



ART & DESIGN

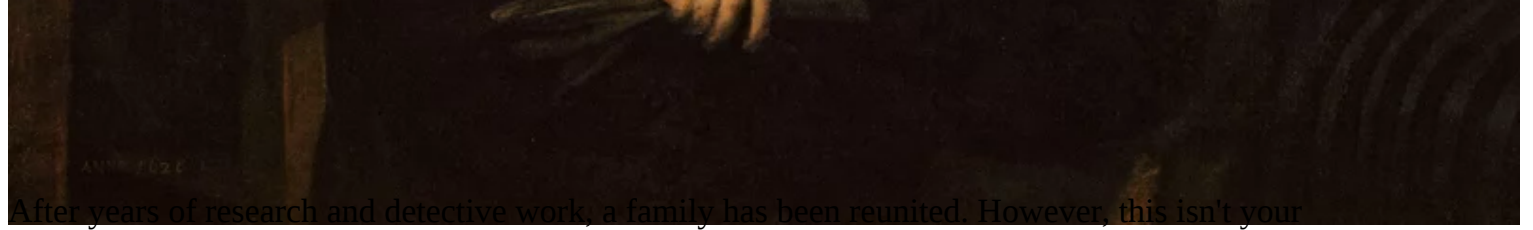
# How these art sleuths reunited a family after centuries apart

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After years of research and detective work, a family has been reunited. However, this isn't your typical tale.

## The backstory

In 1626, a father and son sat for a portrait. The father rests in an armchair sporting a fancy mustache and a goatee along with a large millstone collar around his neck – a ruffled accessory piece many wore in the early 17th century. His son poses beside him with rosy cheeks, wearing the children's fashion of the day.

This particular painting, titled "Double Portrait of a Father and Son," is a vision of wealth. Not only because of the expensive looking garments the father and son are wearing, but because of *who* painted their portrait – Cornelis De Vos.

"He was very sought after, so if you could get him to portrait your family, then you were a wealthy and influential family," said Angela Jager, who curates old master paintings at the RKD-Netherlands Institute for Art History.

There's a loving and tender dynamic coming through in the portrait.

"The father and the son that are so affectionately holding hands, it looks like a unity in itself. You could easily imagine that this was a finished painting if you didn't have that extra-careful eye," Jager said.

## The researcher

Jørgen Wadum is a consultant at the Nivaagaard Collection in Denmark and an independent researcher. Part of his work as an art conservator is to unframe paintings and meticulously look at them from front to back and around the edges.

Wadum and Jager have been working together to study Dutch and Flemish old master paintings at the Nivaagaard Collection. When coming across the painting of the father and son by De Vos, both Jager and Wadum noticed something in the lower right-hand corner of the painting.

"There were a couple of knees covered by a black striped dress," Wadum said. "We could immediately see that there is a story here that we don't know much about yet."

It was evident from this that there was a missing person sitting next to the father and son. This set the pair into action to figure out who it could be.

## The clues

Their first clue would come from photographs that showed the artwork in a cleaned and restored condition. The photograph further revealed that there was a hand in the bottom corner that appeared to be that of a lady.





"It was really a very fashionable lady sitting here with slender fingers, a couple of rings on her fingers," Wadum said. "She was holding beautifully embroidered gloves in her hand with a red lining."

This led Wadum to begin searching De Vos' repertoire for portraits of seated women – missing a right hand, of course. It was a Google search that would lead Wadum and Jager to finally find their missing woman.

They stumbled across a portrait of a lady sitting against a background with a garden to one side and some trees that "matches perfectly with the painting that we have here, even the background – the sky and veil of whitish clouds matched so perfectly," Wadum said.

The mystery woman is discovered.

*Nivaagaards Malerisamling*

Not only had they found their missing woman, her portrait was actually on sale. "So this opened up the opportunity for the museum to actually purchase her and reunite the family. So that was a really great day," Jager said.

## **The final mystery**

The original painting was done in 1626. Jager speculates that the portrait was probably cut down in the first half of the 19th century.

As for why the painting would have been halved, Jager said the original could have been damaged by water or fire.

"This could also explain why we only have the face of the woman and not also her torso," Wadum notes.

The paintings now hang side by side at the Nivaagaard Collection, the family reunited after nearly two centuries apart.

The family is together again.

*Jørgen Wadum/Nivaagaards Malerisamling*

The next phase in Wadum and Jager's research is finding out *who* the family in the painting is. And they are also already working on another reunification for next year.

"So that's a cliffhanger here and during spring next year, we will bring [paintings] together again [that] haven't been together since 1801," Wadum said.

And Wadum poses another question to end on: how many paintings do we come across in museums that look whole but are actually incomplete?

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