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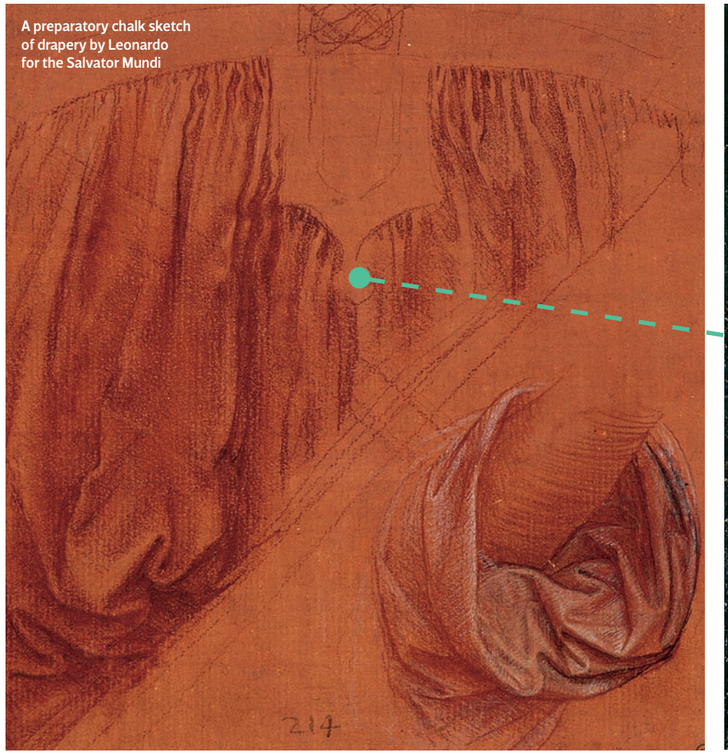
Treasure hunt
The Brits who are taking on the Somali pirates

Save, save, save
Meet the lottery winners who won't live it up

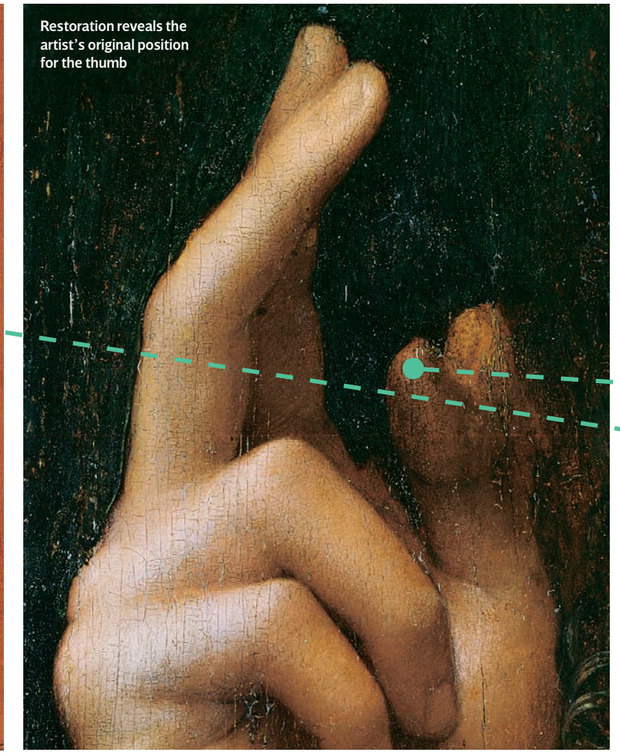
Fingers CROSSED

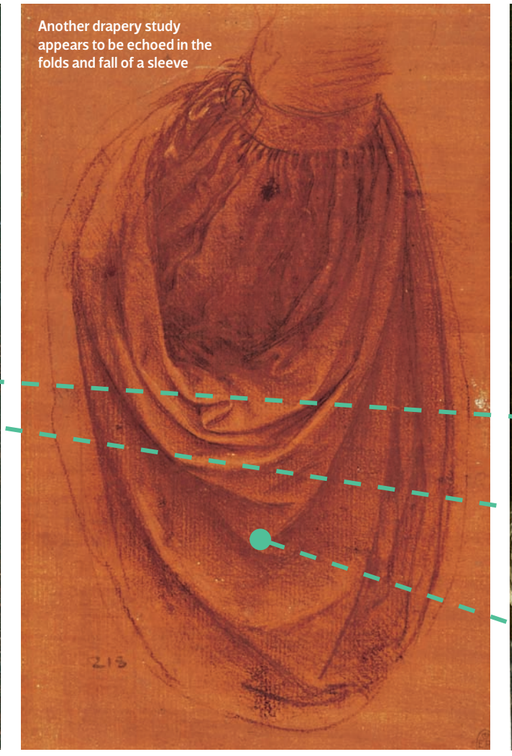
This 'lost' masterpiece turned up in mysterious circumstances. The National Gallery claims it's a Leonardo. Can they be sure?

LEONARDO?

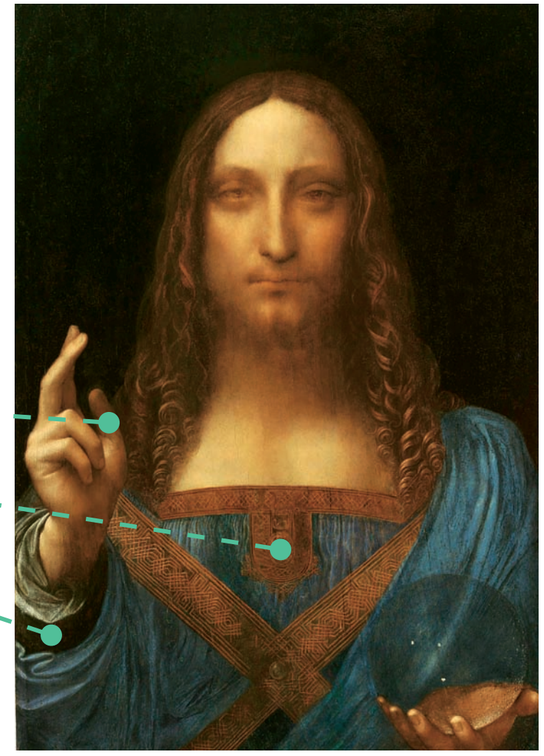


A preparatory chalk sketch of drapery by Leonardo for the Salvator Mundi


Restoration reveals the artist's original position for the thumb



Another drapery study appears to be echoed in the folds and fall of a sleeve



CONVINCE ME

This painting of Christ will go on display at the National Gallery next month in a landmark exhibition on Leonardo da Vinci. It has been valued at $200m and experts and dealers claim it is a rediscovered masterpiece. Can it be? Report by Kathy Brewis

A black-and-white photograph from about 1908 shows a fairly crude painting of Christ blessing the world. There were many such portraits in circulation, and nobody was particularly excited about this one. Now that same painting is making waves. It has been restored and hailed as the original Salvator Mundi by Leonardo da Vinci. The Renaissance genius made only 20 known paintings in his lifetime, including the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper. This could be the 21st.

"It is a very weird picture," says Nick Penny, the National Gallery's director, who claims he was "pretty sure" that it was a Leonardo the moment he saw it. It shares something, he says, with Leonardo's portraits The Lady with the Ermine and the Mona Lisa. "They respond, but hold something back. You can't think about them except in relationship to the viewer. They imply a narrative of which you are a part. That was not true of portraiture before Leonardo. The Salvator Mundi radiates the same kind of intense presence. But because it's Leonardo you do wonder if you're going mad — and you certainly want people whose opinions you respect to look at it." He pauses. "People can judge for themselves."

For a few weeks in London you will be able to see the Salvator Mundi (Saviour of the World) up close. It might be your only chance. Much of the painting's history remains obscure. Its ownership is a closely guarded secret. Robert Simon, a New York art dealer, is representing the owner, or owners — the official line is it is a "consortium".

Why all the secrecy? "It's just privacy and security," says Simon. "One doesn't want people knocking on the door."

Nearly 500 years after his death, Leonardo da Vinci still inspires awe and somewhat obsessional devotion. "Robert very wisely just said to me that he had something exciting he wanted to show me," recalls Penny, who first saw the painting in 2007. "If he'd said 'I think I've got a Leonardo', I would have gone to see it much more reluctantly. So many people say they think they've got a Leonardo and go bonkers over it. But when I got close, I thought it could only be a Leonardo — parts of the work were so extraordinary in quality."

The Christ in this painting hasn't the Mona Lisa's smile, but he has a similarly steadfast gaze; there's the same immediacy and slightly unnerving overfamiliarity. His right hand is raised in the traditional gesture of blessing; his left holds a globe. In 1958 it was sold by the British art historian Herbert Cook for just £45 (about £800 today). Simon won't reveal how it made its journey to America, stating only that it was in a private collection for years and then surfaced when the late collector's estate was sold in 2005. It's now thought to be worth around $200m (£126m), making it one of the most valuable paintings in the world. But the work has never been officially valued — nor is it for sale. At least, not yet. Exhibiting any painting increases its value, an expert in the art market tells me, so while it's on loan and for some time after, it must not be flogged lest the gallery be accused of having ramped up the price. "The assumption is that at some point it will change hands, for money."

Who could afford it? Collectors in the Middle East are big buyers, as are billionaire American art lovers such as Paul Allen, of Microsoft; Steve Cohen, the hedge-fund king; and Bill Gates, who bought Leonardo's vast illustrated notebook, the Codex Leicester, for more than $30m in 1994. The Kimbell, a museum in Fort Worth, Texas, recently paid $24.3m for another Old Master — Poussin's Sacrament of Ordination. A famous Klimt sold in February 2006 for $135m.

But how could a genuine Leonardo have been overlooked? Quite easily, it turns out. "I get sent 'Leonardos' monthly," says Martin Kemp, emeritus professor of art history at Oxford. "These things come up all the time and you develop a well-honed mistrust." But when, two years ago, Penny told him "There's something it's worth you coming in to look at," Kemp was intrigued. In the gallery's conservation studios he joined "a little group of people, including some Leonardo scholars from Italy and from America, and Robert Simon. There were pictures on easels in various states of disrepair," he recalls. "And over on the left, as I walked in, there was this painting that immediately had this presence." Caution was essential, however. "You can easily by wishful thinking start seeing what you want to see. You can make yourself look a big idiot."

Leonardo's portraits are unearthly, partly due to the sfumato technique whereby layer upon layer of extremely thin oil glazes, containing sometimes tiny amounts of pigment, confer a soft, non-definite effect. The difficulty with anything to do with Leonardo now is the sfumato of vested interests, not just financial but professional — an expert's reputation, a gallery's prestige, a curator's career advancement. Martin Kemp describes himself as "austere" in taking no payment for his research — "It's a slippery slope," he says.

Three years ago another "new Leonardo", La Bella Principessa, a painting of an adolescent girl, popped up via Peter Silverman, a Paris-based dealer who claimed he'd stumbled upon it in a drawer at a friend's house in Switzerland. It later transpired he had bought it from another dealer.

PAINTINGS BY NUMBERS

If the Salvator Mundi were indeed to realise $200m, it would be the most expensive painting ever to have changed hands. The biggest price tag to date is for Jackson Pollock's No 5, which sold for $140m in 2006. In the same year, Gustav Klimt's Adele Bloch-Bauer (below right) fetched $135m. In 2002, Massacre of the Innocents by Peter Paul Rubens (below left) sold for $76.7m — after being judged by expert consensus to be a true Rubens the previous year

PREVIOUS PAGES LEFT AND SECOND RIGHT: ROYAL COLLECTION. HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II; SECOND LEFT AND FAR RIGHT: LEONARDO DA VINCI/ZOUTI SALVATOR MUNDI LLC. THESE PAGES, TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF WITT LIBRARY COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART; CENTRE: THE PRINCES CZARTORYSKI FOUNDATION. TOP RIGHT: ROYAL COLLECTION. HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II; BOTTOM, FROM LEFT: THE THOMSON COLLECTION/ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO; AKG IMAGES

Renaissance man at work
The Salvator Mundi (top left). Left: Leonardo's Lady with the Ermine (1488–90) is another lost masterpiece. The subject's subtle expression suggests an inner life and soul. Below: preparatory sketches of her delicate hands

'I'd like to say I looked at it and said,
"Oh, my god, it's a lost Leonardo!"
But it was so contrary to rational thought'

One of the authenticators for that painting was Peter Paul Biro, who is suing the writer David Grann for questioning, in a lengthy article for The New Yorker, the validity of his proof — a smudgy fingerprint by the artist that only showed up under a "multispectral" digital scanner.

Kemp is among the experts who validated the painting as a Leonardo. He demonstrated that it was drawn by a left-hander (Leonardo was left-handed), and found a letter in which Leonardo expresses interest in making a painting on vellum (he usually worked on wood). He also claims to have found, in Poland, the book from which this portrait was removed — with a page missing.

For two "Leonardos" to have emerged so recently seems near-miraculous. Still, when someone brought Simon a tatty, renaissance-ish painting nearly seven years ago, the art dealer took a punt. It had been all but ruined by overpainting (the clumsy repair work of past centuries) and the wood had "tented" and then been planed flat. But there was something about the blessing hand... And so began a detective story.

"I'd like to say I looked at it and said, 'Oh my God, it's a lost Leonardo!' — but I didn't," says Simon. "The idea was so impossible, so contrary to rational thought. And one's opinion was so much inhibited by the state it was in."

He wrapped it in a grey binliner and took it to an old friend, the distinguished painting conservator Mario Modestini, then 98 and confined to his apartment. Modestini put it up on the easel and looked at it with his wife, Dianne, professor of New York University's Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts. She cleaned off some of the overpainting there and then, using a solvent, and suggested that they hang on to it for a ⟩⟩→

Return of a princess?
La Bella Principessa came to light just three years ago

while for further analysis. The first stage of restoration took two years. It wasn't until 2007, when the curls in Christ's hair, of unbelievable delicacy, were fully revealed, that Simon started to wonder if it might be by Leonardo himself. Other clues slowly emerged, including a different original position for the thumb, a pentimento. More than 20 copies of the image exist, all with the thumb in its final position. "It was very clearly a change by the artist," says Simon. "That's when I thought, 'This really could be the original.' "

He showed it to Mina Gregori, a retired professor at Florence university, who was stunned: "I believe it's by Leonardo." Then he showed it to Nick Penny, who had just been appointed director of the National Gallery. "He understood it in a nanosecond. He said that one of his ambitions was for the gallery to be a venue for scholarly inquiry and research and that he'd like the painting to be brought to London so it could be compared to the Virgin of the Rocks." It was Penny who told him: "You need a consensus."

In late May 2008 Simon brought it over, unframed, in a specially built box, in the first-class cabin of a passenger jet "with security at either end, and nervousness". Then the various scholars came —Martin Kemp from Oxford, David Alan Brown from Washington, Carmen Bambach from New York, Pietro Marani and Maria Teresa Fiorio from Milan — and the scholarly research began. You can only imagine the hushed excitement as each started to think the unthinkable.

There are two Leonardo sketches for drapery for the Salvator Mundi — and an engraving of the original, made in London by the German-born etcher Wenceslaus Hollar. "So we are really pretty sure there was either a terrifically good painting or a Leonardo in Britain in the mid-17th century," says Kemp. His team found new historical evidence — an inventory for the dispersal of Charles I's goods after he was executed, which mentioned the painting. Later it was owned by the Duke of Buckingham, whose son put it up for auction in 1763. There follows a gap in the historical record. "Then this picture, which we've now got, appears in the Cook collection in 1900," Kemp continues. "It was photographed and looked hideous."

Could these paintings be one and the same? A leap of faith isn't enough. But Kemp has various clues up his learned sleeve, including what he calls "intellectual consistency". Leonardo was fascinated by the mechanics of vision, and the painting employs depth of field: the face is in softer focus than the raised hand. Then there is the sphere, with little dots in it that glisten in the light. Kemp has worked out that this is rock crystal, a particular interest of Leonardo's. "The heel of the hand is shown twice. The restorer thought this must be a pentimento, but in fact Leonardo has picked up the fact that rock crystal has a double refraction. None of the followers knew that sort of stuff."

Scientific tests revealed that the pigments were of the right vintage; high-resolution viewers showed imprints of a hand. "We know he used the heel of his right hand to soften paint." Infrared photography showed up further pentimenti — the cross and stole on Christ's chest had been repositioned, and the fingers that hold the globe were at first drawn in a different position.

Since Robert Simon went public with the discovery, he has received many emails from Leonardo fanatics. "There's the serious obsession and there's the lunatic one — people for whom Leonardo is a source of fantasy. The paintings are not knowable," he muses. "Every one of them presents a problem and a challenge." Even this one at this stage? "Art historians are a prickly, competitive lot. I wouldn't be surprised if someone stuck their hand up and said, 'I don't believe it.' " Could the experts be wrong? "They could be wrong about anything. But as much as I believe in anything in this world, I believe this is by Leonardo." How have the owners reacted to the authentication? "Happily," says Simon. I'll bet!

Frank Zöllner of Leipzig University is a rare dissenter: he thinks the proportions of the nose ("too long" for such a perfectionist as Leonardo) make it more likely to have been by a talented follower. The rest are convinced, if a little jealous that they didn't unearth it themselves. "People in the art world get sniffy about dealers," says Bendor Grosvenor, director of the London fine-art dealership Philip Mould. "But if it wasn't for the trade, discoveries like this wouldn't be made. Specialist dealers are the ones who are prepared to buy a dirty picture, roll their sleeves up and get stuck into seeing what it is."

Is it wise for the National Gallery to put it on show so soon after its authentication? "They are taking a risk," says Grosvenor, "and I can't applaud them enough for it. Connoisseurship is a nebulous discipline. There can never be absolute 100% proof. You have to accept there's an element of doubt and go with it."

Luke Sysons, the show's curator, is one of the few people who know who owns the picture. "We couldn't exhibit it otherwise. It's not being wafted to us in a brown envelope." He says it's not so strange that the trail goes cold in the 19th century — those 20 or more copies make it harder to track, and by the time the Salvator Mundi showed up in the Cook collection, it had been so badly "repaired" that nobody thought it was a Leonardo anyway. Similarly, nobody has a clue where The Lady in the Ermine had got to between 1498 and the early 19th century. "It's the Antiques Roadshow factor. Something's just sitting on a wall somewhere."

As befits a painting associated with the most enigmatic of artists, nobody knows how this story will end. "It would be nice to show it in the US, as well, but it's a one-step-at-a-time situation," says Simon. "It would be unfortunate for a painting that has never been on public view before to be returned to obscurity." Somehow, that seems altogether unlikely ■

Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan is at the National Gallery from November 9 to February 5 (www.nationalgalleryorg.uk). Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon, by Martin Kemp (OUP, £25), is published on October 13. To order it from The Sunday Times Bookshop at £22.50 inc p&p, tel: 0845 271 2135

'People in the art world get sniffy about dealers, but they're **the ones prepared to buy a dirty picture,** roll their sleeves up and get stuck into seeing what it is'

CORBIS