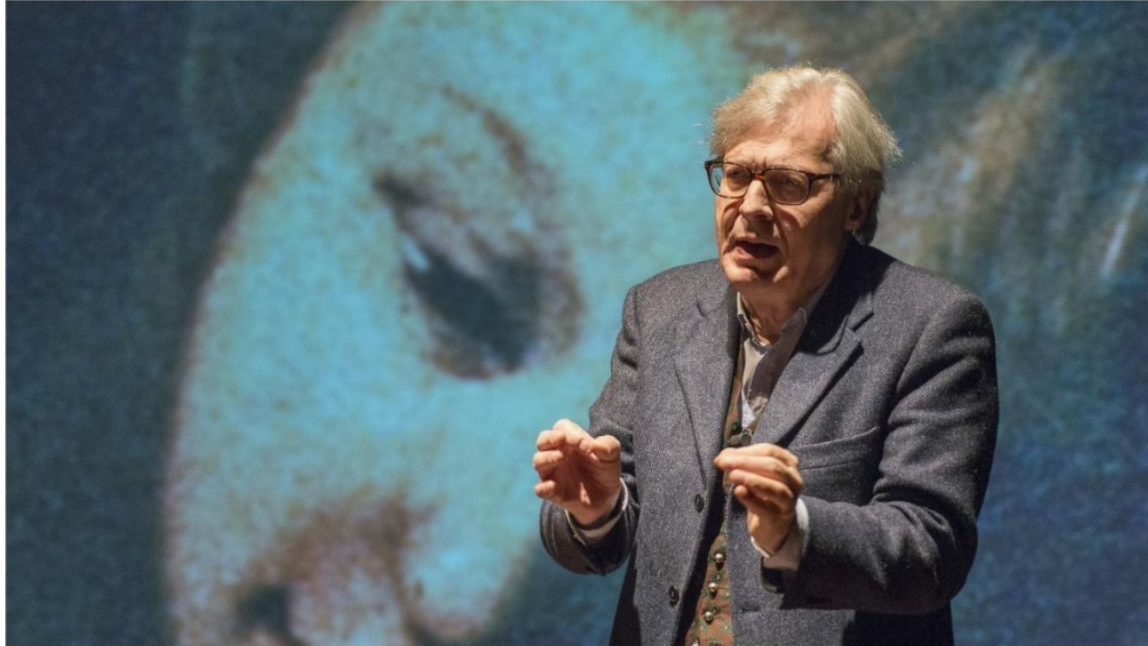


Historian uses escort website to lecture on sensual art

Tom Kington, Rome

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Vittorio Sgarbi's art history lectures are available on Italy's top escort website
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Renaissance art and small ads for prostitutes may seem an unlikely combination but not for Italy's most famous art historian, who has made his debut on the country's top escort website with a series of streamed lectures.

Speaking from his book-lined home, Vittorio Sgarbi is starring on the website Escort Advisor, where two and a half million Italians go every month to peruse adverts placed by thousands of prostitutes.

Before scrolling down to the ads, punters are invited to click on the three half-hour lectures in which he talks viewers through five centuries of nude, sensual art, from the Renaissance to Lucian Freud.

"I have never been a moralist, I am convinced prostitution should be legal and I am happy that escorts are watching these lectures," Mr Sgarbi, 68, said.

Mike Morra, chief executive of Escort Advisor, said he had hired Mr Sgarbi to try to clean up the sleazy reputation of the escort business.



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“This counters the wrong idea that escorts and their customers are rejects on the edge of society,” he said, adding that prostitutes were “women of culture and intelligence who have made female sensuality their work”.

“The reaction has been good — 10-15 million Italian men go to prostitutes every year, from steel workers to CEOs, and we are showing that you do that and still like art and books,” said Marco Alberti, the site’s marketing director.

“We are trying to do what *Playboy* did in the 1960s when Truman Capote wrote for it — showing that liking naked girls doesn’t mean you are not a normal guy.”

Roads outside Italian towns are frequently lined at night with sex workers, often Romanian or African migrants, who are forced to work for little money by violent pimps who prevent them from fleeing the profession. Pimping is illegal; selling sex is not. Mr Morra said sites like Escort Advisor were allowing prostitutes to get off the street and go into business for themselves.

Mr Sgarbi is also an MP and the mayor of a small town near Rome. He banned mask-wearing in his town, and after refusing to wear a mask in parliament he was carried out by ushers.