

Class 7
The Age of Discovery
Week 3
Thursday 6th August 2020

The Last Supper

Some people are easily satisfied with their work, even when they have more to give. They have more potential than they use but are quite happy if they can get away with putting in little effort and doing the minimum. Perhaps they have an attitude that if they work quickly, they will have more time for fun.

Leonardo looked upon such people with contempt; in all he did, he set himself the highest standard; he was quite driven. He would give endless time and unceasing effort to every task, whatever it was. But often people who did not have such high standards, simply could not understand why Leonardo always took such an endlessly long time to finish work. They could not understand that Leonardo was not easily satisfied and that only the very highest achievement was ever food enough for him, as can be seen from the story of the famous painting called the *Last Supper*.

When Leonardo was still working on that great clay model of rider and horse, the monks of the monastery in Milan came to him and asked if he would paint a very special picture for them.

On a wall of their refectory (their communal dining room) the monks wanted a picture of the last meal Jesus had with his disciples – the last meal before He was betrayed and taken to be crucified. At this last supper with his disciples, Jesus said, “One of you will betray me,” meaning Judas Iscariot, who was also present, though Jesus did not say who was going to betray him.

This is the moment Leonardo painted. Jesus had just said these words and the disciples are shocked with horror that one of them could betray their master. Every one of the disciples in the picture shows his horror or his grief in a different way. Only Judas sits grim, sullen and dark, knowing whom the Lord meant.

Even for a genius, Leonardo painting this moment was an enormously difficult task. But he set about it with his usual thoroughness. First, he wanted to find models for the faces of the disciples. For weeks and months, he walked through the streets of Milan, peering at people’s faces. When, at long last, he saw a man whose face he could use for one of the disciples, Leonardo observed that man for hours until he could remember every feature of his face, and then he rushed home to make a quick sketch of the face he had seen.

But sometimes months and months passed in which he could not see a face that was of any use to him. The face of Christ was, as you can imagine, a very great difficulty for him. After many months he saw a young Italian nobleman whose face had just the right balance between gentleness and kindness, and sorrow, which is what Leonardo was looking for.

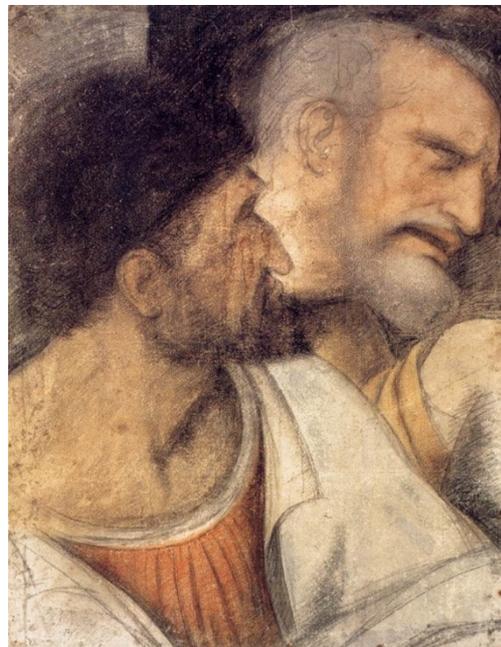
It was not only finding models for faces which posed challenges and took a long time. Sometimes Leonardo would come in the morning and stand before the unfinished painting

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in the monastery, stand there the whole day deep in thought, and then walk out – without having done a single brush stroke.

You can imagine the abbot's reaction to this! He became quite anxious and impatient. Progress was just too slow. He pleaded with Leonardo to work faster and finish it. He became cross with Leonardo, but it made no difference to Leonardo's behaviour, he took no notice of the raving abbot!

At long last the painting was nearly finished. Only one face was missing, and this was the face of Judas – the miserable traitor. And now Leonardo became interested in all kinds of evil, ugly, twisted faces. He filled his notebook with all kinds of horrible faces that he had seen in the streets of Milan and he went to places where thieves and rogues came together and sketched their mean and brutal features. But none of them seemed just right for Judas.



Leonardo's preparatory sketches.

Above-left: ugly faces.

Above right: Judas (left) and Peter (right).

Left: arranging and positioning figures.

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By now the abbot was really losing his patience. He screamed and shouted, “I have put up with slow work while you had the excuse of finding the right faces for Jesus and the disciples, but I am not going to wait for the face of that scoundrel, Judas!”

He demanded that Leonardo finish the picture immediately. Leonardo responded evenly, “Well I suppose I can finish the picture in a couple of hours – I shall simply put your face as the face of Judas.”

The abbot was terrified at this suggestion. He did not want the whole of Milan to see him painted as a villain like Judas. So, he calmed down and let Leonardo take his time.

Leonardo’s answer showed what he thought of people who did not take great trouble over their work. The abbot showed that he was not fussed about the necessary process to create a fine piece of work - that some people just need more time. Leonardo thought people who thought like the abbot were no better than Judas – for every kind of careless work is really a betrayal of the potential good work it could have been.



When the work was finally finished, people from all over Italy and even other countries came to Milan to see it. They all praised it as the most wonderful painting ever created. But here again misfortune struck Leonardo. It was all his own fault, really, and it had to do with his experimenting.

Unlike painting on canvas where an artist uses oils, when painting on walls the painters had always mixed milk in with their paints, but Leonardo was well-known for experimenting with the composition of his paints even further.

The scene would typically have been painted on wet plaster, but this usual fresco technique was fast-drying, and Leonardo wanted to work slowly – over a number of years, so he applied his paint to a dry plaster wall. This, along with Milan’s humidity, stopped the paint from adhering to the plaster wall.



So, Leonardo had used a mixture which did not last very well at all, on a surface which did not hold the paint. In only two years damp patches appeared and spoiled the picture, then the vibrant colours became dull. And the paint began to peel away. Over the course of time the picture became a shadow of its original. Perhaps more upsetting, later on, when other painters tried to improve the masterpiece, they made the painting worse.

In the Second World War – in the mid 1900s – a strange thing happened. A bomb fell near the monastery and the whole building collapsed. All except the wall with Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Over time, as new restoration techniques have been discovered, they have been applied to the painting, but some have done more harm than good, showing you need to be a bit wary of rushing into new technologies before they are tried and tested.

A lot of effort has gone into the restoration and preservation of *The Last Supper* – it is considered very important, as people hold onto the hope that this painting can be kept forever. Recently, a food company gave the Italian government a donation so that together they could pay for a professional conservator to restore the painting. It seems quite fitting that a food company help to save the most famous depiction of this important meal for future generations to appreciate.

But the *Last Supper* made Leonardo so famous that the city of Florence called him back to paint a picture of a great battle on the wall of the Town Hall. A battle scene with hundreds of men and horses – that was a wonderful task for Leonardo. You can imagine how he

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worked on every detail, and this time he had invented a quite special kind of paint; when you painted the picture, the colours looked quite dull, but when the colours were heated, they became wonderfully brilliant. Leonardo had tried it out on cardboard, and it had worked out very well. And so, he painted this battle scene with tireless effort to show the Florentine people what he could do.

The galloping horses, the shining swords, the fighting men in this picture would be something that could never be surpassed. When the picture was finished the colours looked dull. Now charcoal-braziers were brought in and the glowing coals began to heat the paint. But a wall is not the same as cardboard, and as the heat rose, the colours began to run down the picture. Hastily the fire was extinguished, but it was too late. The whole painting was just a blur and smudges of paint. Leonardo turned and left. Once again, his experiments had ruined work that had taken many, many months.