

A Venetian Interlude: Mona at Rest

In 1998, Mona Lisa became George Puskoff's portable muse and tireless traveling companion along the highways and byways of his native Russia. Seven years later – the magical time-span of fairytales – she ascended into the heavens with the Italian astronaut Roberto Vittori. (Was it sheer coincidence that he possesses the good looks of an Italian film star? Or – more appropriately, perhaps – those of a fairytale prince?) The astronaut thus became the first man to sleep legally with Mona Lisa since she left Napoleon's boudoir to assume a place of honor in the Louvre. Another Italian, the immigrant worker Vincenzo Perugia, who kidnapped the beauty in 1911 and concealed her in a cupboard beside his bed, can hardly qualify as Vittori's rival. Nor can those who sleep beneath posters of Leonardo's masterpiece, snuggled between pillows bearing images of La Gioconda, for Puskoff's ingenious reprises have succeeded in restoring to the image something of its original, ineluctable aura. Here the issue is not one of originality but of authenticity.

Following her eventful *Wanderjahre*, Mona Lisa came to rest for more than five months in Venice, where each and every day tens of thousands of visitors would pay her their homage. From June 12 to November 6, 2005, "Mona Lisa Goes Space" constituted one of the principal attractions of the 51st Biennale di Venezia. Light-boxes mounted on the façade of the Santa Lucia train station, since 1846 the principle gateway to the island city, documented the picture's unprecedented journey to the International Space Station. In front of the Stazione Santa Lucia and adjacent to the Canale Grande stood Puskoff's imposing "Mona Lisa Tower," a roofless structure which visitors could enter to gaze upward past rainbow-colored variations on the Renaissance masterpiece, while a melody based on Leonardo's own notations played softly in the background. Flowing through the city from this location, to the Campo del Ghetto Novo in the north and all the way to the Giardini Gardens in the east, seven oversized aluminum panels with a yellow-and-black "Single Mona Lisa 1:1" – once more the fairytale number - were dramatically positioned. Measuring 3 x 3 meters, each was painted in a different yellow tone, thus echoing the chromatic sequences within the tower.

The famous traveler had found repose within the swirl of commuters, travelers and art tourists that lend the city its characteristic flair; she became what T.S. Eliot once termed "the still point of the turning world." (In similar fashion, the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats came to see the tower as a symbol of order and harmony among the turbulence of modern life.) The notion of repose was strengthened by the fact that three of the aluminum panels were visible from the water, so that passengers aboard vaporettos or gondolas moved past the familiar icon, as though passing in ceremonial review before the distinguished guest. On the other hand, the fact that Puskoff's Mona Lisa had come to rest after seven years of earthly and heavenly voyaging did not exclude a degree of dramatic nuance in her reception. Visitors to the tower saw themselves reflected in its curved surface, while every alteration of the sky above found its counterpart within the structure. The kaleidoscopic effects were thus in continuous motion, creating unique tableaux that vanished so soon as they appeared - often so rapidly that they can only in retrospect be fully appreciated through the remarkable photographs they inspired.

The seven yellow-and-black aluminum panels exhibited within the cityscape also had glossy surfaces that underwent more subtle but nonetheless continuous alterations, shifting according to time of day, weather, and passing traffic. More importantly, each was differently contextualized by the surrounding historic architecture, acquiring in the process a distinct sculptural presence. Unlike the relatively modest 70 x 70 cm. format of "Single Mona Lisa 1:1," which Puskoff briefly positioned more or less like a stage prop in 500 different settings throughout Russia, the Venetian panels towered over the viewer. Here they were less like props than elements of a stage set whose effect relied on the total *mise-en-scène*; what resulted was a kind of continuous street theater or happening. In residential areas, with neighborhood youths playing football under the lady's benign gaze, the effect was dramatically different than that prompted by the noble Campo Santo Stefano. Viewed from ships entering the Canale Grande, the panel situated at the Punta della Dogana seemed

at once like a majestic queen of the sea and a sternly watchful guardian, protecting the city from undesirable intruders.

Unfortunately, the undesirable elements already nested within the bosom of the Doges' ancient capital. On the night of June 8th, vandals disfigured the Mona Lisa installed in the picturesque but somewhat decrepit square of Campo Santa Margherita. With ballpoint pens and knives, they subjected the figure to a violent attack, reserving their greatest fury for the figure's celebrated, enigmatic smile. There was none of the sprayer's skewed humor or macho bravura here; the aggression with which one knife-wielding vandal stabbed at the image was unmistakable. The perpetrators were never apprehended, though in the course of the following days they would disfigure several other panels, as well. Mona Lisa had survived a breathtaking journey into outer space, but not a single night on the streets of Venice.

One can only speculate about the motives behind such vandalism. Locals may have seen the work, in its bright and pristine clarity, as an intruder in this ambience of crumbling facades and high unemployment. Perhaps the attackers were angered by the mistaken notion that the installation represented elitist interests, financed by public monies at the expense of much-needed improvements to neighborhoods like that surrounding Santa Margherita. The irony is that with immense energy and engagement, Pusenkoff had personally raised the necessary funds to produce, ship and exhibit his project. (As in the ambitious projects of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, such a procedure is a not insignificant guarantee of artistic freedom.) The artist and six white-gloved assistants had also personally installed the works with a speed and efficiency few public institutions could duplicate.

Plainly, there is always an element of the unpredictable when artworks are removed from a fine-arts context and subjected to the vicissitudes of the "real" world. Yet precisely this theater of the commonplace was one the artist had cultivated with great success in "Mona Lisa Goes Russia." One might conclude, then, that the vandalism perpetrated at the Campo Santa Margherita was no more and no less than the kind of senseless defacement that has become a commonplace feature of the urban environment and had nothing to do with the art world per se. On the other hand,, at least one of the iconoclasts at work on the night of June 8th was an initiate of that world, since he did not simply attack at random but used a ballpoint pen to scribble a mustache onto the face, as though intentionally quoting Duchamp's (in)famous subversion of the image. Shortly thereafter, another cognoscente intervened in the Campo San Maurizio, endowing the Mona Lisa with an even more luxurious mustache and with the motto "It's not art!" The allusion to René Magritte, another manipulator of the celebrated image, is unmistakable. (Police speculated, for undisclosed reasons, that the perpetrator was a young American art student.)

The Venetian vandalism was far from the first occasion on which Mona Lisa was subjected to "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or proved a catalyst for the most contradictory responses. Throughout the centuries she has survived forgery and theft, parody and commercial exploitation, inept reproductions and even the perversity of the coffee mug. As though to compensate for the violence of the streets, throughout the summer and fall of 2005, rainbow images of the celebrated beauty soared aloft in a private tower of near-Byzantine opulence, secure in a city whose famous skyline is accentuated by towers. Such structures variously suggest safety and watchfulness, defense and retreat; they can embody a reaching toward the heavens or a proclamation of authority, but they can also be sites of isolation and imprisonment. They figure prominently in fairytales, as well, often securing the beautiful princess from the outside world and offering appropriate challenges to her rival suitors. Something of this multifariousness is suggested by George Pusenkoff's digital reprises on Leonardo's painting, as well, and by the journeys they have undertaken together. Through it all, the famous face has retained its serene attitude – one that received added dimensions of meaning in the fabled city known as La Serenissima.