

THE ART OF SEEING

EIGHTH EDITION

Paul Zelanski • Mary Pat Fisher

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Value and Light

Another visual element used quite consciously by artists is **value**, the relative lightness or darkness of an area. Values are most easily perceived when color hues are not present, as in Zheng Xie's ink drawing *Misty Bamboo on a Distant Mountain* (2.81). The bamboo shoots and leaves range from dark black through intermediate tones to faint grays. As we saw in the earlier section on Space, we perceive value contrasts most clearly in areas closest to us, so the artist uses this device to help us read the fainter plants in the background as being farther from us than the dark plants in the foreground.

The gradations of value from very dark to very light can be represented by means of a **value scale**. The one shown in Figure 2.82 breaks down the variations into ten equal steps, with black at one end and white at the other. In a work such as *Misty Bamboo on a Distant*

Mountain, there are actually many more than ten values, but the value scale is a useful tool for seeing value gradations lined up sequentially.

In addition to giving spatial clues, values also help us to perceive the modeling of forms. As light falls on a three-dimensional object, such as Gaston Lachaise's sculpture *Standing Woman* (2.83), the areas that light strikes most directly are the lightest, showing up as **highlights**. As contours curve away from the light source in space, the light dims, making the surface appear darker, until it approaches a true black in areas where light is fully blocked. The strong value contrasts on *Standing Woman* help us to grasp the extent to

2.81 Zheng Xie, *Misty Bamboo on a Distant Mountain*, 1753. Set of four hanging scrolls, ink on paper, $26\frac{1}{2} \times 70\frac{1}{2}$ ins (68.2 × 179.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From the P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Family Collection, partial and promised gift of Oscar L. Tang, 1990 (1990.322a-d).



2.82 A ten-step value scale.



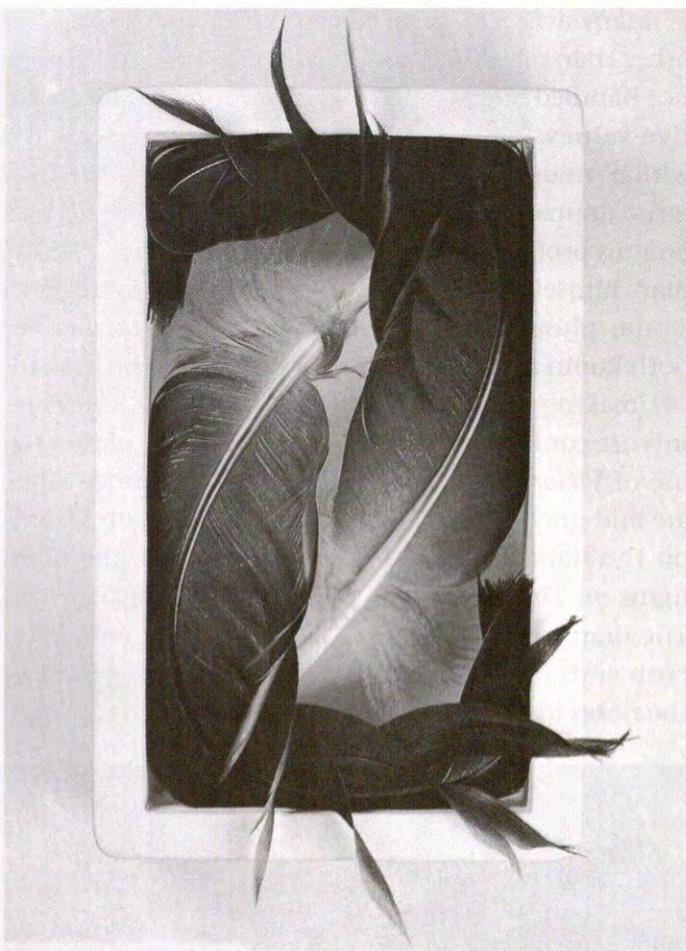
2.83 Gaston Lachaise, *Standing Woman*, 1932. Bronze (cast 1932), 88 × 41½ × 19½ ins (223.6 × 104.3 × 48.4 cm). Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.

Lachaise's powerful Standing Woman has been placed in an outdoor courtyard at the Museum of Modern Art, where the movements of the sun and changes in the weather continually alter the highlights and shadows across her body.

which the form swells out and draws back in space. In this photograph, strong lighting accentuates these contrasts; in more diffuse light, such as on an overcast day, the ins and outs of the form would not be so apparent.

LOCAL AND INTERPRETIVE VALUES

The actual lights and shadows we see on real surfaces are called **local values**. Some photographers attempt by techniques of photographing and developing to capture on film the full range of local values, called a **full tonal range** in photography. Katherine Alling has purposely emphasized this value range in her *Feathers #22* (2.84). She explains:



2.84 Katherine Alling, *Feathers #22*, 1984. Toned silver print, 12 × 9 ins (30.5 × 22.9 cm). Mansfield, Connecticut.

I chose feathers for their lustrous gradations of black, white, and gray. Photography has the capability to record this full tonal range. In the darkroom I reinforced this potential by preserving the whiteness of the box, the blackness of the major part of the feathers and the delicate gradations of gray in the parts in between. This makes the image realistic. But the artifice of twisting the feathers in a box makes them something out of the ordinary. They are transformed into an abstract image. The result is an equilibrium between the realistic black-white-gray actuality of the feathers in a box and the purity of a unique black-white-gray photographic picture.¹⁴

Many artists have manipulated values for purposes other than reproducing visual realities. When they are not handled realistically, they may be called **interpretive values**. One technique is to reduce the degree to which values gradually change, presenting them as more dramatic contrasts. To turn the sculptor Rodin's famous profile into a massive sculptural form, as if the man himself were a monument chipped from black stone, photographer Edward Steichen arranged for both Rodin and his sculpture *The Thinker* to be in shadow, making them appear similarly strong (2.85). Their intense confrontation is set off by the white plaster figure of *Victor Hugo* brooding in the background. There are mid-grays in this photograph, but the main focus is on the stark contrast of the black forms to the highlights on *The Thinker* and the light values of the *Hugo*. The drama of this approach is like hitting chords on both ends of a piano keyboard at once, using none of the notes in between.

During the Renaissance, European painters developed the technique of **chiaroscuro** (Italian for “light and shade”—the depiction in a two-dimensional work of the effects of light and shadow. Values are manipulated for their dramatic effect. In Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul* (2.86) Saul's body gleams with the reflection of the light of God which blinded him. The divine light is emphasized by the surrounding darkness. Rembrandt, the great master of chiaroscuro, portrays himself (1.3) as a softly illuminated form barely emerging from total shadow.

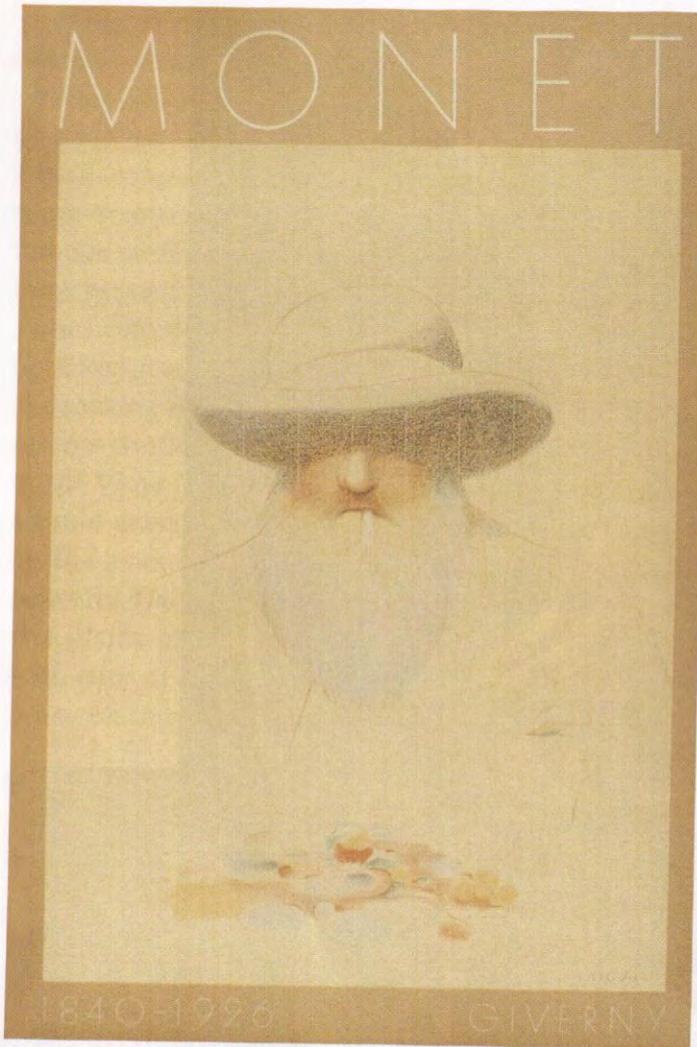
Another approach to interpretive value is to emphasize one area of the value scale: lights, darks, or

2.85 Edward Steichen, *Rodin: The Thinker*, 1902. Photograph. Collection The Gilman Paper Company.
The famous profiles of Rodin and his Thinker made it possible for Steichen to present them in shadow with very little visual information.





2.86 Caravaggio, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, 1600–2. Oil on canvas, 7 ft 6½ ins × 5 ft 9 ins (2.29 × 1.75 m). Cerasi Chapel, S. Maria del Popolo, Rome.
It is reported in the Bible that as Saul was busy persecuting Christians, light flashed from the sky all around him and he fell to the ground, blinded for days. Caravaggio dramatizes this conversion not only by Saul's pose but also by the use of dark and light in his painting. (Saul took the name Paul after his conversion.)



2.87 Milton Glaser, poster for the Monet Museum, Giverny, 1981.

mid-tones. Each carries a different emotional quality. Rembrandt used the dark end of the scale in his self-portrait, with the light of his face barely emerging from the shadows. Graphic designer Milton Glaser has chosen the light end of the scale to represent Monet on a poster (2.87). The choice is appropriate, for the artist emphasized the effects of light in his own work. Here he appears as if in midday light so strong that it has burned away all details except for those disappearing into the shadow under his hat. The fact that Glaser has added slight shadows to the right on Monet's hat and shoulder, an indication that the sun is slightly to the left of directly overhead, keeps the near-abstraction within the realm of the nearly realistic.

In **high contrast** works, artists leave out all minor details, turning forms that usually include a range of grays into a dramatic contrast between black and white. The result may be an unrecognizable, seemingly non-objective design. But in the case of the Guggenheim



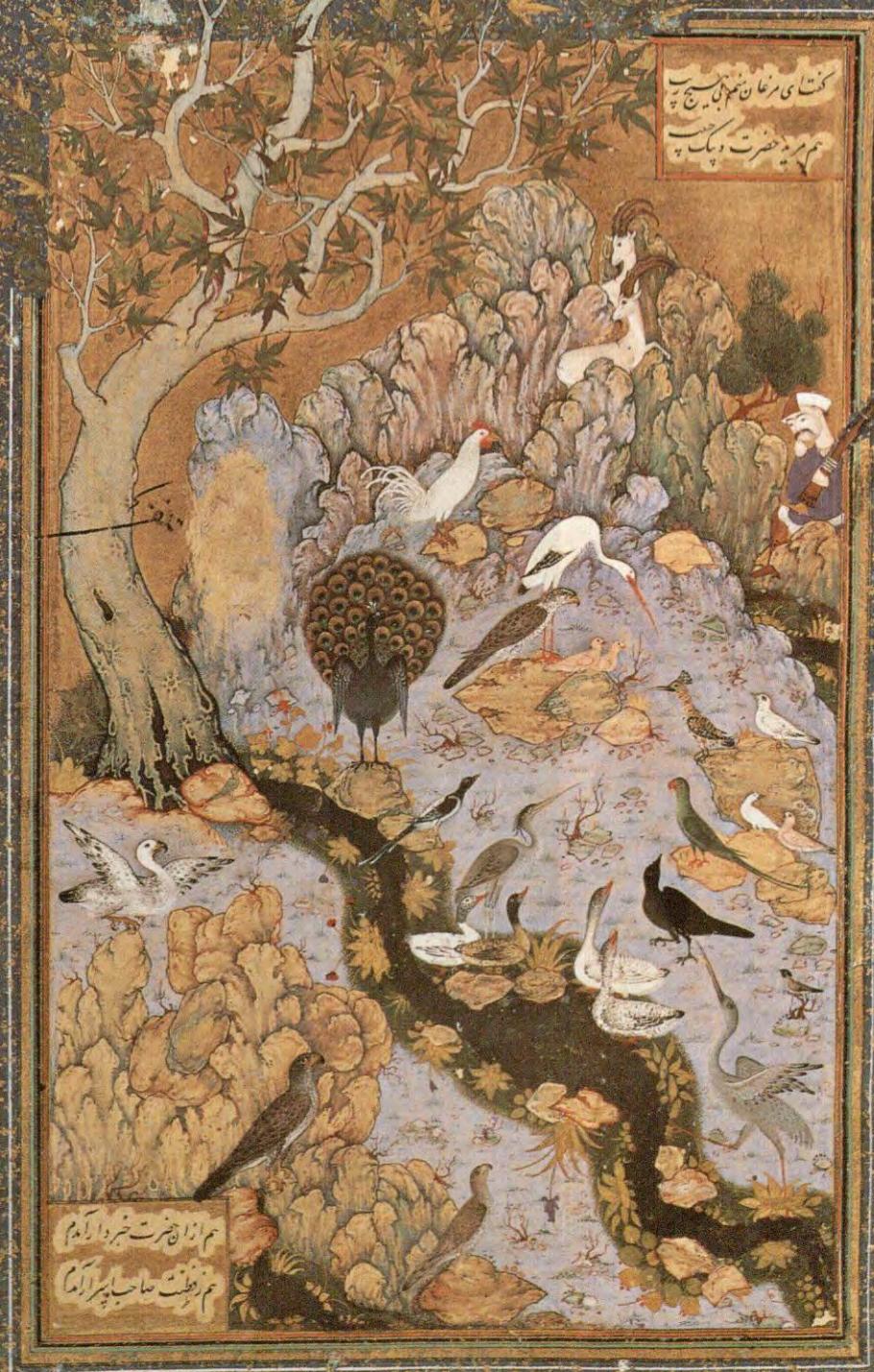
2.88 Malcolm Grear Designers, poster for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1970.

Museum poster (2.88), just enough information is left to allow us to fill in the missing edges of the building's famous spiraling form. Presented in high contrast, it is an intriguing abstraction that calls on us to bring our own knowledge to complete the picture.

LIGHTING

The way a subject is lit—by the sun or by artificial lighting—will affect how we perceive it. In the Persian miniature painting to illustrate the epic poem *The Concourse of the Birds* (2.89), as in most Persian miniatures, Habib Allah presents a uniformly lit scene with no shadows. This lighting represents no particular time of day, removing it from the realm of the real into

2.89 Habib Allah, *The Concourse of the Birds*, 1609. Colors, gold, and silver on paper, $10 \times 4\frac{1}{2}$ ins (25.4 \times 11.4 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Fletcher Fund, 1963. Persian painters eschewed shadows in order to portray paradise.



the ideal, mystical setting of the parable, which symbolically illustrates the unity of individual souls with the divine. In the poem thirty birds undertake a difficult journey in search of the Simurgh, king of the birds, only to discover that they are themselves *si murgh*, which means "thirty birds."

Many works do, however, contain some reference to the ever-changing reality of light. Three-dimensional pieces placed outside in a natural setting—as well as two-dimensional depictions of the natural world—will appear quite different when lit from the east at sunrise, overhead at noon, and from the west at sunset. The sun's angle changes during the year, also altering where the highlights and shadows fall. Moonlight brings a very different quality to a scene or piece of sculpture, softening edges and blurring distinctions between forms. And on cloudy days and during rain or snow the character of a piece or scene will be dramatically changed.

2.90 Tim Noble and Sue Webster, *Real Life Is Rubbish*, 2002. Mixed media, light projector, Dimensions: variable. Courtesy of the artists. *Three-dimensional artists often use shadows consciously, but in this case the physical structure is of no interest in itself: The main thing is the shadow it makes.*

From antiquity, humans have used objects placed outside to track—and honor—the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. To do so reveals the predictabilities inherent in an otherwise uncertain existence. The sun will come up again tomorrow, though the point of its rising will have moved slightly. The solstices—the points on the horizon and calendar where this movement turns back on itself—have long had particular significance. Around the world are found shrines, monuments, and temples oriented toward the sun, stars, and moon, and this ancient concept has been picked up by contemporary artists as well.

The use of artificial lighting allows controlled rather than changing effects. Sculptors are very careful how their works are lit, for the shape, size, and position of shadows and highlights depend on the placement of lighting. Shadows may fall not only within three-dimensional works but also from them onto their surroundings, heightening their impact. Tim Noble and Sue

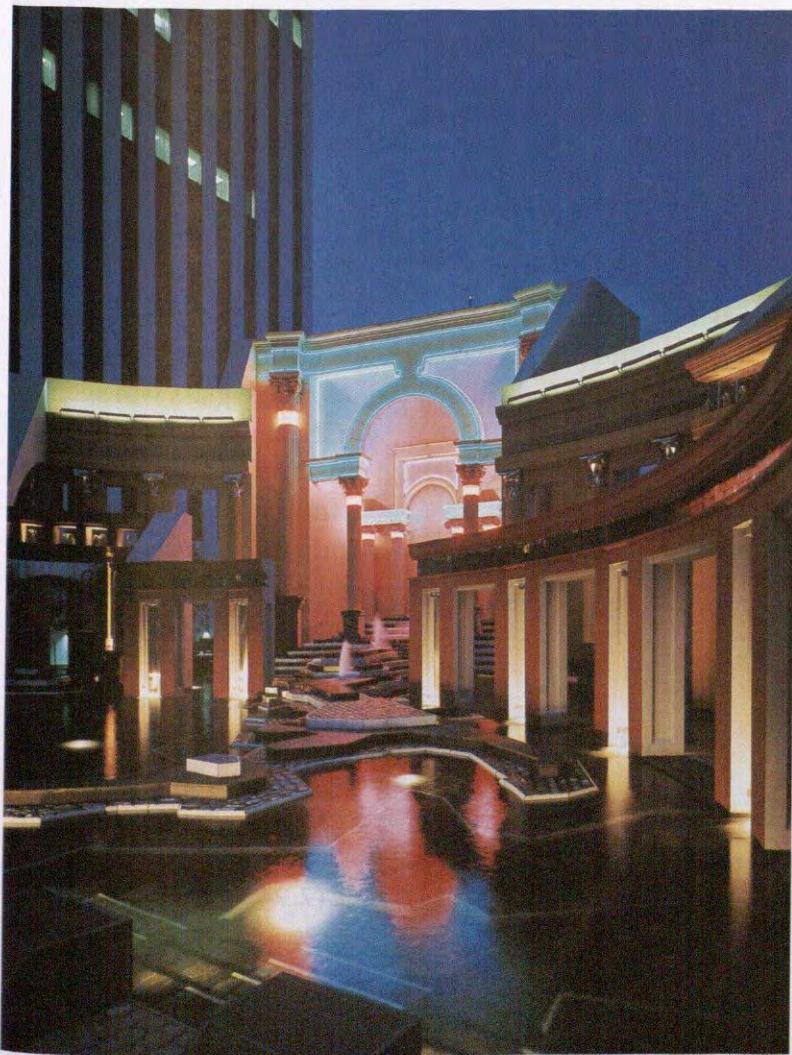


Webster carry this point to the extreme in *Real Life Is Rubbish* (2.90). Their junk assemblages are nothing to see in themselves—their whole point is the shadows they cast. Two piles of household garbage are so arranged that, when lit from one side, their shadows look like themselves as a despondent couple.

We are quite familiar with the use of artificial lighting to add drama to a city's skyline or friendly warmth and light to the interiors of our homes. Less familiar is the use of artificial colored lights to change the hues as well as the values in an area. A spectacularly theatrical use of colored neon lights appears at the Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans (2.91). A celebration of the contributions of Italian immigrants, it is like a stage setting for an opera. Flamboyantly sensual, eclectic, and surprising in its architectural forms, it lures visitors to become part of the play. The neon lights throw a great range of colors across the fantastic architecture, for they mix where they overlap, enticing viewers to experience this multi-hued lighting playing across their own bodies.

Even two-dimensional works can be enhanced or destroyed by lighting. Mark Rothko was extremely particular about the way his large luminous paintings (see Figure 1.40) were illuminated when they were shown. He gave these instructions for a retrospective show of his work:

The light, whether natural or artificial, should not be too strong. The pictures have their own inner light and if there is too much light, the color in the picture is washed out and a distortion of their look occurs. The ideal situation would be to hang them in a normally lit room—that is the way they were painted. They should not be over lit or romanticized by spots; this results in distortion of their meaning. They should either be lighted from a great distance or indirectly, by casting lights at the ceiling or the floor. Above all, the entire picture should be evenly lighted and not strongly.¹⁵



2.91 Charles W. Moore and William Hersey,
Piazza d'Italia, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1978.



2.92 Anish Kapoor, *Cloud Gate*, Millennium Park, Chicago, 2004.
Stainless steel, 66 × 33 ft (20 × 10 m). Courtesy of the artist, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, Lisson Gallery and Millennium Park, Chicago.

REFLECTIONS

Another way in which light is used in art is by taking advantage of the fascinating effects of reflections off a smooth surface. Reflected light tends to capture our attention. Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* (2.92) lures visitors to Chicago's Millennium Park to look at themselves, their shadows, sky and clouds, and the forms of the surrounding buildings, reflected and distorted by the polished curving surface of the installation. The surface itself becomes quite active, ever-changing with the movements of spectators and shifts in the weather.

To depict reflections convincingly in two-dimensional works takes great skill. Richard Estes has perfected the art of painting the reflections in artificial surfaces such as chrome and glass so realistically that they appear to be photographs. His *Double Self-Portrait* (2.93) is a complex tour de force, photorealistcally displaying both the reflections in a restaurant's glass wall of the view across the street—including the artist, who is seen taking the photograph from which this paint-

ing was done—and the intermingled details of the interior of the restaurant seen through the same glass. In certain lighting situations, some glass will seem to hold reflections on its surface, but this glass allows both inside and reflected outside to be seen at once, as if the outer world were penetrating the interior. To add to the visual puzzle of figuring out what is inside and what is outside, there is a mirrored surface inside the restaurant, in which a second reflected image of the artist appears.

When we see an object reflected in water, it may seem to lose its grounded position on the earth and instead appear to be floating in space. Such reflections hold great fascination for us, for they draw us into a different world of spatial possibilities. When the water outside the Byodoin Temple (2.94) is as smooth as it is in this photograph, the temple and its reversed image become a totality apparently floating without support in space. The reversed image is visually exciting in itself as a symmetrical counterpart of the actual temple.



2.93 Richard Estes, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 24 × 36 ins (60.8 × 91.5 cm).
Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Mr. and Mrs. Stuart M. Speiser Fund.



2.94 Hoodo (Phoenix Hall),
Byodo-in Temple, Uji, near
Kyoto, Japan, 11th century.

Leonardo da Vinci on Chiaroscuro

LEONARDO DA VINCI (1452–1519) was one of the major figures of the Italian High Renaissance. His subtle *Mona Lisa* (2.95) is perhaps the world's most famous painting. The mysterious smile of his model has fascinated viewers for centuries.

Leonardo was an inventor, sculptor, and architect as well as a painter, and he had far-reaching curiosity about all natural phenomena. His intensive studies of human anatomy involved dissection of corpses, from which he created detailed drawings of musculature, bones, and joints. He also wrote extensively on art, anatomy, machinery, and natural history, but his voluminous writings were never published during his lifetime. His statements about the use of lights and darks in painting help us to understand why the boundaries of *Mona Lisa*'s facial features are soft and undefined, though undoubtedly the darkened dirty state of the varnish now obscures the original colors of the painting:

"The first intention of the painter is to make a flat surface display a body as if modeled and separated from this plane, and he who most surpasses others in this skill deserves most praise. This accomplishment, with which the science of painting is crowned, arises from light and shade, or we may say chiaroscuro."

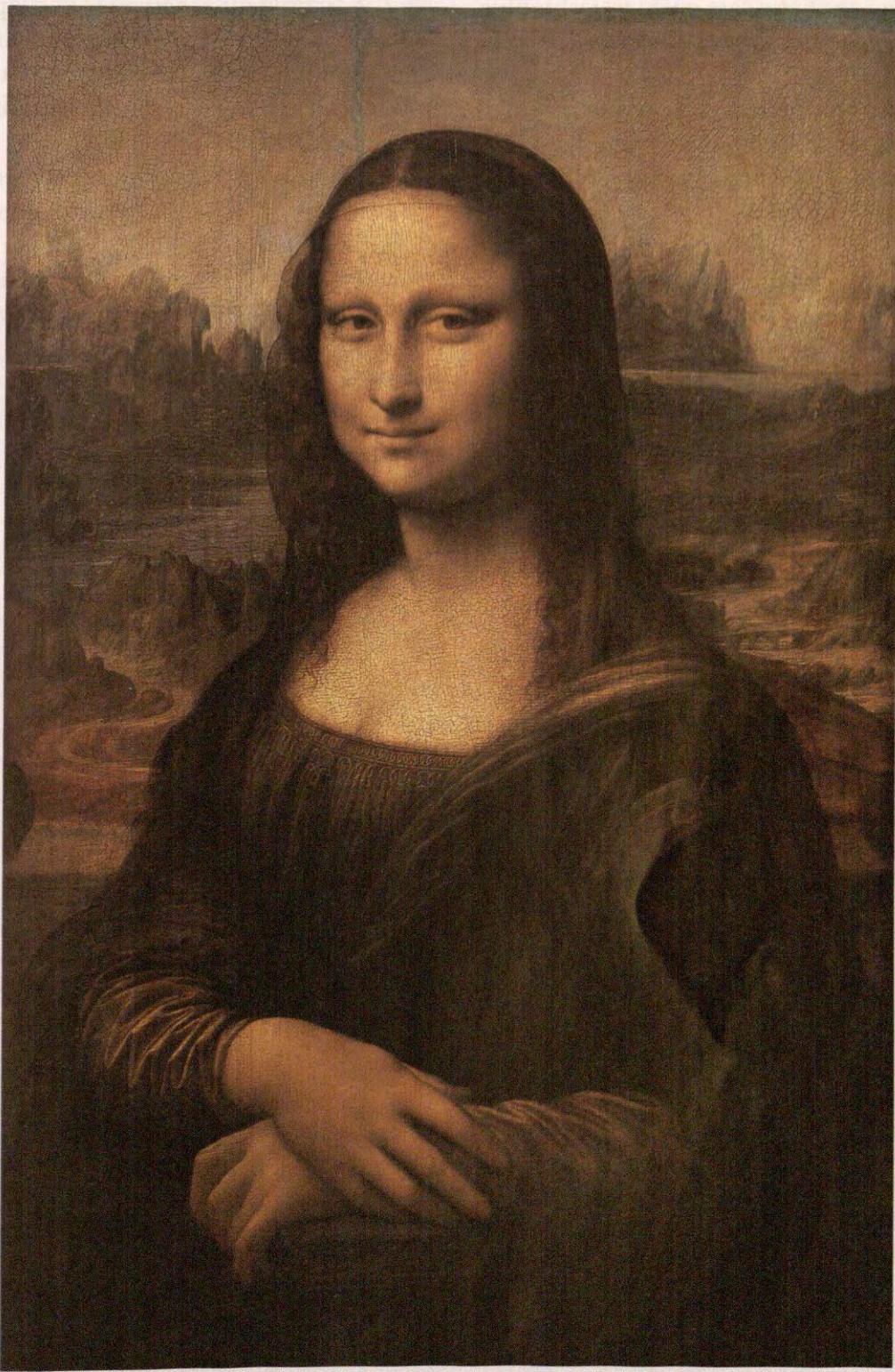
"Shadow is the privation of light. Shadows appear to me to be supremely necessary in perspective, since without them opaque and solid bodies will be ill defined. Those features that are located within their boundaries—and their boundaries themselves—will be ill defined if they do not end against a background of a color different from that of the body. In addition to this, these shadows are in themselves of varying degrees of darkness because they represent the loss of varying quantities of luminous rays, and these I term original shadows, because, being the first shadows, they clothe the bodies to which they are attached. From these original shadows there arise shadowy rays which are transmitted throughout the air, and these are of a quality corresponding to the variety of the original shadows from which they are derived. And on this account I will call these shadows derived shadows, because they have their origins in other shadows."

"Shadow shares the nature of universal things, which are all more powerful at their beginning and become enfeebled towards their end. When I speak about the beginning of every form and quality, discernible or indiscernible, I do not refer to things arising from small beginnings that become greatly enlarged over a period of time, as will happen with a

great oak which has a modest start in a little acorn. Rather, I mean that the oak is strongest at the point at which it arises from the earth, that is to say, where it has its greatest thickness. Correspondingly, darkness is the first degree of shadow and light is the last. Therefore, painter, make your shadow darker close to its origin, and at its end show it being transformed into light, that is to say, so that it appears to have no termination."

"That body will exhibit the greatest difference between its shadows and its lights that happens to be seen under the strongest light, like the light of the sun or the light of a fire at night. And this should be little used in painting because the works will remain harsh and disagreeable.

"There will be little difference in the lights and shadows in that body which is situated in a moderate light, and this occurs at the onset of evening or when there is cloud, and such works are sweet and every kind of face acquires grace. Thus in all things extremes are blameworthy. Too much light makes for harshness; too much darkness does not allow us to see. The medium is best."¹⁶



2.95 Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503–6. Oil on panel, 30½ × 21 ins (76.8 × 53.3 cm). Louvre, Paris.