New scientific research dispels myths surrounding portrait by Sandro Botticelli

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New scientific research undertaken by V&A experts has uncovered tantalising details beneath the paint layers of Sandro Botticelli’s Portrait of a Lady known as Smeralda Bandinelli (c.1470-5), which has been in the Museum’s collection for over a century. The findings dispel a longstanding myth that its former owner, the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, added the sitter’s vibrant red hair and sheds new light on Botticelli’s artistic technique. This painting provides the starting point for the V&A’s major spring exhibition, Botticelli Reimagined, which will show how the Pre-Raphaelites rediscovered the then long-forgotten Florentine master and how artists and designers have responded to his work ever since.

Rossetti purchased the Portrait of a Lady known as Smeralda Bandinelli from Christie’s in 1867 for a modest £20, paying an additional £4 to have it cleaned. A letter to his secretary Charles Augustus Howell dated 1 April 1867 – three days after Rossetti acquired the painting – explains: “I have been restoring the headdress, but don’t mean to tell.” The figure’s reddish-blond hair was previously considered the most likely area of Rossetti’s ‘restoration’. By removing a layer of thick, discoloured varnish, probably added in the mid-19th century, conservators have revealed the original paint layers are less altered than previously thought. Medium analysis confirms that tempera was used throughout and show that the red hair was painted by Botticelli. The analysis also reveals that retouching across the face and white cap is the most probable site of Rossetti’s work.

Mark Evans, Co-Curator of the exhibition at the V&A, said: “In recent decades, technology has deepened our understanding of historic paintings immeasurably. Removing the discoloured varnish has reinvigorated Botticelli’s luminous colours and given the Portrait of a Lady known as Smeralda Bandinelli, and her much-debated red hair, a new lease of life. We are especially delighted to be able to show together for the first time in the exhibition the Botticelli paintings owned by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and John Ruskin.”

Using infrared reflectography – a technique used to look through paint layers and reveal details not visible to the naked eye – V&A conservators have also discovered how Botticelli designed and painted the portrait. He used incised lines to mark architectural elements, such as the pillars and...
window sill and to correctly render the perspective. Botticelli used liquid sketching to plan the costume, followed by a broad wash of paint containing carbon to shade the volumes of the form. The paint layers also show changes Botticelli made to the height of Smeralda’s left forearm and the addition of the cloth in her hand.

The painting was bequeathed to the V&A in 1901 by Constantine Alexander Ionides – a prolific art collector and patron of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to whom the painter had sold it in 1880. The Italian inscription on the window sill identifies the sitter as Smeralda Bandinelli, wife of Viviano Bandinelli and grandmother of the 16th-century sculptor Baccio Bandinelli, who would have been in her early 30s at the time. The inscription was probably added by her descendant Baccio Bandinelli in the 17th century.

_Botticelli Reimagined_ is jointly organised by the V&A and the Gemäldegalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

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Notes to Editors

- Tickets will go on sale in September 2015. Admission £15 (concessions available). V&A Members go free. Advance booking is advised – this can be done in person at the V&A; online at www.vam.ac.uk/botticelli; or by calling 0800 912 6961 (booking fee applies)
- The V&A exhibition is co-curated by Mark Evans, Senior Paintings Curator at the V&A, and Ana Debenedetti, Curator of Paintings at the V&A
- The exhibition is organised by the V&A and the Gemäldegalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. A version of the exhibition will open first in Berlin from 24 September 2015 – 24 January 2016; before arriving at the V&A on 5 March 2016
- To accompany the exhibition, the V&A will publish _Botticelli Reimagined_ edited by Mark Evans & Stefan Weppelmann (£40, hardback)
- The cleaning of Sandro Botticelli’s _Portrait of a Lady known as Smeralda Bandinelli_ (c.1470-5) was made possible with the support of the Friends of the V&A

Corporate support for the V&A is more vital than ever. Please help us by acknowledging the exhibition sponsor Societe Generale.

For further PRESS information about the exhibition, please contact Laura Mitchell or Nina Sandhaus in the V&A press office on 020 7942 2502 or email l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk / n.sandhaus@vam.ac.uk (not for publication).

A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from http://pressimages.vam.ac.uk