



# Mystery of Botticelli's Muse: Has 550-Year-Old Illness Been Solved?

## Description

Simonetta Vespucci, a prominent figure of the Italian Renaissance, is believed to have inspired several paintings by Sandro Botticelli, including his famous depiction of Venus. She died in 1476 at the young age of 23. For many years, historians attributed her death to tuberculosis, a common and often deadly disease, which seemed to fit the narrative of a young woman's rapid decline.

In 2019, researchers, including myself, proposed an alternative explanation. We carefully studied Botticelli's portraits alongside written accounts from the time to observe any changes in her appearance that might suggest an illness. Our findings indicated subtle alterations in her facial features across various paintings. These changes resemble those seen in patients with a pituitary adenoma, a tumour affecting the small gland at the base of the brain that influences hormone production.

We hypothesised that Simonetta may have had a tumour producing excess growth hormone and prolactin, hormones that can alter facial appearance and cause unusual symptoms, such as lactation. This suggestion was made more robust in our latest paper published in *Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism*, where we link her sudden and serious death to pituitary tumour apoplexy, a medical emergency occurring when the tumour either bleeds or swells rapidly.

We presented three main pieces of evidence: the gradual physical changes in her portraits, contemporary descriptions of symptoms that match apoplexy, and documented incidents in her final months that could have triggered a medical crisis. While definitive proof is elusive—there are no medical records from that era—our findings encourage a fresh examination of historical cases through the lens of modern medicine, potentially enriching both fields.

## Comprehension Questions

### Multiple Choice

1. What year is Simonetta Vespucci believed to have died?

- Option: 1476
- Option: 1450
- Option: 1480
- Option: 1465

2. What disease was initially believed to be the cause of Simonetta's death?



- Option: Pneumonia
- Option: Tuberculosis
- Option: Cancer
- Option: Malaria

3. Which artist is known for the portrayal of Simonetta Vespucci?

- Option: Leonardo da Vinci
- Option: Raphael
- Option: Sandro Botticelli
- Option: Michelangelo

4. What was the proposed cause of Simonetta's health issues in the new research?

- Option: Pituitary adenoma
- Option: Lupus
- Option: Arthritis
- Option: Anemia

5. In which journal was the latest paper about Simonetta Vespucci published?

- Option: The Lancet
- Option: Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism
- Option: Nature
- Option: The New England Journal of Medicine

6. What hormone production is suggested to have been affected by Simonetta's potential tumor?

- Option: Insulin
- Option: Cortisol
- Option: Growth hormone and prolactin
- Option: Estrogen

### **True-False**

7. Simonetta Vespucci died at the age of 23.

8. The study concluded there was definitive proof of Simonetta's illness.

9. Contemporary descriptions suggested symptoms matching pituitary tumor apoplexy.

10. Sandro Botticelli had no connection to Simonetta Vespucci.



11. The proposed cause of illness was suggested to be a skin disease.
12. The research encourages a fresh examination of historical cases through modern medicine.

### Gap-Fill

13. Simonetta Vespucci is a prominent figure of the Italian Renaissance and is believed to have inspired several paintings by Sandro Botticelli, including his famous depiction of \_\_\_\_\_.
14. Simonetta died in 1476 at the young age of 23, which initially led historians to attribute her death to \_\_\_\_\_.
15. Researchers proposed that Simonetta may have had a tumour producing excess growth hormone and \_\_\_\_\_.
16. The researchers' findings were published in the journal \_\_\_\_\_.
17. The condition hypothesised by researchers is known as pituitary tumour \_\_\_\_\_.
18. While definitive proof is elusive, the findings encourage a fresh examination of historical cases through the lens of modern \_\_\_\_\_.

### Answer

**Multiple Choice:** 1. 1476 2. Tuberculosis 3. Sandro Botticelli 4. Pituitary adenoma 5. Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism 6. Growth hormone and prolactin

**True-False:** 7. True 8. False 9. True 10. False 11. False 12. True

**Gap-Fill:** 13. Venus 14. tuberculosis 15. prolactin 16. Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism 17. apoplexy 18. medicine

### CATEGORY

1. Health - LEVEL5

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