

Characteristics of renaissance art in the last supper



It is agreed that the Renaissance was a period of great art and architectural feats and ingenuity, during which artists looked back to the classical art of Greece and Rome from which to draw inspiration. This influence can easily be seen in the many paintings and sculpture that came out of the Renaissance. However, the conservative nature of the period, the subject matter, and the restrictions imposed upon artists of that time kept the Renaissance from truly becoming a return to the classics of Greece and Rome.

The most obvious factor in the difference between the two artistic periods is the predominant subject matter the artists of the time chose. In ancient Greece and Rome, the subject matter most popular among artists were depictions of myths, war, or intellectual figures: statues of the gods decorated nearly every significant architectural landmark of the time. Being a Christian society, the art of the Renaissance did not simply depict various bible stories, but also moral stories permeated with religious allusions and symbolism. The Sistine Chapel is just one example among the many depictions of the creation, Madonna figures, and religious icons that existed in that era. However, there were some artists, such as Botticelli who depicted mythological figures as religious icons such as Botticelli's Birth of Venus, which put the Greek goddess into a Christian context.

Artists from both periods experienced problem with completing and preserving works. In Ancient Greece and later Rome, because of frequent war and the threat of invasion, many of the bronze sculptures that existed were melted down so that the metal could be used for weaponry. In addition to that, the construction of the pieces was often so weak that they would

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break, usually at joints such as the ankles because they couldn't support the weight of the piece indefinitely, or other limbs that were too fragile to withstand any kinds of damages. Because artists of the Renaissance were often commissioned by wealthy patrons or the church, they had to work within the guidelines given by the patrons which limited the freedom with which they could compose a piece. Even for artists such as Michaelangelo, often times, funding for commissions would be limited or discontinued altogether, forcing the artist to either leave the piece unfinished or scale down the size of the original project.

Although Renaissance art was based on Greek and Roman schools of thought and art, the subtle stylistic differences between the two periods are reflective of the ideals of beauty at the time. Greek sculpture often depicted highly idealized figures- usually young, athletic men and women- in extremely melodramatic poses, while figures of the Renaissance were more realistically rendered- such as van Eyck's which even showed the flaws of those who posed for the pieces instead of beautifying them- but still remained slightly melodramatic in at least facial expression if not posture.

Though it attempted to revive the classical art of Ancient Greece and Rome, the Renaissance instead simply modified the style and applied it to its own tastes. Artists of both times sought to appeal to the general public with what was popular at the time- war, myth and melodrama in Ancient Greece and Rome, religious icons and pleasing the patron in the Renaissance.

Leonardo's "Last Supper" is a priceless piece of art with much hidden meaning and obvious talents bestowed upon a wall. Under the study of

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Verrocchio as a painter and a sculptor, he was able to use his skills in creating a very detailed and a very naturalistic piece of work that would be remembered for hundreds of years. He was also able to create characters with amazing individuality. Not only was his portrayal of the characters magnificent, but the symbolism he used which emphasized the story being told in the " Last Supper".

Lodovico Sforza chose Leonardo to create " The Last Supper" in the refectory of the Dominican Church of S. Maria delle Grazie in Milan. The Abate of the S. Maria delle Grazie saw Leonardo work from morning until night on " The Last Supper" without eating. Although, there were times he would stop painting for days at a time; or, he would work on a specific character for just a few moments and then leave to continue working on it later. He worked on it from 1495 thru 1498 (Strauss, 27).

Before Leonardo began painting the actual portrait, he put down a substance which was suppose to absorb the tempora and protect the tempora from the moisture on the wall. Unfortunately, the substance was proved unsuccessful, and by 1517 it began to deteriorate.

In May 1556 a painter Giovanni Batista Armenini said that the painting was 'so badly affected that nothing is visible but a mass of blots'(Heydenreich, 18). The painting has continued to decay in the following centuries. It was further damaged by restorations made by careless artists and by the addition of a doorway put in the lower part of the painting. Yet even to this day his painting " The Last Supper" is widely known and visited by many tourists each year.

The remembrance of the "Last Supper" could be due to the sacredness of the parting meal. It is quite obvious that the skill used in the creation of the "Last Supper" was magnificent. Although, the way Leonardo allows its viewers to depict the scene from a specific point in the Bible adds to the importance and significance of the painting in which no other artist could even compare. He does allow the viewer to recognize this scene by the gestures of both the Lord and the Apostles. The Lord sits ever so quietly while the Apostles rise in reaction to what the Lord had just announced. It is rather obvious that Leonardo chose the critical moment after the Lord had stated, 'Verily I say unto you that one of you shall betray me,' because of the emotions that evolve in this specific scene (Matt. 26. 21).

He took much time to express every detail of each Apostle and the Lord. Leonardo had even wrote in one of his notebooks that "A good painter has two chief objects to paint man and the intention of his soul. The former is easy, the latter hard because he has to represent it by the attitude and movement of the limbs"(Heydenreich, 27). For example, the Lord is very relaxed with his arms resting on the table which adds to the portrayal of His greatness. He also emphasized the Lord's greatness by giving Him a serious attitude and by presenting Him as untouchable with the space between Himself and the Apostles.

The distance put between them is called the spacial perspective, which is one of the techniques Leonardo feels is important in naturalistic art. Although, the Apostles are painted in a more restless fashion.

They are all facing different ways and seem to be jumping out of their seats. Even the grouping of the apostles in three was done intentionally. He used four groups of three Apostles in each group in order to symbolize the Holy Trinity which means three, and the four groups were used to symbolize the Gospels and the Cardinal Virtues . He was very cautious in every aspect of his painting from the placement of the figures to the movement they each possessed. Leonardo had to create actions and various postures which would be appropriate for each figure in order to keep them from looking as if they were brothers.

Monica Strauss stated that in her research she had found that " for the first time in the history of the subject, Leonardo had distinguished each one by appearance and gesture"(Strauss, 27). For each of the twelve Apostles he had to not only resort to the historical information on their names and on their appearances but also by the portrayal of their specific qualities as they are known to us from the Gospels. For instance, Judas was put outside the circle of the innocent Apostles and only his shadowed profile can be found. He is the only one to be found sitting in the shadows and in solitude. This allows the viewer to see the guilt he had, for he knew he was the one who would betray the Lord Jesus.

He is also frozen in shock, and he is an outcast in the group. The significance of the portrayal of Judas is very important because in earlier pictures of the Last Supper, no one had ever been able to show this (Heydenreich, 57).

Peter and John, located at the sides of Judas, were both painted with bright heads and with outstretched hands to the Lord Jesus which signify their

fateful connection with Him. Yet, he distinguishes their differences by showing Peter to be more stubborn and argumentative and John to be more gentle and submissive as the Bible has thoroughly explained. Philip, on the other hand, stands up in excitement; and, he puts his hands on his chest to express a tender loyalty towards Christ. Andrew is found next to his brother Peter. Then, there is James the Greater, the older brother of John, who touches Peter's shoulder and forms a link with Peter and John. These three are those who witnessed the Transfiguration and who accompanied Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 17. 1; 26. 36-37).

Leonardo continued to distinguish each of the Apostles as he felt necessary. He placed James the Less, 'the Lord's brother' (Gal. 1. 19), to the Lord Jesus's right where he is like Him in feature and with outstretched arms; but, his gesture is only a reaction and not an expression of a completed action like the Lord Jesus's. Behind James the Less stands the doubting Thomas who is known to share a common feast day. St. Matthew is next and finally comes St. Jude, who is the brother of James the Less and St. Simon. James the Less and St. Simon were martyred together so they too have a common feast day.

Leonardo not only arranged the Apostles in four groups according to kinship and the personal links they shared, but each of the twelve Apostles exhibit an emotional and temperamental reaction appropriate to the character attributed to him in the Gospels. Each disciple reacted in his own way, as men. Leonardo had said, 'Emotions move the face of man in different ways, for one laughs, another weeps, one becomes gay, another sad, one shows anger, another pity, some are amazed, others reflective. In these the hands

and the whole person should follow the expression of the face,' (Heydenreich, 57). He made sure he portrayed this in his "Last Supper".

The Lord Jesus was also given qualities that distinguished Him from everyone else. The Lord Jesus's hands are laid in a resting fashion on the table. His hands lie between the filled cup and the unbroken bread, the symbols of sacrifice, as if pointing in a silent gesture towards them. He seems to relay a message that His business has not yet been completed. Only the objects in front of Him remain in order, as does He remain calm, unlike the objects in front of the Apostles which are in disarray, as are the Apostles also in an unordered emotional state of confusion. Leonardo uses the description of the table to symbolize the state in which the Apostles and the Lord Jesus are in. For this reason, Leonardo not only uses the characters to portray the story but also the objects and the structures which encampeth around them.

Leonardo used the beautiful background motif of the pedimented doorway, which was centered behind the Lord Jesus, in order to emphasize the Lord Jesus's greatness. It acted as a crown of glory hovering over His head. The surrounding walls and ceiling, where tapestries hung, were not in natural perspective but in an idealized one. The surroundings were unrelated to any spectator in the room. The same can be said of the characters in the portrait. Their scale and grandeur is other worldly, but their emotional distress is obviously human. He created the characters as if they were each on their own frontal plane.

He also put a painted border around the painting which cut off most of the ceiling and the walls. These two modifying factors caused the characters to seem to leap out of the portrait.

The " Last Supper" portrayed very individualistic characters which have made Leonardo's piece of work stand out from all the others who also have tried to create the Last Supper; but, talented Leonardo was able to perfect his creation with his perspective of atmosphere and color.

Leonardo had said, 'If we see that the true quality of colours is known through light, it is to be concluded that where there is more light, the true quality of the illuminated colour is better seen; and where there is more darkness, the colour is tinged with the colour of that darkness,' (Heydenreich, 65).

Later he concluded with, 'Nothing ever looks to be its real colour, if the light which strikes it is not all of that colour,' (Heydenreich, 65). He used his theory in his painting to make it more realistic.

He used two sources of light which came from the last gleams of the dying day which entered from behind the window with its charming view of the countryside and from the window in the refectory itself. He claimed to have 'painted in tones of light,' when he created his " Last Supper" (Heydenreich, 66). Rosci had said that it is possible that he may have given the advice on the construction of the rectangular refectory because of the illusion the light gives the painting (108).

The two zones of light make it possible for Leonardo to give his characters a very finely "graduated relief" (Heydenreich, 70). Leonardo caused the colors of Christ's garments, a red tunic and a blue cloak, to reflect in the pewter plate in front of him; and, similarly the plate in front of Philip reflects the red of his cloak. The colors of the Apostles' robes are distributed across the painting in a wonderful array of colors.

To the right of the Lord, the pale green tunic of James the Less forms a transition between the Lord's blue cloak and the red robe of Philip, whose blue sleeves are just a shade brighter than the tone of Christ's cloak.

There is also a mixture of colors in the second group on the right of the Lord. Matthew is clothed in bright blue, which together with Jude's ochre tunic and Simon's violet cloak forms a perfect "three note" chord. Even in the group to the left of the Lord, consisting of John, Peter, and Judas; emphasizes the blending of colors. Judas's greyish blue garment is the only one whose tone remains indefinite and dull which was formed from John's dark, rust red cloak and bluish green tunic and Peter's dark blue sleeve. In the outer left hand group, which stands in the darker background, Andrew's green cloak over a yellow garment, James the Greater's reddish clothing, and Bartholomew's violet blue tunic and dark olive cloak form a "carefully equivalent" to the outer right hand group, which stands in bright light. From one side of the Lord Jesus to the other the colors go from light primary tones to dark subtle blends. All of this coloration is due to the effect that light has on colors. Leonardo really believed that the perspective of light was important because it ensured to make the "Last Supper" as realistic as possible.

Leonardo believed that naturalization was "harmony between mental and physical motion." He accomplished the correspondence between physical movement and mental emotion by the pause between two great emotions which are the "momentarily stiffening" at an extreme point of excitement and at the horror of being "startled out of tranquility" (Heydenreich, 67). The painting portrays both expression and emotion. This combination complements each other. The expressions allow the viewers to see the emotions the characters are feeling. Their frozen movement allows one to see they are human. We can see both their outward and inward reactions. It is as if Leonardo had been there, and he had taken a picture of the marvelous meal. He definitely accomplished his goal in portraying his "Last Supper" as a realistic piece of art. The symbolism, the individualized personalities of the characters, and the skills such as the light perspective and spacial perspective blended together to form a photograph-like painting.