

# LEONARDO LOST & FOUND

Rediscovering the *Salvator Mundi* BY JENIFER MANGIONE VOGT



Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452-1519) *Salvator Mundi*, Oil on panel, 25.8125" x 17.875" (65.6 x 45.4 cm), Private Collection. © 2011 *Salvator Mundi* LLC Photo: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art

The story of a lost Leonardo da Vinci painting sounds like the plot of a suspense novel or cinematic thriller. But it's a true tale that has art connoisseurs in awe. "The painting was located in a family's collection in the U.S. for 50 years," said Robert B. Simon, PhD, an art historian who specializes in Italian Renaissance art. He was referring to Leonardo da Vinci's painting, the *Salvator Mundi*. The owners didn't know they had an original work by the old master. "It was there as a nice bit of religious wall decoration," Simon said.

News outlets in 2011 speculated about the re-emergence of the painting, which depicts Christ making the sign of the blessing, and was first recorded in the collection of King Charles I in 1649. It vanished after being sold by British collector, Sir Frederick Cook, in 1958. Finally, after six years of research and restoration, its authenticity would be confirmed.

## THE AUTHENTICATION PROCESS

A photograph of the *Salvator Mundi* was shown to Simon in 2005. "I immediately recognized it as related to a lost Leonardo, but it was covered with overpaint that disfigured it," he said. "The hope was that it was by one of Leonardo's assistants." Simon took the painting to a renowned conservator, Mario Modestini, then 98, who had worked on Leonardo's *Ginevra de'Benci*, now in Washington. "It was frightening, but I wrapped the painting in a black garbage bag and hopped in a taxi," Simon said. Mario knew it as a piece of importance and his wife, Dianne, a professor of conservation at New York University, began to clean the work. She discovered passages of extraordinary quality suggestive of Leonardo. It looked like they might have an original.

Yet, the pair moved slowly, aware of the criticism that would come with error. Simon went to Europe to conduct academic research. He visited the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, which houses da Vinci's only two preparatory drawings for the painting, along with an etching of it made by artist Wenceslas Hollar, who worked for King Charles I.

## UNCOVERING CLUES

The restoration revealed a *pentimento*, or "change of heart," which showed the artists had moved the original placement of Christ's thumb. Infra-red reflectography conducted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art revealed further changes made by the artist before the painting was completed. Still, more authentication was required. Simon called on Nicholas Penny, director of the National Gallery in London. He suggested the work be presented to an international team of Leonardo experts, including Oxford Renaissance scholar Martin Kemp, who said he knew immediately it was a Leonardo. "It had that kind of presence that Leonardos have," Kemp said. His colleagues concurred and resoundingly authenticated it as a work done by the great master. In November of 2011, the work was revealed in an exhibit at the National Gallery, *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan*. There are only some 15 paintings by Leonardo that survive today, making the discovery even more significant.

Where is the *Salvator Mundi* now? The painting resides with an owner who wishes to remain anonymous. "All I can say is that the painting is not available," Simon explained. "But, it's been requested for a 2015 show in Milan and I'm expecting it will be lent." ●



Key signs of authenticity to Leonardo experts: (1) The alteration of the thumb; (2) The hair ringlets nearly identical to the curls in Leonardo's *St. John the Baptist* painting; (3) The extreme similarities of the mouth compared to the *Mona Lisa*; (4) The detail in the crystal globe that showed inclusions and refractions of light.