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John F. Kennedy and Leonardo's Mona Lisa: Art as the Continuation of Politics

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Travelling Mona Lisa

Probably no other European painting has had as eventful a history as the portrait of Mona Lisa del Giocondo. *(1)* The picture was painted between 1503 and 1506 for the Florentine silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo, Lisa's husband. But circumstances – such as Leonardo's notorious reluctance to finish his paintings, *(2)* his frequent search for better employment, a legal dispute which called him back to Milan and the chance to work for the French court *(3)* – prevented the portrait from reaching its final destination: the home of a middle-class citizen in Renaissance Florence. *(4)* Even before it was completed in the first decade of the sixteenth century, the painting had been dragged halfway across Europe, only to end up in the hands of Giacomo Salaì, reportedly Leonardo's most obnoxious pupil, *(5)* shortly before 1525, *(6)* and in the bath chambers of the King of France, probably around 1540 *(7)*. Here it shared the company of about a dozen paintings by leading Italian masters such as Giulio Romano's portrait of Giovanna d'Aragona or Leonardo's Bacchus and his Saint Anne. Fortunately, Mona Lisa did not remain too long in this splendid but also rather humid environment. Still, even after its removal from the King's bathroom, it must have been kept under fairly careless conditions and it remained practically unknown to those who did not have access to the royal palaces at Fontainebleau or Versailles. Centuries later the portrait made its way into Napoleon's bedroom and, at the beginning of the 19th century, it became part of the French collection in the newly founded Musée du Louvre in Paris. *(8)* Only through public display could Mona Lisa become as famous as she is today, and this fame was enhanced considerably by romantic writers and poets such as Walter Pater, to whom we owe one of the most fantastic descriptions of the portrait. In fact, Pater and others like Théophile Gautier, created the notion of Mona Lisa as the femme fatale, some kind of erotic monster, capable of bewitching the male beholder. *(9)* This view of Mona Lisa as a sexually ambiguous being was influenced by Pater's ideas about art in general and women in particular. *(10)* But Pater's romantic imagination was probably also fed by 19th-century black-and-white reproductions of the portrait which gave Lisa's likeness a rather gloomy atmosphere. In fact, outside its air-conditioned box and under natural light, Mona Lisa looks almost as fresh and light as other contemporary portraits, such as Raffael's Maddalena Doni *(11)*.

Most of todays popular interpretations of the painting are still under the spell of Pater's romantic fantasies and even some serious scholars tend to see the sitter of the world's most famous portrait as a courtisan or prostitute. Other theories focus on diseases Mona Lisa may

Fig. 1; page 316

A shorter version of this paper was given in German at: Artistic Exchange, 28. Internationaler Kongress für Kunstgeschichte, Berlin, 15–20 July 1992, in the section chaired by Carlo Bertelli: Das Kunstwerk als Tourist. – This English version is based on my German text translated by David Jacobs, which I then have revised and enlarged for a lecture at the University of Crete in Rethymnon. – Unpublished material from the Gallery Archives, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., no. RG 7, C 25, boxes 43–44, is referred to as Gallery Archives. – In preparing this paper I have enjoyed the advice of my American colleagues Andrea Beyer, David Allan Brown, Tracy Cooper, Gail Feigenbaum, Ken Gaulin, Evie Lincoln, Alexander Nagel, Mark Neustadt, Michael Putnam and Bill Tronzo. Martha Shears facilitated the use of the unpublished material in Washington.

[1] Paris, Louvre, oil on panel, 77 by 53 cm. – Cf. Giovanni Poggi: Leonardo da Vinci. La vita di Giorgio Vasari, Florence 1919; Roy McMullen: Mona Lisa. The Picture and the Myth, London 1975; Donald Strong: The Triumph of Mona Lisa. Science and Allegory and Time, in: Leonardo e l'età della ragione, ed. E. Bellone and P. Rossi, Milan 1982, pp. 255–278; Pietro C. Marani: Leonardo. Catalogo completo dei dipinti, Florence 1989, pp. 106–109, and Frank Zöllner: Leonardo da Vinci's Portrait of Lisa del Giocondo, in: Gazette des Beaux-Arts 121, 1993, pp. 115–138.

[2] Cf. Luca Beltrami: Documenti e memorie riguardanti la vita e le opere di Leonardo da Vinci, Milan 1919, §§ 108 and 143.

[3] Ibid., §§ 168–171, 177–179, 181, and Grazioso Sironi: Nuovo documenti riguardanti la 'Vergine delle Rocce' di Leonardo da Vinci, Florence 1981.

[4] Frank Zöllner: Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa. Das Porträt der Lisa del Giocondo. Legende und Geschichte, Frankfurt a.M. 1994.

[5] On Salaì's bad reputation see Jean Paul Richter: The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci, 2 vols., New York 1970, vol. 2, pp. 363 and 379 (§§ 1458 and 1525, Ms. C, fol. 15v, and Codex Arundel, fol. 229v).

[6] Cf. J. Shell/G. Sironi: Salaì and Leonardo's Legacy, in: The Burlington Magazine 133, 1991, pp. 95–108.

[7] Cf. L. Dimier: Le Primatice, Paris 1900, pp. 279–283.

[8] Cf. McMullen (as note 1), pp. 153–162; N. Bailly: Inventaire des tableaux du Roy rédigé en 1707 et 1710, ed. F. Engerand, Paris 1899, pp. 2–9, no. 1; J. Cox-Rearick: La collection de Francois Ier, Paris 1972, pp. 17–18, and A. Brejon de Lavergnée: L'inventaire Le Brun de 1683. La collection des tableaux de Louis XIV, Paris 1987, pp. 87–88.

[9] Cf. Walter Pater: The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry, ed. D. L. Hill, Berkely etc. 1980, pp. 97–98 and 380–381, and George Boas: The Mona Lisa in the History of Taste, in: Journal of the History of Ideas 1, 1940, pp. 207–224 (Gautier's essay was first published in 1858, Pater's in 1869; cf. pp. 216 and 218). – For further references see André Chastel: L'Illustre incomprise. Mona Lisa, Paris 1988, and Mona Lisa. Un certain

have had, such as syphilis or a paralysis of her facial muscles. More sophisticated authors maintain that the painting of Mona Lisa is actually a self-portrait of the artist (!), expressing the secret supression of Leonardo da Vinci's homosexuality. [12] There is, of course, not a shred of evidence for any of these interpretations. Some day archeologists will wonder why the art critics and experts of the 20th century were so obsessed with detecting signs of socially unacceptable sexual practices (prostitution and homosexuality) and diseases or both (syphilis) in an apparently quiet and harmless picture. They may also wonder about the measure of violence and aggression involved in our century's understanding of Mona Lisa. In fact, an inventory of works of art and of advertisement-variations based on the picture amounts to a "chronologie d'un martyre" – as french scholars have recently pointed out. [13]

Mona Lisa's fame, fed by the romantic fantasies of the 19th century, reached yet another climax in 1911, when the portrait was stolen from the Louvre by an Italian housepainter, Vincenzo Perugia, and two carpenters, the Lanciolotti brothers. The theft was masterminded by a South American nobleman, who previously had six copies made of the portrait. After the robbery became public, he secretly declared each single copy to be the real painting and sold them individually to five North American millionaires. A sixth copy apparently went to some rich person in South America. [14] The original painting turned up mysteriously two years later in Florence, where the thief, Perugia, tried to sell it to a local antiques dealer. Only Perugia remained in Florence (in prison) and the portrait was returned to Paris, with great fanfare, by way of Rome and Milan. [15] Yet Mona Lisa's greatest travel adventures still lay ahead, during the Cold War: at the start of 1963, to be exact, on the occasion of the painting's loan to the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, when, at unprecedented expense, she was momentarily made the icon of the Free World. These travel adventures and their political meaning will be the topic of my paper.

Military Politics

Mona Lisa's journey to the New World corresponded with certain notable events in world history: Between June and October 1962, while the French and American governments were working out the art loan, the Cold War seemed to be hurtling toward a catastrophic climax. The Soviet Union had apparently responded to the installation of American atomic rockets in Turkey by setting up strategic nuclear weapons of its own on Cuba. On October 10, American reconnaissance planes began to step up efforts to verify the positions of the Soviet launching pads on the island; four

sourire..., ed. Ph. Junod, Lausanne 1992, pp. 109–115 and 121.

[10] For this particular view see the references in Hill's edition of Pater (as note 9), pp. 380–381. – For a broader discussion of this 19th-century view of women and art see Griselda Pollock: Vision and Difference. Feminity, Feminism and Histories of Art, London/New York 1988, pp. 137–144.

[11] Florence, Palazzo Pitti. Cf. Raffaello a Firenze. Dipinti e disegni delle collezioni fiorentine, Florence 1984, pp. 254–255 and passim.

[12] A summary of current theories can be found in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, Magazin, 8 April 1993, pp. 28–31, and Die Bildzeitung, 14 November 1993 (though both authors, exceptionally well informed, do not reveal their sources). – For scholarly more ambitious views on some interpretations see Marani (as note 1), pp. 106–109; Shell/Sironi (as note 6), and Zöllner (as note 1).

[13] Cf. Junod (as note 9), pp. 117–119. – For a justification of this violence see Salvador Dalí: Why they Attack the Mona Lisa, in: ARTnews 1963, reprinted in ARTnews 91, 1992, p. 166.

[14] Cf. Seymour V. Reit: The Day They Stole The Mona Lisa, New York 1981 (I have not been able to verify Reit's reconstruction of the theft); see also Dalí (as note 13) and Chastel (as note 9).

[15] Cf. Raccolta Vinciana 7, 1910/1911, pp. 147–148; Ettore Verga: Cronistoria del ratto della Gioconda, in: Raccolta Vinciana 9, 1913/1917, pp. 161–167, and Chastel (as note 9).

days later the first photos to confirm Washington's fears lay on President John F. Kennedy's desk. Khrushchev, however, yielded to Kennedy's demand for the withdrawal of the Soviet atomic weapons from Cuba on October 22. In the following weeks the Soviet leader dismantled the missile base on Cuba and the Soviet ships loaded with atomic weapons returned home. In January, 1963, which is to say shortly after the President formally presented the Mona Lisa in Washington, the Cuban Missile Crisis was officially resolved. *[16]*

Within the same period important political and military events had demonstrated the common interests, but also the conflicts of interest between the United States of America and the French Republic. Having lost the Algerian War in 1962, and being increasingly thwarted in its military involvement in Indochina, France felt compelled to limit its role as a global colonial power. As far back as the French defeat in Dien Bien Phu in 1954 the Americans, through massive subsidy of the South Vietnamese economy, had assumed the bulk of expenses for western military operations in Indochina, and between 1962 and 1963 the number of American military advisors had risen exponentially – contrary to common belief and Oliver Stone's film, JFK, it was already Kennedy who had sent American combat troops to Vietnam. *[17]* Quite evidently, then, the geostrategic positions held by the armies of the former colonial power, France, were gradually being taken over by the United States. At the same time, however, France was starting to build atomic weapons, creating the so-called "force de frappe" and thus entering into open competition with the Americans in nuclear armament. These two sides of the American-French relations – a common interest in stabilizing the global power of the West on the one hand and open rivalries in nuclear politics on the other – were clearly reflected in the loan of Mona Lisa to Washington and New York.

Art and Politics

As for the painting and its exhibition in 1963: The tremendous sensation created by Mona Lisa's journey to the United States stemmed not only from the painting's fame, but also from officials' eagerness to invest the display of Western civilization's most famous painting with a particularly charged political meaning. Apparently the tour came to be planned in roughly the following way: Edward Folliard, a journalist covering the White House for the "Washington Post", harboured a secret passion for the portrait and for some years he had toyed with the idea of obtaining Mona Lisa on loan for the United States. Folliard got his chance to do so in May, 1962, when he found a receptive audience in France's

[16] Cf. Pierre Salinger: Mit Kennedy. Der Bericht eines seiner engsten Mitarbeiter, Düsseldorf/Vienna 1967 (engl. ed. 1966), pp. 316–358; Robert F. Kennedy: Dreizehn Tage, Berne etc. 1969 (engl. ed. 1968), and Der Spiegel, no. 16, 1992, p. 145.

[17] The number of US military advisers in Vietnam were officially 948 in November 1962, 2 646 in January 1963 and 16 732 in October 1963; cf. The Pentagon Papers as published by the New York Times. Based on Investigative Reporting by Neil Sheehan, Toronto/New York/London 1971, pp. 79–157; Philippe Deviller/Jean Lacouture: Viet Nam. De la guerre française à la guerre américaine, Paris 1969 (2nd ed.), pp. 388–399; Melvin Gurtov: The First Vietnam Crisis, New York/London 1967, pp. 43–46, and Jürgen Horlemann/Peter Gäng: Vietnam. Genesis eines Konflikts, Frankfurt a.M. 1967 (4th ed.), pp. 97–98 and 152–187.

Minister of Culture, André Malraux. Yet in supporting Folliard's suggestion Malraux met with considerable opposition from practically all the officials at the Louvre who, like most French intellectuals, raised violent objections to Mona Lisa's transportation, not only for reasons of safety, security and preservation, but also on basic cultural and political grounds. [18] It did not seem appropriate to send one of the most treasured symbols of European culture to America, then regarded as a country with hardly any culture at all. [19] Things looked bad, then, for Folliard's project. [20] Yet at that very moment in the summer of 1962, Mona Lisa's trip to America was escalated into a top government priority. André Malraux had contacted America's First Lady Jackie Kennedy, and explained Folliard's proposal. Malraux, being on good terms with the President's wife, [21] made it clear that Mona Lisa's trip was intended both as a gesture of gratitude on the part of the French people and as a personal loan to the President and his wife. [22] Once Charles de Gaulle had given his backing to the project, the planning of the Mona Lisa exhibition went ahead unimpeded. Finally, on October 10, 1962, as spy planes were circling over Cuba, John F. Kennedy officially placed John Walker, director of the National Gallery in Washington, in charge of the exhibition. [23]

Fig. 2; page 317

Curiously, Kennedy, in his letter to John Walker, mentioned only the French initiative, just as if there had not been any American proposal. Furthermore, he spoke of two (!) paintings, neither of which he identifies: "I would like you to be my personal representative to discuss, [...] security protection for two pictures to be sent here from France this fall. These pictures will come to the United States as a most generous gesture from President de Gaulle and the Minister of Cultural Affairs for France, André Malraux, to Mrs. Kennedy and me. They offered these pictures to us, to be exhibited in certain museums, for a suitable length of time [...]." [24]

As is well known, one of the paintings mentioned in Kennedy's letter was the Mona Lisa, the other one, as few people will remember, was James McNeill Whistler's "Portrait of his Mother" [25]. Originally it had been planned to have Mona Lisa along with Whistler's mother in the same exhibition. [26] This idea of a two-portrait show, which seems somehow strange today, originated from a plane crash. In 1962 the Atlanta Arts Association from Atlanta, Georgia, had made a trip to Paris to visit the Louvre and to see the portrait of Whistler's mother, then considered an icon of American art. Tragically the plane crashed at the Parisian airport, Orly, and all passengers were killed. [27] Following this accident the Louvre made a grand gesture of good will and permitted the portrait of Whistler's mother to be sent to Atlanta, Georgia. When, in autumn 1962, the portrait of Mona Lisa was scheduled to arrive in the United States, someone – and I have not found out who – decided to organize a joint

Fig. 3; page 318

[18] Cf. for example Gallery Archives, John Walker, letters to André Malraux, of 4 June 1962, and to Edward Folliard, of 14 December 1962; The Washington Post, 13 December 1962; Le Figaro, 15/16 December 1962 (credits the idea for the exhibition to Jackie Kennedy); Der Spiegel, no. 3, 1963, p. 49. See also John Walker: Self-Portrait with Donors, Boston/Toronto 1969, p. 62, and Ulrich Klasen: Die Reisen der Mona Lisa im Spiegel der französischen Presse, in: Mona Lisa im 20. Jahrhundert, exh. cat., Duisburg 1978, pp. 155–159.

[19] On the European view of American Culture see Dan Diner: Verkehrte Welten, Frankfurt a.M. 1993.

[20] Cf. Gallery Archives, Mrs. Albert D. Lasker, letter to John Walker of 21 December 1962; Klasen (as note 18), and M. Hours: Une vie au Louvre, Paris 1987, p. 179.

[21] On Malraux and his relation to Jackie Kennedy see J. Lacoutre: André Malraux, New York 1975 (french ed. 1973), pp. 409, 422 and 447.

[22] Cf. Walker (as note 18), pp. 62–63.

[23] Gallery Archives, John F. Kennedy, letter to John Walker of 10 October 1962.

[24] Gallery Archives.

[25] James A. McNeill Whistler, Arrangement in Grey and Black no. 1 (Portrait of his Mother), Paris, Louvre, oil on canvas, 163 by 142 cm. – Cf. Henry S. Francis: Portraits by Whistler and Chase, in: The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art 52, 1965, pp. 19–22, and F. A. Trapp: A Rearrangement in Black and White: Whistler's Mother, in: Art Journal 23, 1963/1964, pp. 204–207.

[26] Cf. Walker (as note 18), pp. 62–63.

[27] See New York Mirror, 24 June 1962, used by Andy Warhol in his "129 DIE (Plane Crash)", 1962 (see Gert van der Osten: Die Kunst der sechziger Jahre/Art of the Sixties, Cologne 1971 [5th revised ed.], no. 211).

exhibition of both portraits at the National Gallery in Washington. However, when the political importance of the "Mona Lisa Show" became evident, John Walker and Jackie Kennedy decided that each painting should have its own exhibition. *[28]*

With Malraux's interest, de Gaulle's support, and Jackie Kennedy's involvement, Folliard's initially romantic idea was transformed into a major act of state. In fact, the project ultimately became two exhibitions for Mona Lisa alone, the first in Washington, the second in New York and it evolved into a state reception for Mona Lisa grander than de Gaulle could ever have wished for himself. The painting's transport from Paris to Le Havre, however, did not go as smoothly as one would have wished. Bad weather conditions and ice on the streets removed four motorcyclists from Mona Lisa's escort, but with ten cars and 50 special soldiers (CRS) for further protection the painting arrived safely in Le Havre. *[29]* The massive police protection and up to six permanent body-guards, her passage on the luxury liner "France" as well as the luxurious accomodation and around-the clock security she was given on her transatlantic crossing, would have done honour to any state dignitary. *[30]* Yet, compared with the treatment Mona Lisa was about to receive on her arrival in the States, the travel arrangements the French had made for her came to seem almost paltry and second-class.

The Mother of All Block-Buster Shows

Even John Walker, initially critical of the entire project, now seemed to succumb to the rampant "Lisa Fever" and the allure of state ceremony. In a letter of December 3, 1962 to Jackie Kennedy he informs her of the wishes of the French, who were evidently picking up the tab for every phase of the loan and who insisted that the painting be received in grand fashion. The exact phrase he used was "grandes manifestations"; the French were hoping that Malraux and Kennedy would both give brief speeches for the exhibition's opening in the National Gallery. Furthermore they wanted American Navy ships to escort the luxury liner "France" that was carrying the Mona Lisa into New York Harbor. They also envisioned having the painting accompanied by an American honour-guard made up of marines and appropriate escorts from the FBI, the Navy and National Guard. Walker was thus writing to Jackie Kennedy mainly to gain her husband's cooperation in securing the Marines and warships, since they are subject to the decree of the Commander in Chief. *[31]* But in addition to the military ceremony the French had not neglected to consider appropriate civil protocol. The formal presentation of the painting, which had already arrived in the United States before Christmas, was scheduled for

[28] For these facts see Gallery Archives, John Walker, letters to André Malraux of 4 June 1962, and to Edward Folliard of 14 December 1962; Nicole [? from the staff of the French embassy in Washington], letter to John Walker of 28 July 1962; The Washington Post, 13 December 1962; Le Figaro, 15/16 December 1962; Der Spiegel, no. 3, 1963, p. 49, and Walker (as note 18), p. 62.

[29] Le Figaro, 15/16 December 1962, p. 24.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Cf. Walker (as note 18), p. 63, and Gallery Archives, John Walker, letter to Jackie Kennedy of 3 December 1962.

January 8, 1963, at 10:00 pm. This was the day the Kennedys were expected to return from their vacation in Florida, and the 88th Congress of the United States was being convened for its opening session. As a result, invitations were extended to the entire Congress, the cabinet of the Kennedy administration, and the Supreme Court as well. Seldom if ever had the ruling class of the United States been assembled in such full force. The press, the next day, would note with amusement that no head of state had ever been treated with as much care by the Marines as had Mona Lisa. [32]

The Mona Lisa's voyage as well as the protocol and ceremony for the show in Washington had turned into a major act of state. Yet Lisa's appearance in the American capital garnered still other superlatives. Never before had a work of art directly and expressly been lent to a president and his wife, never before had the organization of an exhibition ever been an official matter for the White House, never before and never again did a president of the United States personally inaugurate an art exhibition, much less give an inaugural speech for it. [33] And Kennedy's speech for the opening is one of the most revealing documents of transatlantic cultural exchange in the early 1960's and the Cold War.

As for the opening, it got off to a fine start. As planned, a Marine Corps band started playing at 9 pm, immediately setting the appropriate tone for the festivities. An honour-guard of marines greeted guests at the rear entrance of the White House on Constitution Avenue and at the side entrance on Seventh Street. As the President and his wife entered at around 10 pm, fanfares were sounded, quickly followed by the marine band's "Hail to the Chief". After this, though, an embarrassing technical gaffe occurred. In the course of testing the technical equipment, the overzealous White House security forces had inadvertently short-circuited the entire loudspeaker system. Kennedy saved the day, however, by summoning up all his vocal strength and repeating, without the benefit of a microphone, the last portion of Malraux's speech to the nearly two thousand guests. [34]

Malraux briefly summed up the cultural and historical significance of the Mona Lisa, also hinting at the romantic image of the femme fatale. But generally he described the portrait as a triumph of Christian culture over antique art: "The antiquity which Italy revived proposed an idealization of forms, but the world of classical statues, being a world without sight, was also a world without soul. Sight, soul, spirituality – that was Christian art, and Leonardo had found this illustrious smile for the face of the Virgin. Using it to transfigure a profane countenance, Leonardo gave to woman's soul that idealization which Greece had given to her features. The mortal being with the divine gaze triumphs over the sightless goddesses." [35] After this his speech became more politically engaged.

[32] *Cf. The Evening Star [Washington], 9 January 1963.*
[33] *For a list of all exhibitions see Elise V. H. Ferber: Compilation of all Exhibitions in the National Gallery from its Opening in 1941 to January 1989, unpublished manuscript, Gallery Archives.*
[34] *Cf. The Evening Star [Washington], 9 January 1963.*
[35] *Gallery Archives. The french text was published in Le Monde, 10 January 1963.*

Malraux also pointed out that John and Jackie Kennedy's reception in honour of Mona Lisa represented the most brilliant homage ever bestowed upon a work of art. He went on to cite the various safety and security risks to which the painting had been exposed on its journey. But here in his speech, which Kennedy repeated after the loudspeaker system failed, Malraux went on to point out the considerably more real risks to which American soldiers had been exposed during the First World War and especially during the Second World War as they landed on the coast of Normandy. In Malraux's own words: "There has been talk of the risks this painting took by leaving the Louvre. They are real, though exaggerated. But the risk taken by the boys who landed one day at Arromanches, to say nothing of those who proceeded them 25 years before, were much more certain. To the humblest among them who may be listening to me now, I want to say without raising my voice that the masterpiece to which you are paying historic homage this evening, Mr. President, is a painting which he has saved." *[36]* It was unlikely, of course, that any simple infantryman was present that night among the two thousand invited guests in the National Gallery in Washington. Moreover, those who knew anything about military history noted that the beach of Arromanche had been captured not by American, but by British troops. *[37]* Despite these inaccuracies, Malraux's concluding remarks provided a neat lead-in for the President's own remarks, which continued the military-style speech of the previous speaker. Referring to the French Minister of Culture as a "Commander in Chief", he recalled those wars in which Frenchmen and Americans had fought side by side. "Our two nations have fought on the same side in four wars during a span of the last 185 years. Each has been delivered from the foreign rule of another by the other's friendship and courage." *[38]*

Furthermore, Kennedy remarked that the French and American revolutions had created the very notions of freedom and democracy that were currently being violently challenged in the world, but that remained ideals to which France and America both felt themselves bound to uphold. At this point his speech turned into a political ceremony which could be directly campared with a religious service or the adoration of sacred images: "Our two revolutions helped define the meaning of democracy and freedom which are so much contested in the world today. Today, here in this Gallery, in front of this great painting, we are renewing our commitment to those ideals which have proved such a strong link through so many hazards." *[39]*

Kennedy's militant tone is somewhat startling today, for in January, 1963 the United States were not officially at war with any other nation. Yet the frequent references to war and a threat to world freedom made

[36] Gallery Archives.
[37] Cf. Time, 18 January 1963, pp. 16–17.
[38] Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States. John F. Kennedy [...] January 1 to November 22, 1963, Washington 1964, pp. 4–6, esp. p. 5.
[39] Ibid.

sense as a cultural declaration of war on Communist countries like Cuba, North Vietnam, and the Soviet Union. Kennedy's thoughts about art and politics could be summed up something like this: art and art exhibitions are the continuation of the (cold) war by other means, to elaborate on a phrase from Clausewitz, the famous German thinker on war and politics. [40]

Mona Lisa and Nuclear Politics

Let us once again have a brief look at the political situation of those months in which Mona Lisa was about to be installed in Washington. The Cuban Missile Crisis had just officially ended, and an intensified American military engagement in Vietnam was predictable. Here, in South-East Asia, the French were waging war with American funding, but officially without direct use of troops. This military "joint-venture" of the French and Americans was directly reflected in Kennedy's further description of Franco-American cultural exchange. France – in Kennedy's view – was the leading cultural "power" in the world, the United States its leading military power. Kennedy, with a good deal of irony, put it this way: "Mr. Minister, we in the United States are grateful for this loan from the leading artistic power in the world, France. In view of the recent meeting in Nassau, I must note further that this painting has been kept under careful French control, and that France has even sent along its own Commander in Chief, M. Malraux. And I want to make it clear that grateful as we are for this painting, we will continue to press ahead with the effort to develop an independent artistic force and power of our own." [41] Thus Kennedy compared de Gaulle's atomic armament with the cultural ambitions of the United States at the beginning of the sixties. With an ironic reference to de Gaulle's effort to provide France with an independent nuclear arsenal, he remarked that the United States would also attempt to build up an independent artistic power.

Incidentally, there was an immediate political context for Kennedy's irony regarding the French "force de frappe". Three weeks earlier Kennedy had met with the English Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in the Bahamas (in Nassau) to agree on the formation of atomic forces, which was to be kept under the high command of the NATO. [42] This agreement was in compliance with the demand for a heightened level of European involvement in the discussion and decision-making concerning the installation of atomic weapons, or in other words, Kennedy tried to limit the English and French atomic ambitions by offering some limited influence on the deployment and eventual use of nuclear weapons in Europe. But in the context of his speech in the National Gallery, Kennedy particularly meant to foil de Gaulle's plan to develop separate atomic forces for France, the

[40] Carl von Clausewitz: Vom Kriege (1832–1834), Frankfurt a.M. 1980, p. 674 (III.8.6): "Wir behaupten dagegen, der Krieg ist nichts als eine Fortsetzung des politischen Verkehrs mit Einmischung anderer Mittel". – For an assessment of this remark see Holger Iburg: Abschreckung und Software. Computertechnologie als Instrument der amerikanischen Sicherheitspolitik, Frankfurt a.M./New York 1991, pp. 32–35.

[41] Public Papers (as note 38).

[42] Cf. Le Figaro, 22/23 December 1962, pp. 1–3; Der Spiegel, no. 3, 1963, p. 19, and no. 4, 1963, pp. 42–43.

so-called force de frappe. It was with specific reference to this meeting with MacMillan in the Bahamas that Kennedy's speech described the Mona Lisa as being "kept under careful French control". Yet despite the grateful welcome the painting had received in the United States, America would try to develop independent an artistic "force and power". This ironic and politically charged thematizing of the Franco-American conflict of interests was explained the next day by the Washington newspaper "The Evening Star" for those who had failed to grasp Kennedy's references. The same paper also pointed out that seldom in the history of the United States of America, had the ruling class been present in such overwhelming numbers. *[43]*

In the case of the "Mona-Lisa show" the American President was claiming a quite extraordinary vision of the unity of politics and art, of action and thought: "For M. Malraux has revived for our own age the Renaissance ideal of the many-sided man. In his own life as a writer, a philosopher, a statesman, and a soldier, he has again demonstrated that politics and art, the life of action and the life of thought, the world of events and the world of imagination, are one, and it is appropriate that this Renaissance man comes to us as the friend and emissary of President de Gaulle, the leader who seized the opportunity for the rebirth of France and has given therefore the word 'Renaissance' a new meaning for our age." *[44]* With these remarks Kennedy payed homage to Malraux's role as a republican soldier in the Spanish Civil War, to his merits as a writer and to his ambitions as a philosopher. *[45]*

The ideological magnitude of Kennedy's view did not elude most contemporaries, only but the immediate political thrust of Kennedy's speech aroused various amused commentaries by American journalists. Yet the speech was not without its critics. The United Nations Secretary General, Sithu U-Thant, having apparently found the stress on Franco-American relations too one-sided, decided to stay away from the festivities. *[46]* A French daily took a comic view of the whole affair. In four different versions of Mona Lisa – quite similar to Andy Warhol's interpretation of her *[47]* – the caricature played ironically with the event and its political background. *[48]* Lisa's smile reminded the viewer of Don Camillo, of the Kennedy caricatures, and of the 1960's as the era of American toothpaste ads. The Lady Lisa was, subsequently, depicted sporting the beard of Cuban President Fidel Castro, the most virile symbol of the Latin-American variety of World Communism, thus becoming an icon of the Enemy. And even if the viewer may not have believed very strongly in the threat this likeable proto-hippie posed, help was nevertheless on the way in the form of a Mona Lisa who, evidently thanks to the CIA, had been armed as a warrior, fighting for rights, for the 'Just Cause'. The last

Fig. 4; page 319

Fig. 5; page 320

[43] The Evening Star, 9 January 1963.
[44] Public Papers (as note 38), p. 5.
[45] Cf. Lacoutre (as note 21).
[46] Cf. The Times, 10 January 1963.
[47] Cf. D. Bourdon: Warhol, Cologne 1989, pp. 162–163.
[48] I found this caricature in the Archives of the Department of European Painting, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (folder "Mona Lisa"). I could not trace its origin, but it must be a french daily newspaper of c. 10 January 1963.

caricature seemed to take a more conciliatory stance in depicting a Mona Lisa smiling contently, pacified by chewing-gum – as such, the very embodiment of American culture. The artist, at any rate, wondered with some concern in which of these guises Mona Lisa would return to France.

The article by André Sauger accompanying the caricatures was a fictional letter from Mona Lisa to "Mongeneral" Charles de Gaulle. With her characteristic calmness Lisa reported that all the fearsome might of the United States, and all those little atomic warheads too, had passed her by. She complacently compared the rhetorical brilliance of the American President with salvoes of atomically armed Polaris missiles, and remarked finally that the political meaning of the whole affair could not have been expressed more simply. A similar view was taken in a satirical periodical in Europe. In a fictive dialogue John and Jackie discuss the possibility of having Mona Lisa on permanent loan in the White House or even to trade the picture for something else the French might like to have in return. On the chance to have Mona Lisa permanently John F. Kennedy concludes: "We shall sent de Gaulle some atomic bombs in exchange – for those he would clear half the Louvre." *[49]*

The Professional Custodians of Culture

None of this high political voltage could obscure the fact that the Mona Lisa herself, who had been turned into an icon of the Cold War, was scarcely visible to her many visitors. The portrait was shielded by bullet-proof glass, placed at considerable distance from its viewers and insufficiently illuminated. The average length of time viewers looked at the painting has reported to be between four and ten seconds. *[50]* Looking was replaced by pilgrimage and blind adoration. The picture vicariously received tributes that would no longer have been deemed fitting for the heads of foreign democracies. Instead of being adored themselves, the politicians had installed a painting to receive adoration.

In the light of this situation, some quite bizzare and almost surrealistic suggestions have been made about the exhibition and adoration of the Mona Lisa. For example, James J. Rorimer of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York did not worry too much about the fact that the painting was hardly visible behind its bullet proof glass panel: He tried to make the best of the situation and remarked, "I think the glass may bring out qualities in the painting". *[51]* Seemingly, the custodian of art considered the non-visibility of the Mona Lisa as a newly acquired quality (as if a painting which can not be seen properly would look nicer). Similarly bizzare seems another proposal about the inappropriate dress of the guardians who were watching over Mona Lisa by day and night. Since

[49] "Und dem de Gaulle schicken wir zum Austausch ein paar Atombomben – dafür würde er den halben Louvre ausräumen." Eva Porombka: La Gioconda, in: pardon. die deutsche satirische Monatsschrift 2, 1963, no. 2. – I owe this reference to M. Diers.

[50] Cf. The New Yorker, 9 February 1963, pp. 23–24.

[51] Cf. The Christian Science Monitor, 16 January 1963.

the painting was in the "official custody" of the President, it was guarded by two Marines. However, Rorimer suggested replacing them with ordinary Metropolitan Museum security men because: "Marine dress uniforms are a little too colorful; they tend to distract attention from the exhibit. Our guards have nice drab uniforms." [52]

Also John Walker at the National Gallery in Washington had his own, particular ideas about the "Mona Lisa Show", describing the exhibitions of our century as a kind of religious service. Almost with disgust he commented on the huge number of tourists who were pouring into the museums: "These busloads of tourists were obviously worshippers, but they were worshipping in a new way, with guidebooks and cameras. Wasn't the Mona Lisa also, I wondered, an icon of this novel religion, cultural sightseeing. In communist countries, apart from devotion to the state, it is the only faith encouraged. In the free world, judging by tourism and attendance at art exhibitions, conversions have been spectacular." [53] Later on he described his own role as a director of the National Gallery and made a distinction between the larger part of the art loving public and the few true worshippers of art: "I decided I was the custodian of a precious relic belonging to a sect whose priests are professionals like myself [...]. As with other religions the communicants are divided between the superficial and the truly devote. In the first group are those who expect to acquire grace by merely looking at certain famous buildings or objects. [...] presence alone entitles the spectator to an emanation of culture somehow beneficial. Most of the people who queued up to see the Mona Lisa subscribe to this heresy. Then there are the true believers. To them works of art are sacraments to be consumed with profound attention, even reference. [...] They are the elect." [54]

It almost seems as if, in Walker's view, a large percentage of the public did not really deserve to see particular works of art, such as the Mona Lisa. Adoration of art by too many people became heresy. Art could only be appreciated by the elect, by the happy few. To understand this point of view, one has to consider that the exhibition of the Mona Lisa was something of a shock to Walker; never before had a single painting drawn so many visitors in so few days. And Walker made it quite clear – at least at the beginning – that he did not like the whole idea of the "Mona Lisa Show".

The ideological intensity of Mona Lisa's journey to the United States was never rivalled by any subsequent exhibition, although she was sent on quite spectacular tours to Tokyo and Moscow. Whereas the loan of Mona Lisa to the United States took place at the height of the Cold War, within a clear geopolitical power shift from Europe to America, the painting's trip in 1974 to Tokyo and Moscow was virtually a peace mission. [55] In fact, the loan in 1974, worked out in the autumn of 1973, corresponded

[52] *The New Yorker, 9 February 1963, pp. 23–24.*
[53] *Walker (as note 18), p. 67.*
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] *Cf. Connaissance des Arts, April 1974, p. 7; McMullen (as note 1), pp. 234–237; Klasen (as note 18), and Hours (as note 20), pp. 256–269.*

with a moment of political reconciliations. In 1973 Henry Kissinger had concluded a first bilateral armistice treaty with the North Vietnamese that was followed shortly after by the multilateral ratification of China, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France. The war between North Vietnam and the U.S.A. was officially over. That same year the climate on the Old Continent had also turned mild: as early as 1972 the first treaty for limitation of strategic nuclear weapons – SALT I – was signed, and in 1973 the Conference on Security and Cooperation convened in Europe.[56] Global detente was obviously making significant strides despite a fourth war in the Middle East in 1973 and the crisis over oil prices in the winter of 1973/1974, which meant that the transportation of the Mona Lisa to the East could occur without any of the violent polemics that had been sparked off by the 1963 tour. Indeed, the loan to Moscow was even decided upon only after the painting had reached Tokyo – the decision had all the casualness of a last-minute change in someone's travel plans. Needless to say, in Japan Mona Lisa was also received like a foreign dignitary and worshipped like an icon. There's another story that should be told: On Mona Lisa's flight from Tokyo to Moscow the passengers saw what seemed to be a vision. Suddenly, on the horizon a ball of fire appeared – not a nuclear explosion, as one might have feared eleven years earlier, but rather a Soviet spaceship, peacefully crossing Mona Lisa's path back to good old Europe.[57]

[56] Cf. W. Link: Der Ost-West-Konflikt, Stuttgart/Berlin etc. 1980.
[57] Cf. Hours (as note 20), p. 264.
[58] Letter from Pierre Rosenberg of 6 May 1992.
[59] Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Department of European Painting (folder "Mona Lisa").

The Unity of Art and Politics

It is true that Mona Lisa has joined the ranks of those paintings forbidden further travel. The Louvre assures me, that the painting will never leave the museum again.[58] Still, we should really interpret the spaceship that crossed her path as a prophecy of future travels. The theft of the Mona Lisa in 1911, her triumphal return to Paris in 1914, her journeys during the Cold War and later to the Far East have shown that at any given moment even the most impossible trips may become possible. This realization of the seemingly impossible was the outcome of that unity of art and politics about which Kennedy so eloquently spoke. Strangely enough, the art historians in those days did their best to ignore this extremely clear political vision. An internal brief of February, 1963 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, now in the Museum Archives, explicitly forbids the discussion of political issues with the press.[59] The museum staff was instructed not to answer political questions, particularly in interviews. It becomes clear that the cultural institutions tried to play down the political significance of the exhibition, almost as if the professional custodians of art were ashamed of being abused by politics and politicians.

A similar attitude can be found in the French newspaper "Le Monde". The columnist, Alain Clément, argued in the January 10 issue that the events in the National Gallery in Washington had shown the value of the special links between France and the United States, connecting both countries on a level beyond the changing events of daily politics. *[60]* Clément said that the exhibition of the Mona Lisa had convincingly demonstrated that France and the United States had met on a higher plane, where only works of art but not political issues are at home. Clearly, Clément did not want to acknowledge the political meaning of the exhibition, which Kennedy had openly described a day earlier. Faced with Kennedy's apparent use of art for political purposes, the custodians of art in New York and the journalists in Paris did not want to acknowledge the fact that art is not independent from politics – that art had, indeed, been used by the world's most powerful politician. Evidently, their vision of the unity of art and politics was quite different from that of the American President. Surely, only politicians, and not the official custodians of our culture, could proclaim as Kennedy that "politics and art, the life of action and the life of thought, the world of events, and the world of imagination, are one".

[60] "Les manifestations d'hier [...] mettront en valeur les liens spéciaux qui unissent notre pays aux Etats-Unis sur le plan le plus élevé, à un niveau inaccessible aux oscillations de la conjoncture politique." Le Monde, 10 January 1963.