MEMBERSHIP

FAME!

About this activity

The story of the Mona Lisa, arguably the most famous image in the history of the world

▶ **Language level**: B1 – C1
▶ **Main task**: Speaking; reading; asking questions; storybuilding
▶ **Topics**: The Mona Lisa; art & the media
▶ **Language focus**: Phrases for hedging (e.g. *It is generally believed that, a matter for debate*)

For this activity, you will need the following:
● **A slideshow** of images
● **The PDF ebook** which is provided separately (a copy for each student)

Note: For all materials and discussion, go to the corresponding page in the Resources section:

https://membership.lessonstream.com/resources/fame/

About the story

The Mona Lisa is arguably the most famous image in the history of the world. But how did it happen? From an artistic point of view, does she actually stand head and shoulders above other masterpieces? Or is she just famous for being famous? In this activity, students discover the fascinating story behind the Gioconda's rise to fame, exploring the factors that have made this iconic artwork a cultural phenomenon.

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The incredible story of how
THE MONA LISA
became the most famous image
in the history of the world

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Introduction

Before doing this activity, I suggest that you do "Passive drawings" – another LessonStream lesson plan in which students have to draw a number of situations which involve a passive structure. One of these is:

"The Mona Lisa being stolen"
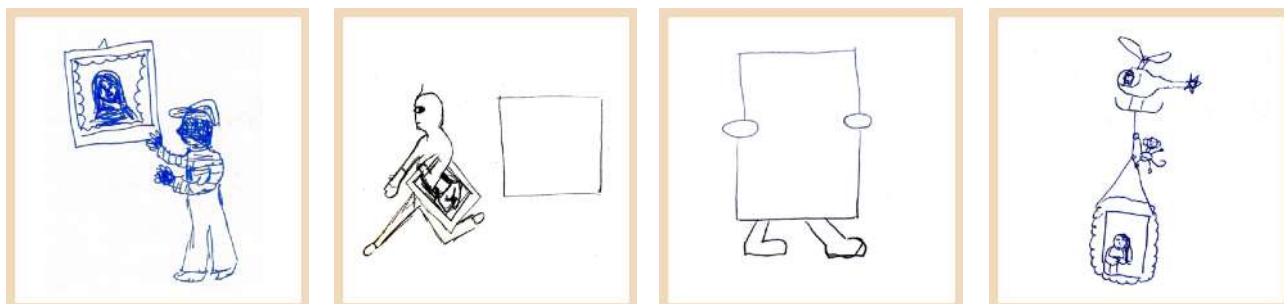
Alternatively, on the day before you do this current activity, ask everyone to sketch a quick picture of the Mona Lisa being stolen. You could do this five minutes before the end of the class. Collect all drawings before they leave but don't tell them why. Keep them curious!

Part one: Picture-telling

1. Tell students that you are going to show them two photographs with a connection. But before you show the photographs, you are going to describe them.

> **Photograph one**: This is a picture of a famous gap on a wall. For two years, many people came to see this gap. Can you explain? Why it was so famous?

> **Photograph two**: This is a photograph of a famous female celebrity in front of a huge crowd. People are holding their mobile phones and selfie sticks in the air, taking pictures to capture the moment. A father is holding up his daughter so that she can get a look. Everyone wants to get to the front of the crowd so that they can see the superstar up close. I wonder what the people are thinking. Do they think she is worth it? Or do they feel disappointed?

> **Note**: As you describe these images, I suggest that you hold them in your hand so that you can see them but your students cannot. You can make print copies of the images or you can display them on a mobile device. This will also allow you to cheat by placing notes over the images. Your students will never know!
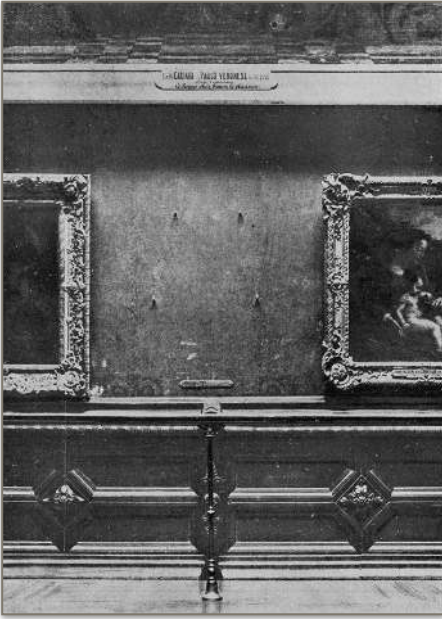
Photograph one (slide 1)

Photograph two (slide 2)

2. Invite students to ask you questions to gather more information about the photographs and try to work out the connection between them.

Discovering the answer

Perhaps the most obvious starting point is for students to ask about the identity of the mystery celebrity in photograph two. If students can work out that it is the Mona Lisa, they will likely be able to guess that photograph two relates to the theft of the painting.

Personally, I would encourage students to look for clues in other places. Here are some key pieces of information that you can either give students or guide them to uncover through their questioning.

- Photograph one was taken in 1911. Photograph two was taken in 2015. In other words, they were taken 104 years apart.
- The famous gap was in the news during the years 1911 to 1913. A lot people came especially to see it.
- The photographs were taken inside the same building but in different rooms.
- Photograph two is crime scene.

3. Once students have worked out the answer, show them the two photographs which were both taken inside the Louvre. These are included in the slideshow.

- **Photograph one** was taken in the Salon Carré in 1911.
- **Photograph two** (by Max Fercondini) was taken in the Salle des États in 2015.

Part two: What do you know about the Mona Lisa?

1. Put students into groups and ask them to discuss the following questions which are included on slide 3.

- Have you ever visited the Louvre in Paris? Did you see the Mona Lisa? What did you think? Tell us about your experience.
- Do you agree that the Mona Lisa is the most famous image in the world? What competitors does it have (e.g. other art images, flags, trademarks)?
- Do you think it deserves to be so famous?
- How did it become so famous? Perhaps it is just famous for being famous. Or is there another reason?
- What do you know about the Mona Lisa? Make a list of as many facts as possible.
- How well do you know the Mona Lisa? Make a quick drawing from memory. And don't cheat by going online! (Everyone in the group should do this.)

2. Listen to your students' guesses and opinions about the Mona Lisa. Contribute to the discussion when appropriate and give language feedback when possible. Also ask different groups to compare their drawings with each other and then with the image of the Mona Lisa itself (slide 4). Find out whose drawing is the most accurate, the least accurate, the funniest and the ugliest.

For your reference, some Mona Lisa facts:

- In Italian, it is called *Gioconda.* In French, it is called *Joconde.*
- It was painted by the Italian master Leonardo da Vinci.
- It is though to have been painted between 1503 and 1506.
- It is a portrait of an Italian noblewoman Lisa del Gioconda, the wife of Florentine merchant Francesco del Giocondo.
- She is sometimes said to have an "enigmatic smile" (enigmatic = mysterious).
- It holds the Guinness World Record for the highest known painting insurance valuation in history at US$100 million in 1962, equivalent to $1 billion as of 2023.
- It is often said that the Mona Lisa is the most famous image in the world. However, at the time of writing this lesson plan, there is no Mona Lisa emoji (but there is a Scream emoji 😱).

3. Now show students the sentences on slide 5. Ask them to work together to decide whether they are true or false.

True or false?

   a.   If you look at the Mona Lisa for long enough, her eyebrows seem to disappear. This effect is sometimes called the 'Mona Lisa illusion'.
   b.   Louis Béroud painted the Mona Lisa in 1911.
   c.   The Mona Lisa was never finished. In other words it is an incomplete work.
   d.   In Italian, the Mona Lisa is called the 'Anaconda'.
   e.   The Mona Lisa was one of Leonardo da Vinci's favourite paintings.
   f.   The Mona Lisa was brought to France by Napoleon.
   g.   At the beginning of the last century, the general public knew nothing about the Mona Lisa.
   h.   When the Mona Lisa was stolen in 1911, it took a whole day for anyone to realise that she was missing.
   i.   In 1911, the police could use fingerprints in criminal investigations.
   j.   Pablo Picasa was suspected as being involved in the theft.
   k.   The robbery was carried out by a well-known international art thief.
   l.   The Mona Lisa is currently kept behind bulletproof glass.

4. Listen to your students' answers but don't tell them whether they are right or wrong at this stage.

Part three: Reading

Give students access to the PDF ebook which is included separately. Ask them to read the book to discover the answers to the true or false sentences. This can be done for homework.
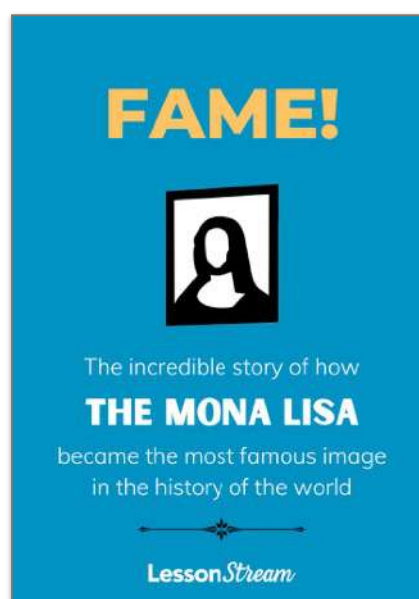
Draw student's attention to the gap-fill glossary throughout the ebook. This is designed to support students with the reading and there are two ways to use it:

I. The whole glossary (recommended for B1 level): Students have to complete the entire glossary by filling all the gaps with words and phrases from the text.

ii. Only when required (recommended for B2 upwards): Students can make use of the glossary definitions whenever they need to find or check meanings from the text.

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When students finish the reading, go over the answers and also clarify any language doubts that they may have.

a. **False**: The real 'Mona Lisa illusion' is described on page 14 of the ebook.
b. **True**: This is true in the sense that Béroud copied the painting. (Students might want to debate this, however!)
c. **Inconclusive**: Whether or not the Mona Lisa is incomplete is discussed on pages 7 and 8. But statements are marked as not absolute (e.g. "Others argue that it was never finished.")
d. **False**: An anaconda is a kind of snake!
e. **True**: It seems safe to say that the Mona Lisa was one of Leonardo's favourites.
f. **False**: Although she did spend some time in Napoleon's possession.
g. **True**: She was not the famous face that she is today.
h. **True**: It was stolen on the Monday, but Béroud didn't report it until the next day.
i. **True**: Fingerprints had already been used to solve a criminal case in the UK (The Stratton Brothers case, 1905)
j. **True**: Although this is absolutely true, it is not mentioned anywhere in the text. You can invite students to investigate the Pablo Picasso story for themselves.
k. **False**: It was a humble Italian immigrant
l. **True**: The Mona Lisa is kept in a bulletproof, temperature-controlled case.

Please note that the answers to the gap-fill glossary are on page 9.

Finally, ask students to discuss the following sentences which are on slide 6:

- What do you think about the story? Is there any aspect of it which you find particularly interesting?
- Different people will take away different things from a story. What do you take away from it? What might the following people take away from it?: an artist, a criminal, a criminal investigator, an art gallery director, a visitor to the Louvre, a member of Vincenzo Peruggia's family (his daughter, for example), a journalist or newspaper editor
- Do you think the theft of the Mona Lisa was good or bad for art, society and the world?
- Do you have any questions that relate to the story, the people or the events? Try to think of at least one.
- Now that you know the story of the Mona Lisa, do you feel more or less enthusiastic about visiting her at the Louvre? Why / why not?

Follow-up: Doubling the image

The term "doubling" refers to the practise of providing a voice on behalf of a protagonist. In this case, the protagonist is the Mona Lisa herself and the voice is going to come from the students.

Start by asking students to make a list of questions that they would like to ask the Mona Lisa. Questions can be funny or serious, and they can address the Mona Lisa as any of the following:

- An actual person that existed (Lisa del Giocondo)
- An artefact that has traveled through history
- A modern celebrity

Set a goal: ten questions from every student, for example. You can also encourage students to think of questions by reading through the ebook a second time and referring to different parts of the story for ideas. Here are some examples:

- Do you ever get tired of your celebrity status?
- What do you dream about when the museum is closed at night?
- Of all the places you have ever been, which was your favourite?
- What was Napoleon like?
- What were you thinking when Leonardo painted you?
- Did Leonardo talk to you while he was working?
- If you could talk to the people who come to see you every day, what would you say?
- What do you think about what Vincenzo Peruggia did?
- What do you think about Vincenzo Peruggia's short jail sentence?
- How do you feel about being portrayed as a symbol of beauty? What sort of message do you send to girls and women today?

Once students have prepared their questions, here is what to do:

1. Display the image of the Mona Lisa somewhere in the classroom for everyone to see. Then nominate a creative student to sit on a chair beside or underneath the image. The student's job is to provide a voice for the Mona Lisa when required.

2. The other students take it in turn to ask questions. When they ask a question, they should speak to the Mona Lisa directly and not to the student on the hot seat.

3. The student on the hot seat has to respond by improvising answers as if he or she is the Mona Lisa.

4. It can take a few questions and answers for this activity to develop momentum. But when it does, it can be quite fun and give rise to lots of speaking. You can let different students be the Mona Lisa but try not to disrupt the communication if it is flowing.

5. As the teacher, you can take a back seat and make notes for language feedback later on. You can also throw in a question or two of your own to keep the momentum going.

Follow-up: Storybuilding

If you asked students to create sketches of the Mona Lisa being stolen (as per the introduction on page 2) it's now time to revisit these.

Go through students' drawings one by one. In each case, find out who drew what and ask questions when there are questions to be asked.

Note: For the full visual experience, you can scan students' drawings and display the images o a screen.

Tell students that you have some more images of the Mona Lisa being stolen – all created by DALL·E, an AI image generator. Display slides 7 to 13 and invite students to comment on the images. For example, you can ask them to describe details and clues that reveal to us that AI lacks human intuition.

Ask students to choose one of the images (either an AI image or a student drawing) and write a story about it. In order to set students up for this, I recommend "How stories work", an activity in the Resources that introduces students to some fundamental storybuilding principles.

Note: You can see me discuss these AI images in a YouTube video.

Glossary answers

Page 5
The exhibits
An easel
To make a living

Page 6
Renowned
The subject
A masterpiece
A portait
A noblewoman
Inconvenient
A catalogue
To make inquiries

Page 7
A nobleman
To commission
To take a risk
A master
Prolific
Your reputation
A self-portrait
A client
To speculate
A version
Alternatively

Page 8
In your possession
A matter of debate

Page 9
To dominate
A theft
Treasure
A global icon
Renowned
A critic
To distribute
A flier

Page 10
The public eye
A press conference
A conspiracy
Parisian
Suspicious
A package
Wealthy
To propose
To vanish

Page 12
An investigation
The authorities
Discarded
National pride
At stake
Notorious

Page 13
To leave no stone unturned
Forensic science
Major
To hit the jackpot

Page 14
A newsstand
Your heart sinks
An immigrant
A victim
Prejudice
Discrimination
To struggle
To make ends meet
To be aware of
An injustice

Page 15
Disgusted
Hypocrisy
To look down on
To reunite
Patriotism
Income
Worldwide

Page 16
Daylight Robbery
A hest

Page 17
The Renaissance
Rigid
To head

Page 18
Junior
Scruffy
The profile
Sophisticated

Page 19
To be based in
A dealer
To claim
Genuine
An associate
High-profile
A trunk
To reveal
To uncover

Page 20
Naive
Your motivation
To debate
Patriotism

Page 21
Sympathy
The authorities
To extradite
To sentence
Your release
To capture
To play a part

Page 22
Blurry
Smoky
To appreciate
A balanced composition
Delicate
Fabric

Page 23
To justify
Your status
Extreme
Fame
A principle
Superstardom
A consequence
Humble
A chip on your shoulder
Notable