

READING PASSAGE 3

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 27–40**, which are based on Reading Passage 3 below.

Museums of fine art and their public

The fact that people go to the Louvre museum in Paris to see the original painting *Mona Lisa* when they can see a reproduction anywhere leads us to question some assumptions about the role of museums of fine art in today's world



One of the most famous works of art in the world is Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Nearly everyone who goes to see the original will already be familiar with it from reproductions, but they accept that fine art is more rewardingly viewed in its original form.

However, if *Mona Lisa* was a famous novel, few people would bother to go to a museum to read the writer's actual manuscript rather than a printed reproduction. This might be explained by the fact that the novel has evolved precisely because of technological developments that made it possible to print out huge numbers of texts, whereas oil paintings have always been produced as unique objects. In addition, it could be argued that the practice of interpreting or 'reading' each medium follows different conventions. With novels, the reader attends mainly to the meaning of words rather than the way they are printed on the page, whereas the 'reader' of a painting must attend just as closely to the material form of marks and shapes in the picture as to any ideas they may signify.

Yet it has always been possible to make very accurate facsimiles of pretty well any fine art work. The seven surviving versions of *Mona Lisa* bear witness to the fact that in the 16th century, artists seemed perfectly

content to assign the reproduction of their creations to their workshop apprentices as regular 'bread and butter' work. And today the task of reproducing pictures is incomparably more simple and reliable, with reprographic techniques that allow the production of high-quality prints made exactly to the original scale, with faithful colour values, and even with duplication of the surface relief of the painting.

But despite an implicit recognition that the spread of good reproductions can be culturally valuable, museums continue to promote the special status of original work.

Unfortunately, this seems to place severe limitations on the kind of experience offered to visitors.

One limitation is related to the way the museum presents its exhibits. As repositories of unique historical objects, art museums are often called 'treasure houses'. We are reminded of this even before we view a collection by the presence of security guards, attendants, ropes and display cases to keep us away from the exhibits. In many cases, the architectural style of the building further reinforces that notion. In addition, a major collection like that of London's