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Beware art inspectors with first-class flights

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Salvator Mundi, which Martin Kemp helped to authenticate as a Leonardo. He said that art historians' opinions were being bought by first-class flights

CHRISTIE'S/REUTERS; SIMONE PADOVANI/GETTY IMAGES

Watch out for art historians turning left on flights, an expert has said, because if they are travelling first class then they may have accepted lavish hospitality from rich clients seeking their endorsement for a contentious work of art.

Martin Kemp, a leading authority on Leonardo da Vinci who played a pivotal role in authenticating *Salvator Mundi* and an emeritus professor at Oxford University, said that such inducements were a corrupting influence. His expertise helped the controversial painting of Jesus Christ to fetch \$450 million last year, setting a world record for any work of art at auction.

Professor Kemp said that he had previously been flown first class and put up in swanky hotels by art owners wanting his seal of approval for their works, but regretted it. “I can, along with other people, obviously add millions and millions to the value of these pictures,” he said. In his new book, *Living with Leonardo*, Professor Kemp said that he now refused to take money for inspecting works, adding that he had an “unpleasant experience some years ago”.

“I don’t even take expenses,” he told the Edinburgh International Book Festival. “I took expenses as a young art historian, was put up in a very swanky hotel, given first-class travel across the Atlantic, and it is corrupting. You have got enough baggage you are taking in when you are looking at an object anyway, particularly with Leonardo.”

It is relatively common for art historians to accept fees, although one warned that if they acquired a reputation for accepting lavish hospitality it could damage their reputations. Bendor Grosvenor, a specialist in paintings by Old Master artists and presenter of *Britain’s Lost Masterpieces*, said that he did not have a problem with experts charging “reasonable fees of £500 or £1,000” but added: “The art world is quite small, so people who do take cheques for opinions — everyone knows about them and their opinion is devalued. So you can only get away with that behaviour a few times.”

Professor Kemp said that his opinions on whether he thought that Leonardo did actually paint *Salvator Mundi* had led to him being subjected to abuse on the internet. He is also at odds with many of his peers. This month Matthew Landrus, his fellow art historian at Oxford University, said that the primary painter of *Salvator Mundi* was Leonardo’s studio assistant, Bernardino Luini. Other art historians have consistently questioned how much Leonardo was involved in the painting of the work. Professor Kemp joked that as Mr Landrus was one of his former doctorate students he “obviously didn’t teach him properly”.

Professor Kemp gave a favourable opinion on the authenticity of *Salvator Mundi* when it first appeared publicly at the National Gallery in 2011 and later helped Christie’s auction house last year with a promotional video before the sale of the painting. The painting is due to be shown at Louvre Abu Dhabi next month. He said that he was working on a book with Robert Simon, one of the dealers who noticed the painting at an auction in Louisiana and had a hunch that it was an unattributed Leonardo. He said that “looking at the whole scene” including the rock crystal sphere that Christ was holding and the depth of field convinced him. “With Leonardo you have this wonderful body of context of extra evidence . . . it is rock solid, it is damaged but rock solid.”

He also cited the abuse and court cases following his support for *La Bella Principessa*, a drawing in ink and coloured chalks on vellum that he said he had “not the slightest doubt” was by Leonardo, even after Shaun Greenhalgh, the convicted art forger, claimed that he had faked it and that the woman portrayed was a worker from a Co-op store in Bolton.

In his book Professor Kemp also decries the art market as an “unregulated jungle” where people exploit their backgrounds in aristocratic families to deceive auctioneers.

CONTROVERSIAL CLAIMS

Jackson Pollock: Red, Black & Silver

Said to have been painted by Pollock on Long Island in the summer of 1956, shortly before he died in a car crash. The painting was owned by Ruth Kligman, Pollock’s mistress. While she claimed he painted the work for her, Pollock’s wife, Lee Krasner, claimed that it was a fake. In 2013 a forensic scientist found traces of Pollock’s hair secreted in the paint, adding credence to Kligman’s claim.



ALAMY

Rembrandt: The Polish Rider

This work once belonged to Polish princes and was painted around 1655. Its origins were queried by the Rembrandt Research Project, which claimed that it was made by his pupil, Willem Drost.

Raphael: The Madonna of the Pinks

While this was attributed to Raphael by Nicholas Penny, director of the National Gallery between 2008 and 2015, critics claim that there are weaknesses in the composition. The gallery claims that scientists have proven its authenticity.

Portrait of Clara Serena, Rubens’ first child

Five years ago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York sold a portrait of Peter Paul Rubens’ daughter for about \$30,000 after deciding it was done by a follower of the Flemish artist. Fast-forward to 2018, and the painting is now accepted as an original and was up for auction with an estimate of between £3 million and £5 million at a Christie’s sale in July.



ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION

Andy Warhol self-portrait, 1964

A red screen print of Andy Warhol was once estimated to be worth \$2 million until it was rejected as a fake by the Andy Warhol Foundation, which controls his estate. The screen print, one of a series of ten, seemingly recreates a photograph taken by the pop artist in a passport booth. The foundation, however, printed "DENIED" across the back in red letters.