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Painting bought for €150 found to be Salvador Dali's earliest surrealist work

Experts confirm that canvas bought from an antiques shop in Girona in 1988 was painted by the Catalan artist at the age of 17



Tomeu Lamo, Carmen Sandalinas Linares, Nicolas Descharnes and Jose Pedro Venzal Placido pose next to a copy of an unreleased work by Salvador Dali titled "The Intrauterine Birth of Salvador Dali" Photo: AFP

By Fiona Govan, Madrid

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An oil painting bought for a mere €150 (£120) from a dusty antiques shop in northeastern Spain 26 years ago has been discovered to be the earliest surrealist work by Salvador Dali, art experts confirmed on Thursday.

The colourful scene - depicting angels swirling in the sky around a womblike cloud formation above a flaming volcano - caught the eye of Tomeu L'Amo, a young art historian as he browsed canvases in a cluttered antique shop in the city of Girona, northeastern Spain in 1988.

He suspected it may have been an early work by Catalan artist Salvador Dali but the shopkeeper insisted that was impossible as it bore an inscription with the date 1896, eight years before Dali was born.

Nevertheless, Mr L'Amo purchased the artwork for 25,000 pesetas - around £120 in today's money - and spent the next quarter of a century trying to confirm his hunch.

"When I saw its colours I suspected it was a Dali. That was my opinion but I did not have proof. I investigated and little by little I became convinced that it was indeed an early work by Dali," he said at an unveiling of the painting in Madrid's Institute of Bellas Artes on Thursday.

A panel of experts gave a press conference to confirm the extraordinary provenance of the work.

"Not only is this discovery hugely important because it is considered the first surrealist work of Salvador Dali," said Nicolas Deschames, a world renowned expert on the artist, "but because of the meaning and context it can bring to many of his subsequent works." He explained that painting, which has been entitled "The Intrauterine Birth of Salvador Dali", explores a recurring theme in the works and writings of the artist, who died aged 84 at his home in Figueras on Catalonia's Costa Brava in 1989.

"It is the only pictorial representation of a recurring theme in the writings of Salvador Dali something the artist called his Intrauterine birth in his autobiography," Mr Deschames said.

The painting has been dated to 1921, when the artist was just 17 years old and several years before Dali was thought to have joined the surrealist movement.

The painting is believed to show a representation of the artist himself in the womb with his brother, who died before Dali was born, being transformed into an angel. It is said to be influenced by the work of Watteau, Raphael and El Greco, masters who Dali was known to have greatly admired.

A team of experts used a series of technological methods to help determine the painting's authenticity. Infrared photography of the canvas revealed lines made by the artist that were consistent with a style he used in later works.

Analysis of the paint used on the canvas proved it could not have been created before 1909 and comparison of the lettering of the inscription with hundreds of other known Dali works by a well-respected handwriting expert showed it was consistent with Dali's own hand.

José Pedro Venzal, the handwriting expert who regularly carries out analysis for Interpol, revealed that the inscription contained a corrected spelling mistake, one that Dali oft repeated in later life.

The ten word dedication in the lower righthand corner of the painting written in Catalan translates as "To My Dear Teacher on the day of his birth", with the date 27-IX-96.

Mr L'Amo believes Dali, who had a reputation for making outrageous claims and carrying out media stunts, used a numerology code to come up with date.

"Dali must be laughing in his grave at the thought that he managed to fool everyone for so many years," he said.

Describing his joy at finally confirming that he had stumbled across an unknown Dali original, Mr L'Amo said: "I was very happy. I felt like a kid in a candy store." He said he had sold the work for "an undisclosed amount" last month to a private collector who wishes to remain anonymous.

The Gala-Salvador Dali Foundation, which runs a museum in the artist's birthplace of Figueres, has yet to recognise the work as a Dali original.