

## Leonardo Codex on the market

Autumn sale at Christie's expected for the last manuscript by the artist in private hands — in 1980 it sold for £2 million

**JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN**

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The last Leonardo da Vinci notebook in private hands, the so-called Codex Hammer will be offered at Christie's, New York, this autumn. The consignor is the Armand Hammer Museum, custodian of the art holdings of the late oil tycoon Armand Hammer.

The museum is selling its namesake's most prized possession—acquired at Christie's, London, on 12 December, 1980 for £2 million excluding premium—as insurance against a potentially devastating lawsuit. The museum's ownership of its collection is being challenged by Mr Hammer's late wife's niece and sole heir, Joan Weiss, who is seeking compensation for a percentage of the collection's aggregate appraised value.

Henry Hopkins, newly appointed director of the merged UCLA/Hammer Museum and Cultural Center, told The Art Newspaper that pending settlement of the case, the museum has removed objects from view totalling nearly half of the collection. Mr Hopkins says the pictures are in escrow as guarantee against any obligation that might result from the suit. Asked if the museum might sell the Codex Hammer, Mr Hopkins told The Art Newspaper, "Very likely, since it's at Christie's right now. It's going to be in one of the sales later this year, sometime in the fall".

Stephen Massey, senior vice president in charge of rare books and manuscripts at Christie's, New York, expressed complete surprise at the

news, and was unable to comment regarding the manuscript's potential value.

“It is more a scientific item, and not necessarily an art object”, says Mr Hopkins of the Codex, adding, “it may have to be the only thing sold”. The proceeds would go either to a settlement with Ms Weiss, or into an acquisition fund.

Created around 1504-1509 the Codex deals with astronomy, geology, cosmogony, and hydraulics, illustrated with around 360 sketches, largely in the margins, about one-third dealing with the movement of water. It was known as the Codex Leicester, having been in the possession of the Earl of Leicester for 260 years.

Selling the Leonardo is just one reason the Armand Hammer collection may soon be a vestige of its former self. There are more than forty European late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century canvases, as well as paintings attributed to Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, Watteau, Goya, and modern American paintings. In addition, Mr Hammer amassed a notable collection of Old Master drawings, and the top US holding of Daumier, including nine paintings, every sculpture, and more than 9,000 works on paper.

At one time the Codex and everything else was promised, and on long-term loan, to Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but, in 1988, after seventeen years, everything was withdrawn amid a nasty dispute over the conditions of the bequest. The drawings (other than Daumiers) were left to the National Gallery of Art in Washington where selections are on continual display. Determined to have his own museum, Mr Hammer spent \$90 million on a two-storey marble-clad building next to the headquarters of his oil company, Occidental Petroleum.

Even before it opened—two weeks before the collector's death in 1990—the Hammer Museum was plagued by legal, financial, and public relations problems from which it is yet to recover: the niece was already claiming half ownership on the basis that Mr Hammer had been coerced into shortchanging her; Occidental shareholders maintained that Dr Hammer had improperly spent company money on the building and the museum

acquired a reputation for disorganisation and mismanagement.

The situation seems to have been improved by the recent signing of a ninety-nine year operating agreement whereby UCLA will run the administrative and curatorial operations; Occidental will keep possession of the building, and the separately incorporated Hammer Museum will retain ownership of its collection (save the Leonardo and whatever else it may eventually sell). The resulting UCLA/Hammer Museum and Cultural Center combines the collections of the Hammer Museum with UCLA's Wight Art Gallery and Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts.

The UCLA/Hammer budget will be anchored by a bond portfolio that Occidental established to provide about \$2.5 million annually for the next thirty years. The university will commit no new funds beyond the \$900,000 p.a. it has been spending on the Wight and Grunwald, which means a lot will depend on private philanthropy. The sale of the codex should generate considerable excitement, and interest from all over the world. But all eyes will turn to the Getty and the Codex Hammer may well be re-christened the "Codex Getty".

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