

# National Gallery of Art

## NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
June 9, 2000

PRESS CONTACT: Deborah Ziska  
Telephone: (202) 842-6353  
E-Mail: ds-ziska@nga.gov  
Fax: (202) 789-3044

### NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART PRESENTS

### NEW DOCUMENTARY ABOUT LEONARDO DA VINCI'S MASTERPIECE

### "GINEVRA DE' BENCI"

### NARRATED IN ITALIAN BY ISABELLA ROSSELLINI

### TO AIR ON RAISAT THIS SUMMER

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., will present *Ginevra's Story*, a new, hour-long documentary, narrated in Italian by actress Isabella Rossellini, on RAISAT this summer. The Gallery is the home of Leonardo da Vinci's Ginevra de' Benci, the only painting by the artist in the Western Hemisphere.

*Ginevra's Story* recounts how Leonardo came to paint the haunting portrait of the young Florentine girl and the special arrangements made to acquire and transport the painting in 1967. It also reveals recent discoveries made by Gallery curatorial and conservation staff with the aid of computer technology.

*Ginevra's Story* takes viewers beneath the surface of what may be the Gallery's most treasured and fascinating painting," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "It is the first of six programs about some of the Gallery's greatest pictures, and we look forward to sharing them with audiences worldwide."

*Ginevra's Story* is made possible by generous grants from ExxonMobil Corporation and The Circle of the National Gallery of Art.

-more-



### **The Painting and the Artist**

There are fewer than twenty paintings known to have been done by Leonardo. Ginevra de' Benci, painted circa 1474, is considered the first psychological portrait in art history and is the first of only three portraits Leonardo painted of women; the others are Mona Lisa in Paris and Woman with an Ermine in Krakow. The film shows the historic occasions on which Mona Lisa and Woman with an Ermine were at the National Gallery in Washington. Among the experts featured in the film, Martin Kemp, professor of the history of art at the University of Oxford, discusses Leonardo's contributions and development as an artist. Leonardo was not only a painter, but a draftsman, sculptor, architect, town planner, inventor, scientist, writer, and musician. According to Kemp, Leonardo "set standards for how you can look at things and how visual materials can express fundamental truths about things."

### **The Acquisition**

For more than 250 years the painting was owned by the princely family of Liechtenstein. The film shows the castle of Vaduz in the tiny principality of Liechtenstein where the painting long resided and was safely hidden in a wine cellar during World War II. The National Gallery of Art and its director John Walker had been keenly interested in Ginevra de' Benci for two decades when, in 1967, Prince Franz Josef of Liechtenstein let it be known that the painting was for sale. The competition to acquire the painting was fierce. When the Gallery paid \$5 million for the masterpiece, it was the largest sum ever paid for a work of art. In the film Italian conservator Mario Modestini relates from personal experience how the Gallery determined that the painting was authentic. Modestini and period newsreels describe the secret arrangements that were made for its transatlantic journey to Washington, D.C.

### **Conservation and Discoveries**

X-radiography and infrared reflectography, done in connection with restoration work on the painting at the Gallery in 1991, revealed an underdrawing made from a preparatory sketch, as well as evidence of Leonardo's fingerprints in the surface of the paint. Leonardo may have been the first artist to use the technique of softening the surface or edges of forms in a painting with his fingers while the paint is still tacky. On the reverse side of Ginevra de' Benci is depicted a wreath of laurel and palm encircling a sprig of juniper with a scroll bearing the Latin motto "Beauty adorns virtue." Infrared reflectography revealed another motto underneath, that of Bernardo Bembo, Ginevra's platonic lover, which says "Virtue and honor."



In the film National Gallery of Art conservator David Bull describes how the removal of discolored varnish from Ginevra de' Benci revealed the painting's clarity, extraordinary range of color and texture, and subtle modulations in the flesh as well as the thinness of the paint application.

With the use of a computer and a drawing of hands by Leonardo from Windsor Castle in Great Britain, David Alan Brown, curator of Renaissance painting, National Gallery of Art, and author of the recently published book, Leonardo da Vinci: Origins of a Genius, (Leonardo da Vinci: Le origini di un genio, Rizzoli, 1999) was able to reconstruct the painting digitally, showing that it had been cut down by one-third some 200 years ago following damage by fire or water. Artists and scholars have been trying to visualize the complete painting for a century, but this is the first time it has been done with a computer. Alexi Bryant, digital imaging specialist, National Gallery of Art, assisted Brown in revealing how the original images probably appeared on both sides of the panel. Computers also aid in revealing how the Mona Lisa and Woman with an Ermine may have originally appeared.

### **Film Credits**

The film credits for *Ginevra's Story* are as follows: director, Christopher Swann; producer, Richard Somerset-Ward; executive producer, Joseph J. Krakora; co-executive producer, Ellen Bryant; coordinating producer, Frances Peters; editors, Michael Crozier and Jim Wright; music composer and creator, Michael Kidd; and location manager, Italy, Maria Laura Frullini. Voiceovers are done by Italian actor Duccio Faggella. The English version of the program is narrated by American actress Meryl Streep.

### **The Series**

*Ginevra's Story* is the first program in a special series that the National Gallery of Art will produce based on intriguing stories about important works in the nation's collection. The programs will provide little-known information about some of the greatest pictures ever painted by masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, Rembrandt, Raphael, Degas, Van Eyck, and Vermeer.

-end-