

# Essay on art appreciation

[Art & Culture](#), [Painting](#)



## **Abstract**

In this essay, two Renaissance paintings are compared in terms of their form, subject matter, and content. Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa and Raphael's Madonna and Child are both seen to have incredible depictions of contemplative, enigmatic women interacting with nature, thus indicating a serenity with their surroundings. However, while the Mona Lisa directs her attention to the audience, inviting them to revel in her beauty and the glory of nature, Madonna and Child directs that same serenity and beauty from the woman onto the baby and the book that she is holding. This indicates a slight separation from nature, while still respecting its beauty.

In the world of Renaissance paintings, there are many fine examples of brilliant art which capture tremendous depth of form and message, while conveying the era in which they were created. In this essay, two Renaissance paintings - the Mona Lisa and Madonna and Child - will be analyzed in terms of their form, their subject matter, and content. While Mona Lisa has a more direct connection with its audience, bringing them into the conversation about nature, Madonna and Child shows an image of humans somewhat distant from nature, focusing slightly more on the tenets of civilization and spirituality.

Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa is a two-dimensional Renaissance painting that was completed in the early 1500s; it is an oil painting on a poplar panel. The painting is rife with soft browns and blues on the face of Lisa and the river behind her, as well as some greens and grays in the landscape and her clothing. Her robes, finally, have some greys and blacks in them, to

emphasize the fairness of Lisa's complexion and complement her hair.

Curves are used extensively in this work, as Lisa's curved body moves with the roads and mountains behind her, providing a smooth balance between the woman and her surroundings. The use of sfumato allows Lisa to have a more lifelike, real appearance (Gombrich, 2011).

The Mona Lisa carries with it an incredible amount of subject matter despite its rather abstract, simplistic subject. The painting literally depicts a woman, with an enigmatic smile on her face, sitting upright against a sweeping vista of mountains and rivers. While the Mona Lisa may seem like a mere portrait of a woman, the beauty of the painting itself (as well as the harmony found between the woman herself and the environment she sits in front of) indicates that it is representational of a sort of satisfaction or connection between man and nature. The muted colors indicate a relative distance between Lisa and the vista behind her, as the use of aerial perspective leaves the surroundings looking as though they stretch on for miles and miles. The lightness of Lisa's face and the river behind her is sharply contrasted with the blacks of her robes, and what looks like dark clouds roaming high in the sky.

With this in mind, the content of the painting seems to imply man's coexistence with nature as an ideal that must be achieved. Da Vinci wanted to paint Lisa as being at peace with her surroundings, hence the slight smile on her face as a symbol of this peaceful harmony. da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa as a portrait for Lisa del Giocondo, the wife of a wealthy businessman in Florence, to put in her home. In this way, da Vinci is both keeping an

historical record of her visage while giving form to the enigmatic peace of man and nature.

The Mona Lisa provides a very personal and unique connection between the audience and the nature behind Lisa. Being a portrait, Lisa's eyes stare nearly directly out at the viewer; this catches the eye, and elicits a personal link to the woman, who seems to be inviting the viewer into her world and into nature itself. This is a stark contrast to Madonna and Child, wherein the two figures contained within the painting are focused on something else entirely, ignoring the viewer.

Madonna and Child (Madonna Conestabile) is a two-dimensional painting by Raphael completed in 1520. It is a tempera painting on canvas, transferred from a wood panel. In this painting, compared to the Mona Lisa, much brighter colors are used - bright reds and blues are found on the clothes of the Madonna, and the blues and greens of the landscape in the background are much more prominent than in the Mona Lisa's background. Then again, the muted colors of da Vinci's painting convey a sense of greater distance to those mountains and rivers, while the rolling hills behind the Madonna are thought to be immediately behind her. The painting itself is a small, circular image, which helps to emphasize the flowing figures; the painting style is also quite gentle and soft, to exemplify how delicate the world and its inhabitants are.

Like the Lisa, Madonna and Child uses curved lines to convey a sultrier, more aesthetically pleasing and romantic appearance; the straight lines of the thin, leafless trees in the background break up the gently rolling hills, which

overlap each other, while a small lake rests to Madonna's left, behind her. As for the Madonna herself, a slight expression of sadness, though with hints of the same enigmatic smile of Lisa, is seen as she and the Child look at a book, contemplating it.

This work of art is meant to be representational, just like the Mona Lisa; it demonstrates a unique sense of harmony between man and nature, with an element of Christian spirituality brought into the equation through the use of the Madonna and Child. The expression on the Madonna's face is one of peace and contemplation, though not without sorrow. The Child's face matches the Madonna's expression, the eyes expressing a world-weariness and a satisfaction with the book and His surroundings.

Madonna and Child is meant to be representative of the glory of God and the Child's place in His world. While the beauty of nature is acknowledged, the emphasis is placed on civilization, knowledge and spirituality. The book is indicative of all of these ideals - modernization, the sacred, all things meant to elevate man above animals. By placing the focus of all characters on the book (and those characters being the Madonna and the baby Jesus), it demonstrates the direction man is taking towards distancing oneself from nature and into the realm of civility. At the same time, the transparent nature of beauty surrounds them, which makes the Madonna's lack of attention to it even more poignant. The function of the artwork was to demonstrate the glory of God in His world; it was sold to Alexander II, who presented it to his wife. It was also Raphael's last painting before he moved to Florence from Umbria. In this respect, the artist's role was to give form to

an intangible idea, demonstrating the love the Madonna has for her Child, as well as the role of nature in man's increasing development toward civilization.

Both Mona Lisa and Madonna and Child exemplify the time period in which they were painted. The Renaissance was a time of glorification and beauty, wherein the simple pleasures and innovations of man were complemented by a respect for nature. As the Renaissance was indicative of a resurgence of Classical antiquity, these two paintings follow that philosophy with curved, elegant lines, while still willing to be dark and secular (in the case of Mona Lisa). Madonna's contemplation of the book would not have been as possible before the Renaissance, as movable type and mass printing had just been invented at the beginning of the 15th century. These aspects and more help to showcase the sheer Renaissance spirit of these paintings.

In conclusion, the Mona Lisa and Madonna and Child discuss the relationship between mankind and nature, using symbolism and a similar color contrast to depict these interactions. Both feature enigmatic, powerful women in control of their surroundings, but Mona Lisa seems to take a more secular, personal approach while Madonna and Child focuses primarily on the child Himself. Both paintings discuss the harmony of man and nature in a powerful way, as exemplified by the relationship between the painting's subject and their surroundings. The addition of the child in Raphael's work, however, shifts the focus somewhat from the mother to the child. While Lisa's focus is on the audience, daring them to accept the harmony of man and nature, Madonna focuses that love for nature into a more religious, sacred context.

In fact, Madonna and her child separate themselves to a greater degree from nature, as the attention of both figures in the painting is focused on the book. While Mona Lisa celebrates nature and the viewer is invited to join it, Madonna and Child demonstrates an outward harmony with nature that involves a greater distance, instead leaning into the realm of spirituality and civilization.

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