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with an Introduction by the President of Magdalen College

I

Introduction

In September 1992, after several months of careful discussion and excited anticipation, the Royal Academy's massive copy of Leonardo's Last Supper was moved to its present position in our Chapel at Magdalen. It arrived stretched on a vast metal drum, packed into a specially constructed wooden crate, thirty feet in length and cradled in an enormous truck that had set out from the Royal Academy at dawn. Twenty people were in attendance and during ten hours of solicitous labour the picture was again unrolled, reframed, and hoisted. I recall the experience of silent delight on the faces of the first people who saw it in its new position. Word rapidly passed through the College and through Oxford generally and ever since that moment there has been a steady trickle of visitors, some returning again and again, to view the work which Sir Ernst Gombrich described as 'one of the great miracles wrought by human genius'.

On 10 March an installation ceremony was held to thank our friends at the Royal Academy for their kindness in agreeing to lend their painting. It began with a lecture by Sir Ernst, attended by a large throng of College members and guests who packed every corner of the Ante-Chapel. At the Evensong that followed the Bishop of Winchester (who holds the office of Magdalen's Visitor) pronounced a moving blessing of the painting and the Choir sang an anthem, specially composed by the Informator Choristarum, Mr Grayston Ives, based on the text used by Leonardo ('And they began to be sorrowful, and to say unto Him one by one, Is it I?'). The anthem describes the painting musically and evokes something of its gestured atmosphere. At dinner in honour of the Royal Academy later that evening, Piers Rodgers, its Secretary, told the story of the provenance of the painting. His talk and Sir Ernst's lecture constitute this first Magdalen College Occasional Paper.

I would like to express the College's gratitude to both the speakers for allowing their texts to be made available, to Jim Hurlock and the American Friends of Magdalen College for covering the cost of moving the painting, to the Fellow Librarian Dr Christine Ferdinand for editing this publication, and, of course, to the President and Fellows of the Royal Academy for their inspired generosity.

ADS

E. H. Gombrich

It is most unlikely that Leonardo would have approved of my attempts to talk about his work or its copy. After all, he was the author of the so-called Paragone, the comparison or rather the contest of the various arts, in which he took a stand against the predominantly literary culture of his time in favour of his beloved art, 'the science of painting'. Thus he reminds us how powerless the poet would be in trying to describe in words what the painter can represent to the eye:

Your pen will be worn out before you have fully described something that the painter may present to you instantaneously using his science. And your tongue will be impeded by thirst and your body by sleep and hunger, before you could show in words what the painter may display in an instant. In such a picture nothing is lacking except the souls of depicted beings. And in each body the integration of its parts is demonstrated from a single viewpoint. It would be a long and tedious thing in poetry to portray all the movements of the participants ... The painter can accomplish this and place it before you with great immediacy and truth.

Leonardo here speaks of a painted battle scene, but what he says, of course, applies with equal force to his rendering of the Last Supper.

Even so, generations of writers have felt undeterred by his warnings and have tried to put their reactions to the painting into words. I have done so myself in my *Story of Art*, and what is more important of course, we have in English two of the most masterly monographs on any artist, the books on Leonardo by Kenneth Clark (1939) and Martin Kemp (1981).

Kenneth Clark, with his inimitable skill as a writer, also helps me to explain the second difficulty we all have to face when confronting this well-worn topic:

It is a point at which the student of Leonardo must hesitate, appalled at the quantity of writing which this masterpiece has already evoked, and at the unquestionable authority of the masterpiece itself. And almost more numbing than this authority is its familiarity. How can we criticise a work which we have all known from childhood? We have come to regard Leonardo's 'Last Supper' more as a work of nature than a work of man, and we no more think of questioning its shape than we should question the shape of the British Isles on the map. Before such a picture the difficulty is not so much to analyse our feelings as to have any feelings at all. But there are alternatives to the direct aesthetic approach. We may profitably imagine the day when the 'Last Supper' did not exist, and Leonardo was faced with a blank wall and an exacting patron.

He was right of course. I suppose a geologist can look at the shape of the British Isles and reflect on their origin and transformations over time, and the historian of art might try to do the same with any great painting. It is true that there are sadly few documentary records of the origin and the evolution of this work. We can infer that Leonardo was commissioned to paint it around 1494 for the refectory of the Dominican monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan which was much favoured by Lodovico Sforza the Lord of Milan and we know that it was completed in 1498, some four years later.

For a good deal of the rest we have to rely on conjectures. One thing we can be sure about: Leonardo, like any other artist in his situation, had two sources on which to rely, the traditions of his art and the text of the Gospels, which, naturally, also form part of this tradition. It is remarkable that of the four accounts in the Gospel, tradition had long favoured the one in St John, despite the fact that St John does not mention the institution of the Eucharist which we generally associate with the Last Supper. The reason for this preference on the part of the painters may perhaps be found in the vivid episode that describes the action and the postures of the participants which, as you will see, also inspired Leonardo.

When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. Then the disciple looked one on another, doubting of whom he spake. Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him that he should ask who it should be of whom he spake. He then lying on Jesus' breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give the sop,

when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly. Now no man at the table knew for what intent he spake this unto him. For some of them thought, because Judas had the bag, that Jesus had said unto him, Buy those things that we have need of against the feast; or, that he should give something to the poor. He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night. (John 13: 21-30)

It is well known that the description of that text of the apostle St John 'leaning on Jesus' bosom' is explained by the ancient habit of lying on couches during meals, though this had largely been forgotten and the apostles were usually represented sitting at table. But tradition still had St John leaning against Christ, and the only rapid sketch we have by Leonardo for this composition indicates that he originally meant to adopt this tradition as well as the action of Christ reaching across the table to give the sop to Judas, who was generally placed there in isolation from the others.

But as you see, Leonardo abandoned this tradition and he may have been encouraged to do so by the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels: In St Matthew we read, after the announcement of the betrayal, that Christ said 'he, that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me.' In St. Mark we read that Jesus said 'one of you which eateth with me shall betray me ... it is one of the twelve, that dippeth with me in the dish'. And in St Luke 'behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table.'

It seems likely that Leonardo took his cue from this version, conspicuously showing the hand of Judas on the table quite close to that of Christ, while most of the other apostles don't have their hands on the table at all.

Leonardo must also have remembered the most vivid version in St Mark where the question of the disciples is repeated for dramatic effect: 'And as they sat and did eat, Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, One of you which eateth with me shall betray me. And they began to be sorrowful, and to say unto him one by one, Is it I? and another said, Is it I?'

In the Gospels of St Matthew and of St Mark the institution of the Eucharist, the dispensing of bread and wine, follows after this scene, which may raise the question whether Judas still received the Holy Communion. In St Luke the Eucharist comes before the prophecy of the betrayal, but it should be noted that in Leonardo's Last Supper there is no visual allusion to this central scene: the apostles are all supplied with bread and wine; there is no loaf, no chalice.

It is usual in art history to contrast the likely gesticulation of the apostle in Leonardo's composition with the more quiet, indeed almost stolid conception of the meal you find for instance in Florentine art in the extant frescoes by Castagno and by Ghirlandaio, and I have also made this comparison. But maybe the traditional version was also intended to embody the moment of the sacrament. Indeed there are paintings, such as one by Sassetta, showing nothing on the table but a large chalice.

It is true that even in this tradition the main elements of the action were mostly taken from the Gospel of St John, in which the Eucharist does not occur, but it is worth noting, in relation to Leonardo, that in the Gospel the announcement of the betrayal is preceded by the episode of Christ washing the feet of the apostles with Peter protesting. Now this scene, which is less frequently represented in the Latin West, demands a good deal of action and gesticulation and Leonardo could easily have been such a dramatic version in one of the Byzantine mosaics of San Marco in Venice.

In any case, there was another important precedent for this variety of expressive gestures of which Leonardo was surely aware. He must have read about it in the Treatise on Painting by Leone Battista Alberti, dating from about 1430, one of the few texts which demonstrably influenced Leonardo's conception of his art. Alberti there singles out for special praise a work by Giotto, the proverbial fountain head of the revival of art, namely the mosaic of the Navicella in Rome showing Christ walking on the water, where as Alberti says 'he placed in the boat eleven disciples, all moved by fear as they see one of their companions walk on water, so that every one of them expresses by his face and gesture that clear symptom of a troubled mind in such a way that each one exhibits a different emotion and state.' In this respect the Last Supper may almost be called a contest with Giotto's masterpiece.

That Leonardo attached immense importance to the skill of rendering the emotions by movement is amply proved by many passages in his so-called Treatise on Painting, so-called, because all we have are his notes which were later combined into a book. Here is one of the most famous of these passages:

The good painter has to paint two principle things, that is to say, man and the intention of his mind. The first is easy and the second difficult, because the latter has to be represented through gestures and movements of the limbs - which can be learned from the dumb, who exhibit gestures better than any other kind of man. Do not laugh at me because I propose an instructor without speech, who is to teach you an art of which he is unaware, because he will teach you better through what he actually does than others can through their words. And do not despise such advice, because the dumb are the masters of movements and understand what one says from a distance when one accommodates the motions of the hands to the words.

'Do not laugh' he says 'when I want the painter to present a dumb show and expect him to take lessons from the deaf and dumb.'

There is a note by Leonardo from the period when he worked on the Last Supper and obviously wished to visualize the movements of the apostles which you can compare with the picture while I read: 'One who was drinking has left his glass in its place and turned his head towards the speaker.' Note that Leonardo says 'the speaker' ('il proponente'), not Christ.

Another wrings the fingers of his hands and turns with a frown to his companion. Another with his hands spread open to show the palms shrugs his shoulders up to his ears and mouths astonishment. Another speaks into his neighbour's ear, and the listener twists his body round to him and lends his ear while holding a knife in one hand and in the other some bread, half-cut through by a knife; another, while turning round with a knife in his hand upsets a glass over the table with that hand; another places his hands upon the table and stares. Another splutters over his food. Another leans forward to see the speaker and shades his eyes with his hand. Another draws back behind the one who inclines forward and has sight of the speaker between the wall and the leaning man.

Now, if you count these gestures in Leonardo's list you will find that he mentions only ten, not twelve. Why? I am sure he had not run out of ideas, but when you come to think of it, the gestures or positions of two of the apostles were fixed by the tradition I have mentioned: St John leaning against the bosom of the Lord and Judas receiving the sop and clutching the money bag. Be that as it may, I would not put it past Leonardo to have actually experimented with the effect of some such shocking announcement on an assemblage of people. There are anecdotes of this kind told by his followers (Lomazzo) and the term 'il proponitore' instead of Christ speaks at any rate not against such a conjecture.

What is not conjecture is the fact that he looked around among people he met to find the right type or model for every figure. Such an exercise had sometimes been suggested to the faithful for their meditations on the Passions of Christ: they would do well to visualise or imagine the events told in the Scripture in terms of their own environment. In any case, we find among Leonardo's notes such jottings as 'Alessandro Carissimo da Parma for the hand of Christ', another man (Count Giovanni) even for Christ himself or simply 'so and so has a good head'. Thus I think we may actually believe a witness (Antonio de Beatis) who reports that he was told some twenty years after the completion of the work in 1517 that it contained portraits of Milanese and of members of the Sforza court.

This in turn gives credence to some of the other anecdotes told about Leonardo at work. We hear that he despaired in the end of finding a suitable head for Christ and left it unfinished and that he would frequent the slums of Milan to find a model for Judas among the criminal types. It was Vasari who canonised the corresponding story of the Prior of Santa Maria delle Grazie complaining to the Duke of Leonardo's procrastinations in completing the work, whereupon Leonardo is said to have explained that he was still looking for a model for Judas, but if the Prior was in such a hurry he would be quite happy to select him as the model. Not even Vasari wants us quite to believe this, except perhaps as a joke, and yet it so happens that there might be a kernel of truth somewhere after all. That Prior, whose name was Bandello, was certainly a man of great sanctity and much trusted by the Duke and nobody would have thought of him as a Judas type - but whether he did never complain of Leonardo's slow progress is a different matter. In fact he may well have done so, for it is to his nephew, also called Bandello, that we owe that most precious description of Leonardo at work which has often been quoted and I cannot omit either. Bandello must have stayed with his uncle, and the painter's eccentricities were probably a frequent topic of conversation at his table. In any case he tells us in one of his Novelle:

Many a time I have seen Leonardo go early in the morning to work on the platform before The Last Supper, and there he would stay from sunrise till darkness, never laying down the brush, but continuing to paint without eating or drinking. Then three or four days would pass without his touching the work, yet each day he would spend several hours examining it and criticising the figures to himself. I have also seen him, when the fancy took him, leave the Corte Vecchia when he was at work on the stupendous horse of clay, and go straight to the Grazie in the blazing midday sun of August. There, climbing on the platform, he would take a brush and give a few touches to one of the figures: and then suddenly he would leave and go elsewhere

We have reason to believe that it was this unorthodox working method that was ultimately responsible for the rapid deterioration and decay of the work. For an artist who wished to be able to have second thoughts, to change, revise, and retouch his work, the traditional technique of fresco painting was quite unsuitable.

As the name 'fresco' implies, the paint must here be applied while the plaster is still fresh and then allowed to harden. In many frescoes of the Renaissance we can therefore still see exactly what area was painted in a single day, in a giornata. This rapidity demanded a fixed plan and if possible a meticulous preparation in the form of a cartoon which could be transferred to the wall by means of pricking and charcoal dust.

Leonardo would never have wanted to forego the possibility of constant revision as we also know from his drawings, and he devised a technique of his own, somewhere between tempera and oil, that proved much less durable than he had hoped. Less durable, but apparently, while it lasted, also capable of the most detailed brushwork, different, we must infer, from the relatively broad brushwork of the traditional fresco technique. Maybe our copy reflects something of this attention to the surface

and texture of objects for which the Netherlanders have rightly become so famous and which Leonardo certainly wished to achieve.

One of the very first reports about the fresco, written by a Frenchman who accompanied François I, singles out this feature of the work, which he called a work of 'singular excellence, because' as he says 'one can see the bread on the table so that you'd say it is real bread and not an artifice, also the wine, the glasses, the vessels, the tablecloth with the food, the figures likewise.'

Vasari, who saw the work a generation later, has sometimes been ridiculed as a Philistine for still echoing this reaction though not in the same order:

Leonardo has seized the moment when the Apostles are anxious to discover who would betray their Master. All their faces are expressive of love, fear, wrath or grief at not being able to grasp the meaning of Christ, in contrast to the obstinacy, hatred and treason of Judas, while the whole work, down to the smallest details, displays incredible diligence, even the texture of the tablecloth being clearly visible so that actual cambric would not look more real.

What is likely to puzzle and even shock the modern reader in these sixteenth-century reactions to the painting is the absence of any reference to the first thing a present day art historian or teacher of art appreciation would single out - the composition, the marvellous artistic feat of so organising thirteen figures in a dramatic scene that their movements do not upset the crystal-clear order of the whole painting. But the fact is that you would not find such remarks in the Renaissance. What we call 'composition', the balance in the forms, was not discussed.

Clearly the problem was not ignored by the painters themselves. From the moment the work was revealed it became indeed what we may call a classic, a model of perfection. If proof were needed, it could be found in the spell which Leonardo's composition cast on nearly all-subsequent renderings of the scene, down to Rubens and Rembrandt who knew it only from crude engravings. But these were perhaps considered the tricks of the trade which artists kept to themselves.

For even if you studied Leonardo's many and copious writings on paintings you would not find him enlarging on the geometrical distribution of his figures in which he so obviously delighted and excelled. What concerns him in his writing was what he called the science of painting, the use of anatomy, of optics, of hydrodynamics and mechanics to create what a modern terms calls 'virtual reality' and the purpose of this exercise is also clearly stated in his notes: he hoped we would react to a real sight, that is by empathy and sympathy. I quote:

That which is included in narrative paintings ought to move those who behold and admire them in the same way as the protagonist of the narrative is moved. So if the narrative shows terror, fear or flight or, indeed, grief, weeping and lamentation, or pleasure, joy and laughter and similar states, the minds of the beholders should move their limbs in such a way as to make it seem that they are united in the same fate as those represented in the narrative painting. And if they do not do this, the painter's ability is useless.

Whether any one of you will be discovered mirroring the movements represented here, I do not know and hardly dare expect. But then our copy obviously lacks one of the principal means by which Leonardo enhanced the illusion of reality, I mean the perspective setting which has been the subject of much comment and analysis in recent years and which creates the illusionistic stage for his dumb show.

That it was dumb he naturally realised and regretted. In fact this is the only concession he makes to the poet in the Paragone which I quoted at the outset:

The only true office of the poet is to invent words for people who talk to each other. Only these words can he represent naturally to the sense of hearing, because they are in themselves the natural things that are created by the human voice. But in all others respects he is bettered by the painter.

Luck will have it that there was a poet who took up Leonardo's implicit challenge, though surely without knowing it. I am referring to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who, in a famous description supplied the words for Leonardo's drama.

Goethe had seen the Last Supper on his way back from Rome to Germany in 1787 and called it in a letter 'the coping stone of all art' and when in 1817 an Italian pamphlet about the work by one Bossi came into his hands, he published a lengthy review in his journal *Aus Kunst und Alterthum*. The review was actually translated into English in 1821 by Noehden, and it is this translation that was generally quoted, and rightly so, since Goethe was polite about it.

You will not be surprised however to hear that I could not resist the temptation of trying to collate Goethe's original text once more with that version, knowing full well that the stately cadence of Goethe's prose and his uncanny precision in the choice of words can never be matched in another language. Even so I hope you will approve of my ending this rapid survey with this translation to focus your eyes again on Leonardo's composition.

We now come to the particular object of our attention, the Last Supper of our Lord which was painted by Leonardo upon the wall in the monastery alle Grazie at Milan ... What is first to be considered is the place where the picture was painted, for it is here that the wisdom of the artist appears to the greatest advantage. Could there be any subject more fitting and more becoming for the refectory of a holy order than the parting meal was to be sacred for all ages to come? ...

Opposite the entrance, on the narrow side of the room stood the Prior's table; on both sides of it, along the walls the tables of the monks, raised, like the Prior's, a step above the ground; and now, when the stranger who might come into the room turns round, he saw, on the fourth wall, over the door, not very high up, a fourth table painted, at which Christ and his disciples were seated, as if they formed part of the company. It must have been an impressive sight at mealtimes to see the tables of the Prior and of Christ thus facing each other, with the monks enclosed between them. For this reason it was also consonant with the wisdom of the painting to take the tables of the monks as his models; there is no doubt, that the tablecloth, with its pleated folds, its stripes and patterns, and even the knots at the corners were taken from the stores of the monastery. Dishes, plates, cups and other utensils, were probably also copied from those which the monks used.

Thus there could be no question of imitating some ancient and unknown custom. It would have been unsuitable in the extreme in this place, to lay the holy company on couches; on the contrary it was to be assimilated to those present. Christ was to celebrate his Last Supper among the Dominicans at Milan.

In several other respects also the painting was calculate to produce a great effect. Being raised about ten feet above the ground, the thirteen figures, exceeding by nearly on half the natural size, occupied a space of twenty-eight Parisian feet in length. Two of them only, at the opposite ends of the table, are seen entire; the rest are half figures, but even here the artist derived an advantage from necessity: every expression of moral sentiment appertains only to the upper part of the body; the feet

are, in such cases, generally in the way. Here the artist produced eleven half figures whose sides and knees are covered by the table and the tablecloth and their feet below are scarcely noticed in their modest obscurity.

Now transfer yourself into this place and picture to your mind the decorous and undisturbed calm that reigns in such a monkish refectory; then you will admire the artist who knew how to instil into his work a powerful emotion and an active life, and, coming as close to nature as is possible created at the same time a contrast with the real objects that immediately surrounded it.

The means of excitement by which the artist shatters the holy tranquillity of the evening meal, are the words of the master, 'Verily, I say unto you one of you shall betray me.'

But before we proceed we must consider one great expedient whereby Leonardo chiefly enlivened his picture: it is the movement of the hands, but only an Italian could have found it. In his nation the whole body is animated; every member, every limb participates in any expression of feeling, of passion, and even of thought. By a varied position and movement of the hands he expresses *I don't care - Come - This is a rogue, beware of him - He won't live long - This is the point! - Mark this especially my listeners.*

Such a national peculiarity could not but attract the searching eye of Leonardo, who was in the highest degree attentive to everything characteristic. In this particular the picture before us is wholly unique so that one can never contemplate it sufficiently. Facial expressions and gestures are in perfect unison, moreover harmonious and conflicting movements of all limbs that can be easily grasped by the eye are most admirably realised.

The figures on both sides of Our Lord may be considered by threes together and thus each of them appears as a unity relating both within the group and with its neighbour. Next to Christ, on the right hand, are John, Judas and Peter.

Peter, who is the farthest away, having heard the words of the Lord, rises quickly, in keeping with his vehement character, behind Judas who, terrified and looking upwards, leans over the table tightly gripping the purse in his right hand but making, with his left, an involuntary convulsive movement as if to say 'What does this mean? What is to happen?' Peter in the meantime has grasped with his left hand the right shoulder of John who is leaning towards him, and - at the same time pointing to Christ - signals to the favourite disciple that he should ask who is the traitor. Holding a knife handle in his right hand he accidentally and unintentionally pokes Judas in the ribs causing a frightened forward movement that even upsets a salt cellar - a most ingenious effect. This group may be regarded as the first one conceived: it is the most perfect.

While on the right hand of the Lord immediate revenge is threatened with moderate movement, horror and detestation of the treachery manifest themselves on the left. James the Elder draws back and spreads his arms with a terrified movement and gazes, his head bent down, like one who imagines that he already sees with his eyes the outrage which he hears with his ears. Thomas appears from behind his shoulder and advancing towards the Saviour lifts up the forefinger of the right hand towards his forehead. Philip, the third of this group, most pleasingly rounds it off: he is risen and, bending as if clearly pronouncing: 'Lord, it is not me - thou knowest - thou seest my pure heart-it is not me.'



And now the three last figures on this side afford new matter for contemplation. They are conversing together on the dire intelligence they have just received. Matthew turns his face with an eager expression to his two companions on the left, while he extends his hand with a quick motion towards the Master, thus linking this group by an inestimable contrivance with the foregoing. Saint Jude shows the utmost surprise, doubt, and suspicion. He has placed the left hand open on the table and raised the right in such a manner as if he were going to strike, with the back of it, into the left—a movement which may sometime be observed in common life when, at some unexpected occurrence a man would say: 'Did I not tell you so? - Did I not always suspect it?' Simon sits with great dignity at the bottom of the table; his whole form therefore can be seen. He, the oldest of all, is dressed in a full garment. His countenance and motion show that he is troubled and reflecting though not shaken, hardly moved.

If we turn our eyes at once to the opposite end of the table, we see Bartholomew, who is standing on the right foot, the left being crossed over, his body bent forward, firmly supported with both his hands on the table. He listens as if to hear what John may elicit from the Lord; for altogether the application to the favourite disciple seems to come from this side. James the Younger, near Bartholomew but behind him, puts his left hand upon the shoulder of Peter in a similar way as Peter has laid his on the shoulder of John, only that James appears mild as he is simply desiring information while Peter seems to threaten vengeance. And, as Peter did behind Judas, so James the Younger stretches out his hand behind Andrew who, being one of the most prominent figures manifests by his half uplifted arms and raised palms the clearest expression of horror, one which occurs only once in this picture though it is sadly repeated in inferior composition which are conceived with less thought and profundity.

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