BEHIND THAT SECRET SMILE - VOGT-LUERSSEN - GIOCONDA

Autor:
Data de publicació: 11-10-2009

Seventeen years of research, beginning in Germany, has led Adelaide historian Maike Vogt-Luerssen to the conclusion that she has solved a centuries-old conundrum.

The private art historian with a passion for the Renaissance is convinced she has uncovered the identity of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa and the heartache behind her sad and mysterious smile. Mona Lisa, says Vogt-Luerssen, is really the lovesick former Duchess of Milan, Isabella of Aragon - and not the wife of a Florentine silk merchant, as has been believed.

www.theage.com.au

June 25, 2004 — 10.00am

Seventeen years of research, beginning in Germany, has led Adelaide historian Maike Vogt-Luerssen to the conclusion that she has solved a centuries-old conundrum.

The private art historian with a passion for the Renaissance is convinced she has uncovered the identity of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa and the heartache behind her sad and mysterious smile. Mona Lisa, says Vogt-Luerssen, is really the lovesick former Duchess of Milan, Isabella of Aragon - and not the wife of a Florentine silk merchant, as has been believed.

Her research has been published in Germany in her book Who is Mona Lisa? In Search of her Identity, adding to her previous works on Lucrezia Borgia, everyday life in the Middle Ages, and women in the 15th and 16th century.

For Vogt-Luerssen, the daunting task of identifying one of the world's most famous women was complicated by the fact that Renaissance portraits were not named, nor were most of them signed.

"If you go to a museum you see Leonardo da Vinci and a name, you see Bernardino Luini and a name but that is a guess, it is really a guess," she says.

However, she points out that the clues to the Mona Lisa are in the painting itself and in other paintings, diaries and records from the time.

Apart from the wan smile and absence of jewellery, the beauty is wearing heavy, mournful garb; Isabella of Aragon's mother died the year before da Vinci painted his most famous work. At this time, the duchess was 17 years old and had recently wed her handsome but dissolute husband, Gian Galeazzo II, Maria Sforza, the Duke of Milan.

Visible on the bodice of Mona Lisa's plain brown dress are symbols of the connected rings of the house of Sforza and below them knots and strings representing the connection between the dynasties of Visconti and Sforza, which she had

married into. Vogt-Luerssen says this narrows her down to a group of eight women.

She located portraits of the others: Bona of Savoy, who was Isabella's mother-in-law; Empress Bianca Maria Sforza and Anna Maria (the legitimate daughters of Bona and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Gian's father); Caterina Sforza, Angela and Ippolita (the illegitimate daughters of Galeazzo Maria Sforza); and Beatrice d'Este (married to Gian's uncle). The Mona Lisa portrait of Isabella of Aragon fitted this context. "This is her picture; then I have all the women," Vogt-Luerssen says.

The sadness and joy in the background of Isabella of Aragon further illuminates the masterpiece by telling us something about the story behind the secret smile.

"Why is she looking so sad? . . . She married at the end of 1488 when she came to Milan but she had a big problem. She married her cousin, a beautiful man but he was a drinker, and he had problems with impotence."

Diarists at the time wrote of a wonderful lady, the Duchess of Milan, who was always crying because her husband beat her. But she was also close to Leonardo da Vinci, the painter at her court for 11 years, who remained a friend, and possibly more, for most of her life. Da Vinci never sold the work, although it was coveted at the time as a superior piece. He took it with him to France, where he died.

"This was a love story," Vogt-Luerssen says. "But it was most difficult because she is high and mighty and Leonardo was a painter. It wasn't allowed."

The widely accepted theory of the identity of Mona Lisa is that she is "La Gioconda", the wife of a Florentine silk merchant, who commissioned the painting as an act of love. She was named as the subject of the painting by the Louvre early last century.

But Vogt-Luerssen discounts that theory, saying the Louvre made its own guess to appease public curiosity, based on a written description of a portrait described in 1550 by an Italian Renaissance art historian, Giorgio Vasari.

"They didn't know who it was so they took the first description they could get hold of and said this could fit, but if you look closely, it does not fit," she says. "Everything the Louvre says is without proof and there were always art historians who opposed this."

A comparison between the Mona Lisa and Vasari's description of La Gioconda reveals discrepancies. His references to it as an unfinished work, the descriptions of pale red circles around her eyes, eyebrows with separate hairs delineated from the skin and a pulse beating at her throat are not evident in da Vinci's Mona Lisa.

Experts such as Chris Marshall, senior lecturer in fine art at the University of Melbourne, are unfamiliar with Vogt-Luerssen's work and remain unconvinced of her views. Marshall says the La Gioconda theory may still hold because Vasari wrote his description in the mid-1500s, working from memory. By then, the portrait was already at Fontainebleau in the possession of King Francis of France.

But by using symbols employed in Renaissance portraiture to denote background and heritage, Vogt-Luerssen has found what she believes are other pictures of Isabella of Aragon that connect with and reveal some physical similarity with the Mona Lisa painting.

She says a black and white Bernardino Luini painting in Washington marked Woman Unknown and bearing some similarity to the Mona Lisa shows Isabella holding a weasel (the symbol of her father, Alfonso of Aragon), and wearing a cross that bore the symbol of her new husband, the Duke of Milan.

"This is, without question, Isabella of Aragon, only the art historians have not found it yet," she says, passionately. "The point is, at that time when people were painted, they were full of significance. This painting is titled, 'Unknown Woman' but I am shouting, 'Look, she is saying to you I am Isabella of Aragon, can't you see it?' It is like someone hitting hammers on you."

Vogt-Luerssen, who studied at the Philipps University of Marburg, stopped formal studies when her husband, Holger Vogt-Luerssen, moved to Australia in 1985 to complete his PhD. Since then, she has studied independently, moving to Australia for good in the mid 1990s.

She has own website detailing her research but has so far sold just 30 copies of her book, mainly to schools in Europe. However, next time she is in Paris, Vogt-Luerssen has a mission. She intends to distribute hundreds of brochures about Mona Lisa's identity among some of the 6 million people who each year pay homage to da Vinci's most-loved work.

Descarregueu l'article en PDF