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Bloomberg

Why Are Critics Calling the \$450 Million Painting Fake?

The art world and chattering classes are casting doubt on a recently sold Leonardo da Vinci. Experts say it's real.

By

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17 november 2017 00:30 CET

Even before Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* went to auction

Wednesday night at Christie's in New York, naysayers from around the art world were savaging its authenticity. Various advisers were muttering darkly, both online and in the auction previews. A day before the sale, New York magazine's Jerry Saltz wrote that though he's "no art historian or any kind of expert in old masters," just "one look at this painting tells me it's no Leonardo."

And that was before the painting obliterated every previous auction record, selling, with premium, for \$450 million.



Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*, which sold at Christie's on Wednesday for \$450 million.

Source: Christie's

Shortly after the gavel came down, the *New York Times* published a piece by the critic Jason Farago wherein—after also noting that he's “not the man to affirm or reject its attribution”—declared that the painting is “a proficient but not especially distinguished religious picture from turn-of-the-16th-century Lombardy, put through a wringer of restorations.”

Had the buyer of the most expensive painting in the world just purchased a piece of junk?

“All of the most relevant people believe it's by Leonardo, so the rather extensive criticism that goes ‘I don't know anything about old masters, but I don't think it's by Leonardo’ shouldn't ever have gone to print,” says British old masters dealer Charles Beddington. “Yes, it's a picture that needed to be extensively restored. But the fact that it's unanimously accepted as a Leonardo shows it's in good enough condition that there weren't questions of authenticity.”

After speaking to multiple prominent old masters dealers— a group whose members aren't exactly known for holding their tongues— the real issue regarding the Leonardo's validity seems to be a question of education: “All old masters have had work done to them,” says dealer Rafael Valls, whose London gallery is situated directly across from Christie's.

“They’ve all been scrubbed and cleaned, but when you think about a particular painting and say, ‘Oh, it’s by Titian, but a quarter of it was recreated by other restorers,’ it still is what it is.”



A detail of the painting.

Source: Christie's

Those in the art world who dismiss its authenticity, dealers say, are simply transferring criteria used to judge contemporary art onto old masters—the equivalent of comparing the specs of a new Honda against a Ferrari from 1965. They're both cars, but that's where the similarities end.

“To a certain extent, you have to put condition aside,” says dealer Johnny van Haeften. “Of course it's not perfect, and of course it's not mint. But can you get another one?”

The Backstory

The painting was probably created in 1500. By the 1600s, it had made it into the court of Charles I, after which it popped up intermittently in inventory records, disappearing in the 1700s and reappearing in 1900, when it was counted among the inventory of a manor house in Richmond. It was then sold in 1958 and disappeared yet again, only to resurface at auction in 2005, when three old masters dealers picked it up for \$10,000.



A black-and-white photograph of the painting, as it existed in 1904.

Source: Christie's

The dealers hired noted restorer Dianne Dwyer Modestini (previously of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art) to remove much of the filth and varnish, at which point the painting was effectively a shell of its former self. Significant portions of the composition were missing altogether.

"I've seen the picture stripped," says Van Haeften, who is friends with one of the work's previous owners. "There are damages to the panel, and it has certainly had a checkered career."

Bruised and Battered

The Leonardo could have been damaged in any number of ways. First, there's transportation to consider—it had to make its way from Leonardo's studio to England on horseback, or in a cart, and then by boat. Then consider the conditions of wherever it hung for the next several centuries: There could have been a leaky roof, a moldy room, or a smoky candelabra nearby.



A screenshot of a video, released by Christie's, that transitioned from an infrared scan of the painting to the restored work.

Source: Christie's

Even in the 18th century, people were aware that their paintings got filthy, so “normally, every time paintings changed hands,” dealer Beddington says, “they got cleaned quite harshly.” This Leonardo, he says, “obviously changed hands quite a bit.”

Every time a painting was scrubbed, “when you clean something like that orb, which is delicately painted, you end up taking something away from it,” Beddington continues. “And that’s normal.”

When Modestini restored the painting, therefore, it was expected that she would paint in what had been lost—both through her cleaning and those of previous owners—in a way that was “keeping in character with what is left,” Beddington says.

A Question of Degrees

The question for most old masters buyers, then, is not whether a painting is “authentic,” but to what degree it’s original. “For the vast majority of old masters, condition is of enormous importance,” says Van Haefen.

Many old masters have only minimal damage or restoration—“an awful lot of Canalettos are in a near-perfect state,” says dealer Simon Dickinson—but when it comes to infinitely rarer artworks, “maybe in the case of a Michelangelo, Raphael, and Vermeer, you have to compromise on the condition,” van Haefen says.

“Because there’s no other possibility of acquiring one.”

“The market tolerance for a da Vinci is quite different than the tolerance for a Van Gogh, say,” says Brooke Lampley, Sotheby’s incoming fine art division chairman, in an interview on Bloomberg Surveillance. “Because even though a Van Gogh is scarce, and someone will pay \$81 million for a great one, there are still more to be had than da Vinci, for whom there are fewer than 20 paintings in the world. People have a much higher threshold for what over-painting or condition problems there could be in a painting.”

It was only natural, therefore, that would-be Leonardo buyers would be willing to compromise on this more than on others; they weren’t going to find a better one.



An additional detail of the painting.

Source: Christie’s

But the buyer didn't compromise quite as much as critics would like to believe. The two central critiques—namely, that it's too stiff, and that it doesn't look like the Mona Lisa—"are ridiculous," Beddington says. "The composition of Christ the Redeemer is always a stiff composition." The fact that it bears little resemblance to the Mona Lisa, he continues, "is that it's a completely different type of painting."

More Than the Painting

The dynamism of the composition, however, is only part of the painting's value. "You're buying much more than the painting, you're buying its history," says Dickinson. "Who's looked at it, who's touched it: You're selling a dream: that what you're in front of, Leonardo was once in front of."

The work, therefore, is as much an artifact as it is a painting, its reputation and history just as talismanic a pull as its actual composition. (Similarly, people don't crowd the Mona Lisa in the Louvre every day just because they're devotees of art history.)

"You have to accept it's more an object than a work of art in a perfect state," says Van Haeften.

