

The Mona Lisa and the universe



By Ian Woodley

The portrait of Mona Lisa by Leonardo Da Vinci has produced much speculation over the years. Who is this lady with the enigmatic smile? Why did Da Vinci paint her? What is the scene in the background referring to?

Various explanations have been provided to try and solve these questions, but definitive proof may well be lost in history. Yet this does not harm my enjoyment of the image. Da Vinci was clearly a master of his craft.

Meanwhile, science can now give us answers to very different queries. What pigments did Da Vinci use? Did he start off with an outline drawing underneath the portrait? Various clever techniques can be applied to give certainty on these matters. Yet when I stand back and view the painting, this knowledge doesn't add to—or take away from—my admiration of the portrait.

Why my fascination with the Mona Lisa? Well, the Mona Lisa has helped me to re-visit a thorny theological question: Why is it that science and faith appear to disagree? Our love of beautiful works of art point us towards a straight-forward answer: They don't disagree at all—because they investigate very different questions.

When I admire the Mona Lisa, I see something of the artist in that portrait. I see Da Vinci's mastery of the art form, his passion for the subject, and

his genius in bringing the whole image together. I see the intangible presence of the artist. And even if I could answer all of those questions on the materials, paint, history, and the subject herself, I still wouldn't be anywhere near re-producing the image we now know as the Mona Lisa.

The universe is the same. Scientists can use Einstein's equations and all of quantum theory to give us wonderful knowledge of what makes the universe tick. They can also plot the timeline from the universe's early beginnings to the modern day. But none of this explains why we are here.

Faith gives us eyes to see God's passion for bringing everything into being, showing us the intangible presence of the divine artist. The Bible seeks to capture that divine presence, to show how the creation reflects our Creator's personality. God is shown to be intimately sculpting the Earth, speaking his innermost desires for creation into existence.

The Bible does not refer to molecules, gravity, or subatomic particles. In fact the Bible appears to ignore the questions of modern science altogether. Instead we are directed to see the big picture of the beauty and order of all things and how God has stamped his personality onto the universe.

If I went on a tour of the National Portrait Gallery in London and was only given a list of the molecules that produce the various colours on

view—well, I would be disappointed. And I say that as someone who studied physics and chemistry at university! By all means tell me some of the clever techniques used by the artist. But above all let me stand back and soak in the mastery of the artwork. The Bible tells us that God 'stood back' from the creation and 'soaked in' all he had done: 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good' (Genesis 1:31). The great Artist felt satisfaction from all he had created.

Science gets us 'under the bonnet' of the universe and shows us the clever techniques God used to bring everything into existence. Faith draws our attention back to the artist, to his character and purpose. A study of the universe is like studying the Mona Lisa: we find that art, history, and science are separate fields of exploration, producing very different answers. Faith doesn't seek to contradict physics, chemistry, or history. Instead faith seeks to add to them. Faith gives us a bigger picture of the world, enabling us to see—and admire—the greatest Grand Master of all art forms.

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