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MAGAZINE

Fresh doubt over world's most expensive painting

National Gallery failed to mention suspicion about *Salvator Mundi* before artwork sold for \$450m

David Sanderson Arts Correspondent

The authenticity of the world's most expensive painting has been thrown into doubt by claims that the National Gallery gave the misleading impression that *Salvator Mundi* was definitely the sole work of Leonardo da Vinci.

The painting soared in value after it was included in the gallery's blockbuster Leonardo show in 2011 and was described in the exhibition catalogue as an autograph work — an original executed without the help of Leonardo's assistants.

It was subsequently sold for a record-breaking \$450 million in November 2017, to a buyer thought to have been acting for Saudi Arabia's effective ruler. However, according to claims in a new book, the Gallery failed to record the doubts of the art historians it had gathered together to analyse who had painted *Salvator Mundi*.

The gallery asked five Leonardo experts in 2008 to examine the painting, which had already undergone restoration. According to the art scholar Ben Lewis, who spoke to those present, during research for his book serialised in the *Times Magazine* today, their verdict on the painting's authenticity can be described as "two Yeses, one No, and two No Comments".

Despite this, no mention was made by the gallery in its catalogue of any doubts over its status as an "autograph" Leonardo. This was a crucial factor for the painting's extraordinary escalation in value from \$1175 in 2005 to \$450 million in 2017.

The author of the authoritative register of Leonardo's works, the catalogue raisonné, Frank Zöllner, has continuously questioned whether the painting is an "autograph" work.

Luke Syson, the gallery's curator at the time, told Lewis that it had been a mistake not to have invited Zöllner to



Experts have questioned whether *Salvator Mundi* is an autograph work by Leonardo

give his views on the painting before describing it as an "autograph" work.

When *Salvator Mundi* was first put on public display at the gallery in 2011 the exhibition did not state that there was "any kind of question mark over it", Lewis writes, suggesting that the gallery had seen "an opportunity for a dramatic pictorial premiere" in its 2011 exhibition.

Mr Syson told the author that he had "catalogued it more firmly" because he was "making a proposal and could make it cautiously or with some degree of scholarly oomph".

Mr Syson, who is now director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, also said of the 2008 meeting: "There are all sorts of reasons for people to be more circumspect about their views now because so much has happened... and 'there was pretty much unanimous agreement that what they were looking at was Leonardo'".

Salvator Mundi was due to be exhibited at the Louvre Abu Dhabi last year but its appearance was cancelled without explanation. The painting's location is not known. In addition to the \$450 million sale price, fees of \$50 million were also paid. The Saudis have not commented on Lewis's revelations.

His book *The Last Leonardo* also explores new doubts over the painting's provenance, which had been generally accepted to have been in Charles I's collection even though it does not have his stamp on the reverse.

Lewis writes that as recently as last year it was discovered that a version of *Salvator Mundi*, which was attributed to Leonardo until the mid-19th century and now hangs in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, does have the Charles I stamp on the reverse.

Lewis's book outlines how many institutions have cast doubt on *Salvator Mundi*'s attribution and rejected

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