

The Rush to Crystallize: *Salvator Mundi*, Leonardo da Vinci and the Art Market

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One of the best pieces of advice I received while working on my Ph.D. dissertation in Art History was by the great art historian Michael Baxandall: “Do not rush to crystallize your ideas.” When researching an artist or an artwork, this metaphor could not be more apt. It takes a diamond between 1 and 3.3 billion years to crystallize. It takes a Cabernet Sauvignon 4 to 20 years to age. And it takes a luxury watch 3 to 5 years to be made. According to *Forbes*, what you are paying for in a luxury watch is Time: the time necessary for highly trained artisan craftspeople and specialists to do their work properly. As Giorgio Armani has eloquently argued recently for the world of fashion, it is time, patience, care and experienced craftsmanship that distinguishes something mass-produced from something well-made. The case is the same for a well-crafted art historical attribution of an artwork. Due diligence is time-consuming, as those who work in the field note. Be prepared to wait a long, long time for success.

What happens when an attribution crystallizes too soon? A perfect example is the painting titled *Salvator Mundi*, attributed to Leonardo da Vinci in a recent exhibition and auction. The object, first recorded for certain around 1900 but not considered of great importance, was at the time attributed to a member of the circle of Leonardo, Bernardino Luini. In 1958 it was attributed to another follower of Leonardo, Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio. It was bought in 2005 for \$1,175, described as a copy. It was then significantly restored and sold in 2017 for \$450 million dollars as undoubtedly by Leonardo da Vinci. A critical turning point for the painting before its sale was the fact that it was exhibited in 2011 at the National Gallery in London, where it was described as “known to have been painted by Leonardo.” This ostensibly gave the work an institutional blessing from a prestigious museum and perhaps unwittingly accounted for its hyperbolic market success.

However, the attribution continues to be seriously questioned by numerous important scholars. Today, 3 years after the sale, scholarly debates still rage as to whether the work is truly by the hand of Leonardo or not. Clearly, given the ongoing fierce dispute we are witnessing now about its authorship, the painting was not yet ripe for attribution when it appeared in a major exhibition and then at auction. This hasty attribution generated what can only be described as a hysterical market response, a buying frenzy that inflated its price far beyond the parameters of any previously acquired artwork and blinded buyers to the many still-open questions surrounding it. In this case, the cart was put before the horse, the market was put before art history.

If the attribution had been allowed time to crystalize, a different road could have been taken. A more cautious, systematic approach would have created time and space to consider various opinions and their motivations *before* the decision to exhibit and *before* the sale. As Charles Hope, Renaissance art specialist and former director of the Warburg Institute noted, at that point the attribution still needed to be tested. There was, in other words, a need for more time to produce a measured critical appraisal. “A lengthier study would have ideally addressed the studio context with historical research, connoisseurship and technical and scientific analyses.” The results could have been published in a reputable scholarly journal and made transparent for the entire scholarly community to debate, before reaching the general public and the market as an absolute attribution. This is the process by which intelligent consensus about authorship should be reached.

One voice that was not taken into account is the reasoned assessment of Oxford University’s Matthew Landrus, who believes that the work is mostly by the hand of Luini. Another is the

analysis by Leonardo expert Carmen Bambach, who believes it is mostly by Boltraffio. Other important questions and problems could have been discussed as well. For example, one of the voices in favor of the attribution to Leonardo turns out to be the dealer selling the work, who, despite his expertise, had an interest in the market value of the painting. Not being an uninterested party, should he have not recused himself in this case due to potential conflict of interest? Another problematic issue is the significant amount of restoration and repainting that was reportedly conducted on the work. At what point is a restoration so extensive that the work can no longer be considered to be by the artist's hand? Finally, what should one make of the centuries of missing provenance? As it was, due to the hasty conclusions, all issues, opinions and objections did not have a chance to be raised until after the sale.

The aftermath of the current story is that the painting had been scheduled to be part of the Louvre exhibition celebrating the 500th anniversary of Leonardo's death, but it never showed up. It is rumored that the reason was the work's exorbitant new market value, making the cost for insuring *Salvator Mundi* too high for it to be included in the show. Did the market create its own worst nightmare?

Whatever the reasons for the work's unavailability, the painting is now in limbo. Nobody knows where it is housed, and there is a growing sense that the work is being hidden because it cannot stand the process of going through the steps of research or a fear that the attribution may be challenged. Leonardo scholar Pietro Marani, who is in favor of the attribution, rightly wrote that it is crucial "to make a work like that available to the community, the public and scholars, I think is a duty." In the end, is it not better to be patient and wait for the facts to crystallize before a sale, rather than risk paying a high price later for a rushed attribution?

Adapted from text originally published in Italian in *We Wealth* online: <https://www.we-wealth.com/it/news/pleasure-assets/opere-darte/salvator-mundi-leonardo-mercato-quanta-fretta/>

English translation provided by the author.

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