

At Supper with Leonardo



LEONARDO'S *LAST SUPPER* is the most famous dinner party of all time. Yet for all its fame and familiarity, scant notice is ever taken of the food that is set before Christ and His disciples.¹ According to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the event takes place at Passover, a time when lamb would normally be served, but scripture is silent on the menu for this particular seder. Apart from Matthew (26:20), who notes that the dinner took place in the evening, and Mark (14:15) and Luke (22:12), who add that it was held in "a large room upstairs, already furnished," the biblical account could hardly be less informative when it comes to the meal itself.² Instead, all four evangelists rightly emphasize the significance of Christ's institution of the Eucharist and His announcement of Judas's betrayal.

Renaissance painters thrived on the possibilities of elaborating historical texts as minimally descriptive as this one. Indeed, they seemed so eager to add superfluous

figures and imaginary settings to religious narratives that the viewer is often left to wonder if the selection of the text was but a pretext for the exploration of unrelated artistic goals.³ Sometimes the elaborations took the form of fashioning the costumes and props *all'antica*, after the antique, just as the term Renaissance suggests; sometimes they sought to demonstrate a mastery of linear perspective or human anatomy; and just as often they restaged a scene in "modern dress" so as to mirror the manners and material culture of the day.

Leonardo did all three in his *Last Supper*, especially when it came to accurately contriving the composition's spatial recession and differentiating among the figures' individual states of mind. Less apparent to viewers of the past has been the attention the artist paid to the meal itself. Although Vasari was sufficiently impressed with Leonardo's realism that he could claim in his 1568 biography of the artist that even the tablecloth was "so cunningly depicted



Above: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, detail of the apostles to the far right. Post-restoration. Right: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, detail of plate containing sliced eel. Post-restoration.

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that the linen itself could not look more realistic,” these fine visual details had all but disappeared by the time he was writing.⁴ The reason, of course, was that Leonardo’s experimental painting technique was such a failure that chips of pigment began to flake off almost as soon as the work was completed in 1498. In 1517 one viewer observed that the image had “already begun to spoil,” while Vasari himself could not hide his disappointment upon seeing the original in Milan in 1566 and discovering that “it was in such a bad state that there is nothing more to be seen than a mass of confusion.”⁵ Numerous accounts document the further deterioration of the work until, in 1901, Gabrielle D’Annunzio’s ode “For the Death of a Masterpiece,” seemingly signaled its final demise.

But the *Last Supper*, of course, did not die. Countless times over the course of the centuries it has undergone “restoration,” with virtually all the efforts consisting of the application of glutinous fixatives and overpaintings that concealed more than they revealed.⁶ Only in 1997 were all the layers of overpaint and varnish removed along with the newer accumulations of grime.⁷ Almost miraculously, Leonardo’s original handiwork became visible again, allowing fresh insights into nearly every section of the composition. For readers of *Gastronomica*, the most revealing passages appear on the table itself.

The tableware in the *Last Supper* consists of an assortment of pewter plates, knives (once thought to be shadows), cruet of water, individual wineglasses and finger bowls, and

one of the of saltcellars.⁸ One of the saltcellars—the one nearest Judas—is tipped over, evidently in the stir of the dramatic moment. Not surprisingly, given Vasari’s remark, the pattern woven into the crisply ironed tablecloth replicates known examples of central Italian textiles of the period.

While it was previously unclear just what food was on the table, we now see that it is neither Paschal lamb nor, as some had supposed, bread alone. There are three large serving platters in the picture, and although the one in front of Christ is empty, the two before Andrew and Matthew—the fourth figures to his right and left—are heaped with food. The plate to our left appears to contain about half a dozen whole fish, while the one on the right is damaged to the point of being all but illegible. Fortunately, the preservation of the three small serving dishes on the right side of the composition (figs. 2 and 3) is sufficiently good to suggest that we are looking at, in fact, sections of grilled eel garnished with orange slices. Other pieces of fruit—pomegranates perhaps, some still with their leaves attached—complete the menu along with plenty of bread and wine, the only sacramental necessities in any depiction of the *Last Supper*.

Fish are an ancient symbol of Christ that appear in Early Christian catacombs as well as in the earliest known



depiction of the *Last Supper*, a sixth-century mosaic in the church of S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.⁹ However, there is no plausible iconographic justification in the Judeo-Christian tradition for having eel on the table, so we must assume the artist introduced it for reasons of his own. Leonardo had little hesitation inscribing himself into his own paintings, and the very concept of *ogni pittore dipinge sé* (every painter paints himself) resounds in his theoretical writing.¹⁰ It is tempting to think that the *Last Supper* may reflect something about his personal eating habits as well.

Tradition has it that Leonardo was a vegetarian, a circumstance inferred both from his repeated defense of animals and the sanctity of life as well as from the oft-quoted letter written in 1516 by an Italian traveler to India, who described the local population as “gentle people... who do not feed on anything that has blood, nor will they allow anyone to hunt living things, like our Leonardo da Vinci.”¹¹ What we know of Leonardo’s actual diet comes mainly from a dozen or so grocery receipts interleaved among the more than five thousand pages of notes that he left behind.¹² One of these, datable to 1503–1504, accounts for the purchase of “peppered bread, eels, and apricots,”

among other things.¹³ Leonardo may have been a vegetarian, but from the grocery lists it is clear that meat—in one instance *bon bove*, “good beef”—was also a staple in his kitchen. Because the artist always had pupils and servants in his house—and his notes regularly refer to them by name—there is no way of knowing just who ate the eels and meat and who ate the beans, peas, mushrooms, salad, and fruit (along with all the wine) that also appear on the grocery lists. Only in 1518, the last year of his life, did Leonardo take note of a meal of his own, concluding a sheet of geometric formulations with an abrupt “etcetera” followed by the remark *perché la minestra si fredda*, “because the soup is getting cold.”¹⁴

The eels in the *Last Supper* may or may not have been on Leonardo’s diet, but they certainly enhance the realism of the representation. Eels were especially popular in Renaissance Italy because they could survive out of water for days and be easily transported in grass-filled baskets or, once dead, be preserved in brine.¹⁵ According to Bartolomeo Scappi, the best ones came from Comacchio, near Ferrara.¹⁶ G.B. Rossetti, another sixteenth-century author, gives thirty different recipes for preparing them.¹⁷

Eels, like other common foods, provided cooks with an opportunity to showcase their skills in virtuosic ways. Leonardo, for his part, seems to have shunned fancy foods, asking in another note, “Does not nature bring forth a sufficiency of simple things to produce satiety? Or if you cannot content yourself with simple things can you not by blending these together make an infinite number of compounds as did Platina and other authors who have written for epicures?”¹⁸

Platina, of course, was the sobriquet of Bartolomeo Sacchi, author of the best-selling *De honesta voluptate et valetudine*, or *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*. We know Leonardo owned a copy of this book, for it appears in an undated checklist he made of his own library.¹⁹ Published in 1470, Platina’s text provides several recipes for *anguilla* (eel) that can be grilled, roasted, boiled, or baked in a pie. If one were to guess, the eels in the *Last Supper* might have been prepared in the following manner, a recipe given in Book x.

When an eel is captured, skinned, and gutted, cut it up into large enough pieces and cook well on a spit near the hearth, with bay leaves and sage placed between the pieces, always moistening the meat with the brine they call *salimola*. When it is nearly cooked, add some meal or ground bread, sprinkling with cinnamon and salt, encrusting it all around. If you want it boiled, cook thoroughly with parsley, sage, and a few bay leaves and cover with verjuice and pepper.²⁰

Serving orange slices with fish seems to have been a popular fad in the period just after the publication of Platina’s book.²¹ By the early sixteenth century, it was already a fixture in Italian cuisine. To cite but one example, Cristoforo Messisbugo’s account of a sixteen-course seafood dinner he prepared in 1529 for the Archbishop of Milan mentions oranges and other citrus fruits being served as the garnish for a variety of fish dishes.²² Leonardo, for his part, probably encountered the novelty at the home of his Milanese patron, Ludovico Sforza, and could not resist including it in the ducal commission for the *Last Supper*.

In many respects, Leonardo’s *Last Supper* is as conventional as it is celebrated. By the time he began the fresco in 1494, it was common for monasteries like Santa Maria delle Grazie to have representations of the subject on their refectory walls. Earlier Florentine artists such as Andrea del Castagno and Domenico Ghirlandaio had staged their *Last Suppers* in similar settings, designing painted perspectives in approximate alignment with the sightlines of those who dined before the fresco.²³ Castagno’s treatment in Sant’Apollonia in Florence, painted a half-century

earlier, introduced the formal structure that virtually all later pictures would follow. Without exception, Leonardo’s Renaissance predecessors also chose to downplay the miracle of the transubstantiation, the moment when Christ transforms bread and wine into the Eucharist, in order to concentrate on His surprising announcement of apostolic betrayal. Again, Castagno anticipated Leonardo by making the dramatic response of the disciples his primary concern. Like all his predecessors, Leonardo originally placed Judas across the table from the others, only later repositioning him alongside his companions in the final composition.²⁴

Significantly, Leonardo painted his *Last Supper* from a higher viewpoint than was typical of most Renaissance depictions of the subject. Doing so allowed more of the tabletop to be visible (it is invisible in the Castagno) and, therefore, more of the meal itself. Had he been interested in historical accuracy, he would have put lamb, bitter herbs, and haroseth rather than non-kosher eel on the table.²⁵ Revising the menu to suit Renaissance tastes, if not his own, Leonardo added a significant note of contemporary realism to a representation that, in truth, had been growing a little stale.²⁶ ●

NOTES

1. To my knowledge, the only study of the theme of the *Last Supper* from a culinary perspective is Carolin Young’s “Depictions of the Last Supper,” in *Food in the Arts: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery*, 1998, ed. Harlan Walker (Devon: Prospect Books, 1999), 223–36. Shelagh and Jonathan Routh’s *Leonardo’s Kitchen Note Books: Leonardo da Vinci’s Notes on Cookery and Table Etiquette* (London: Collins, 1987) is but a fanciful satire based on an invented manuscript they have named the “Codex Romanoff.”
2. Gillian Feeley-Harnik’s *The Lord’s Table: The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994) is the best source for biblical cuisine in general with an entire chapter (chap. 5) devoted to the *Last Supper*. Winifried Frey also discusses the early dietary habits of the two faiths in “Jews and Christians at the Lord’s Table?” in *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Melitta W. Adamson (New York and London: Garland, 1995), 113–144.
3. Peter Burke refers to the phenomenon as the “crypto-secularization” of art in *The Italian Renaissance, Culture and Society in Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 23–24.
4. Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. A.B. Hinds (New York: Dutton, 1970), 2: 161.
5. The first comment is from Antonio de Beatis, as cited by Luca Beltrami, *Documenti e memorie riguardanti la vita e le opere di Leonardo da Vinci*, (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1919), doc. 238. Vasari’s comment appears in his biographies of Benvenuto Garofalo and Girolamo da Carpi (*The Lives*, 3: 317).
6. A history of all the documented and undocumented restorations is given in Pinin Brambilla Barilon and Pietro Marani’s *Leonardo: The Last Supper* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21ff.
7. A complete account of the latest restoration is given in the title cited above.
8. Writing before the latest restoration, Clelia Alberici, “La tavola apparecchiata,” *Raccolta vinciana* xxiv (1992) 3–8, identified the serviceware and tablecloth as common to the period.
9. Young, “Depictions of the Last Supper,” 225.

10. Frank Zöllner, “‘Ogni pittore dipinge sé.’ Leonardo da Vinci and Automimesis,” in *Der Künstler über sich in seinem Werk*, ed. Matthias Winner (Weinheim: VCH, 1992), 137–159.
11. Charles Nicholl, *Leonardo da Vinci: Flights of the Mind*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), 42ff. for full references.
12. See *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci, Compiled and Edited from the Original Manuscripts by Jean Paul Richter*; commentary of Carlo Pedretti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), nos. 1519, 1520, 1521, 1534, 1535, 1544, 1545, 1548, and 1549.
13. *The Literary Works*, no. 1534.
14. Carlo Pedretti, “*Eccetera: perchè la minestra si fredda:*” *codice Arundel, fol. 245 recto*, (Florence: Giunta Barbera, 1975).
15. On the other hand, see Ken Albala’s “Fish in Renaissance Dietary Theory,” in *Fish, Food from the Waters: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, 1997*, ed. Harlan Walker (Devon: Prospect Books, 1998), 9–19, for contemporary arguments that questioned the nutritional benefits of eating fish.
16. B. Scappi, *Opera dell'arte del cucinare* (Venice: Michele Tramezzino, 1570; reprinted Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1981), 136r.
17. G.B. Rossetti, *Dello Scalco* (Ferrara: D. Mammarello, 1584; reprinted Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1991), 201–02, 501–02.
18. *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, Arranged, Rendered into English and Introduced by Edward McCurdy* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1938), 1: 90.
19. *The Literary Works*, no. 1469. This title has been reprinted more than forty times and most recently translated into English by Mary Ella Milham (Tempe: *Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies*, vol. 168, 1998).
20. *On Right Pleasure*, 425. It is well known that Platina took many of his recipes from Master Martino of Como’s unpublished *Libro de arte coquinaria*, which recommends that eel “be roasted on a spit after being skinned and well-cleaned; cook very slowly because this more than any other fish needs to be well cooked. To better season, it is cut into pieces as large as your hand or a little bit bigger. Small eels should be fried in oil; you can also boil a large eel and the small by adding some aromatic herbs to them as they simmer, like parsley, sage, and some bay leaves, with some pepper and a little verjuice.” Martino’s text is now available in English (*The Art of Cooking: The First Modern Cookery Book*, ed. and with an introduction by Luigi Ballerini; trans. Jeremy Parzen [Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005], 102).
21. Interestingly, the fad seems to have died out in the second half of the century, for none of the eel recipes given by Scappi (1570) or Rossetti (1584) call for orange slices on the side.
22. Messisbugo, *Libro novo nel qual s’insegna a’far d’ogni sorte di vivanda* (Venice: Gioanne Padoano, 1557; reprinted Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 2001), 9r–14v. Elsewhere in the book, the author gives simpler fish recipes that also call for orange slices to be served. John McPhee’s *Oranges* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), chaps. 3 and 4, cites other examples of the Renaissance fascination with this fruit.
23. For the *Last Suppers* of Castagno and Ghirlandaio, see F. Hartt, *Italian Renaissance Art*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 2003), figs. 11.11 and 13.37. For other representations of the *Last Supper* from this period, see the Art Resource Web site www.artres.com.
24. Leonardo’s preliminary study in the Accademia, Venice, reveals his first thoughts on the composition. It is reproduced in Hartt, *Italian Renaissance Art*, fig. 16.21. The repositioning of Judas and the absence of halos remain the most iconographically significant aspects of Leonardo’s treatment of the theme.
25. Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord’s Table*, 126–127.
26. And this was not the first time Leonardo painted realistic-looking fish; while still in Verrocchio’s studio in Florence, he painted the bloody fish in his master’s *Tobias and the Angel* that is now in the National Gallery, London. This, according to David Alan Brown, *Leonardo da Vinci: Origins of a Genius* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998) 47ff., is “the first painting in which Leonardo’s hand can plausibly be identified.”