





# 13 Art Mysteries

## Children Should Know

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PRESTEL

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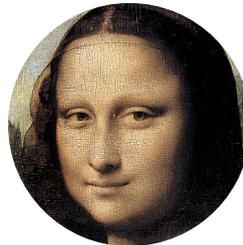
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**T**his book will introduce you to thirteen art mysteries, all with one thing in common: None has been solved, despite the best efforts of scholars, artists, and amateur sleuths to get to the bottom of them. Here you can set out on their trail yourself. A timeline helps you place each mystery in its historical context. A glossary at the end of the book explains difficult terms, which are marked with an asterisk\*. If you want to read more about these mysteries, we give you recommendations for interesting books and Internet sites. And finally, there are quiz questions and tips for experiments that you can do yourself!

Technical terms  
are explained  
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## Moses' Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant is one of the most prized objects in human history. But it has been missing for over 2,500 years.

The missing object is a chest more than 3,000 years old, made of acacia wood and plated inside and outside with pure gold. Its massive golden cover contained two winged figures, divine beings who were part human and part beast—or at least this is how it's described in the Bible's Old Testament. There it is written how God commanded Moses to make the Ark of the Covenant according to God's specifications. The Ark was meant to contain the stone tablets on which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments\*, the laws that God wanted all people to follow.



### Mystery:

Where is the Ark of the Covenant?

### Artist of the Ark:

Unknown

### Date:

The time of Moses

### Location:

Israel

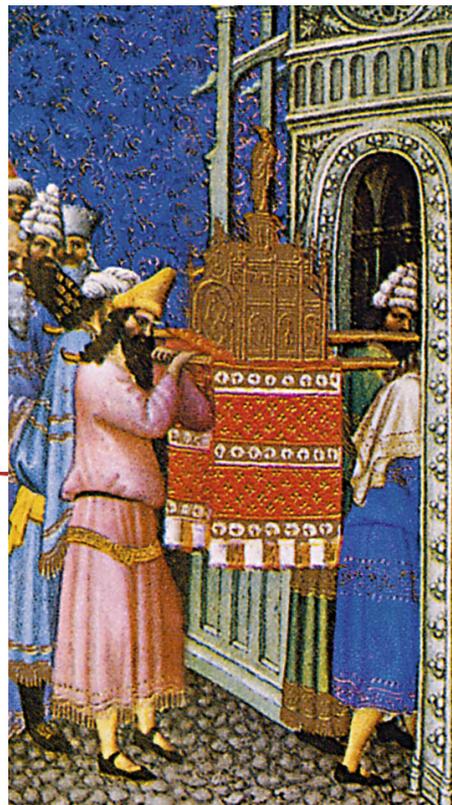
### Distinguishing feature:

The Ark was created at God's command and according to God's instructions

### The Ark is Carried into the Temple

Limburg brothers, ca. 1410–1416, from the Very Rich Hours of the Duke de Berry, Chantilly, Musée Condé

In this book of hours\*, magnificently illustrated for the Duke de Berry by Jan, Paul, and Herman Limburg, the Ark of the Covenant shimmers in gold.



The Bible tells how the Israelites had long been forced to live in Egypt as slaves and servants. Then God chose Moses to lead them to a land where they could live in freedom. The Israelites took the Ark with them during their exodus from Egypt, and they kept it in a folding tent called a tabernacle. The Ark may have arrived in Jerusalem around 1000 B.C. There it is said to have stood for hundreds of years in the magnificent temple built by Israel's King Solomon.

Around 586 B.C. something terrible happened: The troops of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II looted the temple, destroyed it, and burnt all of Jerusalem

586 B.C. Babylonians destroy the Kingdom of Judah and the Temple of Solomon

516 B.C. completion of the Second Temple of Jerusalem

900 B.C. 850 B.C. 800 B.C. 750 B.C. 700 B.C. 650 B.C. 600 B.C. 550 B.C. 500 B.C. 450 B.C. 400 B.C. 350 B.C.



### Passage through the Jordan

Raphael, 1483–1520, Rome, Vatican loggia

The Ark is believed to possess tremendous power. When the Israelites had to cross the River Jordan on their way to Jericho (in what is now Israel), the Ark supposedly held back the water so that the Israelites could walk across on dry ground.

Aaron Places a Vessel with Manna in the Ark  
Nicholas of Verdun,  
1181, detail of the  
Verdun Altar,  
Klosterneuburg,  
parish church

The altarpiece made  
by French goldsmith  
Nicholas of Verdun is just  
as golden as the Ark itself.  
The altarpiece shows  
scenes from the Old\* and  
New Testaments\*.



to the ground. The Babylonians kept lists of everything they stole at that time, but the Ark is not mentioned in the lists. Could it have been destroyed? In any case, the last time the Ark is mentioned in the Bible is before the Babylonian attack.

Jews and Christians, archaeologists\* and amateur researchers, scholars of religion, and adventurers would give a great deal to discover the Ark of the Covenant. Underground passages, caves, and mountains have been searched. Many suspect that the Ark is in Jordan; others think it is in the caves of Qumran in Israel. Could it have been discovered in Jerusalem 900 years ago by the Crusaders\* and sent to the Pope in Rome? Or is it still in Jerusalem, possibly buried near where Solomon's Temple once stood? Today a Muslim mosque called the Dome of the Rock stands on the Temple Mount. Excavations are strictly forbidden there. In 1911 the English aristocrat, the Earl of Morley, supposedly bribed a Muslim clerk to lock him in the Dome of the Rock. He wanted to excavate secretly at night. But he was discovered before he had gotten far enough.

No one knows whether the Ark still exists or where it could be. In fact, it is not even certain that it ever existed!

#### Good to know

In the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* by Steven Spielberg, Harrison Ford plays an archaeologist, Indiana Jones, who searches for the Ark.



**David's Dance before the Ark**  
ca.1450, detail of the choir stall, Maulbronn, abbey

The Ark is often shown in Christian images, since the Jewish God is the same as the Christian God. Christians believe that God sent his son Jesus Christ to Earth to help humankind.

400 B.C. 395 B.C. 390 B.C. 385 B.C. 380 B.C. 375 B.C. 370 B.C. 365 B.C. 360 B.C. 355 B.C. 350 B.C. 345 B.C.

## The Riddle of Apelles

The Greek artist Apelles was the most important painter of Antiquity\*. For hundreds of years, writers praised the perfection of his pictures. Yet not a single one of them has survived.

In order to get some idea of what Apelles' paintings looked like, modern people have had to rely on surviving descriptions of them. Long after his death, the artist's fame continued to intrigue many great painters. They made pictures that showed stories from Apelles' life, or they imagined for themselves—with brush and paint—how his original paintings might have looked. During the Renaissance\*, when European artists rediscovered many ancient artworks, Apelles became a shining example for painters.

In the picture to the right, the Renaissance painter Botticelli imagines how Apelles' famous painting *Calumny* might have looked. Botticelli based his work on a surviving description by the ancient Roman writer Lucian. According to him, the two women whispering to the judging king—shown with donkey's ears as a sign of foolishness—stand for Ignorance and Mistrust. Pale-skinned Envy approaches the throne dressed in a tattered, hooded cloak; accompanied by Passion, Deceit, and Calumny, or Slander\*. Calumny is dragging by the hair a sad young man: persecuted Innocence. To the left we can recognize tearful Repentance and naked Truth. Whether Lucian actually saw this painting remains just as much a mystery as the real appearance of the picture itself.

Apelles' character was just as admired as his art. Despite his great success and fame, Apelles supposedly remained modest and was never jealous of other artists.



### Mystery:

What did Apelles' pictures look like?

### Artist:

Apelles

### Date of birth and death:

ca. 375/370–end of 300s B.C.

### Location:

Greece

### Distinguishing feature:

Even 1,500 years after his death, Apelles remained a role model for many other painters.

### Quiz question:

Did you see the donkey ears of the king? What could that mean? (answer on p. 46)

Alexander the Great 356–323 B.C.

332–331 B.C. Alexander the Great conquers Egypt  
331–330 B.C. Alexander conquers Persia

305 B.C. the Greek Ptolemy (one of Alexander's generals)  
becomes king of Egypt

300 B.C. founding of Nice  
by the Greek colony of Marseille

340 B.C. 335 B.C. 330 B.C. 325 B.C. 320 B.C. 315 B.C. 310 B.C. 305 B.C. 300 B.C. 295 B.C. 290 B.C. 285 B.C.



An art game for two or more players: Player one chooses a picture from an art book, but the other players are not allowed to see it. Player one then describes the picture as precisely as possible with words, and the other players use that description to draw or paint their own pictures. When they're finished, the players can compare their finished pictures with the original.

### The Calumny of Apelles

Sandro Botticelli, ca. 1491–1495, Florence, Uffizi

Lucian writes of how Apelles based this painting on an actual experience. His envious fellow artist Antiphilus went to the Egyptian king Ptolemy and accused the artist of conspiracy against the king. Apelles would have been executed if one of the real conspirators had not confessed to the crime.

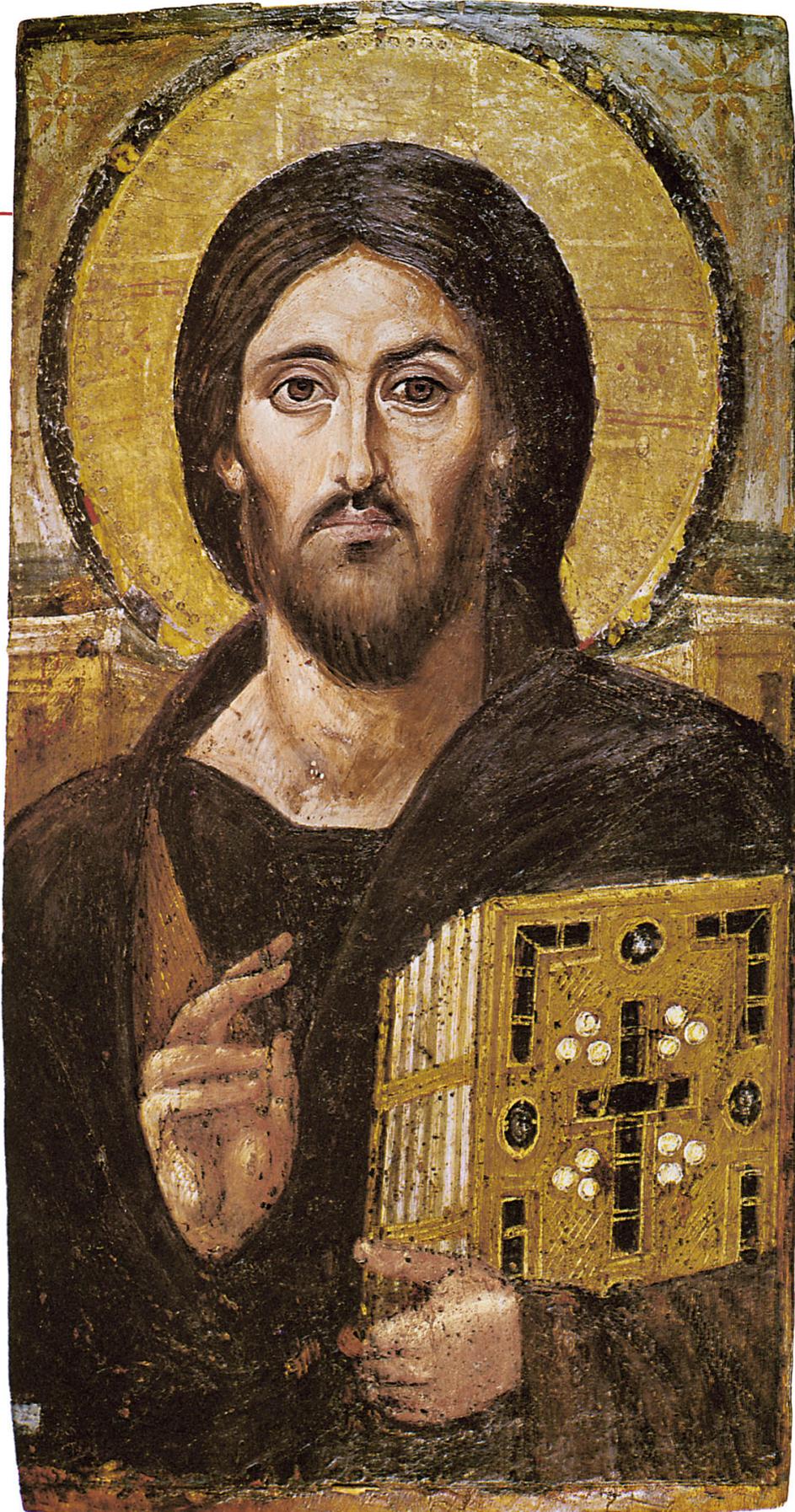
27 B.C. Augustus becomes the first Roman emperor

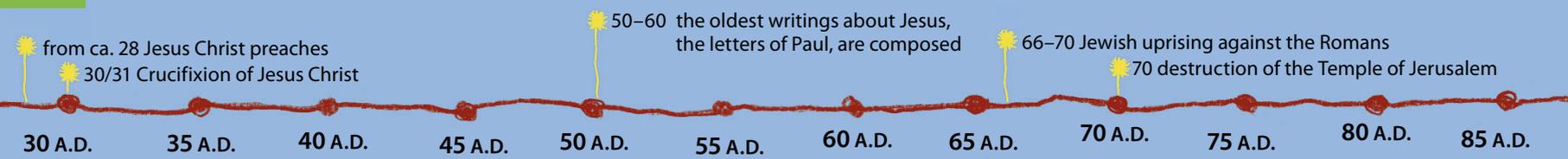
26–36 Pontius Pilate rules Judea, the province of the Roman Empire in which Jesus was born

30 B.C. 25 B.C. 20 B.C. 15 B.C. 10 B.C. 5 B.C. 0 5 A.D. 10 A.D. 15 A.D. 20 A.D. 25 A.D.

**Half-length Image of Christ**  
6th century, Mount Sinai, Saint  
Catherine's Monastery

This icon\* was painted over 1,400 years ago. In the Eastern Orthodox church, icons are considered more than mere portrayals of Jesus Christ or a saint. They are—even today—worshipped as holy images, in which the divine nature of God reveals itself.





## What Did Jesus Really Look Like?

Most Christians imagine him as a bearded young man with long, brown hair and a thin, pale face.

Unfortunately, no portrait of Jesus painted during his lifetime has survived. Maybe he shaved regularly and had a more muscular body. Jesus was probably tan; he did live in Israel after all, where the climate is warm and sunny. Many people even doubt whether the Jesus Christ found in the Bible even existed. Christians believe that he was born as the Son of God around 2,000 years ago.

From the middle of the tenth century, more than 1,000 years ago, a special treasure was kept in the palace chapel at Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey). It was a “true portrait” of Christ, painted on a cloth. King Apgar of Edessa, who lived in what is now Urfa, Turkey, supposedly sent a messenger to have a portrait made of the living Jesus. But the artist was not able to depict Jesus as he really looked. So, as the story goes, Jesus took the cloth and pressed his face into it; leaving an impression of his face that could be seen on the cloth. This portrait, along with a letter written by Jesus, were sent to King Apgar. The “true portrait” was supposedly able to work miracles and was copied countless times. Sadly, it has been missing ever since the Crusaders attacked Constantinople in 1204 A.D.

Meanwhile, in the Church of Saint Peter in Rome, there was another, very similar impression of Jesus’ face. According to legend, it was made while Jesus was carrying the cross on which he would be crucified\*. A woman standing along



### Mystery:

What did Jesus really look like?

### Dates:

ca. 4 B.C.– 30/31 A.D.

### Location:

Israel

### Distinguishing feature:

As legend has it, some images of Jesus Christ were created from a “self-portrait” by Jesus himself, who made an impression of his own face in a cloth.



### Shroud of Turin, detail with impression of a head

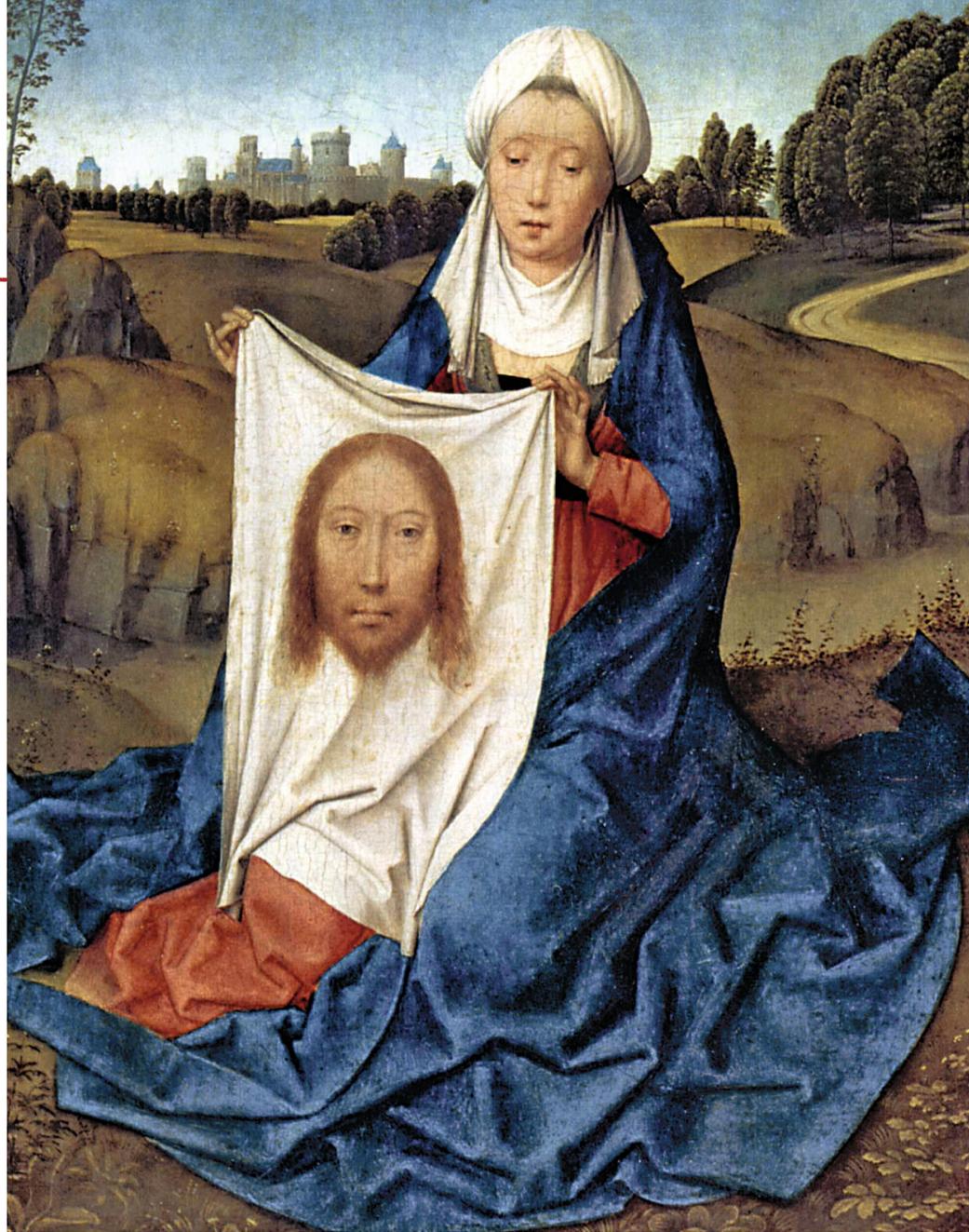
Turin Cathedral

On the fabric of the shroud, many traces of wounds can be seen in the area of the face. Did this man wear a crown of thorns\*? Jesus Christ was called King of the Jews by many of his followers. At the end of his life, Jesus was arrested and given a thorny “crown” by his soldier guards..

**Saint Veronica  
with the Sudarium**

Hans Memling, ca. 1470,  
Washington, National  
Gallery of Art

Saint Veronica displays  
the sudarium (or sweat  
cloth) of Jesus Christ,  
upon which he made  
an impression of his face  
on the road to his death.  
In the background is  
the “heavenly” Jerusalem;  
this is how heaven was  
thought to look.



the way handed him a cloth to dry his sweat and wipe away the blood. Jesus then made an impression of his face in the cloth. The woman’s name was Veronica, derived from the Latin words “vera icon,” meaning “true image.” The portrait disappeared in 1527, when Rome was attacked by German and Spanish soldiers.

In the cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Turin, Italy, a mysterious linen cloth has been kept since 1578 and only rarely shown to visitors. On the cloth, the indistinct body of a bearded man with a thin face can be made out.



**Saint Luke Painting the Virgin Mary**  
Derick Baegert,  
ca. 1485, Münster,  
LWL-Landesmuseum  
für Kunst- und  
Kulturgeschichte

Saint Luke was not only one of the evangelists\*, he was also believed to have been a painter. Many images show him painting a portrait of the Christ child with his mother, Mary. Derick Baegert has relocated this scene from the Holy Land to the Europe of his own day, the 1400s. Look closely, and you'll see a medieval town through the window. Can you find the angel in the adjoining room, mixing paint for Luke? And what is the ox doing there? The ox is a symbol of the evangelist, and it is often shown together with Luke or, symbolically, in place of him.

Stigmata (or wounds) and traces of blood indicate that the person had been crucified. Many faithful Christians believe the cloth in Turin to be the shroud of Jesus Christ, in which he was wrapped after his death on the cross and in which he was buried. But a scientific dating of the fabric has shown that the cloth is not 2,000 years old, but only about 700 or 800. It is also unclear whether the image is even an impression at all. Perhaps it is a very clever painting technique? Numerous investigations have come up with different answers. The Catholic church considers the cloth not a relic\*, but an icon. What Jesus Christ really looked like will continue to be a mystery.

from 1376 construction of the city hall in Bruges

1360

1365

1370

1375

1380

1385

1390

1395

1400

1405

1410

1415

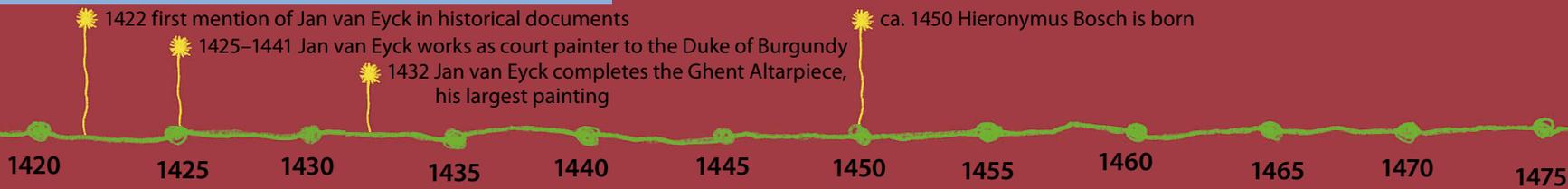
### The Arnolfini Portrait

Jan van Eyck, 1434,  
London, National Gallery

Look at the coat Giovanni Arnolfini is wearing in van Eyck's portrait! With oil paints the artist was able to make even the fine fur trim look realistic.

**Quiz question:**  
Who can be seen  
in the mirror?  
(answer on p. 46)





## Jan van Eyck and Oil Painting

Artists once had to make their paints themselves. Each painter had his or her own recipe. The Flemish painter Jan van Eyck often used oil paint.



Artist’s colors appear red, yellow, or blue because of the tiny pigments, or particles of color, that they contain. The word “pigment” is derived from the Latin pigmentum and means “paint” or “make-up.” Pigments can be made from plants, animals, soil, or minerals. The madder plant, for example, produces a deep red known as madder lake. Precious shades of red are obtained from the cochineal insect and from the murex sea snail. Lapis lazuli, a semiprecious stone, can be ground into fine powder for making ultramarine blue.

To be able to paint with these tiny colored particles so that they stick to the painted surface, a binder is needed. In the Middle Ages, many binders were made from eggs and then mixed with plant oil and water to produce tempera paint. Gouache\* paints were bound in the Middle Ages with animal or plant-based glue. Both of these kinds of paints dried quickly and could be easily used and reused by the painter.

For oil paints, the pigments are bound with seed or nut oil and then mixed with turpentine\*. This kind of paint dries very slowly. But the painter can apply it in many transparent (see-through) layers, or glazes, on the painting’s surface. By doing this, the artist can create colors that are very shiny and deep—or produce subtle changes of color from a dark shade to a light shade. Jan van Eyck’s skill as a painter was so great that he was long thought to be the inventor of oil painting. But this is unlikely. Oil paints were probably known long before van Eyck.



**Mystery:**  
Who invented oil painting?

**Artist:**  
Jan van Eyck

**Work:**  
The Arnolfini Portrait

**Date:**  
1434

**Location:**  
Bruges (Belgium)

1441 Jan van Eyck dies

1474 first mention of Hieronymus Bosch in historical documents

1420 1425 1430 1435 1440 1445 1450 1455 1460 1465 1470 1475



**The Garden of Earthly Delights,  
detail of central panel**

Hieronymus Bosch, 1480–1490,  
Madrid, Prado

Should we be afraid of these birds? Or can we trust them? One man, with his head in a glass bubble, is riding one of the feathered friends. But who are the fearful and astonished looking people to the left near the goose?



1492 Christopher Columbus discovers the New World

1517 Martin Luther publishes his Ninety-Five Theses, which criticize leaders of the Catholic church

1480 1485 1490 1495 1500 1505 1510 1515 1520 1525 1530 1535

## The World of Hieronymus Bosch

Hieronymus Bosch was a painter with many secrets. His real name was Jheronimus Anthonissen van Aken. But he named himself after his hometown of 's-Hertogenbosch. Strange and fantastical creatures can be seen in his images; creatures unlike those of any other artist.

The most puzzling of his paintings is *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. This title did not come from the artist himself; we don't know what he called the work. The painting was created on three wooden panels: a large one in the middle and two thinner ones to the left and right, which could be folded open or shut. This three-part holy painting (or alter) is called a triptych, from the Greek for "three" (tri) and "folding panel" (ptychon). Many altarpieces in Bosch's lifetime were triptychs. They showed scenes from the Bible, and artists had to paint them according to very specific rules. Bosch often did not follow these visual rules. This is why his works are so puzzling to scholars.

The back sides of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* are also painted. But here there are no bright colors—only black, white, and gray. At the time it was common to decorate the outsides of folding altarpieces with such "grisaille" paintings, which could be seen when the wings were closed. Only on Sundays and feast days\* were the wings opened to show the colorfully painted insides to people who worshipped at the church. Bosch painted a very unusual picture on the outside: an enormous, transparent bubble on a dark background, surrounded by nothingness. God sits enthroned in the upper left corner, holding a book in his hand: the Bible, perhaps? The Bible is the source of the Latin verses that the painter has written along the top of the two panels: "Ipse dixit et facta sunt" and "Ipse mandavit et creata sunt."



### Mystery:

What is the meaning of Hieronymus Bosch's strange creatures?

### Artist:

Hieronymus Bosch

### Work:

*The Garden of Earthly Delights*

### Date:

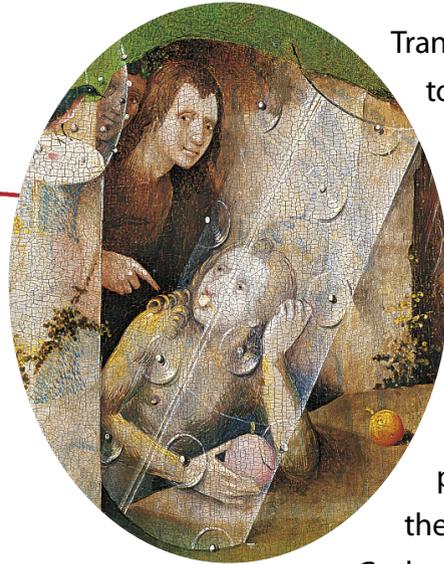
1480–1490

### Location:

's-Hertogenbosch (Netherlands)

**The Garden of Earthly Delights, detail of the left wing**  
Hieronymus Bosch,  
1480–1490, Madrid, Prado

Who is this woman with an apple in her hand behind a glass with knobs on it? Is it Eve? And the man beside her? Perhaps the painter himself?



Translated, these verses mean: “For he spoke and it came to be” and “he commanded and it stood forth.” But wait! Aren’t the pages of the book empty? Many scholars believe that this somber image depicts the world after the Great Flood, which, according to the Biblical account, was sent by God to punish people for their sins. Others believe it is an image of the world on the third day of creation: On the third day, God separated the land from the waters and created plants. But there was no light yet, and so neither were there colors. Animals and people would be created by God on the fifth and sixth days, according to Biblical tradition.

**Not everyone believes in a paradise in the afterlife. But everyone has his or her own idea of a paradise on Earth. Can you paint your own earthly paradise?**

But what a blaze of colors can be seen when the triptych’s panels are opened! On the left side panel Bosch paints the first humans, Adam and Eve, in paradise. On the large central panel humans and animals romp around together. Some of the animals exist in nature, while others are imaginary creatures invented by the artist. Are the people in some kind of “Land of Cockaigne,” where birds feed them fruit? Or are they abandoning themselves to idleness and thinking only of their pleasure, for which God will punish them in hell. Art scholars have different opinions as to the meaning of this work. In his depiction of hell on the right side panel, Bosch has used all the powers of his imagination and invented terrifying monsters. They torture humans as punishment for evil deeds. Terrible images like this were supposed to teach the faithful to be afraid and to illustrate for them what they could expect after death if they did not follow God’s law and the rules of the church.

The puzzles in Bosch’s paintings and his unusual depictions of paradise, heaven, and hell led many church leaders to dislike the picture. But these opinions did not diminish the artist’s fame in the least.



**The Garden of Earthly Delights, Detail of the left wing**  
Hieronymus Bosch,  
1480–1490, Madrid, Prado

On the left side panel there is a fountain in the center that, according to the Bible, "watered the whole face of the ground". Bosch's amazing pink creation looks almost like a man-eating plant. Which animals can you find here? What kind of a strange two-legged dog is that near the giraffe? Not everything here is peaceful and happy. Look carefully! What doesn't fit? Why might Hieronymus Bosch have added scenes that don't fit in the picture at all?

1420

1425

1430

1435

1440

1445

1450

1455

1460

1465

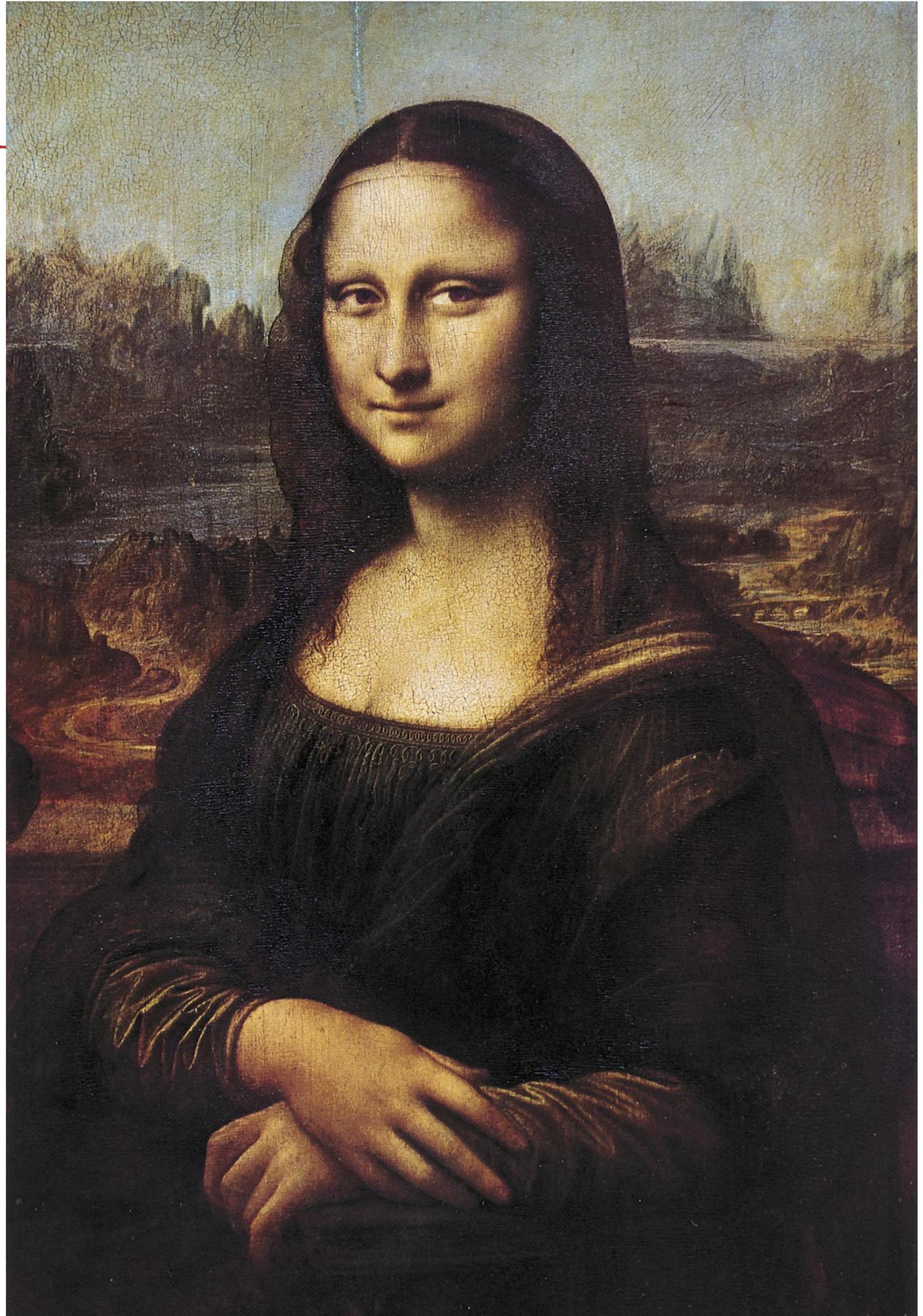
1470

1475

**Mona Lisa**

Leonardo da Vinci,  
1503–1506, Paris, Louvre

The Mona Lisa can be seen in the Louvre in Paris, but only behind bullet-proof glass. Visitors swarm before the portrait. Everyone wants to admire her famous smile!



1480

1485

1490

1495

1500

1505

1510

1515

1520

1525

1530

1535

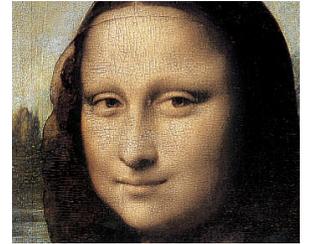
## Why Is Mona Lisa Smiling?

This question has been asked countless times by museum visitors, art historians, and even doctors. Scarcely any other picture has been examined as closely as this one.

The Mona Lisa is one of the most famous images in the world. Her enchanting smile has been praised in poetry and celebrated in song. Yet no one knows for certain who this mysterious woman actually was. Most art historians believe she was a lady in Florence, Italy, named Lisa Gherardi. For this reason, the painting is also called “La Gioconda.”

Some doctors explain that “Mona Lisa” smiles strangely because her face was partly paralyzed, and she could not move her mouth properly. Others believe the woman no longer had any front teeth; apparently many people without front teeth smile just like this. Or is she smiling because she is pregnant or has just had a child? In 2006, Canadian scientists studied the portrait with a special technique that enabled them to see underneath the painting’s surface. They discovered a transparent veil painted around the dress. Wraps like this were once worn by pregnant women and new mothers.

But is the woman in the painting really smiling? The American psychologist\* Margaret Livingstone believes that her smile is visible only when the viewer looks at her eyes. If you look at her mouth, Livingstone claims, her facial expression appears bland. But other people hold the opposite opinion: Only the mouth makes her face seem to smile. You can decide for yourself by covering over first Mona Lisa’s mouth and then her eyes with a sheet of paper. Which feature most clearly gives Mona Lisa her famous look?


**Mystery:**

Why is Mona Lisa smiling?

**Artist:**

Leonardo da Vinci

**Work:**

Mona Lisa

**Date:**

1503–1506

**Location:**

Florence (Italy)

**Tip**

Visit [http://www.citesciences.fr/francais/ala\\_cite/expo/explora/image/mona/en.php](http://www.citesciences.fr/francais/ala_cite/expo/explora/image/mona/en.php) to change the expression of “Mona Lisa” with a click of the mouse.