

MARGARET DALIVALLE,
MARTIN KEMP, & ROBERT B. SIMON



LEONARDO'S
SALVATOR
MUNDI

& THE COLLECTING OF
LEONARDO IN THE STUART COURTS

LEONARDO'S SALVATOR MUNDI



Salvator Mundi, final state.

Leonardo's
Salvator Mundi

*& The Collecting of Leonardo
in the Stuart Courts*

by

MARGARET DALIVALLE,
MARTIN KEMP, AND ROBERT B. SIMON

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is the fruit of an enthusiastic and harmonious collaboration to which the three authors have each contributed their own particular sets of knowledge and skills. Robert Simon was one of the two discoverers of the painting and has brought his high scholarly standards and personal experience to bear upon its startling emergence as a Leonardo. Martin Kemp has drawn upon his knowledge of the primary sources for Leonardo's art and science to characterize the painting's role in the master's career. Margaret Dalivalle has intensively researched its provenance, documenting the presence of a *Salvator Mundi* in British collections, above all those of Charles I and II, and providing new insights into Leonardo's *fortuna* in seventeenth-century Britain. The prime authorship of each of the parts of the book is indicated, but the authors take shared responsibility for the book as a whole and have contributed in various ways to the whole text.

For Robert Simon, there are too many people to acknowledge by name, since the saga of the painting involved the participation of many individuals in varying capacities, over several years. Among institutions the National Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts were crucial participants; and the curators, conservators, administrators, trustees, and staff of all provided significant assistance to the author and care to the painting. Many others were involved in the more practical concerns involving the painting: legal and financial matters, its protection and storage, handling and presentation, transportation, insurance, framing, and photography, commercial and press issues. To them are due thanks, as they are to the staffs of the libraries and institutions that have assisted in research matters, curators who made works of art and research materials available for study, scholars who responded to inquiries, and of course those mentioned in the text that follows. As has often been said in like situations, "You know who you are." However, a few people merit special gratitude and acknowledgment here. This adventure began with the collaboration of Alexander Parish and continued over the years

with his support, trust, counsel, and deep friendship. Dianne Modestini was not only the brilliant conservator that she is, but the introspective voice of the painting as it emerged from oblivion; her connection with the *Salvator Mundi* was at once both objective and intimate. Warren Adelson was a great supporter and consummate professional in all dealings—as were his family, associates, and staff. Sir Nicholas Penny crucially and bravely brought the painting to the attention of Leonardo scholars and then the public. Art historians who were especially generous in studying the painting and sharing their deep knowledge of the artist were David Alan Brown, David Ekserdjian, Mina Gregori, Keith Christiansen, Pietro Marani, and Luke Syson, as was John Somerville, for all matters Cook. Of the departed the author salutes Everett Fahy, Carlo Mastino, Mario Modestini, and David Rosand. Among conservators special thanks are due to Monica Griesbach, Shan Kuang, Nica Gutmann Rieppi, Charlotte Hale, Larry Keith, Beth Price, and Ken Sunderland. The practical management of the author was accomplished by Lucretia Baskin, Erin Marcell, Rachel Ropeik, and especially, Lydia Melamed Johnson. The help and support of close friends was vital: R. J. Berman, Claudia Einecke, Edward Leiter, and Patrick O'Reilly.

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Judd Flogdell, in collaboration with the authors, worked with great commitment to complete the index.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	xi
<i>List of Plates</i>	xvii
Introduction	i
Part I Robert B. Simon	
1. The Discovery of a Masterpiece	5
Part II Martin Kemp	
2. The Calm Centre: Leonardo And The Ineffable	53
3. 'Christ in the Manner of God the Father': The Subject Matter	70
4. Drawings and Dates	84
5. Visual Magic	91
6. Patronage, Some Copies, and Other Versions	121
Part III Margaret Dalivalle	
7. 'A Peece of Christ done by Leonardo' and 'A lords figure. in halfe.': Plotting the Paper Trail	135
8. Inventing Leonardo	153
9. Experiencing Leonardo	167
10. Appraising Leonardo	187
11. 'A Pitiabie Sight'	217
12. After the Original: Hollar and Leonardo's <i>Salvator</i>	230
13. 'Capitanus Stone'	246

14. 'Nothing is hidden under the sun'	258
15. The Picture Vanishes	272
Epilogue: Martin Kemp	280
Appendix:	
<i>Inventory of goods disbursed to John Stone and the Sixth Dividend of Crown Creditors, 1651-3</i>	287
Notes	297
Bibliography	351
Index	373
Picture Credits	383

List of Figures

- | | | |
|------|---|----|
| 1.1 | St. Charles Gallery catalogue of April 9–10, 2005, p. 110 including the <i>Salvator Mundi</i> . | 6 |
| 1.2 | Auction House photographs of the <i>Salvator Mundi</i> . | 9 |
| 1.3 | Wenceslaus Hollar after Leonardo, <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , etching, London, British Museum. | 10 |
| 1.4 | <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , pre-treatment. Detail of the head. | 11 |
| 1.5 | <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , pre-treatment. Detail of the blessing hand. | 12 |
| 1.6 | <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , after initial cleaning (May 2005). | 16 |
| 1.7 | <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , verso of panel during conservation. The back of the original panel is at the left; the remnants of the auxiliary panel with the pattern of the removed cradle, at the right (May 2006). | 17 |
| 1.8 | <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , the original panel rejoined in the studio of Monica Griesbach (July 2006). | 18 |
| 1.9 | <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , verso of panel with new auxiliary support (September 2006). | 19 |
| 1.10 | The <i>Salvator Mundi</i> hanging in the residence of Basil C. Hendry, East Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2005. | 21 |
| 1.11 | <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , painted inscription on cradle (above); painted inscription on frame (below). | 22 |
| 1.12 | (a-f) Versions of the <i>Salvator Mundi</i> composition, composite. Upper row, left to right: Detroit, Detroit Institute of Art; Warsaw, Wilanów Palace Museum; Milan, private collection, formerly Arcore, Vittadini Collection. Lower row, left to right: formerly Zürich, Stark Collection; Milan, Trivulzio Collection; formerly London, Yarborough Collection. | 23 |
| 1.13 | <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , photograph by Gray, prior to the 1913 catalogue of the Cook Collection, London, Witt Library. | 24 |

1.14	Catalogue Entry from the 1913 catalogue of the Cook Collection.	25
1.15	View of the Long Gallery, Doughty House, Richmond. The arrow indicates the <i>Salvator Mundi</i> .	26
1.16	Sotheby's sale catalogue of June 25, 1958 (p. 19).	30
1.17	<i>Salvator Mundi</i> , infrared reflectogram, detail of chest and hand.	36
1.18	<i>Salvator Mundi</i> , infrared reflectogram, detail of hand and orb.	37
1.19	<i>Salvator Mundi</i> , mid treatment (December 2007).	39
1.20	<i>Salvator Mundi</i> and the <i>Virgin of the Rocks</i> in the National Gallery Conservation Lab (May 2008).	42
1.21	<i>Salvator Mundi</i> , after treatment (February 2011).	44
1.22	<i>Sunday Times Magazine</i> , cover, 9 October 2011.	49
1.23	Condition check from Leonardo Live. Conservator Larry Keith examines <i>Salvator Mundi</i> , observed by Luke Syson and Robert Simon.	49
1.24	Installation view of the <i>Salvator Mundi</i> and two preparatory drawings from the Royal Collection at the National Gallery.	50
2.1.	Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi, <i>Adoration of the Magi</i> , Washington, National Gallery.	59
2.2	<i>Adoration of the Magi</i> , Florence, Uffizi.	60
2.3	<i>Virgin, Child, St Anne and a Lamb</i> , Paris, Louvre.	61
2.4	<i>The Virgin, Child and St Anne</i> , detail from 'The Burlington House Cartoon', London, National Gallery.	62
2.5	<i>The Last Supper</i> , Milan, Refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie.	63
2.6	After Leonardo, <i>Head of Christ</i> , Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera.	64
2.7	<i>Saint John the Baptist</i> , Paris, Louvre, detail.	68
2.8	Salà (Giovanni Giacomo Caprotti da Oreno), <i>Christ</i> , 1511, Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana.	68
2.9	Follower of Leonardo, <i>The Young Christ as Salvator Mundi</i> , Musée des Beaux Arts, Nancy.	69
3.1	The Golden Seal of the Bull of Charles IV, 1356, Hauptstaatsarchiv, Stuttgart.	73
3.2	Studio of Sir Anthony van Dyck, <i>King Charles I of England</i> , oil on canvas, c. 1636–40, private collection.	74
3.3	Simone Martini, <i>Blessing Christ</i> , second stage of sinopia, c. 1341, Avignon, Musée du Palais des Papes (formerly Cathedral of Notre-Dame-des-Doms, façade).	75

- 3.4 Andrea Previtali, *Salvator Mundi*, 1518, London, National Gallery. 76
- 3.5 Vittore Carpaccio, *Salvator Mundi*, New Orleans, Museum of Art. 77
- 3.6 Fernando Gallego, *Christ as Salvator Mundi with the Symbols of the Evangelists*, 1494–6, Madrid, Prado. 78
- 3.7 Rogier van de Weyden, *Braque Family Triptych*, detail of the centre, Louvre, Paris. 79
- 3.8 Unknown Artist, *Salvator Mundi*, Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche. 79
- 3.9 Jan van Eyck (after), *Christ* (original from 1438), Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie. 82
- 4.1 Leonardo da Vinci, *Study for a Sleeve*, black chalk, pen and ink with white heightening, c. 1504, Windsor, Royal Library, 12546. 86
- 4.2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Study for the Drapery of a Kneeling Figure*, ink and brush with white heightening, c. 1504, Windsor, Royal Library, 12521. 87
- 4.3 Leonardo da Vinci, *Study for Drapery on the Hip of St. Anne*, black chalk, c. 1508, Windsor, Royal Library, 12529. 88
- 4.4 After Leonardo, *Salvator Mundi*, formerly in the Yarborough Collection. 90
- 5.1 Macro photograph and reconstruction of the underdrawing in the band to the right. 92
- 5.2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Curved Interlace Pattern*, Windsor, Royal Library, 12351, detail. 93
- 5.3 Infrared reflectogram of the *Salvator Mundi*, detail of handprints above Christ's left eye. 94
- 5.4 Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*, detail of hair, National Gallery, Washington. 96
- 5.5 Follower of Leonardo, *Salvator Mundi*, Naples, San Domenico Maggiore. 97
- 5.6 After Leonardo da Vinci, *Knot Design 'Accademia Leonardi Vinci'*, woodcut, National Gallery, Washington. 99
- 5.7 Pattern of two squares offset by 45 degrees. 100
- 5.8 Leonardo da Vinci, *Designs for Interlaces, Perpetual Motion Machines, a Knot and Stars, with other Notes and Calculations*, Milan, Bibliotheca Ambrosiana, CA 760r. 101

- 5.9 *Designs for Interlace Pattern and Sketches for Small Inclusions (?)*, formerly in Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford. 103
- 5.10 After Leonardo da Vinci, *The Effects of Light and Shade on Pebbles under Water*, Vatican Library, MS Urb.lat.1270 f. 159r. 104
- 5.11 Rock crystal sphere owned by John Tradescant, Museum of the History of Science, Oxford University. 105
- 5.12 Rock crystal pebble 106
- 5.13 *Design for a Rectangular Eyeglass on a Stand*, MS F 25r, Paris, Institut de France. 109
- 5.14 Piero della Francesca, *Mary Magdalene*, detail, Cathedral, Arezzo. 111
- 5.15 *Lothair (or Susanna) Crystal*, ninth century, British Museum, London. 112
- 5.16 Raphael, *Urania (or Astronomy)*, from the ceiling of the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican. 113
- 5.17 Raphael, *Celestial and Terrestrial Globes*, from the *School of Athens* in the Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican. 114
- 5.18 After Leonardo, *Salvator Mundi*, detail of the sphere, formerly Yarborough Collection. 114
- 5.19 *The Passage of Light from the Sun to the Earth and Moon and the Phenomenon of 'Ashen Light' on the Moon*, Codex Leicester 2r. 115
- 5.20 *Optics of the Eye, with a Proposed Experiment with a Glass Sphere and Bowl*, Paris, Institut de France, MS D 3v. 117
- 6.1 The *Salvator Mundi* on vellum, private collection. 126
- 6.2 Infrared reflectogram of the de Ganay *Salvator Mundi*. 127
- 6.3 Marco d'Oggiono (?), *The Young Christ as Salvator Mundi*, Rome, Galleria Borghese. 129
- 6.4 Follower of Leonardo, *The Young Christ as Salvator Mundi*, detail of the globe, Nancy, Musée des Beaux Arts. 130
- 6.5 Martin Waldseemüller, *Map of the World*, detail of the vignette at the top left of the main map, 1507, Washington, Library of Congress. 131
- 7.1 MS Inventory of Charles II's pictures etc., at Whitehall and Hampton Court: 'An Inventory of all his Ma^{ties} Pictures in White-Hall' & 'An Inventory of all his Ma^{ties} Pictures in Hampton Court', c. 1666–7, folio 19. RCIN 1112575, Office of the Surveyor of The Queen's Pictures, St James's Palace. 145

- 7.2 'Divident the 6th', fol. 24v, Additional MS 37682, British Library. 148
- 7.3 Return of Capt. John Stone, fol. 81, MS HL/PO/JO/10/1/285, Parliamentary Archives, London. 149
- 8.1 Lucas Vorsterman I, after Leonardo da Vinci, *Head of Leda*, 1627, inscribed 'Leonardo d vinci pin/loeda ex/collection Arund/LVfeci/1627', British Museum, SL, 5227.6. 164
- 8.2 Attributed to Cesare da Sesto, after Leonardo da Vinci, *Leda and the Swan*, Wilton House, Salisbury, Collection Earl of Pembroke. 165
- 9.1 After Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, private collection. 175
- 9.2 Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, *Portrait of a Young Man (?Girolamo Casio)*, c. 1500, verso, oil on panel, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. 177
- 9.3 Bernardino Luini, *Flora*, c.1530, oil on panel, Royal Collection [Hampton Court]. 184
- 9.4 Bernardino Luini, *Holy Family*, tempera and oil on panel, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan. 185
- 10.1 After Cesare da Sesto, *Salome*, oil on panel, Royal Collection [Hampton Court]. 188
- 10.2 Leonardo da Vinci and workshop, *Bacchus [formerly St John in the Wilderness]*, c.1510–15, oil on panel, transferred to canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris. 189
- 10.3 After Giulio Romano and Raphael, *Portrait of Doña Isabel de Requesens y Enriquez de Cardona-Anglesola*, Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome. 190
- 10.4 The Queen's House, Greenwich. 192
- 10.5 Lucas Vorsterman I, after Annibale Carracci, *The Agony in the Garden*, 1627, engraving, British Museum, U,1.120. 197
- 10.6 Annibale Carracci, *The Agony in the Garden*, 1596–7, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, RCIN 402990. 198
- 10.7 Inigo Jones, *Elevation for a chimney-piece in the room next to the back stairs (present North-West Cabinet Room), the Queen's House, Greenwich*, 1637, Royal Institute of British Architects, RIBA Jones and Webb 22. 200
- 10.8 The queen's antechamber, The Queen's House, Greenwich. 201
- 10.9 Early–mid-sixteenth-century Italian (?Venetian) School, *St Sebastian*, oil on panel, Ham House, 1140141. 204

- 10.10 Early–mid-sixteenth-century Italian (?Venetian) School,
St Anthony Abbot, oil on panel, Ham House, 1140140. 205
- 11.1 Joseph Juster after (then attr.) Leonardo da Vinci, *Jesus ludens
in gremio sanctissimae matris liliū tenes*, engraving, c. 1691,
British Museum, 1859,0709.2441. 227
- 11.2 Attributed to Giampietrino, *Virgin and Child*, Courtauld
Institute. 228
- 13.1 Sir Peter Lely, *Portrait of a Man with a Marble Bust*,
c. 1660/65, Hatchlands, National Trust, on loan from
Cobbe Collection. 252

List of Plates

Frontispiece. *Salvator Mundi*, final state.

1. *Salvator Mundi*, cleaned state.
2. Auction House website illustration of the *Salvator Mundi*.
3. *Salvator Mundi*, as acquired, pre-treatment.
4. *Salvator Mundi*, detail of the blessing hand, mid treatment (December 2007).
5. *Salvator Mundi*, ultraviolet fluorescence photograph, after treatment.
6. *Study for drapery for a Salvator Mundi*, red chalk on red prepared paper, c.1504–8, Windsor, Royal Library, RCIN 912524.
7. *Studies of drapery for a Salvator Mundi*, red chalk and white heightening on red prepared paper, c.1504–8 Windsor, Royal Library, RCIN 912525.
8. Follower of Leonardo, *Salvator Mundi*, private collection, formerly the Marquis de Ganay Collection.
9. *St John the Baptist*, Paris, Louvre.
10. Follower of Leonardo, *The Young Christ as Salvator Mundi*, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.
11. *Salvator Mundi*, detail of Christ's right hand.
12. *Salvator Mundi*, detail of Christ's left hand and the sphere.
13. *Salvator Mundi*, detail of Christ's hair.
14. *Salvator Mundi*, detail of Christ's eyes and nose.
15. Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, *Portrait of a Young Man* (?*Girolamo Casio*), c. 1500, recto, oil on panel, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth.
16. Bernardino Luini, *Boy with a Puzzle*, Elton Hall Collection.



Plate 1 Salvator Mundi, *cleaned state*.



Plate 2 *Auction House website illustration of the Salvator Mundi.*



Plate 3 *Salvator Mundi, as acquired, pre-treatment.*



Plate 4 *Salvator Mundi*, detail of the blessing hand, mid treatment (December 2007).



Plate 5 *Salvator Mundi*, ultraviolet fluorescence photograph, after treatment (Photo: Shan Kuang).



Plate 6 Study for drapery for a Salvator Mundi, *red chalk on red prepared paper*, c.1504–8, Windsor, Royal Library, RCIN 912524 [sleeve].



Plate 7 Studies of drapery for a Salvator Mundi, *red chalk and white heightening on red prepared paper, c.1504–8 Windsor, Royal Library, RCIN 912525 [chest].*



Plate 8 *Follower of Leonardo, Salvator Mundi, private collection, formerly the Marquis de Ganay Collection.*



Plate 9 St John the Baptist, *Paris, Louvre.*



Plate 10 *Follower of Leonardo, The Young Christ as Salvator Mundi, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.*



Plate 11 *Salvator Mundi*, detail of Christ's right hand.



Plate 12 *Salvator Mundi*, detail of Christ's left hand and the sphere.



Plate 13 *Salvator Mundi*, detail of Christ's hair.



Plate 14 *Salvator Mundi*, detail of Christ's eyes and nose.



Plate 15 Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, *Portrait of a Young Man (?Girolamo Casio)*, c. 1500, recto, oil on panel, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth.



Plate 16 Bernardino Luini, *Boy with a Puzzle*, Elton Hall Collection.

Introduction

'Finding a real Leonardo in a private American Collection is like finding a new planet.'

—Louis S. Levy, Counsel for Sir Joseph Duveen, in his opening argument at the trial of *Hahn v. Duveen*, 1929¹

This brash statement offered at the celebrated court case involving a putative painting by Leonardo remains remarkably apposite today. Paintings by the master are as significant culturally as the planets are celestially, and of an almost equivalent rarity. And as recent astronomical discourses have shown, the definition of a planet, like that of the attribution of so significant a painting, is never absolutely resolved.

The limited number of paintings generally acknowledged to be by Leonardo can be contrasted with the plethora of those produced by his students, followers, and imitators. This disparity has engendered regular attempts at promoting one or another painting as a lost work by the artist, but despite these many efforts, no painting has been widely accepted as autograph since the *Benois Madonna* (St. Petersburg, Hermitage) appeared over a century ago.²

In 2011 the National Gallery in London organized the extraordinary exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci; Painter at the Court of Milan*. Included there was a painting shown publicly for the first time as a work by Leonardo without qualification—an intense, spiritually evocative bust-length depiction of an almost-beardless Christ, with his right arm raised in benediction and his left holding a crystal orb. The subject, Christ as the Saviour of the World (or *Salvator Mundi*), had previously been explored by many artists. But, as with every

project—artistic or otherwise—undertaken by Leonardo, he transformed it into something astonishing that had only a tenuous connection with its historical antecedents.

While the painting has been discussed—in the catalogue for the exhibition, reviews of it, and subsequent articles—the present volume is the first complete analysis of this essential addition to Leonardo's oeuvre.³ As such it will serve both as an introduction to the study of the painting and a reference for the future explorations that it will surely provoke. However, it is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. As with an opera having a grand and intricate plot, this book will consider three facets of the story, each in depth, while necessarily bypassing many ancillary issues.

The first 'act' of the book relates the painting's journey from anonymity in America, with no provenance and in severely compromised condition, to its public revelation as a work by Leonardo at the exhibition in London. The six-year process of research and conservation, and the introduction to scholars of this unexpected addition to Leonardo's oeuvre, is related by Robert Simon, who shepherded the *Salvator Mundi* on this remarkable journey.

In the central section Martin Kemp focuses on the painting itself—its genesis, iconography, unique visual characteristics, and its dating—as well as the process of the picture's creation, revealed through preparatory drawings, contemporary and later copies, and technical evidence. The integral correlation of Leonardo's scientific, intellectual, and artistic pursuits as evidenced in the *Salvator Mundi* is examined, as is Leonardo's special ways of evoking a spiritual presence that lay beyond the sensory world that he scrutinized with such intensity.

In the third 'act' Margaret Dalivalle takes us to England, where 370 years ago two *Salvators* credited to Leonardo bore mute witness to some of the most tumultuous events of British history. They were prized possessions of King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria, and their entry into this greatest of all private art collections, the saga following the king's execution, and their later peregrinations are revealed through a spirited and scrupulous examination of archival material. We believe that the pictures in the royal collections can be identified as the present painting and as an attractive picture of Jesus as a young Salvator, in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, which is now seen as being by a follower. The taste for Leonardo's works at the Caroline court—involving both autograph and questionable paintings, drawings, and manuscripts—provides the context for this important chapter in the painting's history.

In an epilogue Martin Kemp brings the reader up to date, treating the critical reception of the painting following its exhibition, its acquisition by successive owners, and recent scholarly discussions.

PART I

ROBERT B. SIMON

CHAPTER 1



The Discovery of a Masterpiece

First Sighting

In early 2005 an intriguing painting depicting Christ emerged from the estate of an American businessman. It did not come from an historic house, neither was it found in a culturally celebrated region of the country, nor was it a part of an illustrious collection. In fact, it appears to have been the only painting of significance owned by its recently deceased owner—a work obtained through inheritance and evidently retained more for its devotional qualities than for its artistic merit. The progression of this painting from anonymity to its recognition and acceptance as a lost painting by Leonardo da Vinci is here related in narrative form.

My first sighting of the *Salvator Mundi* came in the form of a small black-and-white illustration in the catalogue of a minor regional American auction house (Fig. 1.1). The St. Charles Gallery was the subsidiary venue of the New Orleans Auction Gallery, one of a few auction houses active in the lively antique trade of the Louisiana city. Important works of art, furniture, and objects would pass under the hammer at their principal location on Magazine Street. Lesser material was relegated to the St. Charles Avenue location.¹ Their sale of 9 and 10 April 2005 promised 1,196 lots of furniture, decorative objects, antiques, paintings, and works of art drawn from several estates. Lot 664 was designated as ‘After Leonardo da Vinci,’ an auction-house descriptor signifying a copy painted at a considerably later date than its known source, and titled ‘Christ Salvador Mundi [*sic*].’ The only further description noted that the



661

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French Cast-Iron Crucifix, in the Louis XVI taste, fourth quarter 19th century, the basal edge fitted with a pair of ground stakes, presented in a natural rusted finish, h. 26", w. 13-3/4". [150/300] *Illustrated*



662

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Elaborate German Parcel-Silvered Black Cast-Iron Memorial Crucifix, in the Belle Epoque taste, fourth quarter 19th century, 50-1/2", w. 18". [250/400] *Illustrated*

663
Attributed to the New Orleans Academy needlepoint panel of Christ Blessing the Loaves, third quarter 19th century, 17" x 14". Presented in a later carved giltwood and plaster frame, c. 1890 and glazed. [250/400] *Illustrated*

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After Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452-1519) "Christ Salvador Mundi", oil on cradled panel, 26" x 18-1/2". Presented in a fine antique gilt and gesso exhibition frame. [1200/1800] *Illustrated*

665
Italian White Marble Figure of a Robed Franciscan Monk, bearing a lily spray, an open book and a child, set on an integral oblong base, the surface gently weathered, h. 23". [800/1200] *Illustrated Color Plate X*

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Italian Carved White Marble Figure of a Robed, Bearded Saint, carrying a spray of lilies and a square, supported on an integral oblong marble base, the surface gently weathered overall, h. 24". [800/1200] *Illustrated Color Plate X*



663



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Fig. 1.1 *St. Charles Gallery catalogue of April 9–10, 2005, p. 110 including the Salvador Mundi.*

picture was 'presented in a fine antique gilt and gesso exhibition frame.' Indeed, the catalogue illustration of the painting unusually included its frame, perhaps to enhance its somewhat dubious decorative value.

Considering the limited research resources available to the auction house, as well as the garbled title of the painting, one must assume that the association with Leonardo and the subject of the *Salvator Mundi* did not arise from any extensive investigation by the St. Charles Gallery, but was transcribed either from a label, later lost, or from an old inventory or appraisal of the former owner's property. In any case, I immediately recognized the composition of the painting from my own previous studies of Leonardo's life and works. The *Christ as Salvator Mundi* was one of three lost paintings by Leonardo known from copies—the others being *Leda and the Swan*, believed to have been in the French royal collections until the end of the eighteenth century, and the *Battle of Anghiari*, the grand mural painted in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio, covered and likely destroyed in the later sixteenth century.

The painting and the problem it presented were immediately intriguing. Copies of works by the great masters are legion and Leonardo's works were no exception. Hundreds of *Mona Lisas* populate living rooms, antique shops, and museum storerooms worldwide—most of which were made by dedicated copyists working from the original in the Louvre or from other copies. These, predominantly from the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, are painted on canvas and are often proudly signed by the copyist on the reverse. Earlier copies, some painted during or shortly after Leonardo's lifetime, are known as well and are the frequent object of speculative theories seeking a second 'original.' However, none has found acceptance except from its promoter.

But this image of Christ was more of a curiosity, since relatively few versions of the *Salvator Mundi* composition were known and, unlike copies of the *Mona Lisa*, there was little consistency in the details among them; each seemed almost an interpretation of the subject rather than a faithful reproduction of a common original. However, what further set this image apart from a *Mona Lisa* copy was that the original painting on which it was based was lost.

Strangely, my response to coming across a version of a lost painting by Leonardo did not include speculation that it might be the missing original. Rather it was almost antiquarian in nature. What, if anything, might this painting tell us about Leonardo's original? And, if one could determine that it was 'period'—that is, of Leonardo's time or soon afterward—whether it might have been painted by one of Leonardo's able pupils or followers—artists