

SAVIOR FOR SALE: DA VINCI'S LOST MASTERPIECE? (2021)



This documentary film investigates one of the most extraordinary episodes in contemporary art history: the transformation of a painting titled *Salvator Mundi* (one of many bearing that title, showing Christ issuing a blessing with his right hand while holding an orb in his left) from an obscure, severely damaged Renaissance artwork reportedly purchased for £45 by an American couple at Sotheby's in London in 1958, to the most expensive painting ever sold at public auction. It was purchased by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for more than \$450 million at Christie's in New York in 2017.

The key to the astronomical rise in value was the contention that it is a hitherto unknown work of Leonardo da Vinci, dubbed by some "The Male Mona Lisa." Vitkine's absorbing film is both a scholarly thriller about that attribution and a muckraking critique of a cynical global art market. It begins with the recollections of Robert Simon, the art dealer who, together with a colleague, purchased the painting from a New Orleans auction house, where it had been put up for sale by its owner in 2005 for about \$1200. It was restored by Dianne Modestini of New York University (so extensively, some have argued, that the result was more her work than that of the original artist); she first suggested that it might be an authentic Leonardo, and the attribution was accepted by art historian Martin Kemp and Luke Syson, the director of London National Gallery who exhibited it as authentic in 2011.

Simon's efforts to secure a sale to a museum or collector were unsuccessful until Swiss businessman Yves Bouvier, acting as an agent of Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev, arranged its purchase in 2013, pocketing more than his commission in the process (a fact that led to a heated legal dispute). Rybolovlev then arranged for its auction by Christie's. Loïc Gouzer, the firm's brash rainmaker, orchestrated an extravagant sales campaign involving a transcontinental tour accompanied by ads showing people—including celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio—gazing at the painting transfixed to build interest and increase the price.

That tactic succeeded beyond all expectations, but controversy over the attribution continues. The film includes interviews with most of the major players in the recent shifts of fortune of this pawn in geopolitical gamesmanship.

-- adapted from Video Librarian

DIRECTOR: Antoine Vitkine
[1 hour 35 minutes]

TRAILER: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdL40JdeQaI>