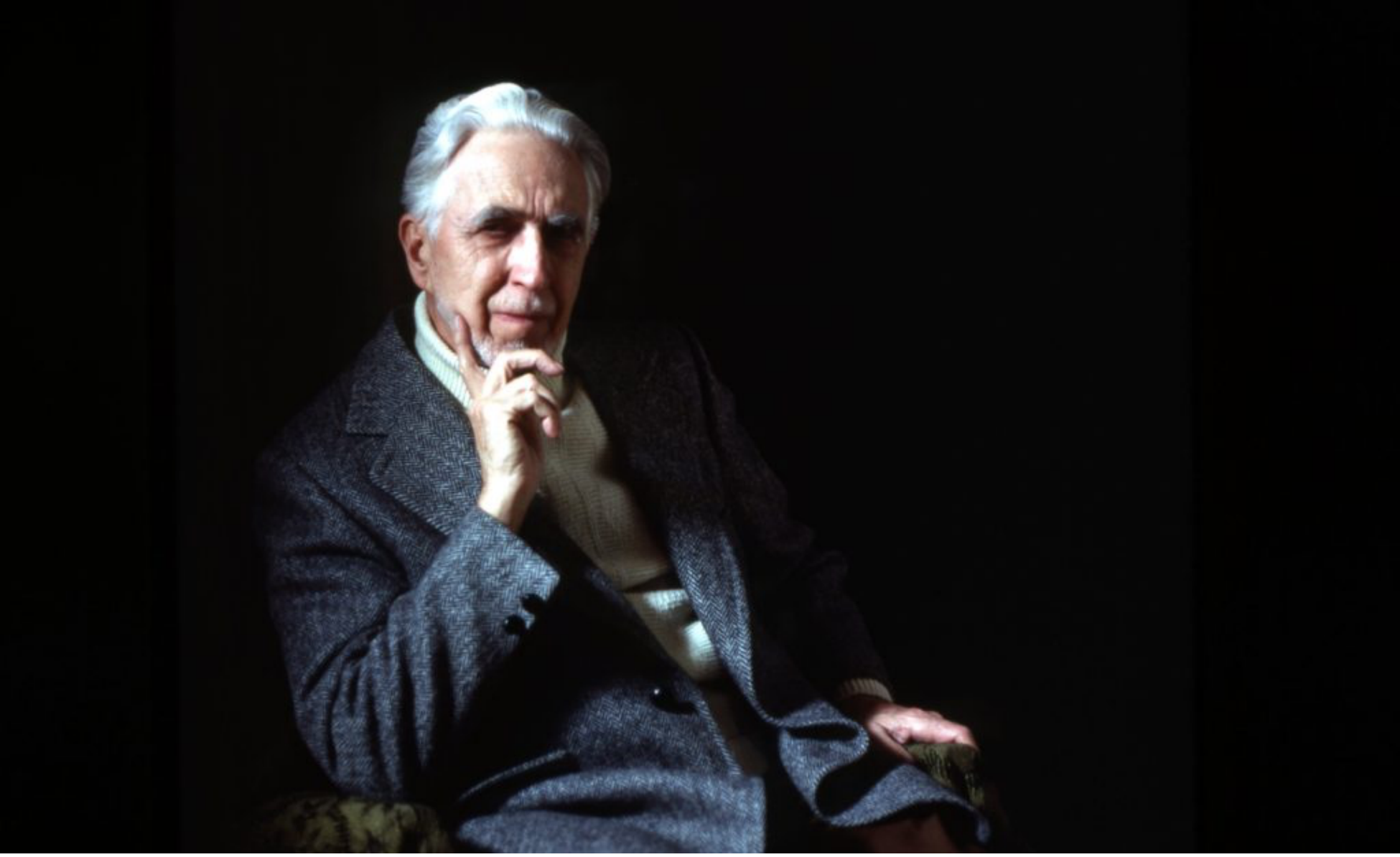
People (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/people)

The Clyfford Still Museum Uncovered a Trove of the Artist's Tapes. Here Is What They Teach Us About One of History's Most Private Painters

The previously unknown recordings are the subject of "Lifeline: Clyfford Still," a documentary that debuts in New York next week.

Taylor Dafoe (https://news.artnet.com/about/taylor-dafoe-731), November 4, 2019



Clyfford Still. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum.

For years, the Miami-based filmmaker and collector Dennis Scholl had wanted to make a documentary about his favorite artist, Clyfford Still. But he needed an excuse. Five years ago, the Clyfford Still Museum dropped one in his lap.

“I got a call from the museum one day and they said, ‘You’re not going to believe what we found,’” Scholl recalls.

ADVERTISING

Research staff at the Denver-based museum explained that they had recently discovered a trove of super 8-millimeter film and 34 hours worth of audiotapes made by Still himself. The material provides an unprecedented look into an artist who intentionally withdrew from the public eye—whose own story was as cryptic as the paintings he produced.

The material serves as the backbone of Scholl's new documentary, "Lifeline: Clyfford Still," which tells the story of the artist through both his own words and the words of others, including his daughters, art historian David Anfam, critic Jerry Saltz, and artists Mark Bradford and Julian Schnabel. It premieres November 12 at the DOC NYC film festival (https://mailtrack.io/trace/link/3dd6203af07835230b71472b1e57c2543f1d0fe8?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.docnyc.net%2Ffilm%2Flifeline-clyfford-still%2F&userId=3962666&signature=ae8e88f6e77baa9c).

A Shocking Discovery

"The tapes were a complete surprise," Dean Sobel, the museum's founding director, tells Artnet News. Sobel explains that the materials—stored in shoeboxes—had never been mentioned during the laborious legal process through which Still's archive was transferred to the museum from the estate of the artist's widow.

For him, the discovery helps fill in a major gap in the story of the Still, a notoriously guarded man who virtually left the art world overnight in the early '60s. "Not that much was known about Still before the museum opened," he says. "I think a lot of myth had built up in the absence of

any archival or scholarly work."

Still sold fewer than 180 paintings during his life—just enough to support his family—and opted to keep most of what he made for himself. He also refused to allow his work to be reproduced in photographs (even after his death) and rejected a number of opportunities to show—all of which helped push him further into obscurity than his peers.

"From the time he passed in 1980 until the opening of the museum, Still was systematically being written out of the canon," Scholl says. "If you allow the market to decide who you are, then the market will ignore you if they don't have access. So the museum—and now, the tapes—give us the opportunity to reevaluate him in the context of those other Ab Ex giants."

The market, for its part, eventually caught up. The same month the museum opened in 2011, a 1949 Still canvas sold for $61 million at Sotheby's, which remains a record for the artist today. Since then, his paintings—the few that are in circulation, anyway—have regularly fetched eight figures at auction. Two days after the documentary premieres, another Still painting (https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2019/contemporary-art-evening-n10149/lot.11.html) will hit the block at Sotheby's evening sale in New York (https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/2019/contemporary-art-evening-n10149.html). It's expected to go for between $12 million and $18 million.

Clyfford Still, *PH-455* (1949). Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum.

A Lifeline for a Private Artist

The audiotapes, recorded by the artist himself, provide an unprecedented look into who Still was a person. "A lot of the times he's simply sitting on the porch in Maryland at the end of the day and pontificating," says Scholl. "Sometimes he's going back and reading essays from some of the shows he's had. Other times he's talking about his colleagues and the level of respect he has or doesn't have for them. It's open and it's honest and it's raw."

Some of the musings can verge on the poetic. "When I hang a painting, I would have it say, 'Here am I,'" Still remarks in one instance. "This is my presence, my feeling, my self.... If one does not like it, he should turn away because I am looking at him."

They also provide a glimpse into just how much of a hothouse—to borrow a word from Scholl—the art scene of the 1940s and '50s New York was. We learn how other artists measured up to Still's own fastidious standards. He respected Jackson Pollock's work, though not his lifestyle. He had no time for Barnett Newman. He resented Rothko, whom Still once considered a kindred spirit but later dismissed as a sellout who stopped growing as an artist after he had a family. (When Still learned of Rothko's suicide in 1970, he allegedly said, "Evil falls to those who live evil lives.")

Clyfford Still with his family. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum.

Ultimately, Sobel notes, the tapes shine a light on the biggest questions that have surrounded Still since his death, and even before that: “Why did he brake away from the art world? Why did he want a single monographic institution for his work?”

For Sobel, the tapes show “just how much he cared about what he was doing. He thought the act of painting, and specifically what he was adding to that long and messy history, was critically important. I think all the reasons he did other things connect back to that.”

Indeed, Still was unabashed in his belief that he was the greatest living painter of his time. He didn’t pretend that painting wasn’t the most important thing in his life, even around his family.

“The word that I would use is ‘uncompromising,’” Scholl says. “I think that he was uncompromising in his position as to what it took to be a great artist, and he was uncompromising in his unwillingness to let the machine that was the art world do with him what it would.”

In a particularly poignant moment in the film, Still’s younger daughter Sandra recalls something her dad told her that she never forgot: “He made it very clear—and he bragged about it once—when he said he leaned over my crib and said, ‘I love you, babe, but you don’t come first.’”

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People (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/people)

Former Tate Director Chris Dercon Urges Saudi Arabia to Lend the Vanished ‘Salvator Mundi’ to the Louvre

Dercon says it’s not too late for the owners of the Salvator Mundi to lend it to the Louve’s Leonardo da Vinci blockbuster.

Sarah Cascone (https://news.artnet.com/about/sarah-cascone-25), November 1, 2019

Chris Dercon, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Chris Dercon, the former director of Tate Modern who now heads (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/chris-dercon-french-association-national-museums-1390834) the French museum organization Réunion des Musées Nationaux–Grand Palais, is urging the “owner or owners” of the infamous painting *Salvator Mundi* to lend it to the Louvre for the museum’s current Leonardo da Vinci blockbuster (https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/salvator-mundi-louvre-1687114).

“To have the painting in the exhibition in the Louvre would have been a win-win situation for all parties involved. I am sad... but the doors are still open,” Dercon said, as reported by Agency France Presse (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/louvre-push-display-missing-da-vinci-culture-expert-151659422.html) “There is still a way to share this work not only with the specialists but also with the public.”

Dercon was speaking at Saudi Arabia's "Davos in the Desert" conference, organized by crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, the purported buyer of the $450 million painting (https://news.artnet.com/market/why-buy-salvator-mundi-1153085). Representatives at the Louvre in Paris and Abu Dhabi remain tight-lipped about the whereabouts of the work and the status of any loan request.

The Louvre's show celebrating the 500th anniversary (https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/leonardo-louvre-preview-1683961) of Leonardo's death opened October 24. The *Salvator Mundi* was conspicuously absent, despite the continued hopes of curators, who had even gone so far as to prepare two copies of the exhibition catalogue—one with the world's most expensive painting, and one without. Instead, a copy of the composition (https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/salvator-mundi-louvre-1687114), attributed to Leonardo's studio, hangs on its own.

The painting was sold (https://news.artnet.com/market/last-known-leonardo-da-vinci-painting-just-sold-1149032) to much fanfare (https://news.artnet.com/opinion/leonardo-da-vinci-salvator-mundi-auction-christies-1137170) at Christie's New York in November 2017, but the details of the deal are still shrouded in mystery. Initial reports identified Saudi prince Badr bin Abdullah (https://news.artnet.com/market/salvator-mundi-prince-bader-bin-abdullah-bin-mohammed-bin-farhan-al-saud-1172081) as the buyer, but it was almost immediately alleged (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/the-real-buyer-of-450m-da-vinci-is-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-1173293) that he had been acting on behalf of Bin Salman. Adding to the intrigue, the Louvre Abu Dhabi then claimed (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/louvre-abu-dhabi-says-it-owns-da-vinci-salvator-mundi-one-day-after-saudi-crown-prince-is-named-1173938) to be the painting's owner, suggesting *Salvator Mundi* had been donated to Abu Dhabi's department of culture and tourism. (Artnet News's Kenny Schachter reported in June that the painting was being housed on Bin Salman's yacht (https://news.artnet.com/opinion/kenny-schachter-on-the-missing-salvator-mundi-1565674).)

Salvator Mundi has not been seen (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/louvre-abu-dhabi-postpones-display-salvator-mundi-1341950)since the fateful auction and it failed to appear (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/leonardo-da-vincis-450m-blockbuster-salvator-mundi-is-en-route-to-louvre-abu-dhabi-1171523) at a planned exhibition at the Louvre Abu Dhabi in fall 2018 (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/salvator-mundi-louvre-abu-dhabi-september-18-1309967).

Several Leonardo authorities have since come forward (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/did-leonardos-assistant-paint-salvator-mundi-1329638) to contest the work's attribution to the Renaissance master, leading to speculation that the Louvre would have credited (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/carmen-bambach-leonardo-da-vinci-1562602) the painting not to the artist, but to his studio. It's possible that the owners of the *Salvator Mundi* are refusing to lend it to the Louvre unless it is identified as an autograph Leonardo.

"Leonardo da Vinci" is on view at the Louvre, Rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris, France, October 24, 2019–February 4, 2020.

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