

CHAT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FROM THE LEONARDO PRESENTATION

PLUS A VERY INTERESTING ARTICLE, AT THE END

COMPILED BY HOWIE BAUM

- 1) **Interesting Comment:** The Art Museum is having a special exhibit this summer on the art work from the Monument Men.

Another related comment: Walter Farmer from Cincinnati was a key person in the Monument men.

Here are 2 links that relate to the Monument Man –

Link to a great article about the movie:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Monuments_Men

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rescuing_Da_Vinci

- 2) **Interesting Comment:** Cincinnati's own Genius of Waters on Fountain Square was cast from surplus Danish military cannons.

- 3) **Interesting Comment:** I was sent links for 2 videos that you might enjoy watching and an interesting magazine article:

- A) Asian woman using makeup to look like Mona Lisa
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuVLA6HC4pM>

- B) Same woman who uses makeup to become the Lady with an Ermine
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_r24Z-QBgo

- C) A man and his daughter who dress up like Leonardo and Mona Lisa (shown at the end of the questions and answers)

- 4) After seeing Michelangelo and Da Vinci by you, do you have any comparison or contrast to share?**

Michelangelo and Da Vinci stood out as strong and mighty-personalities with two irreconcilably opposed attitudes to art - yet there was a bond of deep understanding between them.

Da Vinci was 23 years older than Michelangelo and each had his own set vision about art.

Their fierce independence led to clashes whenever circumstances, such as simultaneous commissions for cartoons of the Palazzo Vecchio, brought them face-to-face.

For more details about them, read the article at <https://www.michelangelo.org/michelangelo-and-da-vinci.jsp>

AN INTERESTING ARTICLE FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE

Valter Conti, strolling through one of Florence's narrow alleyways, began posing as Leonardo da Vinci in 1990. He enjoys the silent anonymity of working as an impersonator.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAOLO WOODS AND GABRIELE GALIMBERTI

BYCLAUDIA KALB

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The old and the new live in tandem in Florence, Italy. Electric cars zip down centuries-old cobblestone streets. Vendors type out texts while displaying their wares on the Ponte Vecchio. Tourists decked in t-shirts, shorts, and Apple Watches feast on gelato under Brunelleschi's famous dome.

Still, there's something startling about witnessing the Renaissance come alive before one's eyes—as it does when Leonardo da Vinci checks his cellphone or Mona Lisa leans out from her frame to take a sip of apple juice.



At Florence's Café Rivoire, Conti sips an espresso while resting his feet. His costume is modeled after a 19th century sculpture of Leonardo that stands outside Florence's Uffizi Gallery.

This is standard fare for artistic impersonators Valter Conti and his daughter Elena Pinori who masquerade as Italy's majestic painter and his most famous subject. At least three days a week, Conti spends two hours dressing to look like a statue of the artist that stands outside the Uffizi Gallery. This requires affixing shoulder-length hair and a wavy beard made out of cotton and acrylic paint; donning a white robe and beret hat; and applying thick white makeup to his face, including his eye lids and lips.

Pinori requires similar time to transform herself into "La Gioconda," the name Italians use to refer to the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, who is believed to be the portrait's sitter. Replicating Leonardo's artistry requires exceptional skill and patience, says Pinori. That's because the artist's famed sfumato technique—a blurring of outlines—gives the painting an ethereal quality that is exceedingly hard to mimic on a sentient face. ([Why Leonardo's genius endures 500 years after his death.](#))





Left: Conti applies white facial makeup under fluorescent light in a back-street storage room in Florence, where he spends two hours getting ready for his day.

Right: Conti enjoys working with his daughter, Elena Pinori, who brings Leonardo's iconic painting to life. Pinori has mastered her makeup to resemble the face of Mona Lisa or "La Gioconda," as she is known in Italy.

Conti, 58, often works alone in Florence, but it is far more entertaining when 47-year-old Pinori—whom Conti adopted as a child when he married her mother—joins him. Together, the pair's impersonations are convincing enough to startle admirers. One day, when Conti shifted positions he so alarmed a French tourist she stepped back, tripped, and fell to the ground. Rushing over to see if she was ok didn't help; the woman became so fearful she could barely speak. Leonardo springing to life in 2019? Was he *that* talented?



Conti occasionally exits the Renaissance to check cell phone messages. Here, he takes a break in front of Florence's famous Ponte Vecchio along the Arno River.

Although their work depends on remaining motionless, Renaissance impersonation requires significant physical endurance. Conti and Pinori must hold their poses for much of the six to eight hours they perform, despite costumes and makeup that can be stifling on hot summer days. Conti's heavily painted lips make it difficult to speak; when he does, his makeup wears off and must be reapplied. Pinori, for her part, needs to appear unceasingly relaxed, sustaining Mona Lisa's beguiling smile and wandering eyes without revealing any other expressions on her face. "This is very difficult," she says.

The payoff, however, is immensely satisfying. Tourists from New York to Tokyo stop to look and take souvenir photos, which gives Conti an opportunity to hand out hundreds of leaflets he stores in a book that is part of his costume. These contain words Conti attributes to Leonardo ("Painting is a poem that can be seen and not heard, and poetry

is a painting that is felt and can not be seen”) as well as Conti’s own enigmatic theories about money, which he calls his “Da Vinci Code of Economy.”



Conti and Pinori pose for countless souvenir photos with enamored tourists outside the Uffizi Gallery. The buckets at their feet and the basket on Pinori’s frame are for donations.

Pinori’s portrayal of Mona Lisa, meanwhile, allows her to animate an artwork that is otherwise inaccessible. The real Mona Lisa, crafted in the early 1500s, is small (barely 2.5 feet by 2 feet) and protected behind thick bulletproof glass at the [Louvre Museum in Paris](#). Tourists jostle to get close, but a railing keeps everyone several feet away from the painting—except for National Geographic photographers Paolo Woods and Gabriele Galimberti, who received permission to spend several hours up close while taking pictures, albeit it under guard. An alarm threatened to sound if they got too near the glass and security officials, ready to pounce, stood nearby.

Many tourists who make the trek to the Louvre barely get a glimpse of La Gioconda’s venerated smile before turning their backs to take a celebrity art selfie before someone nudges them out of the way. One Brazilian woman, who successfully got her snapshot, likened Mona Lisa to the Supreme Pontiff: “She’s like the Papa.”

Pinori’s impersonation brings a live version of this iconic figure to the people. She pays special attention to details that are alluring to viewers: Mona Lisa’s smoky eyes and the thin strip of veil at the top of her forehead. And she and Conti also provide a welcome diversion from the checklist of inanimate tourist destinations in Florence: museums and churches. The best moments are when Pinori sees people react positively to what she and Conti are doing. Their smiles, she says, “light up with light.”

Like any job, Renaissance reenactment has its low points. On occasion, Pinori has to put up with lewd jokes from passersby. And because Conti and Pinori rely on public donations, they have no dependable income. When rain soaks the city streets, as it did

for much of the month of May, tourists evaporate. On a typical day, they might earn 50 to 150 euros (about \$55 to \$170 US); on a bad day, that number drops to 30 euros (about \$34 US) or less.

This year, however, promises to be an exceptional year for Leonardo lovers. Tourist numbers are already higher than ever; the most recent statistics show that 10 million tourists visited Florence in 2017—more than 25 times the city’s population. And with 2019 marking the [500th anniversary of the artist’s death](#) in 1519, the place where Leonardo launched his artistic journey is an ever more tempting destination.

This bodes well for Conti and Pinori, who perform outside the [Uffizi](#) in front of a vast image advertising the gallery’s new Leonardo Room on the second floor. The scene is art at its most surreal: Impersonators acting out Leonardo and the Mona Lisa; a looming backdrop photograph featuring Leonardo’s painting, *Adoration of the Magi*; and sightseers traipsing by in running shoes who may—or may not—go inside to see Leonardo’s original work. ([Read why some of Leonardo's work is still being completed today.](#))

One recent Saturday afternoon, the pair took a break and sat on stone steps in front of one of Florence’s formidable wooden doorways lit by the afternoon sun to unwind and banter about their craft.

Neither one identifies as a person of the Renaissance, nor do they claim the 21st century as their own. Conti sees himself as man of the future; Pinori, a self-proclaimed hippie, says she would have liked to live in the time of “flower power.”

Still, becoming Leonardo and Mona Lisa provides a unique brand of emotional gratification. Conti studied music as a student, but found performing in a public space “too wild.” Impersonation allows him silent anonymity, he says, which he prefers. Pinori, who lives in Pisa and has also worked as a model and actress, is passionate about art and finds it rewarding to animate historical figures and imagine their stories. “It’s beautiful,” she says. “I can be many lives and many people.”

Both Pinori and Conti intend to continue reinventing themselves.

Pinori’s other characters include Venus, from [Botticelli’s Primavera](#) painting, and Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddess of love and war. Conti is now working on a costume for [Galileo Galilei](#), which he plans to introduce next year when a total solar eclipse is expected to darken parts of the southern hemisphere—a prominent time for astronomers.

In his extraordinary sketches, Leonardo often leaped to the future; Galileo, born in 1564, several decades after Leonardo’s death, turned his telescope to the skies. Conti and Pinori take us back in time instead, enlivening a medley of former lives that brighten not only their own souls, but also the spirits of those around them.