

2008 Higher Level Question 10

Leonardo da Vinci is considered by many to have been the most talented of all Renaissance artists. Describe and discuss two paintings by him, one religious and one secular which show his remarkable talent as a painter.

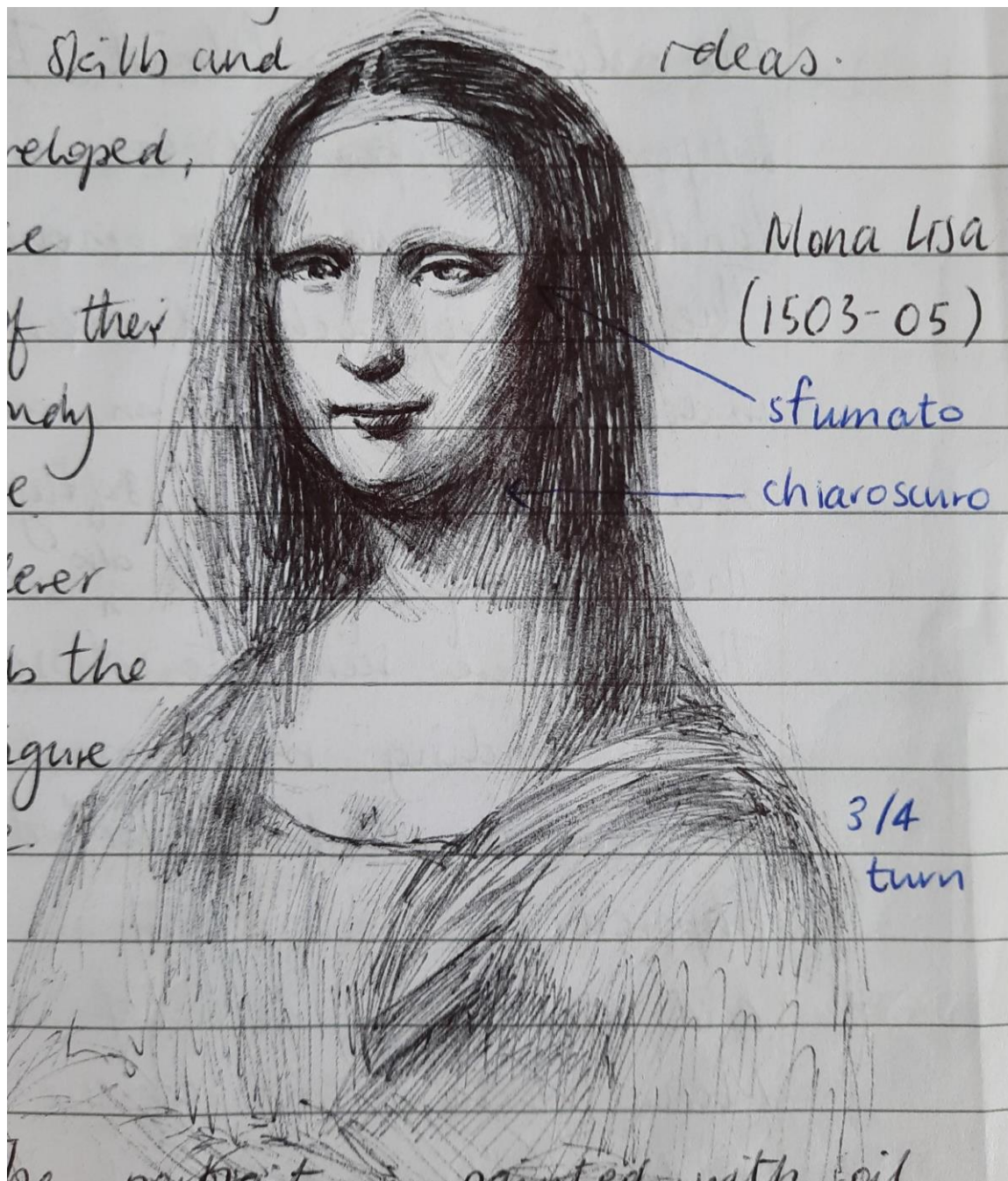
The High Renaissance was a time in Italy when art reached heights of perfection. Many exceptional artists graced this era but one remarkable artist stood out in particular. Leonardo da Vinci is considered to be the most talented of them all. As Giorgio Vasari puts it, it seemed that he was “endowed by heaven with beauty, grace and talent in such abundance that he leaves others far behind”. His skills and interests ranged from science, architecture, geology to art, music and sculpting. It truly seemed that his actions were inspired and came from God rather than human imagination. Leonardo da Vinci was the epitome of a true Renaissance man.

Da Vinci lived in the 1500s during the Cinquecento when the status of artists changed completely. They were no longer seen as mere craftsmen, but people with higher intellect and ideas. This Golden Age of art provided many with patrons and the support needed to develop their skills and ideas. As a result, humanist ideas developed, which in turn inspired Renaissance artists who based a majority of their painting and sculpture on the study of nature and the human figure. They were not just interested in clever realism but also strove towards the ideal beauty of the human figure in Greek and Roman culture.

Mona Lisa

Leonardo da Vinci's “Mona Lisa” or also known as “La Gioconda” embodies this idealised beauty standard. The portrait is painted with oil on panel and is only 77 x 53 cm in measurement. The subject was probably the 24-year-old second wife of a Florentine merchant Francesco Del Giocondo. Leonardo was said to have worked on this commission for up to 4 years until he died in France in 1519. It was then purchased by Francis the 1st of France and was kept in the Royal Family until 1805 when Napoleon put it into the Louvre. The woman sits in a three quarters turn in a pyramid composition in front of a landscape scene. She looks directly at the viewer but her arms, torso and head are subtly twisted in different directions. Leonardo strayed away from the traditional side profile portraits and this gave his portraits a stronger presence. The flexibility of oil

paint allowed Leonardo to fully explore the texture of the skin in greater detail. Her face, neck and hands glow with an inner light that is created through the use of chiaroscuro. The use of sfumato is seen on the corners of the lips and eyes, creating the iconic ambiguous smile and hooded eyes.



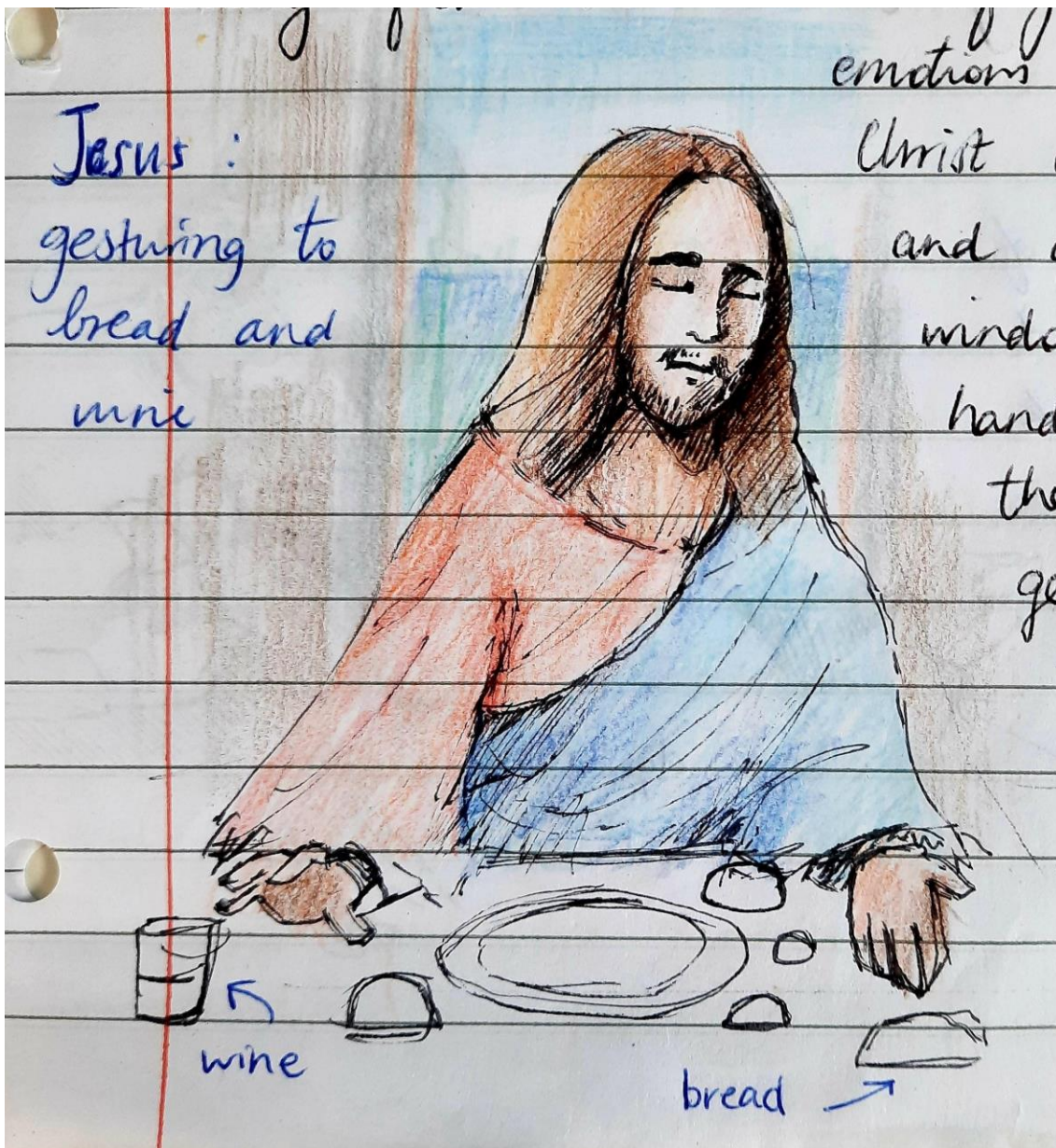
This smokey technique can also be seen in the landscape behind. The ground and hills closer to the subject are painted in warm tones of reddish-brown as the landscape recedes, the mountains become progressively bluer. The scenery behind seems to be assembled from many views indicated from the many horizon lines, but Leonardo overcomes this by softly blending each segment. The use of sfumato also adds to the atmosphere of mystery. The figure seems to dissolve into the background, with its winding rivers and strange rock formations. The scene

almost looks forbidding compared to the warm and welcoming Mona Lisa. Some say she could be a visual representation of happiness, suggested by the word "Gioconda" which means "happiness" in Italian.

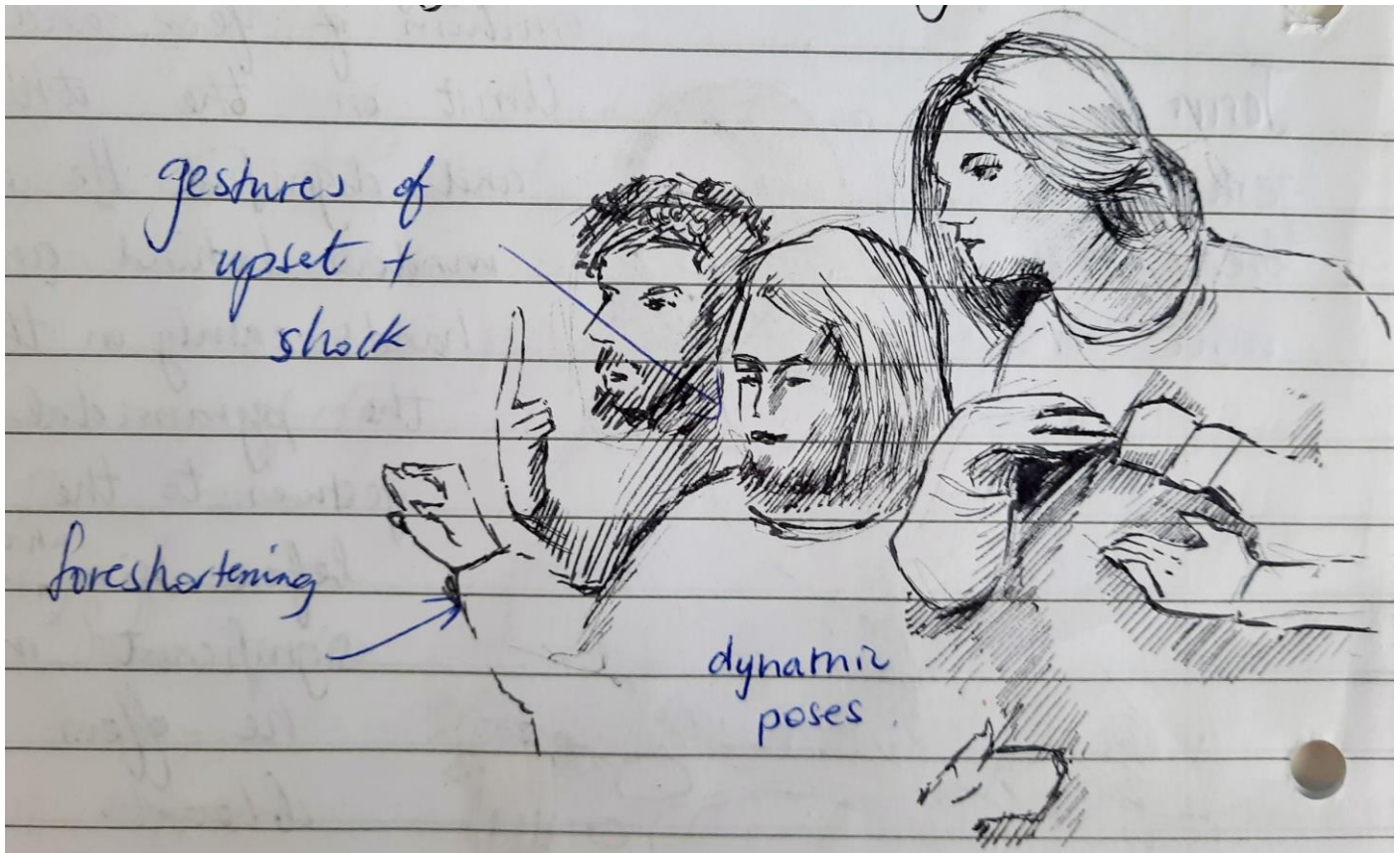
The Last Supper

"The Last Supper" also shows Leonardo's remarkable talent as a painter. This scene was a traditional subject for artists. Most people depicted Jesus and the apostles on one side of the table while Judas is singled out alone on the opposite side. However, da Vinci took an entirely different approach. He chose to depict the moment when Jesus announced "one of you will betray me". The painting captures a range of human emotions and expressions of confusion, self-doubt and disbelief.

Leonardo used the Golden Ratio or divine proportion in the design and architectural features of The Last Supper. This divided the painting into aesthetically pleasing proportions. To solve the problem of the long composition, he arranged the apostles in groups of threes and connected them with gestures and eye contact. To the left of Jesus, we see Peter with a knife clutched in his hands. He leans forward to John and whispers in his ear, isolating Judas from the group as he leans back in the opposite direction. Judas is identified as the outlier with his hand clutching the bag of coins and body propelling away from the central figure of Jesus. His face displays emotions of fear and disbelief. Christ on the other hand is serene and dignified. He is framed by the window behind and places both hands calmly on the table, emphasising the pyramidal composition. He gestures to the bread and wine before him, symbolising the moment when he offers his body and blood.



To the left of Christ, there are two groups of apostles who each express their shock in various gestures. James throws his arms out in surprise, displaying Leonardo's effortless use of foreshortening.



He also employed perspective lines that create an impression of depth in the room. The vanishing point is the face of Jesus. The strong diagonals draw the eye towards the calm figure amid all this chaos and turbulence. The apostles' clothing aids with creating movement and leads the eye to the central figure. Behind Jesus, the open view of the scenery through the window shows the use of atmospheric perspective where the sky beyond the horizon fades into a lighter blue.

Leonardo experimented with the materials when composing this piece. He was dissatisfied with fresco because it dried too fast and prevented him from adding fine detail and so he tried mixing oil with tempera and working directly on dry plaster. This proved to be disastrous, as the great painting began to disintegrate in less than 20 years.