



Mona Lisa's Escort: Andre Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture

Herman Lebovics

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Traveling on the luxury liner France early in 1963, the Western world's most famous painting sailed across the Atlantic on its maiden voyage to the United States. President John F. Kennedy officially welcomed the Mona Lisa for her stay in the capital and New York. In two months almost two million Americans came to admire the French treasure. The goodwill generated by the loan eased U.S.French relations, which had soured over tensions stemming from the Cold War. The mastermind behind the Mona Lisa's triumphant tour was France's newly appointed minister of cultural affairs, Andr Malraux. In this engaging book, Herman Lebovics recounts how Malraux's brilliant foray into the realm of diplomacy was but one example of his efforts to employ France's cultural heritage in the service of a renewed national grandeur. Malraux's cabinet position was created in 1959 by Charles de Gaulle, who entered his presidency deeply concerned over unraveling social cohesion at home and the nation's weak standing abroad. To help him address these problems, he turned to a paragon of the engag French intellectual. Malraux was an acclaimed novelist, a daring adventurer, a flamboyant anti-colonialist and one-time leftist, a courageous resistance leader, and an inspired commentator on art. In his ten years as a cabinet minister, Malraux sought to "marry" the French people to their historic culture and to restore France to her place as artistic center of the West. Lebovics examines the successes and failures of Malraux's remarkable career and the reactions of artists, the political class, and the public to the French state's new engagement with the national culture.

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