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Art 111, Art Appreciation

Art Criticism

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Leonardo Da Vinci

The Last Supper

Painting

c. 1495-1498

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“After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me’” (*English Standard Version*, John 13:21). It is the scene which follows this statement that the acclaimed Leonardo Da Vinci portrays in his painting, *The Last Supper*, which was completed c. 1495-1498 (Meyer). The painting was accomplished on the wall of a nun’s refectory (eating room) in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Italy, where it remains viewable today after a long, complicated history of restoration efforts. For centuries, the work has captured the attention of art critics and laypeople alike due to its unique composition and formal complexity. Part of a period in history known as the High Renaissance, Da Vinci was known for his innovative ideas, ranging from cartography to engineering and even botany. He was the embodiment of the humanist ideal and remains notable for his work across various subjects. A thorough formal and contextual analysis of *The Last Supper* by Da Vinci reveals the painter’s expert use of perspective, shape, and chiaroscuro, as well as his reliance on the surrounding context to express themes of humanism and individuality.

Da Vinci employs geometric representation and unique perspectives to create fascinating formal qualities within *The Last Supper*. However, before understanding these elements, discussing the subject and facts surrounding this famous painting is important. *The Last Supper* was commissioned by Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan, as part of a family mausoleum, a free-standing structure surrounding the burial place of family members (Meyer). This area of the mausoleum would later become a refectory for nuns. The painting is religious in nature and is estimated to have been painted c. 1495-1498. This time period marked an important period in world (and especially European) history, known as the Renaissance, during which a revival in classical learning ensued (Zelazko). Da Vinci was one of the most acclaimed painters during this period, contributing to the legacy and influence of this movement. It is also essential to discuss

the formal qualities of the work. Da Vinci used tempera and oil on plaster to create his representational painting, which is displayed in two dimensions (2-D) (Meyer). The painting is relatively large, measuring 4.6 x 8.8 meters, creating the illusion that the viewer is in the room with Jesus and His disciples. Furthermore, Da Vinci uses a popular Renaissance technique known as “linear perspective” to create a three-dimensional appearance. This illusion is further created by a contrast in value between the background and foreground, which are darker and lighter respectively. Da Vinci also uses geometric shapes in the composition of *The Last Supper*. For instance, when the arms of Jesus and John (directly to the left of Jesus) are traced, they create a triangular shape. Lastly, Da Vinci employs the use of *sfumato* (meaning “smoky”), which is the popular Renaissance technique of blending colors to create a more natural appearance. This may explain why the painting exhibits a hazy, gradient texture, although the painting’s rapid deterioration has also contributed to this feature (Meyer). Lastly, the subject of the painting is the Lord’s Supper (or Last Supper). Specifically, this scene depicts the moment in which Jesus states in John 13:21 that He will be betrayed. The individual, complex emotions of the disciplines are displayed in full, along with a naturalistic look. Da Vinci elects to depict Jesus and His disciples in a normal appearance, in opposition to the custom of attaching a halo to the head of Jesus in preceding works (Zelazko).

Da Vinci’s use of elements of design contributes to the sense of unity, emphasis, balance, contrast, and movement in *The Last Supper*. First, Da Vinci’s use of lines contributes to the painting’s unity. Explicit lines outline the ceiling, walls, windows, and table. These lines create obvious physical structures that contribute to the understanding of the painting as representing a historical event. Implied lines draw the observer’s attention to the center of the painting, where Jesus is seated. Indeed, the original nail that Da Vinci drove into the wall to mark the vanishing

point is still visible on the right temple of Jesus (Franz). The use of lines to create representation and draw the eyes of the observer to the center creates unity within the painting, as a central figure is identified. This vanishing point also emphasizes Jesus as the main subject of the painting by introducing directional forces towards him. The room that Da Vinci depicts contains geometric shapes, including arches and columns in semicircular and rectangular shapes. It also contains organic shapes in the various forms of the thirteen humans seated at the table.

According to Zelazko, the twelve disciples are grouped into four groups of three. The use of geometric and organic shapes coupled with the grouping of disciples creates balance within the painting, which contributes to the seemingly simple appearance of the work. “Earthy” colors such as brown, green, and dark shades of yellow and red are used to depth to the painting. This is further achieved through variations in the value of colors used, which enhances the drama of the work. By using various shades and tints, Da Vinci creates a more prominent foreground and extends the background, contributing to the contrast between these spaces. Da Vinci also creates interest in the background’s negative space by extending the height of the ceiling and including three windows as light sources. Lastly, the aforementioned implied lines and directional forces used in the composition of the disciples imply a movement towards the central figure, Christ. This movement further guides the eyes of the observer towards Jesus, who maintains a symmetrical posture.

Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* does not merely depict a biblical scene but serves as an important commentary on human emotion and spiritual ideas. First, while the subject of the painting is the biblical event of the Last Supper, the meaning of the painting stretches beyond the original narrative. For instance, Meyer references how the group of disciples on the far left exhibit surprised body language, while Phillip is confused, and Judas is taken aback. Each of the

disciples, despite their unity as a group, displayed different reactions shaped by their respective personalities and emotions. This acknowledgment of individualism and human expression was a trademark of High Renaissance Art. The artist intends to put forth his interpretation of the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' words in John 13:21. Furthermore, Da Vinci intended to demonstrate the drama of the scene by utilizing spatial arrangement and contrast between light and darkness. This painting has been received as a complex narrative on the human condition, in addition to a depiction of a biblical event, which fulfills Da Vinci's original intent. The title of the painting, *The Last Supper*, is significant in the discussion of the painting's meaning as it places the work within its biblical context and emphasizes its somber mood. The word "last" indicates that Da Vinci sought to express themes of betrayal and sacrifice in this painting. Lastly, the formal qualities of the painting, such as its arrangement, perspective, and chiaroscuro (strong contrasts between light and dark) play a significant role in interpreting its meaning (Meyer). The spatial arrangement allows viewers to be drawn to Christ, the central figure, which emphasizes the central importance of Christ in this scene. Da Vinci's use of perspective and contrast enhances the emotional depth of the painting and creates realism. The Principles of Design, which were mentioned earlier, include unity, balance, emphasis, contrast, and movement. These principles support the meaning of the painting by enhancing its dramatic and emotional depth. The careful implementation of directional forces, implied lines, contrast, geometric and organic shapes, and spatial arrangement all contribute to the reader's understanding of the complex, humanist ideals that Da Vinci set out to communicate.

The Last Supper can be evaluated using each of the three Philosophies of Art Criticism: formal theory, contextual theory, and expressive theory. In formal theory, we observe the formal qualities which constitute the *The Last Supper*. As discussed earlier, Da Vinci employs the use of

implied lines and linear perspective to create directional forces toward Christ. He utilizes chiaroscuro to enhance the three-dimensional illusion of the painting. If situated in the refectory itself, the painting seems to beckon to observers, “Come! Dine here.” Furthermore, the carefully chosen color palette, which includes soft earthy tones, contributes to the realism of the depiction. Lastly, the use of tempera and oil on plaster allowed Da Vinci to create a smooth texture which aided his detailed forms (Zelazko). In contextual theory, we analyze the broader historical and cultural context of the painting. Zelazko places this work in c. 1495-1498 in Milan, Italy, which was one of the centers of the High Renaissance movement. This movement valued humanism, intellectual ability, and innovation. These influences greatly impacted the way Da Vinci created art, especially regarding his attempt to depict realistic scenes. This can be seen in the highly representational style in which Da Vinci paints *The Last Supper*, as well as his emphasis on human emotion and individuality. Zelazko also expounds on the cultural context which surrounds this work. He states that the painting was commissioned by Ludovico Sforza, whose family was known for commissioning works of high intellectual and cultural value. The Sforza coats of arms, along with the Sforza family initials, is inscribed above the *The Last Supper*, affirming the family’s stamp of approval upon the painting. The historical and cultural context in which Da Vinci painted *The Last Supper* encouraged artistic innovation and realism, two important aspects of his work that propelled his fame and cemented this work’s legacy. Lastly, expressive theory focuses on the personal and emotional expression conveyed by the painting. The emotional depth of the painting, in part communicated by the movement and body language of the disciples, is integral to our understanding of the painting. It is these emotions that humanize the disciples and display their individuality. It is also these emotions that convey the complexity of human personality; they were all witnesses of the same event, yet produced the

widest range of emotions possible, from sorrow to confusion to fear and so forth. Although all three of these theories emphasize different important aspects of the painting, the contextual theory is most efficient in critiquing this work. This is because the work is deeply influenced by its context and is mainly revered as a result of its cultural influence. Based upon ideas of humanism, individual expression, and realism, *The Last Supper* is a testament to the highest ideals of the High Renaissance period.

More than a depiction of the biblical scene from John 13:21, *The Last Supper* stands as an expression of human emotion and the importance of realism. By discussing *The Last Supper's* description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment, we gained an understanding of how Da Vinci used perspective, shape, and chiaroscuro to support the meaning of this painting. By discussing the painting's context and critiquing it according to contextual theory, we further explored the painting's themes of humanism and individuality. *The Last Supper* will continue to provide discussion upon spiritual, moral, and emotional issues, standing as a complex tribute to the time from which it was conceived.

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