

BOOKS

The painting sold for \$450m that might not even be a Leonardo

Decoding da Vinci

ART

Michael Prodger

The Last Leonardo The Secret Lives of the World's Most Expensive Painting by Ben Lewis Wm Collins £20 pp416

There is absolutely nothing about the world's most expensive painting that isn't mysterious. The enigmatic smile of Christ in the *Salvator Mundi* ascribed to Leonardo da Vinci that sold at Christie's New York in 2017 for a record-obliterating \$450m is the least of its conundrums. As the art historian and critic Ben Lewis shows in his forensically detailed and gripping investigation into the history, discovery and sales of the painting, establishing the truth is like nailing down jelly. The greatest mystery of all,

of course, is whether the painting is even a Leonardo. The artist was a celebrity in his own lifetime and almost everything he did was noted by his peers. The *Salvator Mundi*, however, is his only post-1496 painting for which there is no contemporary reference. There are a couple of red-chalk drawings in the Royal Collection that seem to relate to the project, but no visitor ever recorded seeing the painting in Leonardo's possession and no documents refer to its commissioning. After his death in 1519, his pictures and notebooks were prized almost as holy relics but the painting's whereabouts remains a blank.

Leonardo also ran a studio of skilled apprentices who either made copies after his works or made their own, often using his drawings as aids. Only some 15 paintings are definitively attributed to

Leonardo himself, but there are any number by the *Leonardeschi* ("little Leonardos") such as Bernardo Luini and Ambrogio de Predis. Some elements of the *Salvator Mundi* suggest they were painted by the master – the hand raised in blessing and the smocking of Christ's robe – but the standard is not consistent. There also exist some 20 studio versions of the *Salvator Mundi*.

Although the National Gallery showed the painting in its 2011 Leonardo exhibition and although Christie's

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claimed ahead of the sale that there was an “unusually uniform scholarly consensus” supporting the attribution, there are a large number of influential dissenting voices. Frank Zöllner, the author of the *Leonardo catalogue raisonné*, the officially sanctioned corpus of his work, is perhaps the most high-profile scholar to question Leonardo's authorship. Lewis, though, is only partly concerned with the niceties of attribution. His tale pursues two other important themes: the history of the painting and the circumstances surrounding its sale. The two are intertwined.

He first follows two American art dealers, Robert Simon and Alex Parish, who in 2005 found the painting in a heavily over-painted state in the catalogue of a now-defunct New Orleans auction house and bought it for \$175. In 2013, they sold it, heavily restored, via a Sotheby's private sale to Yves Bouvier, an art advisor to the super-rich, for \$80.6m. One day later Bouvier is said to have passed it on to the Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev for

\$127.5m, a hike of \$48m. Four years later Rybolovlev, deep in a legal action against Bouvier for alleged unprecedented mark-ups, sold it for \$450m (with fees) to, it has recently emerged, Mohammad bin Salman, crown prince of Saudi Arabia. As Lewis notes: “Nothing in



the known universe, no item, object or quantity of material, has ever appreciated in value as fast as the *Salvator Mundi*.” Part of the reason for that appreciation is that the painting had acquired a royal provenance: Simon and Parish linked the picture to an item in the inventory of

Charles I, drawn up when his collection was sold following his execution: “Peace of Christ done by Leonard.” No hard evidence, however, ties this painting to Charles I's; indeed it does not have his collection stamp on the back, while another *Salvator Mundi* now in the Pushkin

Museum in Moscow does. Nevertheless, the royal provenance persisted.

Another reason for the price surge was the picture's inclusion in the National Gallery's 2011 exhibition as a bona fide Leonardo. Prior to the exhibition the gallery had convened a private meeting of five experts to assess the picture, the outcome of which, so the public utterances maintained, was an agreement that this was indeed a Leonardo. No so, claims Lewis, only two of the five believed unequivocally in Leonardo's authorship. If this is so, for a public gallery to exhibit a heavily restored painting with no clear attribution, no definitive provenance and owned by dealers is unusual and morally dubious. As Bouvier later said: “If it hadn't been in that exhibition, it would have been impossible to sell that painting.”

It would have been impossible to sell because the picture was a wreck. Once the over-painting had been removed perhaps as little as 20% of the original paint survived and the panel had split into five pieces. The

worst affected areas were also the most important: the face of Christ and the crystal orb. The restoration by a New York specialist called Dianne Modestini was, therefore, no mere touching-up but an exercise in invention. To complicate matters further, Modestini undertook a second restoration after the National Gallery exhibition that made the picture more Leonardo-like in appearance and thus more saleable.

Throughout his fascinating and persuasive account, Lewis remains balanced; the *Salvator Mundi* might be exactly what its supporters claim it to be, even though it sits in “a pool of theories, surrounded by a tangle of conjecture, suspended from a geometry of clues”. The current owner isn't helping: the painting was due to go on show at the Louvre Abu Dhabi last autumn, but never appeared and no reason has been given. So, for now, the *Salvator Mundi* has returned to the obscurity where it has spent so many centuries. ■

Michael Prodger is art critic of the New Statesman