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ART MYSTERY

## The hanging question

The Louvre's landmark da Vinci exhibition opens this week. But its main attraction may be a painting that isn't there...

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BY ED GORMAN

**I**f only there *was* a smoking paintbrush. Half a millennium after Leonardo da Vinci's death, the art world is ready to celebrate his genius by gathering as many of his paintings together in one place as possible.

But when the Musée de Louvre opens its doors in Paris this week on its da Vinci exhibition, much of the attention will focus on a painting that will almost certainly be missing and the mystery of who actually painted it.



It promises to be quite a show, with the star attractions being the five Leonardo autograph paintings in the Louvre collection – among them the *Mona Lisa* – alongside important loans from collections in Britain, Italy and the United States, including works held by the Royal Collection, the British Museum and the National Gallery.

#### Why this story?

Two years ago, *Salvator Mundi* became the most expensive painting ever bought.

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The exhibition has been organised by the curators, Vincent Delieuvin and Louis Frank. But the build-up has been dominated by the likely absence of the world's most expensive painting, the *Salvator Mundi*.



French president Emmanuel Macron in front of the Louvre museum

It is a hauntingly powerful image of Christ with his right hand raised in blessing and the other holding a transparent orb. It is also a work of art that may or may not be entirely by Da Vinci – and as a fiercely contested debate rages over its attribution and provenance, two of the most prominent voices are British.

In April this year, the documentary film-maker, author and art critic, Ben Lewis, published *The Last Leonardo*, subtitled: “The secret lives of the world’s most expensive painting.” Lewis argues that while there is still a possibility the picture is a signature Leonardo, there are too many problems both with its attribution and provenance to be sure. “I hope that the *Salvator Mundi* will be on display in a public museum again soon,” he concludes. “But with an honest question mark.”

Leading the champions of the work as a bona fide Leonardo, to sit alongside the handful of his other unchallenged masterpieces, is



Martin Kemp, emeritus professor of history of art at Oxford who is recognised as the preeminent authority on Leonardo alive today. With Dr Margaret Dalivalle, one of his former pupils, and the American art dealer, Robert Simon, who discovered the painting in New Orleans, Kemp is about to publish his own keenly-awaited book that, he says, will definitively argue that the *Salvator Mundi* is the real deal.

Many will have first heard of the *Salvator Mundi* when it was sold at Christie's in New York in November 2017 for the record sum of \$450 million, having been presented as a signature Leonardo, painted in the early 1500s. This price represented the culmination of an unprecedented leap in value for a work of art that was sold at auction in New Orleans in 2005 for just \$1,175 when presented as "After Leonardo da Vinci".

The transformation in its prospects came about after extensive restoration but also a now highly controversial pronouncement by the National Gallery in London that the *Salvator Mundi* was indeed an autograph Leonardo work with the gallery including it, as such, in its own spectacularly successful Da Vinci show in 2011-2012.

The mystery buyer who stunned the auction room at Christie's in 2017 was – it later emerged – the *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and since the sale to him the painting, listed at the time as Lot 9B, has not been seen in public.



Auction agents speak to clients during bidding on Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* at Christie's



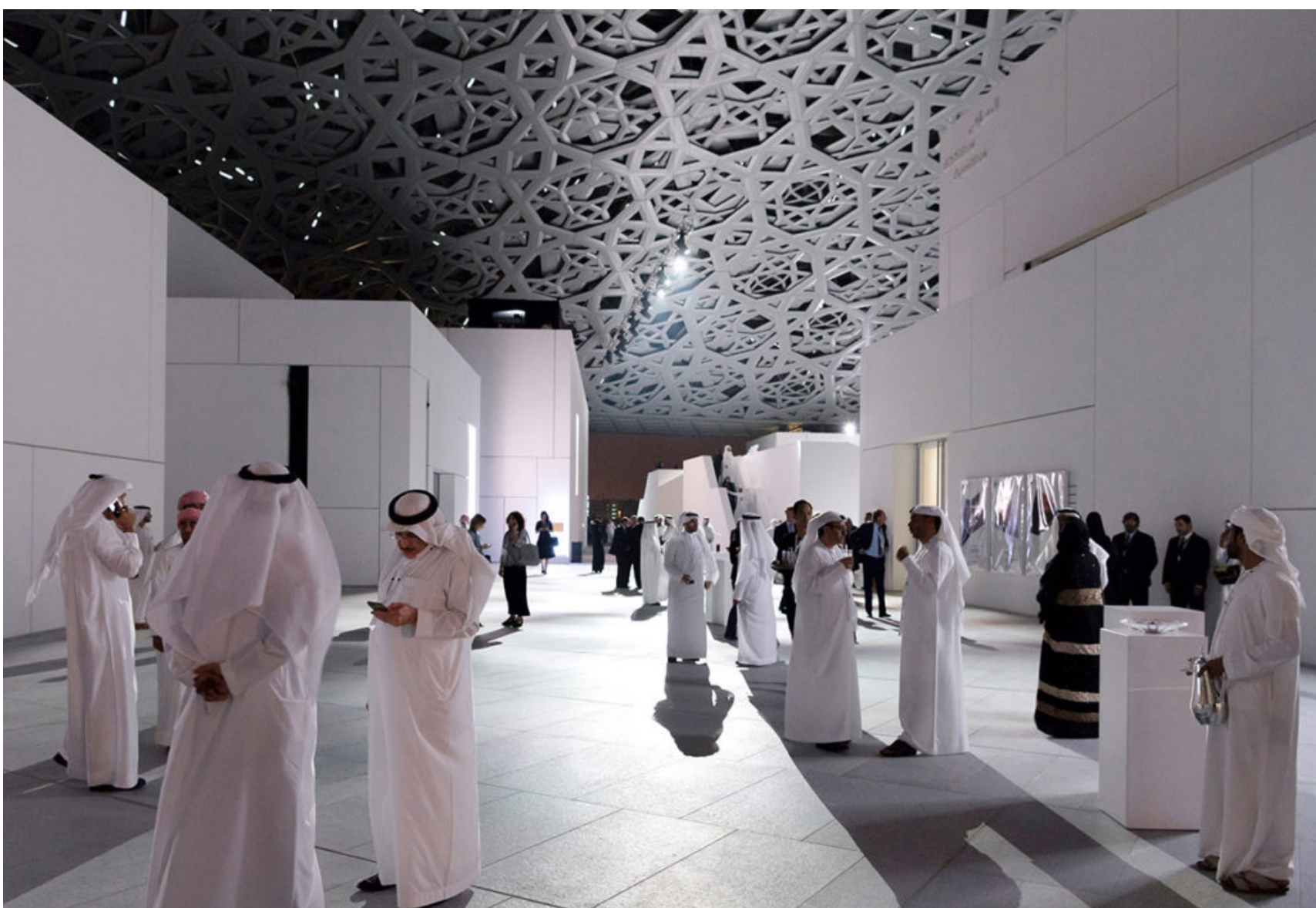
There were suggestions that it had been bought for the Abu Dhabi Louvre where it would be the centrepiece for the new gallery. But a fortnight before the painting's planned unveiling in September 2018 the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture & Tourism announced that it had been postponed. "More details will be announced soon," it said.

Since then there have been rumours in the Gulf, that have made it to the papers in the region, that the painting is being stored on Bin Salman's superyacht, the 440ft *Serene*. Others believe it is being held in one of several purpose-built tax-free art stores in Switzerland.

The Louvre is very touchy on the subject. When I called their press department to inquire about the *Salvator Mundi* and its prospects of being included in the exhibition, the response was polite but firm: "If this is about the *Salvator Mundi* then it will be a very short conversation." I was told that the gallery had requested that the painting be loaned for the exhibition but they had heard nothing and were still awaiting a response.

There is still a chance that the Louvre could pull this considerable rabbit out of its hat but with just days left before the opening this is looking increasingly unlikely.

Why have the Saudis become so reluctant to allow the *Salvator Mundi* to show its face? Are they keeping it for a new gallery to be built specially for it in Saudi or are they smarting from the increasingly trenchant arguments of those who believe Bin Salman may have been sold little more than a "Leonardo+workshop" production in which the master may have contributed parts but left large areas to his pupils? If that is the case the painting would be valued at a fraction of the price the prince paid for it.







Inside the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum – designed by Jean Nouvel

Some suggest the failure to loan the work to the Louvre may be connected to the avowed intent of the curators in Paris to treat it as they see fit and Saudi squeamishness about the potential humiliation of having their pride and joy publicly downgraded. On this subject, the curator, Vincent Delieuvin was quoted in *Le Figaro* in early September as follows: “If (the painting) comes, we will say what we think. Whether it really is by the hand of Leonardo, partly so or not at all.”





Those who doubt the attribution as a signature Leonardo question the choice of a knotted panel of walnut wood on which the painting is set, the stylistic treatment of various parts of the image – not least the eyes of Christ and the treatment of the orb in his left hand – and the fact that there is no contemporary record of Leonardo ever having painted this composition. The attribution argument is made more complex by the fact that the painting was in a dreadful state when it was discovered in New Orleans and has since undergone extensive restoration.

In terms of provenance, the painting is said to have been commissioned by King Louis XII of France and to have found its way into the possession of King Charles I in England among others. The critics argue, however, that the story of its ownership is at best tendentious until the *Salvator Mundi* appears in the collection of the English aristocrat Sir Francis Cook in the early 1900s.

But Kemp, the Oxford professor, believes the work is, as he put it, “absolutely full of what only Leonardo understood – what I call the science of art.” He argues that the pupils or copyists working in Leonardo’s studio had neither the intellectual depth nor the sophistication to have produced an image of this profundity and he has no doubt that the *Salvator Mundi* will eventually be accepted as a signature masterpiece.

“I think in the long term it will settle down,” he said. “It is apparent in terms of the meaning and the quality of the picture, the way it communicates what it is, that it is an absolutely major Leonardo. It stands alongside *Mona Lisa* which is the great statement of painting of a secular subject, albeit of a woman turned into a quasi-divine figure; it stands beside *Mona Lisa* as a very developed statement by Leonardo of a devotional subject.





Visitors in front of the Mona Lisa after it was returned to its place in the Louvre Museum in Paris earlier this year

“It will not come in the next five years,” he added, “maybe not in the next 10 years, but it will come to fit in with his work as a major late statement of his views on devotional painting and nature of the divine,” Kemp said.

Lewis, the documentary maker and art critic is eagerly waiting to get his hands on Kemp’s book entitled *Leonardo’s Salvator Mundi and the collecting of Leonardo in the Stuart Courts*. It is expected to be published shortly after the Louvre opens its doors on the exhibition, having been delayed, according to Kemp, by an editing fault with its pictures. Lewis would like to think that Kemp *et al* may prove him and other doubters wrong, but he is not holding out much hope.

“I hope they blast me out of the water,” he told me. “They have put years and years of work into this and wouldn’t it be great if they actually had discovered a Leonardo? I don’t feel great about my doubt – I just feel committed to report things as truthfully as I can, but I think there is a feeling that they probably haven’t found the smoking paintbrush, as it were, that would prove it was a Leonardo. But what do I know ...”

But Lewis feels pretty confident about something else – that the price of this hidden superstar is unlikely in future to exceed what bin Salman paid for it in 2017. “I don’t suppose Mohammad bin Salman will ever put it on the market, so we don’t know the answer. But I think it is unlikely to ever achieve that sort of price point again because a lot of uncomfortable facts have come out since the auction, particularly as a result of my book.”

Like him Kemp is concerned about the painting and its whereabouts. Ideally he would like to see it in the Louvre taking its place and speaking for itself, as he put it, “in the context” of the other Leonardos.

“In terms of its non-appearance I am marginally worried that it may not be being well treated,” he said. “But if someone has paid \$450 million for an object, I assume that they are interested in looking after it properly. But it is of concern not knowing where it is. I’ve seen no evidence that it’s on Mohammad bin Salman’s yacht. It could be but you need evidence of that – you can’t just say that’s where it is. I’ve seen no evidence that it’s in a Geneva or Zurich picture store which is entirely plausible, but I’ve seen no evidence. So its whereabouts is of concern. Whatever this is, it’s an important



part of world cultural heritage and ideally it should be available to be seen.”

Michael Daley is another sceptic and an arch one. The publisher of the journal *ArtWatch UK* which campaigns to protect the integrity of works of art subjected to injurious or falsifying restorations and ambitious but unsupportable re-attributions, he has no doubt that the *Salvator Mundi* is nothing more than the work of ‘Leonardo school’.



Christie's unveils the Salvator Mundi in 2017 in New York

He says it is let down both by the inconsistency of the paint treatment and the flimsiness of its provenance which he compares to a daisy chain only as strong as its weakest link. He too believes the Saudi prince may struggle to recoup his investment. If he is right and Kemp is wrong, I asked him to put a current value on the world's most expensive painting.

“I couldn't put a price on it because I don't know of any comparable painting that's been sold,” he said. “It would be a very small fraction (of its Christie's sale price) – maybe, just plucking figures – maybe as much as five million or 10 million dollars.”

*All photographs Getty Images*



#### FURTHER READING

– [\*Tortoise considered art\*](#), and the Salvator Muni in particular, as



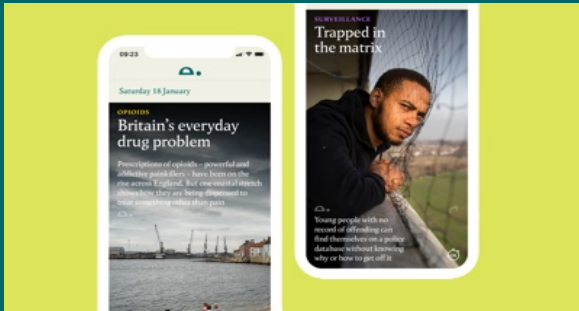
an asset class earlier in the year

- [The Last Leonardo](#) by Ben Lewis (William Collins)
- *Leonardo’s Salvator Mundi and the collecting of Leonardo in the Stuart Courts* by Margaret Dalivalle, Martin Kemp and Robert Simon
- [ArtWatch UK No32 Autumn 2019: How the Louvre Abu Dhabi Salvator Mundi became a Leonardo-from-nowhere](#) by Michael Daley

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