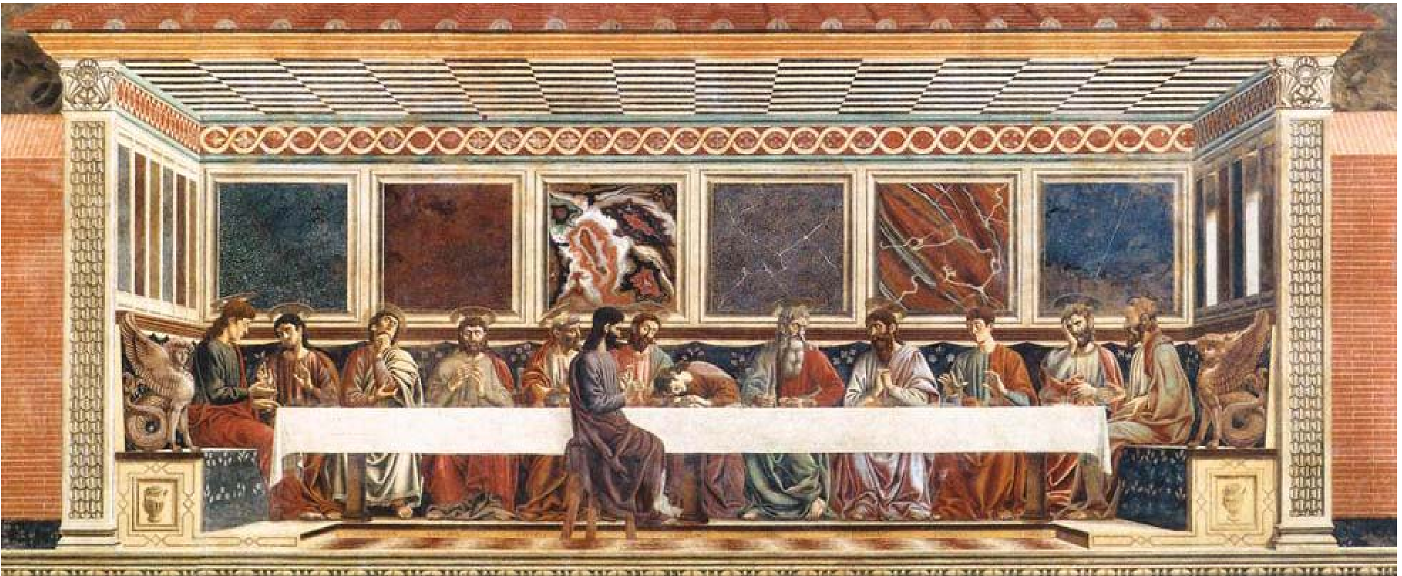


Andrea del Castagno's Last Supper, in a former convent refectory that is now a museum.

The Last Supper Seen Six Ways

By Louis Inturrisi

***The New York Times*, March 23, 1997**

When I was 9 years old, I painted the Last Supper. I did it on the dining room table at our home in Connecticut on Saturday afternoon while my mother ironed clothes and hummed along with the Texaco. Metropolitan Operative radio broadcast. It took me three months to paint the Last Supper, but when I finished and hung it on my mother's bedroom wall, she assured me .it looked just like Leonardo da Vinci's painting. It was supposed to. You can't go very wrong with a paint-by-numbers picture, and even though I didn't always stay within the lines and sometimes got the colors wrong, the experience left me with a profound respect for Leonardo's achievement and a lingering attachment to the genre.

So last year, when the Florence Tourist Bureau published a list of frescoes of the Last Supper that are open to the public, I was immediately on their track. I had seen several of them, but never in sequence.

During the Middle Ages the *ultima cena*—the final supper Christ shared with His disciples before His arrest and crucifixion—was part of any fresco cycle that told His life story. But in the 15th century the Last Supper began to appear independently, especially in the refectories, or dining halls, of the convents and monasteries of the religious orders founded during the Middle Ages. Many of the *cenacoli*, or muraled refectories, in the brochure have been inaccessible for centuries because they were in cloistered areas or had to be restored. Therefore, they are generally well preserved, in excellent condition, with glowing colors, except for the one in the Convento della Calza, which has been poorly restored.

One reason there are so many in Florence is that the subject lent itself well to 15th-century Italian ideals of harmony and perspective. In fact, when Leonardo moved to Milan around 1483, he chose the Last Supper to illustrate the concept of Renaissance perspective then in vogue in Florence. The scene of Jesus and his Twelve Apostles at table did this perfectly because it allowed the artist to divide up a tight interior space harmoniously and balance it by arranging an equal number of apostles on either side of Christ so that the vanishing point was directly behind the protagonist's head.

Furthermore, Florence had major houses of all the religious orders of the day with large refectories where the monks took their meals together. The Last Supper was the preferred subject for a refectory wall not only because it represented a meal, but also because it was during this meal that the Eucharist was instituted. This association of corporal and spiritual food aided the monks in meditation during their meals, which were usually eaten in silence. It was also during the Last Supper that Christ gave His apostles the mandate to "do this in memory of me," thereby establishing the priesthood of which the monks were members.

Finally, the scene of the Last Supper, wit its startling revelation and intimation of imminent disaster, has the kind of high drama that appealed to Renaissance artists. Like Michelangelo's "David" or Cellini's "Perseus," the Last Supper freezes attention on a dramatic moment just before a decisive action. In the case of the David it's right before he loads his slingshot; in the Last Supper, it's the moment (derived from Matthew 26: 20-23) when Christ reveals that one of his own disciples will betray him: "Now when the even was come, He sat down with the 12. And as they did eat, He said, 'Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.' And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto Him, 'Lord, is it I?' And He answered and said, 'He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me.' "

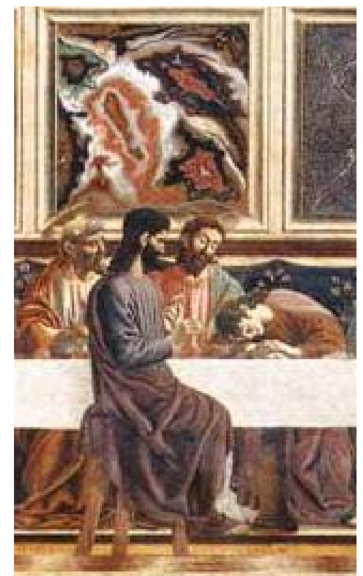
The brochure lists nine Last Suppers, but by postponing three for another visit, you can easily see the other six in a day. I would postpone the Cenacolo of the Badia di Passignano because it is not in Florence proper; the Cenacolo di Santo Spirito because only a small fragment remains, and the Cenacolo dl Ognissanti because it is almost a duplicate of the Cenacolo di San Marco by Ghirlandaio, described below.

Santa Croce has the earliest (1340) refectory Last Supper in Florence, so it is instructive as a starting point. The Last Supper is in the Cimabue museum in the first cloister next to the church in front of the Pazzi Chapel. When you enter the former Franciscan refectory, you will see the fresco along the far wall below a crucifixion scene that spreads out like a tree. Both were painted by Taddeo Gaddi, who worked with Giotto for some 25 years and became the leader in 14th-century painting after Giotto's death.

In comparing this Last Supper to the others, you should remember that there is no background behind the figures, only black space. All except Judas are lined up one after the other and face front. Each is an icon, as their halos make evident. Solid and barrel-chested, the saints are too large for the narrow table that stretches the length of the wall. Moreover, apart from a few furrowed brows, the figures communicate little psychological tension or physical movement, although they are skillfully executed. Christ has his eyes downcast in resignation, and his hand raised in a forgiving blessing; John is asleep in his lap, and the other apostles do not seem very upset by what they have heard.

All of this changes radically when you move across town to Sant' Apollonia's Last Supper (see top of page 1), near Piazza della Indipendenza. It was painted a little over 100 years later by one of the great early artists of the Renaissance, Andrea del Castagno. It was in the former refectory of a Benedictine convent, now the Castagno museum, where it occupies one wall of a long, dimly lighted room.

This wall painting, through carefully calculated mathematical proportions drawn by an expert draftsman, creates the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. Rather than decorate the wall, this Last Supper almost replaces it, projecting the room-within-a-room so that it seems to jut out into the refectory.

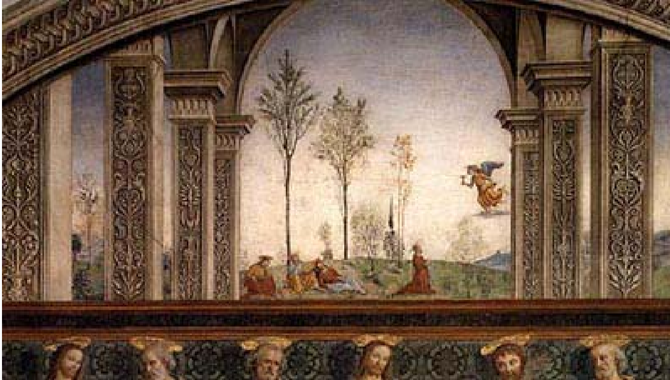


There is a row of chairs in front of the painting, allowing the visitor to sit and contemplate how Castagno did this. The room where the Last Supper is taking place has a sloping red tile roof and inward-slanting side panels that pull the viewer in. At the same time, the black-and-white striped ceiling and diamond-shaped floor tiles push you in the opposite direction. This inward-outward movement is a bit like looking at a hologram until your eye catches on to it. Instead of Gaddi's neutral black backdrop, the background is all explosion of color from six different marble squares that stand out from their white frames and create depth behind the seated figures.

Where to put Judas is always a problem in Last Supper scenes. If he's with the other apostles, how does one pick him out? If he's separated, it unbalances the seating arrangement. In Castagno's conception, Judas sits alone in front of the table, but to good advantage because he interrupts the solid block of white tablecloth and forms a neat circle with Christ and Peter on the other side of the table. Behind their heads, a veined marble slab with sinister red and black flares draws Christ and the two men who will deny him into the same square.

Unlike the tranquil Santa Croce cenacolo, the mood here is tense and foreboding as the dark-robed, satyr-like Judas gets ready to dip the telltale piece of bread into Christ's dish. Moreover, there is irony in the fact that the disciples, who are not paying attention—some are turned away, others are talking and one is clearly daydreaming –seem unaware of what only Christ and Judas know is about to take place.

Castagno was one of the first to use sharp contrasts of light to dramatize mighty events, so everything is molded by a gold Tuscan light. This is the most stylized of the Last Suppers in Florence; it looks like a stage set that will roll off into the wings as soon as this scene is over. But it is one of Castagno's few existing works and a masterpiece of scientific realism (note the skillful transparency of the glasses and bottles on the table).



The Cenacolo of San Marco (1482) in the Museo di San Marco and the Cenacolo of Foligno (1495) by Perugino in the Conservatorio di Foligno are nearby and not far from each other. The first is in Piazza San Marco, the other near the train station. Try to see them back-to-back because both have gardens as backgrounds that open up the paintings. Ghirlandaio's garden is typically Tuscan, full of fruit trees and spindly cypresses, while Perugino's uses the feathery poplars isn't much drama or excitement in either. All the figures are sober, intelligent humanists. Even the cat crouching in the foreground of Ghirlandaio's painting looks as if he knows more than we do. The apostles with their handsome tunics and neat haircuts are well-turned-out courtiers, participants at a neo-Platonic symposium rather than tired fishermen eating dinner.

Left: top portion of Perugino's Last Supper
Right: Ghirlandaio's Last Supper

Their transformation must have been more telling to the monks who could also read the neo-Platonic symbols in Ghirlandaio's garden where each flower (the lily for purity) and bird (the peacock for faith) had a meaning. The walled garden itself was a symbol of virginity and represented the monks' vow of chastity.

Both of these works are brilliant examples of the refinement and virtuosity of Florentine painters during the Renaissance. Reason is what is really celebrated here. You can see it in the regular folds of Ghirlandaio's tablecloth and in the forest of elegant pillars that Perugino has receding into the distance to carry the viewer beyond the Last Supper to the Resurrection. Interestingly, the Perugino Last Supper, in the refectory of the former convent of the Franciscan tertiaries, is the only one where the apostles are actually eating anything. In all the others the menu appears to be limited to a few crusts of bread and some fruit, but here the apostles are cutting up pieces of meat (with elegant forks and knives, no less) and pouring wine. I wonder if the absence of substantial nourishment in the others wasn't intentional, given the monks' long periods of fasting.

Andrea del Sarto’s painting in the Vallombrosan Abbey of San Salvi

The most famous Last Supper after Leonardo's is the one Andrea del Sarto painted in 1519 for the tranquil Vallombrosan Abbey of San Salvi, which is a short bus ride outside the center but not to be missed. Rather than otherworldly saints or humanist philosophers, the apostles in this painting are down-to-earth men who react with human emotions of incredulity, alarm, anger and dismay—even John manages to stay awake. The colors of the painting and the setting are beautifully matched: the reds, browns and tarnished yellows of the Last Supper blend harmoniously with the polished terracotta floor and cream-colored vaulted ceiling.

The amazing thing here, however, is the over-all movement, which can be as subtle as the rippling of the tablecloth or as exciting as the way each hand and each shoulder points to the bread Christ is about to consecrate. In the background, as suits the most dramatic of the Last Suppers, two servants observe the goings-on from balconies resembling theater boxes.

I can't say which is my favorite Last Supper. They are all special. But the one by Franciabigio in the Convento della Calza in front of Porta di Romana is particularly memorable because when I saw it, there were real tables set for lunch in front of it so that the diners in the painting seemed to occupy the head table in the refectory and looked perfectly at home.

There is nothing outstanding about Franciabigio's painting here, but the nun who accompanies you will tell you that it was done in 1514 and that the artist was a follower of Leonardo da Vinci. She may not tell you that it was subsequently heavily restored and badly repainted. "Don't you think it could use a little more burnt sienna?" I opined. She stopped her explanation and looked directly at me for the first time. I was about to tell her how my interest in Last Suppers began but decided not to. She had probably never heard of the paint-by-numbers method.