

The art detective



Like a Renaissance detective on the trail of clues laid down by portrait painters 500 years ago, freelance Adelaide historian Maïke Vogt-Luersssen, has for two decades researched the identity of European nobility painted by the great artists, including Leonardo da Vinci.

By Penelope Debelle

Using the libraries of the three South Australian universities, which hold works by contemporary writers from the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, German born Vogt-Luersssen, has studied the life and culture of the times and tracked the symbols used by painters to identify their noble subjects. Along the way, she has deduced the identities of people in several famous paintings, among them da Vinci's Mona Lisa.

Her conclusions, including the alarming deduction that the identity of the Mona Lisa claimed by the Louvre is impossible and wrong, have yet to gain a foothold in serious art circles. But Vogt-Luersssen, who has published 14 books, most of them biographies and all of them so far in German, has a growing circle of admirers in minor international art history circles who found her on the internet and have sought her help identifying paintings. Next month she flies to Montpellier in the south of France and then to Florence to speak to European media about her identification of two works, one a Madonna painting she believes is Isabella of Aragon painted by da Vinci in his old age, the other a tiny medallion portrait she has identified as Anna de' Medici.

Unlike art historians, who examine brush strokes, materials and techniques, Vogt-Luersssen, 52, who trained as a historian and biologist at the Philipps-University in Marburg before moving to Australia with her family in 1995, relies on the symbols that adorn the paintings. These are the historical markers left by the artist at a time before photography when portraits recorded a person's family and influence. They were meant to contain a record of exactly who the subjects were.

Take the Mona Lisa, which the Louvre has claimed for more than a hundred years is La Gioconda, the wife of a Florentine silk merchant. Not so, says Vogt-Luersssen whose book, *Who is Mona Lisa? In Search of her Identity* makes the case for Isabella of Aragon, a young woman of 18 who was at the time married unhappily to her dissolute husband, Gian Galeazzo II Maria Sforza, the Duke of Milan.

Vogt-Luersssen identified on the Mona Lisa's bodice the symbols of the connected rings of the house of Sforza and below them the connected knots and strings that brought together the dynasties of Visconti and Sforza. With the choice narrowed to one of eight women, Vogt-Luersssen eliminated all but Isabella whose mother died the previous year (which explained the mourning), who diarists said was unhappy because her husband beat her and who, significantly, was close to da Vinci, the painter at her court, for most of her life. Adding weight to the theory of a possible love affair between the painter and his subject, da Vinci never sold the painting although he was offered vast sums for it and took it with him to France, where he died.

Vogt-Luersssen believes the Madonna painting, which she was asked three years ago to help identify, shows the same Isabella and she is preparing for a press conference in Montpellier where she will explain her verification. Much is at stake; the work picked up by three French friends in a small art shop for next to nothing, could be worth a fortune even though Vogt-Luersssen believes it was painted late in his life and was a lesser standard work.

"I said it is Isabella of Aragon with her sons and it is painted by da Vinci," says Vogt-Luersssen, pointing to an intricate laced pattern around the top of the woman's head. "Are you sure? Yes, he has put his special sign right here, in the halo around her head where there are not stars or rays but his symbol, which was private. Leonardo has a special note, and if he puts it in then you know it is (a painting of) Leonardo, or he painted it. All his symbols are here but you don't see Leonardo."

Similarly, Vogt-Luersssen - who is excited at the potential significance of her discoveries even though they have gone largely unheeded - identified Anna de' Medici as the subject of a miniature medallion based at first on the identifying strand of pigeon-egg pearls which were the symbol of the Medici, as well as the Hapsburg symbol of an altar chain hanging further down her neck. Vogt-Luersssen concluded she was either a Medici who married a Hapsburg, or vice

versa, or the daughter of a Hapsburg and a Medici. This narrowed the field to three women and the thoughtful painter gave another clue, the image of Artemis, the goddess of virginity, which eliminated her two sisters, both of whom had six children, leaving unmarried Anna.

Historical research built on contemporary diarists and research of customs combined with family trees and the unlocking of family symbols has launched Vogt-Luersssen into an area of art history that she believes has been poorly treated, if not overlooked. She is critical of the certainty with which so many portraits have been identified and believes many of them, particularly in Italy, are wrong. "I think historians have to read a lot and know everything," she says. "For example, if I say this is Isabella of Aragon, the Duchess of Milan, I have to prove that with contemporary written and picture sources. If they tell me, Maike, you are wrong, then I am wrong and I have to look for another theory but art historians are not doing that. They are not into the details of history. They look at paint strokes and so on, and the rest is interpretation for them."

She has written to the Louvre more than once but has never received a reply. People without standing in the art world have no hope of challenging such embedded wisdom even though others have acknowledged the evidence pointing to the Mona Lisa being Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, was not conclusive. "People write to me, but they are not people of influence," Vogt-Luersssen said. "I have historians on my side, and art historians who are young and not in major positions. They are publishing me on the internet, and in books. My problem is the top of the art historians. That is really the problem because they have too much to lose."

In the meantime, she works eight hours a day on unpaid research decoding paintings that are loaded with symbols she says are crying out to be heard. She will also continue to hound the National Gallery of Art in Washington about a painting she claims was wrongly attributed to Cariani and sits unheralded and all but forgotten in their archives. The painting, Portrait of a Man with a Dog, according to Vogt-Luersssen, is the only known self-portrait of the young Leonardo da Vinci.