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Fresh doubt over Salvator Mundi, the world's most expensive painting

National Gallery failed to mention suspicion before artwork sold for \$450m

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Experts have questioned whether *Salvator Mundi* is an autograph work by Leonardo da VinciALAMY

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The authenticity of the world's most expensive painting has been thrown into doubt by claims that the National Gallery gave the misleading impression that *Salvator Mundi* was definitely the sole work of Leonardo da Vinci.

The painting soared in value after it was included in the gallery's blockbuster Leonardo show in 2011 and was described in the exhibition catalogue as an autograph work — an original executed without the help of Leonardo's assistants.

It was subsequently sold for a record-breaking \$450 million in November 2017, to a buyer thought to have been acting for Saudi Arabia's effective ruler. However, according to claims in a new book, the gallery failed to record the doubts of the art historians it had gathered together to analyse who had painted *Salvator Mundi*.



Bidding representatives applaud after Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* sold for \$450 million in New York in 2017JULIE JACOBSON/AP

The gallery asked five Leonardo experts in 2008 to examine the painting, which had already undergone restoration. According to the art scholar Ben Lewis, who spoke to those present, during research for his book serialised in the Times Magazine today, their verdict on the painting's authenticity can be described as "two Yeses, one No, and two No Comments".

Despite this, no mention was made by the gallery in its catalogue of any doubts over its status as an "autograph" Leonardo. This was a crucial factor for the painting's extraordinary escalation in value from \$1,175 in 2005 to \$450 million in 2017.

The author of the authoritative register of Leonardo's works, the catalogue raisonné, Frank Zöllner, has continuously questioned whether the painting is an "autograph" work.

Luke Syson, the gallery's curator at the time, told Lewis that it had been a mistake not to have invited Zöllner to give his views on the painting before describing it as an "autograph" work.

When *Salvator Mundi* was first put on public display at the gallery in 2011 the exhibition did not state that there was "any kind of question mark over it", Lewis writes, suggesting that the gallery had seen "an opportunity for a dramatic pictorial premiere" in its 2011 exhibition.

Mr Syson told the author that he had "catalogued it more firmly" because he was "making a proposal and could make it cautiously or with some degree of scholarly oomph".

Mr Syson, who is now director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, also said of the 2008 meeting: "There are all sorts of reasons for people to be more circumspect about their views now because so much has happened. . . and there was pretty much unanimous agreement that what they were looking at was Leonardo."

Salvator Mundi was due to be exhibited at the Louvre Abu Dhabi last year but its appearance was cancelled without explanation. The painting's location is not known. In addition to the \$400 million sale price, fees of \$50 million were also paid. The Saudis have not commented on Lewis's revelations.

His book *The Last Leonardo* also explores new doubts over the painting's provenance, which had been generally accepted to have been in Charles I's collection even though it does not have his stamp on the reverse.

Lewis writes that as recently as last year it was discovered that a version of *Salvator Mundi*, which was attributed to Leonardo until the mid-19th century and now hangs in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, does have the Charles I stamp on the reverse.

Lewis's book outlines how many institutions have cast doubt on *Salvator Mundi*'s attribution and rejected opportunities to buy it. Martin Kemp, an expert present at the National Gallery display in 2008, is confident that it is a Leonardo, but his Oxford University colleague Matthew Landrus believes that most of it was done by the artist's assistant Bernardino Luini.

Lewis reveals that the price paid for the painting at auction in the US in 2005 was only \$1,175. He identified the previous owner, Basil Hendry, from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who had been unaware of its subsequent history.

Mr Hendry said that Christie's visited his recently deceased father's house in 2005 to examine artworks, including *Salvator Mundi*, but declined to put it in its sale. Christie's told Lewis that it "did not have any employees who recall this visit or can verify that it took place"

adding that given that the painting was “almost entirely overpainted, it is not surprising that it might have been overlooked by any professional appraiser”.

The National Gallery said that it “makes careful consideration before including any loan in an exhibition. It weighs up the advantage in including it — the benefit to the public in seeing the work, the advantage to the argument and scholarship of the exhibition as a whole. On that occasion we felt that it would be of great interest to include *Salvator Mundi* in *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter of the Court of Milan* as a new discovery as it was an important opportunity to test a new attribution by direct comparison with works universally accepted as Leonardo’s.”

Hunt for the truth

Ben Lewis is an art critic, author and filmmaker who has been trying to unearth the truth surrounding the world’s most expensive — and most controversial — painting (Kaya Burgess writes).

He has made documentaries and TV series for the BBC and for German, Spanish and Danish television about tax fraud in the film industry.

Lewis, 52, was an art critic at the *London Evening Standard* for three years and in 2012 directed and wrote a film called *Poor Us: An Animated History of Poverty*, which won the Peabody Award.

He gained a master’s degree in history and history of art from the University of Cambridge and studied art history at the Free University of Berlin.

The author, who lives in London, has written *The Last Leonardo*, described as an “epic quest” to ascertain whether *Salvator Mundi*, which sold for a record-breaking sum at auction in 2017, was really painted by Leonardo da Vinci.

Lewis was made a visiting fellow at the Warburg Institute for the study of cultural history in London. His website states that he “has gained immense experience of the global cultural scene thanks both to his documentaries, and to his articles and reviews in British, European and American journals”.

