

“Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.” (Pablo Picasso)



Last week we learned that a painting was sold at auction by Christie's in New York, believed to be the last-known of only twenty paintings by Leonardo da Vinci. It was purchased by an anonymous bidder for US\$450.3 million, making it the most expensive painting ever acquired, either at auction or (it is believed) through private sales.

The work was a commission from King Louis XII of France and his wife, Anne of Brittany, around 1500. It was sold for £45 at Sotheby's in London in 1958 (when no one regarded it as a da Vinci). Later on, it was believed to have come from a student of Leonardo, or to be a copy of a da Vinci work. At that time, it sold for less than \$10,000 at another auction house in 2005. The vendor last week was Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev, whom Australian newspapers today would euphemistically describe as “a colourful identity”.

The painting is a common iconographic subject of the sixteenth century. It is entitled *Salvator Mundi* ('Saviour of the World'). Leonardo presents Christ in Renaissance garb, draped in blue as the symbol of the heavens and divine life. Christ holds a crystal orb in one hand and raises his right hand in blessing. We know of Leonardo as an engineer, architect, anatomist, scientist, as well as an artist – the epitome of a man of the Renaissance. As for his faith, this is more of a mystery. For Leonardo, faith had to be balanced

by reason. And yet one could hardly look upon this image of *Salvator Mundi* and not see it as a work of faith.

The work is characteristically da Vincian – a shadowy mysterious quality, the smoky evanescent blurring of boundaries, the intricate detail of the cascading hair and ringlets, the precise anatomy of the hand, his obsession with optics in the lighting of the face and the orb. Many da Vinci paintings have figures pointing to a secret in the work to be discovered, to something enigmatic. But here, Christ both gestures upwards to a celestial realm and also offers a blessing to us here on earth. Transcendent and immanent. This image is also a celebration of science and enlightenment. Leonardo knew that the world was spherical and not flat, hence the orb is a symbol of royalty and a globe of the earth. This sphere, though, is a pure form a quartz or rock crystal. It is an emblem of technology, because only in recent Renaissance times had they rediscovered the ancient secret of carving and shaping quartz. So the painting speaks of the divine, but also of the world, of the here-and-now, of the gift of human talent. I find it interesting that the world is portrayed as a crystal. For God, the world is transparent. As we are transparent to God. God sees us clearly – in our complexity, in our struggles, in our needs, at our best and in our blemishes. Nothing hidden. Yet the hand of a merciful God offers a blessing and points to a kingdom he wishes us to fashion, with all the technologies and sciences that so engaged Leonardo, and within the emergence of a Christian humanism at the time – and much more. Leonardo paints such an ambitious vision.

Thirty years ago, Pope John Paul II spoke to an international association of Christian artists. He said to them:

In a society marked by a sometimes dehumanising technology and by consumerist hedonism, you, dear friends and artists, are called to witness to a profound love for the truth of the world, and of humanity. By creating works that bring out the high vocation of human beings, make yourselves masterly and sincere interpreters of transcendence.

I would like to think that Leonardo would have agreed. To be a masterly and sincere interpreter of transcendence.

Before the auction, Christie's engaged in an extravagant marketing campaign that involved a worldwide tour of the painting which attracted more than 25,000 viewers. Christie's went on to produce a promotional video which recorded a variety of people looking deeply at the work, engaged by its beauty and its power. Some were very moved. Among those who were drawn into it was Leonardo DiCaprio, who will play Leonardo in a forthcoming biopic.

St Ignatius writes in his *Spiritual Exercises* that "it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul but the inner feeling and relish of things" (*Annotation 2*). If you give yourself some space to watch the [promotional video](#), perhaps you will see what Ignatius means. Art touching the transcendent, drawing us to a taste of the divine. A deep feeling. A relish.

And in the end, it leaves me with the question – what would satisfy Leonardo more? That his work was purchased by a billionaire for his or her private delight? Or that it still has power to stir the soul and remind us that the salvation of this world lies in the human heart and its power to embrace the world and transform it?