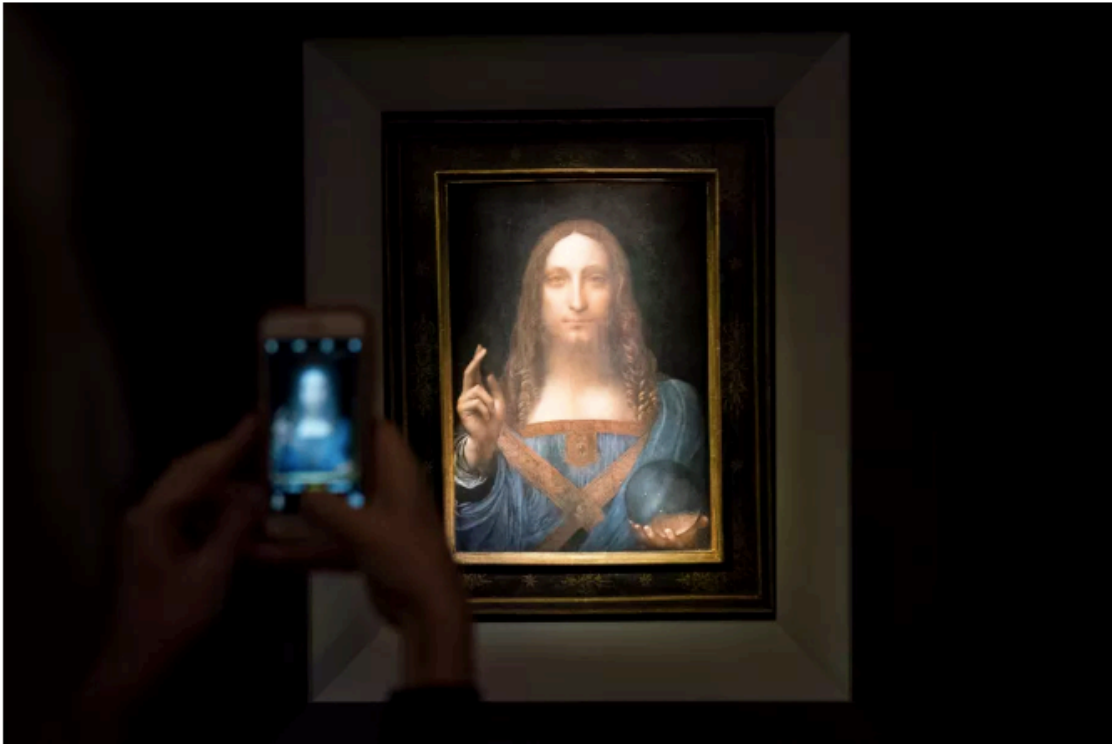


How a long-lost Leonardo da Vinci painting got dragged into a Trump-Russia conspiracy theory

A new conspiracy theory linking the world's most expensive painting to the Trump campaign has little merit, but it does reveal the anxieties of our political climate.

By Gaby Del Valle | @gabydvj | gaby.delvalle@voxmedia.com | Jan 22, 2019, 2:35pm EST



A visitor takes a photo of the painting *Salvator Mundi* by Leonardo da Vinci at Christie's New York Auction House. The painting sold for more than \$450 million in November 2017. | Drew Angerer/Getty Images



In November 2017, a long-lost Leonardo da Vinci painting was put up for sale at Christie's semiannual, invitation-only evening auction. The work, called *Salvator Mundi*, was the star of the night: It sparked a 19-minute-long bidding war between two anonymous buyers and eventually **sold for just over \$450 million**, the highest recorded price for a work of art.

<https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/1/22/18192927/salvator-mundi-trump-conspiracy-theory>

"All of the art journalists I know and work with, people who are very experienced on these things, just laughed out loud [at the theory]," said Ben Davis, the national art critic for Artnet News, who **recently explained the implausibility of the Narativ post**. "It's true that there's sort of a mystery — no one knows what's really going on with it — but these are very opaque institutions. There's lots that I'd like to know about it, but it doesn't strike me as a breadcrumb leading back to evidence of some dastardly plot."

The question of why MBS, through Prince Bader, paid upward of \$450 million for the painting is a bit more complicated. One simple explanation: Because he could. "Record-setting auction prizes are a gentleman's sport to a certain extent," said Davis. Auctions, at their core, are about getting astronomically wealthy people to pay vast sums of money for paintings and sculptures, and to make them feel very cultured for doing so.

Museums — especially new ones — need superstar works if they want to draw visitors. Acquiring the last privately owned da Vinci, particularly one with such fascinating provenance, is newsworthy enough as it is. The fact that it's the most expensive painting ever sold only adds to *Salvator Mundi*'s appeal. The publicity around the painting may be a good way of drawing museum crowds, but it's not ideal money laundering, a practice which requires secrecy in order to succeed.

"If you're going to do something really, really shady," Davis said, "you might not want to do it in a way that's designed to put a big arrow over your head that says, 'Look at me! Investigate me!'"

Contemporary art: The biggest unregulated market in the world

The absurdity of the Narativ theory aside, it's true that the international art market isn't exactly known for transparency or regulations. "People call it the largest unregulated market in the world," Davis told me. "That's part of why people are drawn to it. It's this ideal laissez-faire system where money comes and goes out of nowhere."

Davis, the Artnet writer who disputed the *Salvator Mundi* conspiracy theory, thinks that people who make up these elaborate stories of collusion can unwittingly discredit the more legitimate concerns people have about both the Trump administration and the art market.

“There’s this sense that art is this weird other world that’s really opaque and sinister,” he said.

“It is really weird and sinister, but this isn’t helping anybody. Cooler heads need to speak.”