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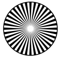
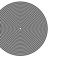
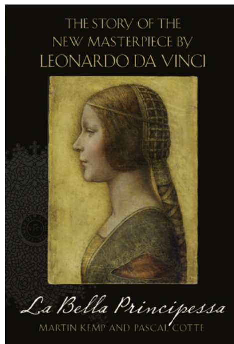



La Bella Principessa: The Story of a New Masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci (or Leonardo da Vinci "La Bella Principessa": The Profile Portrait of a Milanese Woman)

by Martin Kemp and Pascal Cotte, with contributions by Peter Paul Biro, Eva Schwan, Claudio Strinati, and Nicholas Turner
London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2010
208 pp., illustrated, some color, £18.99 (cloth). ISBN: 978-1-444-70626-0

Reviewed by David G. Stork

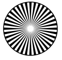
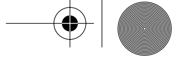


On 30 January 1998, an exceptionally elegant profile portrait of a young woman, executed on vellum in black, red, and white chalk (*trois crayon*) and highlighted with pen and ink, was purchased at Christie's auction house for US$21,850. Although it was cataloged "German School, Early 19th Century," as images of the drawing passed among experts, a few scholars tentatively dared to utter the "L word" and suggest that the portrait was a major discovery: a new work by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519).

This book, by Martin Kemp, an expert on Leonardo and professor of the history of art at Oxford University (recently emeritus), and Pascal Cotte, a founder and director of research at Paris-based Lumière Technology, a firm pioneering the application of high-resolution multispectral imaging of art, presents evidence and arguments that the portrait is indeed by Leonardo, and proposes both a date of execution (mid-1490s) as well as the identity of its subject, Bianca Sforza (1482–1496), Duke Ludovico Sforza's illegitimate daughter. The authors are unequivocal in their conclusion: "With respect to the accumulation of interlocking reasons, we have gathered enough evidence here to confirm that '*La Bella Principessa*' is indeed by Leonardo" (p. 187). In lectures and the popular media, Kemp claims the work to be "the most important rediscovered work by the artist in over a century." Of course, this book will be discussed and debated by experts on Leonardo and Italian Renaissance art, but everyone interested in art, including educated nonexperts, will learn something about the art historical and scientific evidence as well as the reasoning brought to bear on the attribution question, whether or not the authors ultimately persuade them.

The book mentions several Leonardo experts who support the attribution (Dottoressa Cristina Geddo, who works on Leonardo's followers; Mina Gregori of the University of Florence and Fondazione Longhi; and Alessandro Vezzosi, director of the Museo Ideale at Vinci), but, alas, not other Leonardo experts who reject the attribution (Everett Fahy and Carmen C. Bambach, curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Pietro C. Marani, former director of Milan's Brera Museum; and Klaus Schröder, director of the Albertina Museum in Vienna; among others)—just one of many one-sided presentations that pervade the book, as we shall see.

The vexed dialogues between art historians and scientific scholars—their different goals, standards of evidence, terminologies, and even world views—are often evident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in authentication and attribution debates, as others have noted elsewhere. For instance, Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, listed eleven guidelines for authenticating and attributing a work of art, number ten being "Subject the piece to a scientific examination using a wide number of methods.… Then discount everything you find."[1] Ernst van de Wetering described this tension in the Rembrandt Project,[2] as have numerous books on authentication and art forgery. In *La Bella Principessa*, the art historical and scientific evidence are presented as complementary yet reinforcing the same conclusion—no tension here. Both Kemp and Cotte have written extensively on science and art and speak the "other's" language. Such interdisciplinary collaborations, though still sporadic, are becoming more frequent within art scholarship. Kemp wrote the four chapters in Part I "From Style to Sitter" of the book, while Cotte, with occasional assistance from other technical contributors, wrote the nine chapters in Part II, "The Physical and Scientific Evidence." Kemp and Cotte wrote short summary chapters in Part III, "Conclusion."

Some hurdles to the Leonardo attribution were immediately evident: of his 4,000 autograph drawings, none are on vellum. On the other hand, some early evidence supported the attribution: the vellum support was carbon dated to 1440–1650, a result that was fully consistent with an attribution to Leonardo and which rendered the nineteenth-century dating suspect, at the very least. (Forgers, of course, seek materials, especially supports, contemporaneous with the artists whose work they forge—another fact not adequately addressed in this book.) Kemp assumes that the carbon dating indeed indicates the date of execution, and compares the style and proportions in the drawing to those in other works by Leonardo, such as *Portrait of a Woman in Profile* (Windsor Castle). He shows the formal and stylistic similarities between the precise lacework in the sitter's dress and Leonardo's intricate knot designs for the Academia Leonardi Vi[n]ci—mildly persuasive evidence that the design in the sheet derives ultimately from Leonardo's hand. He also shows a number of portraits by followers of Leonardo, such as Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio (1466 or 1467–1516) and Andrea Solario (ca. 1465–1524), and dismisses these artists as unequal to the task of even copying a work of such subtlety and refinement as *La Bella*.

Cotte marshals the technical, scientific evidence. He notes that the sheet has the same square-root-of-2 aspect ratio found in other works by Leonardo, such as *Mona Lisa* (Louvre, Paris), *Cecilia Gallerani* (Czartorynski Museum, Krakow), and *La Belle Ferronière* (Louvre, Paris), but does not mention how simple it would be for anyone to replicate such a proportion. One highlight of the book is the set of very high-resolution, multispectral images of details of the drawing, displayed magnified several times their original sizes. While traditional digital cameras divide the visible spectrum into three broad wavelength or color ranges (red, green, and blue, roughly matching the color-sensitive cones in the human eye), the Lumière multispectral camera uses thirteen narrow wavelength ranges, which extend to infrared and ultraviolet wavelengths invisible to humans. Furthermore, the camera captures images at the remarkably high resolution of 1,570 pixels per mm^2 (roughly the area inside of this **o**), providing a view as sharp as that in a modest optical microscope. The digital images in different wavelength ranges can be overlapped and rendered in different proportions to enhance the visibility of the subtlest features, even those otherwise invisible.

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The resulting mixed images reveal the material composition, *pentimenti*, strokes due to a (right-handed) restorer, and more. Most of this evidence is quite consistent with an attribution to Leonardo, but much is consistent with other explanations as well. Such state-of-the-art high-resolution multispectral images from Lumière have been used elsewhere, most notably in a tour-de-force reanalysis of the *Mona Lisa*;[3] these will surely become more widely used throughout art scholarship, not just by scientists and conservators, but also by curators and art historians.

The authors place much stock in the fact that the shading in the work is from upper-left to lower-right, supporting their attribution to the left-handed Leonardo. Contributor Nicholas Turner writes: "Strongly influenced by their mentor, these followers [of Leonardo] were, without exception, right-handed—which effectively excludes their authorship. Although they might be capable of emulating the forms, techniques and style of their master, they could not copy his left-handed shading or mirror writing" (p. 18). His latter point is moot here as there is no writing in *La Bella Principessa*, moreover, as Pietro C. Marani has argued elsewhere, "The fact that one is looking at a drawing by a left-handed artist does not carry any weight: There exist copies of drawings by Leonardo made by imitators which present this particular characteristic—by [Leonardo's protogé] Francesco Melzi, for example."[4] Again we find an important counterargument unacknowledged by the book's authors.

Peter Paul Biro, an expert in fingerprint and handprint analysis in art, has for decades studied numerous artists, such as Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), whose many works in pastel reveal clear fingerprint impressions. Biro has also found prints in *Teri's Find: A Forensic Study in Authentication* (2001–2007) a large drip painting and a can of blue paint in Jackson Pollock's Long Island, New York, studio, leading him and a few scholars to attribute the painting to Pollock—an attribution that has yet to enjoy scholarly consensus. A good, clear, large fingerprint on *La Bella* matching a good, clear, large fingerprint on an autograph Leonardo work would be extremely persuasive evidence, particularly as judged by scientists. Alas, the fingerprint evidence here is degraded and even after careful image processing is too poor for a convincing match between *La Bella* and Leonardo's *Saint Jerome* (Vatican Museums, Rome), which records some of the clearest Leonardo fingerprints. Biro shows good correspondence between several minutiae (the ends of ridges, key identifying features of fingerprints). He also points to matching "distinctive island" shapes in these fingerprints, but a few minutes on the Web reveals that such an island shape, shown in the figure below,[5] may not be particularly rare. Overall, this evidence does not fully justify Biro's claim that "the coincidence of the eight marked characteristics is strongly supportive of Leonardo's authorship of '*La Bella Principessa*'" (p. 173). A careful reading of the prints, especially by independent fingerprint experts, and statistical analysis are essential if these prints are to support the attribution. All scholars, particularly those working on technical image analysis of art, should look forward to a full scholarly presentation of the fingerprint evidence for independent peer review.

A fingerprint that shows a "distinctive island" much like that found in *La Bella Principessa* and Leonardo's *St. Jerome*. Image from http://education.vetmed.vt.edu/curriculum/vm8054/labs/Lab14/IMAGES/FINGERPRINT.jpg with arrow added by David G. Stork.

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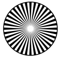
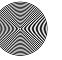
Kemp, convinced the drawing is autograph, is excited by how this work changes our understanding of Leonardo: "it reveals a previously unknown dimension to the way in which he fulfilled his duties at the court of Duke Ludovico Sforza. It is his first known portrait of one of the Sforza 'princesses' … [i]t shows him using a medium that has not previously been seen in his *oeuvre*… [i]t reveals a new facet of his direct engagement with the ranks of the court poets…" (p. 188). In the chapter titled "What Constitutes Proof?" Kemp writes: "The now secure position of the portrait of *Mona Lisa del Giocondo* in Leonardo's body of autograph paintings depends on an accumulation of interlocking reasons, and, not least, on the way that the painting participates actively in how we see Leonardo as a whole. *Any important new work, to establish itself, must significantly affect the totality of Leonardo's surviving legacy over the longer term*" (p. 187, emphasis added). He continues, "any barrage of evidence… contributes something new to the Leonardo we currently know." This is a stance this reviewer cannot quite accept. Above all, the goal of authentication is not to expand or alter our understanding of an artist, his oeuvre, or even that of his contemporaries. Although, of course, scholars must—and do—consider carefully the entire context and corpus of an artist, his style, medium, iconography, and so on, the goal of attribution is instead to establish the *truth*, as far as it can be deduced from all the evidence available. A firm attribution need not affect our understanding of an artist whatsoever. Possible reinterpretation of an artist's oeuvre must come *after* attribution.

The methodological danger of an eagerness in (re)interpretation biasing authentication helps explain the success of one of the twentieth century's greatest forgers. Han van Meegeren (1889–1947) produced forgeries of Dutch masters Frans Hals (ca. 1850–1666), Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684), and Gerard ter Borch (1617–1681), among others. His "masterpiece," if we can call it such, was *Supper at Emmaus* (1936), hailed by many scholars as Vermeer's finest work. Twenty-first-century viewers find it inconceivable that such a painting, which lacks Vermeer's mastery of light, color, composition, and subtle expressions, was once attributed to this master. But art scholars of the 1930s noted the early religious works of Vermeer (*Allegory of Faith*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and his later secular works (*A Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman*, Buckingham Palace, London; and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Mauritshuis, The Hague), and felt there must be transition works. There were none. The story of the *Supper at Emmaus* fit the bill—Christ's return to the temporal world after his resurrection. Moreover, artists depict one of two moments in that story—the quiet of anticipation just *before* the saints recognize Christ (Jacopo Pontormo [1494–1557]) or the ecstatic shock just *after* they recognize him (Caravaggio [1571–1610], Titian [ca. 1488–1576]). Scholars felt the cool, restrained Vermeer would certainly depict the earlier moment, as did, indeed, the van Meegeren *Emmaus*. In short, this astute forger created a work that fulfilled the expectations, the stories, crafted by some leading Vermeer scholars. As a result, these scholars were unjustifiably predisposed to accept the work as genuine.[6]

This review is not the place to weigh in on the attribution except to predict that, while the authors make a strong case, the debate concerning this beautiful portrait is not over. The drawback of this book is that it is not a sufficiently balanced scholarly text, weighing both pros against cons and answering reasonable objections. Such

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objections will continue to arise as more scholars study the work—after all, *La Bella Principessa* is only now, at the time of this writing, being publicly displayed (in Sweden). Nevertheless, any follower of art, authentication, and especially Leonardo who wants to understand the issues beyond the headlines in popular media, and to see the detailed evidence marshaled in support of the authentication, will profit from studying this well-written book. For those who may never have the opportunity to see the sheet itself, the superb high-resolution reproductions alone are nearly worth the price of this book.

DAVID G. STORK, Chief Scientist of Ricoh Innovations, has held academic appointments in eight disciplines, including computer science and art and art history at Stanford University. He is author or coauthor of over thirty scholarly publications on computer vision and technical image analysis applied to problems in the history and interpretation of art, and has lectured on the subject at over 200 venues in seventeen countries. He is coauthor/coeditor of seven books/proceedings volumes, including *Seeing the Light: Optics in Nature, Photography, Color, Vision and Holography* (with David Falk and Dieter Brill; New York: Wiley, 1985), *Pattern Classification* (with Richard O. Duda and Peter E. Hart; 2nd ed., New York: Wiley, 2000), and three proceedings volumes in this discipline, including *Computer Vision and Image Analysis of Art II* (SPIE 2011, forthcoming).

1 Thomas Hoving, *False Impressions: The Hunt for Big-time Art Fakes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996), 21.
2 Ernst van de Wetering, "Thirty Years of the Rembrandt Research Project: The Tension between Science and Connoisseurship in Authenticating Art," *IFAR Journal*, 4, no. 2 (2001):14.
3 Jean-Pierre Mohen, Michel Menu, and Bruno Mottin, *Mona Lisa: Inside the Painting* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006).
4 Quoted in Richard Dorment, "La Bella Principessa: A £100m Leonardo, or a Copy?" *Telegraph.co.uk*, 12 April 2010, at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/7582591/La-Bella-Principessa-a-100m-Leonardo-or-a-copy.html (accessed 4 August 2010).
5 At http://education.vetmed.vt.edu/curriculum/vm8054/labs/Lab14/IMAGES/FINGERPRINT.jpg (accessed 4 August 2010).
6 Jonathan Lopez, *The Man Who Made Vermeers: Unvarnishing the Legend of Master Forger Han van Meegeren* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009).