
NGV NEWS

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NGV SOLVES MYSTERY OF RENAISSANCE PORTRAIT



The NGV announced today that it believes the subject of a mysterious Renaissance portrait it has owned since 1965 is Lucrezia Borgia, and that the painter is famed Renaissance artist Dosso Dossi (c1486-1542).

As a result of this astounding conclusion, the NGV's painting could be the only surviving formal painted portrait of the famous Lucrezia. The discovery is attracting considerable international interest following extensive conservation and curatorial research work undertaken by NGV experts.

"This new research is revelatory", said NGV Director Dr Gerard Vaughan.

"What was previously a portrait of an unknown sitter by an unidentified artist, now seems likely to be one of the most significant portraits surviving from the Renaissance, by one of the great Northern Italian painters", he said.

Lucrezia Borgia was arguably the most famous (or infamous) woman of the Italian Renaissance. She was born in Rome as the illegitimate daughter of Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, who ruled as Pope Alexander VI from 1492 to 1503. She became the Duchess of Ferrara, securing refuge from the political scheming of her family. Her reputation was unfairly tarnished by the villainous acts of her brother and father; she was said in fact to be of gentle disposition and a highly competent administrator of Ferrara, before her untimely death in 1519.

The oval painting, purchased by the NGV in London in 1965, was titled *Portrait of a Youth*, by an unknown Northern Italian painter. The portrait had baffled every expert on the subject since it came into public view during the later twentieth century. It has always been assumed to be of a young male.

Some scholars had concluded that the botanical background to the painting was a later addition and that the oval format was not original; that the panel had been cut down from a rectangular shape.

NGV Paintings Conservator Carl Villis has undertaken several years' detailed technical and art historical research to conclude that the painting is a work by Dosso Dossi of Lucrezia Borgia.

Major technical examination of the painting now confirms that the floral background and its oval shape are entirely original. Until very recently it has been assumed that oval-shaped paintings did not exist in Italy in the first half of the sixteenth century; the only exceptions identified by the NGV's new research were by artist Dosso Dossi and his younger brother.

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NGV NEWS

Further research then pointed to the identities of the artist and the sitter. The group of oval paintings by Dosso Dossi were all painted in approx 1515 -1520, and all in the Este court in Ferrara, where Lucrezia lived. The technical examination shows another characteristic thus far identified as exclusive to Dossi: an unusual priming layer. Additionally, the use of shell gold was also a telling pointer to the Ferrarese origins of the painting.

Gradually, the mystery of the sitter also began to be unlocked.

It had previously been assumed that the sitter in the portrait was a young male, on account of the dagger held in the subject's hands; however, on closer study it became clear that the sitter was much more likely to be a woman.

The myrtle bush and flowers behind the sitter are symbolic references to the goddess Venus, a timeless symbol of feminine beauty; the Latin inscription refers to the Virtue and Beauty of the subject, themes used only in female portraits. The dagger is also a symbolic reference to another Lucretia, the sixth-century BC heroine of ancient Rome, who took her own life with a dagger following her rape, to preserve her family honour. The symbols of dagger and myrtle suggest Virtue and Beauty, as in the inscription but also symbolise Lucrezia Borgia's Christian and family name – the Borgias used Venus as a family emblem.

Portraits of women in the early 1500s were relatively rare, and only a woman of the highest nobility would have been placed on the level of a goddess of virtue and beauty, and a heroine of ancient Rome. In the context of Renaissance Ferrara, Lucrezia Borgia is the only candidate who matches these specific references.

Carl Willis said that the outcome of the process of identification of the painter and sitter had been thrilling:

“It has been very exciting to unlock the secrets of this beautiful and enigmatic painting, which now has unique standing in view of the fame of its sitter and the strength of the artist”, he said.

“Generations of art historians have attempted to identify portraits of Lucrezia Borgia, but this appears to be the only one which contains direct personal references to this intriguing historical figure. The only reliable likeness of her features we have is on a portrait medal in bronze, made in 1502. The facial profile on the medal bears a striking resemblance to our portrait”.

Dr Vaughan said the finding demonstrated again the importance of the work of attribution and analysis of artworks within galleries such as the NGV:

“This identification is the result of highly detailed technical and art historical work, which is the part of the cut and thrust of life in the NGV. From today, a painting previously thought to be of a youth by an unknown artist will be known as the portrait of Lucrezia Borgia by the Renaissance master Dosso Dossi – a great outcome”.

Dosso Dossi's *Lucrezia Borgia* will be on public display from Wednesday 26 November at NGV International, St Kilda Road.

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IMAGE CREDIT: **Dosso DOSSI** Italian c. 1486–1541/42 **Lucrezia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara** c.1518 oil on wood panel 74.5 x 57.2 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Felton Bequest, 1966

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