





One day in 2007, Dianne Dwyer Modestini, a prominent conservator, was in her New York studio restoring a painting that had been lost for centuries. Suddenly Modestini, who has directed the restoration of more than 150 Old Master paintings, became convinced that the one she was working on was by Leonardo da Vinci.

"My hands were shaking. I went home and didn't know if I was crazy," she told me in a telephone interview from Troghi, Italy.

The painting, *Salvator Mundi*, or "Savior of the World," depicts Christ with his right hand raised in blessing and his left hand holding a crystal globe. It is painted in oil on a walnut panel and measures 25¹³/₁₆ by 17⁷/₈ inches.

"In order to restore certain damages to the painting," Modestini said, "I looked at high-resolution images of the 'Mona Lisa.' I had been looking at them for weeks and held them close to the *Salvator Mundi*, trying to understand how to fix the little damage to the mouth of the painting. All of a sudden I realized, comparing the mouths, that *Salvator Mundi* was by Leonardo, because nobody but Leonardo painted that way. The final glaze—pigment mixed with an oil binder—in the area around the mouth was like smoke. It was so thin that you couldn't see the brushstrokes. It was like it was blown on or breathed on.

"I washed my brushes, made sure the painting was well fixed on the easel, put a black cloth on it, and went home. Then I sat down and wrote Robert, telling him I was convinced it was by Leonardo." Robert Simon is an art dealer and part of the consortium that owns the painting.

Three years ago, at least ten of the world's most important Leonardo scholars came to the same conclusion after studying the painting, either at Modestini's studio, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or the National Gallery in London.

Salvator Mundi will be part of the National Gallery's exhibition "Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan," opening November 9 and running through February 5. The show will include eight paintings by Leonardo, the largest number of his 15 surviving paintings ever brought together, according to Luke Syson, the National Gallery's curator of

Italian paintings before 1500 and head of research. Among them will be *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani* (The Lady with an Ermine), on loan from the National Gallery of Krakow, and *St. John the Baptist*, from the Louvre.

The National Gallery in London confirmed the *Salvator Mundi* discovery in a one-paragraph statement on July 6, after ARTnews broke the story on its website on

REDISCOVERING A

Leonardo

How experts around the world concluded that 'Salvator Mundi' was a lost work by the master

BY MILTON ESTEROW

June 22. The statement was followed on July 8 by a two-page release issued by the consortium through a public-relations company in Washington, D.C.

One scholar told me that the consortium had turned down an offer of \$100 million for the painting. "I was told they're asking \$200 million for it," he said. However, Simon said, "As representative of the owners I can say that the picture is not on the market."

Simon is a private dealer who specializes in Italian Renaissance painting. He declined to comment about exactly where the Leonardo was acquired, what the price was, or who the other owners are.

The work was bought at an auction in the United States in 2005 by Alex Parish, a private dealer in New York who is known as a "picker," according to an art-world observer who asked not to be identified. A picker has been described as



Experts have identified *Salvator Mundi* (opposite) as a long-lost work by Leonardo da Vinci that is documented in an etching by Wenceslaus Hollar (above).

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Restorer Dianne Modestini (below) suddenly became convinced that “nobody but Leonardo painted that way.”



someone who “goes to every minor auction he can find and looks for discoveries, things that are underpriced.” Parish declined to comment.

sort. I was wrong to think it was impossible to be a Leonardo. I’ve spent a little part of every day for the last six years doing research. It’s been a compulsive research project.

“The painting was long known to have existed. It was documented with an etching made after the original painting by the Bohemian artist Wenceslaus Hollar in 1650, and more than 20 painted copies by students and followers. Also, two preparatory drawings by Leonardo in the Royal Library at Windsor depict the drapery and raised arm of Christ as seen in the painting.

“The principal reason the painting remained unrecognized for so long was the crude overpainting that had obscured much of the surface. The wood panel on which Leonardo painted had split and bowed. There were repairs and attempts to disguise the repairs with broad areas of crude repaint. The results of hundreds of years of mistreatment are still evident. The principal panel split and can still be noted curving around and to the left of Christ’s head.”

Simon said that some scholars date the work to the late 1400s and others place it after 1500. The “*Salvator Mundi*” theme was popularized by Northern artists such as Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, and Albrecht Dürer and taken up in Italy during the Renaissance.

The first documented owner of the painting was King Charles I of England. A Leonardo scholar told me that Charles I “was interested in Leonardo and tried to acquire the *Mona Lisa* at one point, but the French king was persuaded not to part with the *Mona Lisa*. Charles I owned Leonardo’s *St. John the Baptist*.”

After Charles I was executed, in 1649, *Salvator Mundi* went to Charles II. “The painting was then in the collection of descendants of the Duke of Buckingham, who put it up at auction in 1763,” Simon said. “It disappeared until 1900, when it was acquired by a British collector, Sir Francis Cook. By that time, the painting had been damaged, disfigured by over-paint, and its authorship by Leonardo forgotten. It was listed as ‘Milanese School (c. 1500)’ in a published catalogue of the Cook collection in 1932.”

In 1958, the painting was sold by trustees of the Cook collection at Sotheby’s London for £45 (\$126). The catalogue stated that it was a work by Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, considered by many to be Leonardo’s best pupil.



Curator Luke Syson (left) says that with this image of Christ, Leonardo “takes one into a new area.” Art dealer Robert Simon (right) thought at first that it couldn’t possibly be a work by Leonardo.



Another member of the consortium is Warren Adelson, a New York dealer. Adelson told me, “I can’t comment on the ownership.”

Simon said, “The painting was brought to me in 2005. I was always a doubter. One had to be, with something of this

Dianne Modestini first saw the work in 2005. She is research fellow and paintings conservator for the Samuel Kress Program at the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, and she teaches paintings conservation at the institute. Her late husband, Mario Modestini, who died in 2006, was considered one of the world's greatest restorers of Italian painting.

In 2008, Simon brought the panel to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it was studied by several curators, including Carmen Bambach, Keith Christiansen, Andrea Bayer, and Everett Fahy, and by Michael Gallagher, head of the Department of Paintings Conservation. It was also shown some time ago to curators at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Frederick Ilchman, curator of paintings at the MFA, declined to comment.

At the National Gallery in London, director Nicholas Penny and Syson invited

Study for the *Salvator Mundi*, ca. 1504–8 (left), one of two preparatory drawings by Leonardo, depicting the drapery and raised arm of Christ.



“When I first saw it, I wasn’t thinking Leonardo,” Modestini said. “It was a beautiful picture. The hands were of extraordinary quality. It was very damaged. Part of the head was covered with white gesso. Later we had it photographed, x-rayed, and I looked at it with infrared reflectography, which enables you to look through the paint layers and see features not apparent on the surface. One day I discovered pentimenti, an alteration in the thumb. It had been covered by overpainting, and you could see two thumbs. When Simon saw it, he told me it was the tipping point—that it must be by Leonardo, that only Leonardo would have altered the position of the thumb.”

Leonardo scholars to see the work in the museum’s conservation studio. “We have something interesting to show you,” Penny told the scholars.

Penny had been a curator of Renaissance painting at the gallery and a senior curator of sculpture at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Syson was recently named Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Curator in Charge of the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The scholars included Bambach; David Alan Brown, curator of Italian painting at the National Gallery of Art in Washington; Maria Teresa Fiorio, author of many books on the Renaissance, including a

Modestini discovered pentimenti (above) indicating that Leonardo changed the position of Christ’s thumb, bringing it closer to the palm of the hand.



Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (The Lady with an Ermine), ca. 1489–90, will come to London from Krakow, despite Polish art historians' protests that it is too fragile to travel.

biography of Boltraffio; Martin Kemp, professor emeritus of art history at Oxford University, who has spent more than 40 years studying Leonardo; and Pietro Marani, who directed the restoration of Leonardo's *The Last Supper* in Milan. Later David Ekserdjian of the University of Leicester also studied the painting.

Kemp said of the meeting: "In those circumstances, most people are less reluctant to stick their neck out than I am. What convinced me was the general presence of it—Leonardo's paintings of a single figure have an extraordinary sense of presence—the handling of the details—the hair, the hands, the interlace motif of the costume—and, not least, the effect of the layered glazes, which gives what everybody refers to as *sfumato*, Italian for smoke or smoky. This is a very slow and laborious technique.

"My first reaction was, Wow, this is something different, not one of the routine versions of copies of Leonardos I get sent every month. I wouldn't rely on an instant judgment. The process is a gradual one of research to embed it in Leonardo's career and his intellectual interests.

"To give you two examples, the way the edges of the forms are characterized and the contours are very much in keeping with the kind of optical research he was doing at that point. The globe is rock crystal. He is characterizing inclusions, which are very small gaps in the structure of the rock crystal. Some rock crystal is clear. In this case, there are little spaces, little flaws, and these he has made catch the light like small stars. And the globe has become the crystalline sphere of the heavens."

Syson, in a telephone interview from London, said, "There wasn't any hysteria in the room when the scholars met. It was a process of calm analysis. As far as I know, all who saw it in New York and London agree that it's a Leonardo. Nobody has said to me they don't agree."

Another scholar who was briefed on the meeting said, "There was a lot of excitement. Some were somewhat reticent, but there was general acceptance."

Syson said, "Consensus is a very important part of attributing any picture, especially when it's as important as this. I'm not someone who makes up my mind fast, on the spur of the moment. I remember thinking that it was an extraordinarily powerful image, particularly the blessing hand, which seemed to have a quite haunting quality."

He did not have a eureka moment, he said. "Perhaps it was a combination of first impressions confirmed by close examination under a microscope—the incredible quality of the least damaged part of the picture, the improvised aspects of the picture, which make it impossible for it to be a copy. Normally if a painting is a copy of an existing picture, you wouldn't expect changes of mind, but in this instance you could see very subtly adjusted contours in several places. This is absolutely a standard practice for Leonardo. One of the interesting things about Leonardo is that he believed you shouldn't determine the final design before you started painting the picture because there had to be a degree of improvisation.

"I could see that after he painted the thumb for the first time, he changed his

mind about the position. He painted over the first thumb, which was closer to Christ's shoulder than in the finished version, with black paint, and painted another thumb closer to the palm of the hand. When the painting was cleaned, the original thumb was revealed. The restorer decided to put back the background color on the first thumb. You don't want to see two thumbs in the finished picture."

How much of *Salvator Mundi* was painted by Leonardo? Modestini said, "I think Leonardo is responsible for 95 percent of the painting. I think it's likely that an assistant

painted the embroidery pattern in the stole on Christ's left shoulder. When you look at the painting, the part of the stole that goes over the right shoulder is rendered in a much more intricate and refined way than the left shoulder, which doesn't catch the light in the same way. The highlight is on the right shoulder. The left is more in shadow and abraded."

Where does Syson place *Salvator Mundi* in Leonardo's oeuvre? "I feel he takes one into a new area. He makes you understand how his pursuit of pictorial perfection was allied with his faith and that this is a picture in which he positioned himself as, in a sense, a miraculous talent because he is saying, 'I can see the face of Christ.' The point really is that we have to take Leonardo seriously not only as a scientist but as somebody who was able to translate his scientific interest into religious images."

At least one scholar thinks the attribution to Leonardo is "erroneous." In an article in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the semi-official newspaper of the Holy See, Carlo Pedretti, Armand Hammer Professor Emeritus of Leonardo Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, wrote that another picture, "which was part of the collection of the Marquis de Ganay in Paris," was "closer to an eventual prototype of Leonardo (the existence of which is legitimately dubious)."

"The Marquis de Ganay version has been accepted by practically nobody," a Leonardo scholar who asked not to be identified told me.

And an expert on the Italian Renaissance who also asked to remain anonymous said that *Salvator Mundi* is not one of his favorite Leonardos. "It's dark and



gloomy," he said. "Christ emerges out of a creepy darkness."

Meanwhile, Modestini was recently in Troghi, not far from Florence, where she was completing a memoir by her late husband and working on a talk she will be giving at a symposium on Leonardo, to be held in January at the National Gallery in London. She has spent "hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours" restoring *Salvator Mundi*—probably more time on it than Leonardo. "Even though he worked very slowly," she said.

"I still have to pinch myself," she added. "I've developed a close relationship with this picture. It's such a powerful image. It changes in different light. At the end of the day, it glows from within; it becomes completely three dimensional. Leonardo said you should always paint toward the end of the day when the light is low." ■

The show brings together eight of Leonardo's 15 surviving paintings, including *The Virgin and Child (Madonna Litta)*, ca. 1490–92, in the collection of the Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.