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CHURCH AND DOMINICAN CONVENT OF S. MARIA DELLE GRAZIE WITH *THE LAST SUPPER* BY LEONARDO DA VINCI

“Leonardo may have dreamed of constructing tanks and guns, of placing a dome on Milan’s half-built cathedral, or of completing the world’s largest bronze statue. But he was going to do none of these things. Instead, he was going to paint a wall.”

Leonardo and The Last Supper, Ross King

The Last Supper by Leonardo, despite its poor state of preservation, for over five centuries has been investigated, quoted and exploited by scholars, artists, directors and advertisers – from Andy Warhol to Mel Brooks, from Dan Brown to *The Simpsons* – thus stressing its importance as one of the most renowned symbols of Italian art in the world. The artwork was commissioned by the Duke of Milan Ludovico il Moro. At that time, Leonardo had been living in Milan for over 10 years at the Duke’s service. When, in 1498, four years after he started working on his painting, he delivered the completed artwork, it profoundly shook the minds and hearts of his contemporaries. No-one until then had ever dared to portray, on such a monumental scale and in such a convincing way, the motives of the human soul, represented by the hand gestures and eloquent looks. In the middle of the scene, a composed Jesus has just pronounced the words “One of you will betray me” producing the effect of a shockwave in the apostles, each expressing his feelings in a different way. Someone is having an animated discussion, someone looks anxious and brings his hands to the chest with a wondering expression, someone feels indignant and pushes away the suspect with his hands, someone else knows his guilt and moves backwards placing an elbow on the table.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 93
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: PARIS, FRANCE
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1980



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: *The Last Supper* is one of the first paintings that focuses on a precise and very short moment of time, instead of a long one. It has had a considerable influence, not only on the development of the iconographic theme, but also on the destiny of the history of art.



“The newcomer – young, tall, blond-haired (as Giorgio Vasari described him with great admiration [...]), with his piercing and omnivorous frowned gaze typical of who wants to see and understand everything – was not the kind of person that would be impressed by the size of Sforza’s town: after all, he came from Florence, from the wonderful court of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and had written an exceptional self-presentation letter to the lord of Milan [...].”

Leonardo spent almost two decades in Milan that were among the most fruitful periods of his life, as Marina Migliavacca tells in her historical novel *Leonardo. Il genio che inventò Milano* (2015). Actually, there are very few wall paintings by the artist, but the city can boast of possessing two of them: *The Last Supper*, that heralded a new phase in the history of art, and the fairy-tale atmosphere of the intertwining plants in Sala delle Asse, inside Castello Sforzesco.

Watching ❶ *The Last Supper*, painted on the back wall of the **Refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie**, also Goethe felt he was part of a sacred event, as it happened to the monks of the Dominican convent. Thanks to the correct application of the geometrical perspective, it even seems possible to turn around the laid table and glimpse the landscape beyond the windows that Leonardo softly faded into a bluish light with a poetic use of aerial perspective. The painting emphasises Leonardo’s endless creativity: the apostles are gathered in groups of three, Christ is bigger than all the other figures and all the main lines

at the basis of the extremely carefully designed architecture converge on his right temple. During the restoration, a hole was found where the nail was placed and used to trace the vanishing points by means of threads. After leaving the refectory, many people forget to pay a visit to ❷ **Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie**: the tribune, conceived as a mausoleum of the Sforza family, is one of the most extraordinary and refined architectures of our Renaissance, designed by Donato Bramante, a contemporary and friend of Leonardo. The visit continues to Castello Sforzesco. At Moro’s court, Leonardo’s artwork production was

very fruitful, but unfortunately only the precious wall painting of ❸ **Sala delle Asse** is left. Discovered at the end of the 19th century, despite an extensive restoration, it still shows clear signs of Leonardo’s genius. From here, pay a visit to the ❹ **Pinacoteca Ambrosiana**: the intense *Portrait of a musician* (around 1485) was certainly painted by the *maestro*. However, the greatest emotions arise when contemplating the **Codex Atlanticus**. The delicate sheets full of written notes and drawings are displayed on rotation, but this does not prevent the visitor from embarking on a virtual immersive journey into Leonardo’s endless universe.



MAP



A FRAGILE MASTERPIECE

“He used [...] to go early in the morning and climb up on the scaffolding because the Last Supper was quite high off the ground. So, from dawn till dusk, he used to hold the brush in his hand all the time, forgetting to eat and drink, painting restlessly. Then, for two, three and four days he would not work on it, but he would spend one or two hours a day only contemplating, making considerations, and while examining the figures, he would evaluate them.”

Novella LVI, Matteo Bandello

This novella, dating back to 1554, describes some of Leonardo’s legendary characteristics: his meticulousness and slowness at painting. In *The Last Supper* the artist used an experimental technique similar to painting on wood and, therefore, slower than the fresco technique which requires a swifter approach. However, the technique used, unsuitable for walls, together with the high level of humidity, have caused the rapid deterioration of the painting, only partially stopped by a restoration work (finished in 1999) considered as one of the most challenging ever performed in the history of restoration. Throughout its tormented history, which has included being brutally vandalised and even bombed, *The Last Supper* is still now quite fragile and is constantly being monitored.



‘HE WROTE A LETTER OF PRESENTATION TO LUDOVICO IL MORO SAYING THAT HE COULD BUILD LIGHT AND STRONG BRIDGES, MACHINES TO DESTROY FORTRESSES, VERY PRACTICAL BOMBARDS, INNOVATIVE CANALS, HEATING SYSTEMS, FORMIDABLE AQUEDUCTS, ADDING THAT HE COULD POSSIBLY PAINT SOMETHING, IF NEEDED. (ACTUALLY, THE HEATING SYSTEMS ARE NOT MENTIONED IN THE LETTER, BUT HE BUILT THEM NONETHELESS).’

Leonardo da Vinci is best known by almost everyone as being a great artist and scientist of the Renaissance and he is described as such by Enzo Fileno Carabba in his *Vite sognate del Vasari*.

Famous for drawing the *Vitruvian Man* and painting the *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*, he also left many unfinished artworks – projects conceived just in his mind and never carried out. Leonardo used to take too many commitments at the same time and was not always able to fulfil all of them. Besides, he was very meticulous, every brushstroke was carefully meditated and often his mind got lost in his fantasies. He used to stand for hours, silently, before *The Last Supper*, just giving a few touches of colour, and then disappeared for the rest of the day, wandering and searching for inspiration from real people's faces.

Since he hadn't finished the painting yet, having started it two years earlier, the convent prior lost his patience and complained to the Duke, Ludovico il Moro. Leonardo only had two heads left to complete, that of Christ and that of **1 Judas**, the traitor, but when the artist told the Duke he would give Judas the prior's face, the prior left him alone! Leonardo's artistry can also be seen in his ability to include symbols

in his artworks. If you observe the laid table, you can notice some of them. As a model for *The Last Supper* he used the convent friars' refectory, set with a nice embroidered and well-ironed white **2 table cloth**, where he placed **3 bread**, 13 **4 glasses** of wine and a **5 water jug**. On the left there is a plate with some whole **6 fish**, on the right a tray containing a grilled **7 eel** garnished with orange slices: a very different menu from what Jewish people usually have at Easter (i.e. bitter herbs, unleavened bread, roast lamb and wine) and also anachronistic, as some ingredients could not yet be found on the tables of the 1st century AD. There is no meat, but it does not depend on the fact that Leonardo was vegetarian (actually he was), the artist simply proposed dishes typical of his age. But he was loyal to tradition in one aspect: there is no cutlery, which would actually be introduced many centuries later, apart from the knives used to cut bread.



THE LAST SUPPER in books

Reading suggestions to learn more about its story and innovative aspects.

- **Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper**, Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1817). One of the first attempts of critical analysis of Leonardo's artwork. Goethe's interpretation is also one of the most emotionally engaging.
- **The Da Vinci Code**, Dan Brown (2003). A planetary success with over 80 million copies (and also a blockbuster), the book is a compelling thriller story with exoteric implications unfolding between the Louvre Museum and *The Last Supper*, as a "treasure hunt" among symbols and interpretations, in quest of the Holy Grail and a feminine figure, hidden among the apostles, that would be Mary Magdalene.
- **Lezione sul Cenacolo di Leonardo da Vinci**, Dario Fo (2007). With his usual theatrical and unconventional approach, Dario Fo describes Leonardo's genius.

• **Leonardo and The Last Supper**, Ross King (2012). The Canadian scholar offers an enthralling biographical portrait of the artist focusing on the famous painting in Milan and on the convent where it is kept. Going through historical facts, data and trivia, he also refutes the most bizarre theses.

• **Leonardo. Il genio che inventò Milano**, Marina Migliavacca (2015). The relationship between Milan and Leonardo lasted for two decades. In this fictional biography, the author recalls the moment he arrived in Milan at the age of thirty, the meeting with the Duke Ludovico il Moro, his projects and achievements in all fields, until he left for the court of Francis I of France.

• **Leonardo da Vinci. Il Cenacolo**, Carlo Pedretti and others (2022). Pedretti was one of the greatest experts on Leonardo. Together with Domenico Laurenza, Rodolfo Papa and Marco Pistoia, he traces the origin of Milan's masterpiece and his long-lasting success.

• **Leonardo da Vinci. Il Cenacolo 3D**, Mario Taddei (2023). The author proposes a virtual journey into the painting thanks to 3-D reconstruction technology.

Children's books:

- **Leonardo da Vinci, genio senza tempo**, Davide Morosinotto (2015). Suitable for children aged 7 and up, this nice illustrated book tells the eclectic human, artistic and scientific adventure of the great Tuscan artist.
- **Leonardo da Vinci**, Jane Kent (2018). Suitable for children in their early school years, this book illustrated by Isabel Muñoz deals with all Leonardo's multi-faceted aspects: painting, anatomy, science, travels...
- **Leonardo**, Stefano Zuffi (2019). Leonardo's biography suitable for children aged 10 and up. From 1519, when he was given hospitality by Francis I in one of his Loire's castles, Leonardo tells his private and artistic story in the first person while travelling around Tuscany, Milan and France.
- **Vite sognate del Vasari**, Enzo Fileno Carabba (2021). Starting from the first handbook of art history, written in mid-16th century by Giorgio Vasari, the author proposes a gallery of artists, Leonardo included, described in a light-hearted and dreamy way, where real facts mix with unexpected biographical evolutions.