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Constructing Leonardo: Authorship, Value, and the Hole at the Center of a Modern 'Masterpiece'

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

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DAVIS

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Abstract

The painting known as *Salvator Mundi*, attributed to Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci, sold at auction in 2017 for a record breaking $450 million dollars. The very same work sold for just over $1,000 when it was discovered in New Orleans in 2005. The work remained constant; what changed was its authorship, specifically its attachment to Leonardo da Vinci. Art history's canon rests on the belief that an artist's name provides financial value to a work because of that individual's unique skill, visible in the work at hand as well as in other parts of their oeuvre. But our understandings of how authorship and both aesthetic and financial value function are upended by the case of *Salvator Mundi's* dubious attribution, as the work raised in value despite uncertainty around its author. By scrutinizing the construction of authorship and value and their intersections in *Salvator Mundi*, "Constructing Leonardo" unpackages the unstable ground upon which aesthetic and financial value rests, an instability that stretches beyond the object into the broader contemporary construction of the art object, in the market and beyond.

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I am unendingly thankful for the support of my parents Andrew Szasz and Wendy Strimling, who have acted as an intellectual sounding-board for the ideas and thinking recorded here. My parents have nurtured in me an abiding interest in and curiosity about the world – its material culture, its structures, and everything in between – that continues to serve as a guiding force.

“Almost anyone can be an author;
the business is to collect money and fame from this state of being.”

– A.A. Milne

“Once society discovers that it depends on the economy,
the economy in fact depends on the society.”

– Guy Debord

The author as genius, the artist as one imbued with a special skill that marks their work: these heady constructions remain as culturally resonant today as at the time of their inception, some five hundred years ago. More importantly, they are *active*: for *Salvator Mundi*, a painting depicting Christ as savior of the world attributed to Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci, the strength of these constructions has been leveraged to inform the value of the work, both aesthetic and financial (Figure 1). When *Salvator Mundi* was sold at an estate sale in New Orleans in 2005, the painting was purchased for a mere $1,175.[1] However, just twelve years later, the very same work sold for a record-breaking $450 million at Christie's auction house in New York City.[2] The work at its core is unchanged: its authorship, especially, cannot be edited, added to, or revised. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Walter Benjamin famously writes about "the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence at the place at which it is to be found."[3] I invoke this idea of unique existence here in considering the truth of the work—its history and fundamentally, its author. Regardless of its masterful restoration work and the construction of the work as spectacle, the original canvas lies beneath it all. The aura of *Salvator Mundi* is not so much erased as supplanted by a constructed presence assigned to the work by Christie's in built-in layers: the myth of discovery, the myth of the restoration, the myth of the long-lost masterpiece. Yet over the course of the twelve years between its sales at auction, several key developments took place, which together attached the name of Leonardo to the painting despite a lack of unequivocal proof. Following this attribution, the monetary value of *Salvator Mundi* skyrocketed into nearly a half billion dollars when

[1] *Savior for Sale: Da Vinci's Last Masterpiece?*, directed by Antoine Vitkine (2021; New York: Greenwich Entertainment), film.
[2] Matthew Shaer, "The Invention of 'Salvator Mundi,' Or, How to Turn a $1,000 Art Auction Pickup Into a $450 Million Masterpiece," *Vulture*, April 14, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/salvator-mundi-leonardo-da-vinci.html.
[3] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): 13.

accounting for Christie's commission. The painting underwent an extensive restoration by Dianne Modestini, which drastically changed the appearance of the picture. *Salvator Mundi* changed hands several times, from Basil Hendry, the son of the previous owner of the work, who brought the painting to sale in New Orleans, to art dealers Robert Simon and Alexander Parrish, and finally to Russian oligarch Dmitri Rybolovlev, gaining in value with each transaction.[4] Finally, the composition was marketed by Christie's as a long-lost Leonardo, framed as a relic not for its religious themes but rather for its significance as an old master work 'found' in the contemporary era.[5]

Salvator Mundi provides an inroad into the tangled web of the issues: the author's name, persona, and hand, financial and aesthetic value, and the role of art history and the art market to reinforce these complicated relationships. The name of Leonardo and the specter of his authorial hand are seen to impact *Salvator Mundi*, its trajectory, and its financial value regardless of whether the artist worked on the image; the work reveals the malleability of the seemingly objective marker of author, thus providing an important look into the mechanisms and machinations that undergird the workings of art history and the art market. This thesis argues that the attachment of Leonardo to the painting as its sole author, an attribution presented by Christie's and others involved in *Salvator Mundi's* sale as largely beyond question, is motivated not by the pursuit of art historical fact but rather by the financial interests of those involved. That the truth about the work of art can be so manipulated even with plentiful doubt regarding its history and author demonstrates that the production of knowledge and fact in the discipline of art history at large may itself be imperiled by the hand of the market.

[4] *Savior for Sale: Da Vinci's Last Masterpiece?*, directed by Antoine Vitkine.
[5] Leading up to its sale, Christie's released a video entitled "The World Is Watching," which showed not the work but rather the individuals viewing it and their reactions: contemplative, thoughtful, moved to tears. The implication is that even being in the same room with the painting was enough to engender a transformative experience.

But why does the attachment of the author's name have such power? To understand how and why the authorial name functions to this degree requires turning to Michel Foucault to unpack the construction of the author persona. In his text "What Is An Author?" Michel Foucault writes about the cultural investment in "the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it."[6] Addressing the significance of the name, he writes:

> It is more than a gesture, a finger pointed at someone; it is, to a certain extent, the equivalent of a description. […] An author's name is not simply an element of speech (as a subject, a complement, or an element that could be replaced by a pronoun or other parts of speech). Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification.[7]

The name of the author functions not as a word or a name but discursively. As Foucault argues, the author's name is a means of categorization and description, transcending the individual's personhood and even their work. In other words, the name is a marker that guides the reading of the object. This construction of an author's persona can help us to understand *Salvator Mundi*, which cannot be definitively attributed to Leonardo; yet the connection of Leonardo to the painting is what determines its financial and artistic value. *Salvator Mundi* makes visible the loaded relationship between an author and a text and the financial conditions that the 'right' author creates. More significantly, *Salvator Mundi* shows that the benefits conferred by an author's name can be gained even with uncertain attribution. This unstable attachment not only flips traditional workings of authorship in the history of art, but also reveals a threat to objective truth within the discipline of art history.

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[6] Michel Foucault, "What Is An Author?" in Steven B. Smith, *Modernity and Its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 300.
[7] Ibid, 303–304.

Since the Renaissance, when Giorgio Vasari penned the biographies of the artists in the *Lives*, the persona of the artist has been an ideologically weighty construction.[8] The significance and value, both aesthetic and financial, attached to the author have only grown over time. While always respected and revered, Leonardo da Vinci did not take on the cult-like status that he now has until much later, arguably in the nineteenth century.[9] Similarly, today, the status of author remains privileged and significant in our own understanding of a work of art. There is a continuous trend toward engagement in what Foucault calls *ecriture*—the "attempt to elaborate the conditions of any text" by 'knowing' its author, using the author and their biography to contextualize and understand a text even as the actual conditions of authoring a text or work of art have changed.[10] The artist has been and continues to be positioned as sole genius, reinforcing the mythology created and forwarded by Vasari of the artist as occupying an extraordinary status. In the case of *Salvator Mundi*, which emerges as both a Renaissance art object and one that has continued to change into the contemporary, authorship is privileged both in the period from which it dates and in the period in which it emerges. The pressure and privilege of authorship are actively at work in the handling and understanding of the work from multiple sides, reinforcing the desire to attach an individual who can engender great artistic and financial value to the work. But while authorship seems to be taken advantage of in the saga of this work, it does have a traditional function in the history of art, one that is turned on its head here.

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[8] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[9] This topic has been written about at length, particularly in connection to the *Mona Lisa* and its enduring enigmatic status. Some five hundred years after its creation, visitors crowd daily into the gallery dedicated to the painting at the Musée du Louvre for just a moment in its presence. For discussion of the rise of Leonardo da Vinci and the cult of authorship, see Donald Sassoon, *Becoming Mona Lisa: The Making of a Global Icon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001) and *Leonardo and the Mona Lisa Story: The History of a Painting Told in Pictures* (New York: Overlook Books, 2006).
[10] Foucault, "What is An Author?" 302.

We would traditionally believe that a work of art made by a known author has artistic value not simply because of the author but rather because individual's artistic qualities imbued into that object by their hand. A painting or sketch by Leonardo is great not simply because he made it, but rather because of the unique sight, skill, and ability which go into creating these things, or so the logic goes. However, the relationship between the author, the hand, and the work is complex: even if another could create a composition that looks identical to a Leonardo, we would dismiss it as a copy, as derivative, discuss it in passing in a footnote, or not at all. The author matters more than their artistic product, even if our supposed value judgments about the work ostensibly stem *from* its author-artist.

Some scholars, most notably Oxford scholar Martin Kemp, who wrote a catalogue essay in support of *Salvator Mundi* and its attribution leading up to its sale in 2017, have attributed the painting to Leonardo. In his text *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon*, Kemp discusses the work, connecting it to other icons of Christ and suggesting that Leonardo utilized these icons as models for the composition.[11] Kemp attributes both the formulaic and atypical qualities of *Salvator Mundi*, which will be discussed at length in these pages, to its subject matter. Kemp suggests, for instance, that Leonardo created a work that "exploits artful ambiguity," comparing this to the famously enigmatic *Mona Lisa*, although arguably the emotional ambiguity of each work functions quite differently.[12] In an interview with *artnet news*, Kemp attributes the debate around the authorship of the work to the cultural cache that he believes is available to those who take on the topic, stating pithily, "you get column inches […] people who normally are limited to

[11] Martin Kemp, *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35–37.
[12] Ibid, 37.

the ghetto of the arts pages end up being on the front page."[13] Interestingly, in *Savior for Sale: Da Vinci's Lost Masterpiece?,* one of two recent documentaries which present the saga of and the controversy surrounding *Salvator Mundi*, Kemp, despite having written the expert opinion for Christie's attributing the painting to Leonardo, concludes: "what was published in the Christie's catalogue was overly definite, absolutely."[14] Both this documentary and the other, entitled *The Lost Leonardo*, feature various individuals party to the events that have unfolded around *Salvator Mundi* since 2005, including art dealer Robert Simon, restorer Dianne Modestini, and staff people involved in planning the exhibition of the work at the Louvre Museum. However, while these films make clear that many of those involved are truly convinced of the work's authorship, evidence presented in each documentary also demonstrates a lacuna in *Salvator Mundi's* historical arc, particularly with its recent attribution. At no point is it clear that the evidence for the work's authorship is incontrovertible. Rather, it seems apparent that the attribution is dependent on overlooking elements of the painting that would spark doubt, or otherwise trying to fit the work and its unusual attributes into the oeuvre of Leonardo with explanations that do not resolve the original questions around the painting.

In the case of *Salvator Mundi*, the connection of author to the work is wishful, a construction that many participate in. It is impossible to know who authored the work—its true authorship is obscured by the work's provenance record, made opaque by layers of restoration and damage, and further called into question by the work's appearance prior to restoration in the mid-2000s. And yet, despite the serious questions that exist as to the attribution of this work, it grew in financial value by hundreds of millions after its assignment to Leonardo. Authorship and

[13] Eileen Kinsella, "'Debunking This Picture Became Fashionable': Leonardo da Vinci Scholar Martin Kemp on What the Public Doesn't Get About 'Salvator Mundi,'" *artnet news*, June 12, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/martin-kemp-talks-salvator-mundi-new-book-1570006.
[14] *Savior for Sale: Da Vinci's Last Masterpiece?*, directed by Antoine Vitkine.

value are connected, but not in the way that we might typically expect. The financial value of the work is predicated on the stability of its authorial identification, just as that identification then builds value. Each relies upon the other in their mutual creation and reinforcement of each other.

Salvator Mundi reveals this unstable construction propping up not just the art market, but also art history as it engages the market and its players: the auction houses, dealers, and restorers, among others. Authorship is constantly and conveniently redefined; in the case of *Salvator Mundi*, it is *assigned* even when doing so threatens the real oeuvre of Leonardo. Authorship, then, is revealed by this work to be an unstable concept, one that can be manipulated, changed, and perhaps even bought. It is this instability that I explore in this thesis, with *Salvator Mundi* being the stage upon which these dynamics play out.

INTO THE WORK: ESTABLISHING DOUBT

Crucial to the argument of this thesis is that reasonable doubt can be cast upon the attribution of *Salvator Mundi* to Leonardo. Thus, to enter this discussion, it is necessary to begin with the work itself, with attention paid its formal properties and iconographic details. There is reason to connect the work to the oeuvre of Leonardo, which I address first. However, multiple elements of the work—in form and provenance—create doubt around the certainty of its attribution to the Renaissance master. This lack of certainty is ignored and buried as the potential financial value of the work becomes apparent, making clear that the motive of the attachment of the author Leonardo to the work is at least partially financial. To fully understand the issues around the attribution of this painting, into the work we must go.

Key evidence, beginning with the subject matter of the work, suggests that this painting has a connection to Leonardo. While it is not clear that Leonardo completed work on a painting like *Salvator Mundi*, featuring Christ as savior of the world, it is known that he did begin work

on a composition of this kind. Two studies, made in the medium of red chalk drawing on red paper, are authenticated to Leonardo and demonstrate early work on such a composition. One study, the paper bifurcated, shows an initial working out of the garment that Christ wears, with the fabric gathering at the shoulders and folding loosely near his elbows (Figure 2). The other drawing is a detail that studies the way that the cloth might appear around the sleeve, with an arm emerging from the fabric. The second study focuses solely on the issue of how to depict an arm emerging from a sleeve: in this iteration, Leonardo has added a cuff to the sleeve, so that the cloth encircles the arm more tightly before descending into loose folds (Figure 3). A later etching, made by artist Wenceslaus Hollar in 1650, reproduces the image of *Salvator Mundi*, suggesting that the work was a copy of an original by Leonardo: the image is inscribed, "Leonardo da Vinci pinxit," or "Leonardo da Vinci painted it" (Figure 4).[15] Despite these suggestions of an existing composition by Leonardo of this subject matter, in the material self-published about the process of research and restoration on the work, restorer Dianne Modestini acknowledged that whether such a work existed is inconclusive. She writes, "in 1964, Ludwig Heydenreich […] concluded that there was a lost prototype," suggesting that such a work did exist.[16] However, she goes on: "in 2005, Maria Teresa Fiorio suggested that the painting itself had never been executed by Leonardo and that the derivations come from drawings and cartoons."[17] The authenticated studies, then, could have been all that Leonardo created, with other artists basing their work after his initial compositions. It is also possible that there was a

[15] "Historic Images," *Salvator Mundi Revisited*, accessed April 30, 2022, https://salvatormundirevisited.com/History-of-the-Salvator-Mundi.
[16] "History of the Salvator Mundi," *Salvator Mundi Revisited*, accessed April 30, 2022, https://salvatormundirevisited.com/History-of-the-Salvator-Mundi.
[17] Ibid.

more extensive prototype created, but there is no solid evidence that the painting that surfaced in New Orleans in 2005 would be this work.

Beyond considerations about the history of the composition, technical and material analysis has been done on *Salvator Mundi*. Analysis of the work has shown that various elements of the painting, from panel material to binder type, could conceivably fit with Leonardo's known practices.[18] Despite this, however, Modestini acknowledges that there are inconsistencies with other authenticated works of Leonardo made in the same period. She writes:

> The Salvator Mundi does not suffer from the drying defects that afflict many of Leonardo's works, whether from wrinkling (the Munich painting) or contraction cracks. *Saint John the Baptist* in the Louvre, a work often considered to have been painted in the same period and stylistically related to the [sic] Salvator Mundi, is marred by severely contracted paint in all of the dark passages […] The *Belle Ferronière* and the Paris version of the *Virgin of the Rocks* are also afflicted by this defect, among other works.[19]

Similar discrepancies are discussed by Ben Lewis in *The Last Leonardo: The Secret Lives of the World's Most Expensive Painting*. Lewis writes that the walnut wood panel on which *Salvator Mundi* was painted was poorly selected and prepared, the knot on its surface not filled in as was customary practice for Renaissance artists including Leonardo.[20] Modestini also acknowledges that technical studies cannot authenticate a work: "they cannot prove […] that it is by a particular master."[21] There is some reason to connect this work to Leonardo in its composition and materials, and to date it conclusively to the Renaissance. However, there is not enough evidence to connect it conclusively to the master's hand. Similarities, including the panel's medium and the materials used to prepare the panel, confirm that this work was made in the Renaissance

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[18] "Materials and Techniques," *Salvator Mundi Revisited*, accessed April 30, 2022, https://salvatormundirevisited.com/History-of-the-Salvator-Mundi.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ben Lewis, *The Last Leonardo: The Secret Lives of the World's Most Expensive Painting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2019), 16–17.
[21] "Materials and Techniques," *Salvator Mundi Revisited*, accessed April 30, 2022, https://salvatormundirevisited.com/History-of-the-Salvator-Mundi.

period and even by someone working in similar style and technique to Leonardo: this point alone expands the range of possibilities as to attribution, from an 'autograph work' made solely by the master to a work undertaken by a student, or broadly, in his workshop, from which some twenty works on this biblical theme have emerged.[22] Indeed, there are several key reasons to doubt the painting's attribution to Leonardo, which now become our focus of inquiry.

Multiple elements of *Salvator Mundi* seem to contradict an attribution of the work to the hand of Leonardo, beginning with the composition of the work and its utilization of a standard, 'stock' icon to depict Christ. To rely on established form and iconography was unusual for Leonardo, who pioneered a practice of optical representation that prioritized painting individuals and settings as they really appeared.[23] Yet, it is the opposing practice of conceptual representation that we see in *Salvator Mundi*. From the dark background of the composition, a figure emerges, a man clearly identifiable as Christ (Figure 1). Christ is centered in the composition, positioned frontally near the edge of the picture plane, leaving little room for the viewer to enter the image. He looks out at the viewer straight-on, his eyes meeting ours. The image is symmetrical, and the lines of the painting draw the viewer's eye up to Christ's face, then down to his hands, each of which holds symbolic significance. Christ's right hand is raised in a blessing gesture, with one finger pointed upward toward the heavens and one toward himself, as if indicating his status as God-on-earth. In his left hand, he holds a spherical globe, diaphanous in a way that suggests immateriality. The globe perhaps stands in for the theological relationship between Christ-God and the world, as referenced in the work's title, which

[22] *Savior for Sale: Da Vinci's Last Masterpiece?*, directed by Antoine Vitkine.

[23] Among other places, the attention that Leonardo paid to optical representation is discussed in Larry Keith's chapter "In Pursuit of Perfection: Leonardo's Painting Technique" in Luke Syson and Larry Keith, *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan* (London: National Gallery London, 2011).

introduces the figure as savior of the world.[24] The image of Christ presented here has clear visible similarities to the miraculously appearing *ver icons, non manufactum,* that came to be understood as 'true' images of Christ in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Through connection to this familiar form, repeated across centuries, Christ is instantly recognizable.[25] Both the *mandylion* and the *sudarium of Saint Veronica*—objects known to us today through later artistic representations which either depict the objects themselves or pull from the likeness of Christ that they suggest—feature Christ as a centered figure, looking frontally out toward the viewer (Figures 5 and 6). Such icons present Christ with a light complexion and long, dark, brown hair, parted in the center and coming down on either side of his face, the same iconography used in *Salvator Mundi*. While Leonardo's peers, like the artist, aimed to show their subjects in a realistic manner, Leonardo singularly accomplished what could be called 'optical representation'—representing something as it could really appear to the eye—through a meticulous attention to detail and the completion of numerous studies on the subjects of his work.[26] The use of rote, traditional form and iconography plants a seed of doubt regarding attribution, doubt that grows with further observation of the work.

The background of the work also appears atypical for Leonardo. Other religious works by Leonardo, most notably *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* and the *Annunciation*, utilize the background to emphasize the religiosity of the painting and its subject. Such works make use of a fantastical landscape to suggest to the viewer that the figures are not in or of our world. At the top of *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* are sharp peaks rendered gray and blue tones,

[24] This sphere is similar to the one seen in Albrecht Dürer's *Melancolia I* and the medieval *God the Geometer*, confirming the sphere's reference to the world, which God is in the process of constructing in both images.
[25] For more on the formation of Christ as icon, see Kemp, "Christ. The True Icon," 13–43, in *Christ to Coke*.
[26] Leonardo's medical studies are well-known, and present just one example of the scientific studies that he performed on his subjects. Indeed, Leonardo and his works are often discussed in scientific as well as artistic terms, a classification that is unique among his peers.

layered one after the next (Figure 7). This terrain is unrecognizable, not a Tuscan landscape like that which features in other Renaissance paintings; the rendered terrain does not appear real or earthly. The background thus takes on the status of the symbolic, perhaps referencing the imagined space of heaven.[27] We see a similar background in Leonardo's *Annunciation* (Figure 8). For an artist like Leonardo, known for his careful attention to the world as he saw it and his groundbreaking use of optical, rather than conceptual, representation, such a choice must be deliberate. To create a fantastical landscape is to purposefully convey that the depicted space is one that cannot be seen on earth: to utilize such a landscape for a religious image, then, is to acknowledge the distance between the human and the divine. The message conveyed is that none of us can know heaven or any other divine landscape: these are spaces that can only be imagined. In this way, Leonardo carefully utilizes a painting's background to denote meaning.

In contrast, *Salvator Mundi* has an opaque, black background. Unlike in other religious works by Leonardo, neither Christ's location beyond earth nor his status as God-on-Earth are referenced by use of the background. *Salvator Mundi's* background is more alike to Leonardo's portraits of high society women, including *Presumed portrait of Lucrezia Crivelli, wrongly known as La Belle Ferronnière* and *Lady with an Ermine* (Figures 9 and 10). Both compositions depict earthly, wealthy court women—real women whom Leonardo painted from their visage, rather than from a mental image or replication of a popularized icon. In these paintings, the dark background serves a purpose, focusing the viewer's gaze on the sitter. Rather than noticing what is behind the subject, we take in their porcelain skin, desirable figure, kind and gentle expressions, and sumptuous dress or jewelry. We are firmly placed in the world of the material

[27] Leonardo's use of an imagined space to carry conceptual meaning in religious context is like the fantastical spaces and magical realism in landscape painting that emerges in the work of the Northern Renaissance. This phenomenon is discussed in Katherine Crawford Luber's "Recognizing Van Eyck: Magical Realism in Landscape Painting," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 91, no. 386/7 (Spring, 1998): 6–23.

and the real. The compositional choice thus foregrounds each woman's social status and position: the power of these women is not God-given, but rather comes from their earthly wealth and societal status. The dark canvas, behind the subject, here is in harmony with the works' intended purpose. This same background, however, is strange in *Salvator Mundi*, which lacks the deliberate, carefully considered attention to detail that marks the works of Leonardo.

Beyond inconsistencies in the work's background and its iconography, the emotion conveyed within the painting is also unusual for Leonardo. While his works tend to communicate emotion legibly, *Salvator Mundi* is emotionally evasive and difficult to read. Multiple emotions are suggested on Christ's face, creating an illegible interior psychological state. Christ looks out to the viewer, his eyes meeting ours, and yet we cannot discern a single facial expression. Above his left eye there is a furrow in his brow, suggesting consternation, but his lips are pursed, the top trembling over the lower, as if he is struggling not to cry. The eyes, however, are strangely blank. The expression on Christ's face defies recognition the longer one looks at the work. There is no one recognizable human emotion depicted, a stark contrast to how individuals are typically depicted in Leonardo's work.

Characteristically, Leonardo humanizes divine figures through their facial expressions and gestures. In *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, Mary looks lovingly at her son, Christ child gazes innocently at her, and Saint Anne smiles down upon the two with seeming-amusement, her cheeks flushed as if from laughter. The figures have a humanity to them which connects them to the viewer. Their facial expressions are recognizable; we see real human emotions expressed, despite the godly and saintly status of the figures. Leonardo's *Saint John* is similarly known for being an unusually sensitive and personable portrayal of a saintly figure. There is a gentleness and playfulness to his expression; he smiles knowingly, making direct eye

contact with the viewer (Figure 11). Although there is nothing improper to be found in this moment, it seems he might wink at us in the next. Of course, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* has captivated viewers for centuries for the same reason: the expression on her face suggests a secret thought crossing the sitter's mind that lends an enigmatic mystery to her soft smile (Figure 12).[28] Each of these works displays an emotional interiority that feels real and that creates connection between the subject of the work and the viewer. Leonardo invites us into his pictures and the world they depict.

Salvator Mundi lacks Leonardo's humanizing character. Where the expressions of these subjects connect the viewer to the work, *Salvator Mundi* distances Christ and the observer. Christ's expression is inscrutable; any impression of emotion in one moment slips away in the next. In a skilled portrait, the emotional state of the figures captivates. The emotional interiority of the subject creates the impression that the viewer is meeting the subject face-to-face and personally connecting with them.[29] Strangely, *Salvator Mundi* refuses this connection. This characteristic, like other aspects of the work discussed, suggests again that this work may not be by Leonardo at all.

Even in the minute details, *Salvator Mundi* appears to differ from the style of Leonardo. The painterly technique of the work makes this contrast visible yet again. Christ on the canvas is overly smooth; his face appears out of focus, particularly around the edges and at his chin. Leonardo's practice of *sfumato* is well known, but what appears here is a lack of clarity, rather

[28] *La Giaconda* has taken on a life of its own in the numerous public responses to and "riffs" on the work, including those made famous by artists including Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dalí. The way that this painting continues to captivate and jest some hundreds of years after its creation suggests the enduring skill of Leonardo in creating an emotional interiority that feels real. This is precisely what is lacking from *Salvator Mundi*.

[29] This almost magical quality, also visible in the work of masters like Rembrandt van Rijn and Hans Holbein the Younger, is reminiscent of the "technology of enchantment" discussed by anthropologist Alfred Gell. See "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology" in *The Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999).

than a stylistic choice. The surface of the painting and this soft quality may reveal an attempt to construct a Leonardesque appearance or may be representative of sustained damage to the work, as other areas of the composition are visually clearer. The lower curls of Christ's hair have a crispness that gives less the impression of repainting, as do the fingers on his right hand.[30] Inconsistencies in the work may come from its restoration, a process that attempted not replication but creation. In the process of restoration, the work as we now see it was created, a work that is both Renaissance and contemporary that does not hold up outside of the light box of the auction house.

The work, pre-restoration, was shockingly different, lacking painterly skill or pictorial resonance to spark visual interest (Figure 13). The pigments were cool and red-toned, a stark contrast to the burnished coppers, umbers, and golds featured post-restoration, which not surprisingly appear like Leonardo's color palette. Christ's pre-restoration face appears overly emphasized and unfinished; while *Salvator Mundi* evades emotional recognition, it is apparent that any emotion visible was added in restoration. Christ looks out solemnly, yet there is no light emanating from his eyes. Christ looks straight ahead, his eyes vacant and lifeless, strangely looking in two different directions. His robe also lacks detail, the folds appearing graphic and fabricated rather than real.[31] The cleaned state—the work, with layers of damage and repainting removed—appears to correct some of these issues, most noticeably the area around the eyes and the coloration by the cheeks and forehead, suggesting that some of these flaws stem from

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[30] Interestingly, these are the parts of the work that some scholars, who will not attribute the complete composition to Leonardo, argue that he may have painted. There is no way to know, however, whether Leonardo worked on these or any part of the composition, rendering this point moot.

[31] This detail is particularly important because two authenticated Leonardo sketches for *Salvator Mundi* in the Royal Collection Trust of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II show his practices for the sleeve specifically. In each sketch, the sleeve is rendered much more realistically: the fabric has volume and depth and hangs naturally on the body, a contrast to the completed composition. Leonardo is known for his practice of sketching and observation, closely related to his pioneering use of optical representation; it is unlikely that he would perfect a detail in these stages only to render the same feature with less technical skill in the more complete painting.

repainting at some point after the work's creation. This should cast more doubt, not resolve it, on Leonardo's attribution; so much of what existed on the canvas was done in the centuries after its creation that the original presence of the work is ever more difficult to see. Even if the work, in cleaned state, looks more like a Leonardo, this is hardly a smoking gun for the authorship of the work, particularly given the possibility that this work could have been made by a student of Leonardo, working in his workshop under his tutelage or another painter influenced by him. Photographs taken of *Salvator Mundi* at multiple stages of its restoration reveal a full repainting to make the work fit a particular mold. It is through this process of restoration that a 'Leonardo' emerges. Restoration in this case is a literal cover-up, each layer further obscuring the original subject to the whims and hopes of those working on it now.

Some scholars, including Kemp's Oxford colleague, Matthew Landrus, have argued that Leonardo did not paint *Salvator Mundi* but rather that the composition was made by a student in his workshop, perhaps Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio or Bernardino Luini.[32] These artists would certainly have produced works adhering to and imitating the style of Leonardo while in his workshop.[33] *Salvator Mundi*, in its pre-restoration state, bears similarities to the work of these artists, Boltraffio in particular. Christ's sharp, elongated, and prominent brow bone are like those in his *Portrait of a Notable*, *Santa Lucía*, and *The Virgin and Child*, and his pursed lips and cold expression around the eyes resemble those of Boltraffio's figures (Figures 14, 15, and 16). Even attribution to Leonardo's students, however, has been disputed. Christie's provenance record for

[32]Dalya Alberge, "Leonardo scholar challenges attribution of $450 million painting," *The Guardian*, August 6, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/aug/06/leonardo-da-vinci-scholar-challenges-attribution-salvator-mundi-bernardino-luini.

[33] The workshop model was, fundamentally, an apprenticeship model. Although Vasari mythologizes Leonardo's entrance into Andrea del Verrocchio's workshop, stating that former was already superior to the latter upon his arrival, these workshops and the master-student relationship provided artistic training that is often visible in the works of students in these artistic lineages. It is not difficult to believe that a student of Leonardo could have made a work that showed the influence and even imitated the style of Leonardo. This only furthers muddy the attribution, however.

Salvator Mundi shows that between 1868 and 1939, the work was marked as a 'Free copy after Boltraffio,' making the work at least two artistic generations removed from Leonardo.[34] The next entry of June 25, 1958 records the work as a 'Boltraffio,' bringing the work closer to the master but again highlighting the uncertainty that has surrounded this work for over a century.[35]

Salvator Mundi's provenance record provided by Christie's indicates an uncertainty as to its author. This record includes attributions to Leonardo's students, Boltraffio and Luini, and even their followers. These varied attributions suggest a work that could have been made by any number of artists. Nonetheless, beginning after the process of restoration, the work is recorded as a Leonardo. With such uncertainty, how can it be known that the recent attribution to Leonardo is correct? In short, it is impossible—a fact that should make clear the stakes, primarily financial, that rest upon presenting the attribution as solid. Provenance is a constructed terrain that is "neither stable as a concept nor constant as an instrument;" if even the carefully constructed provenance record of the work reveals an uncertainty around its attribution, this should serve to emphasize the fundamental uncertainty around the identity of the author.[36] The provenance of the work, then, provides not only the final form of doubt as to its author, but also an entry point to scrutinize the construction of attribution, why it matters, and what it masks.

The attribution of *Salvator Mundi* to Leonardo da Vinci was not always framed as certain. In fact, uncertainty around the attribution of the work is part of the story since its purchase in New Orleans by art dealers Robert Simon and Alexander Parish, who engaged in what was essentially a speculative practice, connected to and dependent on the painting's author.

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[34] Sara Friedlander, "Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Salvator Mundi, Provenance," *Christie's Auction House*, accessed June 6, 2021, https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6110563.
[35] Boltraffio studied with Leonardo and his work is often referred to as "Leonardesque." It seems entirely possible that over centuries, the author of a work made by an artist in Leonardo's studio, not by the master but by a student, could become "confused," particularly if that confusion led to a dramatic change in valuation as it did here.
[36] Gail Feigenbaum and Inge Reist, eds., *Provenance: An Alternate History of Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 0.

Simon and Parish saw something of interest in the work, thinking that perhaps it had been made by a student of Leonardo, possibly Bernardino Luini. Even attribution to Luini would increase its value, although to a much lesser degree than if Leonardo had painted it.[37] From the start, this was an exercise in which financial value was tied to authorship, and in which the identification of a renowned painter would result in great monetary benefit for the art dealers. As Parish poignantly stated in an interview, "a major part of what I do […] is educated gambling. You get a good feeling about a piece of art, and you place a bet that you know more about it than the auctioneer does."[38] Simon and Parish speculated on *Salvator Mundi*, and were rewarded handsomely when they sold the painting to Dmitri Rybolovlev in 2013, with art dealer Yves Bouvier acting as a middleman, for $83 million when accounting for Sotheby's commission for facilitating its sale.[39] The potential value of the painting created the conditions for hoping for but most crucially, *constructing the appearance of* a work painted by Leonardo. This construction was in this case not just conceptual but actual. Simon and Parish commissioned Dianne Modestini to restore the painting, which the two hoped would uncover an author of financial value. In the years that followed, Modestini came to believe in Leonardo's authorship and made the canvas appear as such. Modestini fabricated the hand of a Renaissance author with the sleight of her own contemporary hand to support of a narrative of artistic value, stemming from the attached author, that would then create its financial couple.[40]

On Modestini's website, published to record the restoration in the face of public interest and critique, she writes of her own doubt about the work's authorship at the start of the process.

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[37] Shaer, "The Invention of the 'Salvator Mundi.'"
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] This is elaborated upon in Modestini's account of the restoration and its process as documented in "History of the Salvator Mundi," *Salvator Mundi Revisited*, accessed January 23, 2022, https://salvatormundirevisited.com/History-of-the-Salvator-Mundi, and discussed below.

Modestini recalls, she "was not immediately impressed" by the work when it came to her.[41] Modestini's husband, also a conservator of Italian paintings, rendered his opinion as well. He also did not see evidence of Leonardo's hand in the work, although his influence was visible; Modestini records him as stating, "this is by a very great artist, but I don't know who it is. A generation after Leonardo."[42] Much of this story rests upon the trained eye and hand of restorers, a group who hold a special status. Restorers are allowed to work on an existing work of art in a way that remains curiously invisible. While a restorer may at times paint on the surface of the canvas, this work is never attributed to them. Rather, it is framed and understood as simply a furthering of or even a recovery of the original work of an artist. Restorers are highly trained, and the skill of their eye and hand is prized. Restoration is thus naturally tied to connoisseurship, and it was with a connoisseurial eye that Modestini came to identify the work as a Leonardo. She writes of the moment,

> One evening, I was trying, once again, to retouch a loss in the upper lip. I could not master the imperceptible transition to my satisfaction and had removed my retouch numerous times. I had a copy of a book the Louvre had recently published about the Mona Lisa […] I removed the page with the detail of the mouth and pinned it to my easel. At that moment I realized that the Salvator Mundi could not have been painted by anyone except Leonardo.[43]

This story frames the connoisseurial eye of Modestini as able to see the 'truth' of the work and its author; however, this method of attribution is inherently subjective. The attribution, first offered by Modestini in the moment described, was impacted by her hopes, desires, and personal bias, as well as the demands placed on her by the dealers who hired her to restore the painting. It was her own epiphany that then gave her the confidence to "restore" the image as a Leonardo, a self-

[41] "History of the Salvator Mundi," *Salvator Mundi Revisited*, accessed January 23, 2022, https://salvatormundirevisited.com/History-of-the-Salvator-Mundi.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

fulfilling connection that took author and painting into the territory of a contemporary construction.

RESTORATION AND CONSTRUCTION

The restoration created a 'Leonardo' that could stand up to initial scrutiny and go to high-profile auction. A detailed look, then, at the painting across its stages of restoration is imperative to ascertain just what has been constructed and to what end. Images on Modestini's website show *Salvator Mundi* at various stages: before restoration; in a 'cleaned state' with damage removed; at two points mid-restoration; and finally, as a fully restored painting. Close examination of these images and its changes throughout the restoration sow further doubt as to who is the author of the work, illustrating the constructive process in which Modestini engaged.

In 2005, the first color image of the work was taken prior to restoration, providing a starting point for this inquiry (Figure 13).[44] Several key characteristics immediately stand out, highlighting the lack of technical precision in rendering for which Leonardo is known. Immediately, one notices the frontality of the work, an impression created in part by the lack of spatial depth. Compositionally, the work looks more like a rendering of a Byzantine icon than a Renaissance portrait. The strangeness of the work is also seen in Christ's figuration. His left shoulder appears to be strangely cut off, outlined by a sharp black line, carving out the space between Christ's body and the image's dark background. The cloth draping across the same shoulder has almost no visible folds: both the fabric and the body underneath it appear flat and lack dimension. This piece of cloth is visibly a sash and not the shoulder of the robe; it lies over

[44] Modestini notes that the painting underwent several restorations and repainting since it was made, and that she had to undo them to get to a "cleaned state." Given this acknowledgement, it is unclear what we are seeing in the 2005 version. Indeed, the cleaned state may have been the best access to the original. What all of this underlines is just how difficult and ultimately impossible it is to see the original work. Everything that has taken place in the past several decades has been as reconstructive as the restoration process that I track here.

the copper belting across the robe rather than under it. Still, while identifiable, the sash lacks an appearance that makes sense to the eye. It does not appear to be in concordance with how such an item would drape on the body, a contrast to Leonardo's typical attention to life-like representation of even such small details.[45]

Other details in the composition are similarly suspect when compared to Leonardo's careful draftsmanship.[46] For example, the sphere in Christ's left hand, just below the cloth draped across his body, fades almost entirely into the fabric behind it. While the bottom of the globe, held in his hand, is embellished with flecks of white paint, creating the impression of light reflecting from it, the top of the globe is outlined heavily onto the canvas, as if drawn in pencil; this contrasts and takes away from the dimensionality of the important visual feature. A crudely inscribed circle is all that suggests the borders of the sphere. Christ's right hand is better defined, even in this pre-restoration state, and it appears to remain more constant than its counterpart throughout the restoration. His face, however, is where the painting undergoes the greatest change between its pre-restoration state to its final appearance. Christ's face is pallid, with a light, cool-toned forehead and strangely flushed cheeks. His eyebrows are sharp and overly defined, as if lined with pencil, and a deep shadow divides his nose and covers the left side of his face. Christ's eyes are narrow and the skin around them discolored. His right eye is hooded with

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[45] Fabric hangs more realistically on the body in portraits such as *Lady with an Ermine* and *Ginevra de'Benci*, which illustrate the full range of Leonardo's skills and abilities in rendering the human body and how it looks while covered with clothing.

[46] Monica Azzolini addresses Leonardo's practice of anatomical observation, including during autopsy, in her chapter "Leonardo da Vinci's Anatomical Studies in Milan: A Re-examination of Sites and Sources" in *Visualizing Medieval Medicine and Natural History, 1200-1550*, ed. Jean A. Givens, Karen M. Reeds, and Alain Touwaide (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016)., 147-176. At the time, such anatomical observations were a hybrid practice, providing information and study for multiple purposes, including forensic, religious, and medical. Leonardo's drawings and observations served a dual purpose, functioning as source of documentation and knowledge, and as an example of the methods of observation that he applied to his artistic works. The consistent attention and care paid by Leonardo in observing the lifelike conditions of the human body in life and death, a care he also applied to his painterly subjects, is a hallmark of the artist. The absence of this attention to the real and lifelike in *Salvator Mundi* is a sign that Leonardo's hand and eye are missing from the composition.

shades of orange, red, and blue that together look almost like a bruise. The bottom of Christ's face is covered with what looks like a red beard at first glance; a deeper inspection reveals it to be discoloration, perhaps a degeneration of paint. It does not cover the jaw, but rather ends three quarters of the way across the face, a detail which establishes the discoloration as damage rather than a deliberate feature. Christ's hair, too, gives the impression of damage and hasty repainting. The hair atop his head is rendered in a bright auburn that stands out in a line against his pale forehead and contrasts from the curls at its ends. Altogether, the work at this stage lacks artistic precision. It appears both roughly done and damaged; nowhere does *Salvator Mundi* suggest the hand of Leonardo.

The next available image was taken in 2006, showing the painting in 'cleaned state,' with layers of damage and repainting removed (Figure 17). At this stage, some of the technical errors and inconsistencies of the work pre-restoration appear to have been addressed. The red discoloration at the jaw, the hairline, and around the eyes is much diminished, and the sharp line around the sphere in Christ's hands is gone. Despite these improvements, this stage makes apparent the composition's extensive damage areas that Modestini would soon cover and reconstruct. Large sections of paint are missing from the composition, from the chin, the robe, and sections across the hair, as well as in smaller sections across the face; these gaps would ultimately be filled in by Modestini. What is visible of the face, at this stage, appears more sensitively painted than the work pre-restoration suggested; the use of light and shadow appears more skillfully balanced, and there is natural light in the irises of Christ's eyes. However, crucially, while what becomes visible at this stage is indeed more skillful, it is not apparent that it is the work of Leonardo. At this stage, the work reveals a more skilled hand, and looks more like it belongs to the Renaissance regardless of its attribution. The restoration helps to 'place' the

work in time, yet still does little to increase confidence about its authorship. The cleaned state makes plausible the idea that the work was painted by a student of Leonardo, possibly with guidance from or even minor painting by the master as one scholar has suggested.[47] However, it does little to support the ultimate attribution, instead reinforcing the extent to which restoration and repainting can change a work aesthetically. These images, then, open up questions about the conceptual power of restoration to reinforce and make a case for a specific attribution.

The next images document the work mid-restoration, providing a clear look at the restoration process. Images taken in 2008 and 2010, reproduced by Modestini on her website "Salvator Mundi Revisited," can be viewed as a sequential pair, making visible the additions and the work performed by Modestini during the restoration process. The work in the first mid-restoration stage, pictured in 2008, seems to return to the first state of the work in places, as imaged pre-restoration (Figure 18). Shades of red and pink are again apparent across the canvas, from Christ's face and chest into his blue robes, which reflect a warmer tint. The eyes have lost some of the life that they recovered in the cleaned state, looking again darker and less reflective. Modestini's additions to *Salvator Mundi* also become more apparent. Folds have emerged in the flat drapery across the shoulder that were missing pre-restoration, and Christ's upper lip appears puckered, with a shadow like the beginnings of a mustache above it. The expression on Christ's face is blank, at this point lacking both the coldness of the pre-restoration work and the relative warmth of its cleaned state; Modestini strikes her own balance, seemingly, between these histories of the work, and thus engages in her own creation. No visible holes in the paint remain,

[47] Oxford scholar Matthew Landrus has argued that the painting was done by Leonardo's student, Bernardino Luini, in Leonardo's workshop, drawing comparisons between it and Luini's 1515–1530 *Christ among the Doctors*. Landrus posited to *The Guardian* that Leonardo may have had a small hand in the painting, with the majority of work performed by Luini, making *Salvator Mundi* a 'Leonardo studio' work. If this were the case, the painting would still have financial value, but at a much lower rate than if the work was solely attributed to da Vinci.

and we begin to see aspects of Modestini's deduction of how the work may once have appeared, illustrated by her subsequent reconstruction of the painting.[48] In short, Modestini strikes her own artistic balance between the painting's histories and her own creation.

The second image taken in 2010 of *Salvator Mundi* mid-restoration shows a serious progression of the work completed in restoration (Figure 19). At first glance, alterations to the painting are almost imperceptible. The eye focuses on the *impression* given by the composition, skimming over the changes that have created such a radical difference. At this stage, the painting no longer has the garish red tones that previously marked it, instead rendered in grey and blue tones. The painting appears desaturated, a technique that brings out the luminous details: the light on the fingertips, the diaphanous surface of the sphere in Christ's hand, the metallic gleam of the brocade against the robe, and the curls springing from his hair. The color balance calls to mind not just Leonardo and his peers but also the cool, clear light of Northern Renaissance painting; it is as if Modestini has called on a variety of art historical references to create the 'aura' of a master work. The effort would be convincing, if not for the clear progression of its different restoration stages and the pictorial evidence that distinguishes it from Leonardo's oeuvre. The color correction and adjustment of light and shadow in the image also serve to reframe the still-damaged elements of the composition, including the shadow around Christ's lower face, which here becomes a convincing presence of facial hair. Modestini's restorations have vastly improved *Salvator Mundi*, making it appear as a great work of art authored by Leonardo. This very fact, however, should clarify that the painting does not look impressive

[48] The one detail that stands out as unfinished is Christ's thumb, where a *pentimento* is visible; another (possibly original) tip of the thumb, indicating upward instead of outward toward the edge of the canvas, can be seen next to the thumb that remains on the canvas. While *pentimenti* confirm that the work is an original composition, with revisions that a copy would lack, such a detail does not confirm that the work was undertaken by Leonardo. Indeed, *pentimenti* and corrections were often carried out by students in a workshop and could have been made by any author to a work.

post-restoration because the process of restoration uncovered original work by the master. *Salvator Mundi* appears as it does now not because of Leonardo's hand but rather Modestini's.

Images of the work post-restoration show additional changes and alterations (Figure 20). Lifelike color has been added back into Christ's chest and forehead, and a natural pink is in his lips and across his cheeks. The problematic sash has been again repainted, with the previously added wrinkles removed, and luminosity that draws the eye has been added back to the sphere, setting it apart from the robe behind it and the hand that supports it. The elements of the work appear to work in concert, creating more the impression of a great work of art. However, under scrutiny, the restoration of the work falls apart. Visible in the restoration images is the hand not of Leonardo but of the restorer. It is likely that Modestini did come to believe that this was a Leonardo painting, as she relays, and certainly, this belief informed her work in restoration. Importantly, Modestini's belief that the work was a Leonardo influenced her process, as she looked to Leonardo for inspiration, using his paintings as models to restore *Salvator Mundi*. The use of models to inform the restoration reinforced the confusion of authorship. As Shaer questions, "[Modestini's] work was almost ontological in nature; by relying on Leonardo's work to restore the painting, was she uncovering a Leonardo or bringing it into being?"[49] The elements that make the work of value 'as a Leonardo' are those painted by Modestini; problematically, the painting's attribution rests on this fabrication. The work, whatever its beginnings, through its restoration becomes not a Leonardo but a Modestini. But where is the artistic—and financial—value in that?

Roland Barthes writes in *The Death of the Author* that "to assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing."[50] The author informs

[49] Shaer, "The Invention of the 'Salvator Mundi.'"
[50] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 52–53.

the way that a viewer interprets a work; thus, to know the author is to know the work. Visually, this is what Modestini does with her restoration, assigning Leonardo to the work in visible terms and inscribing the presence of his hand. But this very action makes this work less of its original author and more of her hand. A work by a great author is great because of the skill of that artist, their unique sight and hand which craft a work that no other could. But here, the work is claimed to be great because a contemporary restorer imitates Leonardo's style, constructing the work. Traditionally, the restorer's imitative work would not be of much value. So why is this overlooked here? The pull of authorship, the significance that an author has and imbues into the work, creates the conditions for a faulty attribution, one inspired by the weight of the author's and its multivalent value.

ATTRIBUTION AND AUTHORSHIP

That the restoration was followed by an attribution inverts the typical working of authorship. The case of *Salvator Mundi* thus upsets our understandings of how authorship functions and reveals how in art, the idea of stable authorship rests on unstable ground. When this reversal occurs, the building of objective knowledge in art history is also upended. Because authorship is the locus of this construction and instability, it is important to examine authorship as it typically functions. How has authorship been defined in the history of art, from the Renaissance to present, and in what ways does the construction of *Salvator Mundi* present a reversal? To answer this question, it is necessary to look deeply at the construction and logic of authorship.

Giorgio Vasari was the first to systematically record, contextualize, and ultimately mythologize artists in what has become a core tenet in the discipline of art history. In the preface to *The Lives of the Artists*, Vasari explains his project, which he contextualizes by a 'fall' of the

perfected art of classical antiquity that occurred with iconoclasm by early Christians. Vasari frames the artists of the Renaissance, successors to this history, as reviving the genius attainable through painting and sculpture; this genius, however, is not accessible to all but rather carried only by a select few.[51] Vasari creates an artistic armature through which to understand the artists of his time, placing Leonardo in his 'third group,' in which artists "were able […] to rise up and reach complete perfection, the proof of which we have in the finest and most celebrated modern works."[52] The artists of this group were capable of reaching and creating "complete perfection," accomplished through "the imitation of the most beautiful things in Nature in all forms," a freedom which "required copious invention in every particular and a certain beauty even in the smallest details," and a "lightness in touch in making all their figures slender and graceful."[53] These artists accomplished more than those who came before them, perfecting their craft; Vasari frames them and this period as the development of the 'modern' of his time, an arrival into then-contemporary techniques and practices.

As much as Vasari embellishes, his description of artists' key attributes captures something true about Leonardo's work. Indeed, Vasari writes that Leonardo

> initiated the third style which we call modern; besides his bold and powerful design and his extremely subtle imitation of all the details of Nature, exactly as they are, his work displayed a good understanding of rule, better order, correct proportion, perfect design, and divine grace. Abounding in resources and most knowledge-able in the arts, Leonardo truly made his figures move and breathe.[54]

Despite his mythologizing, Vasari accurately captures what is special about Leonardo's work. Vasari and modern scholars identify the same set of qualities that define Leonardo's unique and

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[51] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3–6.
[52] Ibid, 277.
[53] Ibid, 277–278.
[54] Ibid, 280.

observable strengths as an artist. The concordance among scholars—from Vasari to art historians working today—in identifying Leonardo's unique style illustrates the typical solidity of authorship. Art historian Martin Kemp has observed much of the same skills of Leonardo as Vasari, writing in *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon* of *Mona Lisa's* "extraordinary quality […] the sense of presence […] the intensity of human communication between the sitter and the spectator […] the interplay between outer glance, communicative smile, and the implied inner motions of thought […] the miraculous, singing details."[55] The same skills are observable in Leonardo's work today as in Vasari's time: authorship is working in a straightforward and objective manner. The author is stable because they make unique, specific work, work that only they can make and work that is immediately identifiable as theirs. Here, authorship is working as the canon tells us it should. The works of an author are privileged, valuable, and recognizable because of the skill that the author-artist has imbued into the work; no other could create their work. The hand of the artist, here Leonardo, is as uniquely talented as it is recognizable. His authenticated works are valuable—both aesthetically and financially—because of the unique skills and vision that condition its aesthetics.

Authorship has been described similarly by others. Anthropologist Alfred Gell writes in "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology" about the hold that the art object has on a viewer, attributing the power of a work of art to its creation, the making of an object so beautiful that it is confounding and enigmatic—magical. Such an object signifies to a viewer "a display of artistry explicable only in magical terms"; the artist has created something that engages the eye and the mind in such a way that others cannot fully understand or conceptualize how they did it, unable to replicate its effects.[56] The artist emerges as a kind of

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[55] Kemp, *Christ to Coke*, 163–64.
[56] Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," 43.

magician, able to wield their hand and sight in a way that others view as beyond human; such an idea corresponds to Vasari's suggestion of divinely given skill. The idea that such an ability is only accessible naturally, and further only to some, adds value to the artist's hand.

The logic follows that a work of an artist should be immediately recognizable as theirs because their style and skill, imbued into their work, are both unique and readily apparent. In contrast, *Salvator Mundi* was not and is still not clearly, visibly, made by Leonardo. A work of art is traditionally valuable, both aesthetically and financially, because it reflects the skill that only that its artist could imbue. The relationship between the artist and the work thus informs the work's value. *Salvator Mundi* satisfies no part of this traditional relationship. The work lacked aesthetic merit in 2005 when it surfaced at auction; one could argue that it does still even after its extensive restoration. Furthermore, as explored earlier in this thesis, the skilled elements visible after restoration were added by the restorer—thus breaking the traditional, logical progression of artistic value created only through the extraordinary work of the author-genius. Modestini presents her restoration as an objective return to the original by erasing the many layers added to the work since its creation. Her contributions, we are asked to believe, are representative only of what was originally on the canvas. This obfuscates the truth—that Modestini's restoration is not reaching back to the objective 'truth' of the work through subtraction, but is rather additive. With each additional detail added to the work, its original presence is further obscured. The viewer is left to sift through the layers of this complex construction, seeking a truth that seems ever more out of reach.

Serious questions can be raised about this work from almost every angle. Uncertain provenance, differences in the work's formal and iconographic qualities from Leonardo's style, and the additive changes made through restoration breed doubt as to the work's attribution. The

only aspect of *Salvator Mundi* that appears strangely stable, is, in fact, the way that the work has continually increased in financial value via its restoration and attribution to Leonardo. Financial value and the interests of the art market in connection to authorship are the next focus of this inquiry. It is within the connected workings of aesthetic and financial value and their relationship that the motives for attributing *Salvator Mundi* to Leonardo come into clarity.

VALUE

Authorship is understood as connected to artistic value; artistic value informs a work's financial valuation. As a result, authorship itself engenders a work's financial value. In the case of *Salvator Mundi*, this function is at work even when attribution is called into question. Value is both the aesthetic or artistic merit of a work of art and its financial worth. Indeed, it is difficult to disentangle one from the other—but it is necessary to do so. Typically, a coherent and linear relationship exists between artistic merit and financial value. The financial value of a work of art is informed by its artistic merit grounded in the skill of its author. As previously discussed, authorship typically reflects the actual, unique, and observable qualities imbued in a work by its artist. A work would, it follows, have a definable and logically assigned artistic and aesthetic value. For a work made by a master, the financial value rises, following and in concert with the artistic value of the work imbued by the artist's unique skill. Why, and how, does *Salvator Mundi* problematize this relationship?

Because value stems from authorship and authorship here is questionable and constructed, the value of the work, too, seems fabricated and unearned. As seen in the sections on restoration and authorship, *Salvator Mundi* cannot unequivocally be attributed to Leonardo da Vinci; the work only 'becomes' a Leonardo after an extensive restoration. The way its attribution and appearance were constructed via its restoration is a seemingly open secret among experts in

the field, becoming the focus of much discussion and even fodder for jokes. Critic Jerry Saltz recounts one such poignant example when seeing the painting at Christie's:

> Sandwiched between onlookers who'd waited in line outside in the cold to be ushered into the dimmed Christie's gallery to gaze and gawk at what the auction house trumpets as "the greatest and most unexpected artistic rediscovery of the 21st century" — that is, a brand-new Leonardo da Vinci lost in the 1600s, scheduled to be auctioned off this week — a well-known expert in the field leaned over and asked me a question. "Why is a Leonardo in a Modern and Contemporary auction?" Before I could say, "Yeah! Why?" he answered, "Because 90 percent of it was painted in the last 50 years."[57]

Despite the glaring and (more-or-less) publicly acknowledged issues around its attribution to Leonardo da Vinci, the work has been financially valued as if no doubt exists as to authorship. The attribution has been used to underscore a supposed artistic value of the work, one which then leads to financial valuation. In a typical working of the relationship between authorship, artistic merit, and financial value, the artistic merit is both visible and undeniably created by a certain artist, the only one who could have created that work. In the case of *Salvator Mundi*, the elements that appear skillful were created during its restoration by Modestini. Its attribution, artistic value, and financial valuation all rest on this construction. For *Salvator Mundi*, whose attribution is the result of fabrication, its artistic value is unearned. So too, then, is the work's meteoric rise in financial value over the past two decades. A reconstruction of the work's financial appreciation from 2005 to present provides evidence for the mechanisms of this complex construction. The work's first relevant modern sale, in 2005, serves as a starting point for tracing its (artificial) increase in value once in the hands of the art market.

First listed for sale at the New Orleans Auction Gallery in 2005, *Salvator Mundi* caught the eye of art speculator Alexander Parish, who called in art dealer Robert Simon from New

[57] Jerry Saltz, "Christie's is Selling this Painting for $100 Million. They Say It's By Leonardo. I Have Doubts. Big Doubts," *Vulture*, November 14, 2017, https://www.vulture.com/2017/11/christies-says-this-painting-is-by-leonardo-i-doubt-it.html.

York to examine the painting.[58] Simon, believing the work could possibly be another Renaissance copy of Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi*, of which numerous copies exist but the original was believed to be lost, decided, together with Parish, to bid on the work. With a ceiling bid of $10,000, the two ultimately acquired the painting for the paltry hammer price of $1,175.[59] Even a painting by a member of Leonardo's studio would have a higher financial value than the meager sum paid by Simon and Parish, making this a good financial bet. For example, just a few years earlier, in 1999, a period copy "now believed to have come from Leonardo's workshop" had sold at auction at Sotheby's, Christie's largest competitor, for the no small sum of slightly over $330,000.[60] Hoping that restoration would reveal a connection to Leonardo and thus increase the painting's financial value, Simon consulted Dianne Modestini, who ultimately agreed to restore the painting.[61]

The painting's restoration convinced not just Modestini but also Simon that *Salvator Mundi* was a Leonardo. It was at this point that Simon began to proceed toward the painting's sale by setting a price at $100 million, a remarkable amount over what he paid for the painting at the New Orleans auction. To generate interest, Simon began talks with curators at various museums, a process that led to the exhibition of *Salvator Mundi* at London's National Gallery in 2012.[62] The painting, on view in the exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan*, was proclaimed as made by Leonardo.[63] The work's restoration was addressed in the

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[58] Shaer, "The Invention of the 'Salvator Mundi.'"
[59] *Savior for Sale: Da Vinci's Last Masterpiece?*, directed by Antoine Vitkine.
[60] Shaer, "The Invention of the 'Salvator Mundi.'"
[61] Before Modestini could begin the restoration process, the painting required structural attention from a panel specialist; Modestini commissioned her former student, Monica Griesbach, to undertake the task. Taking the wood panels apart and then piecing them back together took six months, after which Griesbach recalls, "the painting did actually come back together nicely" (Shaer, "The Invention of 'Salvator Mundi.'") Already, much work and attention were directed to the painting in the hopes of uncovering—or creating anew—a masterwork.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

painting's wall text, which stated, "the recent restoration of this picture has revealed many of Leonardo's characteristic working methods."[64] The restoration was framed by the exhibition's curators of the exhibition as the uncovering of Leonardo underneath layers of damage and repainting, a framing that authenticated and legitimized its attribution.

Museums are ideological institutions. They have the power to shape cultural beliefs and understanding and are seen as sites of truth and reason.[65] Because of the public trust placed in museums, a well-respected institution's acceptance of *Salvator Mundi's* attribution and the exhibition of the work as such served to validate Modestini's restoration to the general public, regardless of whether it was correct. In "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship," Carole Duncan writes about the power of the art museum as a space, investigating "what art museums say to and about our culture—what political meanings they produce and how they produce them."[66] Duncan explores the way in which museums carry out "political and ideological tasks." As Duncan sets forth, museums are framed in contemporary culture as centers for secular truth, which "has the status of objective or universal knowledge and functions in our society as a higher, authoritative truth."[67] This secular truth takes the place that religious truth held in previous centuries, an interesting similarity to the seeming ideological transformation of *Salvator Mundi* itself from religious icon to contemporary case study for the intersections of art, money, and fame (or infamy). When the National Gallery exhibited *Salvator Mundi* alongside Leonardo's other works, the ideological giant of 'the museum' authenticated the painting in the

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[64] "Leonardo da Vinci: Painter in the Court of Milan," *The National Gallery*, accessed April 2, 2022, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/media/15705/exhibition-guide_leonardo-da-vinci.pdf.
[65] This framing dates to the Enlightenment, which saw the establishment of museums as institutions dedicated to public knowledge.
[66] Carole Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Stephen D. Lavine (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 90.
[67] Ibid.

eyes of the public. This authentication by the museum and its acceptance by the public thus aided to increase the painting's financial value.

Indeed, exhibiting *Salvator Mundi* at the National Gallery nearly led to its sale to the Dallas Museum of Art, which did not proceed only because the museum staff and board could not raise the $100 million purchase price.[68] In 2013, one year after the conclusion of the National Gallery exhibition, Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev became interested in purchasing the painting for his private collection. He sought the advice of Yves Bouvier, a Swiss art dealer who had previously assisted Rybolovlev with acquiring works by Picasso and Modigliani, among others.[69] Importantly, Bouvier warned Rybolovlev of the issues surrounding its authorship and restoration; he recalled in an interview having told his client, "this is a real Leonardo but a small part is the original part."[70] Despite knowledge of the painting's issues, Rybolovlev moved forward with its purchase. Bouvier sent $63 million to Sotheby's, the auction house facilitating its sale, as a retainer, before showing Rybolovlev the painting; Rybolovlev confirmed his intent to purchase the work. Bouvier then forwarded Sotheby's an additional $20 million to complete the sale while collecting $127.5 million from Rybolovlev, pocketing more than $40 million for himself.

While the transaction between Bouvier and Rybolovlev ultimately led to a series of lawsuits and settlements and the souring of their professional relationship, the financial floor for *Salvator Mundi* had been set. While Simon and Parish apparently did not reach the $100 million asking price they originally set, the work sold for $83 million—a huge sum and an exponential increase from the mere $1,000 they paid for the work less than ten years earlier. Restoration and

[68] Shaer, "The Invention of the 'Salvator Mundi.'"
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.

attribution initially worked together to create the work's artistic and financial value, but once on the market, the painting took on a life of its own. With the painting's authorship firmly secured in the public's imagination, *Salvator Mundi's* financial value skyrocketed, tethered to the whims and demands of the art market.

These sales set the stage for the most recent, record-breaking purchase of *Salvator Mundi* at Christie's. In 2017, *Salvator Mundi* came up for auction at Christie's Post-War and Contemporary Evening Sale, immediately capturing the public's attention. Christie's, aware of the questions and issues surrounding the painting and the scrutiny that it might face in an old master category, chose instead to frame the work and its sale within contemporary realm. This decision was both revealing and ironic, mirroring many of the contentions around the work itself. The marketing of the work, its conceptual transfiguration into "a Leonardo," and its sale also reflected the trends in the art market. Susan Moore, writing in the magazine *Apollo*, conjectured that the painting's sale was emblematic of auction house trends, which increasingly focus "on profit above all else and [concentrate] on developing business among the new and not very well-informed global superrich."[71] As she succinctly opined, the sale of the work "became all about the marketing, and it was brilliantly marketed […] there has been nothing before or since to match the creative genius of the sale strategy for the *Salvator Mundi*."[72] Marketed as a long-lost Leonardo masterpiece, a "Divine Mona Lisa," the painting sold for a record-setting $400 million, with an additional $50 million fee to Christie's, bringing the total to $450 million, making it by far the most expensive painting ever sold at auction.[73] *Salvator Mundi* was purchased by a mystery bidder, quickly revealed as an intermediary for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia,

[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

Mohammed bin Salman, who planned to exhibit the painting at the Louvre Abu Dhabi.[74] In a final change to *Salvator Mundi*, following its long saga and concerted attempts to construct the multivalent value of the work, the work finally took on another dimension with its purchase: that of political power. The work, entering Saudi Arabia's cultural reserves, became an instrument of soft power, a way of asserting the cultural power and development of the nation, which is rapidly changing under the rule of Mohammed bin Salman. Despite human rights violations and other concerns around conditions and governance in Saudi Arabia, cultural changes have provided cover for these actions and generated interest in governmental collaboration in some Western nations.[75] As Colm Quinn writes for *Foreign Policy,* "money can't buy you love, but it can change the subject."[76]

Salvator Mundi is a modern construction. This construction is both physical, in the sense of the work's physical transformation during restoration, and ideological, in its attachment to a Renaissance master. However, the financial value of the work that follows is tangible and concrete. It is this quest for financial gain that puts so much into play in this saga—Simon and Alexander's purchase of a strange, damaged, and skill-less work in an small estate sale in New Orleans; their hiring of Modestini to 'uncover' its Renaissance author and aesthetic value; and Bouvier's facilitation of Rybolovlev's purchase.[77] The Louvre Abu Dhabi, the suggested destination of *Salvator Mundi* following the 2017 sale, is itself a bid toward tourism in Saudi Arabia; the work's purchase then also connects to hopes of financial gain, in the form of tourist

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[74] Ibid.

[75] *Savior for Sale* documents the apparently positive relationship, for instance, between the governments of France and Saudi Arabia, each of which would become involved in negotiations around the display of *Salvator Mundi* at the Louvre, as will be discussed in this thesis' conclusion.

[76] Colm Quinn, "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Play," *Foreign Policy*, October 8, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/08/saudi-arabia-mbs-newcastle-united-soft-power-play/.

[77] Among the wealthy, art is a financial investment. This may have been one motivation of Rybolovlev's purchase of the *Salvator Mundi* despite Bouvier's warnings that its authorship of the work was tenuous than it originally appeared. Perhaps, he, too, was gambling that time would prove Leonardo's authorship.

dollars, for its new owner. The movements and changes of work, from 2005 to present, are inextricable from financial value—the hope for it and the speculation that creates it.

Art history is framed as a lofty profession, one engaged with, as Michael Ann Holly defines it, "the act of trying to put into words, spoken or written, something that never promised the possibility of a translation," with the capability of "enveloping the writer in a greater world of mutual understanding."[78] Art objects, too, are often discussed as virtuosic, in both their creation and their contemporary presence. When financial value and commodification are discussed within art history, it is often with the implicit assumption that value is earned by the work's artistic qualities. Financial value and the history of a work of art are not linked in the slanted way in which *Salvator Mundi* has been ideologically constructed. And yet, it is clear in this case that artistic 'truth' and financial considerations have become linked, with financial interests influencing and even reifying the presented 'truth' of the work. What to make of *Salvator Mundi*, a work that so clearly turns the accepted ideas about how the discipline of art history functions on its head? What, exactly, does the case study of *Salvator Mundi* reveal?

THE CONSTRUCTED OBJECT: TOWARD A DESTABILIZED CANON

Salvator Mundi is an unremarkable painting, lacking the artistic resonance that sets it apart from a master work. Despite efforts made in its marketing, restoration, and presentation, the most remarkable element of the work remains its contemporary story and the way it makes visible the machinations of the art market. *Salvator Mundi* makes clear that in certain specific moments, the seemingly stable constructions of authorship and aesthetic and financial value are 'up for grabs,' available for co-opting by the highest bidder. One might argue that not every artwork goes through this type of construction, that in fact, the constructedness of this work

[78] Michael Ann Holly, "Interventions: The Melancholy Art," *The Art Bulletin* 89, no. 1 (Mar., 2007): 7.

makes it an anomaly, and that this noticeable strangeness is the reason for much public discussion around the painting. This all may be true. And yet—a general acknowledgement of doubt and questions around the artwork has done nothing to stop its attribution and the attachment of an unearned artistic and financial value. Not only do these mechanisms undo and obscure truth in the case of this particular work, but they also threaten the larger oeuvre of Leonardo and understandings of the Renaissance canon, as well as means of establishing objective truth within the history of art itself.

Accepting *Salvator Mundi* as an 'autograph' work made solely by Leonardo, when there is no solid evidence that it is his work or that he touched the work at all, blurs and destabilizes exactly what constitutes a work by Leonardo. The qualities that define a work by Leonardo, including those discussed earlier in these pages and pinpointed in similar terms by scholars writing across centuries, may be diluted in their capacity to identify a work by the master. When it is accepted that a work that bears none of these qualities may be 'his,' the ability to categorize his work and to understand his unique skill is imperiled. Art history relies heavily on visual methods of distilling objective truth about an object, a style, a period, or an artist. These methods of knowledge production in the discipline are destabilized by *Salvator Mundi*, which telegraphs that objectivity is for sale. George Orwell famously wrote, in his dystopian novel *1984*, of a world in which objective truth was challenged: "The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command."[79] I am hesitant to make such a comparison; after all, this work is just one case, and not one that is life-threatening or necessarily representative of larger trends in government or otherwise.[80] The handling of the work, however,

[79] George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), 103.
[80] The current owner of *Salvator Mundi*, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman, known colloquially as MBS, has shown some proclivities toward governance like that which is described, chillingly, by Orwell. Recently, *The Atlantic* interviewed MBS, who denied having ordered the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi

and the way that it has been marked as a Leonardo despite evidence to the contrary, is troublesome. It suggests that when it comes to the art market and the moneyed interests that are vested there, truth is a moving target. A masterwork can be constructed just as much as it can be discovered.

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord writes of a society that is ruled by signification more than the sign itself, a society of spectacle. He begins his book, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation."[81] *Salvator Mundi*, itself a quintessentially modern construction, embodies this phenomenon. The work of art has ceased to signify in its typical ways, instead turned on its head and utilized as a vehicle for financial value. Debord addresses the way in which the spectacle breeds its own truths, echoing the discussion here of divorcing the 'real' truth of the work from that which is constructed. As Debord writes, in this process, the subjective may appear much like the objective, and objective truth becomes ever harder to identify.[82] The spectacle, in this case, is *Salvator Mundi*, which is "both the result and the project of the present mode of production," constantly being physically and ideologically constructed and defined as the result of and the center of such a task.[83] The result of all of this is an objectivity that is utterly destabilized and difficult, if not impossible, to locate. As Debord writes, "In a world that has *really been turned upside down,* the true is a moment of the false;" what is 'true' becomes ever further out of

despite international agreement that he had done so. *The Atlantic* reported MBS's response: that if he ordered such killings, "Khashoggi would not even be among the top 1,000 people on the list." Yet he also stated that the killing of Khashoggi was a "huge mistake." The contradictions are apparent and yet, seemingly, no one is in a position of power to disprove such statements. Truth appears very murky indeed.

[81] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 2.

[82] Ibid, 2.

[83] Ibid, 3.

reach.[84] There are real consequences to the accepting of *Salvator Mundi* as a Leonardo, a heightening of status and value to epic proportions that the curious enigma of the work discovered in 2005 did not merit. For all the work to obscure, 'uncover,' repaint, and construct upon the surface of the canvas in an attempt to 'find' Leonardo, the truth of this work is today no closer than it was in 2005; in fact, it is now further obscured.[85]

Salvator Mundi's saga may not be over. In 2019, the Louvre curated an exhibition entitled *Leonardo da Vinci*. In preparation for exhibiting *Salvator Mundi*, on loan to the museum for the exhibition, the painting underwent forensic examination.[86] The Louvre was set to release their findings, which it is believed would have authenticated the painting as a Leonardo, although there is some disagreement on this point. Such an authentication would be hard to dismiss, having the potential to resolve some of the serious questions surrounding the work. Demanding that *Salvator Mundi* be exhibited next to Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, a painting with intense security and that hangs alone, the Saudi Arabian monarchs set conditions to which the Louvre could not agree. With *Salvator Mundi* pulled from the exhibition, the Louvre did not release its report. However, it had already published—prematurely—a short book summarizing conclusions about the painting's authenticity. Despite the museum's attempts to recall the publication, Alison Cole wrote for *The Art Newspaper*, "at least one copy of the 45-page book […] was inadvertently sold at the museum's bookshop."[87] It quoted the president of the Louvre, Jean-Luc Martinez, as unequivocally attributing the work to Leonardo: "the results of the historical and scientific study presented in this publication allow us to confirm the attribution of the work to Leonardo da

[84] Ibid, 4.
[85] The work is also now inaccessible, hidden away in a private location by the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman: it has yet to appear on view since its sale five years ago.
[86] David D. Kirkpatrick and Elaine Sciolino, "A Clash of Wills Keeps a Leonardo Masterpiece Hidden," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/11/arts/design/salvator-mundi-louvre-leonardo.html.
[87] Alison Cole, "How the Louvre concealed its secret Salvator Mundi book," *The Art Newspaper*, March 31, 2020, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/03/31/how-the-louvre-concealed-its-secret-salvator-mundi-book.

Vinci."[88] And yet, the Louvre apparently did not feel confident releasing such a defining statement.

In fact, there is some disagreement about what the Louvre deduced in their forensic study, despite what was confirmed in the rescinded booklet. In *Savior for Sale*, a high ranking French government official, speaking under the alias of "Jacques," states that rather than authenticate the work as wholly painted by Leonardo, the study concluded that "Leonardo merely contributed to the painting."[89] Such a result would not be incongruous with conclusions drawn by Matthew Landrus or American scholar and curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Carmen Bambach, who suggested that the painting was Boltraffio's, with passages done by Leonardo.[90] Jacques added that "this scientific study [conducted by the Louvre] remains the exclusive property of the person that sponsored it," perhaps explaining why the Louvre did not release its findings respective to authorship. It is eminently possible that its owners prohibited the museum from releasing its findings when *Salvator Mundi* was pulled from the exhibition after an agreement could not be reached on where to display it.[91] A spokesperson from the Louvre confirmed the connection between exhibition and authentication, stating, "the book was a project in case the Louvre got the chance to present the painting. As this has not been the case, it is not going to be published."[92] That the release of findings that could lead to the work's authentication—as an autograph work, a workshop piece, or something else—is ultimately left to its new owner, who has a vested financial and political interest in *Salvator Mundi*, again reinforces just how shaky conclusions about the painting's objective truth is when so much

[88] Ibid.
[89] *Savior for Sale: Da Vinci's Last Masterpiece?*, directed by Antoine Vitkine.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Cole, "How the Louvre concealed its secret Salvator Mundi book."

remains intentionally concealed. Again, as at so many other points in this saga, private interests take precedence over the establishment of objective truth. Even seemingly scholarly processes—authentication, studies, the dissemination of knowledge—have a motive, it is apparent, at least where they intersect with powerful private interests.

We end here, with a work that has been alternatively questioned and authenticated, deconstructed and reconstructed, and repeatedly reconstituted in the public eye. What is next for *Salvator Mundi* remains unclear. And yet, its reverberations of spectacle will likely continue to play out. What this study reveals is the precariousness of objective truth in the history of art when private interests and art market forces take precedence. Now that this point has been made apparent, it is difficult not to notice it happening elsewhere, with the consequence being the bending of the truth and manipulation of historical understanding. It is thus that the work reveals a growing instability in the discipline of art history, one created in the complex relationship between a work of art, the museum, the dealer, the buyer, and the art market. This instability stretches far beyond the bounds of *Salvator Mundi*, reflecting the broader conditions of the art market and its intersection with the discipline of art history at this historical juncture. Will the work of art restabilize in the realm of art historical truth? Or will it continue to be manipulated? These are questions that remain to be answered. The same passage of historical time that has obscured the 'truth' of *Salvator Mundi* is that which will, ultimately, provide the ability to answer these questions definitively.

Illustrations

Figure 1 -- Salvator Mundi, digital image with strobe lights. Photographed September 2017, imaged by Christie's. Image reproduced in Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

Figure 2 -- Leonardo da Vinci, Red Chalk Drawing of Mantle, Royal Collection Trust, © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019. Image reproduced in Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

Figure 3 -- Leonardo da Vinci, Red Chalk Drawing of Sleeve, Royal Collection Trust, © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019. Image reproduced in Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

Figure 4 -- Etching by Wenceslaus Hollar, 1650, The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto. Image reproduced in Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

Figure 5 -- Holy Face, canvas with silver casing, 6th (?) and 11th-15th centuries (?), Genoa, S. Bartolomeo degli Armeni. Image reproduced in Martin Kemp, Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon.

Figure 6 -- The Sudarium of Saint Veronica, German (?), 17th century (?), private collection. Image reproduced in Martin Kemp, Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon.

Figure 7 -- Leonardo da Vinci, The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne, c. 1501-1519, oil on wood (poplar), 1.68m x 1.13m, The Louvre Museum.

Figure 8 -- Leonardo da Vinci, Annunciation, c. 1472-1476, oil on wood, 90 x 222 cm, Uffizi Gallery. Image courtesy of the Uffizi Gallery.

Figure 9 -- Leonardo da Vinci, Presumed portrait of Lucrezia Crivelli, wrongly known as La Belle Ferronnière, c. 1490-1497, oil on wood (walnut), 0.63m x 0.45m, the Louvre Museum.

Figure 10 -- Leonardo da Vinci, Lady with an Ermine, c. 1489, oil on walnut panel, 54 x 39 cm, the Princes Czartoryski Museum. Image courtesy of Google Art Project.

Figure 11 -- Leonardo da Vinci, Saint John the Baptist, c. 1508-1519, oil on wood (walnut), 0.729m x 0.563m, The Louvre Museum.

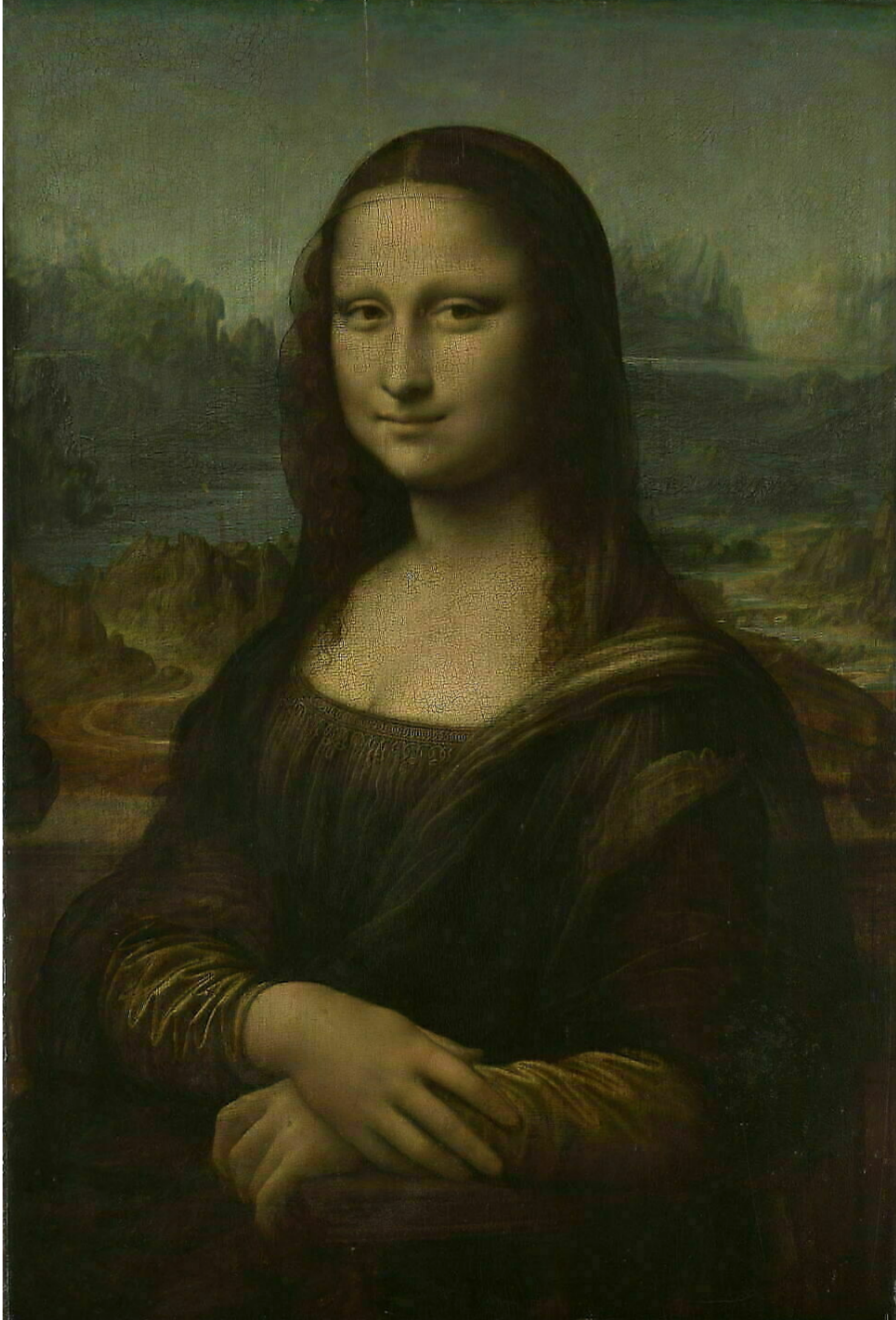

Figure 12 -- Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giacondo, known as La Joconde or Mona Lisa, c. 1503-1519, oil on canvas, 0.83m x 0.65m, the Louvre Museum.

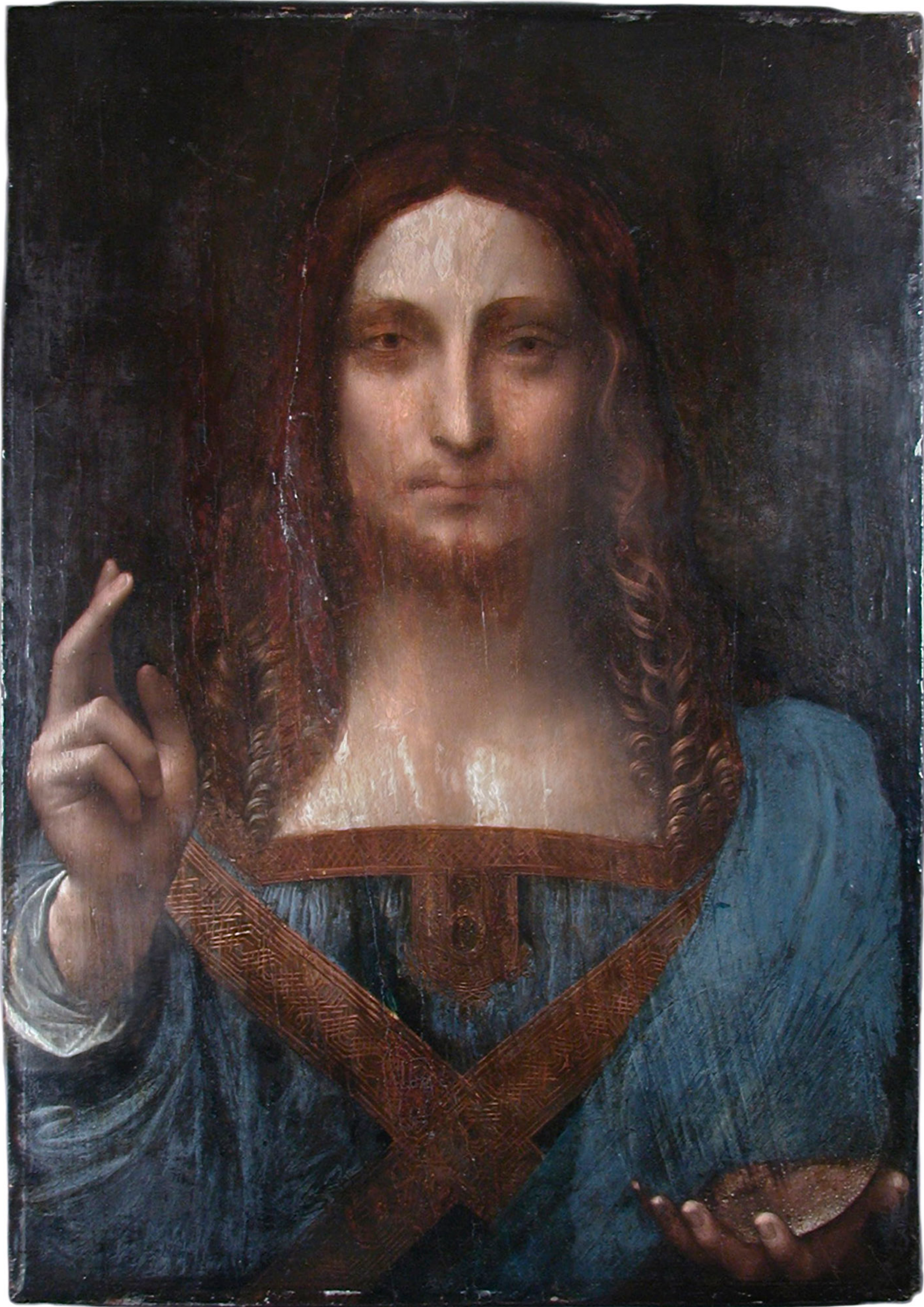

Figure 13 -- Salvator Mundi, before restoration, 2005. Photograph by Robert Simon, courtesy of Salvator Mundi LLC. Image courtesy of Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

Figure 14 -- Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, Portrait of a Notable (or Gerolamo Casio), c. 1500, oil on panel, 57.5 x 42.5 cm, the Uffizi Gallery.

Figure 15 -- Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, Portrait of a Lady as Saint Lucy, c. 1509, oil on panel, 51.5 x 36.5 cm, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Figure 16 -- Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, The Virgin and Child, c. 1493-9, oil on walnut, 92.7 x 67.3 cm, National Gallery, London.

Figure 17 -- Salvator Mundi, Cleaned State, 2006. Drum scan of an 8 x 10 transparency made with Kodak EPY 64 Tungsten film. Photograph by Joshua Nefsky, courtesy of Salvator Mundi LLC. Image reproduced in Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

Figure 18 -- Salvator Mundi, Mid-restoration, June 2008. Drum scan of an 8 x 10 transparency made with Kodak EPY 64 Tungsten film. Photograph by Joshua Nefsky, courtesy of Salvator Mundi LLC. Image reproduced in Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

Figure 19 -- Salvator Mundi, Mid-restoration, 2010. Drum scan of an ektachrome by Joshua Nefsky, courtesy of Salvator Mundi LLC. Image reproduced in Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

Figure 20 -- Salvator Mundi, Finished restoration, June 2010. Drum scan of an 8 x 10 ektachrome transparency. Unknown photographer, courtesy of Salvator Mundi LLC. Image reproduced in Dianne Modestini, "Salvator Mundi Revisited."

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