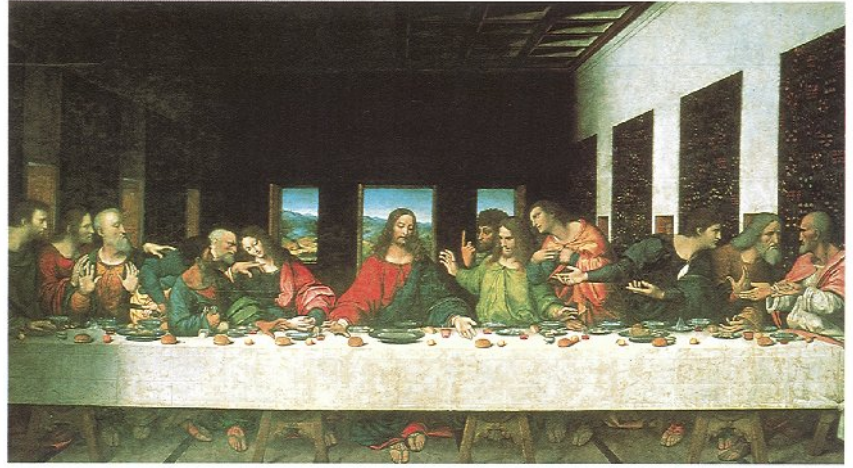


Leonardo Da Vinci's Last Supper : Teacher Notes

Focus of Lesson: Composition

The subject matter of the painting is a dramatic vision of the story told in the four gospels where Christ calls his apostles together to dine before he is betrayed to his enemies. During this meal, there are three dramatic happenings. First, Jesus washed his disciples' feet as if he was a common servant, and told them that this is to be the way they are to behave from now on. Next, he told them to eat and drink the bread and wine as being his body and blood. Finally, the subject of this painting, is his telling them that one of them will betray him. All twelve apostles have different reactions to the news, with various degrees of anger and shock.



Composition: Leonardo repetitively uses basic shapes as elements of his painting, to emphasise, echo and highlight the subject matter. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, we note the great sense of activity and energy of the painting (people gesticulating, very excitable)

Triangles: 3 is a holy number, representing the Trinity.

- Christ himself is a triangle in the exact centre of the painting, pointing directly upward, probably indicating God the Father.
- The shape of Jesus' figure resembles a triangle.
- The other disciples are also arranged in groups of 3, and form triangle shapes.
- The architectural elements - three windows behind Jesus;
- The way the Judas reaching for the bread, the bread and Jesus, form a triangular shape, right at the centre of the painting.

Perspective: The angles and lighting draw attention to Jesus, whose head is located at the vanishing point for all perspective. Regularity of rectangle shapes, way bread rolls arranged, gives a strong sense of order holding everything together despite the emotions going on. Frozen "arrangement" facing the audience.

The Characters

Leonardo's version concentrates on the human personalities: to show the disciple's unique responses to Christ's shocking prediction "One of you shall betray me" ..Although the disciples all have a similar reaction of shock and sorrow, but the Artist gives them a very distinct emotion and personality.

- Jesus' left hand is pointing to the Eucharist and his right to a glass of wine, foretelling how this meal is a symbol of his own body and blood that he will give, and orders his disciples to eat and drink. Contrast between the turbulence and chaos of the disciples reactions, and Christ's self-possession, at the centre, still and emotionless. The room explodes in animated shock, but Christ is serene. He is by himself with the apostles falling in groups to either side, depicting him as being betrayed, isolated and abandoned and yet still at peace.
-
- Judas Iscariot, Peter and John form a group of three.
- Peter looks angry and is holding a knife pointed away from Christ, perhaps foreshadowing his violent reaction in Gethsemane during Jesus' arrest. a dagger in clearer reproductions is

seen to be Peter's right hand, resting against his hip with the palm turned outward; the knife points towards Bartholomew (far left) who was to be executed by being flayed. It may also indicate Peter's impulsive nature, as he cuts off a soldier's ear in John 18:10

- Judas had in previous paintings been excluded Judas by placing him alone on the opposite side of the table or as the only one without a halo. Leonardo creates a more dramatic and realistic effect by having Judas lean back into shadow. Judas' isolation is not just physical it is mainly psychological. He clutches his money bag and stares darkly into space, withdrawing into his mind as his body withdraws from Christ's presence. He is the only person to have his elbow on the table; traditionally a sign of bad manners .

Judas takes the bread at the same time as Jesus, just after Jesus has predicted that this is what his betrayer will do. Jesus is shown saying this to Saints Thomas and James to his left, who react in horror as Jesus points with his left hand to a piece of bread before them. Distracted by the conversation between John and Peter, Judas reaches for a different piece of bread, as, unseen by him, Jesus too stretches out with his right hand towards it. (Matthew 26: 17-46)..

From left to right:

- Bartholomew, James, son of Alphaeus and Andrew form a group of three, all are surprised.
- Judas Iscariot, Peter and John form a group of three.
- (Jesus)
- Thomas, James the Greater and Philip are the next group of three. Thomas is clearly upset; James the Greater looks stunned, with his arms in the air. Meanwhile, Philip appears to be requesting some explanation.
- Matthew, Jude Thaddeus and Simon the Zealot are the final group of three. Both Jude Thaddeus and Matthew are turned toward Simon, perhaps to find out if he has any answer to their initial questions.

Controversy:

Is the person next to Jesus St John the Apostle, or Mary Magdalene? (Da Vinci code)

Critics of these theories will point out that:

- Leonardo was requested to paint the Last Supper, which naturally included Jesus and his Twelve Apostles. As there are only thirteen figures in the painting, an apostle would have been missing to make way for Mary Magdalene.
- The figure in question is wearing male clothing.
- Some of the painting's cartoons (preliminary sketches) are preserved, and none show female faces.
- Other paintings from that period (Castagno's 1447 and Ghirlandaio's 1480) also show John to be a very boyish or feminine looking figure with long fair hair.[5] This was because John was supposed to have been the youngest and most unquestioningly devoted of the apostles, often shown asleep against Jesus's shoulder

Reflection: People continue to puzzle over why Judas betrayed Jesus. Did Judas have no choice but to fulfill his role as betrayer of Christ? Jesus' may well have wanted his last meal with his closest friends to be a happy and special occasion, but it was spoiled by the shadow of Judas' betrayal. But the Last Supper is also the place where God searches our motives, asks us to be part of Him, and gives us himself. This is the place to start afresh, be given strength. 'I am the Bread of Life: he who lives and believes in me will never die'.