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Michael Lewis, the Mega-Author Behind ‘Moneyball,’ Is a ‘Salvator Mundi’ Skeptic. Here’s His Argument

Lewis's new "Against the Rules" podcast explains why there might be cause to doubt the world's most expensive painting.

Tim Schneider, April 30, 2019



Author Michael Lewis talks with host Seth Meyers during an interview on November 7, 2017. Photo courtesy Lloyd Bishop/NBC/NBCU Photo Bank via Getty Images.

In best-selling books such as *Moneyball*, *The Big Short*, and *The Fifth Risk*, journalist and author Michael Lewis has taken on antagonists as formidable as structural bias, predatory banks, and a presidential administration working to hollow out government from the inside. But in the just released fourth episode of his new podcast “[Against the Rules with Michael Lewis](#),” he’s set his sights on an unlikely character: the art authenticator.

“[The Hand of Leonardo](#),” as the episode is called, hinges on the lingering uncertainty surrounding the authorship of Leonardo’s *Salvator Mundi*. Lewis’s interest in the piece derives from its paradoxical status as both the most expensive artwork ever auctioned—its price at auction crossed [\\$450 million](#), in case you’ve been in a medically induced trance since early November 2017—and an artwork lacking unquestionable, objective proof of its creator.

Lewis admits that he isn’t sure who painted the now-famous work. But to him, the point is that no one else can be, either, based on the imperfect evidence available. Instead, the ruling lies with art authenticators who are heavily incentivized to declare competent if not necessarily spectacular works to be masterpieces by canonical talents, even in the face of legitimate doubt. (I [explored](#) this same line of reasoning last year through the lens of [David Killen’s storage-locker haul of possible Willem de Koonings](#).)



Left: *Salvator Mundi*; right: Author Michael Lewis attends the New York premiere of *The Big Short*, the film adaptation of his best-selling book about the 2008 financial crisis. (Photo by Laura Cavanaugh/FilmMagic. Courtesy of Getty Images.)

In signature fashion, Lewis is after something much larger than *Salvator Mundi*’s attribution. “Against the Rules” in general turns on the theme of the loss of fairness in modern life, and here his argument winds through fellow best-selling

author Walter Isaacson (who expressed his own doubts about the painting in his blockbuster biography Leonardo da Vinci), the market for used cars, and the ratings agencies pressured to give high marks to the toxic home-mortgage assets that crippled the world economy in 2008.

Lewis uses all of these examples to conclude that the only types of “referees” still thriving in the world today are the ones who have been compromised—or, at the very least, whose impartiality has good reason to be questioned. Isaacson even casts himself as a miniature case-in-point, as he worries in his interview with Lewis that he got “wrapped up in the excitement” and dialed back his concerns about the painting’s authorship when he participated on a Christie’s panel about *Salvator Mundi* in the lead-up to the historic auction.

The episode also reveals Lewis’s surprising personal connection to the art world. His first job after earning his undergraduate degree in the early 1980s was as an art handler (or, as he labels it, a “stockboy”) for Wildenstein & Co., the illustrious Old Master and early Modernist dealer. A key scene involves his memorable encounter with former Metropolitan Museum of Art director Thomas Hoving, who “made a fetish of his first impressions” of the works at Wildenstein and alleged that half the paintings in American museums were created by someone other than the artist listed on the placard.

“The Hand of Leonardo” is the fourth episode of “Against the Rules with Michael Lewis.” Previous episodes have targeted the societal and personal tensions sparked by NBA officiating, the American student loan market, and Facebook’s harvesting of personal data for profit. The podcast is produced by Pushkin Industries, the podcasting company co-founded by Jacob Weisberg and best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell. New episodes are available weekly through Apple, Stitcher, and other major audio distributors.