

# LEONARDO'S 'THE LAST SUPPER'

by Alan Senior

The restored wall-painting, 'The Last Supper' by Leonardo da Vinci, is to be found in the refectory at the Dominican convent of the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie near Milan. It was commissioned by Duke Ludovico Sforza of Milan, who worshipped at this church and who built the new chapel. He wanted frescoes to brighten the chapel walls and a mural in the adjoining refectory, specifying 'The Last Supper'; Leonardo completed it in 1498. It measures 15 by 29 feet and although it is often called a fresco, Leonardo was experimenting with pigments (using egg yolk, oil and varnish), where he could use more colours. But he worked on dry plaster and by 1517 the paint began to fall off the plaster, due to humidity and the salts leaching out behind the paint layer; it has deteriorated ever since.



Photograph by User Abelson

Nineteen successive painters tried to restore it, creating a thick mass of paint and adhesives, producing a completely new picture at one stage. It has suffered in other ways, too. A doorway (now bricked up) was cut through the bottom quarter of the picture in 1652 and, later, Napoleon's troops stabled their horses in the refectory, whilst some of his soldiers used the apostles' heads as targets with stones and knives. The building was once flooded and in 1943 it was hit by a wartime bomb, when only a fifth of the original painting survived. In 1979 a twenty-year restoration was carried out to help stabilize the process, using cartoons from the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. The result is the painting we now see, criticized by many for the dramatic changes in tones and colours.

The figures, in order from left to right (below) are as follows:

Bartholomew  
James the Younger

Andrew

Judas (with bag of silver and face in shadow, has his other hand poised over a dish (“*He that dippeth his hand with me into the dish,*” said Jesus, “*he shall betray me.*”))

Peter

John (the subject of an influential argument that the figure is really that of Mary Magdalene)

CHRIST

Thomas (looking agitated)

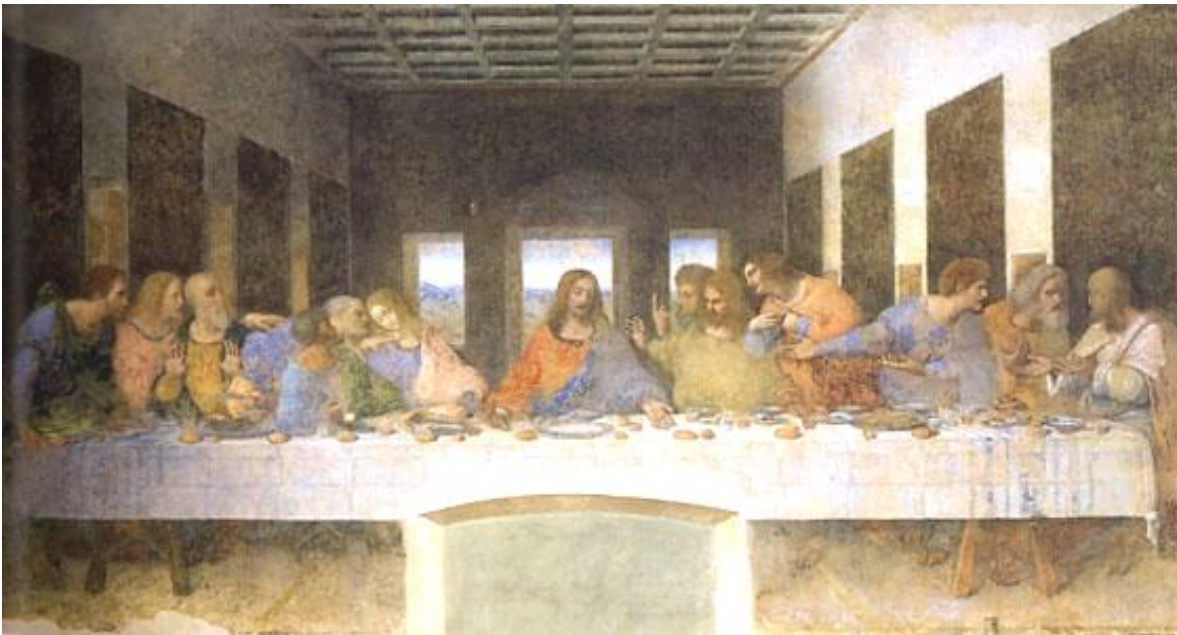
James the Elder (looking stunned)

Philip (puzzled)

Matthew

Thaddeus

Simon the Zealot



When we study the details closely we recognize Leonardo himself as Thaddeus, or St Jude, second from the right... with luxuriant greying beard and hair, adopting that Old Testament prophet's look and gesticulating, but with his back to Jesus. There seems to be a lot of aggression at this supper table; hidden sexuality and dark secrets are indicated, thinks Dan Brown in 'The Da Vinci Code'. True? Leonardo left thousands of pages of notes and manuscripts, with no mention of either Mary Magdalene or God, unusual for those times. The fact is, says the English art critic and connoisseur Brian Sewell, that Leonardo was not such an expert painter at this stage in his career, so he broke up the 13 figures into manageable units – four groups of three with Christ in the centre. There is no 'V' in the heart of the work (claiming to be an ancient symbol of the feminine, meaning 'vessel', 'womb' or 'chalice'); that gap is just a compositional device. Bodies intermingle, with various gestures of astonishment and fear, because Jesus has just announced: "*One of you will betray me!*" Such treachery seems unthinkable to them, so panic and disbelief are being experienced around the table with accompanying gestures. Hands fly here and there in Leonardo's pictorial solution to Christ's pronouncement. So – no secret codes, messages or revelations, just a picture with lots happening.

Leonardo made notes during the planning stage, such as '*a drinker has left his glass in its place and turns his head towards Jesus. Another wrings the fingers of his hand and frowns at his*



companion. Another speaks quietly to his neighbour; the listener turns to lend an ear, holding a knife in one hand. The younger ones have cascades of curls over their faces.' John is usually portrayed as a mere youth in 'Last Supper' paintings and this corresponds to Leonardo's notebook description. The ageing Peter is shown leaning to John, asking who he thinks is the betrayer. There is no menace there, Peter's hand merely rests on John's shoulder, the other hand holding a knife, not a dagger... but it perhaps gives a hint of the way Peter would cut off Malchus's ear when Jesus was arrested.

John does look decidedly feminine. So is it really Mary Magdalene, as indicated by Dan Brown, who was influenced by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln's 'The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail of 1982 and Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's 'The Templar Revelation' of 1997, which contains their thesis on hidden symbolism in Leonardo's paintings? The figure has long hair, but so do others in the painting, including Jesus. Two Mary Magdalene drawings by Leonardo share no similarity whatsoever with the so-called Magdalene here. The figure is simply a Renaissance interpretation of youth, and Leonardo would not have missed out one of the twelve disciples to substitute Mary Magdalene. He could easily have included her somewhere in the scene, especially in a Dominican monastery where she had become the Mother Protectress and Patron Saint of the Order from 1295. Fra Angelico had done so in his 'Last Supper' fresco at the Muséo di San Marco in Florence; also, Dan Brown's discussion of Leonardo's mural only relates to how the picture looked after a 1954 cleaning, whereas the later 20-year restoration revealed a different picture to the heavily overpainted artwork Brown refers to; there is no gold necklace and no suggestion of breasts on the figure.



Mary Magdalene by Leonardo

And what of John's feminine look? Could it be that Leonardo believed that Mary Magdalene was the true beloved disciple, deliberately changed by early Church leaders who considered her status intolerable? However, Sewell emphasizes the fact that Leonardo was homosexual and



many of the figures in his sketchbooks and paintings conform to his ideals of masculine beauty. St John for him was a beautiful young man, and you'd have to go through all the artist's drawings of young men and call them Mary Magdalene too. Also, Leonardo's discerning customer, the Duke who commissioned the painting, would have soon spotted a missing Apostle and refused payment. Leonardo wouldn't have dared replace one of them with Mary Magdalene because the whole religious story of the Apostles is based on men, not women, so why take out St John, the disciple most dear to Jesus? To see secret codes, heresies or symbols, thinks Sewell, is just a modern obsession...

Many Renaissance artists did, however, produce allegorical works, but there are far better examples of

what Brown depicts as Mary Magdalene. As we have said, Leonardo would have had no need to introduce her surreptitiously, as others such as Fra Angelico had depicted her openly – both at the Last Supper and at the Marriage at Cana. So, as far as Dan Brown’s ‘Last Supper’ theory of the Magdalene taking the place of John goes, it turns out to be the most inadequate fictional element in the whole novel. However, what if the figure is neither male nor female, but both?

Whilst I agree with much that art historian Brian Sewell says, I believe he misses two important points. Leonardo was something of a hoaxer and a secret heretic rather than a devout Catholic. He described himself as ‘*a disciple of experience*’ - observing, testing and questioning everything, with nature as his god and teacher. In his painting ‘The Virgin of the Rocks’ the figures deliberately had no haloes until the commissioning monks made him do a second one with proper holy accoutrements. Some think that Leonardo was responsible for creating the 3½ by 14-foot Turin Shroud in about 1492, with the image of the crucified Christ burnt into it, using a sculpture of his face, projecting it on to the linen (coated with a light-sensitive substance), then employing a *camera obscura* to create a permanent image. This was a time when the faking of holy relics was a profitable business and the image is of a very tall man, with signs of having been crucified but with a head seemingly too small for the body, and the man not only has a facial resemblance to Leonardo’s self-portrait, but the two heads share the same dimensions and line up perfectly, leading graphics consultant Lillian Schwartz (who used computer scans to align both heads), to conclude that the image really *is* a self-portrait of Leonardo.

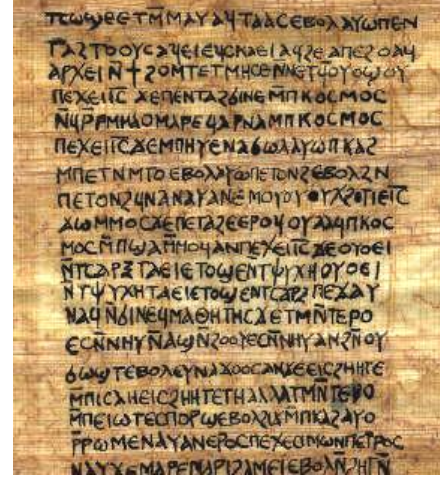


Such a forgery was definitely a job for a skilled heretic and Leonardo was close to two powerful, inter-linked families – the Savoys and the Medicis. The Savoys may well have commissioned it and having such an ‘authentic’ object of faith in their possession would have added significantly to their standing. There are many uncertainties but if it *is* a fake then who better for the task than Leonardo, who despised both the current trade in relics and the Church’s interference in the pursuit of knowledge? “*Search for the glory of Jesus and not his funeral shroud,*” said the Apostles. The irony would have appealed to Leonardo, whilst seeing faithful pilgrims crossing themselves before *his* image would surely have filled him with delight.

Leonardo seems to have been a recluse, an intellectual and part of an underground movement of inter-linked heretics (unknown to the Vatican, of course) who were devoted to passing on secret knowledge stemming from ancient groups of initiates. This ancient teaching, alongside Gnosticism, stipulated androgyny as a spiritual force. The hermaphrodite who carried both sets of physical characteristics in one body represented, for the Gnostics, divine union of God with initiate, or human perfection. Leonardo was obsessed with hermaphrodites, covering his notebooks with them, which could be evidence of access to this secret tradition. So, rather than including Mary Magdalene in ‘The Last Supper’, he may have incorporated instead a hybrid St. John... male/female which may have carried a profound spiritual meaning for Leonardo, going back as far as ancient Egypt where Osiris was interchangeable with Isis, whilst Horus resided in both sexes. St John’s vision in Revelation – that of the Logos – is also hermaphroditic, for he is described as having female breasts.

The philosopher-teachers of antiquity say that, from being previously asexual, humanity became hermaphroditic or bisexual. In this view, our nature of old was not the same as it is now; it was androgynous, the form and name partaking of and being common to both the male and female – hence the bearded Venus in mythology. The separation of the sexes resulted in the loss of spiritual potency and the strengthening of materiality. The highest Deity in esotericism is sexless and formless, and the first manifested beings became androgynous before separating into distinct sexes. Both the Gospel of the Egyptians (Nag Hammadi Library) and Logion 22 in the Gospel of Thomas indicate that the Kingdom will come when the Two has been made One, male and female into a single One; that is, *neither male nor female*. This postulates the union of the Lower with the Higher Manas, of the personality with the Individuality and a return to the androgynous state, sometimes called the Second Adam.

Gospel of Thomas



All spiritual traditions have asserted that our inner being is androgynous; that is, the Higher Self (that which is the innermost part of us, our essence) is neither male nor female. At this level these qualifications are irrelevant. The early Gnostics wrote that, in order to become enlightened, one must discover one's own androgyny; again, in the words of Thomas: "*When you make the male and the female into a single one... then you will enter the Kingdom.*" Taoist adepts also developed a system based on this balancing of inner male and female powers, as did Tantric systems. So the quest was to attain wholeness and balance, an asexuality of one's inner nature... to reclaim divine, unifying consciousness that will take us beyond separateness. In Jungian terms, spiritual androgyny can occur by integrating the animus and the anima. H.P. Blavatsky (in *Collected Writings III*, p. 48) stipulates that androgyny will prevail again in the distant future, indicating that humanity will reach a sexless state in evolution, with procreation being achieved differently.

Meanwhile, we should, like Leonardo, seek greater spiritual truth in Gnosticism, with its emphasis on 'inner knowing' and not, in Blavatsky's words, "*the poverty-stricken orthodox conception of our own degenerate times.*" More and more people are looking for alternatives to orthodoxy, finding themselves able to relate these Gnostic teachings to their personal experiences, and we can thank Dan Brown's novel for setting many people on that road of exploration. But it demands deep, patient, meditative study; as Logion 5 in the Gospel of Thomas says: "*...What is hidden from you will be disclosed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed.*" Such sayings help lead us towards knowing our true identity, and by forgetting self and awakening to the inner self, we will become fully human.



