

Frank Zöllner

Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* as a Touchstone of Art-Historical Methodology

When a *Christ as Salvator Mundi* (fig. 1) attributed to Leonardo da Vinci was unveiled to the public in summer 2011, the ensuing debates revolved primarily around the painting's attribution, which is still disputed today.¹ The *Salvator Mundi*'s subsequent changing of hands, involving large sums of money and political manoeuvring, also raised many eyebrows. On 15 November 2017 the spectacle then reached its provisional climax with the sale of the painting at a highly publicized auction at Christie's in New York.² This was also last occasion to date on which the *Salvator Mundi* appeared on public view. It now appears to be in the possession of the Saudi royal family. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will refer to the painting here as the "New York Salvator".

The controversies surrounding the painting are proof of the great importance of Italian art history. They also afford an opportunity to reflect on the breadth and enduring relevance of art-historical methodologies. The connoisseurial questions surrounding the *Salvator Mundi* go directly back to the roots of the discipline and are well worth asking in their own right.

The New York Salvator is without doubt a high-quality Old Master painting from the early 16th century. It shows Christ making the gesture of blessing with his right hand and holding a glass sphere in his left. A striking feature is the unseeing gaze of the Saviour, whose pose appears frozen – something that can be traced both to the panel's poor state of preservation and to the pictorial formula that Leonardo employed. I shall return to this later. The design for the New York Salvator certainly stems from Leonardo. This is evidenced by two autograph drawings of drapery details in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, as well as by two further variants of the *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, which were produced by artists in Leonardo's circle and are probably based on the same cartoon as the New York panel (figs. 2–3).³



Fig. 1: Workshop of Leonardo, after a design by Leonardo and with Leonardo's participation, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, after 1507, oil on walnut panel, 65.5 x 45.1–45.6 cm, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (photo: 2011–2014 state).

Of these three paintings, the New York Salvator exhibits the highest quality. Detailed stylistic analysis, however, suggests that Leonardo did not complete the painting single-handedly, but that other artists from his circle were also involved in its execution. The modelling of Christ's blessing hand and the design of the filigree embroidery around the neckline of his tunic, for example, come close to the quality of autograph works by Leonardo. The fingernails delineated with

fine shading likewise recall original paintings by the master. But the *Salvator Mundi* also reveals weaknesses. Thus the flesh of Christ's blessing hand has the same waxy look found in a number of workshop paintings, for example in the angels playing musical instruments on the side wings belonging to the London version of the *Virgin of the Rocks*.



Fig. 2: Circle of Leonardo da Vinci, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, oil on walnut panel, 68.6 x 48.9 cm, formerly Ganay Collection, auctioned by Christie's on 28 May 1999, lot 00020, private collection.

Another stylistic characteristic of artists working in Leonardo's sphere can be seen in the New York *Salvator* in Christ's highly stylised-looking corkscrew curls. These ringlets have their origins in a Head of Christ pictorial type created by Jan van Eyck, but a schematic treatment of curling locks is also known from paintings by Leonardo's workshop – we might think here of the two best versions of the *Madonna with the Yarnwinder* and the two above-mentioned *Salvator Mundi* panels from Leonardo's circle (figs. 2–3). In contrast, Leonardo's undisputedly autograph works show a less stylised, more natural treatment of the hair, as witnessed for example by the Paris version of the *Virgin of the Rocks* and the *Mona Lisa*.



Fig. 3: Circle of Leonardo da Vinci, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, tempera on panel, 66.5 x 46.5 cm, Naples, San Domenico Maggiore.

The findings returned by stylistic analyses of the New York *Salvator*, in other words, are ambivalent. The same is true of the information yielded by technical investigations.⁴ There is nothing surprising about this situation, however, since attributions are not decided in a day. The portraits of Ginevra de' Benci and Cecilia Gallerani, for example, were first linked with Leonardo in the 19th century, but this attribution did not find unanimous acceptance until much later and on the basis of compelling findings in the early sources. Of great significance for the New York *Salvator* is the research into its history of ownership. The painting was initially credited with a very distinguished provenance, going back to the French and English royal families of the 16th to 18th centuries. This reconstruction of the panel's history cannot be verified, however. Currently, the New York *Salvator* can only be traced back with confidence to one Joseph Hirst, a Leeds cloth merchant born in 1814.⁵ In comparison with other paintings by Leonardo's hand, this provenance is very meagre. There is historical documentary evidence,

moreover, that in the decade after Leonardo's death there existed at least one *Salvator Mundi* painting made not by the master himself, but by a pupil or copyist.⁶ But within a short space of time this painting, too, along with further copies, faded into insignificance. Leonardo's *Salvator* design, in other words, has received as little attention over the centuries as many of the paintings by his school.

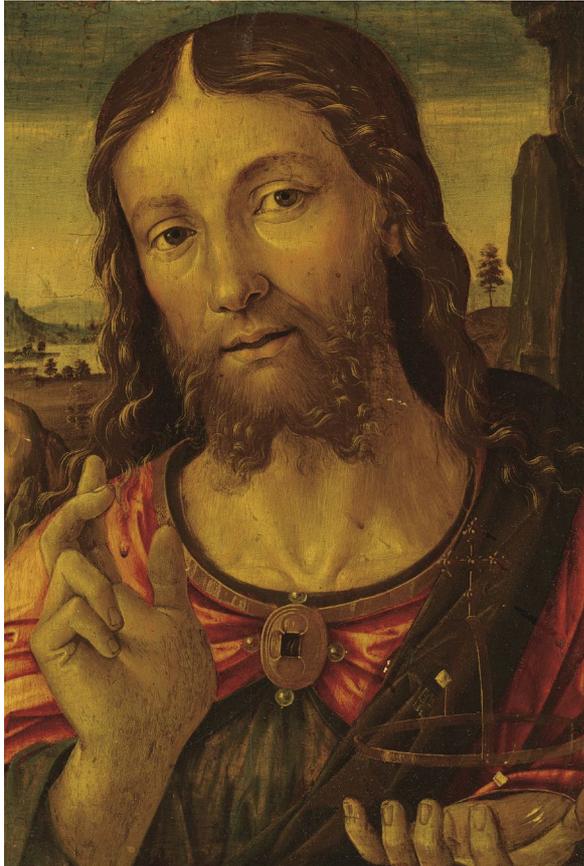


Fig. 4: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Salvator Mundi*, tempera on oil on panel, inset 33.3 x 23.7cm, including later additions of approx. 2 x 2.5cm, ©Christie's Images.

A look at the iconography of the New York *Salvator*, and the history of the pictorial type it employs, is also revealing. First of all, it is surprising that Leonardo should have used a very rigid pictorial formula in his *Salvator*. This contrasts with his well-known tendency to visualise traditional iconographical subjects in dynamic terms or reinvent them altogether. A good example of this is the *Virgin and Child with St Anne* with its animated figure composition. Leonardo's *Salvator* design, on the other hand, is devoid of all

movement. The fact that more dynamic solutions for this subject were already in use and in circulation at this time is evidenced by prints produced in northern Europe, by Domenico Ghirlandaio's highly sophisticated portrait of Christ of about 1490 (fig. 4) and by Albrecht Dürer's *Christ as Salvator Mundi* (fig. 5), painted around 1503–1505.⁷ Leonardo, by contrast, has oriented himself towards a more static and somewhat conventional pictorial type. This *Salvator* type appears increasingly in Italian panel painting from around 1475 onwards and shows a frontal bust-length portrait of Christ making a gesture of blessing and holding a glass globe. One of the earliest examples is probably the *Christ as Salvator Mundi* by Melozzo da Forlì (fig. 6), executed around 1480–1482, which Leonardo could have seen in 1502 during a stay in Urbino. Further examples are found in the Venetian painting of the late 15th and early 16th century, including by Vittore Carpaccio (fig. 7) and artists in his circle.

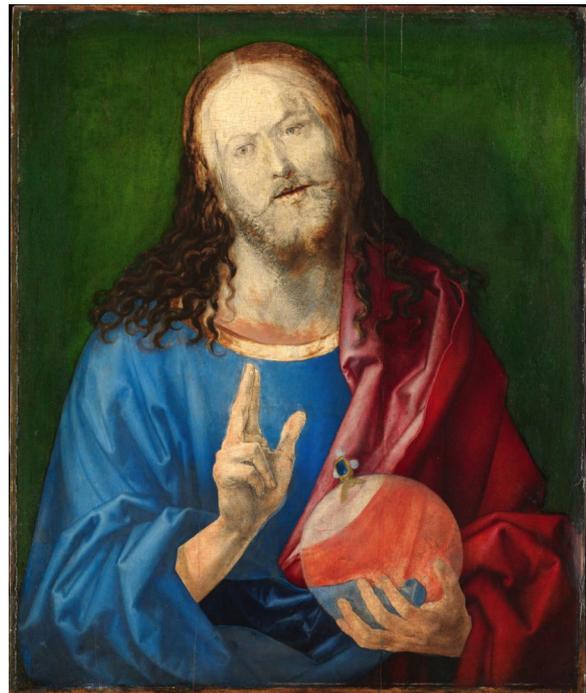


Fig. 5: Albrecht Dürer, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, ca. 1503–1505 (?), oil on panel, 58.1 x 47 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931.



Fig. 6: Melozzo da Forlì, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, ca. 1480–1482, oil on panel, 54 x 40.5 cm, Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Palazzo Ducale.

The paintings by Melozzo da Forlì and Carpaccio testify to the fact that, by the first decade of the 16th century, the *Christ as Salvator Mundi* as a subject enjoyed a certain dissemination in Italy. We can clarify this observation by turning our attention to the popular contemporary medium of manuscript illumination. Here, in fact, a variant of the bust-length portrait type used by Leonardo appears ever more frequently from around 1460 onwards. In terms of numbers, representations of *Christ as Salvator Mundi* in books of hours (figs. 8–9) far exceed those that have come down to us in larger-format paintings. This trend seems to have reached its peak between 1500 and 1520, and thus during the very same years in which Leonardo conceived his *Salvator* design. This look at pictorial tradition and here in particular at manuscript illumination reveals, in other words, that Leonardo adhered to a *Salvator Mundi* type that was popular in his day. This finding has direct consequences for our understanding of Leonardo's *Salvator*, for in books of hours a miniature of *Christ as Salvator Mundi* (fig. 9) appears almost exclusively in conjunction with the

Veronica hymn “*Salve sancta facies*” (“Hail, Holy Face”). As a devotional practice, the veneration of the Veronica was linked with vast indulgences and with the indispensable requirement, too, that the prayer should be recited directly in front of a painted portrait of Christ. It is probable that the Christian faithful in Leonardo's day would have automatically associated a *Salvator Mundi* with the popular Veronica hymn and its granting of indulgences – particularly since it can be shown that the devotional practice associated with books of hours was also performed in front of panel paintings.



Fig. 7: Vittore Carpaccio, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, ca. 1507–1508, oil on panel, 28.5 x 24 cm, private collection, Courtesy Robert Simon Fine Art, New York.

A complete history of the *Salvator Mundi* pictorial type is still lacking, but the comparisons possible thus far tell us that Leonardo's design is singular or unusual in several respects. In contrast to examples of the subject from book and panel painting, his *Christ* wears a tunic embellished with numerous fine vertical pleats. The two subtly ornamented bands that run across the Saviour's chest are also striking and call to mind a crossed stole. This detail is rarely encountered in panel painting and only occasionally in manuscript illumination. The same is true of the colour of the New York *Salvator*'s tunic and mantle, both of which are blue –

something with few precedents and not found later. In the 16th-century copies inspired by Leonardo's *Salvator*, certainly, Christ's draperies are generally rendered in two different colours (figs. 2, 3 and 10). Equally unusual is an omega-shaped drapery fold to the left above one of the ornamental bands, clearly visible above all in the two, qualitatively less outstanding *Salvator* paintings from Leonardo's circle (figs. 2–3). Some of these unusual details are found in representations of high-ranking church dignitaries. These parallels have yet to be explained.

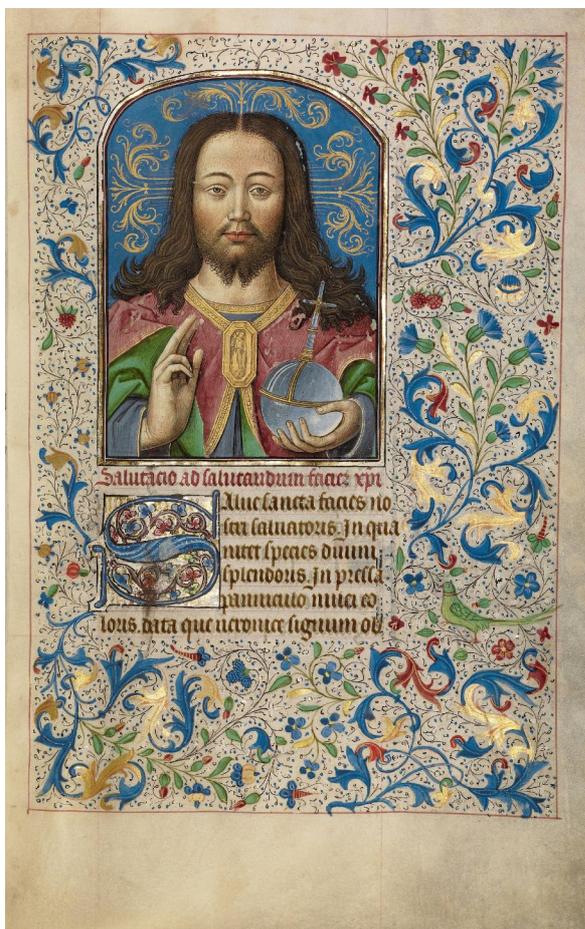


Fig. 8: Workshop of Willem Vrelant, *Salvator Mundi* from the Arenberg Hours, ca. 1460, 25.6 x 17.3 cm, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig IX 8 (83.ML.104), fol. 32r.

The history of the reception of Leonardo's *Salvator* design is somewhat more telling. The works in this lineage include the two paintings by members of Leonardo's immediate sphere that we have already encountered (figs. 2–3). Further copies and variants inspired – albeit probably only indirectly – by

Leonardo's design followed over the course of the 16th and 17th century (fig. 10).⁸ In 1650 the Bohemian artist Wenceslaus Hollar made a *Salvator Mundi* etching that is possibly based on the New York painting. Hollar's print possesses a certain quality, which often cannot be said of the 16th-century painted copies (fig. 10). These latter have never been studied as a whole, but it has recently been shown that two versions previously attributed to Leonardo's circle (Detroit and Warsaw) were executed at the earliest in the final third of the 16th century and outside Italy.⁹ Compared with the far-reaching influence of the *Virgin and Child with St Anne*, of which numerous high-class variants exist,¹⁰ the reception of Leonardo's *Salvator* design was thus modest, both in terms of quality and quantity.



Fig. 9: *Salvator Mundi* miniatures from books of hours ranging in date from ca. 1460 to ca. 1520.

Leonardo's extensive oeuvre in the areas of art theory and science suggests that some of his ideas on visual theory found expression in his paintings. This is conceivable in the case of the New York *Salvator*, too. If we compare the painting with possible forerunners, copies and variants, we are struck by its suggestive sfumato and its lighting subtly directed to different areas. These elements are regular subjects of reflection in Leonardo's theoretical writings and substantially contribute to an auratisation of the Saviour – something wholly in keeping with the *Salvator Mundi* subject. Indeed, blurriness as a principle contributes decisively to characterising the numinous that is a theme of religious art.¹¹

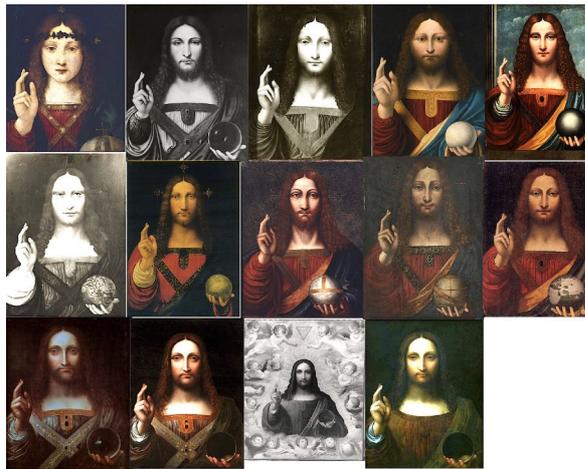


Fig. 10: Copies indirectly inspired by Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi* design: Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; ex-collection Yarborough; Beurret Bailly Widmer auction, Basel, 24 March 2021; Sotheby's auction, New York, 29 January 2016; Hampel auction, Munich, 6 December 2018; ex-collection Trivulzio; ex-collection Vittadini, now private collection, Milan; Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; Courtauld Galleries, London; Artnet, 23 May 2001; private collection, Switzerland; private collection, Pistoia; Detroit Institute of Art; Wilanów Palace, Warsaw.

The spectrum of traditional art-historical methodologies briefly set out here shows that research into Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi* is still at an early stage. Stylistic comparisons, above all with further paintings from Leonardo's circle, are still far from exhausted. We need to re-examine our modern idea of sole authorship in connection with a work of art. With regard to the New York *Salvator*'s provenance, which remains inadequately documented, we must hope that new sources will come to light and help to clarify open questions. Such finds in the early sources have regularly been made in recent years. Further discoveries can also be expected in the area of the history of the *Salvator Mundi* pictorial type. A perusal of the photo collections relevant to Italian art-historical scholarship immediately suggests that the existing material base can be further expanded. The visual material consulted so far for the purposes of comparison also needs to be examined in much greater depth, in order to be able to determine more precisely the history of the reception of Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi*. The devotional practice associated with the subject is another important aspect. It would be fruitful to consider Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi* in its nature as a religious painting, for it was created as such. The *Salvator Mundi* nevertheless proves, however, that art history's traditional methodological repertoire has lost none of its relevance for Italian studies.

Endnotes

1. Margaret Dalvalle, Martin Kemp and Robert B. Simon, *Leonardo's Salvator Mundi & The Collecting of Leonardo in the Stuart Courts*, Oxford 2019; Ben Lewis, *The Last Leonardo. The Secret Lives of the World's Most Expensive Painting*, London 2019, pp. 200–227; Frank Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452–1519. Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 4th edn., Cologne 2019, pp. 6–11 and 250–251; Vincent Delieuvin and Louis Frank (eds.), *Léonard de Vinci*, Paris 2019, pp. 302–313. – For more detailed references, see also my article "Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*, its Pictorial Tradition and its Context as a Devotional Image", in: *Artibus et historiae*, 42 (83), 2021, pp. 53–84.
2. Loic Gouzer and Candace Wetmore (eds.), *Leonardo da Vinci. Salvator Mundi*, auction cat., New York 2017.
3. Roberto Antonelli, Claudia Cieri Via, Antonio Forcellino and Maria Forcellino (eds.), *Leonardo a Roma. Influenze ed eredità*, exh. cat., Rome 2019, pp. 358–360 (Antonio Forcellino), pp. 425–434 (Cinzia Pasquali); Delieuvin and Frank 2019, pp. 302–310.
4. See Dianne Dwyer Modestini's website; Dianne Dwyer Modestini, "Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* Rediscovered. History, Technique and Condition", in: Michel Menu (ed.), *Leonardo da Vinci's Technical Practice. Paintings, Drawings and Influence*, Paris 2014, pp. 139–152.
5. Dalvalle, Kemp and Simon 2019, pp. 27–29; Lewis 2020, pp. 210–221.
6. Eduardo Villata, *Leonardo da Vinci. I documenti e le testimonianze contemporanee*, Milan 1999, p. 288; Jan Sammer, "Salai's Legacy", in: Nicola Barbatelli (ed.), *Leonardo and His Outstanding Circle*, s.l. 2019, pp. 167–178.
7. Johannes Gebhardt and Frank Zöllner, "Paragone. Leonardo in Comparison", in: Johannes Gebhardt and Frank Zöllner (eds.), *Paragone. Leonardo in Comparison*, Petersberg 2021, pp. 9–19.
8. Ludwig H. Heydenreich, "Leonardos *Salvator Mundi*", in: *Raccolta Vinciana* 20, 1964, pp. 83–109; Maria T. Fiorio, "Un *Salvator Mundi* ritrovato", in: *Raccolta Vinciana* 31, 2005, pp. 257–282; Dalvalle, Kemp and Simon 2019, pp. 20–24, 89–90; Lewis 2020, pp. 105–110, 124, 232–233; Ben Lewis, "Searching for the Smoking Thumb. A *Salvator Mundi* Paragone", in: Gebhardt and Zöllner 2021, pp. 21–41. See also <http://www.seybold.ch/Dietrich/SeeingRightThroughSomeone> and <http://www.seybold.ch/Dietrich/ASalvatorMundiGeography> [accessed 3.7.2021].
9. Lewis 2020, pp. 105–110; Lewis 2021.
10. Vincent Delieuvin, *La Saint Anne. L'ultime chef-d'œuvre de Léonard de Vinci*, Paris 2012.
11. Frank Zöllner, "The Measure of Sight, the Measure of Darkness. Leonardo da Vinci and the History of Blurriness", in: *Leonardo da Vinci and Optics. Theory and Pictorial Practice*, ed. by Francesca Fiorani and Alessandro Nova, Venice 2013, pp. 315–332.

Figures

1. Workshop of Leonardo, after a design by Leonardo and with Leonardo's participation, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, after 1507, oil on walnut panel, 65.5 x 45.1–45.6 cm, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (photo: 2011–2014 state).
2. Circle of Leonardo da Vinci, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, oil on walnut panel, 68.6 x 48.9 cm, formerly Ganay Collection, auctioned by Christie's on 28 May 1999, lot 00020, private collection.
3. Circle of Leonardo da Vinci, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, tempera on panel, 66.5 x 46.5 cm, Naples, San Domenico Maggiore.
4. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Salvator Mundi*, tempera on oil on panel, inset 33.3 x 23.7cm, including later additions of approx. 2 x 2.5cm, ©Christie's Images.
5. Albrecht Dürer, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, ca. 1503–1505 (?), oil on panel, 58.1 x 47 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931.
6. Melozzo da Forlì, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, ca. 1480–1482, oil on panel, 54 x 40.5 cm, Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Palazzo Ducale.
7. Vittore Carpaccio, *Christ as Salvator Mundi*, ca. 1507–1508, oil on panel, 28.5 x 24 cm, private collection, Courtesy Robert Simon Fine Art, New York.
8. Workshop of Willem Vrelant, *Salvator Mundi* from the

Arenberg Hours, ca. 1460, 25.6 x 17.3 cm, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig IX 8 (83.ML.104), fol. 32r.

9. *Salvator Mundi* miniatures from books of hours ranging in date from ca. 1460 to ca. 1520.

10. Copies indirectly inspired by Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi* design: Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; ex-collection Yarborough; Beurret Bailly Widmer auction, Basel, 24 March 2021; Sotheby's auction, New York, 29 January 2016; Hampel auction, Munich, 6 December 2018; ex-collection Trivulzio; ex-collection Vittadini, now private collection, Milan; Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; Courtauld Galleries, London; Artnet, 23 May 2001; private collection, Switzerland; private collection, Pistoia; Detroit Institute of Art; Wilanów Palace, Warsaw.

Photo credits: Wikimedia commons: 1–4; Zöllner 2019: 5; Zöllner 2021: 6–8; Zöllner: 9.

Summary

This essay highlights the scope and importance of traditional methods of art history for our understanding of Leonardo da Vinci's „Salvator Mundi“ and that these methods have not yet been fully applied.

Author

Frank Zöllner, Prof. Dr., is an Art History professor at the University of Leipzig, Germany.

Title

Frank Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci's Salvator Mundi as a Touchstone of Art-Historical Methodology*, in: *kunsttexte.de*, Festausgabe, ed. by Angela Dressen, Susanne Gramatzki and Berenike Sukalla (Sektion Renaissance), no. 1, 2022 (7 pages), www.kunsttexte.de.

DOI: doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2022.1.88237