



KCRW ART TALK with Edward Goldman

“Mona Lisa, Jackie, and...Yes, Me!” July 8, 2008

If I tell you that I caught a glimpse of Jackie Kennedy once, in her post-Camelot period, would it pique your interest? "Come on, Edward," I can hear you saying, "people were running into her on the streets of Manhattan for years; what's the big deal?" Here's my story. In 1976, the Metropolitan Museum was organizing an exhibition of Russian Imperial costumes, and Jackie, one of the catalog editors, came to Leningrad to see these costumes in the Hermitage collection. You bet it created quite a stir. She was being escorted on a special tour of the museum collection, and I caught a glimpse of her at the gallery with two Madonnas by Leonardo da Vinci.



Funny, I had completely forgotten about that encounter, but all that came back after reading an advance copy of the book [Mona Lisa in Camelot, by Margaret Leslie Davis](#). Once upon a time, the occupants of the White House were not only unafraid of Art and Culture, on the contrary, they actively cultivated relationships with artists and musicians, and Jackie Kennedy played a key role in that. During the Kennedy's state visit to France in 1962, she seemingly charmed everyone, including French President Charles de Gaulle. One thing led to another, and voilà, a smitten de Gaulle promised to send to Washington the most prized possession of the Musée du Louvre: Leonardo's portrait of Mona Lisa. Horrified officials at the Louvre and the National Gallery in Washington,

calculating the risk of transporting the fragile work of art, tried to put a stop to this plan.



There are a lot of fascinating details in this book about what happened behind the scenes in Paris, Washington, and the White House, and how Jackie, thanks to her personal friendship with French Minister of Culture André Malraux, arranged the historic visit of Leonardo's 'First Lady of Art' to the United States.



Twelve years later, in 1974, the Mona Lisa embarked on yet another extremely rare trip, this time to Tokyo. And on the way back home to Paris, as a result of a last-minute request by Soviet President Brezhnev, French authorities granted permission for her brief stopover in Moscow, where she was shown at the [Pushkin Museum](#). The exhibition lasted only eleven days, and you cannot imagine the pandemonium it caused; people stood in endless lines throughout the night waiting to be admitted into the tightly controlled gallery for only a few precious minutes with Leonardo's masterpiece. And that's where my first encounter with her took place. With my colleagues from the Hermitage, I took an overnight train to Moscow to see the Mona Lisa in the early morning hours, before the museum opened to the public. She smiled at us politely, but in keeping with her tradition of the last 500 years, didn't say a word. Needless to say, I was starstruck, so it took some time before I was able to calm down enough to examine this remarkable painting.



It was another twenty years before our next encounter took place, this time in Paris. I had never been there before, so you can imagine how eager I was to rush to the Louvre to devour its treasures. Postponing the pleasure, I spent the whole day in the museum seeing its various collections before arriving at the famous quarter-mile long Grande Gallerie to say hello to Mona Lisa. She hadn't aged a bit. We smiled at each other, and all of a sudden something went terribly wrong; the whole museum plunged into darkness. The moment I planted my feet in front of the Leonardo, the museum experienced a power failure. So there I was, alone with my lady, in total darkness, but let me assure you, neither of us broke protocol.

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The unveiling of the Mona Lisa at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 8 January 1963; © Photo © Abbie Rowe, National Park Service /John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston