

Artwork That I Admire

Posted on October 30, 2019

Introduction

This comparative art reflection considers one painting I strongly admire, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, and one I find more difficult to appreciate, Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*. The original response contains valuable personal reactions but misidentifies the *Mona Lisa* as an ink painting, treats Renaissance and nineteenth-century art too broadly, and interprets the woman in *The Kiss* as clearly unwilling without acknowledging ambiguity. A stronger evaluation combines personal preference with accurate information about medium, period, composition, technique, iconography, and museum context. Disliking a work does not require proving that it fails, and admiring a work does not require treating every popular claim about it as fact.

Artwork I Admire: The Mona Lisa



Title: *Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, Wife of Francesco del Giocondo*, known as the *Mona Lisa*

Artist: Leonardo da Vinci

Date: approximately 1503–1519

Medium: oil on poplar panel

Location: Musée du Louvre, Paris (Musée du Louvre; Delieuvin; Kemp)

Historical and Artistic Context

Leonardo began the portrait during the Italian Renaissance, when artists were studying anatomy, optics, geometry, landscape, and the expressive possibilities of oil paint. The sitter is generally identified as Lisa Gherardini, wife of the Florentine merchant Francesco del Giocondo. The painting is not a summary of the entire period from 1400 to 1700, nor is it a drawing. It belongs to a culture in which portraits increasingly represented individual identity, social position, and psychological presence. Leonardo's scientific observation informed his art, but the painting should not be reduced to a scientist illustrating daily life. It is an experimental portrait whose slow development and subtle transitions made it unusual even within its own period.

Composition and Pose

Lisa sits in a three-quarter pose with her hands folded and body turned slightly while her face addresses the viewer. This position creates stability without complete symmetry. The folded hands do not inherently symbolize masculinity; they contribute composure, decorum, and the sitter's controlled presence. A low parapet separates her from the landscape, while the chair and armrest structure the foreground. Leonardo avoids the rigid profile used in many earlier portraits, allowing the sitter to appear psychologically available while remaining self-contained. I admire the way the pose communicates confidence without theatrical gesture. The painting holds attention through restraint, making small changes in gaze and expression more important than dramatic action.

Sfumato and the Face

Leonardo's technique of *sfumato* creates gradual transitions without hard outlines, especially around the eyes and mouth. Thin layers of oil paint soften boundaries so that expression changes with viewing distance, lighting, and attention. The famous smile does not literally appear and disappear because of magic or because one must look away. Visual perception is more sensitive to broad low-frequency information in peripheral vision and to fine detail in direct vision, contributing to the changing impression. I admire this ambiguity because it makes the viewer participate. The face cannot be reduced easily to happiness, sadness, seduction, or indifference. Its emotional openness sustains repeated looking.

The Landscape

The background combines winding roads, water, rock formations, distant mountains, and atmospheric haze. It is not simply a barren land recording one historical setting. The landscape appears imagined and geologically active, connecting the human figure with processes of water, erosion, and time. The horizon levels differ slightly on the two sides, contributing to subtle instability. Atmospheric perspective shifts distant forms toward cooler and less distinct tones, increasing depth. I admire how the landscape prevents the portrait from becoming merely social documentation. Lisa appears calm before an environment that seems ancient and unfinished, suggesting a relationship between individual life and natural transformation without offering one fixed symbolic explanation.

Identity and the Madonna Comparison

The sitter's calm frontality and idealized presence may remind some viewers of Renaissance images of the Virgin Mary, but the *Mona Lisa* was not historically called the Madonna as an alternative title. Confusing the portrait with a sacred image erases its secular identity. Leonardo did use compositional knowledge developed through religious painting, and Renaissance viewers would have recognized

conventions of dignity and motherhood. The power of the portrait comes partly from raising a merchant's wife to an extraordinary level of visual attention. She is neither a generic symbol of "real womanhood" nor simply a copy of Marian imagery. She appears as an individual whose identity remains partly protected from the viewer's desire to define her.

Material Survival and Conservation

The painting has survived for more than five centuries, but it has not remained physically unchanged or perfectly "original." The poplar panel has been stabilized, varnish has aged, and environmental conditions are managed carefully. Cracks and tonal changes are part of the object's history. Authenticity is not something an ordinary viewer can determine accurately by direct sight alone; experts use provenance, technical imaging, materials analysis, documentation, and comparison. The work's fame has also shaped how it is experienced behind protective glass and amid large crowds. I still admire the painting because its physical vulnerability contrasts with its cultural durability. Preservation makes continued interpretation possible but also reminds viewers that masterpieces are material objects requiring care.

Why I Admire It

My admiration comes from the balance of technical precision and unresolved meaning. The painting is carefully constructed, yet it never feels completely closed. The sitter's expression, the relationship between figure and landscape, and the soft transitions allow multiple emotional readings without becoming vague. Leonardo demonstrates that realism is not only copying visible detail. It can involve understanding how perception works and how little information is needed to suggest life. The *Mona Lisa* has been reproduced so often that its actual complexity can disappear behind celebrity. Looking closely restores the painting as a quiet, intellectually ambitious portrait rather than a symbol one is expected to admire automatically.

Artwork I Dislike: The Kiss



Title: *The Kiss (Lovers)*

Artist: Gustav Klimt

Date: 1908-1909

Medium: oil and gold leaf on canvas

Location: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna (Österreichische Galerie Belvedere; Natter)

Vienna and Klimt's Golden Period

The Kiss belongs to Klimt's Golden Period and to the cultural world of Vienna around 1900, not to a general nineteenth-century Romantic movement. Klimt was associated with the Vienna Secession, whose artists challenged academic institutions and integrated painting with design, decoration, architecture, and applied arts. His use of gold was influenced by Byzantine mosaics and by experiments with luxurious surface. The painting's nearly square format and ornamental pattern reduce ordinary spatial depth. Understanding this context does not require me to like the work, but it changes the basis of criticism. Klimt was not failing to produce Renaissance realism; he was deliberately combining bodies with decorative abstraction.

Composition and Pattern

The embracing figures occupy the center of a gold field and kneel or stand at the edge of a flowered ground. The man's robe contains angular black-and-white rectangles, while the woman's garment

uses circular and floral motifs. These patterns can be read as gendered contrasts, though the interpretation should not be treated as universal fact. Their bodies disappear into shared ornament, creating unity while preserving visual difference. I find the decorative density somewhat overpowering because it competes with the human encounter. The gold surface makes the image iconic and memorable, but it also creates emotional distance for me. I respond more strongly to the quiet spatial depth of Leonardo's portrait.

Consent and Ambiguity

The woman's closed eyes, tilted head, bent arm, and hand around the man's neck can be read as surrender, tenderness, uncertainty, or discomfort. The man's face is largely hidden as he bends toward her cheek or mouth. It would be too confident to say that the painting clearly depicts unwillingness. At the same time, modern viewers are justified in asking how power and consent are represented. Her kneeling position near the edge and his enclosing posture can feel restrictive. My discomfort with the image comes from this ambiguity rather than from proof of one narrative. The work is stronger, though less personally appealing, because it refuses to settle whether the embrace is mutual, overwhelming, sacred, erotic, or possessive.

Gold, Sacred Art, and Desire

Gold leaf traditionally carries associations with religious icons, wealth, transcendence, and light. Klimt transfers that visual language to erotic intimacy. The lovers seem removed from ordinary time and place, as if desire has become a sacred or total environment. This symbolism helps explain the painting's popularity: viewers can see private love elevated into something monumental. I find the transformation excessive because the ornament risks idealizing a relationship whose emotional terms remain uncertain. Yet the same feature that limits my enjoyment is intellectually interesting. Klimt makes it impossible to separate affection from display, body from pattern, or spiritual elevation from material luxury. The painting invites admiration and suspicion simultaneously.

Comparing the Two Paintings

The *Mona Lisa* and *The Kiss* create intimacy through opposite strategies. Leonardo uses subtle modeling, atmospheric depth, and an individual gaze. Klimt uses flattened gold, repeated pattern, and physical enclosure. In the portrait, the sitter remains separate from the viewer and landscape; in the embrace, two figures nearly dissolve into one decorative form. I prefer Leonardo's restraint because it leaves more space around identity. Klimt's image feels more declarative, even though its emotional meaning is ambiguous. The comparison shows that personal preference often depends on formal qualities. My response is not simply to the subject of one woman versus two lovers but to how each artist organizes surface, space, and access.

Revising My Judgment

The original response says *The Kiss* would improve if the woman's gesture were corrected to show passion more clearly. That proposal assumes art should remove emotional difficulty and confirm the viewer's preferred story. I now think the ambiguity is one reason the work remains open to debate. I still dislike the crowded ornament and the feeling of enclosure, but I would not ask the artist to make consent visually simple. The task of criticism is to explain the response while recognizing the work's aims. A painting can be successful without giving me pleasure, just as a famous painting can deserve skepticism despite institutional prestige. Personal judgment becomes stronger when it is informed rather than absolute.

Conclusion

I admire Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* for its oil technique, balanced composition, perceptual subtlety, atmospheric landscape, and respect for the sitter's unresolved identity. I find Klimt's *The Kiss* less appealing because its dense gold pattern and enclosing embrace create emotional distance and discomfort. Accurate comparison corrects several errors: the *Mona Lisa* is oil on poplar rather than ink, and *The Kiss* is a Viennese modernist work of 1908–1909 rather than a typical nineteenth-century Romantic picture. My preference remains personal, but it is now grounded in form, history, and interpretation. Art criticism becomes meaningful when admiration and dislike lead to closer looking rather than final dismissal.

References

1. Musée du Louvre. "Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, Wife of Francesco del Giocondo, Known as the Mona Lisa."
2. Delieuvin, Vincent. *Leonardo da Vinci*. Musée du Louvre, 2019.
3. Österreichische Galerie Belvedere. "Gustav Klimt, The Kiss (Lovers)."
4. Natter, Tobias G., editor. *Gustav Klimt: The Complete Paintings*. Taschen, 2017.
5. Kemp, Martin. *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*. Oxford University Press, 2006.