

Older Than the Rocks



He has her still before his eyes,
the day she sat, fresh and alert.
It seemed so easy then to paint
her face. She was not proud:
though of old family, she'd married down.
But he was good to her, she said.
Three children then
(Six now, he'd heard).

And Giacondo's well?
The Count says so.
*My friend, he says, my loyal friend
released from jail. His wife, you painted her
ten years ago?*

It seems much longer, though.
I've done too much and seen too much
between that time and now,
and grown too old.

I have the painting still.
The face, the hands
Are mine – and hers
The rest? So many schemes took me away. I let
my pupils do what I could not.
When Giacondo called
he would not have it – so
now all men know
that Leonardo never ends what he's begun.

*Paint her again. For me. For him.
You owe him still.*

And will she come to Rome
To sit for me? I cannot ask for that.
But I have grown too old.
She's older too. Her face
is not the face I knew.

*Then let this be your task, old man
who knows so much
of faces and of time.
Paint her again, though not
as you remember her
but how you know she is,
these ten years on.*

*You say you paint the souls
of women and of men.
So finish now what you began
And paint hers, if you can.*

The old man gives a sigh, and smiles.
Tomorrow he'll begin
to paint again.

Jenny Brien

Nothing is certain in Renaissance art, but the history of the Isleworth Mona Lisa, and the argument that it is an earlier version by Da Vinci himself, can be found at monalisa.org.