

# 'It's kind of scary – I wrapped it in a bin liner and jumped in a taxi with it'

A New York art dealer's discovery is the talk of the new Leonardo da Vinci exhibition at the National Gallery, reports **Ben Hoyle**

**R**obert Simon has always hero-worshipped Leonardo da Vinci. When the New York art historian and small-scale art dealer was 15, he made a "pilgrimage" to the artist's birthplace at Vinci in Tuscany. In his 20s he almost wrote his doctoral thesis on Leonardo's followers, but was dissuaded by the immensity of the task.

So when some old friends in the art world came to Mr Simon six years ago with a crudely restored picture that they had recently bought, he wondered if he was getting carried away when he started to speculate that it might be by one of the great man's apprentices.

It has turned out rather better than that; for the friends, for Mr Simon and for anyone who loves art.

This week in London the painting, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, went on show to the public for the first time as one of the star attractions of the National Gallery's exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan*, where it was presented, with the backing of the world's leading experts, as a lost masterpiece by Leonardo himself.

Seeing it on the walls of the gallery, between two preparatory drawings from the Queen's collection and opposite the magnificent Burlington House Cartoon, was an "overwhelming experience", Mr Simon said.

"Just walking through the exhibition was emotional, seeing such great paintings and drawings brought together, each of which has been for me, and for many others, the subject of pilgrimages.

"But then seeing this picture on the walls of the National Gallery, something I have held under my arm in a bin liner, had in my house for a night and that I have worked on for probably an hour a day for six years, it was absolutely thrilling, an extraordinary feeling."

That's hardly surprising, and not just because he now has a stake in the picture as "sweat equity" for the work he has done on it. In the catalogue to the exhibition, Luke Syson, the curator, argues that the painting is the original Leonardo, among more than 20 copies, that was etched by Wenceslaus Hollar in 1650, that it once belonged to Charles I and that it has the potential to change our view of Leonardo as a painter and a man.

None of this was apparent until it was cleaned and restored by the current, anonymous, owners. In 1958 the same picture was sold at Sotheby's for £45. No one suspected then that it could be a Leonardo and it vanished from view until this summer, when Mr Simon broke cover.

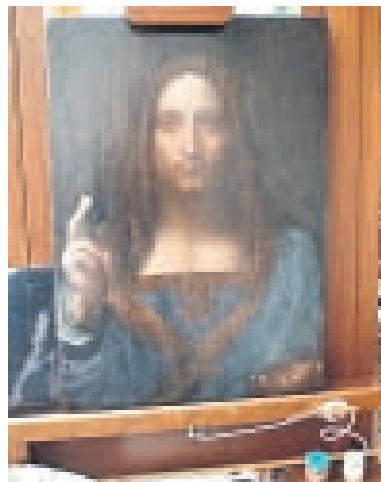
Its value now is a matter of almost impossible conjecture, given how rarely important drawings by Leonardo come up for sale, let alone whole paintings, but there is every indication that it could set a world record price for a work of art if it did come on the market, exceeding the \$140 million paid in a private sale for Jackson Pollock's *No 5* in 2006. The National Gal-



Robert Simon with the *Salvator Mundi* painting; he began to suspect that it was the original by Leonardo da Vinci while it was being restored in New York, below

lery's stamp of approval will have helped.

Mr Simon, a heavily built man of 58 with a soft voice, a foul cold and a large ink splodge on his shirt on the day that he told his story, won't reveal who the other owners are, except to say that they are from the "art side, not the money side" of the art market, that there are only a handful of them and that if the picture had turned out to be by one of Leonardo's pupils, worth, say, £1 million to be divided between them,



it would still have made a significant difference to all of their lives.

He says that there are no plans to sell but accepts that "it's not something, obviously, that I personally could keep". So far he is substantially out of pocket over the painting, having paid a fortune in insurance, on top of heavy investment in travel, a new library of Leonardo books and a suitable 16th-century frame. The owners agree, however, that "it's not all about money".

"Everyone involved recognises the importance of it as a work of art. Doing the right thing has been very important and will continue to be," Mr Simon says. If that means selling it for half the price they could attract, to ensure that it stays on public view, then they would prefer to do that.

Mr Simon was first shown the *Salvator Mundi* in 2005. Not long afterwards he dropped in on Mario Modestini, 98, an eminent conservator, and his wife, Dianne, a professor at the Conservation Centre at New York University. He took the painting with him.

"It's kind of scary just to think about it but I wrapped it in a bin liner and jumped in a taxi with it under my arm. Mario was tremendously impressed by the picture: he thought it could be by Solario, a Leonardo follower."

Mrs Modestini began cleaning the

picture that night and by 2007 Mr Simon was starting to suspect that it might even be by Leonardo, for reasons including the remarkable delicacy of the revealed brushwork and the discovery that the artist had initially positioned the thumb on Christ's "blessing hand" differently. Every other similar image has the thumb in the final position, suggesting that this must be the original.

Nicholas Penny, one of the world's leading connoisseurs of Renaissance painting, became director of the National Gallery at the start of 2008. Just before that, he came to see what Mr Simon told him was "an extremely important Renaissance painting" and "seemed to understand it in a nano-second. The first thing he said was, 'You'll have to sell this to Dan Brown' [author of the novel *The Da Vinci Code*]."

Dr Penny organised a viewing of the painting with the world's foremost Leonardo experts in London in May 2008. The night before Mr Simon crossed the Atlantic, he took the painting home with him for a "very nervous" night, followed by a flight when he felt "like Fredo Corleone in *The Godfather* taking a million dollars in a suitcase to Cuba". The flight home was better because the experts had all

backed the attribution. Back in New York he filled out his customs declaration form as "One painting by Leonardo da Vinci" and the customs agent asked him to open the sealed case. "I asked, 'Is that necessary?' and he said, 'Yes, I'm an Italian-American and I have to tell my grandchildren'."

Inclusion in the National Gallery show marks the culmination of the first part of the *Salvator Mundi*'s re-acceptance into the artistic canon. The picture is unavoidably odd and expert

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appraisals so far have ranged from tearful testimonials to its spiritual power and wonder at its technical boldness to complaints that it is "weird and spooky".

Mr Simon is dying to see for himself what the paying public make of it but suspects that he might have to wait until December to find out. He half-heartedly blamed his cold but then confessed the real reason: the show is sold out. "I don't have a ticket and I hate to bother anyone."

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, DAVID BEBBER