

---

# A PAINTER, A PAINTING, AND PERCEPTION IN *THE MONA LISA VANISHES*

---

Kevin Kienholz  
Emporia State University

**Abstract:** The author reviews Nicholas Day’s *The Mona Lisa Vanishes: A Legendary Painter, A Shocking Heist, and the Birth of a Global Celebrity* (2023), including background information and a discussion of the book’s exploration of the nature of contemporary celebrity culture.

**Keywords:** *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*, art history, celebrity culture, mass media

At first glance, Nicholas Day’s 2023 exploration of the real-life 1911 theft of the *Mona Lisa* might not strike readers as a particularly contemporary story. One might reasonably assume this would be a tale of intrigue confined to the two years between the famous painting’s theft and its (spoiler alert!) eventual recovery, but Day examines the theft of the world’s most famous painting from a wide range of time periods, including our own contemporary world. It quickly becomes clear to readers that this story speaks not only to the time in which the painting was stolen but also to our present-day concerns. Thus, the book links two seemingly disparate worlds, separated by over 100 years, and examines how culture can be shaped by mass media and celebrity spectacle.

The tension in Day’s book comes not from the fact that the *Mona Lisa* was stolen or even that it was recovered—many readers will know that both of those things happened before they pick up the book. Rather, the book gathers momentum from Day’s exploration of the unlikely backstory of how the *Mona Lisa* came to be in the first place (it turns out that Leonardo da Vinci had *a lot* of trouble following through on his projects) and why the painting became so famous once it was finished. In short, Day does not shy away from the reader who might well be asking, “What’s the big deal about this painting?” I’ve wondered that myself. It turns out that being stolen was a real boon for the *Mona Lisa*.

The narrative structure of this book takes readers back and forth in time, from 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence and Milan to 20<sup>th</sup> century Paris, as Day makes use of frequent shifts in setting which will challenge even the attentive reader. Likewise, keeping track of the numerous historical figures—both those who are famous and those practically unknown—places significant demands on anyone who tackles this book. But the author rewards his readers’ persistence and attention with not only a fascinating who-done-it mystery, but a meditation on the way in which we perceive the world around us as well as an occasion to consider the very nature of celebrity. Brett Helquist’s illustrations appear throughout the book, providing points of visual interest as well as anchors that help readers keep track of this complicated tale of intrigue.

Readers who enjoy history will appreciate this book—especially those interested in Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance world in which he lived. Fans of mystery will also enjoy this tale of an audacious crime and its slowly developing and sometimes bumbling investigation. With that said, Day provides a great deal to consider about our own world, especially in a culture in which plenty of

individuals seem to be famous simply for being, well, famous. He also explores what it means to live in a world viewed through a lens of mass media, the way in which conspiracy theories spread, the controversy concerning the return of stolen artwork to its country of origin, and the challenge of understanding what is right in front of our eyes. As Day notes, “Sometimes it is hardest to see what’s most obvious.”

More than 500 years after its creation, the *Mona Lisa* remains squarely in world’s line of sight, and it continues to demand a second glance from everyone who contemplates that enigmatic smile. (A recent break-in at the Louvre should spur additional interest in this text.) While the center of this book remains the theft of a work of art destined to become the most famous painting in history, Day also manages to cleverly explore the idea of what makes something worth looking at in the first place. In today’s attention economy, what could be more relevant than that?

### Reference

Day, N. (2023). *The Mona Lisa vanishes: A legendary painter, a shocking heist, and the birth of a global celebrity*. Random House Studio.

### Author Biography

Kevin Kienholz is a professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Emporia State University, where he works primarily with preservice middle and high school English teachers. He joined the faculty at ESU in 2000 after having taught English for seven years in his home state of Oklahoma. He can be reached at [kkienhol@emporia.edu](mailto:kkienhol@emporia.edu).

**KANSAS ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH**

2026 Conference | October 30-31, 2026 | Drury Plaza Hotel, Wichita | Register at [kansasenglish.org](http://kansasenglish.org)

Proud affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

| GENERAL ADMISSION            |       |
|------------------------------|-------|
| FULL CONFERENCE              | \$190 |
| FC PRESENTER                 | \$160 |
| SINGLE-DAY REGISTRATION      | \$130 |
| S-D PRESENTER                | \$100 |
| LATE FULL CONFERENCE         | \$240 |
| LATE SINGLE-DAY REGISTRATION | \$180 |

| STUDENTS & RETIREES          |       |
|------------------------------|-------|
| FULL CONFERENCE              | \$100 |
| SINGLE-DAY REGISTRATION      | \$80  |
| LATE FULL CONFERENCE         | \$125 |
| LATE SINGLE-DAY REGISTRATION | \$100 |

| INSTITUTIONAL SPONSORSHIPS   |               |
|--|---------------|
| <b>GENERAL</b>   | <b>\$360</b>  |
| 2 registrations   \$20 savings   ¼ page program ad   SM. ad on KATE Conference website page  |               |
| <b>BRONZE</b>  | <b>\$700</b>  |
| 4 registrations   \$60 savings   ½ page program ad   MED. ad on KATE Conference website page |               |
| <b>SILVER</b>  | <b>\$1020</b> |
| 6 registrations   \$120 savings   ¾ page program ad   LG. ad on KATE Conference website page |               |
| <b>GOLD</b>  | <b>\$1320</b> |
| 8 registrations   \$200 savings   Full page program ad   Front page ad on KATE website       |               |
| <b>PLATINUM</b>  | <b>\$1600</b> |
| 10 registrations   \$300 savings   Full page program ad   Front page ad on KATE website      |               |

Send your educators to the best ELA conference in Kansas. Recruit the best to your institution, too!

All registrations are for a FULL conference. No single-day registrations. Gold & Platinum sponsorships eligible for institutional representative speaking opportunity before the general membership on a day of your choice. All conference registrations include meals, KATE membership. Travel and lodging not included.

ALL CONFERENCE REGISTRATIONS INCLUDE MEALS, KATE MEMBERSHIP. TRAVEL AND LODGING NOT INCLUDED.