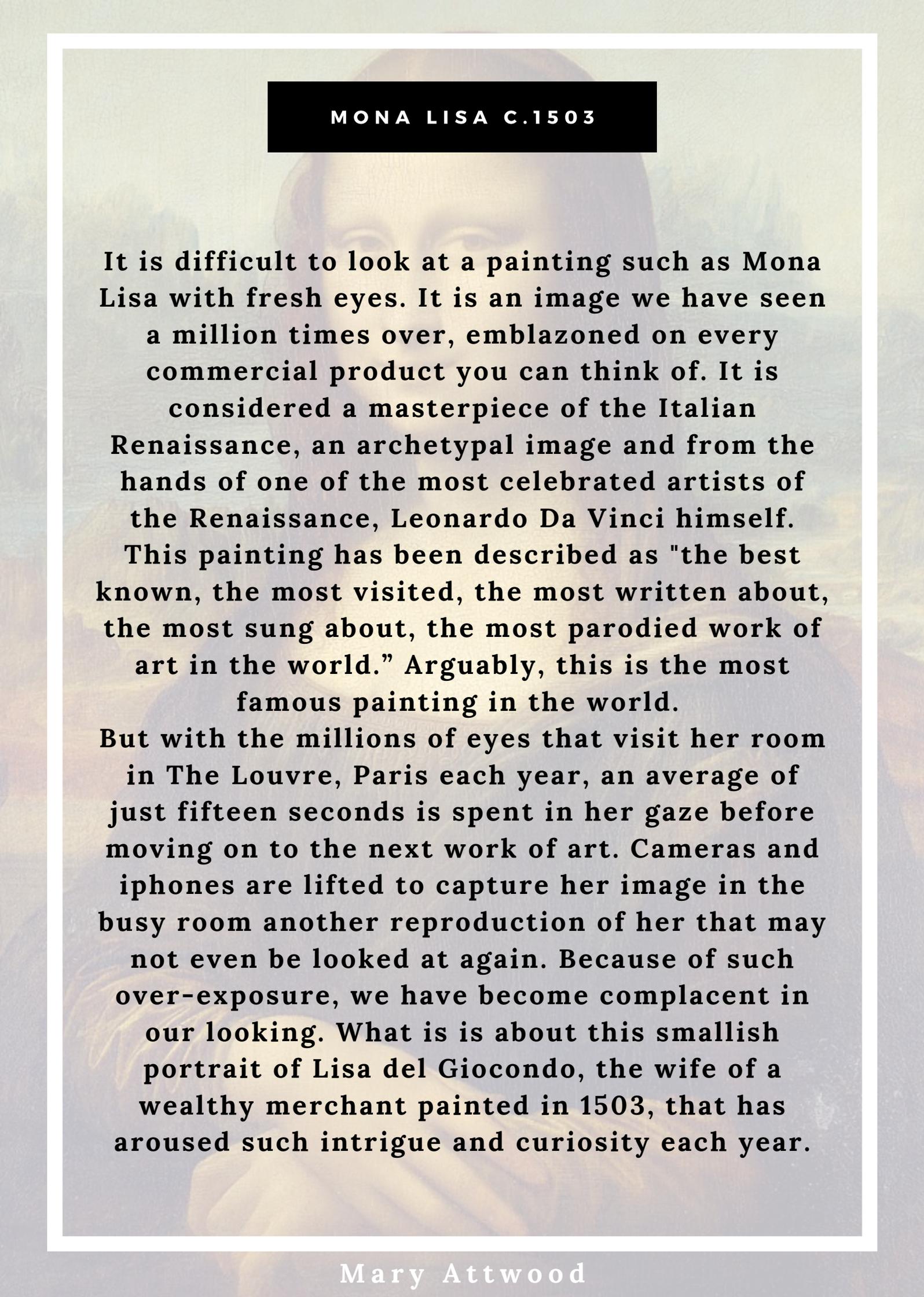


Mona Lisa
by
Leonardo Da Vinci

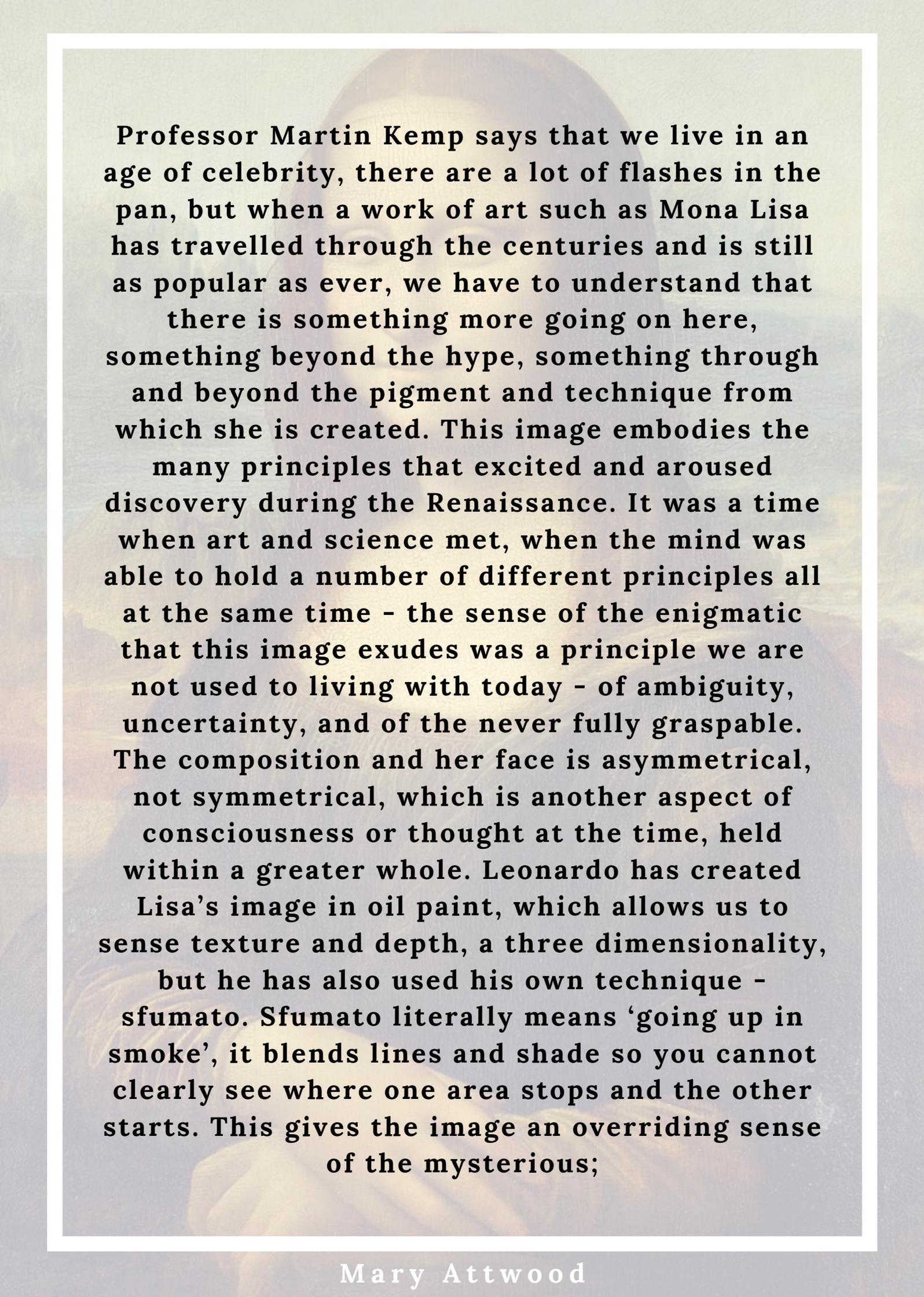


MONA LISA C.1503

It is difficult to look at a painting such as Mona Lisa with fresh eyes. It is an image we have seen a million times over, emblazoned on every commercial product you can think of. It is considered a masterpiece of the Italian Renaissance, an archetypal image and from the hands of one of the most celebrated artists of the Renaissance, Leonardo Da Vinci himself.

This painting has been described as "the best known, the most visited, the most written about, the most sung about, the most parodied work of art in the world." Arguably, this is the most famous painting in the world.

But with the millions of eyes that visit her room in The Louvre, Paris each year, an average of just fifteen seconds is spent in her gaze before moving on to the next work of art. Cameras and iphones are lifted to capture her image in the busy room another reproduction of her that may not even be looked at again. Because of such over-exposure, we have become complacent in our looking. What is it about this smallish portrait of Lisa del Giocondo, the wife of a wealthy merchant painted in 1503, that has aroused such intrigue and curiosity each year.



Professor Martin Kemp says that we live in an age of celebrity, there are a lot of flashes in the pan, but when a work of art such as Mona Lisa has travelled through the centuries and is still as popular as ever, we have to understand that there is something more going on here, something beyond the hype, something through and beyond the pigment and technique from which she is created. This image embodies the many principles that excited and aroused discovery during the Renaissance. It was a time when art and science met, when the mind was able to hold a number of different principles all at the same time - the sense of the enigmatic that this image exudes was a principle we are not used to living with today - of ambiguity, uncertainty, and of the never fully graspable. The composition and her face is asymmetrical, not symmetrical, which is another aspect of consciousness or thought at the time, held within a greater whole. Leonardo has created Lisa's image in oil paint, which allows us to sense texture and depth, a three dimensionality, but he has also used his own technique - sfumato. Sfumato literally means 'going up in smoke', it blends lines and shade so you cannot clearly see where one area stops and the other starts. This gives the image an overriding sense of the mysterious;

it is a portrait of a real woman who once lived, it is not a religious subject matter, but through the image Leonardo has also encapsulated the enigmatic nature of the divine, which moves through life and experience and through our sense of vision. Because to the renaissance eye, this image was alive and present. The artist and historian, Giorgio Vasari writing later in the 1500s, said of Leonardo Da Vinci's masterpiece;

"...whoever wished to see how nearly art is able to imitate nature, was readily able to perceive it from this head; for here Leonardo subtly reproduced every living detail. The eyes had their natural lustre and moistness...the nose with its beautiful nostrils, rosy and tender, seems to be alive...the mouth, joined to the flesh-tints of the face by the red of the lips, appeared to be living flesh rather than paint. On looking closely at the pit of her throat, one could swear the pulses were beating."

So perhaps art is not merely an object to be glanced at or ticked off a checklist. Looking at this painting in the way Vasari described, as something which is animate and alive, changes our experience from a distanced spectator to something participatory and dynamic - and the image alters from a static object to be analysed to a living being.