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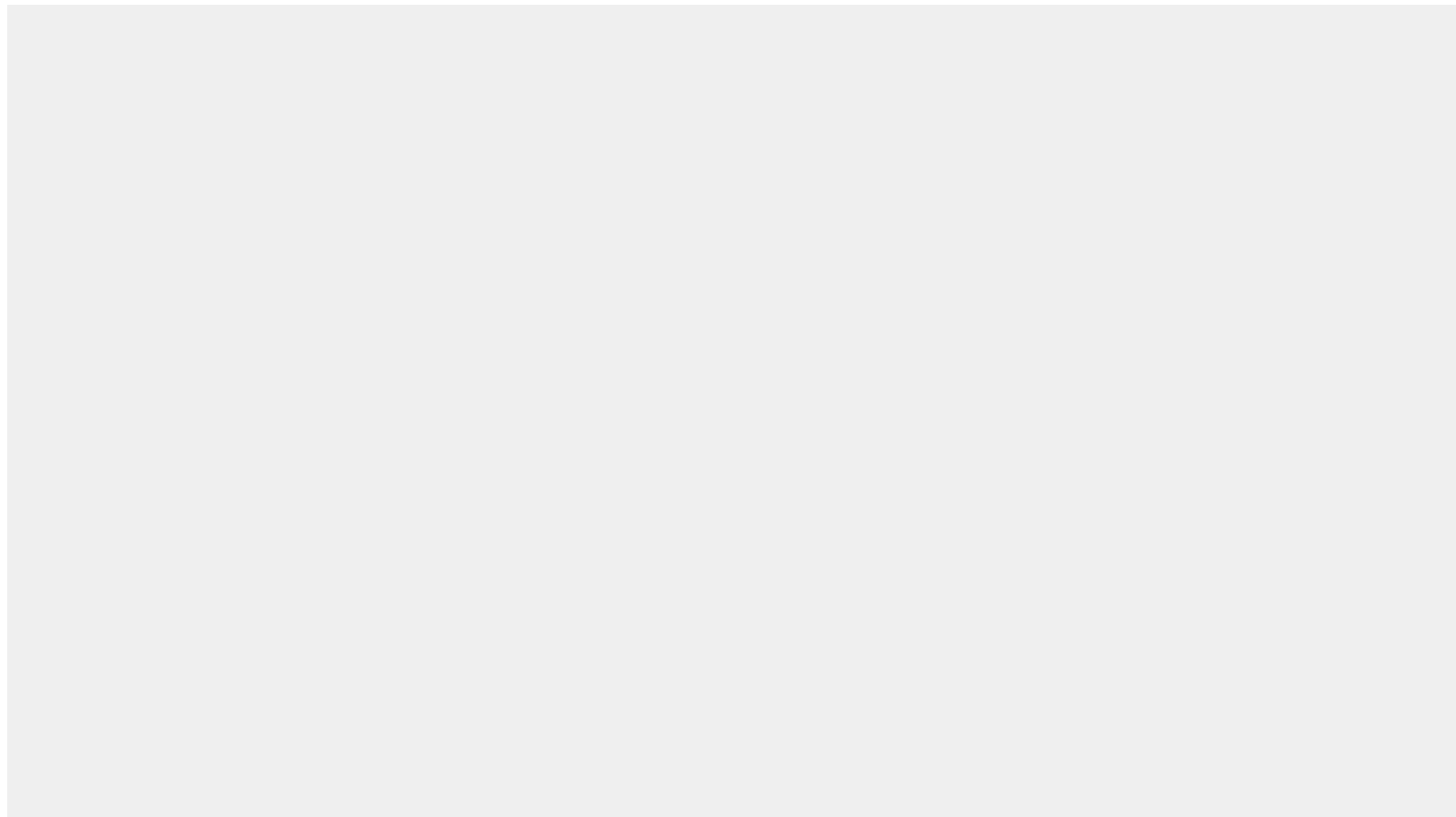
ART

The Last Leonardo by Ben Lewis review — is Salvator Mundi really worth \$450 million?

This impressive book casts serious doubts on whether the world's most expensive painting is a Leonardo, says David Sanderson

David Sanderson

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Salvator Mundi broke records when it was auctioned in 2017
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The art market demands an impossible certainty. Who will spend tens of millions buying a picture that *might* be a Caravaggio? What use is a maybe, maybe not Michelangelo for a gallery launching a blockbuster exhibition? Authentication is not just about money, it's a matter of reputation too. Even the most sober art historian can become rather drunk with the possibility of discovering a masterpiece — surely, that sludgy brown daub must be the real thing?

The Last Leonardo is about “the secret life of the world’s most expensive painting”, the *Salvator Mundi*. It is also about that search for certainty and the dilemmas raised by the lure of big money and professional pride. The *Salvator Mundi* was sold as a signature Leonardo for a record \$450 million in 2017, after it appeared at the National Gallery’s huge Leonardo show in 2011. Ben Lewis, in this dogged and entertaining piece of reporting, casts serious doubts on its authenticity as an autograph work. He argues that it was “easy to see how a potpourri of interests — financial, political and even psychological — combined to turn a workshop painting into a Leonardo”.

THE LAST LEONARDO





The
Secret
Lives
of the
World's
Most
Expensive
Painting

BEN LEWIS

It is not hard to be enraptured by the “zing” of the painting — and its backstory only adds to its mystique. It was supposedly painted around 1500, possibly for Louis XII of France; it later crossed the Channel and was owned by the doomed Charles I. It was then sold off by the Commonwealth as part of a civil war reckoning — then bounced between various English houses, fading farther and farther into obscurity. In 1900 or thereabouts it resurfaced, although attributed to another painter, as part of the renowned Cook Collection, then suffered the ignominious fate of being sold at auction to a travelling salesman in 1958 for £45.

Five decades later came its miraculous resurrection. In 2005 it was bought on a hunch for what was later reported by the buyers to be \$10,000 from a now closed New Orleans auction house. It was cleaned and restored, and an assembly of art historians seemed to agree that it was a Leonardo. Cue blockbuster exhibition premiere in London,

followed by a multimillion-dollar ricochet through the shadowy world of billionaires and art dealers. It became exhibit A in a series of court cases, set a world record auction price and ended up in the hands of a Middle Eastern prince.

Lewis, a visiting fellow at the Warburg Institute, an art critic and documentary maker, has uncovered — through thorough research and interviews with the main players — many discrepancies in the sanctioned story of *Salvator Mundi*. Rather than a dry-as-dust art monograph, the result is a pacey detective story. His conclusion is that “a house of cards of circumstantial and tendentious evidence” has been constructed that “reminds one of the opening caveat of a Hollywood period drama: Based on actual events”.

Lewis takes us back to 16th-century Milan to ask why Leonardo would have painted Christ on a walnut panel with a “gnarled, ticking time bomb” of a knot in it; Leonardo would have known this piece of wood would eventually compromise the quality of the painting. Lewis observes that “it seems out of character for him to accept such a flawed surface to paint on, especially if the work was destined for an important client”. Lewis also reminds us that there is no evidence from Leonardo’s lifetime that he painted *Salvator Mundi* himself.

There is also no proof that Louis XII commissioned it, or that this particular walnut panel was ever in Charles I’s collection. One particularly devastating fact is that in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow there is another *Salvator Mundi* that has Charles I’s stamp and which until the mid-19th century had been attributed to Leonardo.

Lewis makes the point that when this particular \$450 million *Salvator Mundi* — there are thought to be dozens of versions by Leonardo’s followers — appeared again in the public record as part of the Cook Collection, no art historian who saw it thought it was a Leonardo. On and on Lewis goes, finding troubling facts that undermine the authenticity of the painting.

There are other oddities too. He discovers that it was bought in 2005 for \$1,175 rather than the \$10,000 claimed by Robert Simon and his consortium. “I reasoned to myself that if they told the world the real price, no one would ever believe the painting could be a Da Vinci. That was the best \$9,000 they never spent,” Lewis says. The National Gallery, Lewis claims, seemingly ignored the doubts of art historians — of the five

experts it asked to examine the painting, only two claimed it was a Leonardo. The gallery also flouted a convention that public galleries should not display works it knows are on the market.

As Lewis says, lawsuits have “multiplied around Leonardo’s Christ in layers, like rings of toxic gas around a beautiful planet”. The information ferreted out in *The Last Leonardo* rather suggests that the lawyers are going to continue to be kept busy as auction houses, art buyers, galleries and art historians are asked awkward questions. In his conclusion, Lewis thunders that *Salvator Mundi* is the most vivid symbol of “dysfunctionality within the ecosystem of art”. It is hard to argue with that.

The Last Leonardo: The Secret Lives of the World’s Most Expensive Painting
by Ben Lewis, William Collins, 396pp, £20

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