

The Miami Herald

Posted on Fri, Sep. 16, 2011

Mona Lisa exhibit questions long held beliefs

By Jon Silman



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Miami Dade College students Niouseline St. Jean and Jorge Charadan check out A Reason to Smile by artist Seward Johnson at Mona Lisa Unveiled. The exhibition displays the history of the painting by Leonardo da Vinci and the contemporary perspective on the work including Johnson's at the Freedom Tower in downtown Miami.

Perhaps what keeps them coming back is the mystery.

The Mona Lisa, one of history's most famous paintings, is the current subject of an exhibit at the Miami Dade College Freedom Tower in Miami. The exhibit — divided in two parts — features the historical aspects of the original and more contemporary reinterpretations.

"When you stare into her face it's kind of like you expect not to be moved by it," said Wanda Texon, Associate director of MDC's art gallery system. "But there's something about her features and pose that you can't delineate. It just grabs you."

That's part of what makes the painting so interesting. Good art raises questions, an

exhibit of art about the Mona Lisa multiplies those questions by 10. The painting is believed to be completed in the beginning of the 16th century, and purported to be the portrait of the wife of a wealthy silk merchant, but that explanation, although widely accepted, is also completely boring.

"It's one mystery on top of another about who the model was and when it was painted, and, you know, 500 years is a long time," Texon said.

Other theories? She's a woman of the night. She's pregnant. It's his mother. It's Leonardo da Vinci himself, etc. But one of the most ignitable theories is that it's a portrait of a man who was not only da Vinci's apprentice, but his lover, Texon said.

Sculptor Seward Johnson's installation, A reason to smile, plays with this idea by showing a seated Mona Lisa behind a facade with hairy man legs.

Gian Giacomo Caprotti, also known as Salai, or Little Devil, inherited all of da Vinci's works after his death, including the Mona Lisa. In fact, the exhibit's flagship painting is a 16th century painting called Nude Gioconda, thought to be conceived by da Vinci and painted in collaboration with Salai.

Along with exploring the chronology of the painting, the exhibit also covers its modern day resurgence. When the painting was stolen from the Louvre in 1911, it shot back to the forefront of popular culture. Often thought to be larger than it is, the painting was tucked under a coat by a museum employee, but was later recovered. The exhibit features some of the day's newspaper covers of the theft.

Some of the contemporary works skewer the piece, and the contrast between the older and newer ones is striking and comical. There's the dino Lisa painting called The Mona Lisasaurus, the brain face Mona called Cerebralisa, and of course, the Salvador Dali impression of the painting complete with Dali's signature pencil mustache.

The exhibit is on loan from the Museo Ideale Leonardo da Vinci in Florence, Italy, and was created by its director Alessandro Vezzosi and Agnese Sabato, president of the museum's international association.

"There's a lot of mystery behind it," said Isabel Arias, 17, who was visiting the museum with her friend Tiffany Yanez for a humanities class at MDC. "They don't know if she's smiling or sad."

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