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Is it a portrait by Leonardo da Vinci? Millions at stake

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO
The New York Times

VINCI, Italy — A 19th-century German School portrait that sold for \$21,850 at a Christie's auction in 1998 has now been attributed to Leonardo da Vinci by some experts.

A spokesman for the mixed-media portrait's Swiss owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, said offers to buy it already are pouring in. He said the top bid so far was more than \$50 million, by an intermediary acting on behalf of a Russian.

The 13- by 9.4-inch work — which might be a betrothal portrait — did not cause a furor when it went on sale in New York, where it was bought by a U.S.-based dealer who sold it last year.

If it is a da Vinci, skeptics say, it went unrecognized by auction-house experts and the specialized dealers who attended the sale, including the one who bought it.

"The market is a fairly efficient place," said Hugh Chapman, assistant keeper at the department of prints and drawings at the British Museum in London. "This would be an amazing miss."

Still, there are those who believe the portrait is by da Vinci.

"This profile is almost too beautiful to be true," said Alessandro Vezzosi, director of the Museo Ideale Leonardo da Vinci, pointing to a photograph of the work that now hangs here. (The original is kept in a Swiss vault.) Scientific studies aside, he said, "the iconography and the aesthetic speak clearly" that it is a da Vinci.

Eighteen months ago, the Swiss collector showed the portrait to Peter Silverman, a friend and Canadian collector who was the first to suspect his friend might have made an amazing investment. "I saw it, but I didn't dare speak the L-word," Silverman said.

The two collectors took the portrait to Lumiere Technology, a Paris-based company specializing in multispectral digital technology that had digitized two da Vincis.

"The first time that the owner gave me this drawing he didn't say a thing; the author was secret," said Pascal Cotte, Lumiere Technology's chief technical officer.

Though Cotte tested the work for nearly four weeks, he said, it did not take him long to come up with a name. "I went to the owner and said, 'I have a feeling it's a drawing by Leonardo.'"

In June, Lumiere announced it had authenticated the work as a da Vinci.

Carbon 14-dating tests carried out by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich and released this month place the work's date between 1440 and 1650. But art dealers and art historians interviewed recently had mixed opinions.



This photo of an artwork some attribute to Leonardo da Vinci was provided by Alessandro Vezzosi. AP

Scientific tests "can be very useful, but they can't guarantee an attribution because the first criterion is quality and that can't be discerned through mechanical means," said Jean-Luc Baroni, a London-based art dealer.

Nicholas Turner, a former curator of drawings at the British Museum and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, saw the work in December and was struck by the left-handed shading — da Vinci was left-handed — as well as the physiognomy and the details.

Other experts are more skeptical. Carmen Bambach, curator of drawings and prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and a leading Leonardo specialist, said, based on the photograph, the "work does not seem to resemble the drawings and paintings by the great master."

A lot is at stake, in terms of prestige and money. Da Vinci is a star at auctions in part because little of his work goes up for sale, and his work would most likely sell in the double-digit million-dollar range, Kemp said.

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