

### About This Mona Lisa

Fed up with "the red rant of unearned praise," novelist Stanley Elkin fires away in *Art & Antiques* (Summer 1991) at some "overrated masterpieces," from *Hamlet* to *Citizen Kane*. But when he comes to Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the curmudgeonly critic almost succumbs to her famously mysterious smile.

See her there in her cat-who-ate-the-canaries, her smug repose and babushka of hair like a face on a buck. A study in browns, in muds and all the purplish earthens of her jaundiced, low-level, f-stop light. See her, see her there, this, well, girl of a certain age, with a faint streak of bone structure blowing off her skin like a plume of jet trail all she has for brow. See her, see the leftward glancing of her color-coordinated eyes inside the puffy, horizontal parentheses of her lashless lids. See the long, low-slung nose dropped inches below the painterly rules of thumb. Now see her famous statelies, her upright, comfortable aplomb, her left forearm along the arm of a chair, her fat right hand covering it, as clubby and at ease as one foot crossed over another . . .

In and closer in to the central occasion of

her odd, asexual face, in where the mystery lives, the secret agenda, in toward her giacondas, her giaconundrums, the hidden mystery of her guarded gingivitis smile! Because I'm changing my mind here, a little I am, and thinking maybe it's Nat King Cole's version I'm not that crazy about, his viscous syrups I'm thinking of, confusing the box-step cliché and sentimentals with the fact of her face. Because what levers our attention is that nose and those lips, and a truth about art is the company it keeps with the slightly askew, the fly in that woodpile of symmetry, mere balance in painting, equilibrium, a stunt of the "beautiful." What commissions the eye is face . . . It's the face that draws the eye in the *Mona Lisa*, but I was only kidding about the mystery of that smile. There is no mystery. No one ever had to solve a face, and the notion of this face's enigmatics has always been a kind of anthropomorphism, only paint's pathetic fallacy, facial phrenology, a horoscopes by bone structure, an astrology of the eye, the palmistry of character, wrong-headed, literary, the racism of beauty, unreliable finally as any other pseudoscience, as if to say, oh, as if to say, "Read my lips."

Next slide . . .

a whole cadre of routine-bound dull souls . . . In contrast with the myopia of *Dead Poets Society*, it had insight into the singular nexus between certain leadership gifts and the ego that cannot settle for a steady engagement in the common enterprise but must star in public displays of extraordinary powers over the young."

The Keating-Brodie type has its counter-

parts in real life, and these self-loving performers, always playing the malcontent, do serve a function, in Heilman's view. They provide an outlet for students' melodramatic "discontents, suspicions, and negative judgments." In short, while the Keatingesque Great Teacher may seldom, if ever, be a good teacher, he does make a fine institutional safety valve.

### Propagandistic License

John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Peirson* (1784) was a masterpiece and possibly the finest British historical painting of the 18th century. Yet, like the engraving of the Boston Massacre that strongly influenced it, Copley's painting played fast and loose with certain historical facts.

"Genius and Glory: John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Peirson*" by Richard H. Saunders, in *The American Art Journal* (Vol. XXII, No. 3, 1990), 40 W. 57th St., 5th fl., New York, N.Y. 10019.

Copley (1738-1815), who had been a successful portrait painter in colonial Boston, was by 1781 well established as a painter in London. That January, French forces invaded the Channel island of Jersey and obtained its surrender; British forces, led by Major Francis Peirson, ignored the surrender order of the island's



*Copley gave a military skirmish great national import.*

lieutenant governor, advanced on the main town's central square, and routed the French. In the moment of triumph, however, young Peirson was fatally shot.

Copley sensed the appeal that Peirson's sacrifice and the modest military victory might have to Englishmen, dispirited by years of martial failure in the American colonies. In his rendition, Copley did want historical accuracy—but only up to a point, according to Saunders, director of the Christian A. Johnson Memorial Gallery at Middlebury College. Copley believed “that it was not the artist's duty to depict reality. On the contrary, it was the artist's responsibility to elevate reality to a level beyond that of simple reporting, to communicate values such as nobility and sacrifice to future generations.”

Other artists had taken a less elevated approach to the Jersey battle. In the center of the earliest picture, by Thomas Gram

Colley and E. Hedges, Scottish troops of the 78th Highland Regiment, led by officers in kilts and tam-o'shanter, advance in rows, firing on the retreating French. One Highlander, meanwhile, rushes to assist the wounded Peirson, who braces himself against a building near where his troops entered the square. In placing him at the edge of the scene, Saunders notes, the artists “chose reportage over drama.”

Copley, by contrast (and despite at least one battlefield account), put Peirson at center stage, falling dramatically “into the arms of his military subalterns.” He relegated the Scottish Highlanders to far less prominent positions. It was *English* noble sacrifice that the painting was to display, after all. He also added a splendidly attired black servant, who avenges Peirson's death—but who probably did not exist.

Copley drew inspiration for his masterpiece from the 1770 print of the Boston Massacre, which depicted a similar scene. Paul Revere, who received most of the credit for the print, had taken the idea from an almost identical one by Copley's half-brother, Henry Pelham. Effective as radical propaganda, the Revere-Pelham portrayal of the massacre had little to do with what actually happened: Boston toughs provoked British troops into firing on them. Just over a decade later, Copley transformed the “graphic image of colonial hatred” into a masterful portrayal of “the glory of British military prowess.”

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## OTHER NATIONS

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### *The 'Perfect Dictatorship'*

Long hidden by a veil of constitutional democracy, Mexico's system of presidential absolutism (*presidencialismo*) is increasingly being seen, by Mexicans and foreign-

“Mexico: The Crumbling of the ‘Perfect Dictatorship’” by Andrew Reding, in *World Policy Journal* (Spring 1991), World Policy Inst., New School for Social Research, 777 United Nations Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10017.

ers alike, as a de facto form of dictatorship, says Reding, a Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute. Indeed, when Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa declared in