The Invention of the 'Salvator Mundi'

vulture.com/2019/04/salvator-mundi-leonardo-da-vinci.html

Matthew Shaer

April 14, 2019

In 2005, an unusual painting appeared on the website of the New Orleans Auction Gallery, a small operation headquartered on the banks of the Mississippi River. Twenty-six inches tall and 18 and a half inches wide, the painting depicted Christ in Renaissance-era robes, one hand raised in benediction, the other cupping a diaphanous sphere. "After Leonardo da Vinci (Italian 1452–1519)," read the description. "*Christ Salvator Mundi.* Oil on cradled panel."

Among the people to click on the listing for Lot 664 was a Rockland County art speculator named Alexander Parish. Parish has spent his entire career in the art world, first as an assistant, later as an adviser to a major European gallery, and now as what's known as a picker — a dealer who purchases art from minor auction houses and antiques sales and resells it to wealthy clients at a profit. "A major part of what I do," Parish told me, "is educated gambling. You get a good feeling about a piece of art, and you place a bet that you know more about it than the auctioneer does."

Parish felt very good about Lot 664. In fact, although he had only a few postage-stamp-size JPEGS to work with, he thought he might be looking at a piece by a student of Leonardo's — perhaps the Milanese painter Bernardino Luini. That same afternoon, he sent a link to his friend Robert Simon, the owner of an old-master gallery on the Upper East Side, who has a doctorate in art history from Columbia University with a specialty in the art of the Renaissance.

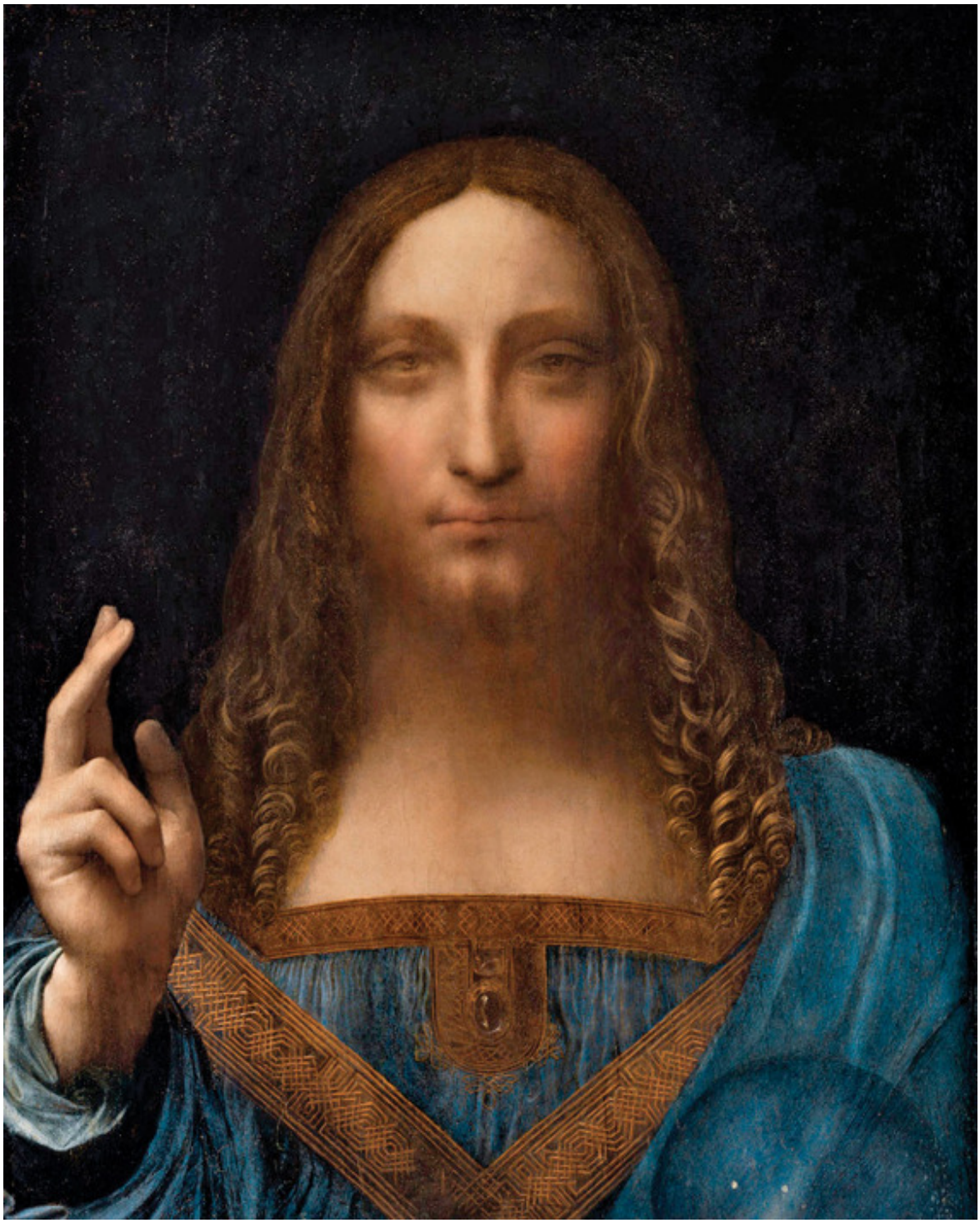
"My first reaction was that it was a very intriguing painting," Simon recalled. As he knew, the original *Salvator Mundi,* painted by Leonardo around 1500, possibly for the French king Louis XII, had been one of da Vinci's most copied works — dozens of replicas hang in museums around the world, but the original had been lost to history. It seemed possible that another period copy dating to the Renaissance would exist. Simon and Parish agreed to invest in the painting together, with a bid ceiling of $10,000; Parish would handle the bidding via phone. "My memory of the auction is that I just sat there waiting for the price to go up," Parish said. "But it became apparent that no one else was interested." His winning bid came in at $1,000.

Today, of course, the contents of Lot 664 are worth far more than that: The picture has since sold once for $127.5 million and again, in a record-setting auction at Christie's, for close to half a billion dollars. It has been held up as the "male Mona Lisa" and the "Holy Grail of old-master paintings" and derided by this magazine's art critic, Jerry Saltz, as a "two-dimensional ersatz dashboard Jesus." It has been owned by a Swiss tycoon, a Russian

oligarch, and Saudi royalty. Along the way, it has come to illustrate how the interests of dealers, museums, auction houses, and the global rich can conspire to build a masterpiece out of a painting of patchwork provenance and hotly debated authorship. Its rise is both an astonishing tale of restoration and historical sleuthing and — for those inclined to see the world less romantically — a parable of highbrow greed, P. T. Barnum–style salesmanship, and reputation laundering.

But on the day it arrived at Parish's home in upstate New York, it was still just a painting of unknown origin and questionable condition. Gingerly, the dealer slid the picture from its cardboard container. He noted the gilded frame, likely a 19th-century addition, and the thick layers of paint that had been applied to Christ's face by a past restorer. Then he placed it back in the box and drove it into Manhattan, where Simon was waiting.

The fully



restored *Salvator Mundi.* Photo: The Picture Art Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

The worth of their latest acquisition would be determined by the dealers' ability to connect it to Leonardo's inner circle. If the painting was by Luini or another Leonardo disciple, they could expect to get hundreds of thousands of dollars for it. In 1999, a decent period copy now believed to have come from Leonardo's workshop had gone for $332,500 at auction at Sotheby's. But before any real attribution efforts could take place, before the dealers could start piecing together the story of the oil painting and its putative author, it would have to be thoroughly restored.

On April 27, 2005, at 2 p.m., Simon wrapped a trash bag around the *Salvator Mundi* and took it to the apartment of Dianne Dwyer Modestini, a research professor at New York University and a lauded art restorer. As Simon waited, Modestini placed the painting on her easel. She was unimpressed. Christ's face, which she'd later learn had been repainted in the 20th century, looked to her like a "clown's mask"; as for the overall condition of the picture, she told me recently, "it was bad, even allowing for its age."

"I could recommend a student restorer at NYU," she said to Simon.

"I think this needs a grown-up," the dealer shot back.

Opening her supply cabinet, Modestini produced a vial of acetone and mineral spirits and a cotton swab and conducted a preliminary cleaning of the picture. Two things immediately stuck out to her. One was that the original panel had fissured, resulting in two uneven "steps" near Christ's face. A previous restorer, Modestini deduced, had attempted to address the problem by inserting a mixture of gesso and glue into the fissure.
"Unfortunately," Modestini has since written, this was "not the only measure that had been taken to level the uneven surface: At some point in the past, the step had been shaved down from the front with a sharp plane."

The second major discovery concerned Christ's blessing hand. Before bringing the painting to her, Modestini says, Simon had used the infrared lens on his digital camera to take a few photographs of the picture. When he'd examined the resulting images, he had seen a ghostly shape behind the blessing hand. With a few swipes of a solvent-drenched cotton swab, Modestini revealed what she thought might be a trace — or a pentimento, derived from the Italian word for "repent" — of an earlier draft of the painting. In contrast to the curved digit in the finished work, and to every Renaissance-era replica of the *Salvator Mundi* Simon was aware of, this thumb appeared to be upright.

Modestini was not blind to the significance. "Pentimenti," she told me, "are in general an indication a painting isn't a copy, because the copier only observes the surface of a picture, not the skeleton underneath." In other words, if you're an imitator without access to an artist's creative process, you're going to imitate only what you can see. Still, neither she nor Simon said a word — Modestini for the simple reason that she was unfamiliar with the history of the *Salvator,* Simon out of prudence.

Compared with his peers, Leonardo, an inventor and scientist as well as an artist, was a notably unprolific painter: Fewer than 20 known paintings can be attributed to his hand; the last to be discovered was the so-called *Benois Madonna,* or *Madonna and Child With Flowers,* which emerged out of a private collection in St. Petersburg in 1914. As of 2005, two paintings remained unaccounted for: *Leda and the Swan,* a large-scale mythological allegory, and the *Salvator Mundi.*

If Parish and Simon had somehow managed to stumble upon the latter, they'd be lucky — absurdly so. They'd also find themselves playing an entirely different game than the one they'd set out to play. After all, the bar for a genuine da Vinci would be miles higher than that for a genuine Luini, and clearing it would require time, money, and the support of some of the most powerful brokers in the art world.

Christie's unveils the *Salvator Mundi*, by Leonardo da Vinci, in 2017. Photo: Ilya S. Savenok/Getty Images

Modestini concurred that, in the parlance of the industry, the picture had "potential." She told Simon she'd help restore it, but first it would need the attention of a panel specialist. She suggested Monica Griesbach, a former student of hers. Griesbach, who now lives in Madrid, recalled that her initial reaction to the condition of the painting was trepidation. "The damage, it was considerable," she told me. The planing was only the start of it. Flipping the picture, Griesbach saw that the original panel was supported by both a cradle and a thick wood auxiliary panel, which was attached to the walnut by marouflage — a now-outdated method involving layers of thick adhesive. When she chiseled off the auxiliary panel, the entire painting came apart in her hands. "In total, there were seven separate pieces," she said. Worms had tunneled through the wood. "My guess is that the tunneling had occurred before the planing, and when it was planed, the panel became even more

fragile and it broke." Griesbach labored over the painting for six months, reassembling the work using adhesive and tiny slivers of wood to mend the fissures. "And the painting did actually come back together nicely," she told me.

In November 2006, when Modestini retook possession of the *Salvator Mundi,* she had a better sense of the work that lay ahead of her. "There were passages that were unusually well preserved," she told me, citing the blessing hand and the tumbling curls on the left side of Christ's head. "But you also had passages" — such as the right-side curls and that "clown's mask" on the face — "that were extremely damaged."

Very few 500-year-old paintings have survived to the present day in perfect condition. "The vast majority," says Brian Baade of the University of Delaware's art-conservation department, "have required restoration during their long lifetimes." Sometimes restoration is just a matter of removing surface coatings that have degraded or darkened. Often it requires more substantial work, including in-painting, which fills in damaged areas. "Conservators," Baade said, undertake this technique "not to trick the viewer but to reintroduce a sense of coherence and harmony, which is lost when damage remains visible." And yet restoration, like authentication, is a subjective science. Two hundred years ago, it was common for restorers to overpaint pictures so heavily that the original image all but disappeared; some schools of restoration, particularly in Europe, have advocated a minimalistic approach that allows viewers to distinguish between the original artwork and the in-painting without having to hold a black light to the canvas.

In restoring the *Salvator Mundi,* Modestini, who says she "tries to imitate the original as closely as possible," would be charged with bringing a badly damaged painting back to life while conserving what remained of the original draftsmanship. And if her efforts on the painting happened to yield insight into its authorship, so much the better.

In an essay published in 2015, Modestini details the long process of restoring Christ's face, which gave her no shortage of trouble — a previous clean had stripped away the 20th-century overpaint while revealing areas of abrasion around the eyes and chin. "The ambiguity between abrasion and highlight made the restoration extremely difficult, and I redid it numerous times," she wrote. Equally time-consuming was the "muddy background." To fix it, she added "a glaze of rich warm brown," then more layers of paint, distressing the paint between layers "to make it look antique … The new color freed the head, which had been trapped in the muddy background, so close in tone to the hair, and made a different, altogether more powerful image."

About a year into the restoration process, Modestini was repairing some damage to Christ's lip when she noticed a set of color transitions that she described to me as "perfect. Just the way the paint was handled — no other artist could have done that." In 2006, the Louvre had published a book called *Mona Lisa: Inside the Painting,* which included high-resolution close-ups of the subject's features. "I was studying her mouth, and all at once, I could no longer

hide from the obvious," Modestini later wrote. "The artist who painted her was the same hand that had painted the *Salvator Mundi*." Already Modestini had used intact portions of the painting, such as the corkscrews of hair, to inform her in-painting of destroyed ones. After her epiphany about the authorship, she no longer was just restoring a Renaissance painting — she was restoring a Leonardo. She studied how he had handled certain passages or transitions in analogous works, such as the Mona Lisa and Leonardo's other masterwork, *St. John the Baptist.* Her work was almost ontological in nature; by relying on Leonardo's work to restore the painting, was she uncovering a Leonardo or bringing it into being?

No specific technique used by the *Salvator Mundi*'s restorers was particularly unusual. What sets the painting apart, one prominent art-world figure told me, is the scale of the restoration. "You'll get defenders of the painting who will say, 'Look at a work like [Hans] Holbein's *The Ambassadors.* That had loss too, and it was restored and repainted, and now it's hanging in a museum!' " the source said. "Well, yes, but that loss was 5 to 10 percent of a very large painting. With all due respect to the immense talents of Dianne Modestini, the *Salvator Mundi* was a much smaller picture, and the amount of required intervention was proportionally higher. And that should be a key area of debate: Where does conservation become invention?"

An etching of the painting from 1650. *Photo: University of Toronto Wellenclaus Hollar Digital Archive/Wikicommons*

1500: Possibly painted for Louis XII of France.

1625: Acquired through marriage by Charles I of England.

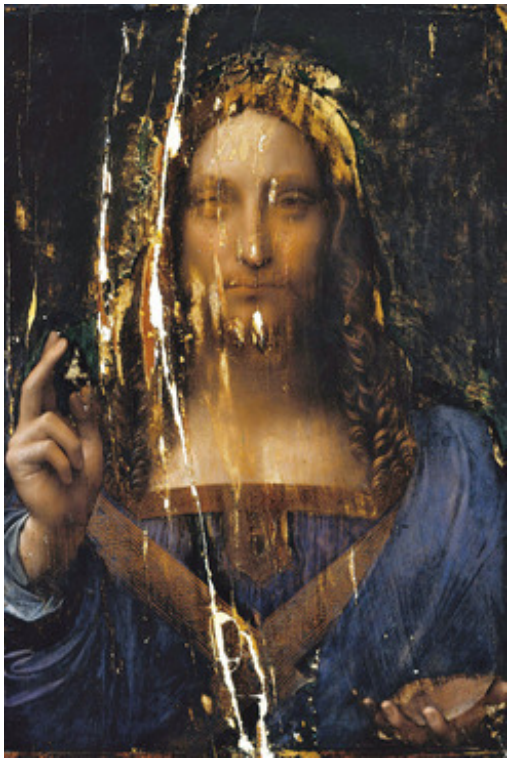
1651: Sold to a mason named John Stone.

1666: Returned to the Crown under Charles II.

1666–1900*: Whereabouts unknown.*

1900: Sir Francis Cook acquired a *Salvator Mundi.* Was it the same one?

1958: Warren E. Kuntz bought Cook's painting at a London auction. Kuntz gave it to his nephew Basil Clovis Hendry.



The painting after Modestini cleaned off the previous attempts at restoration. *Photo: © Salvator Mundi LLC*

2005: Alexander Parish and Robert Simon bought the painting at auction.

2005–6: Restored by Dianne Modestini.

The painting's 2005 condition. *Photo: © Salvator Mundi LLC*

2007: The Met's Keith Christiansen and art historian Mina Gregori gave it their thumbs-up as a Leonardo.

2008: Sir Nicholas Penny of the National Gallery in London brought scholars together to view the painting.

2010: Warren Adelson came on as a third investor.

2011: The National Gallery included *Salvator Mundi* in its Leonardo exhibition.

2012: The Dallas Museum of Art put an offer on the painting.

2013: Yves Bouvier purchased the work from Simon, Parish, and Adelson for $83,000,000.

2013: Bouvier immediately flipped the work to Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev for $127,500,000.

The fully restored *Salvator Mundi*. *Photo: The Picture Art Collection/Alamy Stock Photo*

2017: Ahead of its auction, Christie's showed *Salvator Mundi* in Hong Kong, London, San Francisco, and New York, where it sold.

2017: Bought by Prince Badr, current minister of Culture, on behalf of the Saudi crown prince. **Auction price: $450,300,000.**

The painting was to go to the Louvre Abu Dhabi but never made it. It missed its scheduled debut in September, and its whereabouts are unknown.

1 / 6

While Modestini was restoring the *Salvator Mundi,* Simon was researching its provenance. One of his earlier trips was to a research library in London to view photographs of the Cook Collection, a massive trove of art assembled in the late 1800s by Sir Francis Cook, a wealthy British merchant. Simon had learned that Cook had a *Salvator Mundi,* which was attributed by the merchant's staff to Boltraffio, a pupil of Leonardo's. The picture had been auctioned by Sotheby's in 1958 for £45 to a buyer identified only as "Kunz."

Simon held up an image of his pre-restored *Salvator Mundi* to a black-and-white photograph of Cook's picture. They were the same, down to that strange "clown's face" repainting job. His *Salvator Mundi* was Cook's. "Kunz" would turn out to be Warren E. Kuntz, who gave it to his nephew, a Baton Rouge sheet-metal baron named Basil Clovis Hendry. It was Hendry's family who put the painting up for sale after his death in 2004.

But before 1900, the painting's history is much murkier. A painting believed to be the *Salvator Mundi* is mentioned in an inventory by one of Leonardo's students in 1525. After that, it disappears, only to reemerge a century or so later, apparently in the possession of Charles I of England. Notoriously tyrannical and equally image-conscious, Charles saw Italian Renaissance art as the ultimate prestige item; he had at least one other Leonardo in his 2,000-piece collection as well as paintings by Titian and Raphael. Charles I was beheaded in 1649, and his collection was sold after his execution to satisfy royal debts.

Simon visited Windsor Castle in England to see Leonardo's preparatory studies for the *Salvator Mundi.* The designs for the folds of fabric around Christ's arms were a match for the painting in Simon's possession, as was the repeating embroidery that crisscrosses the robe. And Simon found it significant that his *Salvator* had been painted on walnut. "A lot of the other Italian artists of the time preferred poplar," he said. "Leonardo liked walnut."

Simon presents his own journey to belief as a reluctant awakening. "I was a doubter," he told me. "I didn't start out like a lot of other people might, saying, 'It's a Leonardo. Prove me wrong!' And then, over time, this funny thing happens: The evidence starts to pile up that it is."

Simon has maintained that it was always his preference that the *Salvator Mundi* go to a museum, preferably one in the U.S. But he and Parish would not be giving the painting to an institution — neither man was independently wealthy, and the costs to date, from storage to restoration fees, had been substantial. "I did a lot of what I'd call 'triangulation' in coming up with a price," Simon told me. He considered the relevant recent old-master sales as well as the small number of Leonardo works that had gone on sale in the 20th century. In 1989, for example, two Leonardo studies of drapery had each sold for just under $6 million at auction; in 2001, an equally small paper piece had fetched about $11.5 million at Christie's. Further back, there was the *Madonna* painting purchased by the Russian czar in 1914 for what would be hundreds of millions today.

But there were X factors, too: The art market was the biggest it had ever been, spurred by a new generation of deep-pocketed foreign investors who had come to see it as a safe place to park their cash (or, as numerous reports have demonstrated, to hide misbegotten gains). Rare art was also a status purchase, offering far more reputational sheen than, say, a Bugatti sports car or an island in the Caribbean.

And no art trophy was going to be bigger than a Leonardo. Da Vinci's appeal, Simon told me, "is broad. It goes beyond the art collector or the museum. He's treasured by everyone. He's a different animal." The buyer wouldn't just own a painting; he'd have a claim to the patrimony of Western civilization. The asking price, the painting's owners would later decide, should be no less than $100 million. But first the art world would have to accept the painting's origin story.

In 2007, Simon began surreptitiously showing the *Salvator Mundi* to a hand-selected group of scholars. The first to weigh in positively on its authenticity was Mina Gregori, an Italian art historian, whom Simon invited to see the painting at his gallery in New York. “She came. I showed it to her,” Simon recalled. “She said, ‘It’s him.’ ”

A few months later, Simon arranged for the painting to receive a fuller evaluation at the Met. According to a person present, “there were reservations about the condition” as well as “considerable excitement about the attribution.” Soon, Keith Christiansen, then a curator in the Met’s European-paintings department, affirmed that the painting was by Leonardo. “Keith has an extremely critical eye, and if he accepts it, I was like, ‘We have to accept it too,’ ” Parish told me. “That was the *thunk* moment. The moment where I allowed myself to think, *Am I a guy who owns part of a Leonardo?*”

As early as 2006, the National Gallery in London had been throwing around the idea of a big Leonardo show tied to a new restoration of the museum’s major da Vinci painting, *The Virgin of the Rocks.* The show had been approved by Charles Saumarez Smith, then the museum’s director, but it would be left to Sir Nicholas Penny, Smith’s successor, to execute. Penny knew of the *Salvator Mundi* — he’d seen the painting at Simon’s gallery on a business trip to New York. Including a never-before-seen Leonardo in the show would be a major coup for the new director.

Penny suggested that Simon bring the painting to London for a side-by-side comparison with *The Virgin of the Rocks.* In a March 5 email to experts, Penny wrote that he and the National Gallery’s head of research, Luke Syson, along with “our colleagues in both painting and drawings in the Met,” were convinced that Simon’s *Salvator* was the Leonardo original. Still, he went on, “some of us consider that there may be [parts] which are by the workshop.” Included on the list of recipients was Martin Kemp, a research professor emeritus at Oxford and the author of several books on Leonardo.
In May 2008, Kemp and the other experts were led through the staff entrance of the National Gallery and into the museum’s main conservation studio. Simon had flown to London in business class with the *Salvator Mundi* a few rows away in the coat closet. As promised, the staff had removed *The Virgin of the Rocks* from the galleries and placed it on a stand next to the *Salvator Mundi.*

A former National Gallery staffer recently described the meeting to me as “a way of making sure we weren’t about to go out on a limb or, by showing the picture, risking the reputation of the National Gallery.” The museum, the person continued, “emphatically” did not want to “prove or even argue the attribution.” And yet, given the stakes for the painting itself — inclusion in a major exhibition or a decidedly inglorious trip back to New York — it’s hardly surprising that much of the discussion turned to attribution. “I left the studio thinking

Leonardo must be heavily involved," Kemp later wrote. On this point, he recalls being in the majority: "No one in the assembly was openly expressing doubt that Leonardo was responsible for the painting."

Kemp identified Carmen Bambach, a specialist in Renaissance art and a curator of drawings at the Met, as the "most reserved about the painting's overall quality." This was almost certainly understating it. In 2012, Bambach published an essay for the respected art-world magazine *Apollo* in which she argued that the "severely damaged original painting surface exhibits large portions of recent integration" — extensive restoration, in other words. "In the present reviewer's opinion, having studied and followed the picture during its conservation treatment," Bambach went on, "much of the original surface may be by Boltraffio but with passages done by Leonardo himself."

In 2010, Simon and Parish got some incalculably good news: Their *Salvator Mundi* would indeed be shown in the National Gallery's Leonardo exhibition. Better yet, it would be shown as an "autograph" Leonardo — not a collaboration, not a partial Leonardo, but a Leonardo da Vinci original, full stop. In an email, Syson, the exhibition's curator, told me the authentication was the result of slow, painstaking independent assessment. "You need to study the scientific evidence incredibly carefully; does what can be seen in X-ray or infrared or in paint cross sections agree with what we know of the artist and the period?" he wrote. "But ultimately the conclusion has to be based on connoisseurship, on what we — as trained and experienced experts — can see with our own eyes." He likened an artist's technique to handwriting, a unique signature that can be recognized, but he also suggested the judgment came from "the power, the energy, of the picture when you're standing in front of it."

On that notion, there would eventually be heated disagreement. "It is hard to believe that Leonardo himself was responsible for anything so dull," Renaissance specialist Charles Hope has argued. David Nolta, an art historian at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, has said the condition of the work was too compromised to merit such certainty. "More importantly," Nolta said, "I trust one scholar above all others on the subject of Leonardo da Vinci, and that is Carmen Bambach."

Others have aired plausible guesses about the true identity of the painter. "My view is that Leonardo produced the preparatory drawings; he and assistants expanded these studies on a cartoon and pounced it for transfer," Matthew Landrus of Oxford University told me, referring to a kind of tracing technique often employed by Renaissance-era artists. Landrus believes the painting's author is Bernardino Luini, the same artist that initially occurred to Parish.

In 2011, Simon took the *Salvator Mundi* back to London, this time with the painting traveling in the plane's cargo hold in a custom crate designed to insulate it from damage. By the time "Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan" opened in November 2011, the National

Gallery had sold out most of the tickets. In January, the museum pushed back its closing time until 10 p.m. in order to accommodate additional patrons.

To some critics, seeing the *Salvator Mundi* in the context of the established Leonardo canon proved clarifying. It was difficult, wrote Laura Cumming of the *Observer,* "to connect the dissolving sfumato" — the technique of gradually shading together tones and colors — "of the *Virgin and Child With Saint Anne* and *Saint John the Baptist,* a feat of diaphanous chalk and charcoal, with the hideously glib sfumato of the recently attributed *Salvator Mundi.*" Another critic, the *Telegraph*'s Richard Dorment, concluded the *Salvator Mundi* "looks like nothing else in the show … All I can say is that if Leonardo did paint it, then I'll bet a fiver he's also the joker behind the Turin Shroud."

Few observers issued as forceful a critique as Carlo Pedretti, a longtime scholar of da Vinci and a former chair in Leonardo studies at UCLA. In an opinion piece for the Vatican's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano,* Pedretti pointed out that years earlier, another *Salvator Mundi,* "a better version," in his estimation, had been floated as the original. Whether it was — the scholarly consensus today is that it wasn't — the public, Pedretti went on, should be cautious of "the sophisticated marketing operation" surrounding Simon and Parish's version. "There is … much in circulation in the art market," he wrote, "and it would be wise not to chase chimeras like the case of the 'rediscovered' *Salvator Mundi,* which in the end explains itself. Just look at it."

A condition of Simon and Parish's loan of the *Salvator Mundi* to the National Gallery was that the painting not be actively on sale, or "in the trade," in art-world parlance. Still, it escaped the attention of no one in the art world that the *Salvator Mundi* would be the only painting in Syson's upcoming exhibition to be privately owned, and by a consortium of dealers at that. (In late 2010, Simon and Parish had recruited a third partner, the Manhattan old-master dealer Warren Adelson, to help defray costs related to storage and insurance.) Its mere presence in the show would add millions of dollars to its value.

"Was it on the market?" Kemp later wrote, summing up the whispers surrounding the piece. "Would exhibiting it mean that the National Gallery was tacitly involved in a huge act of commercial promotion?"

In retrospect, it almost certainly was. A few months before the show's opening, Maxwell Anderson, the incoming head of the Dallas Museum of Art, arranged to see the *Salvator Mundi* in New York: If it was a Leonardo, it would be the perfect big-budget acquisition with which to start his tenure in Texas. Standing in front of the painting, "I was totally smitten," Anderson recalled.

He asked Simon whether other museum heads had been given an opportunity to purchase the painting. "Robert wasn't interested in sharing that information," Anderson told me. "And I didn't press him. Dealers tend to take confidentiality as seriously as any psychiatrist." Why

they do so is not only a matter of privacy: If an artwork is seen multiple times by experienced buyers but not actually purchased — or, more commonly, if it goes to auction but fails to fetch even its reserve — a stigma becomes attached to it. Buyers get skittish: Did other people, with more practiced eyes, see something they didn't? It becomes "burned," its value severely diminished.

In fact, according to multiple sources, in 2008 and 2009, both the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York had viewed the painting and declined to pursue an acquisition. Both institutions accepted the age of the painting and the connection to Leonardo, but given how much restoration work had been put into bringing the painting back to life, they balked at the $100 million price tag.

Still, as Anderson put it to me recently, "I was willing to roll the dice." He and Simon promised they would speak again after the National Gallery exhibition. In February 2012, Simon resumed his discussions with Anderson, who suggested that Simon, Adelson, and Parish let the museum hold onto the *Salvator Mundi* while they tried to fund-raise. "I thought if I could get donors and board members in front of it," Anderson recalled, "they'd be as enthusiastic as me. Which they most certainly were."

In March, Anderson stood up at a board meeting and showed a slide of the *Salvator Mundi.* "You could hear a pin drop," he remembered. "The room was fascinated. You started to get all this energy about what we might be able to do." Soon, he and Deedie Rose, the doyenne of Dallas philanthropists, were paying visits to dozens of deep-pocketed collectors and donors, waxing poetic on the upside for the museum and for Dallas as a whole: increased ticket revenue, more media attention, a sense of civic pride at being one of only two American museums to own a Leonardo painting. "We were methodical," Anderson told me. "We concentrated on the kind of individual who thought the city deserved the best and who would be able to give a million-dollar pledge on the painting." But ultimately the museum couldn't come close to the $100 million asking price and talks collapsed.

The negotiations left Simon, Parish, and Adelson exasperated. "It had been a long road," Parish told me. "Eight years long. We were out of pocket on all these costs. It was time the painting got run up the flagpole" — time to explore the possibility of a private sale.

The audience for such a sale was limited. Although there were a few dozen buyers who might be able to purchase a $100 million painting, there were far fewer who would be willing to spend $100 million on a heavily restored probable Leonardo.

One such buyer, a multibillionaire Russian oligarch named Dmitry Rybolovlev, was staying in his daughter's $88 million apartment at 15 Central Park West, a short drive away from the gallery where the *Salvator Mundi* was being stored. A mining-ore baron, Rybolovlev seemed to attract controversy wherever he went. He'd been jailed and tried for the murder of an archrival (he was eventually acquitted). His efforts to hide money and assets from his ex-

wife were held up in the Panama Papers exposé as "a textbook example of the lengths rich people (in most cases, men) go to protect their considerable wealth in case of a marital breakup." In 2008, he bought Donald Trump's Palm Beach estate for $95 million, a markup of $50 million and an investment that earned him a place in the Russiagate orbit.

According to a person with firsthand knowledge of the situation, in early 2013, Rybolovlev began exploring the possibility of purchasing the *Salvator Mundi* for his growing art collection. For assistance, he turned to the Swiss dealer Yves Bouvier, who had previously accumulated a number of high-value artworks on his client's behalf, including four Picassos and a Modigliani sculpture worth $60 million.

From his home in Singapore, Bouvier conducted some preliminary due diligence on the *Salvator.* It was a "nice" painting, he concluded, and worth purchasing, within reason. "I said to Dmitry, 'This is a real Leonardo but a small part is the original part, and you have to be careful,' " Bouvier told me. "I did not want to give him my personal guarantee on this painting. I said, 'If you like it, I will get it for you, but you need to buy it only because it is personally interesting to you as a decorative painting.' " Bouvier was in part calibrating his own risk in the deal: He thought there was a chance that the painting, if Rybolovlev ever tried to flip it, wouldn't hold up to scrutiny.

On March 20, 2013, Bouvier contacted Sotheby's, which would act as intermediary in the sale and protect both buyer and sellers if things went south. The same day, the Swiss dealer wired $63 million to Sotheby's, and on March 22, he flew from Singapore to New York. At the Sotheby's offices, Bouvier explained that he wanted to show the painting to an acquaintance to see what they thought of it. He did not specify the identity of this third party, and Sotheby's has subsequently claimed it did not ask. The painting was already on the premises; if Bouvier was ready, a staff member could place it in a carrying case and accompany the dealer to his friend's apartment.

In Rybolovlev's penthouse, the oligarch and the dealer retired to the living room, dozens of floors above Central Park. Bouvier says a young woman, possibly a girlfriend, translated for Rybolovlev. (Rybolovlev doesn't speak English, and Bouvier has no Russian.) Bouvier had not told Rybolovlev he would be bringing along the painting; now, with a flourish, he removed it from the carrying case. "It's so beautiful," the Russian said.

Bouvier reiterated his warning about the authorship of the painting. "I said, 'You're sure you want to buy this?' " he recalled. "He said, 'Yes, yes, I am sure.' " According to Bouvier, a deal was struck on the spot. He would acquire the painting for Rybolovlev for $127.5 million. What Bouvier did not disclose, Rybolovlev would later claim, is that Simon and his partners were selling it for only $80 million; more than that, Rybolovlev's lawyers have said in a suit, Bouvier actively barred his client from speaking to the sellers and manufactured fake negotiations intended to give Rybolovlev the impression that he was getting the best possible price for the *Salvator Mundi.* (Bouvier disputes Rybolovlev's account.) In the coming

weeks, Bouvier wired an additional $20 million to Sotheby's, bringing the total price to $83 million, $3 million of which belonged to the auction house for brokering the transaction. Then, on May 15, Bouvier sold Rybolovlev the painting.

Simon, Adelson, and Parish would also end up frustrated with the transaction. They had no idea their painting would be immediately sold at a higher price to a different buyer. When Sotheby's caught wind of their dissatisfaction, the auction house filed preemptively in federal court to block a potential suit. In a statement, it said it had not been aware of Bouvier's plans and accused the dealers of "experiencing seller's remorse." Simon, Adelson, and Parish are prevented by a nondisclosure agreement from discussing the dispute. But according to someone with knowledge of the situation, a lawsuit was never filed; instead, Sotheby's and the dealers settled quietly.

On a warm morning this spring, I visited Simon at his gallery on 80th Street. Throughout our three-hour conversation, he was polite and talkative, if wary — as he'd warned me in an earlier email, "I am frustrated and exhausted by some of the coverage of the *Salvator Mundi*." Particularly aggrieving, he told me, was the apparently endless fusillade of critical media coverage of the painting, which often seemed to him to come from people with very little firsthand experience of it and equally little training in fine-art authentication. Anyway, he continued, the "two sides" approach was hardly appropriate in this context. Some of the best scholars in the world had determined that the *Salvator Mundi* was a genuine Leonardo. (Kemp later expressed a similar sentiment to me: "You see this with coverage of celebrities. The first story is the building up of a new celebrity, and the second story is the celebrity's fall. Reporters enjoy knocking things down, don't they?")

While the painting was still in Rybolovlev's hand, these issues faded into the background. But then, in 2017, Rybolovlev, mired in his dispute with Bouvier, opted to unload the painting. According to someone with knowledge of the situation, Rybolovlev had numerous offers from private buyers, but, together with his new art adviser, Sandy Heller, he opted to sell through Christie's, which could turn the sale into something of an event. The move made good sense, given the course the *Salvator Mundi* had taken in previous years. "The owners before [Rybolovlev] had run into headwinds," another art-world insider told me. "Major museums were hesitant; the sellers weren't able to place it right away. But all of that becomes irrelevant when it goes to Christie's — and to the contemporary sale, of all things."

Christie's had decided to place the painting in an upcoming contemporary-art sale and subsequently twisted itself into knots attempting to defend the decision. "Despite being created approximately 500 years ago, the work of Leonardo is just as influential to the art that is being created today as it was in the 15th and 16th centuries," Loïc Gouzer, an executive at the auction house, said in a statement at the time. "We felt that offering this painting within the context of our 'Post-War and Contemporary Evening Sale' is a testament to the enduring relevance of this picture."

As one art-world insider said to me, it's a lot likelier that the real rationale had to do with money: Contemporary sales tend to be splashier than their old-master counterparts, and "there wouldn't be as much scrutiny. It became all about the marketing, and it was brilliantly marketed." Susan Moore, a market columnist for *Apollo,* said, "There has been nothing before or since to match the creative genius of the sale strategy for the *Salvator Mundi*." In an email message, she added that the way the painting was sold was emblematic of an auction world that increasingly focuses "on profit above all else and concentrates on developing business among the new and not very well-informed global superrich."

The advertising blitz that preceded the November auction was light on the details of the restoration — there was one small, blurry pre-restoration photograph of the piece in the 174-page catalogue — and heavy on the kind of language intended to entice trophy hunters: In videos, the painting's import was likened to "the discovery of a new planet," and one froth-flecked press release labeled it "the Divine Mona Lisa." Like a rock star, the *Salvator Mundi* hit the road, making tour stops in cities thick with wealthy potential buyers — Hong Kong, San Francisco, London. "People are deeply taken by this work," proclaimed Christie's executive François de Poortere. "You could buy it and just build an entire museum around it."

His words proved prophetic. On the evening of November 15, a swarm of art-world luminaries and celebrities streamed into Christie's headquarters in Rockefeller Center, where potential bidders on the *Salvator* were handed specially made red paddles. An image of the painting against a blue background smiled back at attendees. Within a few minutes, bidding had far exceeded the $100 million reserve and rocketed to $200 million, then $280 million. Less than 20 minutes after the auction for Lot 9B had commenced came the bang of the gavel at $400 million, with another $50 million going to the auction house — by hundreds of millions the most ever paid for an artwork at auction.

In early December, the New York *Times* revealed the identity of the buyer: a Saudi prince who is suspected to have bought the painting on behalf of Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman. The crown prince had reportedly bought it as a gift for the newly opened Louvre Abu Dhabi. The *Salvator Mundi,* a person with knowledge of the deal told the *Financial Times,* would be the glue that tightened the relationship between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. "It is supposed to be a state-to-state gift," the person said. "Like when France gave the Statue of Liberty to the United States."

More recently, rumors have emerged of an even more complicated scenario: Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, the *Daily Mail* has reported, bid against each other in the Christie's auction, both under the incorrect assumption that they were competing with Qatar, an opposing regional power, for the picture. But the auction house told me that, past the $230 million mark, there were just two bidders, and only one of them was bidding on behalf of a client in the Middle East. The other, Christie's says, came "from another part of the world." According

to someone with firsthand knowledge of the situation, that second bidder was the Chinese billionaire Liu Yiqian, who wanted the painting for his new museum in Shanghai, though Liu has publicly denied it.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi is officially the product of a collaboration between the French government and the government of the UAE. In practice, the arrangement is mostly a licensing deal, one with a tremendous upside for Abu Dhabi's rulers, who are hoping to turn the city into the Middle East's global hub. (See also: Abu Dhabi's Ferrari World theme park, NYU Abu Dhabi, and soon, maybe, the currently delayed Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.)

The works on display at the Louvre Abu Dhabi are largely loans from other institutions. The *Salvator Mundi* was supposed to be the cornerstone of its permanent collection and was set to be unveiled in September. Instead, Abu Dhabi's Department of Culture and Tourism has refused to discuss its whereabouts. Into this information vacuum have rushed conspiracy theories. Many are far-fetched: One, voiced by the website Narativ, relies on reports that Rybolovlev was a possible target in the Mueller investigation — and on Rybolovlev's proximity to Vladimir Putin — to link the painting to some sort of shadowy deal between "Trump and Russia."

Meanwhile, Jacques Franck, a Parisian scholar and occasional consultant to the Louvre, has repeatedly argued that the painting has not gone on view because of what he described to me as "doubts about the authenticity" on the part of the owner. For the same reason, a February piece in the *Telegraph* speculated, the Louvre in Paris canceled plans to request the picture for inclusion in an upcoming Leonardo exhibition. (The Louvre flatly denied these claims: The museum "asked for the loan of the *Salvator Mundi* for its October exhibition," a spokeswoman said, "and truly wishes to exhibit the artwork.")

According to several people with knowledge of the situation, the most plausible explanation is also the most straightforward. For the time being, the *Salvator Mundi* remains in a Switzerland free port — a kind of tax-free haven — while Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman mulls whether he wants to move forward with the gift or keep the painting for himself. "The Saudis are really trying to build their own tourism industry, and this would be a big tourist attraction," one source told me. For a ruler wrapped up in an international controversy over the murder of the Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, this would make a good deal of sense — MBS would be just another in a long line of owners who used the painting as a way to spruce up his image.

Wherever it is, as a top art-world official told me recently, "there's now so much money involved that there cannot be objective discussion. And the art press, which should be addressing this in depth, has been very quiet. No wonder: Most of their advertising is from Sotheby's and Christie's."

To Syson, the former National Gallery curator, the tragedy of the *Salvator Mundi* runs deeper than its disappearance or the arguments over its authenticity. The issue, he told me, is the transformation of the painting from potential artistic treasure to prize and bargaining chip. “If the picture had been bought by a leading public museum, or lent to one, in the months following the show in London, then I’m guessing the quality and tone of the debate would be very different now,” Syson told me. “The *Salvator Mundi* would have been constantly on view, and we would all have had the chance to go on thinking about it — about its condition and, yes, about its attribution as well. And we’d have been doing that thinking in a calm place. But,” Syson added ruefully, “something else happened: a melodrama of money.”

This article appears in the April 15, 2019, issue of* New York *Magazine.* ***Subscribe Now!*