



Newsday

Review: 'Mona Lisa in Camelot'

BY TOM BEER | tom.beer@newsday.com

October 12, 2008

MONA LISA IN CAMELOT: How Jacqueline Kennedy and Da Vinci's Masterpiece Charmed and Captivated a Nation, by Margaret Leslie Davis. Da Capo, 272 pp., \$24.95

With "Mona Lisa in Camelot," author Margaret Leslie Davis has the first and last word on a minor subject: the loan of the Da Vinci painting to the National Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum in 1963.

After all, how much is there to say about a museum transaction?

Well, plenty - when the painting is this iconic, and the one brokering the deal is first lady Jackie Kennedy.

The story begins in May 1962, when the Kennedys are touring the Louvre during a state visit to Paris. "I would love to see the Mona Lisa again and show her to Americans," Jackie whispers in the ear of French cultural minister André Malraux.

A series of complex negotiations unfold over the following months: Malraux will be wined and dined in Washington, the anxious director of the National Gallery coaxed into accepting responsibility; a special double-wrapped aluminum case manufactured for the ocean-liner voyage.

Jackie conducts the operation like a gracious field marshal, achieving her objectives, Davis writes, "through a smile, a handwritten note, a timely telephone call, or a memo of instruction." The painting arrives safely, and nearly 2 million Americans flock to see it, making it the first blockbuster exhibition.

Readers may tire of Davis's hyperbole - everything is "ultimate" and "supreme" - but she offers an intriguing sketch of Jackie - a woman as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa herself.