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A Man Who Bought a Painting for \$500 in a Bar Says It's a \$30 Million Rembrandt—But Experts Say It's Really a Case of Wishful Thinking

The new owner wants to sell the work and use the money to invest in his favorite soccer team.

Naomi Rea, August 6, 2019



Would you trust a painting bought in a joint like this? Photo by Arterra/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

A sympathetic barfly who bought a painting from a down-and-out stranger believes his good deed will pay off big time. He claims the €500 (\$560) painting of Jesus that he bought off a

stranger at a bar near Liège could be a lost Rembrandt worth €30 million (\$33 million). Unfortunately, the feel-good tale might be too good to be true.

The businessman from Verviers in Belgium declined to give his full name and told local press to call him “Mr. Jo.” He says he bought the work off a stranger who explained that he was buried in debt and asked for €500 for the painting, called *Ecce Homo* (no relation to the botched Beast Jesus fresco of the same name). Mr. Jo says he took pity on the man and forked over the cash to help him out.

The anonymous patron says he displayed the work in his home for a spate, until an art-savvy friend suggested he get it evaluated by an expert. Mr. Jo says he had it examined several times after specialists noticed similarities in technique to Rembrandt. Soon enough, he claims, a member of the Belgian Chamber of Art Experts attributed it to the Dutch Golden Age painter, and reportedly valued the “exceptional” work at over €30 million. Mr. Jo says he plans to sell the work and use the money to invest in his favorite soccer club.

The story is making the rounds now because Mr. Jo has announced his ambitions to sell the work, but the attribution is not fresh. Belgian newspaper *L'avenir* identified the expert referred to in the original report as Baudouin Van Steenberghe, a collector and member of the Association of Belgian Art Experts who died in 2008.

The paper has raised skepticism about the attribution, however, reporting that an unnamed source within the industry said that the work is “a fake.” The publication also cites a study by the Brussels-based Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage suggesting the painting could not be by Rembrandt because it dates from between 1676 and 1699, after the artist’s death in 1669.

A member of the institute confirmed to the Belgian paper that it examined the work, but demurred at the attribution. “At the time, it was presented to us... by an intermediary, to date it. We did not say it was a Rembrandt and, reading the press reports, it is impossible to know.” The organization says it has not seen references to the work in any existing publications on Rembrandt.

Experts contacted by artnet News, including the British art historian Martin Royalton-Kisch and Michiel Franken, a curator at the Netherlands Institute for Art History, had not heard of the work, and could not say anything authoritative about the image without seeing detailed pictures of it. (This journalist is no Rembrandt expert, but a hard-to-find alleged image of the work depicting a sickly Jesus, reproduced in a Dutch paper, doesn’t look like anything that will be hanging in a museum anytime soon.)

“These stories happen from time to time,” Royalton-Kisch says, “but quite often the pictures turn out to be copies rather than the real thing.” Specialists in 17th century painting at the Belgian Association of Art Experts did not return a request for comment by press time.