Facial recognition software solves Gaskell silhouette mystery

November 11 2015, by Kath Paddison

On the 150th anniversary of the death of Elizabeth Gaskell (12 November 1865), a long-held mystery surrounding the true identity of a silhouette suspected to be of the Victorian novelist has been solved.

A team from The University of Manchester used state of the art facial measuring software and more traditional provenance research to authenticate the silhouette which is owned by the descendants of the Gaskell family.

Following their research, medical artist Ray Evans and Stella Halkyard, visual collections manager at The University of Manchester Library, now admit that whilst they can never confirm the silhouette's authenticity irrefutably, they say it is very likely to be of Gaskell.

Ms Halkyard said: "The silhouette has an excellent 'provenance' and a 'chain of unbroken custody' which means that it has been kept by Gaskell's descendants and we know where it has come from and where it has been throughout its history."

She added: "At The John Rylands Library we have a miniature portrait that is accepted as a likeness of Gaskell. It was made during her lifetime by her step uncle who was a very skilled portraitist and a comparison between the two images shows strong similarities."

Mr Evans analysed the two images using scientific facial comparison methods and found that the facial proportions and morphology of the face of the person represented were virtually identical.

He says his results were "consistent across the two images" and that

"putting all this evidence together makes it likely that the two images portray the same person and that person is very likely to be Elizabeth Gaskell."

Both images are being made available from 12 November via the world's largest online collection of Elizabeth Gaskell works. The collection was digitised earlier this year by the University's Library which used cutting edge technology to digitise selected works from their internationally renowned Gaskell collection.

Provided by University of Manchester

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