



Lost Leonardo painting had tangled path to \$450 million sale

By JENNIFER PELTZ November 16, 2017



NEW YORK (AP) — Just a dozen years ago, a worn, touched-up, old painting of Christ went for less than \$10,000 (8,450 euros) at an estate sale. On Wednesday, it was auctioned for a record-breaking \$450 million (380 million euros) as a long-lost Leonardo da Vinci dubbed “the Last da Vinci” or the “male Mona Lisa.” Years of painstaking cleaning and study led scholars to authenticate it as Leonardo’s roughly 500-year-old “Salvator Mundi,” Latin for “Savior of the World.” But some experts are stunned at the jaw-dropping price for a painting with a patchy history and heavy restoration.

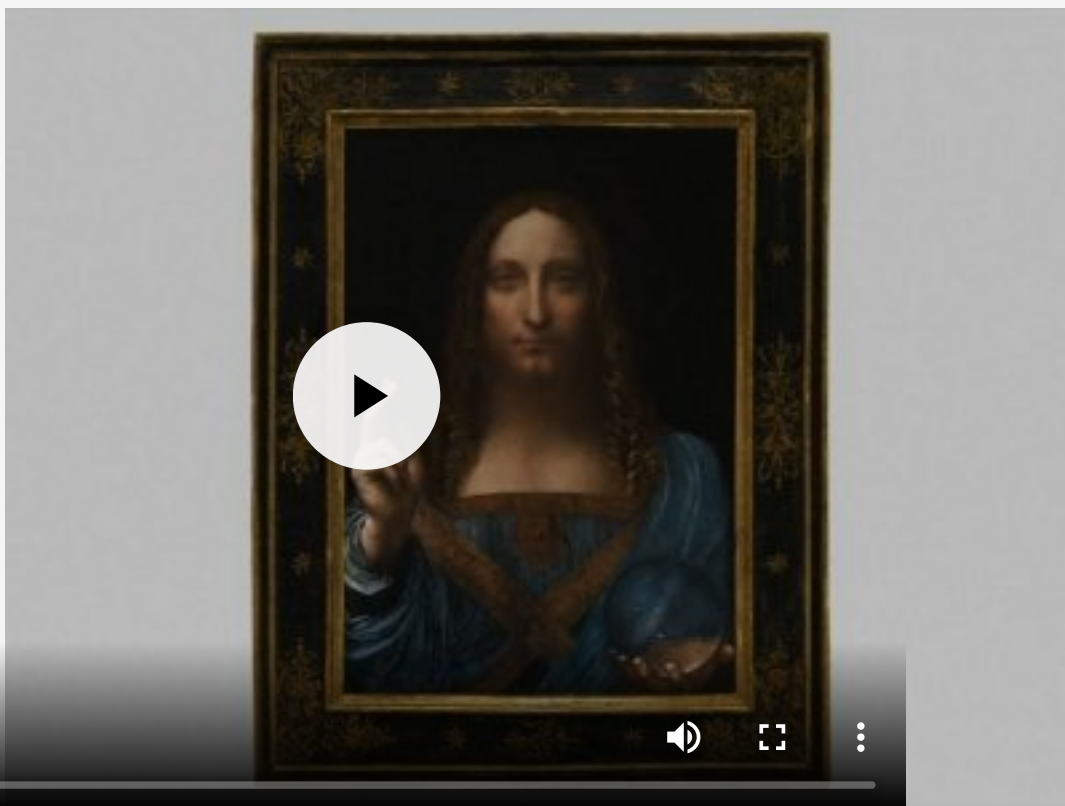
A look at the painting and its complicated, colorful past:

A MASTERWORK IS MADE

Leonardo made “Salvator Mundi” around 1500, according to Christie’s auction house, which conducted Wednesday’s sale. The painting depicts a blue-robed Jesus holding a crystal orb and gazing directly at the viewer.

The archetypal Renaissance man created some of the world’s most famous paintings, including the “Mona Lisa” and “The Last Supper,” but fewer than 20 of his paintings are known to exist.

“Salvator Mundi” is the only one in private hands — since 2013, those of Russian billionaire Dmitry Rybolovlev. Thousands of people lined up to see it before the auction.



A painting of Christ by the Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci sold for a record \$450 million at auction on Wednesday, smashing previous records for artworks. “Salvator Mundi,” is one of fewer than 20 paintings by da Vinci known to exist. (Nov. 16)

The high price, easily a record for a work of art at auction or in a private sale, surprised even experts. But Old Master paintings expert Nicholas Hall said Thursday it’s understandable that the painting commanded intense interest from bidders and the public.

Leonardo is “completely in a class of his own as a mind, as a myth, as an artist,” said Hall, a former Christie’s official who now runs a New York gallery. “There was and is this huge, genuine interest in this

artist, and the story behind this painting — and the painting.”

ITS TRAVELS SPAN CENTURIES AND CONTINENTS

The painting, possibly commissioned by France’s King Louis XII, made its way to royalty in England, where prints and inventories record it in the mid-1600s, according to Christie’s. Then the painting’s trail went cold until an English collector acquired it in 1900. By then, many parts had been repainted, and it was attributed to Leonardo students, not the artist himself. It was auctioned in 1958 for 45 pounds — about 1,000 pounds, \$1,300 or 1,100 euros today — and slipped from the art world’s view again until two New York art dealers bought it at the 2005 estate sale in the U.S.

“I recognized that there was tremendous quality to it,” said one of the dealers, Robert Simon. But at first, “I didn’t dare think it could be by Leonardo.”

A PRIZED PAINTING IS REDISCOVERED

Because of the centuries of inexpert touch-ups, the dealers enlisted a conservator to clean and restore the painting. After a year and a half of work and research came “an extraordinary moment,” Simon said: “We started to think that this painting, which was just an interesting picture, might actually be by this great master.”

Further study, analysis and examination, involving at least a dozen experts, led to “a broad consensus” that the painting was an original Leonardo, according to Christie’s. Among the factors: infrared imaging revealed that the artist had changed the composition slightly while working, indicating that the painting wasn’t simply a copy. Known Leonardo sketches correspond to the folds of the Christ figure’s robes, Christie’s noted, and the detailed curls and hands adhere to the artist’s style.

The prestigious National Gallery in London included the painting in a 2011 Leonardo exhibition. Two years later, the owners, by then a consortium, sold it for \$75 million to \$80 million (63 million to 68 million euros) to a Swiss art dealer. The dealer soon sold it to Rybolovlev, for \$127.5 million (108 million euros). The deal is a subject of a legal fight between the two.

Christie’s isn’t identifying the new buyer.

SOME ARE SKEPTICAL

Some scholars think the painting should be attributed to Leonardo’s studio, not to him personally.

“It’s a good studio work with some participation from Leonardo,” perhaps 15 percent, said Jacques Franck, a Paris-based art historian who has published scholarly articles on the artist.

Among his arguments: that the figure’s hand doesn’t reflect Leonardo’s mastery of anatomy.

To some others in the art world, the price is dumbfounding given the painting’s condition and the gaps in its provenance.

“It’s got a mystique? That’s enough to drop half a billion dollars?” asked Todd Levin, a New York-based art adviser who consults clients on purchases. “It’s a triumph of branding and desire over connoisseurship or expertise and reality.”

Not so, said Simon, the former co-owner.

“There’s always room for subjectivity of opinion,” he said, but “the evidence is overwhelming that this is a Leonardo.”

And beyond that, he said, “this is an extremely compelling picture that has a great spiritual effect on many people.”

Associated Press writer Karen Matthews contributed to this report.

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