

HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT ART

Originally published in France as  
*Comment parler d'art aux enfants*  
by Société nouvelle Adam Biro 2002  
First published in the English language by  
Frances Lincoln Ltd  
4 Torriano Mews  
Torriano Aveune  
London NW5 2RZ  
[www.franceslincoln.com](http://www.franceslincoln.com)

Translation by Phoebe Dunn  
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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library

ISBN 0 7112 2388 2

Set in Meridien

Printed and bound in Singapore by KHL Printing Co Pte Ltd

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

# CONTENTS

<b>8</b>	Introduction	<b>86</b>	7. <i>Landscape with St Jerome</i> , Joachim Patenier
<b>10</b>	<b>A good start</b>	<b>90</b>	8. <i>Portrait of Charles V at Mühlberg</i> , Titian
<b>12</b>	Developing an interest in paintings	<b>94</b>	9. <i>Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap</i> , Pieter Bruegel
<b>14</b>	Tips for successful visits	<b>98</b>	10. <i>David with the Head of Goliath</i> , Caravaggio
<b>17</b>	What to show them, depending on their age	<b>102</b>	11. <i>The Cardsharp with the Ace of Clubs</i> , Georges de La Tour
<b>18</b>	5–7 year olds	<b>106</b>	12. <i>Apollo and Marsyas</i> , Jusepe de Ribera
<b>20</b>	8–10 year olds	<b>110</b>	13. <i>Still Life with Fruit and a Lobster</i> , Jan Davidsz de Heem
<b>22</b>	11–13 year olds	<b>114</b>	14. <i>The Judgment of Solomon</i> , Nicolas Poussin
<b>24</b>	<b>It's OK not to know</b>	<b>118</b>	15. <i>The Love Letter</i> , Johannes Vermeer
<b>26</b>	Paintings and museums	<b>122</b>	16. <i>The Colossus</i> , or <i>Panic</i> , Francisco de Goya
<b>31</b>	Painters	<b>126</b>	17. <i>The Poor Poet</i> , Carl Spitzweg
<b>36</b>	Painting in the twentieth century	<b>130</b>	18. <i>Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway</i> , Joseph Mallord William Turner
<b>42</b>	Religious art	<b>134</b>	19. <i>The Luncheon</i> , Claude Monet
<b>46</b>	Portraits	<b>138</b>	20. <i>Women Ironing</i> , Edgar Degas
<b>50</b>	Mythology, history and allegory	<b>142</b>	21. <i>The Bedroom</i> , Vincent van Gogh
<b>52</b>	Landscapes	<b>146</b>	22. <i>The Birthday</i> , Marc Chagall
<b>54</b>	Scenes from everyday life and paintings of objects	<b>150</b>	23. <i>The Mechanic</i> , Fernand Léger
<b>56</b>	The price of a painting	<b>154</b>	24. <i>Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue</i> , Piet Mondrian
<b>58</b>	<b>How to look at a picture</b>	<b>158</b>	25. <i>Weeping Woman</i> , Pablo Picasso
<b>62</b>	1. <i>The Annunciation</i> , Fra Angelico	<b>162</b>	26. <i>Number 3, Tiger</i> , Jackson Pollock
<b>66</b>	2. <i>The Arnolfini Portrait</i> , Jan van Eyck	<b>166</b>	27. <i>Untitled Blue Monochrome</i> , Yves Klein
<b>70</b>	3. <i>St George and the Dragon</i> , Paolo Uccello	<b>170</b>	28. <i>The King of the Zulus</i> , Jean-Michel Basquiat
<b>74</b>	4. <i>The Birth of Venus</i> , Botticelli	<b>174</b>	29. <i>Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in a Street in Soho</i> , Francis Bacon
<b>78</b>	5. <i>The Temptation of St Anthony</i> , Hieronymus Bosch	<b>178</b>	30. <i>The Girls from Olmo II</i> , Georg Baselitz
<b>82</b>	6. <i>The Mona Lisa</i> , Leonardo da Vinci	<b>182</b>	Resources
		<b>184</b>	Photographic credits



## 6 The Mona Lisa

Painted about 1503–6; oil on wood; 77 x 53 cm

Louvre Museum, Paris

Leonardo da Vinci (Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci)

Born in Vinci, near Florence, 1452; died in Amboise, France, 1519

### **Who is this woman?**

She lived in Italy about five hundred years ago. Her first name is Lisa, but she was called Mona Lisa, which means Lady Lisa. Her family name was del Giocondo, so she is also known as *La Gioconda* (in Italy) or *La Joconde* (in France).

### **Who painted her?**

The portrait is by Leonardo da Vinci. He was already very well known at the time. He lived in the same city as Lisa del Giocondo.

### **There aren't many colours**

Leonardo did not use many different colours, especially not bright ones. He preferred his paintings to be easy to look at. He wanted your eyes to take in one item at a time and to move smoothly across his paintings like a caress or a cloud.

### **Why is the painting so dark?**

The picture was definitely lighter when it was new but over the years it has aged. Instead of getting wrinkles, as people do, the painting has cracked and darkened. The protective layer of varnish has also changed and become a brownish colour. Mona Lisa certainly once had paler skin and looked much healthier. The sky behind her was bluer too.

### **It looks as though she hasn't got any hair**

She has got hair; but in those days the fashion was for women to have some of their hair removed, raising the hairline very high on the forehead and leaving their faces clearly visible. If she could see us today she would probably be horrified by our hairstyles. She'd think we looked very scruffy.

### **Did Leonardo paint her because he thought she was beautiful?**

We don't know whether he thought she was particularly beautiful. He painted the portrait because Mona Lisa's husband commissioned it.

### **Why do people always say that the Mona Lisa is beautiful?**

Some people may well think she is beautiful. But it might also be that others confuse the painting with the woman: for them saying the painting is beautiful is the same as saying that the woman in the painting is beautiful. However, they are two very different things: this is a picture of a woman, not the woman herself in flesh and blood. It is the painting that is famous, not the woman. When people say 'Mona Lisa' we don't think of the woman, who she was or where she lived. We think of the painting, of this portrait.

### **Did other artists paint in the same style as Leonardo?**

No one has ever been able to match his famous *sfumato*. But, thanks to him, painters gradually started to pay more attention to shadow. Artists also started to compose their portraits as he did, with the subject's body forming a large triangle like a pyramid. The Egyptian pyramids were symbols of the sun, like rays of light made in stone, evoking the idea of eternity. In Mona Lisa's time the triangle composition was used in sacred paintings such as the Madonna and Child. Once again, by using this style in a portrait Leonardo was going against tradition.

### **Was the painting famous in Leonardo's time?**

Yes, it was very famous. Everything about it was new: the pyramid composition, the idea of showing the subject in a realistic environment, the way the subject is linked to the landscape, the use of light and shade (*chiaroscuro*), the sensation of capturing a moment in Mona Lisa's smile. These were not just technical innovations: they showed a new way of looking at the world. An apparently unexceptional woman became a symbol of the whole of humanity, captured for eternity in one moment between a passing light and a shade that holds her secrets.

### **Did Leonardo paint many paintings?**

Painting was just one of many subjects Leonardo was interested in. Today we only know of about a dozen of his paintings. However, he left behind large quantities of drawings and notes that show how busy he was. He studied the human body (anatomy), the earth (geology), plants (botany), stars (astronomy) and optics. He was fascinated by everything about the natural world, however small, and particularly by anything to do with movement: the dust of a battle, the wind in a storm, the light at dusk, a grimace or a smile. As well as being a painter he was a sculptor and an architect and also an engineer. He invented flying machines, and designed fortifications and weapons. In everything he did he tried to deepen his knowledge and understanding of the world. The *Mona Lisa* represented such an important stage in his learning that he kept the painting until he died. So Mona Lisa never received her portrait. Not only did it capture her image: it perfectly illustrates Leonardo's thinking.

### **Why is this painting so famous?**

It was the first time that a portrait had looked so lifelike: instead of painting Mona Lisa with a fixed expression, as any other painter would have done, Leonardo gave her a fleeting look, a sort of half-smile that might be just starting or just finishing. Around the woman, although everything is peaceful, the light too is in the process of changing. No one had ever seen such a picture, able to give the impression of time passing.

### **What's in the background?**

She is sitting in a *loggia*, a sort of balcony, and she is turned towards us, as if we are with the painter inside the house. Behind her we see the view that she would have been looking at, before she turned round: valleys, a river with a bridge and roads leading into the distance. Although she is the only person in the painting, she is not cut off from the rest of the world.

### **Why didn't Leonardo paint more accurately?**

In real life not everything is clearly visible, especially small detail in the distance. Leonardo showed that accurately in this painting: that's why he drew almost everything in the painting without hard edges or outlines. We can't really make out where one shape ends and the next begins; we imagine them more than we actually see them. They are lost in a kind of mist. The mountains in the background are so hazy that they merge into the sky. This technique was called *sfumato* (from the Italian *sfumare*, meaning to evaporate like smoke).

### **The hands are very well lit**

The hands play an important role in this painting. Some people fiddle with their hands or drum their fingers, or their hands tense up even when the rest of their body appears to be relaxed. Mona Lisa is absolutely peaceful and calm. We can tell this from her hands, gently resting on one another.

### **This isn't a very happy painting**

This painting may give a melancholy impression when compared to other paintings from the same period that are lighter and more colourful – but these lighter paintings were not necessarily intended to convey a sense of happiness. In those days light and dark were mainly used as symbols, light representing good (meaning God) and shadow representing evil. So people painted as little shadow as possible. By giving equal importance to light and shade Leonardo was doing something new: he was treating his subject scientifically as much as symbolically. Elements that are well lit can be seen, observed and understood; things that are in darkness remain unknown.



## 7 Landscape with St Jerome

Painted about 1520; oil on wood; 74 x 91 cm

Prado Museum, Madrid

Joachim Patenier

Born in Dinan or Bouvignes, 1475–85; died in Antwerp, 1524

### **This is a large landscape with small villages**

The countryside stretches as far as the eye can see. It's dotted with castles and villages full of small houses. There are mountains and forests, a light green lake on the right and in the distance is the sea.

### **Who is the old man in the shelter?**

That's St Jerome. He wants to be alone to think without being disturbed by anyone so he has decided to leave city life behind and to live outdoors. He is very small in the painting. Seeing him in the corner like that, you understand that he wants to be left in peace.

### **He has an animal with him**

He is looking after a lion with a thorn in its paw. The grateful lion becomes his companion, like a dog. They are always shown together in paintings. The lion can be seen again a little further away on the right-hand side; he's bounding towards a donkey that is carrying a load of wood. The lion isn't going to eat the donkey; he's chasing after it because St Jerome has entrusted him with its care. He must take it to pasture and make sure it is protected from harm.

### **This painting contains mainly green, blue and brown colours**

Green is the colour of grass and trees, blue is the colour of the sea and the sky, and brown is the colour of earth and rock. However, these three colours have not been used in a uniform way: each is full of subtleties. Patenier uses dozens of different hues and, depending on where they are used, he creates very different atmospheres with them. You can almost feel the warmth of the sun or the coolness of the shady leaves from the variety of greens he uses.

### **They are odd-looking mountains**

The artist has mixed reality with his imagination here. Of course he knew what real rocks looked like. But perhaps he also had at home a collection of small pebbles whose shapes he liked. He painted them here on a grand scale and they became huge mountains with extraordinary shapes.

### **Where did the real St Jerome live?**

He lived mainly in Rome and in the Middle East. He spent five years in the desert in Syria, then lived in Bethlehem in Palestine, where he founded a monastery. He died in AD 420. Of course this landscape bears no resemblance at all to those places because Patenier never visited the Middle East and probably didn't know much about a desert landscape. The green scenery here suggests that St Jerome is far from the bustle of city life. In those days, that was enough to give the idea of a 'desert'.

### **Why did the artist make the landscape more important than the person?**

Patenier lived at a time of great discoveries. Thanks to the expeditions of Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama and many others, Europeans were learning of far-off lands full of untold riches. The conquistadors set off to the Americas in search of gold, and the influence of Western Europe spread ever further across the globe. The wide-open spaces of Patenier's landscape reflect that new way of seeing the world. With him a painting becomes a place for travel and adventure.

### **It would take a long time to cross this landscape**

That is one of the important ideas behind this picture. Appreciating the space in the painting gives you a sense of time passing. There are no direct routes but plenty of diversions and obstacles. The painting suggests that there are many paths and ways. It is easy to imagine yourself within the landscape choosing a direction and heading into the unknown. Even at its very furthest point the picture opens up new possibilities: all you would have to do is board one of the sailing ships on the coast. Patenier lived in Antwerp, one of the largest ports in Europe, and ships like this must have been a familiar sight.

### **As you get towards the horizon the land turns turquoise**

Turquoise is a colour rarely found in nature but it often appears in Patenier's work. As it's a mixture of green and blue it belongs as much to plants as it does to the sky. The green of the fields becomes light and blue like the sky and the blue of the sky takes on the colour of the fields. It's as though nature has changed its mind and the colours you take for granted have been transformed. A turquoise landscape has something magical about it.

### **Is this a religious painting or a landscape?**

It's both at once. The figure of the saint gives the image a religious foundation and the landscape can be interpreted as a metaphor for the Christian journey towards salvation. But St Jerome's life also provides a perfect pretext for painting a landscape: instead of the scenery simply being a backdrop, here it evokes the idea of limitless space. Patenier invented a new kind of painting, one rooted in the tradition of religious subjects but also one that gives prominence to the landscape. It was with him that landscape painting was truly born.

### **Does this landscape actually exist somewhere?**

No. You could look all over the world and never find this scene. But some of the elements in this landscape are borrowed from reality. Patenier was born in the Meuse region of France, famous for its cliffs and caves, and later he moved to the south of France to a place called Baux-de-Provence. The natural scenery he saw in these places inspired him. He borrowed a shape here, a detail there, trees, houses, bushes, coastlines, a particular cloud or a little shelter, and brought them all together in this painting.

### **On one side of the painting everything is pointy and on the other everything is flat**

The composition illustrates different aspects of life. On the left the shapes are complicated and tall. There is a tall church with some houses at the summit of the mountain; to get to the monastery, where St Jerome lived, was a hard and tiring climb. On the right-hand side of the picture everything is peaceful and the countryside is much gentler. This contrast is a way of illustrating the idea that sometimes life is hard and we have to struggle, while at other times everything goes well and life seems simple.

### **St Jerome is tiny in this picture; does that mean he's not important?**

Not at all. He's in the foreground, which means you must take him in before you can make sense of the rest of the painting. Only then can you go on. The landscape can be read as symbolic of his thoughts: sometimes St Jerome's meditation is as peaceful as the valleys and at other times his mental turmoil stops him in his tracks. It's as if he is on a winding road full of obstacles and his destination is hidden from view. Moving through this painting is like entering his mind.

### **Is St Jerome always painted in a landscape?**

No. The countryside is one of two traditional settings for pictures of St Jerome. In the other he is shown working in his study, writing, reading or thinking. He was both an intellectual (he translated the Bible into Latin from the original Greek and Hebrew) and a monk (he lived as a hermit isolated from society and devoting himself to prayer), so he typifies some of the complementary aspects of the Christian life. That inspired painters to show him in different settings.

### **There is a small cross close to St Jerome**

It's a crucifix. Even if you don't know St Jerome's story you can tell from it that he is a Christian and a religious man. The cross with Jesus on it is leaning against the rock opposite Jerome almost as if the two are in conversation. A skull also appears next to the rock. Skulls are often featured in religious paintings, to evoke the idea of the death of the first man, Adam. Together the skull and the crucifix symbolize death and redemption.