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Leonardo's muse keeps her secrets as she leaves the Louvre

Thinning the painting's varnish has revealed the fine features of La Belle Ferronnière, but researchers remain unable to confirm her identity

by VINCENT NOCE | 1 May 2015



Long journey: La Belle Ferronnière (around 1490s) is on loan to Palazzo Reale, Milan, then travels to Louvre Abu Dhabi.
Photo: © CRMF/T. Clot

It is fitting that the first major outing for Leonardo's newly restored *La Belle Ferronnière* is to the city where the work was made five centuries ago. The painting, which is in the collection of the Louvre, Paris, has returned to Milan for Leonardo, 1452-1519, at Palazzo Reale (until 19 July). The Italian retrospective has been timed to coincide with the Milan Expo (1 May-31 October). The work is also due to travel to the United Arab Emirates in 2016 for the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

The sitter's fine features and most of her delicate complexion have been recovered, thanks to restorers at the Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France. They thinned the painting's varnish, which measured between 40 and 60 microns and was almost as thick as the paint layers.

But *La Belle Ferronnière*, which has puzzled art historians to the point that the attribution was at times disputed, has kept some of its secrets: no one knows when the work entered the royal collection and the model's identity remains uncertain. The confusion is not helped by its title. The "belle" depicted was once believed to be Madame Le Ferron, a mistress of King Francis I; another theory identified her as Anne Boleyn.

Vincent Delieuvin, the curator responsible for the Louvre's 16th-century Italian paintings, says that the work might depict Cecilia Gallerani, the mistress of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, or the duke's spouse, Beatrice d'Este, "although nothing can confirm either of these hypotheses".

Research does confirm that the work was made in Milan in the 1490s. The 8mm-thick panel is made of walnut, which Leonardo used during his stay in the city. But experts have ruled out the possibility that the panel was cut from the same board used for Leonardo's *Lady with an Ermine* (around 1489-90), which is now in the collection of the Czartoryski Museum in Krakow and is known to be an image of Cecilia Gallerani. "Through X-radiograph analysis, we were able to demonstrate that these two panels definitely do not belong to the same board," says the researcher Elisabeth Ravaud. Unusually, the panel was covered with a lead-white ground layer and not with gesso. A similar base was found on another portrait of Gallerani and on the *Mona Lisa*. A pinkish hue on the sitter's jaw and neck is still visible, and her face remains covered by yellow varnish, although this has been greatly reduced.

"We did three tests to lighten the varnish, and the scientific committee chose the intermediate one," says the restorer Agnès Malpel. In France, restoration projects are closely followed by a handful of purists, and French conservators are particularly respectful of a work's history, including mistakes. It will be useful to consider this approach when the time comes to clean the *Mona Lisa*.