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THE ART NEWSPAPER

NEWS

SALVATOR MUNDI

Was Leonardo's Salvator Mundi for sale when it went on show at the National Gallery?

Public collections usually avoid showing works that are on the market, but expert claims the \$450m picture was made available to museums and collectors before the 2011 exhibition

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30th January 2020 12:26 GMT

A row has erupted over whether Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* was offered for sale before it went on show in an exhibition at the National Gallery, London, in 2011 (it is generally frowned upon for public collections to show works that are available for sale). In a letter to the *London Review of Books*, the art historian Ben Lewis claims that the work, which sold for \$450m at Christie's New York late 2017, was put on the market between 2009 and 2010, and made available to museums and collectors worldwide. The New York-based dealer Robert Simon, who found the work at a Louisiana auction in 2005, was aware of the move, Lewis claims. Lewis says in the letter that "since the publication of my book *The Last Leonardo* I have been sent testimony by the renowned international antiques and carpet dealer Michael Franes, in which he states that he attempted to sell the *Salvator Mundi* on Simon's behalf in 2009-10... Franes put together two large dossiers of documents, one for restoration, the other for provenance." Franes could not be reached for comment at the time of writing. Lewis adds, however, that "perhaps what Simon meant is that he briefly took the *Salvator Mundi* off the market between July 2011 and February 2012 to avoid any embarrassment to the National Gallery".

The dispute was sparked after the art historian Charles Hope questioned the attribution of the painting by the National Gallery to Leonardo, raising the issue of the sale earlier this month in an article in the *London Review of Books*. "One of the two owners identified at the time, an art dealer named Robert Simon, did produce a press release before the exhibition opened, 'summarising the ownership, critical and conservation history of the painting', as he now puts it. In this he rather coyly stated that the picture was 'privately owned and not for sale'," Hope says.

Simon told [The Guardian](#): "I believe the dealer you cite had proposed to offer the painting to a single museum with which he claimed to have a special relationship, but I was unaware of the

offerings to the other institutions you mention, nor can I recall the existence of a 'written exclusive contract for one year' with him. In connection with the initial offering I shared information about the painting with him—both on the phone and via email— although I never met the man.” He declined to comment further.

Research suggests that the Salvator Mundi may have been commissioned by France's King Louis XII and that it was later owned by Charles I of England though provenance of the work has also proved problematic.

The work is thought to have gone missing until it was bought in 1900 for the collection of Francis Cook, when it was attributed to a follower of Leonardo. Upon the dispersal of Cook's collection in 1958, it was sold at Sotheby's London as a copy after Boltraffio for £45 to a buyer named Kuntz. It was bought by an American and, after a family death in 2005, was sold at a small, regional auction in the US (possibly in Louisiana or Virginia), apparently without an attribution. The price is believed to have been less than \$10,000. The painting was acquired by a trio of New York-based dealers: Robert Simon, Alex Parish and Warren Adelson. The dealers' consortium, known as the R.W. Chandler company, had the work thoroughly investigated by specialists and then conserved by Dianne Dwyer Modestini in New York.