

Senate, many congressmen, and the justices of the Supreme Court.”

### National Tragedy, National Rebirth

In February 1860, Brady took the first of what would be many photographs of Abraham Lincoln, as the presidential candidate was on his way to make a speech at Cooper Union [SEE inside front cover, this issue]. Lincoln was wearing a black suit badly wrinkled from travelling, and despite his exceptional height, cut less than an impressive figure, according to accounts. Yet, Brady’s image of this man, whom he was meeting for the first time, overcomes the creases and a homely lankiness (Brady later recounted pulling up Lincoln’s collar to make his neck appear shorter), to present a figure of simple but comely stature. Lincoln, as well as his wife and sons, would return many times to Brady’s studio in the years ahead. And, when Brady determined to document the War, Lincoln signed a card saying “Pass Brady,” to give him access to every situation. Since that time, and for succeeding generations throughout the world, Brady’s photographic images have conveyed the austere power and nobility of the American nation resolutely mobilized, lest government “of, by, and for the people . . . perish from the Earth” [SEE inside front cover, this issue].

For today’s photographer, there is no better model to use in studying the art of portraiture. For historians, and for citizens, Brady’s dedication has left a priceless window into our past—a window we would do well to consult today. For, in Brady’s work, we find many of the life and death issues which confronted the nation then, within our gaze today.

—Philip S. Ulanowsky

*The exhibit will be at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. through Jan. 4, 1998. It will travel to the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Mass., and the International Center for Photography in New York City. The beautiful exhibit catalogue, “Mathew Brady and the Image of History,” by curator Mary Panzer, is available from the Smithsonian Institution Press for \$39.95.*

## ART

# Leonardo’s ‘Last Supper’: A Lesson in Metaphysics

It is a true pleasure to witness the joy invariably experienced by visitors to the “Last Supper” [SEE inside back cover, this issue], one of the masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), in the Refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, in Milan. In the Sixteenth century, Francis I was so taken by it, that he nearly had the wall demolished and brought back to France! Happily, today we have faithful photographic reproductions. But, whence comes the enchantment? We shall here attempt to discover what gives this work such power, and the means Leonardo developed to achieve it.

The fresco, at 15 ft. by 28.5 ft., was completed by Leonardo when he was forty-three years of age, between 1495 and 1497, a very eventful period of his life. Dissatisfied with the prevailing fresco technique, which required rapid execution on fresh plaster, Leonardo worked in oils on an impression (base of ground color) for absorption, which permitted retouching at will. This risky technique caused deterioration as early as 1517, according to witnesses. We need not recount here the story of the battle between the retouchers, on the one hand, and the restorers, on the other, each trying to “heal” the work.

In my view, the most savage of the massacres done to the painting—outside of the restorations—are: the enlargement of the door by the Dominicans in 1652, cutting off the feet of Christ and adjacent apostles; that of the dragoons of

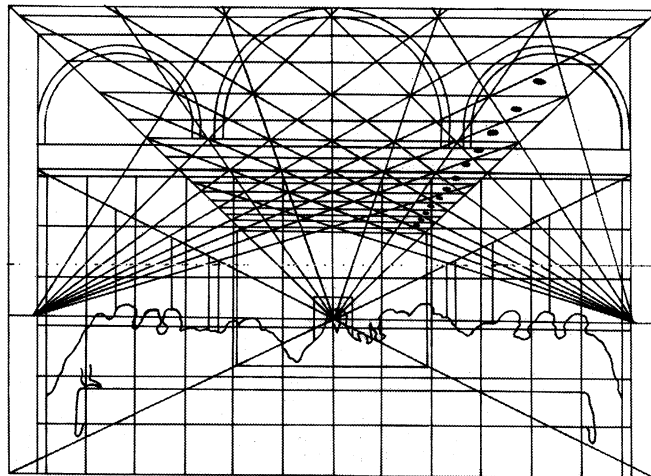


FIGURE 1. *The central vanishing point is in the face of Christ.*

Napoleon, who turned the refectory into a stable and took pleasure in throwing bricks at the heads of Christ’s disciples; and that of the Allied bombing of the convent in 1943, which the fresco miraculously survived.

### Against an ‘Exterior’ God

To better understand the innovative character of Leonardo’s “Last Supper,” compare it with that of Andrea del Castagno (1421-57), which Leonardo might have seen in Florence, as it dates from 1447 [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. The excellent art historian Jacques Cagliardi describes it in his book, *The Conquest of Painting*:

“When one enters the ancient refectory of the convent of St. Appollonia, one is startled by what one believes to be thirteen lifelike polychrome statues. They are seated around a table, in a great hall of marble which appears to emerge from the wall; silence, isolation, and immobility dominate . . . —this last is broken only by the movement of hands, which are raised, opened, and come together. The frozen features of the apostles, enveloped in thought, create an even heavier atmosphere; none of them dare to

look at Christ. . . . A harsh light emphasizes the marble's violently contrasting veins of porphyry, alabaster, and onyx. It is all in a glacial coloring. The violent stiffness of the individuals is intensified by the geometric abstraction crossing the implacable vertical and horizontal lines."

This locates, precisely, everything with which Leonardo desired to break: contemplative Greco-Roman symbolism, dictated by the rigidity of a God exterior to human creativity. As we shall show, Leonardo used his genius to mobilize all the power of perspective invented by the Ghiberti-Brunelleschi-Donatello team at the beginning of the century, as well as the profound philosophy of Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa—in particular, his 1453 work "On the Vision of God." In this way, Leonardo made the "Last Supper" a true lesson in metaphysics.

### Viewing the Drama

First, he chose the most dramatic moment of the story:

"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 disciples looked one on another, doubting of whom he spoke."

—Gospel of John 13:21-22

In setting this scene, the iconography of the Middle Ages often placed Judas *on the opposite side* of the table. But, by placing Judas among the other disciples, Leonardo reinforces the dramatic questioning, provoking the viewer and his free will: Someone will betray, *but who?* Perhaps a disciple; perhaps a monk, taking his meal in the refectory. Maybe even you, the viewer.

In his version of the "Supper," Castagno attempted to homogenize the spatial construction, to unify all the elements of the composition. Conscious of all the pitfalls of linear perspective, Leonardo reverses the procedure of first projecting the point at infinity, and using this to then deduce the harmony of the figures; he places the central vanishing point in the center of the face of

Christ [SEE Figure 1], who is himself at the center of the composition, before three windows which open on a distant landscape (this is the principle of the *loggia*, typical of Flemish painting at the beginning of the Fifteenth century\*).

The implications of this choice are manifold. First, he underlines the notion of consubstantiation: Jesus is the link between Heaven and Earth, because he is the Son of God, become man amongst men. It is striking that, in Leonardo's "Supper," one identifies Christ immediately, whereas, in order to find Castagno's portrait of Christ, one must search among the disciples.



FIGURE 2. *The fresco suggests light coming from the left-hand windows.*

Instead of being static, Leonardo's disciples get up, speak, gesture, look at each other and at Christ, as if they cannot believe their ears. The movement of an "invisible fluid" seems to emerge from a distance, and the arms of Christ direct this dynamic toward the agitated organization of the groups of disciples. Imitating the approach of Castagno, the whole work was conceived as a *trompe l'oeil*: The fresco integrates the actual space of the refectory, by suggesting a ray of light coming from the windows of the left wall [SEE Figure 2], and points to Leonardo's successful mastery of

\* See the author's "The Invention of Perspective," *Fidelio*, Winter 1996 (Vol. V, No. 4), esp. pp. 62-63.

chiaroscuro.

Following, and in opposition to the "fashion" of his time, Leonardo discards all arrangements of the architectural elements, placing the tiling (which was traditionally placed in front, and thus, at the base of the painting) on the ceiling [Figure 1]. The fronting curve which crowns the central window behind Christ, magnificently integrates the structure of the ceiling with the curved form of the small door below the fresco.

### The Vision of Christ

Another phenomenon, independent of perspective, is that described by Nicolaus of Cusa in "On the Vision of God," apparently drawing on a painting by his friend "Roger" (van der Weyden) in Brussels. A group of monks stand in a semicircle around a portrait of the face of Christ. Since the painter suggests three dimensions on a plane surface, the painting can be viewed in the same fashion by each monk in the semicircle. Each has the illusion that the image looks at him, and that when moving, the eyes of Christ follow him! A mental mechanism for organizing space inserts itself into all perception. Cusa uses the paradox of this visual phenomenon, to introduce a theological

concept: Christ views each in a personal manner; he establishes this relationship with all mankind. His love is infinite and without reserve.

In the "Last Supper," this love is expressed by a metaphor; that is, the vision of Christ. The physical act of vision which organizes the total space, coincides with the theological concept of the divine love that orders the harmony of Creation. The spectator who comprehends the spatial organization of the painting, partakes thereby in the encounter with God. Thus, a mirror effect operates, where Man is elevated to the living image of the Creator, and we are brought through our vision to participate in Him (*capax Dei*).

—Karel Vereycken