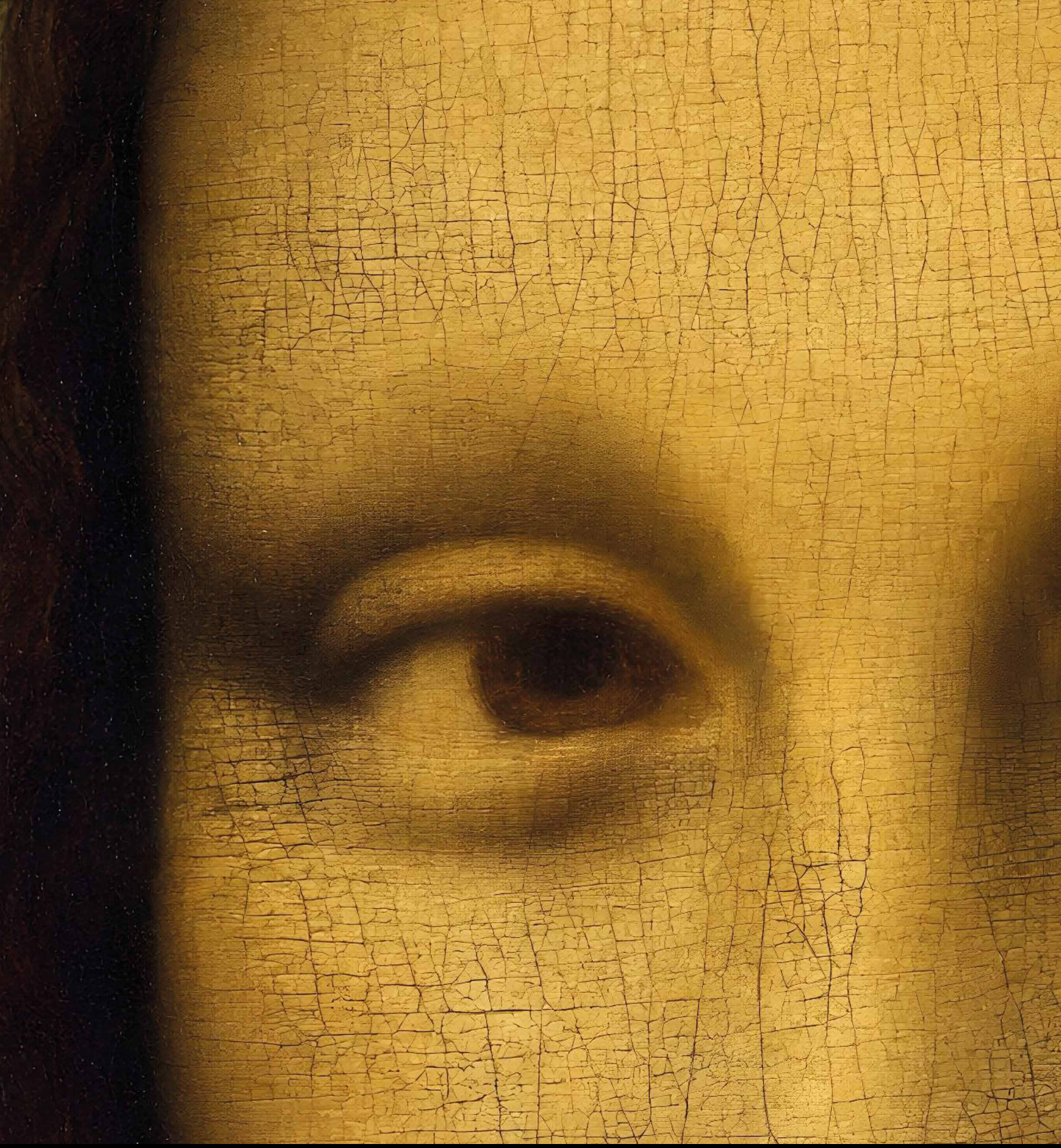
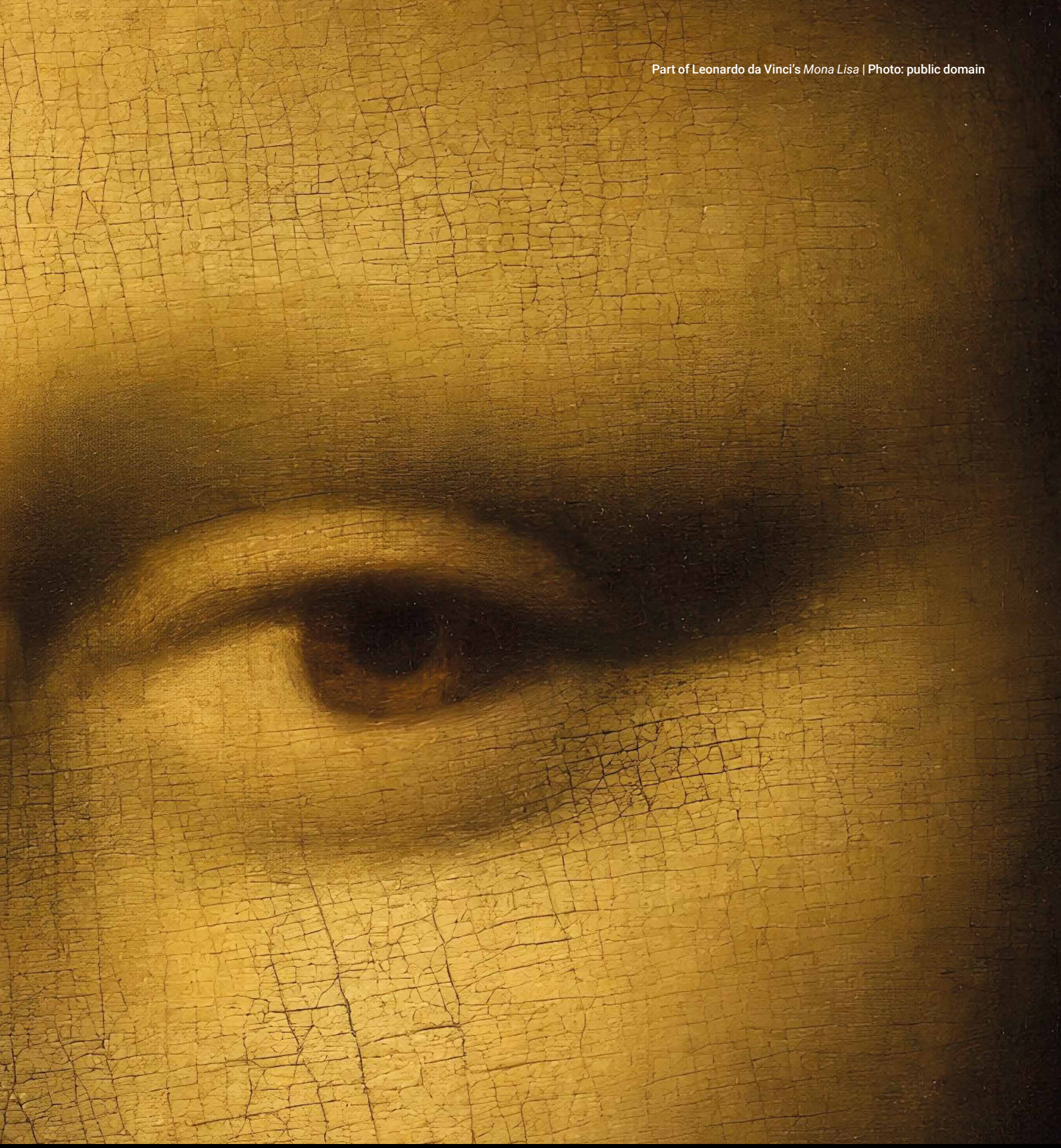


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MONA LISA
IS LOOKING AT YOU



Part of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* | Photo: public domain

30,000 – that's how many visitors the Louvre welcomes every day. As the world's most visited museum, it has become a staple of mass tourism and a must-see on any list of places to visit in Paris. However, this huge interest has led to overcrowding, making it physically difficult to view the masterpieces. The rise in the popularity of museums is transforming an intimate aesthetic experience into a superficial social one, in which the act of engaging with a work of art gives way to cultural rituals and the pressures of social media.



Tourists taking photos of the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre in Paris (2023)
Photo: APK, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The Mona Lisa – an icon of global culture – epitomises this phenomenon. Her image is used extensively by filmmakers, advertisers, manufacturers of merchandise and clothing, and creators of internet memes.

It was already stirring up a great deal of excitement long before now. In 1911, for instance, it captured the attention of millions when Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian immigrant, decided to simply take it from the Louvre to his own flat. This incident caused a worldwide sensation, and one of the consequences was the decision not to loan the masterpiece to other museums. An exception was made for the first time in 1963, when the Mona Lisa crossed the ocean to meet with American audiences at the request of Jacqueline Kennedy. Witnesses claimed that it was indeed a spectacle worthy of a Renaissance masterpiece. On a frosty January night, several thousand people waited to witness the unveiling of the painting. Exhibited first at the National Gallery of Art and then at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, it attracted millions and generated enormous media interest. Her face appeared on the front pages of newspapers across the country. Due to the huge interest, the museums had to extend their opening hours, and every visitor had just a few seconds to view the work.

'Andy Warhol summed up this phenomenon perfectly, pointing out that people did not go there to see the painting, but to take part in a social event. Nobody wanted to feel left out. If the French had sent a copy instead of the original, hardly any visitors would have even noticed the difference. Warhol's commentary on the Mona Lisa's trip abroad took the form of a famous colour lithograph', explains Barbara Lewicka, PhD, from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Silesia, a sociologist specialising in American art from the late 19th- and early 20th-century.

What was an ironic hypothesis for Warhol, contemporary museum institutions are beginning to use as a deliberate strategy for dealing with mass audiences. Rather than fighting the visitors' urge to capture the encounter with art in a photograph, they offer alternative solutions.

The National Museum in Kraków made an interesting choice: between 2017 and 2019, while the Czartoryski Museum was undergoing renovation, visitors could view another famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci at its venue. 'The Lady with an Ermine is here', proclaimed a huge billboard partially covering one of the museum walls.

'The specially designed space encouraged a more intimate encounter with the masterpiece, but photography was not permitted. However, the museum put a copy of the painting nearby for those who wished to take a photo documenting their encounter with the artwork despite the restrictions', says Barbara Lewicka. This type of an encounter involves very specific experiences. First, you stand in a never-ending queue, only to find yourself moving in a mechanical rhythm from canvas to canvas within a confined space. You have to constantly watch out for the exhibits and the people brushing past you. The air becomes heavy, thick and stuffy, filled with the hum of the crowd. And the painting itself? You can only glance at it in passing for a mere few seconds, feeling the pressure of the crowd surging behind you.

'The world's largest museums have become tourist attractions and can now be compared to amusement parks. If these are organised tours, there often isn't much time, which means that participants are constantly in a rush', says the researcher.

'I should add that, a dozen or so years ago, the director of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence decided to remove the sculptures from the museum's main hall. His motivation was precisely the huge influx of tourists. People gathered there in such numbers that the presence of the sculptures significantly impeded the smooth flow of visitors. People were practically tripping over them, which was deemed impractical and dangerous – both for the sculptures and visitors', says the researcher.

The mass nature of art appreciation is also linked to a shift in etiquette. The sociologist recalls watching the Chopin Competition with her grandfather in the early 1990s.

'Our attention was briefly caught by the audience members. Amongst people in evening attire sat a man in a Batman sweatshirt. My grandfather was appalled. What was an even more difficult experience for me was a concert I once attended in the Golden Hall of the Vienna Philharmonic. The orchestra was playing Brahms in a masterful fashion, and yet the men sitting next to me were glued to their phones the whole time', adds the researcher.

This is one of the consequences of a shift resulting in such places losing their original function and becoming tourist attractions.

The very notion of a museum as a monumental, classical building where certain standards apply has its roots in the 19th century. Previously, various collections were housed in so-called cabinets of curiosities. The Louvre was initially a fortress, then a royal residence where a private art collection began to be assembled. It was not until the French Revolution that the building's doors were opened to the general public. The famous glass pyramid was added in the 20th century.

The sociologist points out that 19th-century museum buildings – and concert halls – were designed to emphasise their role as temples of art and to command respect. In museums, works were displayed in chronological order to familiarise visitors with historical periods. Today, exhibitions that juxtapose objects from different periods are becoming increasingly common.

Great works of art also become symbols, elements of our social identity, as evidenced by an incident in 2022, when two members of the organisation Just Stop Oil poured tins of tomato soup over Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* at the National Gallery in London. Footage of the incident went viral, though the painting itself remained undamaged thanks to protective measures. Similar stories concern the *Mona Lisa*, which over the past seventy years has been subjected to various forms of protest, including attacks with acid, spray paint, cake, and soup. The security system has protected these works and preserved them for future generations.

'The choice of protest method was no accident. It was a strike against a specific symbol. I do not believe that pouring a tin of soup over a great work of art is ever a justified action, but I must admit that these people knew how to attract the media's attention', explains the sociologist.

It turns out that in a world dominated by mass tourism and high-profile protests, art can also be experienced in a different manner, for instance, by visiting storage facilities usually reserved for art historians and conservators. The Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam opened its unique storage facility to visitors while the main building was undergoing renovation. The storage is an extraordinary mirrored structure resembling a huge bowl that reflects the city's skyline.

This is part of a wider trend towards experiencing different spaces, not just traditional exhibitions. The Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, as Barbara Lewicka explains, allows visitors to see endless rows of storage shelves full of paintings through a glass wall. Currently, the San Marco monastery in Florence is hosting an exhibition of Mark Rothko's paintings, set amongst beautiful polychrome frescoes. The researcher emphasises that the setting is not accidental, as the colours of the ancient frescoes can be found in the American painter's splashes of colour.

'What I enjoy most is visiting small, private museums. They often house extraordinary art collections', says Barbara Lewicka. Perhaps it is precisely there, far from the overwhelming queues, camera flashes, and hustle and bustle, that art regains its former power. And the Mona Lisa? I've seen her once, and that's enough', concludes the researcher.



First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy at the opening ceremony of the *Mona Lisa* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington | Photo: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (public domain)