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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

# 'Salvator Mundi'

Sir, – Martin Kemp and Stephen Campbell (Letters, September 6) were right to take me to task over the quote from my book, *The Last Leonardo*, in Federico Varese's article (August 16). It is indeed inaccurate to say that the "Salvator Mundi" would be the only painting by Leonardo which is undocumented. There is a more precise formulation a few pages later in my book – "There is no Leonardo painting executed after 1496 which is not remarked in contemporary sources – except, perhaps, one now". I blame a sleepy scribe.

In other respects, however, Kemp and Campbell's points may be disputed. It is not the case that Leonardo's later paintings are undocumented. After Leonardo became a famous artist in Italy and France, his works were commented on in contemporary sources, often more than once – that is how we know he worked on the Mona Lisa, "St John and Virgin and Child with St Anne". It is very strange that no one in Renaissance Italy noticed Leonardo was painting a Salvator Mundi, if indeed he was, especially since so many copies apparently derived from it, and he would have spent several years on it, if its production process was anything like the "St Anne" or Mona Lisa. The lack of documentation does not prove that he didn't paint it, but it adds to the case against.

Campbell is right, of course, that the "Salvator Mundi" is "Leonardesque" and scholars agree about that. But this does not mean it is by Leonardo. A century and a half ago almost anything Leonardesque was attributed to Leonardo. But since the late nineteenth century art historians have been at pains to distinguish between (a) autograph works by Leonardo, such as the Mona Lisa, (b) works designed by Leonardo but predominantly executed by assistants



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in his workshop with Leonardo's participation, such as the London "Virgin of the Rocks", and (c) works entirely executed by assistants, such as the numerous Giampietrinos in the Hermitage. Most of the disagreement over the "Salvator Mundi" rages over whether it belongs in the first division autograph Leonardo category or the second division Leonardo+Workshop category.

Regarding the key meeting of Leonardo experts at the National Gallery in London in May 2008, where the "Salvator Mundi" was apparently authenticated as by him, Robert Simon (Letters, September 13) may be right that most of the art historians there expressed sympathy and support for the view the painting was by Leonardo, and later sent him private emails suggesting the same. But without a formal process or public accountability, art historians often default to polite enthusiasm and support, and, importantly, most of them also expressed the view at the time that Leonardo's assistants had also painted parts of the painting.

Professor Kemp points to the Salai inventory of 1525 which certainly mentions a painting of Christ, but art historians have long thought this document is a list of pictures by Salai himself. The "Christ in the Manner of God the Father" could be Salai's

portrait of Christ, dated 1511 in the Ambrosiana, or it could be another version of a Salvator Mundi, or, indeed, the Saudi/Abu Dhabi "Salvator Mundi" itself. Once again we have possibility not certainty.

The proponents of the "Salvator Mundi" have thus sought to downplay the difference between the two categories of Leonardo and Leonardo+Workshop, correctly stating that most art historians agree Leonardo painted parts of the Saudi "Salvator Mundi". That makes it an important discovery and, perhaps, in the eyes of the public, a Leonardo, but it does not mean it is a Leonardo within the conventional terms of Leonardo studies. That in turn indicates to us the elephant in the room. Behind the debate over the "Salvator Mundi" lies a broader art-historical agenda: to upgrade the Leonardo and workshop paintings. The National Gallery catalogued the London "Rocks" as autograph Leonardo in its 2011 exhibition. There is a commercial incentive to this, but it is also a reasonable line to take, in the light of recent studies of Renaissance artists' workshops, yet it has never been openly stated by the "Salvator"'s proponents.

Both the long-awaited book by Martin Kemp, Margaret Dalivale and Robert Simon, which was originally to have been published in 2011/12, and the forthcoming Leonardo exhibition at the Louvre (which may show the "Salvator Mundi") could solve many of the questions surrounding attribution. But at least one problem of the attribution will remain: expertise has preceded published scholarship – and by as much as eight years. It should have been the other way round.

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