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December 16, 2005

OF HUMAN INTEREST
Scientists discover Mona Lisa was happy

By **Toby Sterling**
Associated Press

AMSTERDAM, Netherlands -- The mysterious half-smile that has intrigued viewers of the "Mona Lisa" for centuries isn't really that difficult to interpret, Dutch researchers said Thursday.



Ⓜ zoom

That smile: Researchers say emotion recognition software helped them "prove" Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" was mostly a happy camper -- 83%, to be exact. - Associated Press

She was smiling because she was happy -- 83 percent happy, to be exact, according to University of Amsterdam researchers.

In what they viewed as a fun demonstration of technology rather than a serious experiment, the researchers scanned a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece and subjected it to cutting-edge emotion recognition software, developed in collaboration with the University of Illinois.

The result showed the painting's famous subject was 83 percent happy, 9 percent disgusted, 6 percent fearful and 2 percent angry. She was less than 1 percent neutral, and not at all surprised.

Leonardo began work on the painting in 1503, and it now hangs in the Louvre in Paris.

The work, also known as "La Gioconda," is believed to have portrayed the wife of Francesco del Giocondo. The title is a play on her husband's name; it also means "the jolly lady" in Italian.

Harro Stokman, a professor at the University of Amsterdam involved in the experiment, said the researchers knew the results would be unscientific -- the software isn't designed to register subtle emotions. So it couldn't detect the hint of sexual suggestion or disdain many have read into Mona Lisa's eyes.

Biometrics experts not involved with the experiment said the results were interesting, even if they aren't the last word on the "Mona Lisa."

"Facial recognition technology is advancing rapidly, but emotional recognition is really still in its infancy," said Larry Hornak, director of the Center for Identification Technology Research at West Virginia University.

Stokman said he knew the University of Amsterdam effort won't prove or disprove controversial theories about the painting. One is that it was actually a self-portrait of Leonardo as a woman.

"But who knows? In 30, 40, 50 years, maybe they'll be able to tell what was on her mind."

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