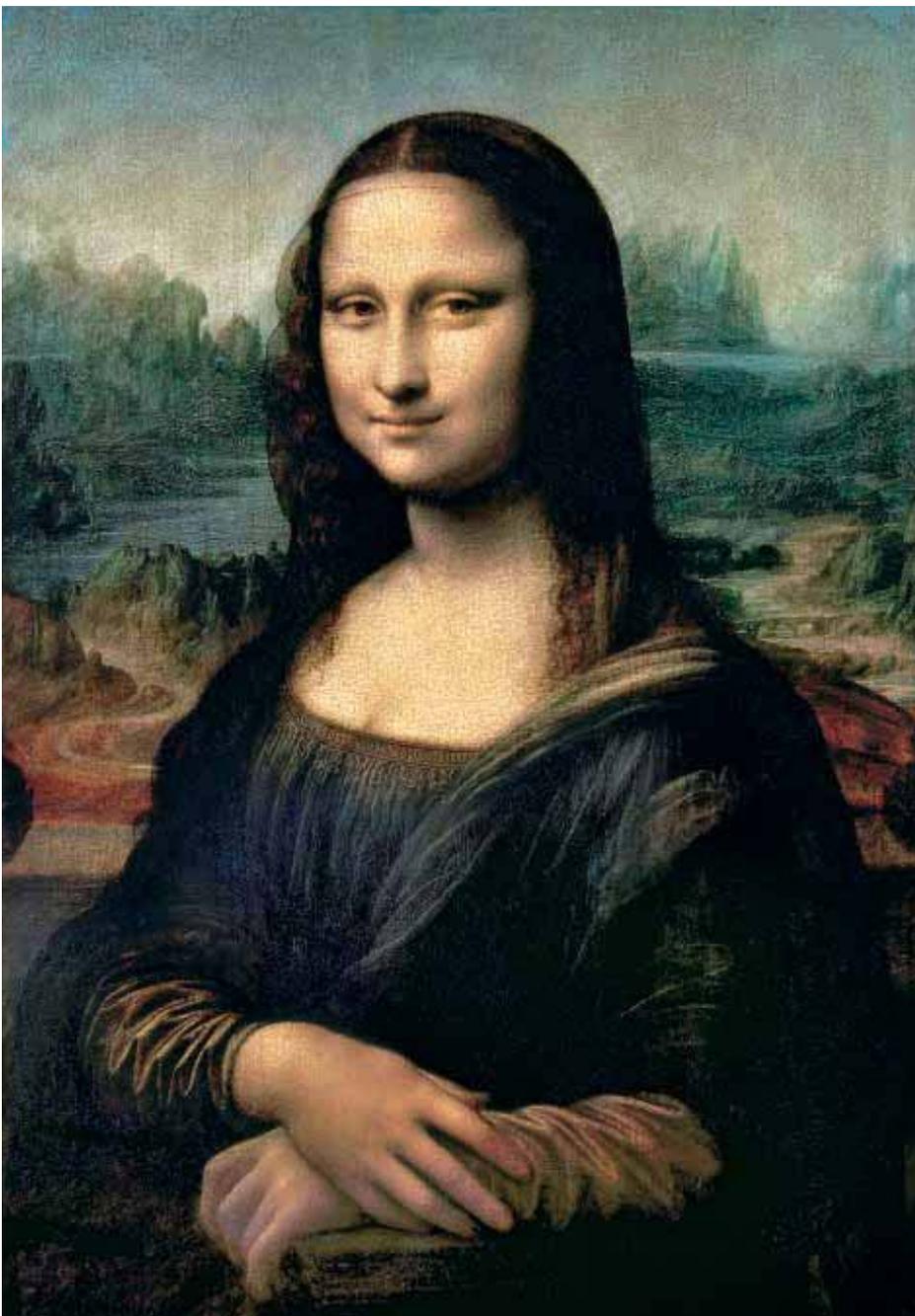




How the Mona Lisa came to Camelot

When Jackie Kennedy brought the world's most famous painting to America it was hailed as a diplomatic triumph. But behind the scenes there was a deal to allow the French to develop their own nuclear deterrent. Deirdre Fernand unravels the strange tale of how 'Mona mania' changed the world



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Feature *Mona Lisa*

This page: a glamorous Jackie Kennedy in 1960, two years before realising her dream of bringing the Mona Lisa (opposite) to America

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Christmas came early to the White House that year. By six days. Washington was dressed in its winter best: the national tree, a towering Colorado blue spruce, was decked, shoppers thronged the streets and the festive lights strung along Pennsylvania Avenue made the dark nights glow. On December 19, 1962, Jackie Kennedy received the gift she had long been dreaming of. No sparkling diamond from Harry Winston could compare; no silken gown by Givenchy compete. The present would also, at least for a short time, oust her as first lady of the greatest superpower in the world. For once she would have to play second fiddle to another woman. Move over, Jackie, the Mona Lisa had arrived.

Early on that December morning, a flotilla of small ships sounded their sirens as the SS France entered New York harbour. On board was Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. Save for evacuation during two world wars, La Joconde, as the French know her, had never left the Louvre museum on loan. A thief had taken her to Italy in 1911 but she had been quickly recovered. Paris had guarded this masterpiece of the Renaissance, thought to date from 1503, for more than 450 years.

The story of how the world's most famous painting came to be lent to the world's most famous first lady is a love story, of sorts. As a young student in Paris in the 1950s, Jackie had fallen in love with art — and with all things French. Ten years later, returning as the wife of the most powerful man in the world, it was France's turn to fall in love with Jackie.

Half a million people thronged the streets of the capital to welcome the couple on their state visit. Now a grand gesture was all that was required to cement that Franco-American relationship. France saw the United States as a valuable ally against communism, and seized the chance to buy goodwill by lending its most precious artefact. America, meanwhile, promised to turn a blind eye to France's nuclear ambitions. A deal was struck: the Mona Lisa would travel to the United States for three months.

But, as Margaret Leslie Davis, the author of a new book, *Mona Lisa in Camelot*, explains, the

course of true love was not to run smooth. As the painting was about to leave France, American intelligence revealed that the Soviets were building nuclear arsenals in Cuba. "No one could think about consigning a painting on a dangerous ocean voyage when the world seemed on the brink of nuclear war," she says. It was only after lengthy negotiations that the Cuban missile crisis was averted — and the deal back on. "Once the crisis had passed, the Kennedy machine was able to turn the loan of the Mona Lisa into a powerful symbol of freedom."

Davis believes the story has been forgotten because "it just got buried". Not by time, but by

grief. "Just eight months later the president would be assassinated," she says. A week after his death, his grieving widow granted an interview to *Life* magazine. In words that would reverberate around the world, she harked back to the legend of King Arthur's Round Table, describing her late husband's administration as "one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot". Forever after, the period between John

F Kennedy's inauguration in January 1961 and his assassination in Dallas, Texas, in November 1963 would be known as the Camelot years.

Davis, a historian who lives in California, stumbled upon the story when she came across letters between Jackie Kennedy and John Walker, the director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, while researching a book about patrons of the arts. She then found photographs of the first couple at the unveiling of the exhibition: "The presidential couple understood the power of symbols, and saw the

exhibition as an opportunity to burnish the American image at home and abroad."

With her husband's support, Jackie fought for the Mona Lisa, regarded by many in the art world as too fragile to travel. "She saw the loan as a personal project. Its coming or not was seen as a personal success or failure," Davis adds. "Today we tend to remember her as a fashion icon, and we underestimate her intellect and passion

for the arts." It helped that Jackie was able to woo

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the French in their own tongue. In 1951, while an undergraduate, she had won Vogue's Prix de Paris, a writing contest that awarded a stint on the fashion magazine and a year in Paris.

On May 31, 1961, the Kennedys arrived in Paris at the start of their official French visit. Jackie charmed everyone, even the French president, widely known for his *froidueur*. Mrs Kennedy, de Gaulle told her husband, knew "more French history than most French women". But it was not de Gaulle she wanted to meet.

France's minister of culture, 59-year-old André Malraux, was a longtime hero of hers. Handsome and charismatic, he was not only a renowned writer and intellectual but also a hero of the Spanish civil war and the French resistance.

Malraux was flattered by her interest in him. "Jackie bewitches, simpers and bubbles with sophisticated banter" when she is with him, noted one reporter. The trip could not have gone better. Afterwards, overjoyed by his wife's reception in France, Kennedy would famously describe himself as "the man who accompanied Jackie Kennedy to Paris".

Little wonder that on the couple's return to Washington, Jackie lost no time in planning a return visit from the French minister. For five weeks before his arrival in May 1962, Jackie worked on Malraux's itinerary, including their visit to the National Gallery of Art. According to *Paris Match*, they talked about the international significance of great art during their tour. "You should lend us some of your art works," she told him. "I would love to see the Mona Lisa again and show her to Americans." Malraux replied, perhaps off-guard: "I'll see what I can do."

He could not have known that the subject would come up again later that afternoon when a reporter from The Washington Post, Edward Folliard, asked about the painting during a press conference. Had the first lady put him up to it? "Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Mona Lisa could be shown in the National Gallery?" asked Folliard. The room fell silent. "Perhaps a loan could be arranged," replied the minister. "France feels that these masterpieces belong to mankind — she has no

copyright on them."

For the state dinner to honour Malraux, Jackie had gathered America's most accomplished artists, including the painter Mark Rothko, the writers Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams and the future Nobel prize-winner Saul Bellow. Every detail was perfect. For Malraux's delectation she had chosen *homard en bellevue*, a lobster salad once served to Louis XV by his mistress, Madame de Pompadour. As the party came to a close, Malraux leant across to the first lady. In a moment caught on film, he promised to loan her the Mona Lisa: "*Je vais vous envoyer La Joconde.*"

Those words would send the art world into shock. After all, the old lady was nearly 500 years of age and needed constant temperature and humidity. Many French officials, worried about the fragility of the painting, tried to stop the exhibition. Popular opinion, too, was against it, with newspaper columnists railing against its loan. But politics won the day. As Davis argues, it was de Gaulle's quest for international stature during the cold-war years that would sway him. He needed American support to develop France's own nuclear arsenal, the *force de frappe*. Yet it took a tragic accident, the crash of a ➤➤➤➤



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Left: schoolchildren visit the Mona Lisa at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1963

Below: protected by an aluminium case and flanked by secret-service agents, the painting arrives in New York

Bottom left: the Kennedys leave their residence at Quai d'Orsay, Paris, for a glittering state dinner in Versailles on June 1, 1961

PREVIOUS PAGES: LEFT: BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY; RIGHT: CAMERA PRESS/YOUSUF KARSH. THESE PAGES: TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT: AP. RIGHT: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY

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chartered Air France jet at Paris-Orly airport in June, to decide the fate of the picture. On board were more than 120 Americans, many of whom were art-lovers returning from Europe. The highlight of their trip had been the chance to see Whistler's Mother, painted by the American-born artist James McNeill Whistler, in Paris. When news of the crash, at the time the world's single worst air disaster, reached Malraux, he wrote a note of sympathy to Jackie, promising to send the Whistler portrait to America as a tribute. "I think that gesture showed that a work of art could be a great symbol of friendship and healing," says Davis. The Whistler loan would pave the way for that of the Mona Lisa. It would arrive before Christmas. But first she had an ocean to cross.

On October 14, just weeks before the painting was due to depart, reconnaissance pictures from American U-2 spy planes confirmed the existence of Soviet nuclear-missile installations in Cuba. Once fully operational, they would be capable of striking American cities. On October 22, the president announced in a television broadcast that 19 Soviet ships with bombers, nuclear warheads and missile parts were steaming towards Cuba. If the ships did not turn back, he would order an attack. For the next few days, the world teetered on the brink of nuclear war. After tortuous top-level negotiations, Kennedy agreed to pull US missiles out of Turkey if the Soviets stood down in Cuba. On October 28, the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, broadcast a message to Kennedy on Radio Moscow, thanking him for his "sense of proportion", and promising to turn the ships around and dismantle Cuban installations.

Final arrangements for the Mona Lisa could now be made. She would travel in an aluminium case kept at a constant temperature. That would be placed in a padded crate and bolted to the floor of her cabin. On her sea voyage, nine French guards and two officials from the Louvre watched over her.

The photographs of the unveiling ceremony at the National Gallery of Art show a radiant Jackie. "The event was more like a queen's coronation," says Davis. As The Washington Post reported,

"The Mona Lisa, first lady of the world among paintings, and Jacqueline Kennedy, first lady of the nation, came face to face." But one important man was missing. "De Gaulle stayed in France," noted the author Donald Sassoon, "there was room for only one star." To greet the 2,000 dignitaries, the first lady had chosen a strapless pink chiffon gown encrusted with pearls and brilliants teamed with diamond drop earrings. The effect was dazzling. And there was one more reason for her happiness. Though the couple had yet to announce it, Jackie was pregnant again

and the president was overjoyed. Their daughter Caroline was then five and John Jr two; an earlier daughter, born in 1956, had been stillborn.

President Kennedy's oratory that night was masterful, stressing the historical and political ties that bound their countries. The two nations had fought side by side, he said, and their respective revolutions had come to define democracy and liberty. His speech elevated the Mona Lisa into a powerful tool of propaganda in the cold war, representing western progress and civilisation. In what would be the most quoted line, he told his audience: "Politics and art, the life of action and the life of thought, the world of events and the world of imagination, are one."

It was after nearly 2m people queued in Washington and New York to visit the Mona Lisa that the term "blockbuster" passed into common parlance to describe popular exhibitions.

Queues stretched 10 abreast for nearly a third of a mile. School buses brought children, many from deprived areas, to pay their respects. "Mona mania" swept through the capital, with bartenders creating Mona Lisa cocktails and hairdressers emulating her coiffure.

The Mona Lisa altered America's image of itself. "The Kennedys helped put the arts centre-stage," says Davis. "And Jackie was the guiding force behind so many projects." A fixture of many art foundations, she married the tycoon Aristotle Onassis in 1968 and worked in publishing in New York during the 1970s. Diagnosed with cancer, she died in 1994 at the age of 64.

Looking back at the time of the Mona Lisa, Arthur Schlesinger, the historian and presidential



aide, concluded that it had been a golden interlude for Jackie. In his study of the Kennedy administration, *A Thousand Days*, he wrote: "She had dreaded coming to the White House, fearing the end of family and privacy. But life for herself and her husband and children was never more intense and more complete."

On the night of the opening, as the corks and flashbulbs popped, the president and his wife could not have known that their happiness was to be short-lived. The baby she was expecting, Patrick, was born prematurely on August 7 and died two days later. And on November 22, 1963, the Kennedys visited Dallas. Smiling and waving, they toured the city in an open-topped car ■

Mona Lisa in Camelot, by Margaret Leslie Davis (published by Da Capo Press, price £14.99), is available at the offer price of £13.49, inc p&p, from BooksFirst, tel: 0870 165 8585

*Kennedy's oratory elevated the Mona Lisa to
a powerful tool of propaganda
representing western progress and civilisation*

LEFT: TIME LIFE/GETTY; RIGHT: CORBIS



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**Right: 'Mona mania' hits
New York's Metropolitan
Museum of Art in 1963**

**Below: Jackie Kennedy
exchanges pleasantries
with Charles de Gaulle**