

The Renaissance and the Baroque:

A Comparison of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* With Peter Paul Rubens' *The Straw Hat*

Julia E. Benson
ARTS 1692
February 9, 2001

The Renaissance (from roughly 1400 A.D. until the mid-fifteenth century) and the Baroque (the seventeenth century) eras produced some of the best-known artistic works created in the Western world. Though the two periods show pronounced differences in composition, style, and subject matter, they nevertheless share many characteristics in common. In order to understand these similarities and differences, it is helpful to compare works of the two periods.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503-1505) and Peter Paul Rubens' *The Straw Hat* (c. 1620-1625) treat similar subject matter in the style of their respective eras. Both paintings show a young woman in a similar pose, body turned in three-quarter profile with the head slightly turned back toward the viewer. Each woman has her hands folded in front of her. Neither woman gazes directly at the viewer, but rather just to the viewer's right, with a slight smile on her face.

Mona Lisa is reputed to depict the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, and as a result the woman depicted is often referred to as *La Gioconda*, "the Smiling One." The composition of the picture is strictly pyramidal, with the folded arms and hands of La Gioconda forming the base of the pyramid, her arms and shoulders the sides of the pyramid, and her head the apex. The armrest upon which her left arm rests is barely visible, while the armrest support is completely lost in shadow underneath.

Da Vinci's heightened Renaissance-era passion for detail is readily apparent in *Mona Lisa*. The tiniest details of the folds of the figure's gown, as well as the fine details of the rocks in the background, particularly those closest to the viewer, are precisely, painstakingly painted. Even the patterning of the braid at the neckline of the gown is clearly visible as the figure is examined.

The entire picture appears bathed in a smoky mist due to da Vinci's masterful use of sfumato to define the light and shadows of both image and background. The lighting of the entire picture is subdued, yet very natural. Highlights and shadows appear naturalistic, and realistically define the face and form of the Mona Lisa. However, her dark clothing tends very much to blend into the dimly lit background, unifying the composition in a very typically Renaissance fashion.

Despite the sfumato, the details of the landscape behind La Gioconda are easily seen, as is typical for this time. Da Vinci's use of linear perspective is subtle due to the lack of distinct reference lines, but present nonetheless as the viewer looks back into the landscape and easily locates the vanishing point behind the figure's head. The mountains in the distance, the waterway running behind the left side of the figure, and the road and aqueduct in the near foreground are distinct despite the mists and add interest to the overall picture.

La Gioconda herself is a mysterious figure, most frequently described as "enigmatic" by scholars. She is simply and conservatively dressed, with her hair modestly covered with a gauzy veil. Her gaze is straightforward. She is a woman with nothing to hide, as seen in her direct gaze and her hands, folded in front of her but both clearly visible. She appears chaste and reserved, restrained, almost otherworldly – in short, an woman exhibiting the qualities of the Renaissance "ideal" woman as exemplified by the Virgin Mary.

Rubens' future sister-in-law, Susanna Fourment, is the subject of *The Straw Hat*. She stands in such a way as to give a somewhat pyramidal composition as well, with folded arms forming the base of the pyramid, arms and head the sides and apex

respectively. In fact, this composition is so reminiscent of the *Mona Lisa* that the viewer wonders if Rubens was familiar with da Vinci's painting and deliberately set up his composition this way.

However, Rubens' composition is broken in two ways. The hat atop her head, set at a jaunty diagonal, adds a new line cutting off the top of the pyramid. Also, the billowing-out of her skirt, barely seen below her folded arms, gives the impression of a second, truncated pyramid hiding beneath the first.

Rubens shows the typical Baroque free brushstrokes in his painting. This is most clearly seen in the details of Fourment's dress and hat. The lace at her cuff and the feathers on her hat are obviously recognizable, but the fine details are obscured by the flowing brushwork typical of that style.

As opposed to da Vinci's sfumato, Rubens uses the customary Baroque method of strongly contrasting lights and shadows to emphasize and highlight areas of his image. The lighting on Fourment herself is still, in this case, naturalistic, with shadows and highlights where expected, but the contrasts are far greater than those in the *Mona Lisa*. The strong coloring of Fourment's clothing and the contrast of color and texture between fabric and skin serve further to make her stand out as a focal point.

Additionally, the contrast in value between foreground and background in Rubens' work is far more pronounced than in da Vinci's painting. While the background of *The Straw Hat* is as smoky and mysterious as in the *Mona Lisa*, it is far less distinctly described. Background, for Rubens as for many Baroque artists, is decidedly subordinate to the main focus of the work. The background of this work is simply an indistinctly drawn cloudbank with wisps of blue sky barely peeking through. With no distinct images

in the background to serve as a reference point, linear perspective is clearly ignored in this composition. The viewer's eye is unequivocally drawn to the figure in the foreground; the background becomes an afterthought and never really attracts the viewer's interest.

Susanna Fourment depicts a different woman entirely from La Gioconda. Her attire is designed to emphasize her voluptuous figure and to attract the attention of those around her. While the large hat she wears mostly hides her hair, flyaway wisps of hair peek out from under its brim. The feathers atop her hat and the frills of her dress echo this loose, untamed quality. Given Rubens' well-known penchant for "lusty" women, these may well imply something about her character. Furthermore, Fourment's gaze is seductive rather than straightforward. Although her hands are folded in front of her, she hides the left hand behind the right, in a fold of her sleeve, implying that she has secrets that she isn't telling us. This woman is far from otherworldly! She appears knowing, sexual, unrestrained and unreserved – very much the opposite of La Gioconda, in short.

Two women, two artists, two viewpoints from two eras – two very different paintings result. The *Mona Lisa* gives a typical Renaissance portrayal of the idealized woman: restrained, classically influenced, and technically and compositionally perfect. *The Straw Hat* portrays a Baroque-era woman as she actually existed, subordinating composition and technique to the expressiveness and true portrayal of the subject.

Personal note: I must add that, of the two women, I would much rather meet Susanna Fourment -- she looks like a far more **interesting** person than La Gioconda!