



# LEONARDO: ARTE COME PROGETTO

Studi di storia e critica d'arte  
in onore di Pietro C. Marani

A	R	T	E
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COLLEZIONI LUOGHI ATTORI

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## COLLEZIONI LUOGHI ATTORI

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Il titolo della collana sottolinea l'intenzione di considerare l'Arte come un sistema dinamico caratterizzato storicamente dalla molteplicità dei suoi attori. Se la creazione costituisce il cuore dell'arte, fulcro e motore del processo di produzione e di fruizione delle opere sono spesso figure che assumono e svolgono altre funzioni. Dai committenti ai collezionisti, dai conservatori dei musei ai destinatari di una più generica ma sempre più vasta educazione all'arte: lo sviluppo attuale della disciplina impedisce ormai di valutare semplicemente come secondario e accidentale il loro ruolo. Secondo questo approccio l'opera d'arte è "opera aperta": l'attenzione ad aspetti largamente interdisciplinari e alla sociologia dei fenomeni artistici intende infatti collegare il collezionismo e le sue pratiche, anche museologiche, a contesti e congiunture, a circuiti polivalenti e multiformi di cultura e di mercato. L'interesse, anche metodologico, è rivolto a tutte le possibili forme di diffusione e mediazione; la volontà è quella di considerare l'ampliamento di orizzonti che caratterizza oggi il dibattito sull'Arte e anche di perseguire l'idea che i documenti d'archivio o gli allestimenti museali possano proporre una Storia non meno significativa di quella degli oggetti evidenziando preferenze culturali ed estetiche.

The title of the series draws attention to its intent to regard Art as a dynamic system, characterized throughout history by a multiplicity of actors. While the heart of art may be creation, the linchpin and driving force to the production and consumption of works of art often rests with figures who take on and carry out other functions. Those who commission works of art and those who collect them, museum conservators and the recipients of a general but increasingly broad art education – the current development of the discipline makes it impossible to consider the roles played by such people as simply secondary or accidental. According to this approach, the work of art is an "open work": indeed, the attention to largely interdisciplinary aspects and to the sociology of artistic phenomena aims to link collecting and its practices, including its museological practices, with contexts and circumstances, with the multipurpose and multiform circuits of culture and market. The series' interest, including its methodological interest, is toward all possible forms of art diffusion and mediation; the purpose is to consider the broadening of horizons that currently characterizes the debate on Art and also to pursue the idea that archive documents and the way exhibitions are mounted in museums can convey a History as meaningful as the one set forth by artifacts, highlighting cultural and aesthetic preferences.

Tutti i contributi pubblicati nella collana sono sottoposti a double-blind peer review.  
All contributions published in the series are subject to double-blind peer review.

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a cura di

Paola Cordera e Rodolfo Maffei

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# Mona Lisa Opens Reign over U.S.

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This short essay will address the *Mona Lisa's* loan to the United States and its exhibition in Washington DC (8 January-3 February) and New York (7 February-20 March) in 1963.

Its political-diplomatic implications (Franco-American relations in the post-war period),<sup>1</sup> as well as its ideological connections (the association of the Kennedy presidency with Leonardo's painting as the symbol of Western ideals),<sup>2</sup> and cultural issues (the exhibit as one of the first blockbuster art shows presenting never-before-travelled masterpieces supporting revenue generation for museums and broader economic impact in local communities) have been already discussed. A combination of all these factors may explain the reason why the prospect of an overseas exhibition firmly rejected by the Louvre curators in 1949, could be overcome fourteen years later.<sup>3</sup>

Chronicles have detailed the intense debate over the risks involved in the shipment of such a fragile painting overseas, precautions to safeguard it during its trip (in an isothermal and metal case constructed by the specialized firm Maison Soulé), and the warm welcome it received in the United States. Some members of the public – boosted by the French newspaper *Le Figaro* in its campaign to prevent the picture from leaving the Louvre Museum – might have questioned the

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in the following are: AN for Archives Nationales (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine) and MET for The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives (New York), James J. Rorimer Records, Box 25. F. Zöllner, *John F. Kennedy and Leonardo's Mona Lisa: Art as the Continuation of Politics*, in W. Kersten (Hrsg.), *Radical Art History. Internationale Anthologie*, Zürich, ZIP 1997, pp. 466-479; H. Lebovics, *Mona Lisa's Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press 1999.

<sup>2</sup> M.L. Davis, *Mona Lisa in Camelot: How Jacqueline Kennedy and Da Vinci's Masterpiece Charmed and Captivated a Nation*, New York, Perseus Books Group 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Chief Curator of the Département des Peintures et Dessins to the Director of the Musées de France, 18 February 1949. AN, Direction des musées de France, 20150042/5/1.

mediocre sum of insurance coverage for such an irreplaceable artwork, a paltry 50,000 Francs (around \$ 85,000 today).<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, far less valuable paintings on loan to American exhibitions – e.g. Gustave Moreau (Chicago), Eugène Delacroix (Boston), and François Boucher (Seattle) – were insured for sums between 100,000 and 300,000 Francs. According to the American press, by the simple fact of its fame, the *Mona Lisa* was an unsaleable painting that discouraged any attempt to steal it.<sup>5</sup> By that as it may, the risks of shipping such a rare artwork were entirely underestimated (fig. 1).

The focus here will be on exhibition and display criteria and their subsequent impact on the American public, of the «portrait *par excellence*» or, in Pietro C. Marani words, the «universal model into which the painter has poured all his acquired knowledge».<sup>6</sup>

In 1962, a specific protocol detailed the terms of this exceptional event.<sup>7</sup>

Each step of the exhibition process was under Presidential guardianship in Washington DC, in an ideal connection between the political centers of the two countries, embodied in the display of their flags on opposite sides of Leonardo's painting. John Walker, then-director of the National Gallery of Art, fully embraced this vision in his foreword to the exhibition booklet: «An Ambassador of goodwill between the two Republics, this most inscrutable of ladies will [...] perform her mission of friendship with unparalleled success, and when she leaves America she will take back to France the affection and gratitude of us all for the honor of her visit».<sup>8</sup>

In his chronicle of the event, *Mona Lisa Opens Reign over U.S.*, Jean M. White described the inaugural courtly ceremony that took place «in the marble halls of the National Gallery amid splendor that recalled the Renaissance world of Leonardo da Vinci».<sup>9</sup> His description took pains to link the formal setting to Renaissance architectural ideals of balance, measure, and harmony, thereby conferring onto Washington's visitors a sense of the pageantry that they might imagine they shared with Leonardo's noble contemporaries.

<sup>4</sup> AN, Direction des musées de France, 20150333/552.

<sup>5</sup> R.E. Dallos, *Mona Lisa, Guarded Like a True Celebrity Arrives in New York*, «Wall Street Journal» 18 December 1962.

<sup>6</sup> «The image is a “type”, or universal model into which the painter has poured all his acquired knowledge, all his “science”. It is this iconic quality as the embodiment of the cumulative learning of all time that has influenced its public and critical reception over the centuries, and that reveals both its greatness and its limitation». P.C. Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings*, New York, Harry N. Abrams 2019, p. 192.

<sup>7</sup> *Protocole à soumettre à l'approbation du Gouvernement français et du Gouvernement des États Unis*, Washington 1 December 1962, MET.

<sup>8</sup> *On the occasion of the exhibition of the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci: lent to the President of the United States and the American people by the Government of the French Republic*, Washington, H.K. Press 1963.

<sup>9</sup> J.M. White, *Mona Lisa Opens Reign over U.S.*, «The Boston Globe» 9 January 1963, p. 27.



1. *The Mona Lisa, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1963.* National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gallery Archives. RG26B, Audiovisual Records, Exhibitions, and Installations. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gallery Archives

The menu for the formal dinner, including «a Renaissance sauce for the Beef and a dessert of Poires Mona Lisa (prepared the way Mona Lisa might have liked them)» was far from being a secondary detail. Instead, it mirrored that same agenda, reinforcing the belief of the United States' cultural (and political) primacy and linking it to the Renaissance golden age. It too advanced national claims to cultural excellence.

The protocol allowed the possibility of a subsequent exhibition in New York, contingent on the National Gallery's oversight and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's assurance of appropriate conditions. This museum's standards seemed not to fulfill the French demand for climate conditions to a painting particularly sensitive to atmospheric variations. Nevertheless, James J. Rorimer's authority as Director and Trustee of the Museum and as Chief of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Section of the Seventh Army during World War II carried the day, and the Leonardo travelled to New York. Any subsequent hope of obtaining the *Mona Lisa* by the Art Institute of Chicago has quickly dimmed.<sup>10</sup>

From a museological perspective, the display in Washington DC aimed to emulate the aesthetics of the Grande Galerie of the Musée du Louvre, the siting to Leonardo's painting since the end of World War I. A burgundy velvet back-

<sup>10</sup> P.T. Rathbone to J. Jaujard, 19 December 1962. AN, Délégation générale aux expositions et aux échanges culturels (ministère de la Culture), 19890127/36.



2. Visitors gather in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to attend the opening of the *Mona Lisa* Exhibit, 8 January 1963. Abbie Rowe. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

drop strengthened the effort of «the National gallery [...] to match the color from the Louvre's grand galerie».<sup>11</sup> Visitors' words of appreciation often remarked on the «beautiful frame on that lush red velvet» (fig. 2).<sup>12</sup>

Despite all efforts, some French guests raised objections such as: «Maybe the lighting was better here, but in the Louvre, nobody destroys the illusion».<sup>13</sup>

Celebrated French interior designer Stéphane Boudin (1888-1967) – who was tasked with redesigning several rooms at the White House between 1961 and 1963 – also voiced his disagreement. Indeed, he argued that grey or soft green tones were preferable.<sup>14</sup> One wonders if his opinion was inspired by the theatrical setting of the 1952 Paris exhibition *Hommage à Léonard de Vinci* and the temporary repositioning of the *Mona Lisa* at the western end of the Grande Galerie against an ivory curtain backdrop, framed by almond-green velvet drapery.

<sup>11</sup> J.M. White, *Mona Lisa Opens Reign over U.S.*, cit.

<sup>12</sup> D. Samoff to J. Rorimer, 8 February 1963, MET.

<sup>13</sup> S. Conrad to J. Rorimer, 12 March 1963, MET.

<sup>14</sup> G.W. Goodard to J. Rorimer, 9 January 1963, MET.

The National Gallery's scenography, of course, was within a purpose-built public gallery and not a former palace, but its ambitions were princely, just as Kennedy's White House aimed to become.

Museum professionals were assigned the final decision for the exhibit display. In using a burgundy color, the explicit connection with the velvet ornamentation of the Louvre Museum – itself modeled on the red walls of the celebrated *Tribuna* of the Medici Gallery in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence – was evident. For this very purpose, Director Rorimer asked for and received a sample of the Louvre velvet from the director of the Musées de France Jean Chatelain. The Metropolitan Museum Archives still preserves this fabric sample, although Rorimer's final choice, as we shall see, was different.

The visual association with prominent and celebrated historical models would resonate in the rooms of American museum, generating in visitors the emotional tension of unveiling a hidden treasure in its precious chest.

The arrangement fueled visitor imagination in associating the display's setting with a magnificent space in the service of art. Around the same time, famed architect Philip Johnson (1906-2005) addressed similar concepts claiming the architect had «as in a church – to make the visitor happy, to put him in a receptive frame of mind while he is undergoing an emotional experience».<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the National Gallery was re-arranged accordingly, for the worship of the *Mona Lisa*. Every detail was discussed well in advance with the Louvre Museum staff. A sense of the minutiae, the responsibility and the weight of anxiety can be gleaned from the biography by Madeleine Hours, curator of the Musées Nationaux and chief of the Laboratories of the Musées du Louvre.<sup>16</sup> Taken with her detailed report written during her visit to the United States to check technical conditions for the exhibition, the *enjeux* becomes clear.<sup>17</sup> To her, a coveted location had to be worthy of a masterpiece and provide the highest climate conditions standards, a large entrance, and a suitable space to accommodate crowds.

Among different options, Hours and Director Walker determined room number 40 was too small, and the Rotunda area looked inappropriate for suitable contemplation of the painting. In the end, Walker's predilection for the West Sculpture Hall met French requirements when arranged with a brick or wooden wall about two-thirds down the West Corridor. Velvet draperies conveniently hid the wall to maintain aesthetic consistency and reduce humidity variations. The *Mona Lisa* would hang high on the central wooden panel of a kind of folding screen, providing a further protection on both sides of the painting. Two hygrothermograph recorders, hidden in flowerpots, monitored

<sup>15</sup> P.C. Johnson, *Letter to the Museum Director*, «Museum News» 1960 (38), p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> M. Hours, *Une vie au Louvre*, Paris, Robert Laffont 1987.

<sup>17</sup> AN, Délégation générale aux expositions et aux échanges culturels (ministère de la Culture), 19890127/36.

the room's climate. The final removal of some sculptures provided suitably-sited exhibit space.<sup>18</sup> Hours expressed her greatest appreciation for the simple and elegant strategy of introducing Leonardo's painting with Verrocchio's terracotta bust portraying Giuliano de' Medici from the National Gallery's permanent collection (inv. 1937.1.127).

As for the logistics of the exhibition, visitors from the main entrance could proceed in a kind of secular pilgrimage through the marble Rotunda, starting to reverently admire the portrait at a distance and then walking down a long marble corridor to the barrel-vaulted gallery's West Sculpture Hall.

Although the New York exhibition is conventionally described as being staged similarly to the Washington event, it is worth noting some of its peculiarities here. For instance, the *Mona Lisa* booklet published by the Metropolitan Museum was written by the Museum Curator of Paintings Théodore Rousseau (prefaced by J.J. Rorimer), while the Washington edition (prefaced by John Walker) had a text prepared by the Musée du Louvre. Marked by less overt political connotations, the New York exhibition may have been less dictated by the instructions of the French curators.

People entering the Metropolitan Museum proceeded from the Great Hall straight to the Medieval Sculpture Hall, where the painting was displayed (fig. 3). In Hours' words, this was the ideal location in terms of size and climatic requirements, given what she considered the excellent conditions of wooden artifacts that same room displayed for the past ten years.

The room's vast size could also accommodate Rorimer's determination not to dismantle holdings of Western monasteries and churches on view there: in his opinion, this installation could also arouse visitors' curiosity, persuading them to extend their visit to the rest of the museum, which registered an increase in the number of visitors in the days *Mona Lisa* was on display.

Originally installed in the Cathedral of Valladolid, a wrought-iron choir screen bisecting the gallery framed the painting at eyesight level. The Spanish gate thus became part and parcel of the general display. Concealed behind fabrics, its central doorway opened onto a chapel-like recess. On the right side, a lectern behind the gate evoked religious practices consistent with the reverential tone sought by the organizers.

Rorimer's choice of a bright red fabric background rather than the Louvre burgundy velvet has gone unobserved. This option seemed to better match medieval art and crafts masterworks displayed behind the gate. Marie-Louise D'Otrange Mastai of the *Connoisseur* magazine concluded this arrangement was «remarkably felicitous».<sup>19</sup> The evocation of a liturgical space for the viewing of a secular

<sup>18</sup> J.M. White, *Sculpture at Gallery Moved for Mona Lisa*, «Washington Post» 14 December 1962.

<sup>19</sup> L. D'Otrange Mastai, *The Connoisseur in America*, «The Connoisseur» 1963 (615), p. 66.



3. *The Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci, on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1963.* Installation photograph in the Special Exhibition Gallery. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Unknown photographer. ©2022. Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art, Resource/Scala, Firenze

masterpiece was a brilliant conflation, elevating museum practice to a kind of religious rite. Rather than admire a simple portrait, people could worship it.

A visitor named Carlos Leyva of Brooklyn described his experience as a kind of ecstatic mysticism:

Finally, I got close to the door. Then I was allowed to come in. It was a large room. And there she was. The moment was so exciting, I could scarcely hear the footsteps and voices of the others. I gazed at her from the distance as if seeing a miracle. Gradually, I stepped forward with my eyes fixed on hers. From the distance, she looked like a queen proud of her subjects who eagerly pushed one another to get close to her [...] As I approached her, she also started looking at me and did not take her eyes from mine [...] She seemed to understand my emotion and kept on smiling at me.<sup>20</sup>

However naïve or emotional, visitors' comments such as this help us understand the event's atmosphere and its impact on viewers.

The exhibit's success may seem somehow odd when measured against contemporary standards. After waiting hours outdoors (in cold temperatures), visitors could pause in front of the painting for an insignificant length of time (no

<sup>20</sup> C. Leyva, *A visit to the Metropolitan Museum*, 10 February 1963, MET.

longer than five to seven seconds), at a distance, and behind a slab of bullet-proof glass. One visitor remarked on the poor illumination, noticing such issues as «reflection in the glass protecting the painting nearly obscured *Mona Lisa*» and «conflict of the lights».<sup>21</sup> Despite posters with enlargements of *Mona Lisa*'s hands and eyes arranged for the benefit of the fatigued audience waiting in line, some visitors went so far to complain: «it was an insult to my intelligence to wait 2 hours in line; and then not to be permitted to stop in front of the picture and take a look at it. I had to keep moving. Some people were comparing the whole thing with a concentration camp and being treated like animals».<sup>22</sup>

The event's official public relations images certainly did not reveal any such inconveniences. Instead, photographs aimed to present the successful effort to handle crowds – the two exhibitions recorded a large spike of attendance attracting nearly 2,000,000 visitors<sup>23</sup> – and emphasize the solid pedagogical value of the event by showing school groups in front of the painting or capturing visitors' ecstatic faces. To promote the exhibition's educational benefits, no admission was charged, and school classes were guaranteed earlier hour access before the museum opened.

Only authorized reporters could photograph the exhibition's triumphant achievements. This decision – following the 1962 protocol by the French government – had to meet the American administration's quest for controlling the event's image to convey to public opinion.

Sales desks in “the *Mona Lisa* Area” were set up to meet the natural desire to have a memento. Profits from items sold – including a booklet and a limited selection of reproductions such as a color print and three different postcards – were allocated to the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, the French overseer of collections and museums.

The interdiction to visitors to take photos naturally increased the wish to have them. The purchase of reproductions – further sales desks within (and outside) the museum sold a broader range of merchandise, brochures, and publications geared toward the exhibition – brings to mind the completion of a religious service or pilgrimage, the faithful bringing home a souvenir following a shared communion. As is widely acknowledged, it was precisely one of those reproductions sold at the Metropolitan Museum that inspired artist Andy Warhol to create his own *Mona Lisa*, a true “new” celebrity among his Hollywood stars portraits.

In his overall assessment of the *Mona Lisa* show, James Rorimer described the event as a crowd-catcher, comparing the numbers of museum visitors to crowds following mass events such as spectator sports events or pilgrimages.<sup>24</sup> Despite

<sup>21</sup> E.H. Wood to J. Rorimer, 9 and 18 March 1963, MET.

<sup>22</sup> Unknown [signed «Disgusted»] to J. Rorimer, 7 March 1963, MET.

<sup>23</sup> J. Rorimer to A. Malraux, 16 April 1963. AN, Délégation générale aux expositions et aux échanges culturels (ministère de la Culture), 19890127/36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



the dangers, effort and anxiety, the *Mona Lisa* exhibition gave tangible form to Rorire's vision of a truly democratic museum, boosting access to art: «With accessibility to our objects comes understanding. Somehow art on a pedestal must be brought nearer to the visitor».<sup>25</sup>

And indeed, it has established a 50-year trend that only recent pandemic events have undermined.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with W.G. Rogers, «The Sun» 15 November 1959.

