

Compare and  
contrast: leonardo da  
vinci's mona lisa and  
pablo picasso's  
seated wo...



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The two works of art chosen for this exercise are - Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa and Pablo Picasso's Seated Woman (Marie Therese). Both these works are masterpieces of visual art and exemplify the defining features of their respective movements. What is common between them is that they are both portraits of women. But the sense of aesthetics is distinct between the two.

There are several reasons why Mona Lisa's appeal to art lovers has endured through five centuries and superseding art movements. The enigmatic, inviting yet warm hint of a smile of the model is a constant source of discussion and debate. The artistic sensibilities and the cultural preoccupations of the High Renaissance are witnessed in the work. That Leonardo da Vinci was a polymath with a keen interest in the sciences inform a reading of Mona Lisa. For example, the intricate detail, complexity and the multiple perspectives applied to the work is typical of High Renaissance art and also da Vinci's style. The intellectual rigor of his endeavors in the fields of optics, engineering, biology and aeronautics are brought to bear on the technical approach to painting the Mona Lisa. For, unlike Picasso's spontaneous and quick creations (including the Seated Woman), da Vinci's approach to his art was highly meticulous. But he was also highly experimental with his art, which led to ground-breaking innovations as in Mona Lisa.

Pablo Picasso's 1937 masterpiece Seated Woman (Marie Therese) is aesthetically far removed from da Vinci's great work. One of the leading proponents of Cubism, Picasso's emphasis is in deconstructing three-dimensional real-life visuals into the realm of two-dimensionality. Whereas graceful curves and soft lighting are central features of Mona Lisa, the <https://assignbuster.com/compare-contrast-leonardo-da-vincis-mona-lisa-and-pablo-picassos-seated-woman-marie-therese/>

Seated Woman is defined by sharp straight lines and abrupt changes in color. The personal relationship of the muse to the artist always has a bearing in the nature of the art work. This is applicable to the two works in discussion as well. In the case of Mona Lisa, the model Lisa Gherardini is the wife of Francesco del Giocondo - the latter commissioning the work. Hence the model was no more than a formal acquaintance to the artist in this case. In contrast, Marie Therese was a long-term mistress to Picasso. This accounts for the impression of greater intimacy in Seated Woman. The fact that the artist was in love with his muse adds an intangible layer to the work, which is evident in the Seated Woman. The painting carries a sense of harlequinade - the stark bright bands of color are so placed that the dress appears like a costume. A measure of a work of art's quality is it's openness to multiple interpretations. The Seated Woman certainly offers more than one. For example, a cursory glance at the image reminds one of the Queen from a deck of playing cards. The interspersed stripes and color bands accentuate this impression.

Coming to technical details, Mona Lisa is done with oil on a poplar panel. It was believed to have been created by Leonardo da Vinci in the first decade of the 16th century. What is so path-breaking about the painting is how it convergences the genre of landscape with portraiture. The facial expression, clothing, hair and body language of the model are much scrutinized in scholarship. An equal scholarly scrutiny should be accorded to what is in the background of the model. Normally, portraits are set within the premises of the house and might include the furniture, walls, flower-vases, windows, curtains or other usual domestic accompaniments. Where Mona Lisa stands

out with respect to early 16th century style of art is its bold mixing of the genre of landscape painting with that of conventional portraiture. But these two aspects of the work, rather than compete or negate the overall effect, actually prove complementary. The rich individual complexity of the model in the foreground is heightened by a corresponding geographic complexity that is in the background. The unbounded terrain of valleys, rivers and rugged mountain tops add to the enigma and aura of Lisa. The vague outlines applies to the background geography is resonant with the underplayed outlines in Lisa's visage - especially her eyebrows, eyelids and corners of mouth. The effervescent lighting that illuminates Mona Lisa's face finds its echo in the distant glare of snowy mountain tops.

The positioning of the hands in both the portraits suggests the attitude of the poser. In the Seated Woman, the right hand, bent at the elbow crosses the torso and is rested on the arm-rest. The left hand is likewise bent at the elbow but is held near the head, giving an impression of contemplation. The body language is also indicative of a quiet authority exerted by the model (Marie Therese). Consistent with the aesthetic principles of Cubism, the features are distorted and their shapes and sizes are disproportionate to what is real. What is conspicuous by its absence is the feminine grace - a feature amply present in Mona Lisa. The folded yet relaxed hands of Lisa indicate modesty and virtue; it can also be interpreted as Lisa having a reserved disposition. The flowing hair is a mark of Lisa's sensuality. In these respects, Leonardo's work is a showcase of a traditional portrait. But what gives it import as a cornerstone in the evolution of art is the expansive backdrop he chooses for the painting.

In order to fully appreciate the Seated Woman, the nature of relationship between the artist and his muse is necessary. Marie Therese had been Picasso's secret mistress for seven long years between 1927 and 1935. She was just 17 years old when the secret liaison began, whereas he as 45 years old at the time. Hence, youth and youthfulness is a theme evident in all the portraits of Marie Therese, where she is invariably depicted as having a bright disposition. The blonde hair is symbolic of the allure of youth. In contrast, since Mona Lisa was professionally commissioned by one of the aristocratic patrons of da Vinci, the latter could not take many liberties in terms of technique. Hence Leonardo adopted a formal pyramid design to place the subject at the center of the frame. The light embracing her face, arms, neck and chest are all directed from the same source. There is a subtle geometric symmetry of circles and spheres in the painting. The manner in which da Vinci uses the armchair is quite different to that of Picasso. The former uses it mainly to distance the viewer from the subject, while latter employs it for symbolism, as in the chair 'caging' or 'locking up' the subject.