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# The Mona Lisa Mystery



An Art History Mystery  
by Dina Anastasio  
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Between the years 1503 and 1506, the Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci worked on a painting that would become one of the most famous paintings in the world.



Detail of the portrait of the *Mona Lisa*, painted by Leonardo da Vinci between 1503 and 1506

It is called the *Mona Lisa*.

Until recently, there were few certain facts known about the woman in the painting—or about her life.

Her real identity had remained

unproven. Many people thought that she lived in the town of Florence, Italy, where Leonardo also lived. Others believed that he painted it by copying the parts of several different people. Some people even thought that the artist just imagined her in his mind.

New evidence supports the long-held belief that she was a real person and her name was Lisa. The evidence also shows that both Lisa's family and her husband, a wealthy silk merchant in Florence, knew Leonardo's father.

The small painting has been hanging in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, for over 200 years. Every day, visitors come to stare at her mysterious smile and her eyes. They try to imagine what she was thinking about as she **posed**. Artists looked closely to see what special skills Leonardo used to make her hands look so natural. How did he create the shadowy background behind her?



Leonardo da Vinci studied anatomy, bones, and muscles and was able to make his figures appear lifelike.

But in 1911, another mystery about the *Mona Lisa* was created. One day, the painting disappeared and didn't come back for over two years.

On August 22, 1911, an artist named Louis came to the Louvre Museum to study and copy the *Mona Lisa*, as artists and students were allowed to do. It was a Tuesday, which is important because on Monday the museum was closed.



Louis entered the room where the *Mona Lisa* had always hung. But the painting wasn't there. Had someone moved it? He waited for a while. Then he asked a guard to please go and ask about it. When the guard came back, he had very bad news.

The *Mona Lisa* was missing.

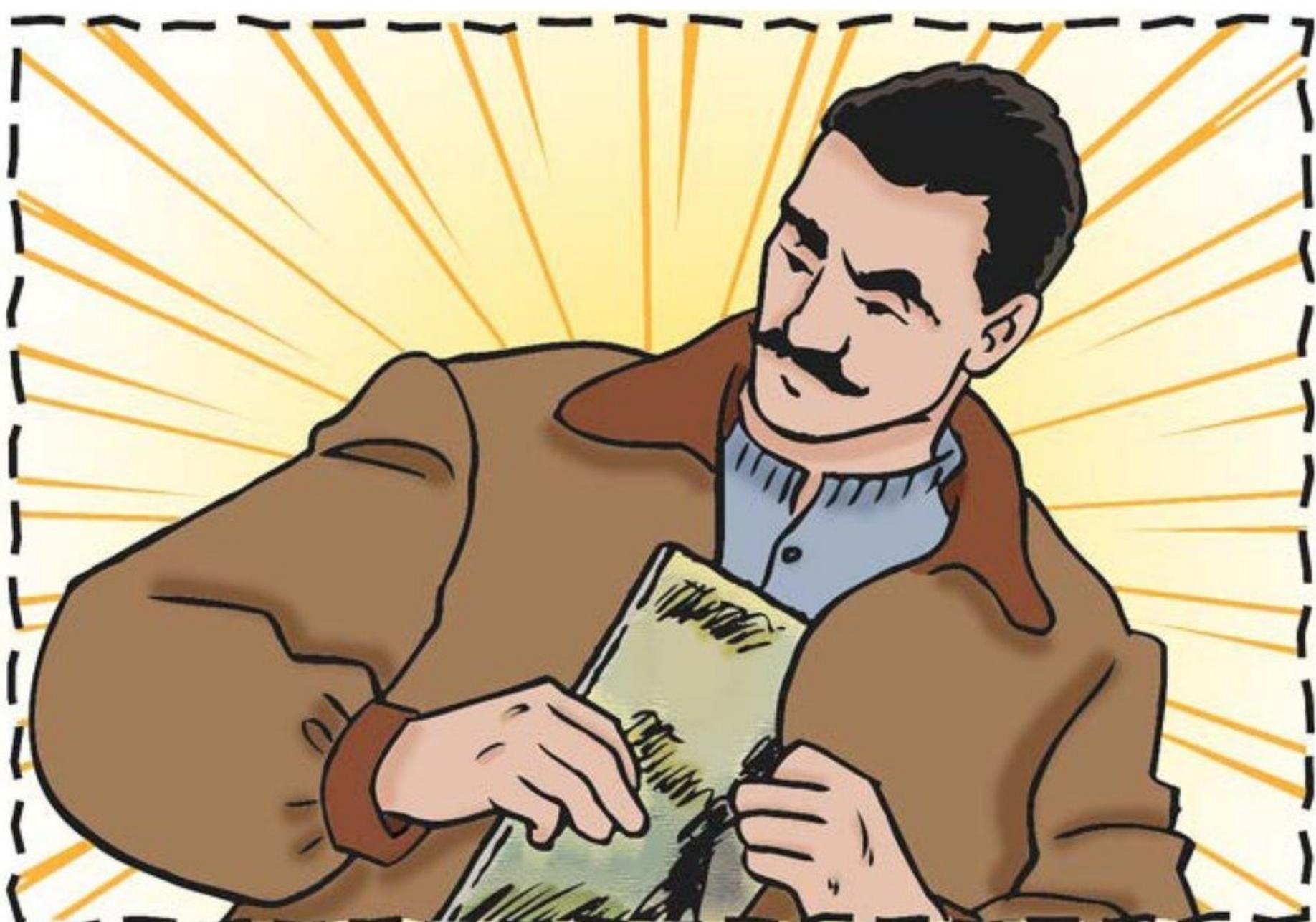




The police were called. They searched every room. Soon, they had Clue Number One. The *Mona Lisa*'s wooden frame was found near the stairs.

The police questioned every person who worked at the museum. They felt sure that the theft had occurred on Monday, when the museum was closed. They guessed that the thief had been a museum laborer. Or had he just dressed as one—so no one would notice him?

They thought that when the guard was away, the thief simply had taken the painting off the wall. He carried it to the stairs. Then he took off the painting's heavy frame. The *Mona Lisa* is painted on a piece of wood—so it couldn't be rolled up.



He had put the painting under his work shirt and gone down the stairs. The door was locked. He knew how to take off the lock, so he did. Then he walked outside and was gone.

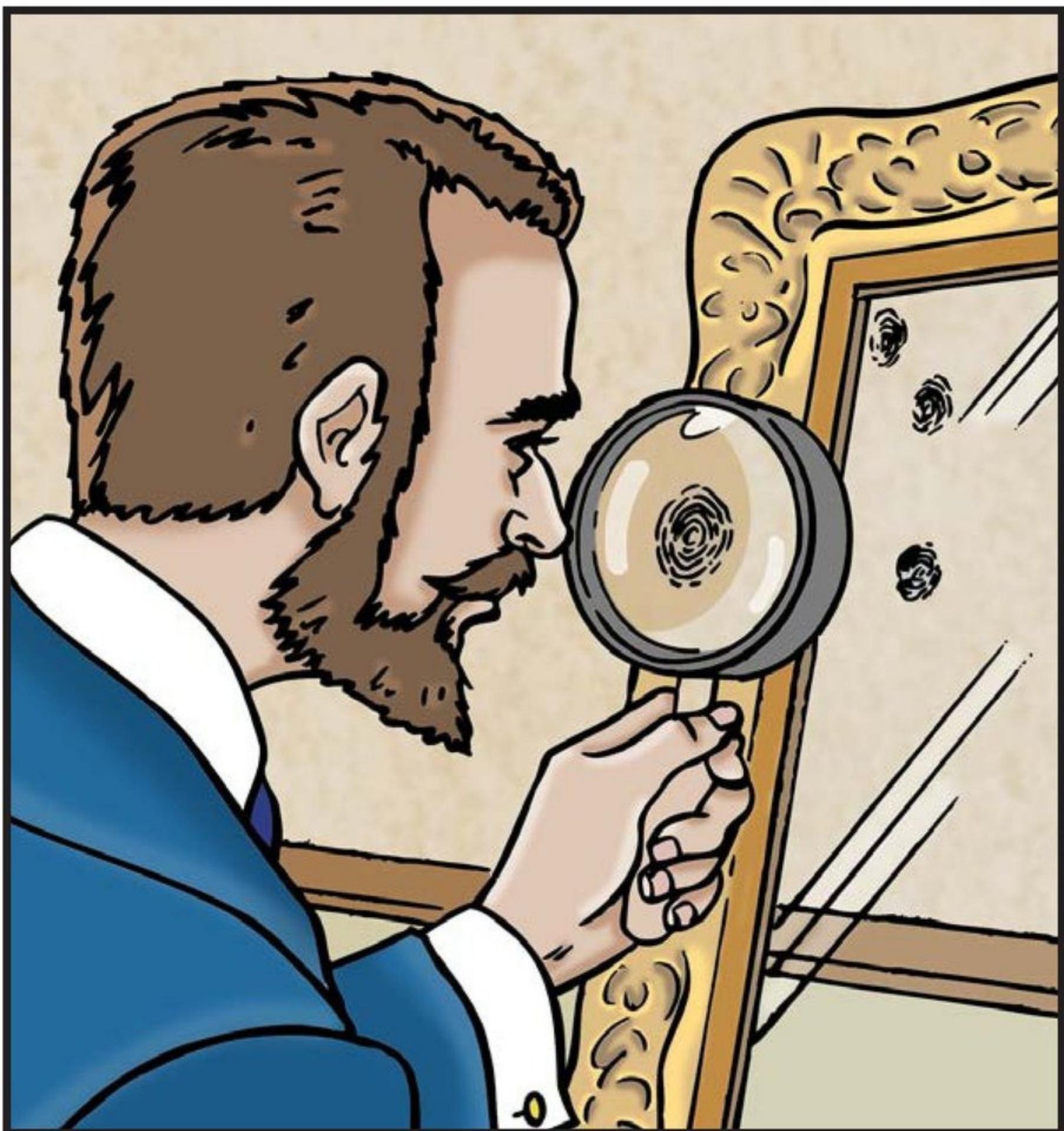


The museum closed for a week. The police talked with everyone they could think of. They closed all the **border** crossings in and out of France.

Fingerprint experts arrived. They fingerprinted people from all over the city and put the fingerprints on file. Every day, people waited to hear what the police had learned.

When the museum opened again, people came to stare at the empty space where the *Mona Lisa* had hung for over 100 years. They just couldn't believe that the *Mona Lisa* was gone.

Then the police found Clue Number Two. Clue Number Two was a thumbprint. It was on the glass of the frame that they found by the stairs. The experts compared the thumbprint on the glass to all the thumbprints they had put in the file. Would one match? Would this print solve the crime?





Everyone waited for the fingerprint results. But there was a big problem. The thumbprint on the glass was from the thief's left hand. The fingerprint experts had taken prints from people's right hands. They couldn't match the right-hand prints in the file to the thief's left thumbprint.

Everyone was upset. No one knew what to do next. For the next two years, people called the police almost every day. Everyone had a new theory about what had happened to the *Mona Lisa*, or where it was. But there were no real clues.

The *Mona Lisa* seemed to have vanished.

Then came Clue Number Three. But perhaps it shouldn't be called a clue at all, because it was the thief himself who told the police about his **motive** for taking the painting. The famous painter of the *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo da Vinci, was Italian. Leonardo had painted the *Mona Lisa* in Italy. But the painting had been hanging in a museum in France for years.

Can you guess the thief's motive?

Two years after the theft, on December 10, 1913, a man named Vincenzo walked into an **antiques** store in Florence, Italy.

"I have the *Mona Lisa*," he said.

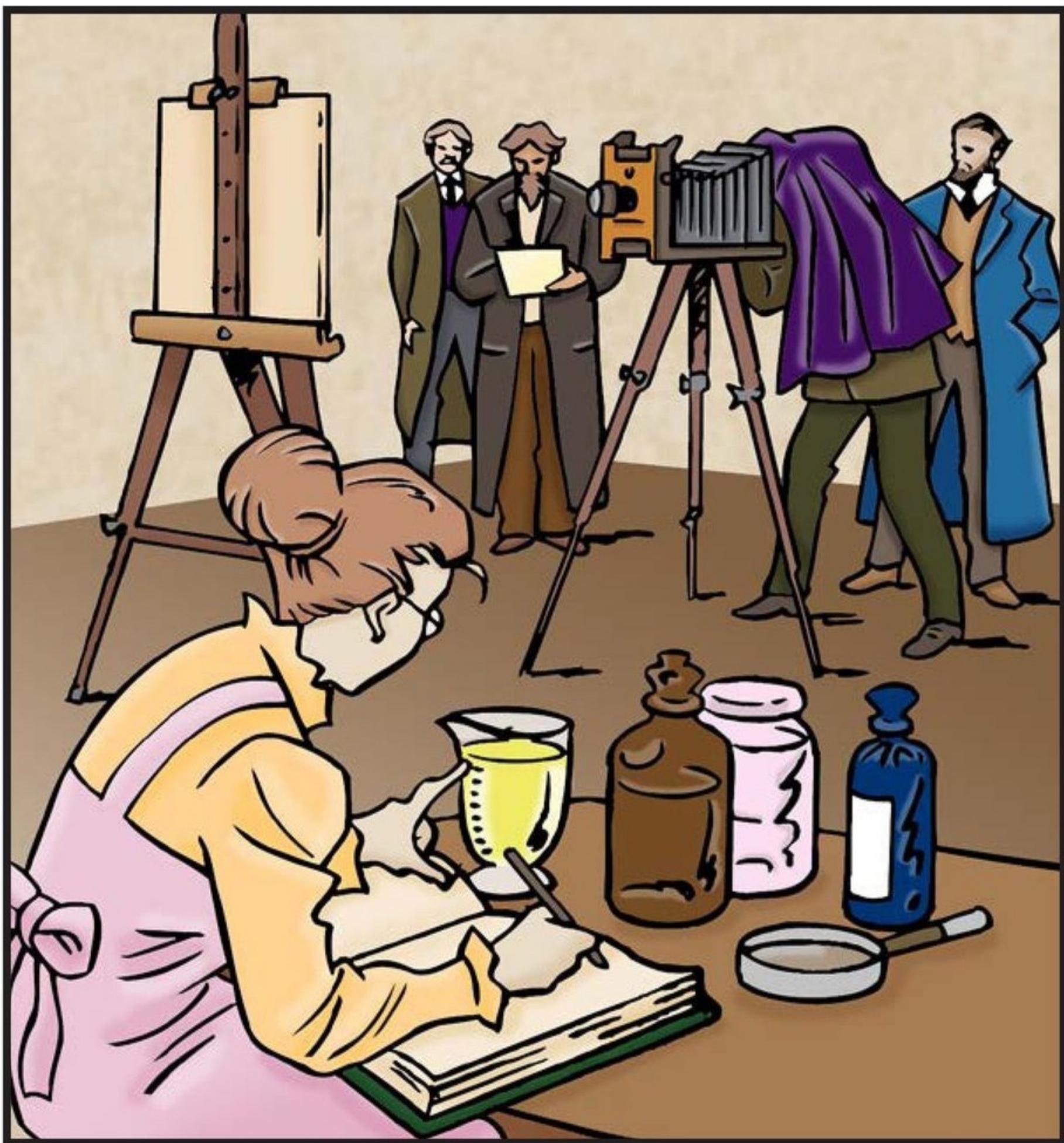
The owner of the antiques store called the director of a museum in Florence. They both went with Vincenzo to his hotel room.



Vincenzo opened a trunk and removed a false bottom. There was Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*.

Vincenzo admitted to stealing it. He had been a laborer at the museum. He saw the *Mona Lisa* every day. He was sad that it was in a museum in France. His motive for taking it, he said, was to return the *Mona Lisa* to Italy, where he believed it truly belonged.

Safely back in Paris, the painting was examined by experts. They wanted to be sure that this was the real painting, and not a **forgery**. X-rays and photographs were made. Was this the same paint and **varnish** used in other Leonardo paintings? What about the wood on which it is painted? How old was it?





The painting was indeed Leonardo's **masterpiece**. The *Mona Lisa* was returned to a special place in the Louvre Museum. It still hangs there today, and is seen by over fourteen thousand people a day.

After only seven months, Vincenzo left jail to cheers. He was a celebrity. People sent him wine and flowers.



He married, and then the man who had said that he hated France—moved his family back there! Vincenzo Peruggia opened a successful paint and varnish store in a small French town. There he lived a quiet and uneventful life until he died in 1947.

## Glossary

<b>antiques</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	art, furniture, or objects that are old and valuable (p. 12)
<b>border</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the line that divides one country or area from another (p. 9)
<b>forgery</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a false copy of a valuable object (p. 14)
<b>masterpiece</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an extraordinarily good or impressive piece of art (p. 15)
<b>motive</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a need or belief that causes a person to do something (p. 12)
<b>posed</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	sat very still (p. 4)
<b>theory</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a possible explanation(p. 11)
<b>vanished</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	disappeared; not in sight (p. 11)
<b>varnish</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a clear, liquid seal that dries to protect a surface (p. 14)

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