

The Last Supper

Leonardo Da Vinci
(painted 1495-1498)

"Imagine"

We are surrounded constantly with images; on television, on computer screens, on advertising billboards, in books and magazines. The number of images presented to us on any given day is virtually uncountable, and most of them pass in and out of our consciousness without a second thought. Rarely, if ever, do we ask what these images might mean and what affect they might have on us, much less do we wonder how the endless onslaught, the sheer volume of images we process, might influence us.

The importance of the image and the power of images to influence thought, be it in a painting or dramatized on a stage or written in the words of a work of literature, has been recognized by philosophers since at least the time of Socrates and Plato in Athens of the fifth century, BC. Plato believed that the dramatic arts (those inspired by the Muses of Greek mythology), including painting, drama, literature, music, and dance, were all capable of affecting the souls of those exposed to them; therefore artists, poets, musicians, and the like could shape the souls of a city's citizens for better or worse through their arts, which could be used to cultivate virtue or vice. With the dawn of the Modern period and the Scientific Revolution in the 17th Century AD, the very notion that humans possessed such a thing as an immaterial soul began to diminish, and the belief that it might exist or that it could be perfected or corrupted became a matter of subjective personal opinion, something the individual could believe privately, but a belief not to be imposed on others. Today, we assume the 'right to freedom of artistic expression,' and see the curtailment or suppression of that right as a far greater danger to civilization than the message that might be subjectively perceived by the individual viewing a work of art or listening to music... or playing a video game... or watching a movie or music video. But if we are wrong and Plato was right, then the message conveyed by these arts, a message that we passively receive because we view them merely as entertainment and therefore uncritically, is shaping our souls and molding our character, for better or worse; and that message is all the more powerful precisely because we have convinced ourselves that it is harmless.

In either case, what matters for the present purpose is that the ancients and medievals saw things differently. They believed in the power of the image to influence the beliefs of the individual, and that meant that only those images that cultivated virtue in the soul and rationality in the mind were to be tolerated- those that stirred the passions and gave emotion control over reason were to be suppressed. If you consider the magnificence of Michelangelo's *David* or the Sistine Chapel, or Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, or the beauty of a piece of classical music or the serenity of a Gregorian chant, you'll realize that only a worldview very different from our own could have produced them. So, philosophy was essential to the education of the artist, in order to ensure that the artist produced images that directed the soul to the True, the Good, and the Beautiful- all of which were thought to be objectively knowable and universal, not matters of personal taste. And it is worth noting that an image's truth value had nothing to do with its 'historical accuracy,' and everything to do with its meaning, and the extent to which that meaning provided authentic insight into the real nature of things that mattered; things like what it means to exist, or to be human, or to think, or to know, or to love. Please note that every term on that list is now defined subjectively by our 'modern civilization.'

What all of this means is that we simply cannot understand a piece of art or literature from antiquity on any terms other than its own. We cannot expect the images of the ancients to pass the test of the modern, any more than you should expect to pass your Geometry test on the basis of what you learned in Theology. Or, to put it another way, if we want to find truth in the art and literature of the past, we must first come to grips with the kind of truth such art and literature seeks to convey, and with how it seeks to do so.

What Does It Mean?

So, how should we approach a work of art such as a painting or a work of literature like the Bible in order to properly appreciate it and to understand what it means? In a sense, this question has been at the heart of this class from its beginning. Billions of Christians believe the Bible to be the word of God or inspired by God in some sense; even many non-Christians take the Bible seriously as a source of wisdom and spiritual insight. The decision to accept the Bible as the divinely inspired word of God or to reject it as such depends at least in part on what the text is trying to say, on how we come to understand what it means. In this class, we have considered one model for how meaning might reliably be determined. Now we will reconsider it, in stages. The question, again, is this: How should we interpret or understand a work of art, such as a painting, or a work of literature, such as the Bible?

Recognize it for what it is, and appreciate it as such.

Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples is considered a masterpiece- to some, the greatest ever painted. One need not be Christian to appreciate his artistic genius. The scene is depicted according to the account in John 13:21 when Jesus reveals to his disciples that one of them will betray him. Da Vinci's notebooks have revealed the identity of each disciple in the painting (sorry, Dan Brown, no women). Take a closer look...



Detail 1 (left): Bartholomew, James, son of Alphaeus, & Andrew each express surprise and disbelief as Jesus reveals that one of the disciples at the table will betray him,

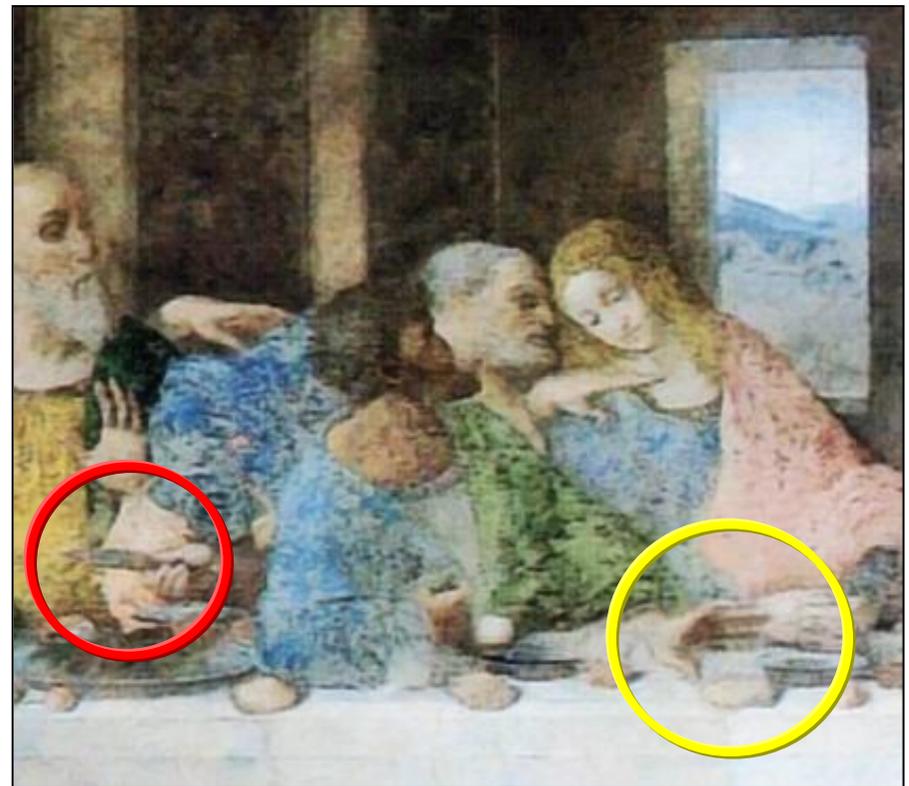
These three are looking towards Peter, anticipating an answer from him about who the betrayer is... Peter is, after all, part of Jesus' 'inner circle,' one of his three closest followers. But Peter is not the disciple closest to Jesus in John; rather, the Beloved Disciple is, so Peter is not the one who can ask such a personal question.

Detail 2 (right): Peter, Judas, and John 'son of Zebedee' (the 'Beloved Disciple,' traditional author of the fourth gospel). Peter is urging the Beloved Disciple to ask Jesus to reveal the name of the betrayer.

Note the knife in Peter's hand (directly behind Judas' back, in the red circle)- merely to cut the bread, or is this to be understood as the 'sword' he will later use to cut off the ear of the high priest's servant?

Judas is dark-lit, in contrast to the other disciples; also, his head is lower than anyone else's, both symbolizing his intentions. (Typically, the other disciples were painted with halos, Judas without. Da Vinci sought more 'realism.')

Note that Judas is reaching for a morsel of bread (yellow circle), and notice the direction John appears to be looking... does John see him... does he know what Judas is destined to do?



Detail 3: Thomas, James the Greater, and Philip all sit to **Jesus'** left; they too are in disbelief.

James and Jesus appear to have their eyes focused on a morsel of bread between them... but, while no one else notices, Jesus reaches with his right hand, either towards a chalice -the 'cup' into which Judas will dip his morsel- or towards the same morsel Judas is reaching for (see red circle at right)

In either case, Jesus seems to indicate that he knows that Judas is reaching for the morsel, and therefore he knows that Judas is about to betray him. In the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies his betrayer as 'the one to whom I hand the morsel after I have dipped it.' (Jn 13:26) The other disciples, meanwhile, are apparently looking at the wrong piece of bread!



Detail 4: Matthew, Jude Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot. Matthew and Jude are turned towards Simon, apparently asking him what Jesus could possibly mean when he says he 'will be betrayed' by one of them, or asking him to whom Jesus is referring if indeed the betrayer is among them.

Most of the disciples, ironically, appear to be so concerned with solving the mystery of who the betrayer will be –and with exonerating themselves- that they are oblivious to what is happening right in front of them...

This is at least one plausible interpretation of the scene Da Vinci has depicted. We could stop here, appreciating the painting as great art and leaving it at that, as indeed most of us do. Da Vinci has powerfully captured the moment of Judas' betrayal, and his painting has enabled Christians through the centuries to both make sense of and connect with this event as it was understood by the gospel author. It has provoked thought, stirred emotions, and strengthened faith. In its own way, it is truly inspired, and it rightfully deserves its reputation as a masterpiece. But... is that enough?

Think critically, and inform your judgment.

Art and literature do not merely entertain. They shape the thoughts and opinions of the viewer or reader on whatever subject they address, and they can therefore either reveal truth or conceal it. To passively and uncritically digest the images of art and literature is to allow one's view of reality to be shaped by potentially deceptive puppet masters (to borrow an analogy with which you should now be familiar). There are questions we might ask. How faithful was Da Vinci to his source material? Is his painting 'historically accurate'? What assumptions did he make about his intended audience? Consider:

The subjects depicted are European, not Jewish. The figures' complexions and hair styles are those of Italian Renaissance men, not Semitic men of the 1st century AD.

All 13 are seated on the same side of the table. This was typical of paintings in Da Vinci's time, as it allows all of their faces to be seen; but it is obviously neither realistic nor historical.

That they are 'seated' to begin with is problematic. In antiquity, people reclined on the floor or on cushions for meals. They rested on their left elbow and ate with the right hand, abiding by cultural standards of honorable behavior. Again, this painting portrays a Renaissance Italian setting.

Not all of their identities can be known. The Gospel of John never lists all 12 disciples by name, so assuming that the 12 mentioned in the Synoptics are the same as John is to harmonize- reading information from other gospels into this scene. The Gospel of John never mentions James son of Alphaeus, Matthew, or Simon the Zealot, and there is only one reference to the 'sons of Zebedee,' but not specifically to James and John (!). Furthermore, that one reference occurs in a chapter (21) of the gospel that many scholars see as an addition to the original text. Da Vinci 'filled in the blanks' with what he knew from the Synoptics... but what if John left some of the disciples nameless on purpose?

Their clothing is dyed multi-colored. Again, typical of Renaissance Italian men, but in antiquity, dyed clothing was more expensive (hence the emphasis in the Synoptics on the color of Jesus' cloak when scourged; purple for royalty, and scarlet was reserved for Roman soldiers). The social standing of Jesus and his disciples as portrayed in the gospels makes such clothing unlikely.

There is daylight outside the window. But supper would have been eaten specifically *after* sunset in ancient Judaism. The setting of the sun indicated the start of the new day.

The upper room is expansive and has colonnades. The room in this painting is bigger than the remains of typical first-century domiciles in and around Jerusalem unearthed by archaeology, and features architectural details unlikely for Jewish residences in Jesus' time.

Is the painting 'accurate historically'?

No... it portrays the Last Supper in a way that John the Apostle and Evangelist could not possibly have envisioned it, and in a way that Jesus and his disciples could not possibly have lived it. Da Vinci's historical inaccuracies appear to be the result of his own biases, culture-bound assumptions, and prejudices; and our discovery of them seems to reveal his ignorance, perhaps even his arrogance. The artist is human after all. New questions emerge. Does this painting misrepresent, perhaps even deliberately? Does its continued appreciation perpetuate a deception? Does it encourage the ignorance or arrogance it conceals? Do its viewers make mistaken assumptions about Jesus because of it? The typical Western Christian pictures Jesus as a white European male, thanks in part to paintings such as Da Vinci's. What role has such a picture played in the complexity of racial relations in the West? How might it influence the attitudes of non-Westerners towards Christianity?

Again, we could stop there. The painting is still a masterpiece, but flawed. Now that we are aware of its flaws, perhaps we are immune to them. It is, after all, 'only a painting,' right?



But look deeper.

Consider the context.

Da Vinci produced this painting specifically for the refectory of the monastery in Santa Maria Delle Grazie, in Milan, Italy. The painting was completed in the late 15th century (the Italian Renaissance). The refectory is no longer used by the monks, because the painting has become so famous.

Note how the painting fits into the surrounding architecture- its perspective lengthens the room, continuing the walls of the refectory.

Why?

The monks in the monastery were men who had dedicated their lives to following Christ- they too had become his disciples. In the refectory, they shared meals together, just as Jesus and the twelve had done.

The painting depicts how Jesus' disciples, at their last meal together, responded to the revelation that one of them would betray Jesus, their teacher, friend, and Lord. Its placement in the refectory made the monks part of that moment, making it immediately relevant to them, making them part of the moment rather than mere observers, and asking them to consider... *'Had it been you, how would you have responded? How DO you respond? What kind of disciple are you NOW?'*

Put simply, the painting's purpose is NOT history (In fact- its 'historical inaccuracies' are quite deliberate), even though it is based on a moment Da Vinci himself believed to be historical. Rather, its purpose is theology- to encourage continued faith in the face of the daily challenges that confront the believer. For each disciple of Jesus who sees it, it asks anew the question, *'Who do you say that I am?'* A question answered not merely by what we say, but in how we live. It is from the historical moment that such questions get their importance and urgency

Yet again, we could stop. We could say, 'Yes, the painting is relevant to THAT context... but that context is **not mine.**'

But look deeper still... and expand your assumptions about Truth.

Imagine being able to converse with Leonardo Da Vinci about the impact of his painting. We might say something like this:

'Nice painting... but it's not entirely faithful to the gospel story that you based it on... too bad you couldn't have done a better job accurately conveying the details of the story, as you might have made the story more accessible to those who do not know it. As it is, instead your painting is forever destined to preach a message that falls largely on deaf ears, because those for whom it was painted are long dead, and those who see it now are either too distracted from what you might've gotten right by what you obviously got wrong or, even worse, they don't even realize your mistakes, and are destined to repeat and perpetuate them. The truth is this painting will probably unintentionally tell us more about you than it ever will about its subject, and that is truly a sad irony when you consider the subject.'

Here is how I imagine Da Vinci's response:

'Thank you for admiring my painting, but I think perhaps you've missed the point. Do you really believe that when I painted it I actually expected the monks in the refectory to believe that by some remarkable coincidence, Jesus' Last Supper took place in a room matching the architecture of their dining hall, some 1500 years later? And that Jesus and his disciples all looked like Renaissance Italians? Do you really think that this is what I believed? If so, perhaps you are the simple-minded idiot, not I.

'I took the essence of the moment, and I conveyed it in a way that made it meaningful and relevant to those for whom I painted it. They were *already believers*; they did not seek proof, they sought encouragement. They did not need a painting that made the moment plausible, they needed one that illuminated its meaning. The fact that you are not a monk in that monastery in no way diminishes the effectiveness of my painting at accomplishing its purpose, which is not mere history, but the strengthening of faith, and hope, and love; of authentic discipleship. If I have encouraged those who see my painting to see Jesus as someone worthy of faith and worship, then in that encouragement I have conveyed something far more important *historically* than the color of his clothing, or his skin... or the dimensions of the room in which he shared that fateful night with those who were closest to him.

'There is history, and there is Truth. But they are not synonymous, and when one reduces Truth to history, one faces the inevitable consequence that history is only probability and not certainty, and so, therefore, must be Truth. Yet as each moment passes, we know that the ones that have passed were real, no matter how improvable that reality is to those who did not share them with us. And sometimes we become convinced that those moments have meaning and significance beyond ourselves, and we are compelled to communicate that meaning to others- to drag them out of their caves- and to show them the Truth that we have been privileged to witness. But sometimes, to do so is to face ridicule, to face skepticism; even worse, to face indifference.

'But worst of all is facing ourselves if we choose silence. So I painted, and so many have believed. Had I 'detached' myself from my subject, you might have gotten your 'historical' Jesus, in an accurate room, accurately dressed, accurately eating, accurately ethnic... *inaccurately irrelevant*. Instead, I am completely, unapologetically attached. In fact, it is my attachment that is precisely the 'history' that I seek to convey. I ask you: How am I unfaithful to the witnesses that have gone before me? How have I distorted the Truth of the gospel? If it is 'good news,' am I being truthful if I merely convey the 'news,' thinking I am somehow doing you a favor if I don't try to convince you that it is 'good'? That implies not only that you are wise to distrust me, but that I should not trust myself. *Are you likewise suspicious of yourself?* I have come to believe and am convinced that Jesus alone is the holy one of God- that he alone has the words of eternal life. To whom shall I go? I go to anyone who has ears to hear, or eyes to see.

'I know your dilemma- you wonder whether those who have gone before you are worthy of your trust, worthy of a conviction that changes the course of your whole life, and may require sacrifice and suffering in this life; all for the sake of clinging to the desperate hope of a happy ending to the human story and some glimmer of meaning in an otherwise apparently meaningless universe. "What if it's all a lie?" you think. The choice, as you see it, is between courageously believing the obvious no matter how difficult to bear, or believing the apparently absurd because the way things are is too unbearable a burden. That's why every little detail in my painting that does not correspond to the 'facts of history' as you think you know them brings you comfort. Your suspicion that the apparently absurd is really absurd and only believed by the gullible gets confirmed, and the call to conversion -with all of the dangers it carries- can safely be ignored.

'Think about it. That choice is an illusion. Reject Christ, reject his witnesses, become a skeptic... this is not courage, it is all-consuming fear- fear of being the victim of a lie... duped... a sucker. It is the fear of the risk of Love. Live by that principle, and you will live alone, with only your self-righteousness to keep you company. It is the love of others and of God that you have sacrificed, and in isolation you suffer, 'respected'...all the more tragic if you cannot realize it. I risked. I ventured. I sacrificed. A true artist cannot do otherwise for what or whom he loves. And art transcends history, as does Gospel. I love, so I create, just as the God of Love has created me. My art is my cross; I take it up, I carry it, and I follow. *Who do you say that I am?* He asked. I answered that question with brush and canvas.

'You are tempted to reject His love because 'we cannot be certain.' Your philosophy is a resounding gong, a clashing cymbal. You've got it backwards. The certainty you seek is not possible without the love you have rejected. It is you who are culture-bound, prejudiced, trapped by the unquestioned assumptions of a so-called philosophy that ridicules belief without 'hard evidence' -material proof. In your world, to know is to accumulate and catalogue data, not to shape and mold character. Knowledge for you is about power; power to manipulate and control, to buy and possess. Power that you assume others will take if you don't get to it first, in which case you will become its victim. By severing knowing from loving, you have impoverished both. You cannot know the real power of love to transform, because you no longer think that there is anything to learn from it. For you, love is like a drug, to be felt and indulged, nothing more. It is through science that you know, and you are quite proud of the accomplishments that your science has made. *Bravo!*

'But what compels the scientist? Would the doctor still seek to find a cure for the disease if he had never experienced or imagined the experience of losing a loved one? Not all science is motivated by love, but then not all science is for the Good. Have you ever wondered what distinguishes the good science from the bad?

'The truth of what love is escapes you. How can the love of the God who sacrificed himself as a crucified peasant ever appeal to one such as you? How can the creative wellspring from which a painting such as mine comes forth ever be known to you? *Through science??!*

'No wonder your marriages are failing, your churches are emptying, the children you cannot see you permit yourself to kill, and your fellow men, women, and children languish in poverty while you surround yourself with more and more elaborate distractions. Because you have divorced knowing from loving, love can teach you nothing, and it is only valuable to you for how it makes you feel. You have collectively forgotten what it means to let knowledge penetrate your soul - which, of course, you don't really believe in- and to change your very being.

'Know this: The reason you cannot accuse me of distorting history in my painting is that my painting is not about history, at least not the kind that matters to you. It is not about the Jesus that was, the 'Historical Jesus,' as you are fond of calling him. It is about the Jesus that is. The essence of Christianity lies in the belief in the resurrected Christ. Jesus is not a dead man from the past; he is a living presence in the present. Do you not see what this means? If he is present to us now, he teaches us now, he knows us now, he loves us now, he calls us now. But we can still deny him now, we can betray him now, we can even persecute and seek to kill him now. The same choices that faced those twelve disciples face any disciple, in any time. And the stakes are just as high. My painting sought simply to make that Truth apparent to those who might be disciples in my own time.

'Do not sit around waiting for another Da Vinci to make Jesus relevant to your time, to your place, before you are willing to believe. Rather, realize that I only did what every believer must do, to the best of his or her ability, with the gifts God has given, for all those around us, at any time, in every place. *'Εγώ είμι,*' He said. 'I AM'; Not 'I was.' And He is still the *living* Christ! Can the biography of any man who is still alive be considered complete? Can any painting of such a man ever fully capture his essence? What then of one who has always been, and always will be?

'You claimed that my painting unintentionally says more about me than it ever will about its subject. You are foolish to think that there is any distinction between those two things. The subject of the painting is the object of my faith, it is who I say He is. The greatest irony of all is the fact that the way you live, the choices you make, who you are, what you believe...these things "unintentionally" reveal everything about who you say that He is, most of all if you do them while calling yourself His disciple. I will not claim that yours is a time that seeks to kill Him, but you are certainly standing at a distance in the courtyard of the high priest, warming yourself by the charcoal fire as He awaits His sentence, and you have been asked, *Are you one of his disciples?* But you cannot answer that question if you do not even know who he is, can you?