would adopt, to its own ends). A lot has been said about the sexual origin of the “artistic impulse”,

the case of Picasso being a paradigmatic example of it, in its “macho” version. The feminist artist Carolee Schneemann, in her work called Interior Roll, makes a very intimate reflection about it, from a more “feminine” angle. During her performance, she used to read fragments in roll form of her text titled “Cézanne, she was a great painter”, while extracting them from her vagina.

The dream of Leonardo which provoked the analysis by Freud, where a kite placed its tail in his mouth, with clear sexual connotations (in a homosexual way), refers to the great interest the Tuscan genius showed in birds’ flight. The bird, generally a symbol of the spirit and soul, had in its origin, like the fish, a phallic symbolism (in Italy, Uccello is one of the popular names for the penis, and in Cuba a homosexual is called “bird”). The marvellous studies by Leonardo on the flight of birds are without any doubt the basis for Futurist paintings like that of Giacomo Balla, called Swallows: lines of movement + dynamic successions.

One of the most extravagant nonsense, worthy of the Paranoiac-critic Dalinian Method, is that which attributes the name of Mona Lisa to the anagram formed from Amon (Egyptian God of the occult) and Isis (his female version). Amon-Isis would in time become Mona-Lisa, an explanation which would once and for always clear up the matter of its androgyny.