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Mona Lisa descendant just grins and bears it

Family knew they were related to artist's model and now others are jealous

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When your family's noble history goes back 1,000 years, suddenly discovering that you're related to the woman who posed for the Mona Lisa is apparently no big deal.

"It's certainly entertaining, but it's not something we make a big fuss about," said Italian princess Natalia Guicciardini Strozzi. "It just means one more famous person has been added to our family history."

In a telephone interview from Tuscany, Strozzi said news from German academics that her ancestor posed for Leonardo da Vinci's famous portrait hasn't come as a complete surprise.

"My family always knew we were descendants of Lisa Gherardini," she said, referring to the 16th century wife of the wealthy Florentine merchant, Francesco del Giocondo, the woman long suspected as da Vinci's model for the Mona Lisa.

Not that there's much of a resemblance. Strozzi says her wide and often exuberant smile has never been mistaken for the Mona Lisa's enigmatic expression.

"I don't have her smile at all. But around the eyes, people have said there's a resemblance," said Strozzi, 30, adding her younger sister, Irina, doesn't have the famous smile, either.

"But our father, when he does that smile, it's precisely the same. You can see our father in the Mona Lisa's smile," said Strozzi, referring to Prince Girolamo Guicciardini Strozzi, who owns a 1,014-year-old winery in Tuscany.

Strozzi links to Gherardini were reportedly confirmed last year by Italian genealogist Domenico Savini. He found that the del Giocondo family name expired with its male descendants in the 17th century. But female descendants lived on to form part of the Strozzi family, and likely several other families.

"We are the 15th generation of Lisa Gherardini's descendants; of that, there is

no doubt," said Strozzi, a theatre and TV actor who also helps manage her family's winery.

But there remained doubts about whether Gherardini was indeed da Vinci's model. This week, German academics at the Heidelberg University library announced the discovery of notes scribbled in the margins of a book by its owner in October 1503.

The notes, made by a Florentine city official, compare Leonardo to the ancient Greek artist Apelles and say he was working on three paintings at the time, one of them a portrait of Gherardini.

Strozzi welcomed the news, but was more interested in explaining her family's historic importance, without the Mona Lisa. This after all, is a family that includes Winston Churchill as an ancestor and twice hosted former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who stayed at their Tuscan villa while on holiday.

Strozzi notes that she grew up with Gregory Peck as a family friend, lived in St. Petersburg as a child, and took ballet lessons from Rudolf Nureyev before becoming a ballerina. She recently published a book about her life.

Strozzi traces her roots to two noble Florentine families, the Giucciardini and the Strozzi clans. Francesco Giucciardini was a well-known historian and politician in medieval Florence and philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli was his secretary.

The Strozzi, who counted Michelangelo as a friend and sometime art teacher, were enemies of the powerful Medici clan and were pushed into exile. The Medici bloodline eventually expired but the Strozzi continued to flourish in banking.

A running joke in the Strozzi family today is the Medici family portraits that hang in the Strozzi dining room.

"People say, 'Why do you have portraits of your enemies in your house?'

'We say, first of all, because we respect the dead. But most of all it's a kind of vengeance because they're all dead and they're forced to watch over the Strozzi, alive and well, as we eat," the princess said.

When news broke that the Strozzi were related to da Vinci's model, it was too much for some Florentine families. Some accused the Strozzi of chasing cheap publicity.

"There was envy more than anything else," she said, adding that other established families suddenly started claiming ancestral links to all sorts of famous people.