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Could Leonardo's Bella Principessa be Greenhalgh's Bolton Sally?

Convicted UK forger claims to have faked the Renaissance drawing

by MARTIN BAILEY | 30 November 2015



The forger Shaun Greenhalgh claims he produced La Bella Principessa, later to be attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. The notorious forger Shaun Greenhalgh claims to have faked the Leonardo drawing of La Bella Principessa, said to be worth £150m. This astonishing claim, reported by the art critic Waldemar Januszczak in *The Sunday Times* (29 November), comes from *A Forger's Tale*, a memoir written by Greenhalgh in prison. The book is published by Januszczak's company, ZCZ Editions.

In 2007 Greenhalgh, from Bolton (Greater Manchester), was sentenced to four years and eight months in prison over a series of fakes, including a sculpture of an Amarna princess and assorted antiquities, sculptures, paintings and drawings. His elderly parents, George and Olive, had been involved and were given suspended sentences.

Greenhalgh now claims to have produced *La Bella Principessa*. He says in *A Forger's Tale*: "I drew this picture in 1978 when I worked at the Co-op. The 'sitter' was based on a girl called Sally who worked on the checkouts... She was a bossy little bugger and very self-important." To obtain an old piece of vellum, Greenhalgh reused a 1587 land deed. He mounted the drawing on a board taken from a Victorian school desk.

The portrait, drawn with ink and coloured chalks on vellum, surfaced in 1998 at Christie's, where it was catalogued as a German 19th-century picture. It had been consigned by Florentine-based Jeanne Marchig, who said that her husband Giannino owned it when they had married in 1955. If this provenance is correct, then Greenhalgh could not be its artist. The drawing sold for \$22,000, going to a Canadian collector, Peter Silverman.

In 2008, Martin Kemp, a Renaissance specialist at the University of Oxford, identified the portrait as a Leonardo. Dating the picture to around 1495-96, he believes that it depicts Bianca, the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza. The jacket of a book on *La Bella Principessa* by Kemp and co-author Pascal Cotte suggests that it might be worth £150m. Most other specialists have not accepted the portrait as a Leonardo, believing it to be a misattribution.

Kemp says that tests on the drawing showed that it was made with pre-17th century chalk. He argues that it is "hugely unlikely" that Greenhalgh would have been able to acquire sufficient old pigment to have drawn the portrait. Describing Greenhalgh's claim as hilarious, he told *The Art Newspaper* that "the silly season for Leonardo never stops".

La Bella Principessa still retains her mystery. Perhaps the drawing should now be added to Greenhalgh's extensive oeuvre, but art history is replete with fakers who have falsely claimed credit for works they did not create. In 1978 Greenhalgh was just 17, so he would have been highly precocious to have produced such a forgery. And in this case, there could be clues: Greenhalgh calls his model Sally, but curiously goes on to say that this was not her real name, which was Alison. He entitles his book a "tale". When it comes to fakers, things are often not quite as they appear.