A Question of Tonality

I was excited to learn about and then get a copy of Ben Lewis's new book, *The Last Leonardo: The Secret Life of the World's Most Expensive Painting* (Ballantine Books) about Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*. And yes, I'd known before buying it of the painting's damaged condition, its uncertain provenance, and its controversial restoration. Despite all that, I've long found it a fascinating work and wanted to learn more about it. The subtitle suggests, perhaps fairly, that there's a certain 'thriller' element to it, although there's a good bit less of it than one might expect from a glance at the dust jacket. Probably half of the book's pages are devoted to the piece's provenance, and although that is surely a confusing and at times conflicted tale, it's hardly thriller material. And, while damage has unquestionably been done - both to certain works of art and to some individuals' reputations - there don't seem to have been any murders associated with the painting (so far, anyway).

I found it a difficult book to read, even though interested in it and favorably disposed towards it. And although I'm usually quick to smell a rat, I can be frustratingly slow at locating and cornering one. Something kept troubling me as I was reading, but I was near the end of the book before I finally figured out what it was.

Lewis makes a point of wanting (he says) always to be fair and balanced in what he presents and in his own evaluations, and if Microsoft offers a word processing function that keeps a running tally of word-count "for and against" - the pros and the cons - I'll bet he succeeds in being balanced. But as with any tale, the tone of the telling can be the most telling detail. A reader of the book who did not already know of Martin Kemp's pre-eminence in the field of Leonardo studies and of his unrivaled reputation would read of it here, duly related - read of it, yes, but probably not remember it. But of Kemp's errors, his supposed bumbles and fumbles? Those are all related with considerably more relish - and they have more staying power. The author does not state, not exactly, that since

Professor Kemp is now well past his prime, his judgments might be somewhat, well, *compromised*, but the reader could be forgiven for thinking that that's just what was said - by reason of the tone with which it was said. And of the many thousands of viewers who saw the *Salvator Mundi* when it was on public display and were moved by the experience? That's duly noted, certainly, but *tonally*... had they known more about it, they surely wouldn't have been as moved by it as they were.

Where Lewis most revels in the telling of this sometimes-sordid tale (and as he might well do) is in his thorough illuminating of the smarmiest parts of the art world's underbelly - not news to many of us to be sure, but still infinitely disheartening. And - Oh, my! Look! Here come Jared and Ivanka (not, it appears, without justification).

Confusing and involved (and probably overlong) as the provenance material is, the telling of it is generally straightforward. But when he believes some degree of personal evaluation is warranted, Lewis's writing conveys a degree of cynicism that manifests itself more in tone than in factual statement. So by the time I was into the last chapter, I was sure I had his number - and had cornered the rat.

Then, almost as an afterthought, I read his six-page *Afterword* - and read it again, and yet again. For a while I entertained the notion that he might have hired it out, had had someone else write it for him, because it seems such a deeply-felt, impassioned, and at times moving lament on the current state of the art market. His analysis of how it is (alas) reflective of the global market economy in general is particularly astute, and his plea for something better appears to be genuine. Yet, how does Lewis's plea, genuine though it may well be, square with the rest of his book?

One looks in vain in the book for any mention of art objects as other than commodities. There's nary a mention of the spiritual aspect of conceiving a work, then making or creating it (or, as Aquinas puts it so perfectly, "calling it into being"), and there's certainly no mention

of the contemplation of a work of art as itself a kind of spiritual discipline. While Lewis notes that several have commented on how much the *Salvator Mundi* resembles an Orthodox icon, he doesn't bother to mention that in Orthodox tradition the act of painting an icon is itself to be understood as a form of prayer. Art works are *commodities* to be located, evaluated, and marketed: they are simply nouns, not - as our man Aquinas would surely insist - verbs at all.

So, too, is his book (in its published form, anyway) a commodity. While there's a wealth of information found between its covers, and there's an obvious (and occasionally contagious) enthusiasm for the investigation itself, there's no sense of generosity (or of humility) in the unfolding and sharing of his years spent in that investigation. (Perhaps his editors, fearful that its lack of homicides and sexual predators would make it less marketable, felt it needed to be made snarkier and more confrontational.) But it should also be noted that, even busy as he was going after the errors and short-comings of others, Lewis managed to meet his own quota for howlers. The next time you visit Washington, D.C., for instance, you might forego your usual visit to the National Gallery of Art and take in instead the National Museum of Art (p.158). (It should be easy enough to locate; the two institutions apparently share an address.)

His book is itself a manifestation of that which he laments with such eloquence in the *Afterword*. Surely no-one expects (or wants, probably) from an art historian a theological expostulation on the spiritual aspects of art, but if there's not even a passing mention of them - in a book devoted, as this one is, to the *Salvator Mundi* - this is what we're likely to be left with - and more's the pity for it.

Carl Smith (*August, 2019*)