

LEONARDO DA VINCI PAINTING DISCOVERED

Painting Gains Attribution After Careful Scholarship and Conservation

A lost painting by Leonardo da Vinci has been identified in an American collection. The picture depicts Christ as the Savior of the world (in Latin, the *Salvator Mundi*): a half-length figure of Christ facing frontally, holding a crystal orb representing the world in his left hand as he raises his right in blessing. Measuring 25 ¹³/₁₆ × 17 ⁷/₈ inches (65.6 × 45.4 cm) and painted on a walnut panel, the *Salvator Mundi* is one of some 15 surviving oil paintings by the Renaissance master. The last time a Leonardo painting was discovered was in 1909, when the *Benois Madonna*, now in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, came to light.

Leonardo's painting of the *Salvator Mundi* was long known to have existed. More than 20 painted copies by students and followers of the artist are known, as is a meticulous 1650 etching made after the original painting by the Bohemian artist Wenceslaus Hollar. In addition, two preparatory drawings by Leonardo in the Royal Library at Windsor depict the drapery and raised arm of Christ as seen in the painting. Although versions of the picture have occasionally been put forward as Leonardo's original, none has gained any consensus among scholars until now, and many experts had presumed the original to have been destroyed.

PROVENANCE

The present painting was first recorded in the art collection of King Charles I of England in 1649. It was sold after his death, and later returned to the Crown upon the accession of Charles II. The painting later passed to the collection of the Duke of Buckingham, whose son put it at auction in 1763 following the sale of Buckingham House (now Palace) to the King. All trace of it was then lost until 1900, when Sir Frederick Cook acquired it. However, by that time the painting had been damaged, disfigured by overpaint, and its authorship by Leonardo forgotten. A photograph taken before 1912 records its compromised appearance at that time. (This photograph has recently been circulated in the media, as has another photo [with Christ in a red tunic], which was incorrectly identified as the recently rediscovered work.) Cook's descendants sold the painting at auction in 1958 for £45, when it was catalogued as a copy after a work by Boltraffio, one of Leonardo's most gifted students. For the remainder of the 20th century, the painting was part of an American collection until it was sold following the death of a family member. The *Salvator Mundi* is now privately owned and not for sale.

CONSERVATION

In 2005, the painting was brought to Robert Simon, an art historian and private art dealer in New York for study and research. Although the painting had been partially cleaned at some point in the recent past, much of the repaint seen in the old photograph had remained. Nonetheless, it was evident that there were passages of extraordinary quality, including the blessing hand, which had survived virtually untouched, as well as the coiled ringlets of hair on the right, the interwoven knot pattern of the stole, and the crystal orb, which were visible but obscured by layers of dirt and varnish. The painting was clearly a work of considerable quality and interest, and although there was then no serious belief that it might be by Leonardo himself, it was decided to treat the work with the highest standards of professional care.

A comprehensive program to examine, treat, and study the *Salvator Mundi* was soon begun. Dianne Dwyer Modestini, Senior Research Fellow and Paintings Conservator for the Samuel H. Kress Program at the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, supervised the overall conservation of the painting and undertook the cleaning and restoration of the paint surface. At the same time, Robert Simon began research into the painting's provenance, its relationship to other versions of the composition, and its connection with Leonardo's painted and drawn works, especially the preparatory drawings at Windsor. After nearly seven years of focused scholarship, conservation, technical analyses, and consultations among scholars, this extensive process has recovered a long-obscured, yet extraordinary work of art of undeniable importance and beauty.



Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), *Salvator Mundi*, c. 1500
Oil on walnut panel, 25 ¹³/₁₆ × 17 ⁷/₈ inches (65.6 × 45.4 cm)
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The principal reason that the painting remained unrecognized for so long was the crude overpaint that until recently obscured much of its surface. The wood panel upon which Leonardo painted had at one point split and bowed. Previous restoration attempts had involved large areas of stucco fill; thinning, flattening, and gluing of the panel to another backing; and attempts to disguise the repairs with broad areas of crude repaint. The recent conservation treatment has remedied and repaired these underlying problems, but the results of hundreds of years of mistreatment are still evident. The principal panel split can still be noted curving around and to the left Christ's head; the rich dark background has survived in irregular passages, and local areas of paint loss and abrasion are scattered throughout the painting, as is typical of many works from the period. The recent restoration of the painting has attempted to minimize the visual impact of these damages with a minimal amount of restoration to those areas where losses occurred.

AUTHORSHIP

As the possibility of Leonardo's authorship became evident, it was decided to show the painting to scholars in the field so that an informed consensus about its attribution might be obtained. The initial phase of conservation of the painting had been completed in the fall of 2007. At that time, the painting was viewed by Mina Gregori (University of Florence) and Nicholas Penny (Director, National Gallery, London; then Curator of Sculpture, National Gallery of Art, Washington). In 2008, the painting was studied at The Metropolitan Museum of Art by museum curators Carmen Bambach, Andrea Bayer, Keith Christiansen, and Everett Fahy, and by Michael Gallagher, head of the Department of Paintings Conservation. In late May 2008, the painting was taken to the National Gallery in London, where it could be directly compared with Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* of approximately the same date. Several specialist Leonardo scholars were also invited to study the two paintings together. These included Carmen Bambach, David Alan Brown (Curator of Italian Painting, National Gallery of Art, Washington), Maria Teresa Fiorio (Raccolta Vinciana, Milan), Martin Kemp (University of Oxford), Pietro C. Marani (Professor of Art History at the Politecnico di Milano), and the gallery's Curator of Italian paintings Luke Syson. More recently, following the completion of conservation treatment in 2010, the painting has again been studied in New York by several of the above, as well as by David Ekserdjian (University of Leicester).

The study and examination of the painting by these scholars resulted in an unequivocal consensus that the *Salvator Mundi* was painted by Leonardo da Vinci, and that it is the single original painting from which the many copies and versions depend. Individual opinions vary slightly in the matter of dating. Most place the painting at the end of Leonardo's Milanese period in the late 1490s, contemporary with the completion of the *Last Supper*. Others believe it to be slightly later, painted in Florence (where Leonardo moved in 1500), contemporary with the *Mona Lisa*.

The reasons these scholars are convinced the painting is by Leonardo are several. Among the most significant are the painting's adherence in style to Leonardo's known paintings; the extraordinary quality of its execution; the relationship of the painting to the two autograph drawings at Windsor; its correspondence to the composition of the "Salvator Mundi" documented in Wenceslaus Hollar's 1650 etching; and its manifest superiority to the more than 20 painted known versions of the composition.

Further crucial evidence for Leonardo's authorship was provided by the discovery of *pentimenti* — preliminary compositional ideas, subsequently changed by the artist in the finished painting, but not reflected in the etching or other copies. The most prominent of these — a first position for the thumb in the blessing hand, more vertical than that in the finished picture — was uncovered and photographed during the conservation process. Other *pentimenti* have been observed through infrared imaging. Technical examinations and analyses have demonstrated the consistency of the pigments, media, and technique discovered in the *Salvator Mundi* with those known to have been used by Leonardo.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Salvator Mundi will be exhibited for the first time in "Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan," to be held at the National Gallery, London, from November 9, 2011 until February 5, 2012.

Yale University Press, London, will publish a scholarly monograph on the painting, titled *The Lost Christ of Leonardo da Vinci*, later this year.

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