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Leonardo: Artist, inventor, matchmaker?

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By MARTA FALCONI
Associated Press Writer

ROME (AP) -- Born 500 years too early to put her photo on an online dating site, this young woman tried a different matchmaking approach - a portrait by Leonardo Da Vinci.

Experts say a little-known portrait of a young woman, previously attributed to an anonymous German artist, is likely a drawing made by Leonardo. The 13-by-9.4-inch parchment is believed to be a nuptial portrait aimed at attracting a possible groom for the unidentified woman.

The drawing, which could be worth millions if the new attribution is confirmed, was bought in 1998 for \$21,850 by a private collector at an auction in New York, said Alessandro Vezzosi, the director of a museum dedicated to the artist in his hometown of Vinci.

"Every element points to Leonardo," said Vezzosi, one of the experts who examined the drawing. "This work looks extraordinary."

Facing left, the woman wears Renaissance garments and the shoulder of her dress is marked by "Vinci knots," a traditional decoration that points to the artist born in the small Tuscan town, Vezzosi said.

Vezzosi said it may also be the first work on parchment attributed to the Renaissance master.

Experts say the technique and style of the portrait indicate it was drawn by a gifted, left-handed artist, just like Leonardo.

"The left hand trait is really impressive for how fluid, secure and precise it is," Vezzosi said.

Vezzosi said several experts have backed the attribution over the last few months. The discovery is based on the analysis of the drawing by a Paris-based lab that already studied another Leonardo masterpiece, the "Lady With an Ermine," which was attributed to the artist only in the early 19th century.

Based on its style the portrait has been dated to 1485-1490, placing it at a time when Leonardo (1452-1519) was living in Milan.

However, Vezzosi cautioned that further tests, including carbon-dating, must be carried out.

Carlo Pedretti, director of a center for Leonardo studies at the University of California in Los Angeles, also believes the work is likely Leonardo's.

"Despite all the perplexity that it may cause, also regarding the lack of information on its provenance, the work is at least for now the most important find since the identification of the Lady With an Ermine," he said.

Nicholas Turner, former curator of drawings at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the British Museum, was among the first experts to be alerted to the portrait and associate it with the Renaissance artist.

The work is of "extremely fine execution," Turner told The Associated Press. "There were only very few artists of that caliber then."

Vezzosi did not identify the drawing's owner and said he was not aware of any plans to sell or display it.

He said there could be more works by Leonardo waiting to be discovered.

"There are collectors who keep these works of art in bank vaults, but it is likely that we'll find others," he said. "We know of artworks that have been documented and that we haven't found yet."

On the Net:

The Leonardo museum in Vinci: <http://www.museoleonardo.it/>

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