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**Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman appears to have 'lost' the world's most expensive painting. The Leonardo da Vinci masterpiece, Salvator Mundi, may hold the key to the Trump-Russia investigation. And, the artwork itself could be evidence of collusion.**

Leonardo da Vinci's 'last' masterpiece was to be unveiled on September 18 at the spellbinding new Louvre in Abu Dhabi, but the exhibit was put on a temporary hold, amid rumours the painting was [lost](#).

The art world has become increasingly [alarmed](#). After all, Salvator Mundi is the most expensive artwork ever sold. "Nobody outside the immediate Arab hierarchy knows where it is," Da Vinci scholar Martin Kemp [told](#) The Times.

Questions are being raised. First, why did the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, an art novice, [buy](#) the masterpiece? Secondly, why did he overpay for it by \$300 million? Even for the stupendously wealthy Prince Mohammed bin Salman, that's not just a simple rounding error. How do you misplace a \$450 million painting anyway?

We can also reveal Special Counsel Robert Mueller is [investigating](#) both the buyer and the seller of the Da Vinci masterpiece as part of the Trump-Russia investigation.

All the intrigue suits Salvator Mundi's already storied past well, but as I write this, no-one has seen the rare masterpiece in over a year, and its exact whereabouts have been unknown for over 100 days.



The Louvre Abu Dhabi was to exhibit the Da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* from September 18, this year.

## Masterpiece or Fraud?

Leonardo da Vinci is said to have painted the *Salvator Mundi*, which literally translates to 'Savior of the World', as a male counterpart to his *Mona Lisa*, and an homage to his other Christ masterpiece, *The Last Supper*. The result of those intersecting ideas is an eerie portrait of Jesus Christ in a blue renaissance robe, offering benediction with his right hand raised and while holding a glass orb in his left.

Da Vinci was not prolific. He only painted 20 great works his entire life. That's why the art world heralded *Salvator Mundi*'s rebirth over a decade ago with a messianic zeal only it could muster. "A painting of the most iconic figure in the world by the most important artist of all time," gushed Loic Gouzer, co-chairman of post-war and contemporary art at Christie's. "The opportunity to bring this masterpiece to the market is an honour that comes around once in a lifetime."

*Salvator Mundi* has a pedigree, but also a bit of a sketchy past. The painting was first recorded in the collection of King Charles I in the early 1600s, but since then 'Salvator' was inauspiciously passed down from one lesser royal collection to the next, until it eventually sold for a mere £45 at a Sotheby's auction in 1958, before disappearing for more than half a century.

In 2005, 'Salvator Mundi' had its second coming when a consortium of businessmen acquired the damaged masterpiece from the estate at a small regional auction house. The Savior needed saving itself. Christ's hair and face were painted over, and the canvas ripped on the side of his face.

It took six years of painstaking research and inquiry by the world's 'leading authorities on the works and career of Da Vinci' to not only authenticate the lost masterpiece but to completely restore it, allowing Christie's to present it to the world as it would have looked when Da Vinci painted it.



The reborn Salvator Mundi was unveiled at London's National Gallery in 2011 to much fanfare, although you'd be hard-pressed to [find](#) mention of the masterpiece in the gallery's official guide. You can read a back-pedaling attribution to Da Vinci in the Gallery's statement: "an important opportunity to test this new attribution by direct comparison with works universally accepted as Leonardo's."

As if that weren't enough, a quick [reading](#) of Jonathan Jones' review in The Guardian would convince any ardent art follower something was afoot. "The transparent orb is far too brilliantly painted to be the work of one of his disciples," Jones wrote, referring to a painting technique not yet invented in Leonardo's time. Some [doubted](#) it was a genuine Da Vinci, others thought the reconstruction was heavy-handed. Despite the question marks over its authenticity, the world's wealthiest art collectors scrambled to acquire it.



## A Russian in the House

Dmitry Rybolovlev's story is typical of many Russian oligarchs. He made his fortune as a potash miner until the Kremlin bought him out, sending him into a friendly "exile". Rybolovlev chose the Grimaldi House of Monaco to [set up](#) shop. He bought the luxurious penthouse "La Belle Epoque" on Monaco's famous seaside cliffs, the AC Monaco football team, 10% in the Bank of Cyprus and allegedly an extensive network of corruptible judges, ministers and other officials. He also met Swiss art dealer Yves Bouvier, from whom he bought about \$2 billion in art. Rybolovlev officially [paid](#) Bouvier a 2% commission per painting, but he later found out the Swiss art dealer was also acting for the seller, marking up prices and pocketing the margin along with both buyer's and seller's commissions. That is how Rybolovlev came to [own](#) The Salvator Mundi for \$127 million, instead of its valued \$80 million. The two men have been squabbling in court ever since. Both have been arrested. And Rybolovlev is suing Sotheby's for knowing and not telling, he was being ripped off. The case itself could be a scam: money launderers often sue each other to wash their money with a judge's order. Since March 2013, the now \$127 million 'Salvator Mundi' has been hanging in Rybolovlev's penthouse in New York City. Rybolovlev sees no shame in the \$47 million he lost in the purchase of the masterpiece. It wouldn't be the first time someone's accused him of overpaying.

In addition to several corruption [investigations](#) in Monaco and Europe, Rybolovlev is also under investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller for the \$95 million purchase of Donald Trump's home in Palm Beach in 2006, which Trump had

bought four years earlier for \$41 million. There was no market reason for the \$ 54 million mark-up, except to save Trump from another bankruptcy. After struggling to sell it, Rybolovlev demolished the property to sell it for its seafront land. Experts point out all three of Rybolovlev's investment interests – football, art and real estate – are prime vehicles for money laundering.

The corruption investigations into Rybolovlev may connect his finances directly to the Kremlin. Especially if they prove he manages the assets of Russian deputy premier Yuri Trutnev, as claimed in Der Spiegel in November.

Rybolovlev occupies the same proximity to Putin as Oleg Deripaska, making him extremely rich and powerful and a loyal ally of the Russian president. Rybolovlev regularly mixes affairs of state with his personal business. In 2016, he met Donald Trump twice in the final days of the campaign. Both men deny the meetings took place, but radar tracking reveals their planes coincided on airport tarmacs in both Charlotte, NC and Las Vegas, just days before the election.



George Nader is an emissary for the Crown princes of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi.

## The ‘Other’ Don Jr. Meeting

There has been a lot of ink spilled on the June 9 meeting at Trump Tower, involving Donald Trump, Jr., Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya and a significant offer of dirt on Hillary Clinton, to which Don, Jr. famously responded, “I love it.”

But a far more significant meeting took place at Trump Tower three weeks later which has received far less coverage, and yet it may be the most important evidence of collusion Robert Mueller has uncovered. The August event may well become “the single most important event of Trump-Russia,” Seth Abramson, author of “[Proof of Collusion](#)” told me this week.

Erik Prince arranged the meeting. Prince is a mercenary who is notorious for his work with Blackwater. He is still a gun for hire working for the Chinese and Emiratis yet somehow, Prince still played a pivotal, yet unofficial role for the Trump Transition and [coordinating](#) this meeting was as significant as they come. Prince planned to meet his guests at a nearby hotel to avoid the glare of the media assembled in Trump Tower’s gilded lobby.

You’re wondering who the guests were? George Nader, a Lebanese-American businessman who was acting as an emissary for both the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman (MbS) and the de facto leader of the UAE, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ). Nader was accompanied by Joel Zamel, the Australian-born Israeli founder of Psy-Group, and an expert in social media manipulation.

As the three men made small talk, President Obama was on TV pleading with the Republican Party to reject Trump as their candidate, and calling him “unfit to serve.” Prince smiled and checked his watch. He knew Obama’s criticism would only strengthen Trump’s chances. “We have the green light to go up,” Prince told Nader and Zamel.

The three men made their way out of the hotel for the short walk to Trump Tower through rush-hour traffic, passed the media in the lobby and up to the 26th floor in one of those golden elevators. Donald Trump, Jr. was already in the conference room with Stephen Miller, when the three men walked in.



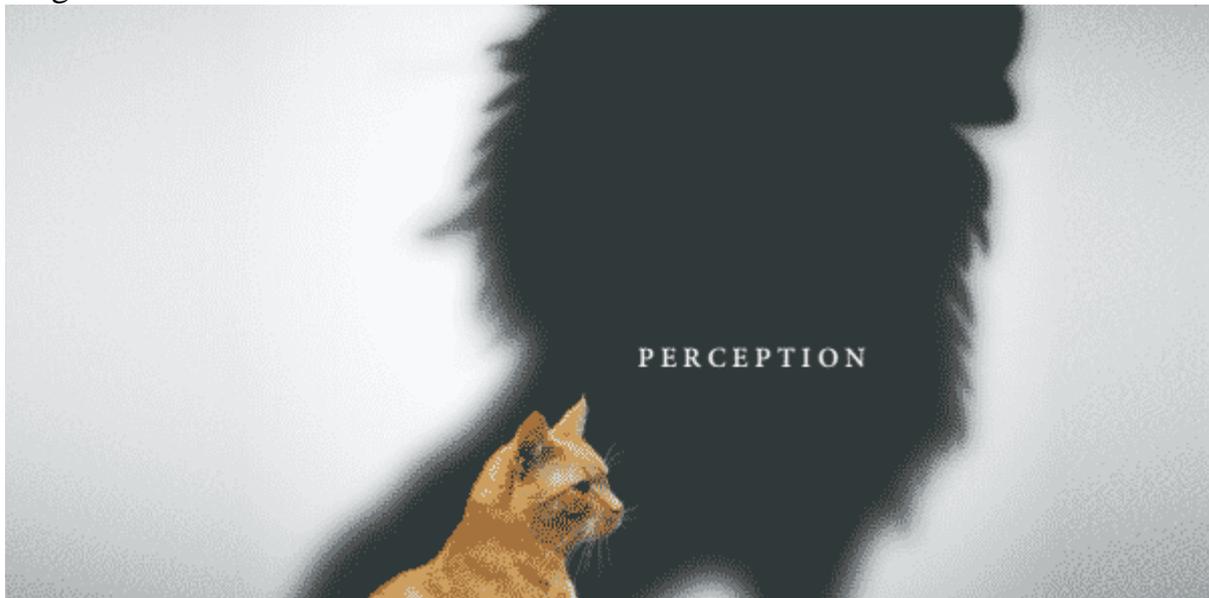
Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed poses for a photo with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during the Saudi-UAE Summit in Jeddah. Reuters

## The Plot To Elect a President

Nader began his pitch. The Saudi and Emirati princes “were eager to help your father win election as president,” Nader said. He said Zamel’s Psy Group was particularly successful at social media manipulation and the two crown princes would bankroll a multi-million dollar plan drawn up by Zamel, to help elect his father president.

Psy-Group had figured out how to shift public sentiment by creating fake news, publishing it on fake news sites and then amplifying it through a network of some 5,000 fake social media accounts. The company’s side-hustle was providing services in the dark arts of honey-trapping, hacking and blackmail, for a fee.

Not surprisingly Don. Jr. “responded approvingly” to the pitch, according to the New York Times but he later claimed he turned down the offer. There are no contracts or invoices to prove the campaign was ever executed. Lawyers for both sides deny any campaign collaboration. Of course, if they had, it would have been illegal.



Psy-Group’s marketing material.

## The Facts Don’t Concur

In reality, there is evidence Psy-Group carried out some work for the campaign. For one thing, the Trump Campaign’s main digital partner, Cambridge Analytica, didn’t have the tools to deliver the social media content the campaign constantly credits for its victory.

Cambridge Analytica’s raison d’etre was psychographic profiling using stolen Facebook data. Psy-Group brought to the table a fake news factory proven to sway minds.

CamAnalytica and Psy also appeared to let the cat out of the bag when, one month after Trump's victory, they publicly [announced](#) they would partner on future campaigns together, including a joint pitch the U.S. State Department, but failed to explain how they were introduced to each other.

Sources also tell the Daily Beast [contacts](#) between Psy-Group and the Trump Campaign were far more extensive than first reported, involving at least two other members of Trump's inner circle. Company founder Zamel also spoke to Trump officials about helping Saudi Arabia and regime change in Iran.

Psy-Group is based in Israel but it is registered in Cyprus and corporately aligns in off-shore holding databases with companies owned by Russian oligarchs and banks. Mueller has also taken a specific interest in Zamel, and his close relationship with two of Putin's most powerful oligarchs, the aforementioned Oleg Deripaska and Dmitry Robolovlov.

In February, Mueller [subpoenaed](#) the Cypriot bank accounts of the Psy-Group and [dispatched](#) a team of investigators to Israel this Spring to interview Zamel. This clearly struck a nerve. Within a week, Psy-Group shuttered the entire operation.

And remember, George Nader is cooperating with the investigation and he was in on every conversation with Don, Jr., Zamel, Kushner and the two crown princes. Nader has already testified before a grand jury and acknowledged making a \$2m payment to Zamel. Psy-Group almost certainly worked for the campaign, the question is how did they get paid?

## Art of the Deal

\$300 million. That's the incredible profit Rybolovlev made on the sale of Salvator Mundi. \$300 million is also the amount Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (acting through an intermediary) "accidentally" overpaid for the artwork.

At first, laundering hundreds of millions of dollars in full view of a global audience, may not seem like the smartest move, but the facts support this may have been what the two crown princes and Dmitry Rybolovlev tried to do.

Rybolovlev put the masterpiece up for auction through Christie's in November 2017. The estimated price for Lot 9B was between \$80 and \$120 million. Christies's auctioneers were [stunned](#) when bidding quickly surged past \$80 million in just seconds and then, just as effortlessly over \$130 million. Two anonymous bidders continuously outbid each other, not stopping until they had run up the price to \$450.3 million, making it the single most expensive work of art ever sold at auction.

In the ensuing days, The New York Times [unmasked](#) Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman as the masterpiece's real buyer but the identity of the second bidder stayed hidden for months.

In March, The Daily Mail revealed the counter-bidder was Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ). The princes claimed they had no idea the other was bidding and dismissed the whole thing as a mistake.

To be clear, these are the very same crown princes George Nader represented at the August 3rd meeting with Donald Trump, Jr. and whom, Nader promised, would pay for the social media campaign.

On the seller's side, Dmitry Rybolovlev was not only well-acquainted with Psy-Group's founder but as an owner of the Bank of Cyprus, he could quietly carve out payments to Psy-Group, along with any kickbacks to Putin, without anyone noticing

It's worth noting that four months after the Da Vinci auction Mueller sent investigators to Israel to ask about specific deposits to Psy-Group's Cypriot bank accounts. The FBI travelled to Israel in February, a month before the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince was outed as Salvator Mundi's second bidder.



Donald Trump started his first foreign trip in Saudi Arabia. Here he's with Prince Mohammed's father, King Salman (center), and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

## Savior of the World

I started writing this piece after watching the giddy display of backslapping by Vladimir Putin and Mohammed at the recent G20 summit. The two looked like they had gotten away with something big, Is it possible the high fiving was over this transaction?

The whereabouts of Salvator Mundi remain unknown; there are no plans to exhibit the artwork; the mystery of what happened at auction is deepening and Mueller's relentless investigation into Psy-Group continues. These are all things that suggest to me there is much more to discover about the August 3 meeting and the Saudi, UAE and Israeli involvement in Trump-Russia.

The entire affair supports the new prevailing theory about the direction of the Mueller investigation.

Up until now, Robert Mueller's focus has been squarely on Russian collusion but as citizens from other countries are implicated, it seems the Special Counsel has widened his purview from just collusion with Russia, to collusion with a multi-nation alliance of at least four countries including Russia, Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates and Israel.

Gregg Smith, the former CEO of Prince's Frontier Services Group told me this week he believes "the Israelis, Emiratis and Saudis all had a role and [Erik] Prince was [Steve] Bannon's conduit to them."

There can be no certainty when the game is subterfuge, and we need to wait for Mueller's final report before we reach any conclusions, but if Leonardo's Salvator Mundi proves to be a key which helps unlock Trump-Russia, "Savior of the World" could prove to be nothing short of prophetic.