Theme 2: Leonardo da Vinci and the Italian Renaissance

Lesson 10: Leonardo (continued)

We do not know Leonardo’s sexual preference, though a “flamboyant homosexual,” as the novel claims on page 45, he was not: he once vigorously and successfully defended himself against a charge of homosexual behavior. There is no record, in fact, of any amorous relationship with anyone at all. Long before Sigmund Freud attempted to psychoanalyze Leonardo centuries after the painter’s death, art historians and art lovers had wondered aloud about his depiction of decidedly androgynous figures. The angel in the *Madonna of the Rocks* is one such example. When we eliminate the disturbingly odd posture and concentrate on the facial features, the delicate beauty is striking (at left). The model may have been a handsome boy just going through puberty. The model could also be a lovely girl of similar age. The hair length suggests the female gender, but we must be careful here, since we are out of our time, place, and culture: for example, the man Jesus is always depicted with long hair in the Renaissance. When we turn from the *Madonna of the Rocks* to what appears to be a drawing of the same model, the face is even more beautiful—and more ambiguous (at right). It also looks somewhat older and definitely more earthly. The *Art Renewal Center* labels this sketch “Head of a Girl,” rather than as a study for the angel above. Is it a girl?
Part 2
Angel simply means messenger in Hebrew (ma’läk) and in Greek (aggelos) and may apply to human as well as divine message carriers. The two angels named in the Protestant Bible—Gabriel and Michael—and the other angel named in the Catholic Bible—Raphael—are obviously of masculine gender. Biblically, traditionally, then, angels are masculine in gender, if not in sex, and in Renaissance painting, as in art of the Middle Ages, we read these angels as masculine figures.

Sketches for the Last Supper offer us a softer glimpse of the hairy disciples. Consider a study for St. Philip (at left) and compare it to the painted figure in a copy of the Last Supper from the sixteenth century, when the work was still fairly detailed (at right). The face in the drawing is much more feminine than the face in the painting. But is it in fact the face of a woman?

Next we examine the figure to the right of Jesus in the Last Supper, which the novel claims to be Mary Magdalene, but which convention has always identified as the Fourth Gospel’s Beloved Disciple, who in turn is usually identified as St. John (at left). Tradition makes the Beloved Disciple the youngest of all, and so he often goes beardless in paintings to emphasize his youth.

Like the rest of the painting, this section has deteriorated badly. The quote from page 243 of The Da Vinci Code tells us that this “individual had flowing red hair, delicate folded hands, and the hint of a bosom,” and is—“undoubtedly”—a woman. The figure to the left of the redhead, identified as St. Peter, has kindly grown a beard to help us determine that he is indeed a man, but the figure we most want to read is not very cooperative. What remains of the face tells us next to nothing. The remaining eye looks down demurely and the hair is parted neatly, which may be interpreted as feminine traits. But we must remember the Last Supper’s Jesus, who is not so very different, particularly in the sketch we looked at. The resemblance becomes more apparent when we flip the image and deteriorate the facial features as in the St. John / Mary Magdalene of the Last Supper (at right). The face of Jesus is somehow feminized in the process. If we forget for a minute that this is supposed to be the face of Jesus, that is, if we examine only the visual information, the face on the right could easily be a woman’s.
Part 3

It is revealing to look at a Leonardo work that represents a female face for certain (at left). Whether it is the face of the Virgin or the portrait of some Renaissance lady, the gender-blurring virtually disappears whenever the painter treats a woman. Despite the novel’s assertion that the Mona Lisa’s face is androgynous, most people have not seen it that way. As we know, the Mona Lisa soon became synonymous with feminine beauty and subtlety. Remember too that in the sixteenth century, soon after the portrait was painted, Giorgio Vasari identified the sitter as the wife of a well-known and powerful man. A counter theory also dating back centuries holds that the Mona Lisa is really a portrait of a high-class prostitute with whom Leonardo fell in love. Only after Freud “proved” psychoanalytically that Leonardo must have been a repressed homosexual, did the hypothesis of Mona Lisa as a self-portrait in drag come into vogue in certain circles. Theme 1 already considered that hypothesis and found it wanting.

There is an interesting sketch by Leonardo that may show us more than we want to know about this topic. The so-called Incarnate Angel, like the figure of St. John / Mary Magdalene in the Last Supper, suggests femininity in its handling of head, hair, arms, and torso (at left). The breast is especially evocative of a female figure. However, there is a masculine parallel in the paintings of Leonardo. Not only does the upraised hand echo the gesture in Leonardo’s painting of St. John the Baptist, but the face, hair, left hand, and angle of the loose garment bear an uncanny resemblance (below right). The shift of the upraised right arm covers any problematic swelling around the nipple, and in fact the rendering of St. John the Baptist—however handsome and graceful he may appear—leaves viewers assured of his masculinity.

Might the drawing be a preparatory sketch for the painting, which was completed only a few years before Leonardo’s death? Although there seems to be no authoritative link between the two, it is hard not to associate the images.

The reproduction above shows only half the drawing. If we consider the Incarnate Angel as a whole, there can be no doubt at all about the figure’s sex (below). The anatomical frankness also indicates why this sketch is so hard to find in art books and on the Internet. Leonardo was certainly no prude, as his X-ray like illustration of a man and a woman having sex attests, but to endow an angel or a saint with such a carnal appetite was not only shocking in its time (and ours), but impious, blasphemous, and dangerous. One critic describes the facial expression as a leer, just to make things worse. If we keep our eyes above the waistline, however, the smile is sweeter than that.

Of course, the drawing does not announce itself as a holy figure. It is only a naked boy or very young man.

1 For those unfamiliar with Christian saints, it should be pointed out that St. John the Baptist is not the same person as St. John the Beloved Disciple.
2 See “Leonardo: The disturbing leer of the bisexual angel” online.
What to make of all this? The figure to the right of Jesus in the Last Supper may well have somewhat feminine features. Such an aspect, however, does not insure that the figure represents Mary Magdalene or any other woman. When drawing and painting masculine figures, in particular young and attractive males, Leonardo often played with gender. His motivation is not particularly important to the twenty-first century. He was a true genius, a man so unique in creativity, curiosity, and scientific spirit, that we lesser mortals cannot quite imagine ourselves in his skin. If his talent and intellect are beyond our ken, the same probably holds true for his inner life.

Leonardo was in his sixties when he drew the young man, if we date the sketch alongside the painting of St. John the Baptist, and the High Renaissance was drawing to a close. It did not come crashing down around anyone’s ears, though some historians mark the end of the Italian Renaissance on May 6, 1527, the day Spanish and German troops sacked Rome. But this event had little immediate impact on art. Although Leonardo died in 1519, Michelangelo lived until 1564, and Titian lived even longer, finally falling victim to the plague in 1576.

It is perhaps better to think of the Renaissance not as ending, but as evolving. In the past, art historians tended to speak of later painters as having developed their art in reaction to the Renaissance, rejecting its paradigm and its principles; but in many ways these movements or attitudes or styles, such as Mannerism and the Baroque, simply carried Renaissance ideas to their logical extremes. The fundamental notions of the Renaissance were slow to break down and have never quite gone away.

An understanding of the revolutionary changes in painting will not be complete without turning our attention to northern Europe, the principle area of interest in Theme 3. Before abandoning Leonardo, the Italian Renaissance, and the novel The Da Vinci Code, however, there is important work to do.