



the **DA VINCI CODE**

Has an Adelaide art sleuth uncovered the true identity of the Mona Lisa?



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Adelaide art sleuth Maike Vogt-Luersssen says she has cracked the code that reveals the identity of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*

HER charms are subtle. She has a restrained smile and a mysterious, knowing look. She sits confidently with her arms folded in a virtuous pose. The small Renaissance masterpiece may once have been sharp and clear but is mellowed by time and varnish. The softened edges create a sense of illusion, as if she is underwater.

The *Mona Lisa* – although not every tourist who flocks to the Louvre agrees – is the most treasured piece of art in the western world. The 500-year-old, oil-on-wood portrait is owned by the French Republic and has never been for sale. On the open market, her price would be in the stratosphere.

But what are we really seeing? Who is this woman? Painted by Leonardo da Vinci in the early 1500s, she evokes raptures from art lovers who see in her something older than the rocks, the embodiment of an ancient goddess. The received wisdom is that the woman behind the smile is La Gioconda, a wealthy Florentine silk merchant's wife named Lisa Gherardini, a devout but unremarkable woman who was the mother of five children. Being the subject of the world's greatest painting was an accident triggered by crossing paths with a genius. It's a story endorsed by the Louvre, so we assume her identification is backed by irrefutable proof based on a trail of carefully examined records.

We may be wrong.

From her humble office in a quiet street in Blackwood, in the Adelaide Hills, Maike Vogt-Luersssen is convinced the Louvre has guessed, and guessed wrongly, who the *Mona Lisa* depicts. "What the Louvre says is without proof," she says. "They have many paintings by Leonardo attributed to the wrong people." She says the Louvre is overlooking critical conflicting information in saying the *Mona Lisa* is La Gioconda and she is convinced she knows the real identity of the woman captured so intimately by da Vinci.

Her claims are easy to dismiss. The initially unassuming woman with a strong German accent is a private researcher with no standing in the art world, only a small and dedicated international following mainly in Europe. This week she was in Florence giving a talk on the *Mona Lisa* at the invitation of an Italian art journalist, Marco Ferri, who has published Vogt-Luersssen's work on the Medicis. She is university-educated with a degree in history, biology and education and moved to Adelaide from Wilhelmshaven, Germany, in 1995 with her husband Holger, an industrial chemist. She has devoted more than a decade to the private study of social and art history in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Along the way she has published several books on Renaissance art, most of them in German.

Like Dan Brown and his da Vinci code, she taps into the power of symbols to unlock concealed messages. But unlike Brown, whose elaborate constructs involving the Knights Templar and the marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene are pure fiction, Vogt-Luersssen works from a more solid base. She uses diaries and contemporary sources which she checks against recorded family symbols, accounts of social customs and commonsense facial recognition.



HER STORY begins with a fundamental problem that bothers some art historians but which others happily gloss over. It is a contemporary account of da Vinci's painting of Gioconda's wife published in 1550 by Giorgio Vasari, a biographer of the leading Renaissance painters and sculptors. In a long and florid description, he refers to the "unfinished painting", which our *Mona Lisa* clearly is not.

And the details do not match.

Vasari writes of the lustrous brightness of her eyes and around them those "pale, red and slightly livid circles, also proper to nature". The eyelashes and eyebrows – of which *Mona Lisa* has virtually none, she is noticeably hairless – are said to be represented with "the closest exactitude" and with "the separate hairs delineated as they issue from the skin". The mouth of the woman in Vasari's portrait has rose-tinted lips that match the colour of her face, and at the pit of her throat is a beating pulse. None of these are evident.

"It just doesn't match, absolutely not," says Vogt-Luerssen, her voice rising in increments as she struggles to explain what others cannot see. "But now we have a tradition. Human beings like to have a name, so we have a name, *Mona Lisa*."

Various historians over the years have questioned the discrepancies but few are brave enough to take the next step of rejecting something that was settled centuries ago. Who would dare say that the Louvre is wrong, that a mistake was made and that Vasari was describing a completely different painting?

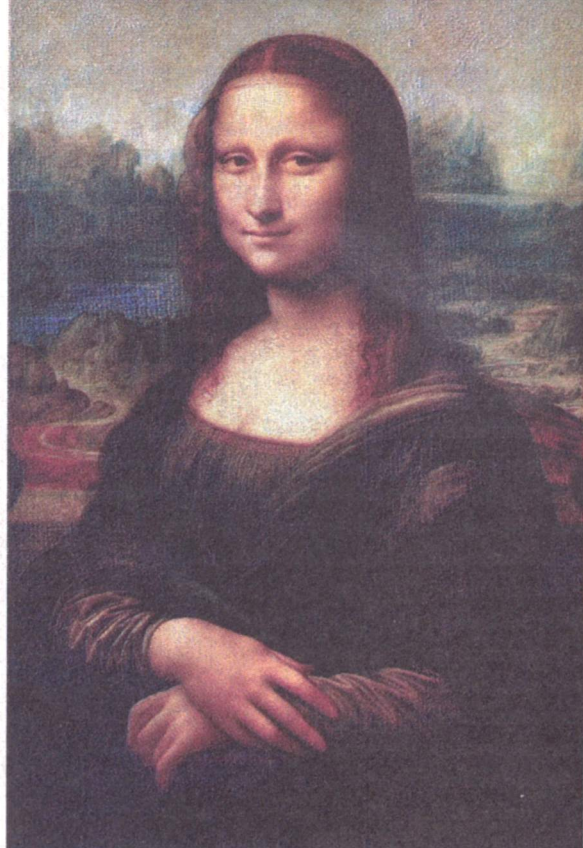
"The drawing that Vasari refers to is Lisa del Giocondo but we no longer have that drawing," Vogt-Luerssen says. "We don't know where it is. It may be lost, it could be waiting to be recovered. Museums have art archives that are 10 times larger than what appears in the gallery."

As Vogt-Luerssen dug deeper, she discovered something else. She was working on a book (since published) on the French house of Bourbon which has as its insignia a sea shell. It was a mark of heraldry used by high families to identify them and show their lineage. She was studying a portrait of a very young Suzanne of Bourbon who was wearing a headscarf bordered with shells when the penny dropped. "Oh my God, how can we have forgotten symbols?" asks Vogt-Luerssen.

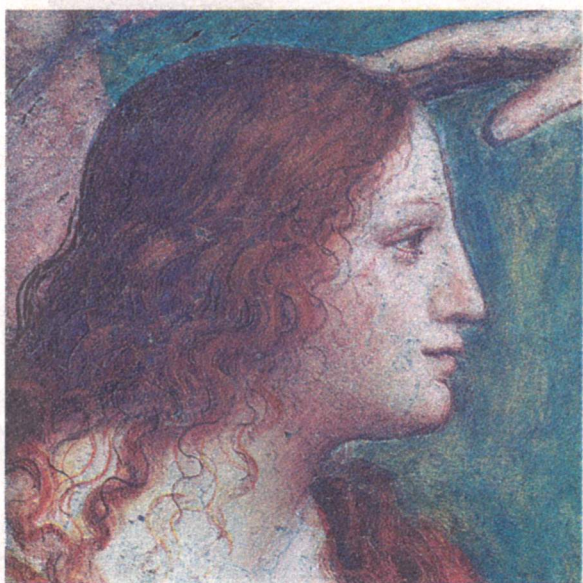
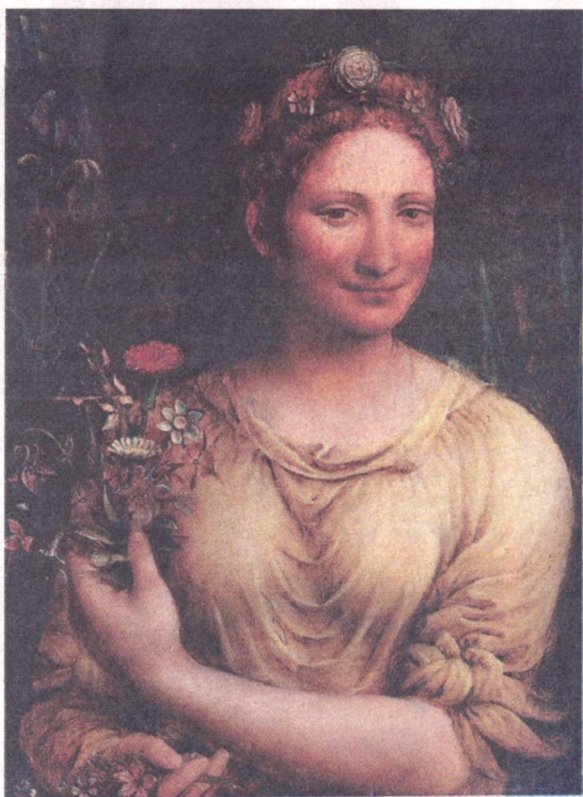
As she explains it, if you look at a painting of a battle from the Middle Ages, each side is fighting under a coat of arms so it is immediately clear what you are seeing. Painters like da Vinci, says Vogt-Luerssen, did exactly the same thing. They wove into the fabric of their paintings identifying symbols so a portrait – which was a person's claim to posterity – announced to an outsider who the subject was. Vogt-Luerssen went back and unlocked the code used not just by da Vinci but by all portrait painters from the 13th century on. "All the high dynasties had books of hours, religious books for praying," she says. "You can learn the symbols ... a red rose, a red dragon, a shell, a portcullis."

Which brings her to the *Mona Lisa*.

Hidden in the decorative work at her rather sombre neckline are two symbols which Vogt-Luerssen says identify her. The first is the chain of connected rings around her bodice which are the symbol of the House of Sforza. Below them are stylised knots and strings, da Vinci's own creation of a new Sforza-Visconti symbol that incorporated Visconti's star-like sun. Vogt-Luerssen says contemporary sources show she is dressed in the style of a Sforza duchess of Milan, a dress of dark green with sleeves of black velvet and a light veil indicating the final stages of mourning.



THE CLAIM THAT ISABELLA IS MONA LISA DEPENDS ON THE CURIOUS FACT THAT LEONARDO DEPICTED HER THREE TIMES



Five women fitted the Sforza-Visconti description and after eliminations for age, Isabella of Aragon (whose mother had just died) was left. Isabella, the Duchess of Milan, and da Vinci knew each other well. He was held in great favour in the Milanese court and for almost five years they lived in the same palace. They were at the very least friends. Da Vinci's biographer says that after Isabella was widowed, she was confined to a wing of the palace near da Vinci's studio and he spent an inordinate amount of time inventing plumbing and machinery to give the Duchess hot water for her bath.

Da Vinci never parted with the painting, a fact which makes no sense if it was a silk merchant's commission. He kept it with him all of his life and took it to France where it made its way to the palace at Fountainbleau and from there to the Louvre.

Vogt-Luerssen is not the only person to believe the *Mona Lisa* is Isabella. In 1978, the late US novelist and biographer Robert Payne reached the same conclusion. He arrived by a similar pathway, having first rejected

Vasari's description of Gherardini. He sleuthed through the clues and, without symbols, decided on Isabella, a high-born woman of noted beauty. He also unearthed two other almost identical *Mona Lisa* studies which are treated as copies but which may not be. She ages slightly across

the three portraits and Payne says it shows her as a virgin, a woman of the world and a widow. "The claim that Isabella is *Mona Lisa* depends on the curious fact that Leonardo depicted her three times in the same attitude over a period of about 10 years," Payne writes.

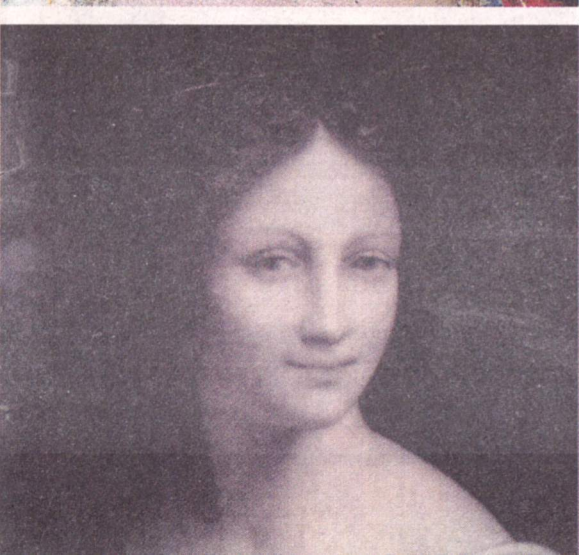
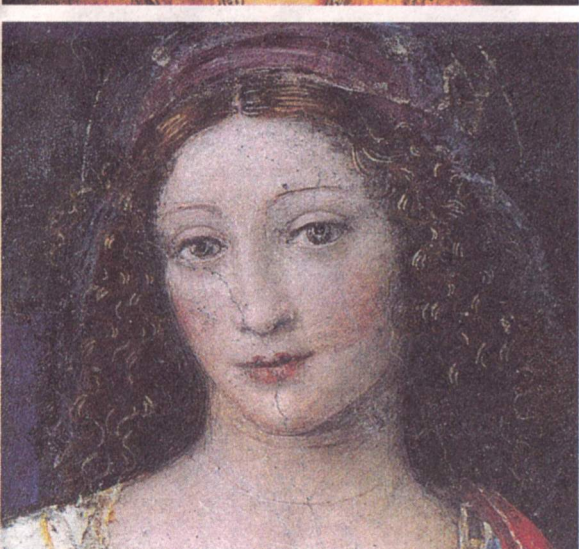
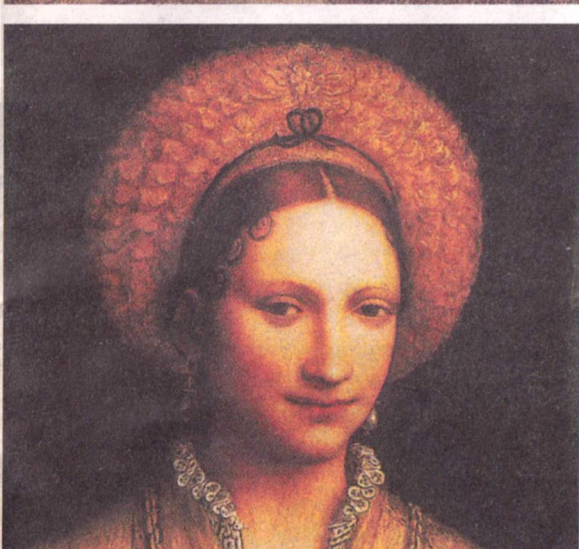
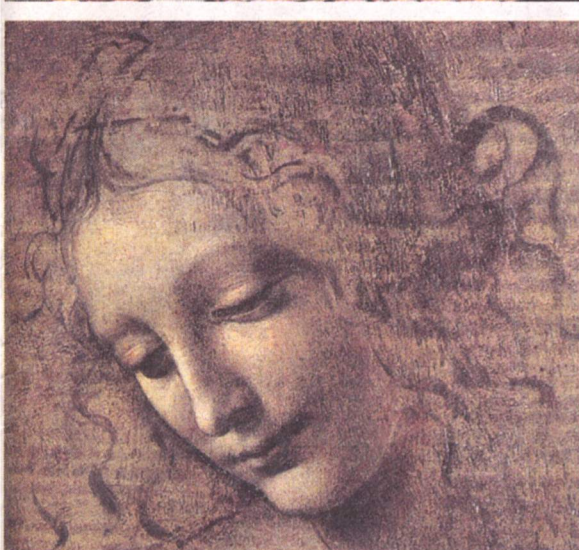
Vogt-Luerssen wishes she could have met Payne. "I have the greatest respect for him, because we have only a few people who are able to think for themselves and do not repeat what everybody is saying," she says. "I am very sad that I can't talk to him. I would have had at least one person who was able to understand what I discovered and who would have been able to make it possible that the world had to listen to it."

In Florence, Vogt-Luerssen hopes to get her theories discussed but she accepts her status as an outsider. She wrote to the Louvre once but did not receive an acknowledgement. "They must get hundreds of letters a day," she shrugs.

Her concerns with the quality of the work of some leading art historians run deep. Their assumptions can be built on shaky foundations then propped up by vested interests. No owner of a valuable painting wants to be caught with a fake. The art establishment, for all its pretensions, is an invitation to fraud. Even an innocent mistake is disastrous because it triggers others. "It's a mess and it's getting worse," Vogt-Luerssen says.

She says the supposed "proof" that emerged in 2008 confirming Lisa Gherardini as the *Mona Lisa* shows the problem. A footnote in a margin written in 1503 noted that da Vinci was working on a portrait of Lisa del Giocondo. This was the proof that *Mona Lisa* was Lisa Gherardini, the wife of Giocondo. But Vogt-Luerssen says no. There was a Lisa del Giocondo who da Vinci was painting but she was the sister of Francesco del Giocondo, the husband of Lisa Gherardini, and she was 35, too old to be the *Mona Lisa*. If it was Lisa Gherardini, the note would have said so because Renaissance women did not change their name when they were married.

"This shows how little the great art historians know about the time they are supposed to be experts of," Vogt-Luerssen says. She calls the cataloguing of European art "a catastrophe" and fears the subject of every second Italian Renaissance painting is wrongly identified and the artist of every fifth painting wrongly named.



The Mona Lisa, top,
left, and some of the
many faces of Isabella
of Aragon.

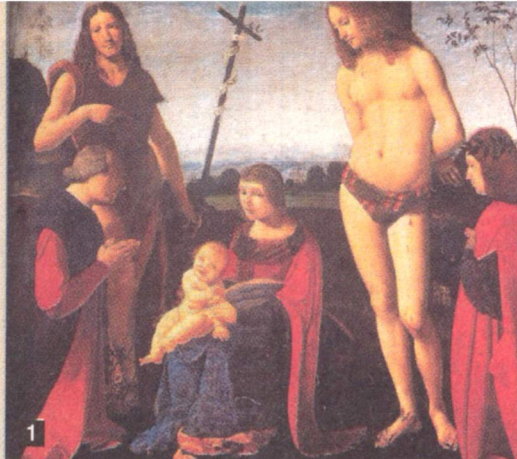
PART OF our enduring fascination with a small, dark portrait that has to be protected by bullet-proof glass could be that we still do not understand her. There are other larger and more splendid da Vinci works that would be better candidates for international adoration, and yet the mystery of *Mona Lisa* lingers.

In the meantime, Vogt-Luerssen keeps coming across Renaissance paintings that she believes are Isabella of Aragon. Some are arrestingly similar to *Mona Lisa* with her long nose, distinctive bottom lip and almost hairless eyes and eyebrows. The most notable of these is *Pomona*, a painting attributed to Francesco Melzi but described as “Leonardesque” in its intense botanical detail and the goddess’ half smile. Vogt-Luerssen has found scores more, some by da Vinci and others not, showing the same distinctive features and the consistent colours and symbols of her lineage.

Just last month, another one turned up, sent to Vogt-Luerssen by someone who saw it in a collection of da Vinci’s works. She doubts that it is a da Vinci (although copies are sold online as such) but recognises Isabella, right down to the Sforza colours and the ermine fur, a symbol of the Neapolitan Aragonese. She has the same eyes, the familiar mouth ... and in the background a snippet of landscape taken almost directly from the *Mona Lisa*. Another mystery waiting to be solved.

“Isabella was not without reason the most famous Italian woman of her time,” says Vogt-Luerssen. “I think the reason we are still talking about *Mona Lisa* is because it is not accepted this is just a merchant’s wife.” ■

Read more about Vogt-Luerssen’s claims at kleio.org/en



Could they be wrong?

1 VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH ST JOHN THE BAPTIST AND SEBASTIAN

The Louvre says: Painted by Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio.

Vogt-Luerssen says: Da Vinci.

Vogt-Luerssen says a misidentification two centuries ago of this painting as the work of Boltraffio, a high Renaissance painter from the same studio as da Vinci, condemned students to perpetuating the mistake. Experts studied Boltraffio’s style and came to the wrong conclusion. “The next time they say, ‘Ah! This is Boltraffio’ ... No! This is Leonardo! Mistake after mistake.”

2 LA BELLA PRINCIPESSA

Art experts say: Bianca Sforza by Leonardo da Vinci.

Vogt-Luerssen says: Angela Borgia Lanzol.

La Bella Principessa sold in Manhattan five years ago for \$22,000. It is now worth many millions (the previous owner is suing) after being identified three years ago as a da Vinci by leading Oxford art historian Martin Kemp. Vogt-Luerssen says it is definitely the master because it was “signed” with a da Vinci symbol on her sleeve that can be found in his emblem at the Academy of Milan. But the woman is not Bianca Sforza but Angela Borgia Lanzol, a distant cousin of Lucrezia Borgia.



3 PORTRAIT OF A YOUTH

National Gallery of Victoria says: Lucrezia Borgia by Dosso Dossi.

Vogt-Luerssen says: Renee of France by Dosso’s brother, Battista.

Four years ago the NGV identified this portrait of the “infamous murderess” Lucrezia Borgia, by Dosso Dossi.

According to Vogt-Luerssen, who has published a book in German and English on Borgia, the style of dress in the portrait – the bound hair, the high necklines and stiff collars – are typical of the 1530s when Borgia had been dead for at least 10 years. She also believes the painting was done by Dosso’s talented younger brother Battista. Rather than Borgia, Vogt-Luerssen says it is Renee of France. “It is still hanging, wrongly identified,” she says. “They went to a big effort to turn this into Lucrezia Borgia but I don’t think this is widely accepted.”