LOST, STOLEN *or* SHREDDED

LOST, STOLEN *or* SHREDDED

Stories of Missing Works
of Art and Literature

RICK GEKOSKI

PROFILE BOOKS

Published in Great Britain in 2013 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
Exmouth Market
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Sabon by MacGuru Ltd
info@macguru.org.uk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 491 3
eISBN 978 1 84765 932 3

The paper this book is printed on is certified by the © 1996 Forest Stewardship Council A.C. (FSC). It is ancient-forest friendly. The printer holds FSC chain of custody SGS-COC-2061

Contents

1

Has Anyone Seen the *Mona Lisa*?

When I attended Huntington High School, in Long Island, in the late 1950s we had a neighbour, who lived five houses down to the right if you faced our (identical) house, named Mr Andrews. He was distinguished and rather pompous, with a fruity modulated voice – perhaps he was English, or wished to be? – always formally dressed and with immaculately cut, wavy grey hair, which he wore rather longer than most gentlemen of the time, presumably as a sign of his artistic nature. Recently retired from the law, he now spent much of his time painting in oils. He was, he regularly affirmed, extremely good at it, particularly at making copies of famous paintings. So good, in fact, that apparently 'the best curators at the Met' were unable, on the basis of visual evidence alone, to distinguish an Andrews from a Da Vinci: his version of the *Mona Lisa*, he chortled, had fooled them entirely.

I didn't believe him, but there was something so audacious in the claim that a tiny sliver of doubt remained in my mind. I looked carefully at his copy of the picture, which hung over his brick fireplace, like my parents' (palpable) reproduction of Renoir's *The Boating Party*. It looked pretty good to me. I was fifteen at the time, and I'd grown up on such reproductions.

When I was a boy, I loved going to museum shops. In the galleries themselves I would rush about, seeking a picture or image that I wanted to take home. In the shop afterwards I would systematically go through the available reproductions to see if I could find my favourite to put on my bedroom wall. At six I wanted a soft-focus Rembrandt image of a seated woman – my mother never sat still, and was certainly not soft-focus – but it was soon replaced by an Alexander Calder print in orange and blue, and that a year or two later by a perky Miró. I could not bear the idea that my pictures should hang (as it were) side by side: Miró replaced Calder, he didn't join him. This process continued for a surprisingly long time, as if just one image were quite sufficient by way of self-definition. In my dorm at Penn I had a poster of that Picasso dove, and a few years later my rather spare room in Merton College, Oxford, had a blue-period Picasso nude as its only adornment. I didn't give up this habit until I had to, when renting my first flat gave me such wall space that it demanded filling. It was rather fun, spreading things out, putting things together.

It was only in my thirties that I began to abjure copies in favour of originals. My parents' *The Boating Party* looked pretty much real, aside from the fact that it wasn't. You could fill a room with similarly good reproductions of the finest paintings, and I have no doubt that they would look terrific to an ignorant eye. But such reproductions were, I began to feel, vulgar and undesirable.

Mr Andrews's Mona Lisa image was certainly intended, in a playful manner, to deceive, but it was not a forgery, simply a copy. The forger Mark Hofmann, whose copies of Mormon letters and the *Oath of a Freeman* were presented

as 'discoveries', intended to profit through his capacity to deceive the experts, whereas Mr Andrews's modest home industry was a harmless hobby, and his capacity to fool all those curators was merely a source of pride and amusement to him, not a source of income. No doubt the inflation of his self-worth was a by-product of the process, even more irritating to his wife and children, I suspect, than to us neighbours. Or maybe they were proud of him? After all, Mr Andrews was in a long tradition of copyists of Da Vinci's masterpiece, dating back to the time of Leonardo's production of the picture in the early sixteenth century.

A strikingly fine copy of the *Mona Lisa* has been owned by Madrid's Prado Museum since it opened in 1819, which can pretty reliably be described as contemporary to the real thing, likely enough to have emanated from one of the assistants at the Master's own studios. It is painted on a small walnut panel, an expensive material which had been used by Leonardo for several paintings, including *The Lady with an Ermine* (1490) and *St John the Baptist* (1516), and it may well have been commissioned by a wealthy buyer frustrated by his inability to get Leonardo to sell the real thing.

There are apparently dozens of copies of the picture dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though no one knows how many of these were simply acts of homage (which was common at the time) and how many were intended to pass profitably as the *Mona Lisa* itself: the essential difference between a copy and a fake. Most of these surviving versions are distinctly inferior to the real thing and unlikely ever to be confused with it, even by a fifteen-year-old. But for so many copies to have been produced so quickly after the original composition seems odd – can they

all have worked from the King of France's original? – and suggests, at least, that there was more than one version to copy.

The Prado version, if it did emanate from Leonardo's workshop, may well have served as a second model. Ironically, that copy, though certainly distinguishable from the real thing to an expert eye, is a work of great beauty which is more accessible than Leonardo's own picture, having recently undergone two years of restoration, which have cleared layers of black paint overlay to reveal details of the background that are now obscure in the original. Leonardo's picture has never been restored by the Louvre, because the many layers of cracked varnish make it too risky a process with such a fragile surface.

The result, if you look at the pictures side by side (they were exhibited together, for the first time, at the Louvre in March 2012), is that the studio copy is much clearer and gives a much better idea of the original composition. On the left of La Gioconda's head, the craggy landscape is crisp, with the details of the grey rock formations absolutely precise. In comparison, this whole area in the original is much darker and obscure in detail.

But even if the Louvre version had been restored, and (let us surmise) the two pictures were now well nigh indistinguishable, the Leonardo would still be entitled to the greater respect and admiration, for his picture carries with it the facts of its composition and can be traced to his own hand. What we have now are two competing versions, one restored to what it may originally have looked like in the early sixteenth century, the other bearing all too obviously the effects of time upon a painted surface. I greatly prefer

the latter, not just because it is the original, but because I like what time does to things, how ageing deepens and shadows, produces a glow of its own. Patination is why we admire seventeenth-century oak cupboards, respond so deeply to the depth and glow that the wood acquires over the centuries. Our response to the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, its eerie and unexpected combination of filminess and the sharp reality that throws her smile into such enigmatic relief, is the effect of the years upon the surface of the paint, so that the sitter seems to emerge from the depths of a shimmering timelessness.

We speak too frequently of the ravages of time and too little of the glow that it can produce. The villa of Calpurnius Piso, which was destroyed in the eruption of Vesuvius, and which housed one of the finest libraries of Classical antiquity, provided the model for the first Getty Museum, which opened in 1974. I visited the museum in 2006, just after a major renovation from its original incarnation, and hated it at first sight. No patination, no gravitas. Kapow! So bright and new, the reds fresh as the day they came out of the can, the yellows too insistent, released from the effects of time. The effect was startling, unsettling and unpleasant. So many bright colours, so many new statues, rooms, fountains, courtyards. It looked like a well-designed McMansion, vulgar and self-important. Nouveau Riche. I yearned to experience it in its old age, tired, ruined, Roman! Lacking antiquity, spared both the enhancements and the ravages of time, it simply looked like a house that one would never – no matter how much money one had – build for oneself, or even consent to visit, unless one were a Roman, way back then.

The Getty villa is not a restoration but a replica, and rather less successful than some other attempts to recreate the past, such as the shockingly beautiful Ishtar Gate at Berlin's Pergamon Museum, which was partly built with materials excavated from the original site. Yet restoration provides us with an analogous set of problems to replication, for if the restorer attempts to return an object to its original state (a topic much in dispute in the profession), they are in danger of making something old look, simply, as if it were new. There was ferocious criticism in 1994, when an over-zealous cleansing of Michelangelo's decorations to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel produced a result so fresh that many people felt that, if the grimy encrustation of time had been stripped from the surfaces, so had the gravitas. The result could have been recently painted by my old neighbour Mr Andrews, if he'd been as talented as he claimed.

And so, alas and rather shamingly, it was him of whom I was thinking on my first visit to the Louvre in 1963, as I approached the *Mona Lisa*. It was hard to get a proper look at it, but from the few bits I could discern it was clearly better than the version that fooled all those curators, in Mr Andrews's living room. On later visits to Paris, in the late 1960s, during my years at Oxford, I always made it a point to pop into the Louvre to revisit the *Mona Lisa*, as if dropping in on a friend. Drawn, in the first instances, by the painting's mystique – the most famous painting in the world! That enigmatic smile, that inimitably captivating presence! – I later came to be more interested in the crowds surrounding it than in the picture itself. These were then stereotyped as 'camera-laden Japanese tourists', but you weren't allowed to take pictures, and only a small percentage of the visitors were Japanese anyway.

It didn't matter where you were from, the behaviour was exactly the same: spectators rising on tiptoes, craning their necks, trying to get a glimpse of her Mona-ness. What these frustrated viewers had in common was simple. Desperate to view they might have been, but few of them seemed to know a damn thing about art. Art wasn't the point. She, herself, that smiling icon, she was the point. The gathered throng had come not to see a painting, but to peer at a celebrity: they were aesthetic paparazzi. The only tragedy was that you were not allowed to get your camera out. What a missed opportunity! To have one's picture taken with such a lady!

The history of the painting is a little obscure, but it most likely dates from Leonardo's residence in Florence between 1503 and 1505. Even by contemporary standards the picture was technically remarkable for its use of sfumato, by which the background dissolves in form, giving a mysterious blending of light and shade, and an unearthly timelessness. Leonardo achieved this effect, according to recent research at the Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France, by applying over forty layers – probably using his fingers rather than a brush – of thin glaze. If you mix this with various pigments, you will eventually get the blurry shadowy quality that can be observed round the Mona Lisa's mouth, and that evanescent smile which seems to come and go: an uncommon example of a smile being wiped not off but onto someone's face. According to the researcher Philippe Walter, 'even today, Leonardo's realisation of such a thin layer remains an amazing feat.'

Yet the smile for which the lady was to become famous did not strike its first onlookers as remarkable. A contemporary manual describing the correct deportment of young ladies

recommends just such a look: 'close the mouth at the right corner with a suave and nimble movement', it advises, 'and open it on the left side, as if you were smiling secretly.' Some years later, Leonardo was to use a similar smile on the faces of his pictures of St Anne (1510) and St John (1516), both of which also hang in the Louvre. Curiously, that expression seems to fit the face of women and men equally well. In fact, a number of commentators, both ancient and modern, have maintained that the reason for La Gioconda's apparent bemusement is that she is actually a self-portrait of the artist in drag – which a computer expert in 1997 claimed he could prove by almost seamlessly superimposing Leonardo's face over that of his supposed subject.

Perhaps this is why Leonardo loved the picture so much that he couldn't bear to relinquish it. He travelled with her as with a mistress – he couldn't keep his hands off her – until, some time in the 1530s, he sold the painting to François I for the enormous sum of about $100,000 in today's money. From that time the portrait was the possession of the kings of France until it was deposited in the Louvre early in the eighteenth century. It became an immediate favourite at the new gallery, and its fame grew as the century progressed.

On the morning of 21 August 1911 the Louvre was closed, as it always was on Mondays. Nevertheless, a staff of over 800 people might be found within the building's massive confines: the museum covers over 49 acres and houses half a million works of art. Some time between 7.00 and 8.30 in the morning – while one of the attendants went for coffee and another was sleeping – someone walked into the Salon Carré, took the *Mona Lisa* off the wall and vanished. Its absence was noted within the hour, but it was assumed

that the painting had been taken to be photographed. As the hours passed, its absence was increasingly remarked: 'Has anyone seen the *Mona Lisa*?' First curiously, then anxiously, then frantically, the question was repeated during the course of the day. Where was it? No, it wasn't being photographed, nor had it been removed for conservation or cleaning, nor were there plans to reframe or rehang it. There was no reason for it not to be there. 'Has anyone seen the *Mona Lisa*?'

Many hours passed before the unthinkable was confirmed. The picture's frame was found in a stairwell, but the lady herself had vanished. 'It was as if someone had stolen one of the towers of Notre Dame', said the museum's Director, Théophile Homolle, as if to suggest that the painting had been equally securely in its place. It hadn't been: security at the Louvre was so lax, and objects disappeared with such frequency, that it was mildly surprising that anything was left there at all.

On Tuesday morning sixty police officers were dispatched, art lovers coming out of the Louvre were searched, railway stations were patrolled. But it was too late; the thief had had too long to get away. Where did he go? Where did she? Who took her? Reports in the newspapers treated the case as an abduction, or a kidnapping, rather than a mere theft.

The police and public were desperate for a quick arrest. Rumours flew about. The picture had been stolen to blackmail the government! Perhaps by a gang! That would do it. And some sort of conspiracy too. An informant calling himself Baron Ignace d'Ormesson approached the *Paris-Journal* newspaper with a story of how, four years earlier, he had regularly stolen objects from the Louvre's Asiatic