

Art History Newsletter

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Mona Lisa the Cold War Tool

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Vanity Fair has [excerpted](#) a new book *Mona Lisa in Camelot*, by Margaret Leslie Davis. When France agreed in 1962 to lend the *Mona Lisa* to America, art officials on both shores opposed the idea:

The treatment and care of old-master paintings was [National Gallery of Art director John] Walker's specialty, and he believed extremely fragile works of art should never move needlessly from continent to continent. The *Mona Lisa* was no exception ... Walker attempted to make it clear that he would not support the plan. He favored museum stipulations that forbade the lending of certain artworks. Even a layperson had to acknowledge that a 450-year-old picture painted on wood could not travel thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean at the depth of winter without risk of damage ...

Meanwhile, in Paris ... Madame Madeleine Hours, head of the Louvre's prestigious museum laboratory ... had practically lived with the masterpiece, constantly checking the small picture like a mother hen. Madame Hours felt the idea of shipping the painting to America was extremely foolish. "I had had many opportunities to see how fragile and how sensitive to differences in temperature the painting was," she said ... Madame Hours prepared a report anticipating the worst possible harm that could come to the masterpiece were it allowed to travel. She felt certain that her alarming conclusions would discourage the authorities, but her report accomplished the exact opposite. Malraux dismissed the concerns as exaggerated and announced his decision that the exhibition would proceed as planned.

The loan proceeded.

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