Theme 2: Leonardo da Vinci and the Italian Renaissance

Lesson 9: Leonardo (continued)

Part 1

Castel Gandolfo, the Vatican observatory described above, appears more than once in the novel *The Da Vinci Code*, and always as part of a negative image of the Roman Catholic Church and its power. Not that Protestantism fares any better at the hands of Dan Brown. His relentless attack on all orthodox Christianity is perhaps the chief difference between this novel and its predecessor, *Angels and Demons*, in which the same protagonist, Robert Langdon, works to save the Church from its enemies. There is no subtlety in this novel, and readers easily tell the good guys from the bad guys. The problem resides in a certain inconsistency in which the good and the bad shift around, at times unconvincingly.

The same lack of subtlety emerges in the ekphrastic passages of the novel, a bluntness that should make the text easy to analyze, if not always enjoyable to read. Unfortunately, the passages sometimes suffer also from the same inconsistency. For example, after teasing the reader with a secret meaning hidden in the *Madonna of the Rocks*, the novel never satisfactorily solves the visual riddle. By now you have seen that the novel confuses, perhaps deliberately, the two children in the painting. The angel crouching sphinx-like looks as feminine as it does masculine, and calling her or him Uriel does not make it so (at left). We will discuss gender in Leonardo’s artwork in another place.

Was Leonardo a true subversive, the cunning head of a secret society dedicated to the ultimate truth about the man Jesus, a genius who communicated that secret in coded paintings—as the novel suggests throughout—, or merely a “prankster who often amused himself by quietly gnawing at the hand that fed him,” as the novel also suggests on page 45? Dan Brown seems to want to have it both ways.

Since the novel is a work of fiction, we know that any truth therein is strictly incidental. The realistic or mimetic aspect is functional. The novel must convince us of its plausibility, and readers demand no more than that. It uses ekphrasis two ways: 1) to bolster its credibility by reproducing what we know as true, and 2) in an effort to support more outlandish claims by advancing from a platform of verifiable data, such as an actual painting.
Part 2

Leonardo’s Last Supper is a key element in the novel’s use of ekphrasis in pursuit of these goals. This work is, of course, neither the first nor last time a Christian painter dealt with the subject. But it is also safe to say that Leonardo’s remains the most famous. The reason no doubt has much to do with the fact that the masterpiece began to fall apart almost immediately, and thus became scandalous in its own time. As previously mentioned, Leonardo experimented with an oil-based medium on water-based plaster, and the results were predictably disastrous. Oil and water do not mix without a substantial emulsion to lock the molecules side by side. For instance, in mayonnaise the egg manages to hold the vinegar and oil together, at least temporarily; if the egg spoils, the molecules break down again and the oil separates. In the case of Leonardo’s painting, the pigment flaked off little by little as the plaster wall surface expanded or shrank naturally with the weather.

Copies from the sixteenth century show us something of the original color and detail, and the recent restoration has given us more to see on the convent wall where it was painted (above). Sadly, the work can never be seen again as Leonardo painted it in 1498.

As in all paintings by Leonardo, the Last Supper—even in its woeful state—reveals the work of his hand in a technique known as sfumato. This wonderful sounding word comes from Italian and refers to the blurring or smudging of outlines in a painting. Unlike Botticelli’s clean intricate lines, Leonardo never offers sharp edges. We have seen in Theme 1 that sfumato is one of the secrets behind Mona Lisa’s smile. The contours of the nose and lips blend into the highlights and shadows of the complexion. The chin and jaw line fade into the background as if turning away in three-dimensional space. The misty atmosphere softens everything in it. We see the same slight blurring in the Madonna of the Rocks and in the Last Supper.
Part 3
Paintings of the Last Supper, which took place in Jerusalem on the evening before Jesus died on the cross, are technically illustrations of a biblical text. The Gospel According to Mark (14:12–26) tells it this way:

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.”

The disciples left, went into the city, and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, “I tell you the truth: one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.”

They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, “Surely not I?”

“It is one of the Twelve,” he replied, “one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. “I tell you the truth: I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.”

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.
Part 4
The painting encapsulates the precise moment in which Jesus reveals that one of the Twelve, his closest disciples, will betray him. They tip back in shock and protest. Or turn away to argue with or accuse one another. Thanks to preparatory sketches and traditional iconography, we can identify the figures at the table (below right). Judas is the easiest to spot, his face in shadow and his fist on the moneybag.

The Bible helps set the scene for any painter. The episode must take place in a large upper room. There must be a table and thirteen people at the table; in the fashion of the time they are said to be reclining, but this practice was rarely if ever depicted literally in European painting. The Passover meal or Seder itself traditionally consists of hard-boiled egg, roasted lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and other foodstuff symbolic of the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. Mark also mentions wine, a cup, and a bowl, although other Gospels add further details.

Leonardo uses some but not all of these particulars. Not surprisingly, his vision is personal. As in the Madonna of the Rocks, none of the figures of the Last Supper wears a halo, despite their holiness. The patrons and viewers of the painting knew its religious nature: whether on paper (at left) or on the wall (at right), the image of any man in red and blue robes surrounded by twelve other men, particularly when displayed in a Christian church or convent, could only represent Jesus and his disciples. The Last Supper was an especially important element in Renaissance theology and liturgy, as it typified the first Roman Catholic mass. Bread and wine became the body and blood of Jesus Christ, whose ultimate sacrifice saved humankind.

Did Leonardo believe any of the Christian doctrine? The novel would have us believe not. And this brings us to another assignment.