LEONARDO DA VINCI (1452–1519) Christ as Salvator Mundi about 1499 onwards

Oil on walnut 65.5 × 45.1 cm Private collection

It has always seemed likely that Leonardo painted a picture of Christ as the Saviour of the World. In 1650 the celebrated printmaker Wenceslaus Hollar signed an etching of Christ raising his right hand in blessing, holding a transparent orb in his left, with a nimbus of light behind his head; the image was taken, he states, from a painting by Leonardo (fig. 111).2 Though Hollar was generally well-informed, this would not be enough on its own to prove that an autograph picture by Leonardo had once existed. By the seventeenth century any number of paintings by his pupils and associates were firmly attributed to Leonardo himself and there was no shortage of pupils' pictures depicting the Salvator Mundi, all clearly related to one another, all unmistakably Leonardesque. In 1978 and 1982 one of these many versions was promoted as Leonardo's lost 'original', partly because of its similarities to the etching, a suggestion that has rightly been rejected.3 Hollar might very well have been copying a copy.

There is other evidence, however, that Leonardo explored this or a related subject. As early as the mid-1480s he drew a 'head of Christ', in pen and ink, which appears in the list of his works preserved in the Codex Atlanticus (see p. 25). And in the early sixteenth century he discussed painting an adolescent Christ for Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua.4 Most importantly, there survive two red chalk drawings of draperies, obviously related to the composition etched by Hollar and the many workshop copies (cats 89, 90). But even these do not constitute proof that Leonardo painted a Salvator Mundi, and it has sometimes been argued that these drawings might have formed the basis for one or more finished designs - perhaps cartoons that he made expressly to be copied by pupils but with no primary version by the master himself. Other scholars have imagined, more straightforwardly, that Leonardo's own painting disappeared long ago.

The re-emergence of this picture, cleaned and restored to reveal an autograph work by Leonardo, therefore comes as an extraordinary surprise. Though Hollar's Christ is very slightly stouter and broader, the two images coincide almost exactly. The draperies are just a little simplified and there is no glow of light around Christ's head. Otherwise the newly discovered painting has the same snaking locks of hair, expressionless face and uncannily direct gaze, and the same swathe of monumental drapery across his shoulder. And the knot-pattern ornament on Christ's crossed



FIG. III WENCESLAUS HOLLAR (1607–1677) After Leonardo da Vinci, *Salvator Mundi*, 1650 Etching, first state, 26.4 × 19.0 cm The Royal Collection (RL 801855)

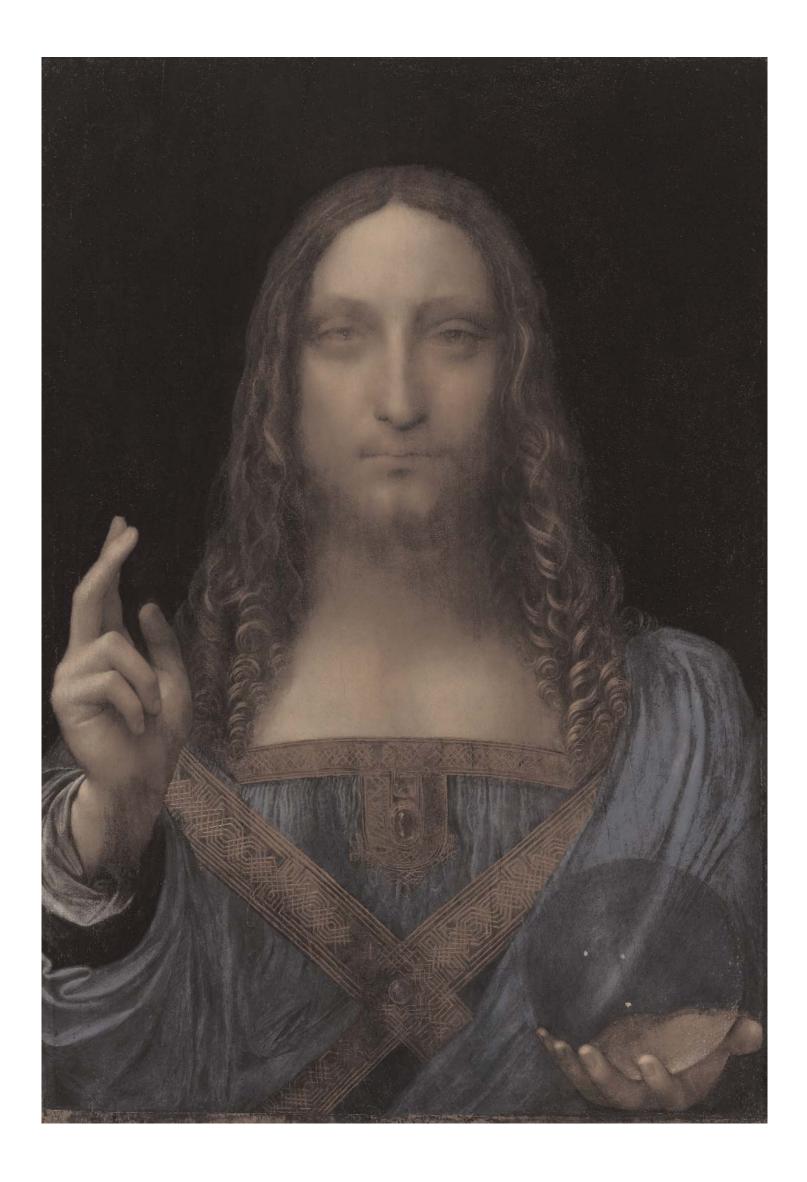
stole and on the border of his vestment are very similar indeed, a particularly important consideration given that this ornament is the aspect most subject to change in the different surviving versions. There can be no doubt that this is the picture copied by Hollar.

In fact this version of the Salvator Mundi is not a new discovery. It has been known since the beginning of the twentieth century but never seriously studied and certainly not recognised as Leonardo's own work. The picture was acquired in 1900 by Sir Francis Cook for his collection at Doughty House in Richmond, Surrey, through or from his long-standing adviser, Sir J.C. Robinson. It has not yet been discovered where Robinson obtained it. In 1913 Tancred Borenius catalogued it as a 'free copy after Boltraffio', twice removed therefore from Leonardo. In 1958 it was sold from the Cook collection, still as a copy after Boltraffio. The low esteem in which it was held is easy to explain: by the time it came into Francis Cook's possession it had been very considerably overpainted. Christ's blessing hand was the least altered area but his head had been almost entirely reinvented. And that after 1958 it was known only from the poor black-and-white photograph reproduced in Borenius's catalogue only compounded the problem.

The reasons for such abundant overpaint are also clear. Though both Christ's hands are well preserved, elsewhere the picture has suffered. Sometime in the past the panel split in two, causing paint losses along the length of the crack. It has also been aggressively over-cleaned, with some abrasion of the whole picture surface and especially in the face and hair of Christ, where Leonardo's sequence of delicate paint layers

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Borenius 1913, p. 123; Suida 1929, p. 140; Clark 1935, vol. 1, p. 80; Suida in Los Angeles 1949, pp. 85–6; Heydenreich 1964, p. 109; Snow-Smith 1982, pp. 11, 12, fig. 7.



were especially vulnerable. It may well be that this ill-judged restoration took place quite early in the picture's history, possibly soon after it arrived in England in the early seventeenth century.

The location of the picture in Hollar's 1650 etching has long been a matter of speculation. It is known that his long-standing patron, the exiled Queen Henrietta Maria, received proof copies,⁵ and it seems that this gift had special meaning. Both the Queen and the Royalist printmaker had fled England in 1644, and when Hollar presented Henrietta Maria with the etched Salvator Mundi her king, Charles I, had been dead just a year, beheaded in 1649. In the inventory of the royal collection drawn up after his execution, there appears: 'A peece of Christ done by Leonardo at 30:00:00 / Sold to Stone a/o 23 Oct. 1651'.6 It appears to have hung in Henrietta Maria's private 'closets' at her house in Greenwich. Hollar must have made a drawing of Leonardo's painting while he was still in England, when it still belonged to the King and Queen. This drawing then formed the basis of the print, an image that had now come to have additional associations for the Catholic Henrietta Maria. The several connections with the Queen suggest that the Salvator Mundi is likely to have come to England when she married Charles in 1625, and was originally the property of the French royal family: several of the best copies have a French provenance.7

None of this, of course, is evidence for the picture's autograph status. After all, the pictures by pupils copying Leonardo's design may sometimes have been rather good, and one such might easily have been owned by Henrietta Maria. The quality of Christ's blessing hand suggests that the picture had previously been significantly underestimated; but it took its recent cleaning to reveal the picture's overall quality, as well as characteristics consistent with Leonardo's own technique. There is, for example, a major pentiment in the thumb of Christ's proper right hand, and other, lesser adjustments of the contours elsewhere (such as in the palm of the left hand seen through the transparent orb). Such changes of mind are typical of Leonardo and would be surprising in a copy of an existing design. The head was perhaps executed with the aid of a cartoon; when the picture is examined in infrared, spolveri can be seen running along the line of the upper lip. The rest of the body has a much looser, brushy underdrawing, with further small changes of mind.

This combination of careful preparation for the head and much greater improvisation for the body is again characteristic of Leonardo. The painting technique is close to that of the *Mona Lisa* (fig. 32) and the *Saint John the Baptist* (fig. 41), the face in particular built up with multiple, extremely thin paint layers, another technical aspect that makes Leonardo's authorship certain. Like both these pictures, the *Salvator Mundi* may well have been painted over an extended period of time.

There are several remarkable features, all painted with startling delicacy and precision: the curling highlights in the hair, the brilliantly irregular pleats in the tunic, the grand sweep of the cloak. Only the repeat pattern of the ornament is a little disappointing. Leonardo appears to have painted the first section on the left and perhaps delegated the rest. Christ, unusually for this date, is dressed entirely in clothes of celestial blue, painted with precious lapis lazuli.

And it is with Christ's costume that we begin to understand the ways in which Leonardo chooses to present him as king of the whole universe. This is Christ as characterised in John 4:14: 'And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the World.' There is nothing obvious about this. Christ does not have a crown, nor even a halo. But he does carry an orb, the emblem of kingship as well as a symbol of the world. Its tiny specks show that Leonardo conceived this globe as made of rock crystal, the purest form of quartz, widely thought to have particular properties of which Leonardo was certainly aware.8 It was believed to be formed from ice petrified on the very highest mountain peaks, possessed of formidable magic powers. During the Middle Ages, pieces of rock crystal, all cut in Antiquity, were frequently set into reliquaries, giving the stone a sacred context. And it was precious in part because, during this period, the secrets of how it could be worked were lost. It was not until the early sixteenth century, after the execution of this painting, that Renaissance craftsmen rediscovered the technique. There were therefore several features of Christ's orb that made it into something miraculous even before its perfect spherical shape is taken into account.

As Leonardo knew very well, the sphere was a divine form, regarded as perhaps the most important of the Platonic solids, an unattainably regular and continuous form in which, Plato proposed, the whole universe is contained. By depicting this sphere as if

NOTES

- I This discussion anticipates the more detailed publication of this picture by Robert Simon and others. I am grateful to Robert Simon for making available his research and that of Dianne Dwyer Modestini, Nica Gutman Rieppi and (for the picture's provenance) Margaret Dalivalle, all to be presented in a forthcoming book.
- 2 'Leonardus da Vinci pinxit. Wenceslaus Hollar fecit Aqua forti, secundum Originale, A.º1650.'
- 3 Snow-Smith 1978, pp. 69–81; Snow-Smith 1982.
- 4 A figure of Christ the Redeemer by Leonardo is recorded by Padre V.M. Monti in his Catalogus Superiorum Cenobi Ord. Praed. S. Mariae Gratiarum (Archivio di Stato, Milan), painted in a lunette over the main door leading from the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie to the convent. It was destroyed in 1594 or 1603 when the door was enlarged. See Marani 1989, p. 130, no. 6A
- 5 Snow-Smith 1982, p. 27.
- 6 Millar 1972, p. 63. Research soon to be published by Margaret Dalivalle will show that John Stone was forced to return it to the Royal Collection after the Restoration. Subsequently it seems to have passed from James II into the possession of John Sheffield, Ist Duke of Buckingham (1648– 1721). In 1763 it was sold for a rather low sum by Buckingham's illegitimate son, not to reappear until 1900.
- 7 See Fiorio 2000, pp. 162–3. A version of the picture is recorded in an inventory drawn up in Milan on 21 April 1525 thought to list copies made by Salai, Leonardo's much beloved assistant, of pictures by his master that had been left in France. Coming just after Salai's death, the description of the picture is interesting: 'Uno Cristo in modo de uno Dio Padre' (A Christ in the guise of a God the Father'). See Shell and Sironi 1991a, p. 49.
- 8 Pliny, Natural History, XXXVII, 23–9. See Castelli 1977, pp. 310–11, 351–3, cat. 234–6; Gasparotto 2000, pp. 67–8. Leonardo certainly owned at least two books in which he might have found such information, a 'Lapidario', most likely the text by Marbodeus, Il lapidario o la forza e la virtù delle pietre preziose delle erbe e degli animali, and the Secreti d'Alberto Magno, which could be the Liber secretum de virtutibus herbarum lapidum et animalium by Albertus Magnus published in Bologna 1478. See Reti 1974, vol. 3, pp. 98–9, 102–3.

- 9 BN 2038. fol 22a: R 118.
- 10 See Koerner 1993, pp. 80-5, 104, 106, 127, 468 n. 76.
- II See Montesano 2004; Petti Balbi 2007
- 12 The painting must also be the source for the painting of the same subject by the Master of the Pala Sforzesca (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), most recently dated 1490–4 though it might be a little later. See Marani 2007, p. 55. Christ's blessing hand is almost directly cited, and the picture therefore seems to belong to around 1500. The same is true of Marco d'Oggiono's Young Christ in the Galleria Borghese, Rome.

made from rock crystal, Leonardo ensured that it would be perceived as if formed from light itself. He explained that the light which passes through 'diaphanous bodies' like glass or crystal [vetri or cristalli] produce 'the same effect as though nothing intervened between the shaded object and the light that falls upon it'.9 This perfect sphere is seen to both contain and transmit the light of the world. Moreover, Christ's hand remains miraculously undistorted. Leonardo has therefore created an object which would be understood as a piece of divine craftsmanship, but still be his own invention. Never did he make the connection between his own creativity and God's more explicit.

He made the same point by the way he painted the face of Christ itself. If the painting of the orb is marvellously modern, dependent on Leonardo's understanding of the passage of light, the face of Christ - rigid, symmetrical, absolutely frontal - is deliberately archaic. He seems to have been aware of the central panel of a polyptych ascribed to Giotto and his workshop (North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh) showing Christ blessing. From this he takes the blessing hand, with the index and third finger crossing, and particularly the sweep of the drapery across the body. And, as Joanne Snow-Smith observed, he also based his first design for Christ's sleeve (cat. 89) on this painting. His picture also contains a reminiscence of the terracotta busts of Christ produced in Verrocchio's workshop. But, above all, Leonardo is demonstrating his awareness of those images of the Holy Face believed to have been made miraculously: the sudarium or veil of Saint Veronica, treasured at St Peter's until the Sack of Rome in 1527, and especially the Mandylion of Edessa, the portrait of Christ that he made by pressing his face to a piece of cloth that he sent to the king of Edessa, curing him of a fatal illness. Both these miraculous images were regarded as examples of the so-called acheiropoetos, an image not made by human hands; they therefore become the ultimate truthful, unmediated likenesses.10

They had already been imitated by painters. In the Netherlands, it was Jan van Eyck who was chiefly responsible for formulating the canonical Holy Face, though no autograph version survives. Joseph Leo Koerner has pointed out that van Eyck (to judge from copies) makes a case for this picture as similarly unmediated by the elimination of all visible signs of its making. It is by his extraordinary artistry, he seems to

say, that he can become a privileged witness of the face of Christ. He too can make the invisible visible, the word flesh, and his work becomes a new kind of miracle, founded on God-given talent. Leonardo makes the same extraordinary claim; the extreme delicacy of his technique in the *Salvator Mundi* conceals any sign of his brushwork. Just as God created Christ as his perfect image and likeness, so Leonardo has sought to recreate the perfect icon. Leonardo's art is therefore seen to be just as wonderful as that of the crystal orb, itself unmakable except by God and Leonardo.

To become the witness of Christ, Leonardo needed, as van Eyck had done, to base his image upon one of the existing images already recognised as miraculous. His own picture of 'the most beautiful among the children of men' needed to be recognisable, and he was forced to abandon his own canon of ideal proportion. He may also have taken his patron's wishes into account. The history of the Mandylion of Edessa is obscure. It is thought to have been transferred to Constantinople in AD 944, but what happened thereafter is much disputed. Suffice it to say that by 1500 at least three images were all claimed as authentic. One belonged to the French kings, kept at the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris until the French Revolution. Another, still revered today, was (and is) just outside Genoa, at San Bartolomeo degli Armeni. II Genoa was a Sforza possession, and when Milan fell to the French in 1499 they also took over the great port city as well as responsibility for its treasured Holy Face.

Snow-Smith has shown that King Louis XII and his consort, Anne of Brittany, were particularly devoted to Christ as Salvator Mundi, and that they could connect this cult with the Mandylion of Edessa, twice over we now see. Given the date - around 1500 of Leonardo's preparatory drawings, the style of the picture and its subsequent association with a French princess, Louis and Anne become the most likely patrons for Leonardo's Salvator Mundi, probably commissioning the work soon after the conquest of Milan and Genoa. This would therefore be one of the French commissions mentioned by Fra Pietro da Novellara.¹² And it was perhaps to accommodate their wishes that Leonardo based Christ's features, the set of his eyes and the heavy lower lids, and especially his smoothly arched eyebrows running down into a long nose, on the Christ of the Mandylion of Edessa. LS