
'*SALVATOR MUNDI*': A REAL FAKE LEONARDO

Pierre Beaudry, 9/10/18

FOREWORD

On November 15, 2017, a famous New York City auction house published the following announcement: “On a historic night at Christie’s in New York, [*Salvator Mundi*](#), a depiction of Christ as ‘Saviour of the World’ by one of history’s greatest and most renowned artists, sold for \$450,312,500 / £342,182,751 (including buyer’s premium), becoming the most expensive painting ever sold at auction.”¹

The irony is that Leonardo da Vinci may have had a hand in producing that painting, but the composition which is before our eyes and minds today is so uncharacteristic of the great master’s mind that the curators who manipulated it made a mockery of it and turned the composition into one of the crudest mystification ever.

INTRODUCTION

One look at a few people involved in the preparatory setting before this auction and you will realize that something is not quite kosher; for example, consider the presence of the CEO of Aspen Institute, who is also chairman of CNN fake news, and editor of *Time* magazine. Those résumé titles give you a hint that you might be looking at one of the top opinion makers in American business today. However, for most people, these are not sufficient to establish that he is a con-man of the highest order.

¹ [Leonardo's Salvator Mundi makes auction history](#), November 15, 2017.

On the other hand, when you discover that the same person, Walter Isaacson, is also the author of a biography of Leonardo da Vinci² and is the one who authenticated the [Salvator Mundi](#), just a month before it was put up for auction, you begin to ask some serious questions about the nature of coincidences.

Finally, when the author of that *Time* best seller book attempted to prove that his claim to authenticity was based on a major mistake that Leonardo da Vinci “had made consciously” while composing that painting, then, I suggest you immediately stop having doubts, and bring to your mind the question: “*Qui Bono?*” Who benefits from this fraudulent affair?

THE FRAUDULANT FABRICATION OF THE ‘MALE MONA LISA’

On November 15, 2017, the Wall Street Journal reported: “Art dealer Robert Simon and his colleague Alexander Parish bought a painting by an unknown artist in 2005. Simon then asked his friend Dianne Modestini to restore it. Her work on the piece eventually led to the discovery that it was Leonardo da Vinci's "[Salvator Mundi](#)," and helped her through one of the hardest times in her life.”³

Now, ask yourself: “How can you best tell a lie and get away with it?” The answer is: “When a truth is couched in the fallacy of an apparent greater truth.” And, that is how Walter Isaacson fooled everybody when he gave his interpretation of the [Salvator Mundi](#), convincing everybody that Leonardo had made a “conscious” mistake deliberately in order to show that Christ could make a miracle. The restoration expert, Dianne Modestini, reported that the eyes of Christ were left “untouched” in order to express the “mystical” personality of the divine. Let us see how this double fraud was perpetrated. First, Isaacson reported:

“In one respect, it [the painting] is rendered with beautiful scientific precision, but Leonardo failed to paint the distortion that would occur when looking through a solid clear ball at objects that are not touching the ball. Solid glass or crystal, whether shaped like an orb or a lens, produces magnified, inverted, and reversed images. Instead, Leonardo painted the ball as if it were a hollow glass bubble that does not refract or distort the light passing through it.”⁴

² Walter Isaacson, [Leonardo da Vinci](#), Simon & Schuster, New York, October 2017.

³ Wall Street Journal, November 15, 2017, [Finding the \\$450 Million Salvator Mundi: A Love Story](#), YouTube,

⁴ [Leonardo's Salvator Mundi makes auction history](#), November 15, 2017.



Figure 1 Salvator Mundi, c.1500.

Although the fallacy of composition of Isaacson is a very good sleight of hand, I will show you why this crystal ball could not have been produced by the mind of Leonardo. Isaacson hid the truth by stating that: “he [Leonardo] was subtly trying to impart a miraculous quality to Christ and his orb.”⁵ Isaacson makes believe that Leonardo did not want the observer to be distracted from what he considered to be the real subject of the painting which is Christ’s divine power of making miracles. True! But, we are witnessing a different miracle, here. We are witnessing the miracle of a \$450 million dollar swindle.

The real miracle, here, is that people at the auction believed him, because they were all prepared to be deceived, and the painting was intended to become the highest record sale ever made. It was as if prospective buyers accepted to be deceived provided it was done by the biggest con-man in town. Isaacson nailed the fraud down by adding the following pitch for his book. During his interview with Artnet’news, Isaacson said:

“Just to be very clear, this article [from Arnet’news] leaves a bit of a false impression. In my new book, I state clearly and unequivocally that this painting of *Salvator Mundi* is by Leonardo. And I explore the reasons that he did not show the crystal ball distorting the robe of Christ. I say it was a conscious decision on Leonardo’s part. I do not say in my book, nor did I say in the interview, nor do I believe, that anyone but Leonardo painted this painting. I believe he made a decision to paint the crystal ball in a way that is miraculous and not distracting. All of the art experts I know agree, from Martin Kemp to Luke Syson.”⁶

A week after the auction, a surprisingly truthful article from [The Guardian](#) reported that the authenticity of Leonardo was very doubtful, and its editorial was rather inclined to believe the Italian Renaissance specialist, Carmen Bambach, who attributed the painting to both Giovanni Boltraffio and to Leonardo da Vinci. Bambach explained that “having studied and followed the picture during its conservation treatment, and seeing it in context in the exhibition, much of the original surface may be by Boltraffio, but with passages done by Leonardo himself, namely Christ’s proper right blessing hand, portions of the sleeve, his left hand and the crystal orb he holds.”⁷

⁵ Quoted by Wikipedia in [Salvator Mundi](#) (Leonardo)

⁶ Quoted from Eileen Kinsella, [Jerry Saltz and Other Doubters Love to Hate Leonardo’s ‘Salvator Mundi’ – But Here’s What the Experts Think](#), Artnet’news, November 14, 2017

⁷ [The Guardian](#), November 20, 2017, [Artistic license? Experts doubt Leonardo da Vinci painted \\$450m Salvator Mundi](#).



Figure 2 Over painted version before restoration (left) and photo of the restored portrait (right). Composite Christie's/Art Collection/Alamy.

The black and white portrait in Figure 2 comes from a very old photo. No one bothered to ask why Christie's did not provide a more recent color photograph taken just before Dianne Modestini started her restoration. Moreover, if Modestini had provided a step by step progress of her process of transformation, she might have gotten more credibility. But, she didn't and the work remains couched in mystery. At any rate, in a rare effort to get at the truth, *The Guardian* pursued its own investigation of experts and restorers and asked some revealing questions:

“Could the painting be a product of ‘picture surgeons’ and their botching? ‘Restorers started calling themselves ‘picture surgeons’ at one point and were mocked for being more ‘cosmetic surgeons’,’ explains [British artist

Michael] Daley. 'What they do is what they've always done; strip down previous restorers' work and add their own – the traditional complaint against them is that they are forever undoing and redoing pictures, which is always destructive in the first part and falsifying in the second.' The painting's conservator Dianne Modestini started working on *Salvator Mundi* in 2005. When reached through email, Modestini stands by the artwork as a Leonardo, and disagrees when asked about the claims that the artwork has been heavily over-painted."⁸

Indeed, the painting's attribution can be questioned, especially after several restorations were made during the last 500 years. As the New York curator, Todd Levine said:

"I don't believe the attribution to Leonardo is correct... The attribution to Giovanni Boltraffio strikes me as correct... This painting, regardless of who it's by, is in a poor condition at best, It has been considerably over-painted several times and it has been aggressively over-cleaned. If the image of a painting is defaced to this extreme extent, it doesn't matter who it's by, the painting is effectively gone. When one is standing in front of the painting, regardless of the artist, it's not a gripping masterpiece, and Leonardo is known for gripping masterpieces, it's hard for me to believe the attribution to Leonardo."⁹

WHAT ARE WE TO THINK?

First of all, Leonardo da Vinci had a masterful scientific understanding of optics and of the laws of light propagation; he would never have chosen such a theatrical trick as the introduction of a chiromantic crystal ball for the purpose of attracting or distracting the viewer on such a sublime subject. Such trickery is definitely not in the character of Leonardo whose purpose has always been to have his viewer discover a higher state of mind, rather than experience visual effects. Moreover, he would never have used Christ for the purpose of a scientific experiment or for the purpose of introducing a mystical interpretation. Yes, he makes only "gripping" masterpieces, and this is not one of them. Thus, the choice of a crystal ball demonstrates a completely pagan outlook and is a give away that we cannot be dealing here with a Leonardo.

⁸ The Guardian, Nov. 20, 2017.

⁹ The Guardian, Nov. 20, 2017.



Figure 3 Detail of the eyes before (above) and after (below).

Secondly the eyes of Christ in the first painting of *Salvator Mundi* are horizontally uneven and are of different sizes. For instance, the lower lid of the left eye is much too low. The restoration version, however, lifted the left eye lower lid while erasing parts of both eyes. This cannot be another Leonardo mistake. The left eye is much smaller than the right eye and is partly abraded while the right eye is partly glazed over. Why all of this deconstructing makeup? It appears that the purpose was an attempt to recreate the “*sfumato*” shading effect that Leonardo is so famous for, and which was reconstructed to represent his signature. It was from that standpoint that the restoration had been made to convince the buyers, and it did.

The result of the restoration left Christ with dead eyes or looking like a blind man. Modestini made the eyes appear hazy for the purpose of creating a distorting effect so that Christ is made to look at you as if from behind a veil of mystifying power. In the restoration, Christ is staring at you in almost a cross-eyed manner,

projecting an almost hypnotic effect on the spectator. When one compares this fraudulent painting with the sublime treatment of [LEONARDO DA VINCI, THE LAST SUPPER](#), there is no possible confusion. However, Modestini insisted on giving the following mystifying interpretation:

“The irises of the eyes, painted directly over the imprimatur, are as thin as watercolor and seem to have been left in reserve until a late stage. The underlying white preparation shows through more in some areas than others, and is the only way glints, motes and reflections are rendered; there is no body color. This highly unusual technique lends a mystical element which is unsettling. It is a god-like gaze and this is one of the devices Leonardo utilizes to convey the divine. Since both eyes have been abraded, the left one to a greater degree than the right, the ambiguity between abrasion and highlight made the restoration extremely difficult and I redid it numerous times. As little as possible was done to the left eye. No attempt was made, for example, to emphasize the pupil, which is reasonably well preserved in the right eye. Carefully following the remnants of the original, which contain a line of drawing to place the lower lid, resulted in eyes of slightly different size; the left is smaller than the right. Imposing a more logical or definite shape caused the eyes to completely change character.”¹⁰

Furthermore, American artist, Veronica Winters, made the crucial point about the crystal sphere by identifying why it could not have been painted by Leonardo. She wrote: “The orb’s reflection makes this painting the hardest thing to believe that it’s by da Vinci. It’s painted with transparency of glass that’s impossible to achieve, considering the shape and properties of the orb, regardless of its material.”¹¹ Then, she added the following illustrations of her own hand holding a crystal ball with different lighting.

¹⁰Eileen Kinsella, Op. Cit.

¹¹ Veronica Winters, [The Salvator Mundi painting: is it real or fake?](#)



Figure 4 <http://veronicasart.com/the-salvator-mundi-painting-of-leonardo-da-vinci-is-it-real-or-fake-da-vincis-orb-is-not-his/>

Some truths about how to manipulate the rich into buying fake paintings can be found in the book by Philip Hook, *Rogues' Gallery*. But, I caution the reader about it, because one has to read constantly in the slippery shady areas between the lines. As Hook said about his own book: “Here for the first time is the history of art dealers, those extraordinary men and woman who, over centuries (and almost entirely out of the public eye), built their profession on a singular skill: identifying the intangible but infinitely desirable qualities that characterize the greatest works of art—and finding clients for whom those qualities are irresistible.”¹² In other words, the art of “dealing” becomes the consummate art of manipulating greed and sense perception.

It is only by looking for what is not there, in the mind of the subject, that one can discover the fraud from the truth, because this is the only method of any truthful discovery. For further reading about the art of deception, I recommend my old report: [**CAGLIOSTRO AND THE NECKLACE AFFAIR.**](#)

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¹² Philip Hook, *Rogues' Gallery*.