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## ***Debunking The Da Vinci Code Leonardo's Last Supper-- The Artist's Real Intention***

***By Elizabeth Lev, Art Historian***



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Truth be told, Leonardo da Vinci is not one of the 10 historical figures I would most like to invite to dinner. Perhaps the historical rivalry between Leonardo and Michelangelo was so fierce that one starts to take sides. Nonetheless, after 46 weeks of "The Da Vinci Code" ensconced at the top of the best-seller lists, I felt obliged to come to the defense of his work.

A little background for the remnant still unsullied by the reading of this book: Author Dan Brown makes the incredible claim that the individual seated at the right hand of Jesus in da Vinci's "Last Supper" is not, as commonly understood, the Apostle John, but rather ... Mary Magdalene, who would be Jesus' wife.

Although the work presents itself as fiction, it is written in such a way as to cause doubt. I have heard countless Rome visitors make comments like the following: "I know it is fiction, of course, but it brings up some interesting questions ..."

The acute nature of the problem set in when my American students, instead of asking where the outlet stores in Florence were, began inquiring where they could see "The Last Supper." Then one day in the classroom, the bomb was dropped: "Professor Lev, isn't that Mary Magdalene sitting next to Jesus?"

Now, there is a positive side to all this. The students are taking an interest in Leonardo and many are learning the names of the apostles for the first time. Unfortunately, the author stimulating these first impressions has no idea what he is talking about. The major religious and historical gaffes aside, a word must be said about Leonardo's "Last Supper."

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Amid Leonardo's copious writings, very little reveals his personal thoughts and feelings. Artists generally do not look to be remembered through their diaries, notebooks or doodling pads. One thing for sure, nothing in Leonardo's writings suggests that the person next to Jesus is anyone other than John.

Brown capitalizes on Leonardo's soft-featured, beardless depiction of John to offer his fantastic claim that we are dealing with a woman. Of course, if St. John were really Mary Magdalene, we may well ask which of the apostles excused himself at the critical moment.

But the real problem stems from our lack of familiarity with "types." In his Treatise on Painting, Leonardo explains that each figure should be painted according to his station and age. A wise man has certain characteristics, an old woman others, and children others still.

A classic type, common to many Renaissance paintings, is the "student." A favored follower, a protégé or disciple, is always portrayed as very youthful, long-haired and clean-shaven; the idea being that he has not yet matured to the point where he must find his own way.

Throughout the Renaissance, artists portray St. John in this fashion. He is the "disciple Jesus loved" — the only one who will be at the foot of the cross. He is the ideal student. To the Renaissance artist the only way to show St. John was as a beardless youth, with none of the hard, determined physiognomy of men. The "Last Supper" of Ghirlandaio and Andrea del Castagno show a similarly soft, young John.

Leonardo's innovation lies not in his depiction of John, but rather in the dynamism of his composition. Unlike his predecessors who showed a group of men talking around a table, Leonardo selects the most dramatic moment of the meal. Jesus has just made the announcement, "One of you will betray me." The composition accordingly registers the shockwave that emanates from this statement.

Instead of the typical 11 apostles on the far side of the table and Judas on the side closest the viewer, Leonardo places them all on the same side, so there is a ripple effect from the isolated Christ framed by a window out toward the apostles who are grouped into threes. The most important set comprises Peter, John and Judas. Impetuous Peter thrusts himself toward John, asking him to inquire of Jesus who the betrayer will be; in doing so, he pushes Judas outward toward the viewer.

The original image (it has been heavily repainted) had Judas' head turned directly toward John, whose serene countenance manifests the assurance of his own innocence. The low forehead, and dark, brutish features of the traitor Judas

stand in sharp contrast to the luminous delicacy of John. The viewer is forced to think about where he or she stands (or sits) in this picture. Are we calm in certainty of fidelity, do we protest too much, or do we hide in the shadows?

Unfortunately, all these truly important questions are overshadowed by the silly speculations of Dan Brown.

One thing is clear, during the real Last Supper, Mary Magdalene was elsewhere.

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To read more about the Da Vinci Code - be sure to stop by the Crossroads Library and read visit Amy Welborn's Author Page and then read **Carl E. Olson's The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code**.

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