On and off, during the years 1503-6, Leonardo Da Vinci painted the portrait of Mona Lisa -- i.e., Madonna Elisabetta, third wife of Francesco del Giaconda, who in 1512 was to be a member of the Signory.

Presumably a child of Francesco, buried in 1499, was one of Elisabetta’s children, and this loss may have helped to mold the serious features behind La Gioconda’s smile. That Leonardo should call her back to his studio so many times during those three years; that he should spend upon her portrait all the secrets and nuances of his art modeling her softly with light and shade, framing her in a fanciful vista of trees and waters, mountains and sky -- clothing her in raiment of velvet and satin woven into folds whose every wrinkle is a masterpiece -- studying with passionate care the subtle muscles that form and move the mouth -- bringing musicians to play for her and to evoke upon her features the disillusioned tenderness of a mother remembering a departed child: these are inklings of the spirit in which he came to this engaging merger of painting and philosophy. A thousand interruptions, a hundred distracting interests, the simultaneous struggle with the Anghiari design, left unbroken the unity of his conception, the unwonted pertinacity of his zeal.

This, then, is the face that launched a thousand reams upon a sea of ink. Not an unusually lovely face; a shorter nose would have launched more reams; and many a lass in oil or marble -- as in any Correggio -- would by comparison make Lisa only moderately fair. It is her smile that has made her fortune through the centuries -- a nascent twinkle in her eyes, an amused and checked upcurving of her lips.

What is she smiling at? The efforts of the musicians to entertain her? The leisurely diligence of an artist who paints her through a thousand days and never makes an end? Or is it not just Mona Lisa smiling, but women, saying to all men: “Poor impassioned lovers! A Nature blindly commanding continuance burns your nerves with an absurd hunger for our flesh, softens your brains with a quite unreasonable idealization of our charms, lifts you to lyrics that subside with consummation -- and all that you may be precipitated into parentage! Could anything be more ridiculous? But we too are snared; we women pay a heavier price than you for your infatuation. And yet, sweet fools, it is pleasant to be desired, and life is redeemed when we are loved.”

Or was it only the smile of Leonardo himself that Lisa wore -- of the inverted spirit that could hardly recall the tender touch of a woman’s hand, and could believe in no other destiny for love or genius than obscene decomposition, and a little fame flickering out in man’s forgetfulness?

When at last the sittings ended, Leonardo kept the picture, claiming that this most finished of all portraits was still incomplete. Many years later, Francis I bought it for 4,000 crowns ($50,000), and framed it in his palace at Fontainebleau. Today, after some time and restorations have blurred its subtleties, it hangs in the majestic Salon Carre of the Louvre, daily amused by a thousand worshippers, and waiting for time to efface and confirm Mona Lisa’s smile.