Philosophy of art as the meeting point of philosophy and painting: the case of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa

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ABSTRACT

Renaissance philosophical thought is generally characterised as anthropocentric. During this period, a new sense of identity emerged; pride and self-assertion and an awareness of one's own power became distinctive. At the same time, the arts were becoming increasingly important, leading to a cult of beauty, harmony and human creativity. The most famous example of this flowering of individual creative activity in the arts is Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, which despite many interpretations remains one of the most mysterious and inscrutable works of art. This article attempts to trace the correlation between the Mona Lisa's portrait image and the philosophical ideas of the Renaissance. It is not a secret that painting in general contains a certain attitude to its corresponding reality. Moreover, pictorial art tends to represent the philosophical ideas of its time. It conveys them in its own artistic way, rather than in verbal forms. This means that to comprehend things and concepts, we can interpret messages not only written down on paper, but painted on canvas. This philosophical approach to painting highlights the coincidence of ideas in philosophy and art. It is also an example of synchronicity: two completely different fields, although not overlapping in methodology and form

Textus et Studia nr 1(37) 2024, s. 71–89
doi: https://doi.org/10.15633/tes.10103
www.czasopisma.upjp2.edu.pl/textusetstudia

of expression, nevertheless seeming to illuminate one another. In addition, this view can suggest a plausible and fruitful philosophical way of thinking about art.

KEYWORDS: Philosophy of art, pictorial art, Leonardo da Vinci, Mona Lisa, portraiture, Renaissance philosophy

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: filozofia sztuki, malarstwo, Leonardo da Vinci, Mona Lisa, portret, filozofia renesansu

The Renaissance, and the 16th century in particular, was a remarkable time in terms of outstanding works of art, which would take tremendous effort to list. From this point of view, philosophy as such was probably not directly involved in the flowering of the sciences and arts. At the same time, it would be an unforgivable mistake to say that philosophy did not exist at all.

In a broad sense the Renaissance signified a rescue from oblivion of the classical works of Greece and Rome in their influence on science and art, a return to nature, and the evolution of mankind towards individual liberty as a reaction against medieval asceticism[1]. However, the escape from theology did not mean that the scientists decided to abandon the search for truth. That was not it at all. In their works – "experiments"[2] – they also paved way to the knowledge of truth, even if it differed from the previous one, which relied on a speculative method.

In pointing out the close connection between philosophy and art in the Renaissance, it is important to note the words of Francis Bacon from his *Novum Organum*; for man, by the fall, lost at once his state of innocence, and his empire over creation, both of which can be partially recovered even in this life, the first by religion and faith, the second by the arts and sciences[3]. Therefore, art and science were put on a par with each other as things which are in some sense inseparable in order to overcome the original sin.

1 J.W. Lieb, *Leonardo da Vinci – Natural Philosopher and Engineer*, "Journal of the Franklin Institute", 191/6 (1921), p. 767–806.

2 Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* is an example of such "experiments". The name itself comes from the French word "essais", meaning "attempts" or "tests", which shows that this new form of writing did not aim to educate or prove. *The Essays* of Michel de Montaigne were rather exploratory journals.

3 F. Bacon, *Novum Organum*, https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/bacon-novum-organum [access date: 30.01.2023].

For his part, Albrecht Dürer, the greatest German Renaissance painter, wrote in the introduction to his *Treatise on proportions* that the measurement of the earth, water and stars could be better understood through painting, and that many things were also made known to people through it[4]. Dürer in general emphasised the cognitive value of art. It is not without reason that he asked this question in his writings: is the artistic man pious and by nature good? And gave very insightful answer: "he escheweth the evil and chooseth the good; and hereunto serve the arts, for they give the discernment of good and evil"[5].

The above reflections on the relation between art and science by the most brilliant personalities of their time turn out to be in resonance. It can be considered as evidence that art and science, if not directly dependent on each other, at least had a strong correlation. This means that art and philosophy undoubtedly resonated with each other. It is also worth noting that there is no fundamental contradiction between these two reflections, despite the fact that they were given by Francis Bacon and Albrecht Dürer – the philosopher and the painter – each from their own perspective. Both of them highlighted collaborative exploration of the world by means of art and philosophy. This depiction of art as an act of cognition; that it neither imitates nor copies reality as well as philosophy, has not lost its relevance to the present time. In other words, art thinks no less than philosophy, but it thinks through affects and percepts[6].

In the light of the previous points, it should be said that the title philosopher in the Renaissance is not in the used in the same as it is today, but rather it is seen as a title given to a person who is a theoretician, a practitioner, a natural scientist, as well as an artist at the same time. This is due to the fact that an idea loudly proclaimed in antiquity had become relevant again: all human capabilities should be directed towards the research for truth, where art occupied one of the main positions.

4 A. Dürer, *The Writings of Albrecht Dürer*, transl. W.M. Conway, New York 1958, p. 177.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 176.

6 G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Philosophy, Science, Logic, and Art*, transl. H. Tomlinson, G. Burchell [in:] *What Is Philosophy?*, New York 1996, p. 166.

Later, the term "Renaissance man" emerged to describe a sort of all-embracing thinker. *Homo universalis* was characterised by a diverse approach to education, which represented the humanistic ideals of that time[7]. Certainly, one of the most brilliant representatives of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, is described as the epitome of the artist-genius as well as of the "universal man". Leonardo had become a kind of wonder of the modern world, standing at the beginning of a new epoch like a prophet and a sage. He was a man of unquenchable curiosity and a feverishly inventive imagination in both painting and scientific works[8]. Leonardo was a keen searcher after the cause and reasons for the things he saw about him, and his greatest delight was in discovering the fundamental laws which underlie natural and physical phenomena. His philosophical writings extend over the whole realm of speculative and natural philosophy[9].

In general, any Renaissance painter had to have knowledge of various sciences if he wanted to penetrate into the mysteries of nature. Dario Antiseri and Giovanni Reale in *The History of Philosophy* pointed out that Leonardo obviously had such knowledge, but it was impossible to separate the scientist from the artist in Leonardo, because for him painting was a science, moreover, painting was the top of the sciences[10]. Not unexpectedly, Leonardo himself talked about the synergy between philosophy and art. He was convinced that he who despised painting loved neither philosophy nor nature: "If you despise painting, which is the sole imitator of all the visible works of nature, you certainly will be despising a subtle invention which brings philosophy and subtle speculation to bear on the nature of all forms"[11].

Leonardo da Vinci's painting undoubtedly correlates with the nature. Art for him had cognitive value. This connection can be observed both in his art works and writings, in which he made an emphasis using an interesting comparison: "If poetry treats moral philosophy, painting has to do with natural philosophy"[12]. The artist

7 P. Strathern, *The Artist, the Philosopher, and the Warrior* [in:] *The Artist, the Philosopher, and the Warrior: Da Vinci, Machiavelli, and Borgia and the World They Shaped*, New York 2010, p. 32–192.

8 H. Gardner, H. De la Croix, R.G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, New York 1980, p. 526.

9 J.W. Lieb, *op.cit.*

10 D. Antiseri, G. Reale, *Storia della filosofia*, Milano 2008.

11 D.V. Leonardo, *Leonardo da Vinci Notebooks*, Oxford 2008, p. 185.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 190.

thereby used painting to learn about the natural world around him. In this way, each of Leonardo's works is a synthesis of his research, a unique combination of philosophy and art as a means in the search for truth, and the unveiling of the secrets of nature.

As a short digression it is worth quoting the famous "formula" of the Russian religious thinker Prince Evgenii Nikolaevich Trubetskoi: an icon is theology in colour. The main idea behind this original formulation was to demonstrate that an icon represented a certain kind of theological treatise. In his book of the same name, *Icons: Theology in Color*, Trubetskoi wrote that painters and icon painters expressed their artistic conceptions and reflections on Christianity in colours: "They were not philosophers, they were seers, and they put their thoughts into colours, not words"[13]. A parallel can probably be drawn and something similar can be said about the works of Leonardo – "philosophy in colours".

For such an example of "philosophy in colours", it is interesting to look at Leonardo da Vinci's picture of the Mona Lisa. Obviously, the Mona Lisa is by no means an icon in the direct theological sense. Although there are certainly features of artistic "Iconicity" in the painting. Indeed, many works of Western European art are characterised by this unique additional quality[14]. In this sense the Mona Lisa is an iconic work which has had a significant impact on the culture as a whole. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to analyse one of Leonardo da Vinci's most famous pictorial works, the Mona Lisa, to reveal its philosophical content and compare it with the general philosophical ideas of that time.

Note that the ideas of Renaissance philosophy were based primarily on the idea of anthropocentrism. The individual was seen as the centre of the universe, its main value and driving force. It is indicative that in the centre of Michel Montaigne's philosophical searching is not God, but man himself. Moreover, the concept of God is replaced by the concept of nature. There are such phrases

13 E.N. Trubetskoi, *Icons: Theology in Color*, transl. G. Vacar, New York 1973, p. 15.

14 H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, Wheaton: Leicester, England 1994, p. 18.

in his *Essays*: "nature has richly graced you"[15], "the good precepts of our universal mother Nature"[16], and "nature can do all, and does all"[17]. For Montaigne, it is nature that gives birth to, graces and ultimately rules human life. This unconditional appeal to Nature as the cause and source of life pervades his entire work[18].

In generalisation, it can be said that the centre of philosophical research began to shift from God to human beings and their earthly life. The Renaissance implied the exaltation of the human person, and as a consequence of this, increased focus on the individual portraiture emerged in painting. In fact, the foremost figures, who often themselves posed for long periods of time to artists, were usually well-known historical personalities. The painting portrait in the Renaissance had long been connected with the "cult of personality" which originated in the 15th century and provoked people to record their features accurately for the first time since antiquity[19]. Painting, naturally, did not forget Christian themes, just remember Leonardo's Last Supper. However, artists' interest turned to depicting human beings as well. Apparently, the Mona Lisa is also a portrait – probably the most famous portrait in the world[20].

Along with portraiture came what we call art theory today. Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting* was the first treatise that explicitly defined painting as having a status equivalent to one of the Liberal Arts[21]. As a result, painting was theorised, putting it on a par with the rest of the sciences[22].

There is a fact about Leonardo da Vinci's work, also worth mentioning: Leonardo's total output in painting is really rather small; there are less than 20 surviving paintings that can be definitely attributed to him, and several of them are unfinished[23]. It is quite unusual that with such a small number of paintings, most of them are undoubtedly recognised as peerless examples of art. Among these paintings is, without any doubt, the Mona Lisa. Not getting into details of the broad subject matter

15 M. Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, transl. J. Florio, London 1892, p. 211.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 89.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 144.

18 *Ibidem*.

19 N. Mann, L. Syson, *The Image of the Individual: Portraits in the Renaissance*, London 1998, p. 9.

20 H. Gardner, H. De la Croix, R.G. Tansey, *op.cit.*, p. 529.

21 L.B. Alberti, *On Painting*, transl. R. Sinisgalli, Cambridge 2011, p. 79–88.

22 M. Kemp, J. Richards, *The New Painting: Italy and the North* [in:] *The Oxford History of Western Art*, M. Kemp (ed.), Oxford 2000, p. 152–161.

23 L.H. Heydenreich, *Leonardo da Vinci: Biography, Art, Paintings, Mona Lisa, Drawings, Inventions, Achievements, & Facts*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leonardo-da-Vinci [access date: 28.01.2023].

about the study of who the depicted woman really was and for whom the portrait was painted, it is important to underline painting was not just for decoration or to please the eye. Painting was more than art alone. Paintings tended to interpret man and the world in a particular way[24].

In his essay *Metaphysics and Art*, Max Scheler argues that a painting contains a certain view of reality, a philosophy, not expressed in verbal form, nor in the form of discourse, but in its own artistic way. The artist perceives the image, expresses it by means of painting, and at the same time gives it his own interpretation of the surrounding world of ideas. Herewith, the affinity between art and metaphysics cannot hide the fact that language in both philosophy and art functions fundamentally differently, despite the identity of its function in general[25]. The Mona Lisa is quite naturally no exception to this rule. It is not just a portrait of an enigmatic woman, but a view of the world. This perspective coincides with the philosophical ideas and attitudes in which she originated.

Apart from resonating with the mindset of society, works of art reflect and translate the phenomena that are taking place. West European painting is the ultimate in efficacious representation, embodying as they do an undeniable visual truth[26]. There is also no doubt that the Mona Lisa is a masterpiece of fine art: "La Gioconda is, in the truest sense, Leonardo's masterpiece, the revealing instance of his mode of thought and work"[27]. It may then be assumed that she is the emblem of the Renaissance in the fullness of its ideas and creations.

The value of a pictorial art means that its content becomes an object of reflection. Francis Schaeffer argues the artist expresses his view in his work, so it is impossible to perceive an artist's work without having at least some awareness of his views. No one, for example, who understands Leonardo can look at his work without realising something of his respective world views[28]. Moreover, Leonardo da Vinci, among other artists of

24 H.R. Rookmaaker, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

25 M. Scheler, *Metaphysics and Art*, transl. M.S. Frings [in:] *Max Scheler (1874–1928) Centennial Essays*, Dordrecht 1974, p. 101–120.

26 M.A. Hagen, *The Perception of Pictures: Dürer's Devices: Beyond the Projective Model of Pictures*, Cambridge 2014, p. 15–16.

27 W. Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry [the 1893 Text]*, Berkeley 1980, p. 124.

28 F.A. Schaeffer, *Some Perspectives on Art* [in:] *Art and the Bible*, London 2009, p. 49.

his time, expressed a Renaissance form of humanism in his work. Florence[29], for example, where so many excellent works of art were created, was the centre for the study of Neoplatonism[30].

The Renaissance was distinguished by the turn to Platonism, but Platonism entered the period with centuries of layering, i.e., in the form of Neoplatonism with all the magical and Christian infiltrations. Stones, metals, herbs, shells of molluscs as carriers of life and spirit could be used in consideration of their natural properties. Talismans with medicinal purposes were common as well. Charming music, song hymns with single voices or instrumental accompaniment – all these were supposed to contribute in a harmonious way to the beneficial effects of nature on human life. No serious contradictions of all this with Christianity were generally seen: after all, Christ himself was often a healer[31]. On the other hand, the thoughts of enthusiasts throughout the Renaissance were full of aspirations for religious renovation. For Erasmus of Rotterdam, for example, this renewal consisted in shaking off all that was imposed by the force of church authority, and in challenging the scholastics who complicated the simplicity of evangelical truth[32].

In the most general terms, that was the context of the Renaissance, the time in which Leonardo da Vinci lived and created. Clearly, Neoplatonism and other philosophical movements, which formed a particular intellectual and spiritual climate, couldn't have helped but play a role in Leonardo's worldview. Nor is it surprising that all these found its expression in the painting of Mona Lisa.

As much as the Mona Lisa is admired, it has a long-standing reputation as something disturbing and demonic. The latter is habitually associated with her famous smile. Indeed, it is easy to read it as gentle and girlish, but at the same time one can see scepticism and even a sneer in that smile. This ambiguity is readily apparent.

It is important to note that there is no credible evidence that Leonardo himself considered the smile or the

29 According to the British art historian and one of the world's leading authorities on the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci, Martin John Camp, in no sense was Leonardo from Florence, and he was to live there for less than twenty of his sixty-seven years, but if intellectual and artistic ancestry are to count for anything, then he may legitimately be called a child of Florence. The basis for the aspirations which dominated his career had been conceived there by earlier generations of painters, sculptors, architects and engineers, and were generated in his own mind by direct contact with the Florentine masters. M. Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: the Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, Oxford 2006, p. 2.

30 F.A. Schaeffer, *op.cit.*, p. 44.

31 D. Antiseri, G. Reale, *op.cit.*, p. 30–55.

32 *Ibidem*, p. 67–71.

Mona Lisa's face to be anything strange, disturbing or mysterious. Moreover, for Vasari the smile in the portrait was not in any question; no suspicion is to be found in his writings either, rather quite the contrary: "in this portrait by Leonardo, there is a smile so pleasing that it seems more divine than human"[33]. On the other hand, Vasari claims that the level of skill in depicting the woman in this painting was frightening. Anyone who looked very attentively at the hollow of her throat would see her pulse beating, it can be said that portrait was painted in a way that would cause every brave artist to tremble and fear, whoever he might be[34].

Let us pay attention to how Leonardo formulates the overall aim of any artist in his notes: "A good painter has two chief objects to paint, man and the intention of his soul; the former is easy, the latter hard, because he has to represent it by the attitudes and movements of the limbs"[35]. This assertion is important because, according to the artist himself, it was probably not very difficult to portray the external image of the Mona Lisa; it was much more difficult to portray the inner being, that is, the intention of the soul.

This is especially crucial to take a close look at the intentions of the Mona Lisa's soul, because the inner state and intentions emanating from the portrait are much more indicative of an understanding of the ideas of the time than the outer appearance alone. Probably one of the most comprehensive descriptions is given by Walter Pater[36].

First of all, Pater points out that the Mona Lisa is the beauty of the Greek goddesses and beautiful women of antiquity, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed. Here is this great poetic passage:

> It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside

33 G. Vasari, *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci, Florentine Painter and Sculptor [1452–1519]* [in:] *The Lives of the Artists*, J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (eds.), Oxford 1998, p. 294.

34 *Ibidem.*

35 D.V. Leonardo, *op.cit.*, p. 168.

36 Walter Pater (1839–1894) is an English essayist, art critic and literary critic. His first and most often reprinted book *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1877) was taken by many as a manifesto of Aestheticism. In his short biography of Leonardo first published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1869, and later in his collection of essays, *Studies in Renaissance History*, he gives one of the most poetically accurate descriptions of the Mona Lisa.

> one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed![37]

According to this description, the Mona Lisa is embodied beauty tainted by maladies. It would probably not be an overstatement to call these maladies sin. Besides, this sin is also seen to be covered by a "mask" of human appearance. But this image of the beautiful young woman cannot deceive the spectator for a long time. Something terrible about this "malady-sin" is intuitively clear to us, it is captured in the picture.

In this context, it is instructive to add a few remarks about Leonardo's attitude to Christianity. Despite the extensive references to classical antiquity, the Renaissance was not a time of godlessness or paganism. Although in painting there was a great deal of depiction of scenes from the ancient world, the themes of biblical history did not disappear altogether. However, the relationship with the Church, including the artists, did not always succeed.

In matters of religion, Leonardo seems to have been to a considerable extent an agnostic, but his doubts and weak faith and beliefs did not lead him into the kind of "pernicious activity" which led Galileo, Savonarola, Giordano Bruno and others into serious conflicts with the church[38]. There is evidence from Giorgio Vasari of how Leonardo da Vinci was, dying. After lying ill for many months and not long before his death, he wished to be carefully informed about the Catholic faith. Having confessed and repented, he desired to take the most Holy Sacrament out of bed, even though he could not stand upon his feet and had to be supported by his friends[39]. Nevertheless, according to Robert Wallace, Vasari in the first edition of his *Lives of the Painters*, published in 1550, wrote that Leonardo was of such a theoretical frame of mind that he did not adhere to any kind of religion, believing that it is perhaps better to be a philosopher than a Christian[40].

37 W. Pater, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

38 J.W. Lieb, *op.cit.*

39 G. Vasari, *op.cit.*

40 R. Wallace, *The World of Leonardo: 1452–1519*, Boston 1966, p. 166–167.

Therefore, the audience is able to see something in the Mona Lisa that has an evil connotation. They are able to recognise it, but have no way of making a judgment on it. Man has no right to judge. It is solely God's prerogative. The only possible move we can make is reflection, i.e., trying to identify who or what is hiding under the mask.

For instance, Erasmus of Rotterdam in his *Praise of Folly* uncovered, in his philosophical manner, the real faces of those who were hiding behind masks. In this way he was trying to make things appear as they really were. It was his own way of discovering the truth. Here is a splendid passage from his reflections: If a person were to try stripping the disguises from actors while they play a scene upon the stage, showing to the audience their real looks and the faces they were born with, would not such a one spoil the whole play? For at once a new order of things would be apparent. The actor who played a woman would now be seen a man; he who a moment ago appeared young, is old; he who but now was a king, is suddenly an hostler; and he who played the god is a sorry little scrub. Destroy the illusion and any play is ruined[41].

This example of the theatrical masks from *Praise of Folly* may help to reveal what is hidden on the picture. There is no secret that a person's essence is not always defined by their outward appearance. It is the paint and trappings that take the eyes of spectators. In that case, it would be reasonable to claim that the image of this beautiful woman is just a mask that hides something quite different. That is what Erasmus called "destroy the illusion"[42].

In order to remove the illusion it is necessary to pay particular attention to the way in which Walter Pater develops his description of the Mona Lisa: all the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there… the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age… the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias… she is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has

41 D. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, transl. H.H. Hudson, Princeton 2015, p. 37.

42 *Ibidem.*

been dead many times… and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary…[43]

It is quite remarkable how the initial attractiveness and a certain mysteriousness of the image in its interpretation turns out to be a rather grim thing with a disappointing conclusion. On the one hand, we see evil embodied in the beautiful woman – she is the lust of Rome, all the sins of the Borgias, and the vampire, and on the other hand, we see Leda, the mother of Helen of Troy, and Saint Anne, the mother of Mary.

This duality in the description is disconcerting. After all, these are not just two different perspectives, not just simple opposites, because even opposites at some level allow for the presence of each other. Here one excludes the other: "For evil has no nature of its own. Rather, it is the absence of good which has received the name 'evil'"[44].

Follow Leonardo's own advice – "The eyes which are called the window of the soul…"[45] – and look into the Mona Lisa's eyes. This is surprising, strangely enough, but it's not just we, the spectators, who are looking at her, but she is looking at us as well. Her eyes are elongated and slightly narrow. Combined with that smile, it gives the impression of a sneer captured on her face. It looks like the sneer comes from the inside. Seems as if someone is watching from inside this face or from inside the mask. It is not incidental Leonardo remarks that any mask always conceals a lie: "falsehood puts on a mask"[46].

However, in order to expose someone, we need to feel and to know the superiority behind us. Let's not overlook the fact that we are faced with a being who has absorbed the whole world: "all the thoughts and experience of the world"[47]. If that's true, there will be many more masks than just one. There will be an endless number of them.

The worst part is that by taking off these masks, one by one, we will not get to anything. There will probably be an emptiness inside. *Nihil*. This is a well-known

43 W. Pater, *op.cit.*, p. 98–99.

44 Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, transl. R.W. Dyson, Cambridge 1998, p. 461.

45 D.V. Leonardo, *op.cit.*, p. 190.

46 *Ibidem*, p. 245.

47 W. Pater, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

metaphysical problem. Aristotle's famous postulate *nature abhors a vacuum* means that nature has no vacuum, because a dense material continuum would immediately fill the void[48]. It should be noticed that in his texts Leonardo da Vinci refers to this problem. Leonardo claims that nothingness has no centre, and vacuum and nothingness are not the same, for the one is divisible to infinity, and nothingness cannot be divided because nothing can be less than it is[49].

From this we can assume that the Mona Lisa is not just a vacuum that Leonardo, like a creator, filled with paint on a canvas. According to Leonardo, the Mona Lisa is like nothingness. Having absorbed everything, it cannot be divided: "nothingness cannot be divided"[50]. Then the Mona Lisa is not human at all. The outwardly beautiful image is no more than an illusion. There is a mask in the painting that shapes nothingness, centring and creating boundaries for it. Nevertheless, this nothingness successfully imitates real life, i.e., existing. In this sense, it is also worth noting that this unity of being and nothing was pointed out by Hegel[51]. He argued that pure being and pure nothing are therefore the same: "The truth is neither being nor nothing, but rather that being has passed over into nothing and nothing into being. But the truth is just as much that they are not without distinction; it is rather that they are not the same, that they are absolutely distinct yet equally unseparated and inseparable, and that each immediately vanishes in its opposite"[52]. Probably because of the repeated passing back and forth from being to nothing and from nothing to being, the Mona Lisa has a duality.

Besides that, in some sense, the Mona Lisa is the personification of sin in painting. It is not without reason that evil takes all sorts of forms, but it is particularly frightening when evil chooses to take on an attractive image. It becomes an incredibly plausible illusion that is difficult to resist, like the Mona Lisa; by which one can be fascinated. To compare the Mona Lisa to the ancient

48 Aristotle, *Physics*, transl. R. Waterfield, Oxford 1996.

49 D.V. Leonardo, *op.cit.*, p. 260.

50 *Ibidem.*

51 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, transl. G. Di Giovanni, Cambridge 2010, p. 25–335.

52 *Ibidem*, p. 59–60.

goddess Leda and especially to Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, is rather impossible to accept in view of Christianity[53]. It is absolutely unthinkable that either of them would sneer like that. Evil and good cannot coexist in one form.

Following Kant, it would be relevant to ask the question he raises in his *Religion within the bounds of bare reason*: could not someone assert that the human being is by nature neither of the two, but someone else, that he is both simultaneously, namely in some points good, in others evil?[54] The main conflict is based on a disjunction: the human being is either morally good or morally evil. Once again, we face a bifurcation. However, with such ambiguity Kant's maxims run the risk of losing their determinateness and stability.

For Kant, a human being cannot be evil in one respect and good in another. It is a question of the maxim that man accepts. If one has accepted the moral law into one's maxim, which is by definition universal in character, one can no longer accept something contrary to the good, i.e., not accept the moral law into one's maxim, this would simply contradict itself. It is also impossible to accept the moral law in part, because it is an 'either-or' choice. This attitude in regard to the moral law is never indifferent (it is never simultaneously neither of the two, neither good nor evil)[55]. But the question still remains: are we dealing with a human being when trying to understand the Mona Lisa? If the answer is no, then the efforts of the human mind may not be sufficient.

This duality and the combination of the Mona Lisa's outward beauty and inward ugliness have raised questions for more than one researcher, including philosophers. For example, the Russian philosopher Alexey Fedorovich Losev looked at the Mona Lisa through the prism of Renaissance philosophical ideas. Following art historians, he noted that the portrait exhibits purely Renaissance features – clarity of contours, tactile flexibility of lines, sculptural overtones of emotions within the

53 W. Pater, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

54 I. Kant, *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, transl. W.S. Pluhar, Indianapolis 2009, p. 22.

55 *Ibidem*, p. 22–27.

face, and the harmony of a portrait that contradicts and invites to a faraway future with a semi-fantastic landscape. That indeed is the Renaissance, according to Losev[56].

Nevertheless, Losev also could not help but pay his attention to the Mona Lisa's infamous smile. He claimed that if you look into her eyes, you can easily see that she is not smiling at all. It is not a smile, but a predatory face with cold eyes and a distinct knowledge of the helplessness of the victim the Mona Lisa wants to possess[57]. In that case, for Losev, there is hardly a peak of the Renaissance in this demonic smile[58]. Therefore, Losev sees in the Mona Lisa, on the one hand, the undoubted Renaissance individuality expressed in the language of painting in the portrait, but on the other hand, a frightening smile that takes the painting far beyond the Renaissance.

Another impressive description of the Mona Lisa was given by Théophile Gautier[59]. Like many others, Gautier focuses on the Mona Lisa's smile: a veil falls with her hair beside her face, but the expression, wise, deep, velvety, full of promise, attracts you irresistibly and intoxicates you, while the sinuous, serpentine mouth, turned up at the corners, under violet-tinged shadows, mocks you with such sweetness and grace and superiority, that you feel wholly timid[60]. A sinuous and serpentine mouth does not promise anything good. Such images, from a Christian perspective, have rather unambiguous references. Indeed, sin attracts, especially when it has a pleasing appearance, and slowly intoxicates. That is why it is so difficult for human beings to fight evil. In some sense, it is a vicious circle, which is not the easiest to break. It should be added that this characterisation does not diverge much from Walter Pater's description. We are equally touched by what we have seen, images we have seen for a long time, voices that seem so familiar, whispering secret dreams to us; suppressed desires, desperate hopes are painfully brought back to mind[61].

The above views cannot be said to be surprising. It has to be admitted that the Mona Lisa is the infinite work

56 A.F. Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniya*, Moskva 1978, p. 426.

57 *Ibidem*.

58 *Ibidem*, p. 427.

59 Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) is French poet, dramatist, and art and literary critic. His expressive description of the Mona Lisa was first published in *L'Artiste*, the journal of which he was editor. It then featured in his *Les Dieux et les demi-dieux de la peinture* in 1864.

60 T. Gautier, *Les dieux et les demi--dieux de la peinture*, Paris 1864, p. 24–25.

61 *Ibidem*.

of nature. This is a kind of "harmonic contradiction"[62], created by Leonardo as a creator and true polymath. Furthermore, the Mona Lisa is the embodied effect of Renaissance ideas. There is some beautiful, harmonious, natural being – man by nature; the fusion of nature in one being.

The Mona Lisa reigns proudly in the Louvre today, one way or another. This portrait is a magnificent example of its time. It is no accident, no provocation by the artist, nor is there any incompleteness in the painting, at least in the sense of a philosophical reflection of Renaissance ideas. It is a natural outgrowth of the Renaissance, albeit in many ways prophetic – the rise of atheist ideas will not be long in coming. The Mona Lisa has also become a symbol of the fact that fearless entry into a deeply secular world is possible, if one remembers that one can only confront evil having a background in Christianity.

62 A.F. Losev, *op.cit.*, p. 426.

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