

# National Gallery of Art

## NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
November 1, 2000

CONTACT: Deborah Ziska  
Telephone: (202) 842-6353  
E-mail: ds-ziska@nga.gov

**NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART PRESENTS**  
**GINEVRA'S STORY, A NEW DOCUMENTARY**  
**THAT UNCOVERS THE MYSTERIES OF LEONARDO DA VINCI'S**  
**FIRST KNOWN PORTRAIT,**  
**Narrated by Meryl Streep,**  
**To Air on Public Television Stations Nationwide**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., will present *Ginevra's Story*, a new, hour-long documentary narrated by actress Meryl Streep, on public television stations nationwide beginning in November 2000. The Gallery is the home of Leonardo da Vinci's haunting and hypnotic masterpiece, Ginevra de' Benci, the only painting by the master in the Western Hemisphere and the first of only three known portraits he painted of women; the others are Mona Lisa in Paris and Woman with an Ermine in Krakow.

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

"Ginevra de' Benci is one of our most asked-about paintings and is equally popular with visitors and art scholars from all over the world," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "*Ginevra's Story* is the first in a series of programs about some of the Gallery's greatest works of art, and we look forward to sharing them with an ever larger audience."

Utilizing the potential of x-ray analysis and infrared reflectography, as well as the power of computer technology, *Ginevra's Story* takes viewers beneath the surface of what may be the Gallery's most treasured painting in order to reveal fascinating stories about both Ginevra and Leonardo. The film goes on location in the painting conservation laboratory of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the wine cellar of the Castle Vaduz in Lichtenstein, and the streets of Florence, Italy, a renowned center of Renaissance art.

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Viewers will learn the answers to such questions as "Who was Ginevra and how did Leonardo come to paint her?", "Why was the panel painted on both sides?", "Why was it sealed in a wine cellar?", and "What mysterious chain of events brought it to Washington, D.C.?"

### **The Artist**

There are fewer than twenty paintings known to have been executed by master painter Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). However, he is often credited with changing the course of Western art. Extraordinarily gifted, he was the quintessential "Renaissance man," renowned also as a draftsman, sculptor, architect, town planner, inventor, scientist, writer, and musician. Ginevra de' Benci, painted circa 1474, is considered the first psychological portrait in art history. Among the experts featured in the film, Martin Kemp, professor of the history of art at Oxford University, discusses Leonardo's contributions and development as an artist. According to Kemp, Leonardo "set standards for how you can look at things and how visual materials can express fundamental truths about things."

### **The Picture**

The sensitive and finely modeled image of the 16-year-old Ginevra de' Benci, the daughter of a wealthy Florentine banker, probably celebrates her arranged betrothal to Luigi Niccolini, who was twice as old as his bride. Some art historians have speculated that her pale and sullen visage was due to the sudden departure of the married Venetian ambassador Bernardo Bembo, with whom she had a platonic affair, an accepted convention at the time. The heraldic motif painted on the reverse side of the portrait, with the motto "Beauty Adorns Virtue," praises Ginevra, and juniper plants symbolize chastity. The juniper bush, *ginepro* in Italian, is also a pun on her name.

### **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, safely hidden in a wine cellar during World War II. The National Gallery of Art and its second 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 archival newsreels reveal the secretive and meticulous arrangements that were

made for the painting's transatlantic journey to the United States. At the time of its acquisition, the painting was compared to Mona Lisa, which, as a Kennedy-era loan, had enthralled more than a half million visitors to the National Gallery of Art for 27 days in 1963.

### **Conservation and Discoveries**

X-radiography and infrared reflectography, done in conjunction with restoration done 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 with his fingers while the painting was still tacky.

The reverse side of Ginevra de' Benci depicts a wreath of laurel and palm encircling a sprig of juniper with a scroll bearing the Latin motto "Beauty Adorns Virtue." Infrared reflectography revealed beneath the surface another motto—"Virtue and honor"—that of Bernardo Bembo.

In the film, National Gallery of Art painting 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 Leonardo da Vinci: Origins of a Genius (Yale, 1998), 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. The film also shows how the computers helped 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. An Italian version

ginevra's story . . . page 4

of *Ginevra's Story*, narrated by actress Isabella Rossellini, is being aired in Italy on RAISAT; a Japanese version is in production.

*Ginevra's Story* is distributed by American Public Television. American Public Television (APT) is a major source of programming for the nation's public television stations. Known for identifying innovative programs and developing creative distribution techniques, APT provides stations with program choices that enable them to strengthen and customize their schedules. It also serves as an essential distribution and funding option for producers. More information about APT's programs and services is available on the Web at [www.aptv.org](http://www.aptv.org).

### **The Videotape**

The 57-minute videotape in VHS format is available for \$29.95 through the National Gallery of Art Shops and through the Gallery Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). To order by telephone, call 1-800-697-9350.

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### **"Ginevra's Story"**

#### **A National Gallery of Art Production**

#### **Fact Sheet**

**Length:** 57 minutes  
**Release Date:** Nov. 5, 2000 to public broadcasting stations  
**Airdate:** Check local listings  
**Presenting Station:** WLIW-TV, New York, New York

**Distributed by:** American Public Television (APT)  
Contact: Dawn Anderson  
(617) 338-4455 x149

**Narrator:** Meryl Streep  
**Executive Producer:** Joseph J. Krakora  
**Co-executive Producer:** Ellen Bryant  
**Director:** Christopher Swann  
**Producer:** Richard Somerset-Ward  
**Coordinating Producer:** Frances Peters  
**Editors:** Michael Crozier, Jim Wright  
**Music Composer and Creator:** Michael Kidd  
**Location Manager, Italy:** Maria Laura Frullini

**Languages:** English and Italian (narrated by Isabella Rossellini); Japanese version in production

#### **For more information, video dubs, and slides:**

Sarah Holley  
National Gallery of Art  
(202) 842-6359  
e-mail: [s-holley@nga.gov](mailto:s-holley@nga.gov)

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### **Biography** **Meryl Streep** **Narrator, *Ginevra's Story***

Meryl Streep's great empathy for her characters and the diversity of women she has chosen to portray have distinguished her work in film, television, and theater for more than two decades. She has won the Academy Award twice, as Best Actress for *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and Best Supporting Actress for *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). In 1999 she was nominated by the Academy for the eleventh time, as Best Actress for her portrayal of a dying mother in *One True Thing*. In 2000 the Academy recognized her again and nominated her for Best Actress for her work in *Music of the Heart*, in which she starred as an inspirational violin instructor in a tough East Harlem school.

A graduate of Vassar College and Yale Drama School, she began her career onstage and appeared in seven plays during her first season in New York. She won the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Theater World Award, an Obie, and a Tony nomination.

Early in her career, Streep won an Emmy for her work in television in the miniseries *Holocaust*, and more recently, an Emmy nomination for *First, Do No Harm*, which she co-produced and in which she starred.

Streep made her film debut in Fred Zinneman's *Julia*, with Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave, then starred opposite Robert DeNiro in *The Deer Hunter*. After supporting roles in Woody Allen's *Manhattan* and *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, she won her first Oscar for her work with Dustin Hoffman in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. A string of memorable films followed, including *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; *Sophie's Choice* (directed by Alan Pakula); Mike Nichols's *Silkwood*; *Falling in Love*; *Plenty*; Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa*, with Robert Redford and *Heartburn* (again for Nichols) and *Ironweed*, both opposite Jack Nicholson.

She next starred as Lindy Chamberlain, the Australian mother accused of murder in *A Cry in the Dark*, directed by Fred Schepisi, for which she won Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival. She turned to comedy in Susan Seidelman's *She-Devil*, then played Carrie Fisher's alter ego in *Postcards from the Edge*, for which she won the American Comedy Award for Best Actress. After co-starring with Albert Brooks in his take on the afterlife in *Defending Your Life*, she traveled to Europe to co-star with Vanessa Redgrave, Glenn Close, and Winona Ryder in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. She returned to play opposite Goldie Hawn and Bruce Willis in Robert Zemeckis's *Death Becomes Her*, a rumination on plastic surgery and life in Beverly Hills.

More recently, Streep won acclaim for her work in *The Bridges of Madison County*, *The River Wild*, *Marvin's Room*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *One True Thing*, and *Music of the Heart*. In September 1999 she received the Gotham Lifetime Achievement Award from the Independent Film Project in New York. She has been married to sculptor Don Gummer for twenty-two years. They have four children.

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