

## Psychiatry and the media

### Mona in the mirror

Following the publication of this article by Digby Quedest in the *Psychiatric Bulletin* 1992, 16, 754–756, there appeared in the *Times* of 14 December a news report on the front page and a leading article which is reprinted below.

#### THAT CERTAIN SMILE

##### The mystery of the Mona Lisa must be unexplained

The lady is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times and learnt the secrets of the grave . . . But what is her secret, and why is she smiling in that disturbing way?

The enigma on the face of the Mona Lisa has excited detective and exegetic instincts since her paint was just dry five centuries ago. Viewers have found there everything from maternal tenderness to the pitiless archaic smile, from the essence of fulfilled womanhood to the sly triumph of a Borgia who has just slipped exotic seasoning into the soup. In spite of her continental nickname, jocund does not exactly fit that sinister leer. She is an ambiguous painting, which does not give everything away, and to which everyone can bring a particular obsession. Characteristically, Freud found sex in *La Gioconda*, the contrast between reserve and seduction, “consuming men as if they were alien beings”.

The latest theory, from a psychiatrist who has a record of such historico-artistic detection, is that she is a self-portrait by Leonardo. This is not quite new. X-rays of the painting have shown a beard beneath the surface. The new suggestion is that she is a mirror image; and transposing the picture in a mirror certainly warms up that disturbing smile and makes it look remarkably like the half-smiling statue of David by Verrochio, for which the young Leonardo is thought to have been the model. The suggestion is that Leonardo, who was left handed and probably homosexual, used his own face in the mirror as his model for a self-portrait in inversion, both laterally

and sexually. The tradition is that he was infatuated with the Mona Lisa, and kept her with him until his death in Paris.

Nothing about a great painting is un-interesting. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the heart of an artistic mystery can be plucked out by such literal detective work. Among the arts of reason is to know when reason must stop.

There is a mystery too about the reflection of the Rokeby Venus in her mirror. Nobody knows what the naked mother, baby and the young soldier are up to in Giorgione’s “*La Tempesta*” except that an idyll of beauty is about to be swept away by the storm. For centuries critics have been arguing about what the Venus de Milo is actually doing.

Adrian Gilbert was fat, and fond of deer-poaching and sack, “the greatest buffoon in England”, according to Aubrey. He may have been a model for Falstaff, but Falstaff he was not. Dr Joseph Bell, the Edinburgh professor, could tell his patients’ occupations from their faces. But he was only one influence on the creation of Sherlock Holmes. It does not explain the mystery of the Sonnets to show that Shakespeare was the Earl of Oxford, or even Elizabeth I, just as it does not entirely unwrap the *Odyssey* to suggest that it was written by a woman.

Ambiguity, ambivalence and mystery are characteristics of great works. Art must transcend experience. The secret of the Mona Lisa’s smile is safe for eternity.

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