

Part One: Steinberg and the Attention to Detail

Original and innovative, veteran art historian Leo Steinberg, a professor emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania, has long been a legendary figure in his field. Leo Steinberg's Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper serves to further inspect and investigate one of the most universally recognized paintings in the world. While first glance shows Jesus simply and modestly at the center of a dining table, flanked by six disciples on either side, upon further inspection of details there is much disagreement and controversy. In his studies, Steinberg strategically attempts to answer various debates on what exactly is represented, what the depicted actions express, and how and where the assembly is seated. Leo Steinberg's intricate and well thought-out book serves to dismiss all of the debates through his unique method of careful investigation of each detail presented.

The Last Supper was a mural painted in the 15th century by renowned painter Leonardo da Vinci. In the Gospels found in the Christian Bible, the Last Supper was the final meal shared by Jesus and his twelve disciples in Jerusalem. Misinterpretation of Leonardo's picture, Steinberg believes, commenced early. Steinberg's study displays a thorough analysis through various aspects of Leonardo's painting. Separated in nine distinct chapters, Steinberg organizes and systemizes his thoughts and theories regarding this work of art. Chapters on the twelve disciples, feet and hands, functions of objects, and the importance of space, and its connection with the viewer, all serve to further aid in the understanding of the depth of Leonardo's art. Jesus, being the main figure, rightly bears the closest and most careful examination. This book offers very concise and calculated arrangements towards supporting Steinberg's theory that all these features are

not the result of “a chance optical constellation”¹, but in fact part of a prearranged and planned design. As a reader, one can appreciate the attention to detail and the deep study and inspection required to formulate such a book. However, undertaking the task of evaluating such a piece proves difficult as Steinberg enlists the help from two distinct sources: “the observations of writers and scholars, and the responses of artists as expressed in copies and adaptations”². By including the aid of other authors and professionals, Steinberg offers a more exhaustive study. The inclusion submits alternative opinions and perspectives, which serve to further the detailed analysis of Leonardo’s art. Steinberg’s book does, at times, read like the calculated ravings of a madman. It contains a descriptive surplus of persons, themes, words, and patterns. But this excess clearly arises from a long, ardent appreciation of Leonardo’s painting, supplemented by bounteous scholarly depth and imagination; his thoughts can perhaps only be contained in such an eccentric book.

The structure of the mural and the connection with its viewer plays a large part in Steinberg’s discussion and argument about the representation of space. Details such as the receding banquet hall, with its darkened wall tapestries and faint far-off apertures, presents a huge disjunction. The space is internally coherent, a mathematically exact projection of a rectangular room onto a two-dimensional canvas. But it is also radically severed from our visual experience, so that no matter where one stands in the refectory at Santa Maria delle Grazie, the painting refuses to “come right”³. Always, the perspective construction swerves dramatically inward, as if on hinges: “no depicted interior in

¹ Steinberg 2001, “Leonardo’s Incessant Last Supper,” p. 23.

² p. 14.

³ p. 121.

Renaissance painting is so prone to distortion as one shuffles about”⁴. This forces the viewer to not be content with analyzing and examining the artwork from one vantage point. Thus, Leonardo succeeds in controlling the audience by making it necessary to view the mural at various positions in the refectory. In fact, as Steinberg shows with the help of a shoebox diorama, the “perspective comes right”⁵ at a single spot in the room, on the eye level with Christ, several meters elevated over the floor of the refectory. From every other vantage point, the perfectly rectangular perspective construction is “driven toward triangularity”⁶ by the eye; the space cranes toward the perfection of the Trinity, and achieves it only at the level of Christ himself. Leonardo’s construction, says Steinberg, is thus both mathematically precise and allows perspective to aid in narrative symbolism, choreography, and iconography. This method of interpretation raises important questions about the practice of iconography, or writing with images. Steinberg elaborates that Leonardo’s unusual perspective has relevance insofar as it gives us information about the picture’s story. This kind of scholarly method of reading works of art is achieved through the finding of profound meanings disguised in painted objects and in its connection with the viewer.

Leo Steinberg’s argument of the importance of detail is furthered through his intricate study of the twelve disciples and notably the person of Jesus. His book interprets the placement, pose, and gestures of each. Apart from the image of Christ, Judas is arguably the most controversial and fascinating character depicted. Painted as a dark, swarthy man, Judas’ long shaggy and unkempt hair is found sprawled over his face. Such appearance displays a man of viciousness and complete ruin, a man of betrayal. This

⁴ Steinberg 2001, “Leonardo’s Incessant Last Supper,” p. 119.

⁵ p. 121.

⁶ p. 120.

painting would be an image of the last supper which would take place the very night Judas Iscariot betrays Christ (John 13:21-30). Judas' hard calloused face has a countenance marked by scars of avarice, deceit, hypocrisy, and crime; a face that would delineate a character who would betray his best friend while his right hand is shown gripping on the very bag of money paid to him to betray Christ. One important detail is the "villainously low brow", which looks "abnormal" and "purposed"⁷. Another distinguishing detail "in the drawing is the emotional stress, the held breath, the clenched mouth under pried open eyes" and "upper and lower face in astonishing contrapposto"⁸. Even his placement on the table suggests a sense of discontinuity between him and the other disciples. Leaning on his right elbow onto the dinner table, Judas subsequently separates himself from the remainder of the disciples demonstrating that it was he who would eventually betray Jesus. Shadows fall over his face and body, significant to both hide his face from the others as well as demonstrate the shame involved with his anticipated crime. Moreover, the anatomy of the neck displays a strained, muscular, and tense complexion juxtaposed by the "flattened" depiction of the necks of the remaining subjects. All of which serve as evidence towards pinpointing Judas as the criminal.

The image of Andrew adds to the complexity and intricacy of Leonardo's art. Seated three seats from Jesus' right, Andrew, brother of Peter, was a trustworthy fisherman turned disciple. Adept at converting people to the followings of Jesus, Andrew would commit his life towards the following of Christ ultimately concluding with the termination of his life as a martyr. The most distinctive detail is the upright hands with the palms facing outwards. Andrew displays himself "with his hands spread open shows

⁷ Steinberg 2001, "Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper," p. 94.

⁸ p. 94.

his palms, and shrugs his shoulders up to his ears, making a mouth of astonishment”⁹. The most important and most critiqued gesture, his hands, are said to “resonate with ulterior meanings”¹⁰. As a reaction to the announcement of the betrayal Andrew raises his hands in a sense of shock and disbelief. It is important to note that Andrew is the only disciple to demonstrate such a gesture. Steinberg theorizes that it is because he was “first called of the Apostles”¹¹ and that he was arguably the most loyal and faithful apostle. For this reason it is only he who displays “astonished hands” upon hearing the news of the approaching crime. Compared to Judas, Andrew’s complexion and attitude towards the betrayal is completely opposite evidenced by the placement, pose, and gestures of the two apostles.

Steinberg boldly proclaims “in the Last Supper no detail is waste”¹² and it is his responsibility as a critic and lover of the arts to exhaust himself with studies and theories. In his book, Steinberg does not announce his theories to be absolute truth but rather acknowledges the importance of a collaboration of critics and opinions. Steinberg ultimately argues that it is only through the disputes and differences among keen observers, which ultimately enables the best understanding of Leonardo’s art and each detail presented. His book, Leonardo’s Incessant Last Supper, makes clear “that every multivalency in the painting earns praise for being straightforward and clear even though disagreements over what it is that is clearly presented never subside” and that “the task throughout was to discover what art could be made to do”¹³.

⁹ Steinberg 2001, “Leonardo’s Incessant Last Supper,” p. 97.

¹⁰ p. 98.

¹¹ p. 100.

¹² P. 134.

¹³ p. 194.