

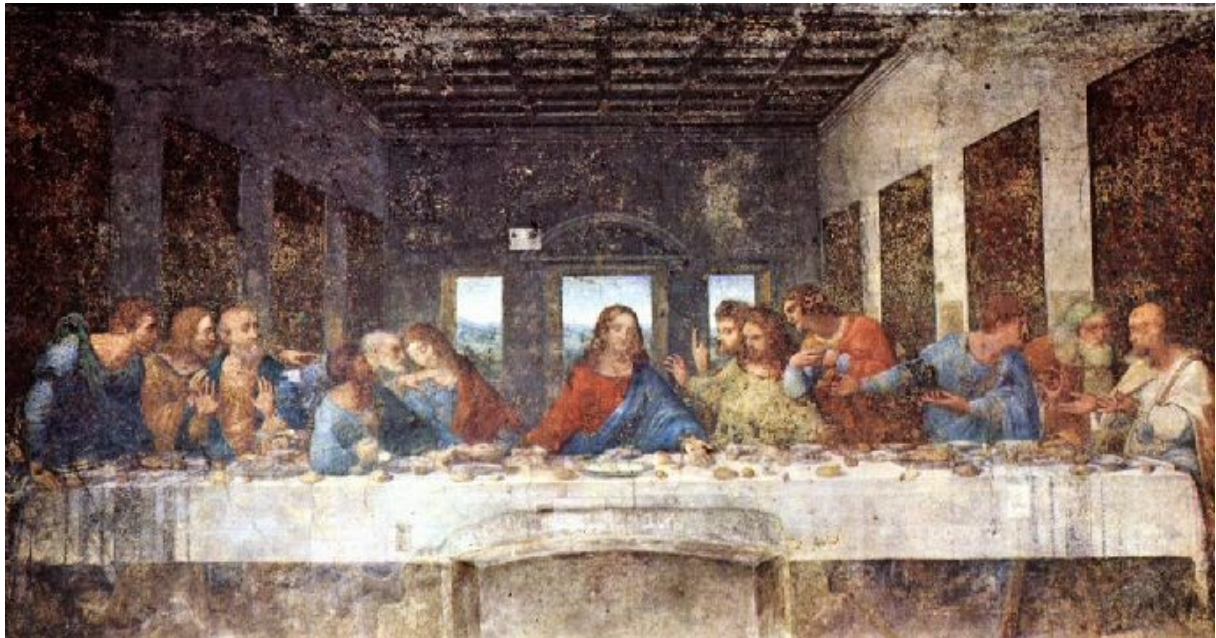
## DA VINCI CODE & LEONARDO : The Last Supper

### **Author's note:**

I can write with authority about the *Last Supper* because of my training in art, and because Christian art has interested me since my teens.

Just as fiction has to be assessed first as fiction, and history as history, so a work of art has first and foremost to be seen in artistic terms. What were the artist's aims? What was he up to? The answers to such questions regarding Leonardo da Vinci's painting called '*The Last Supper*' are crystal clear and unambiguous.

I hope you find my analysis interesting.



### **Not a Sacred Moment**

The painting is not in a church or chapel, but in the dining room of a Christian community. Had it been behind the High Altar in a church Leonardo would probably have depicted the moment when Christ took the bread and wine and declared them to be his 'Body' and 'Blood' – a specially sacred and religious theme. But Leonardo apparently took a considerable time to decide which moment he would depict, and then opted for another.

Probably because the room was for ordinary meals, and not for worshipping, Leonardo opted for an incident when Jesus was *not* doing anything specially 'sacred' or 'religious'. It is likely that for this reason the standard symbols of Jesus's status and holiness, e.g. his halo, are absent.

Leonardo chose the moment described in St. John's Gospel when the sacred meal is over, and Jesus astounds his Apostles by declaring that one of them would *betray* him.

Dan Brown, typically, took no pains to find this out, so in chapter 57 of the *Da Vinci Code* he has Sir Leigh Teabing gloating over the fact that there is no Chalice! (Really!) Teabing then accuses scholars of not noticing or ignoring the fact of the missing chalice(!), and claims that the fresco is the 'entire key to the Holy Grail mystery'. All of Brown's theories rest on the assumption that Leonardo was painting Jesus instituting the Eucharist/ Mass/ Holy Communion – but he *wasn't!* It is a pity that Dan Brown never noticed.

### **The Great Illusion**

Have you ever been in a restaurant where a huge mirror on a wall has tricked you into thinking that the dining area was twice the size? Leonardo was up to a similar, but far greater, trick. His mural completely covered the 29' wide wall. First, he made the room seem twice its size - and through its three far windows the friars could glimpse their familiar Tuscan countryside. Second, as they looked between the heads of their fellow-diners, they could glimpse Jesus and his Apostles seated at an extra table in the room – at their own level and alongside them.

Sadly, Leonardo's masterly illusion has now been completely shattered because no one can sit at table in front of it, view it as Leonardo intended, or glimpse the Apostles between the heads of fellow-diners. The reason is that the floor of the dining room ('refectory') has long since caved-in.

This means that we now can only view a mural that is up on the first storey from downstairs on the ground floor!

This is a visual and psychological disaster! Leonardo's visual illusion is shattered, and the viewer finds him/herself looking up to Jesus elevated to a position far above. This is the exact *opposite* of Leonardo's visual message to the resident friars; that the Lord Jesus Christ was right among them in the routine of their Christian corporate life, and not just in 'worship'.

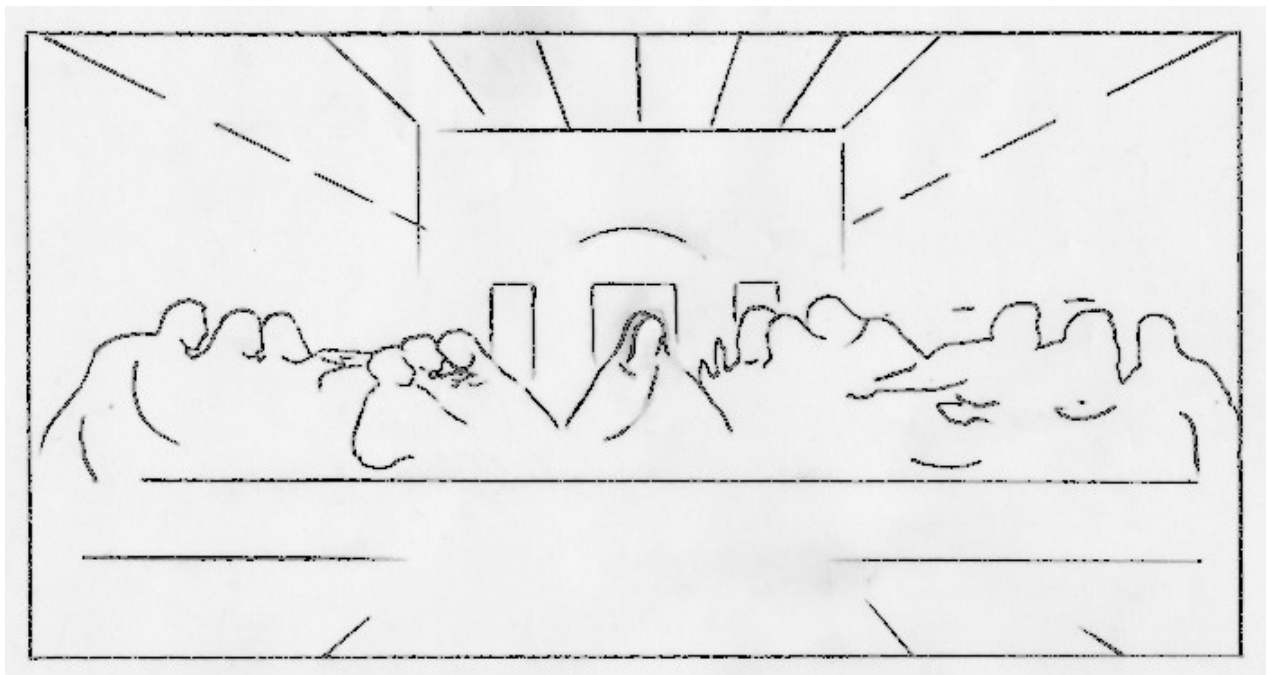
Reproductions at least have the advantage of being able to be viewed straight-on, but should be hung from the ceiling if you want to get the 'feel' of seeing the real thing in Milan.

Leonardo used every visual trick to extend the room, and the four dark tapestries on each side wall and the chequered ceiling enabled him to stress the receding perspective lines and to push back the windows – whose brightness would otherwise appear to bring them nearer. (The receding lines had another, and much more important, function – see item 4 in the list below.) The austere walls, plain square-topped windows, flat ceiling and lack of pictures, images, candlesticks and ornament tell us clearly that Leonardo is deliberately wanting to avoid being 'sacred' or 'churchy'.

## The Centrality of Christ

On the other hand the person and position of Jesus as Lord, not only of the disciples past but of those present having their meal, needed to be made clear. Crowns, regalia and religious symbols were inappropriate for depicting Jesus present at an ordinary meal, so Leonardo used at least ten visual devices to affirm Christ's supreme status above all. Here they are:

1. Jesus Christ is the exact centre of the composition.
2. Behind him is the largest of three windows, so Christ is silhouetted in a way that no one else is. Only the central window is wide enough to create light right around the head.
3. The light of the window acts somewhat as a spotlight and also as a halo, and the latter is gently emphasised by the large window having a curved stone decoration above it.



4. All the receding perspective lines, on the side walls, the ceiling and the floor, meet at one point (that artists call the 'vanishing point'). Leonardo places Christ's head exactly at that very point so that all perspective-lines lead to it – to Christ's right eye to be precise, as his head is slightly turned and off-centre.
5. In addition, Leonardo aligns Christ's outstretched arms so that they also back-up the lines of perspective and similarly point to his head.
6. Eight, perhaps nine, of the Twelve Apostles are looking towards Jesus, and as viewers mentally tend to 'follow the eyes' of people in paintings to see what they are looking at, so the eight or nine pairs of eyes also all point to Jesus.
7. Leonardo did not want the visual boredom of having all twelve Apostles looking at Jesus, so he has three who do not: Apostle number 6 on the left side and Apostles numbers 10 and 11 on the right. But having done this, Leonardo takes *considerable* pains to make sure that the viewer does not look away from Jesus also and follow the eyes of these three. He does this by having in front of each of them very strong visual pointer(s) going in the proper direction – i.e. towards Christ.

On the left hand side, Apostle number 6 has in front of him a hand and finger literally pointing to Jesus.

Apostles numbers 10 and 11, on the far right hand side, have in front of them no less than *three* hands all pointing to Jesus. In addition, the natural 'movement' away from Jesus of their eye-direction-line has a visual barrier dropped right across it to slow it down. Leonardo creates this by positioning the last two Apostles (11 & 12) in such a way that the wall-tapestry is visible between them, and creates a strong dark vertical line right across the direction-line of their looking away from Jesus.

8. Red is the colour we experience most 'immediately' because of its short wave-length, hence its use for stop lights, warnings, etc.

Leonardo has Jesus's garment of the brightest red (on the left as we view him). It is a much brighter red than the outer garment of John. (Dan Brown sees both only as 'red'.)

9. Moreover, the scarlet shape of Jesus's garment is designed also to point straight to Jesus's head.

On the left side (as we look at it) of the garment is the straight line up Christ's right arm that points to his head.

Because we read left-to-right our eyes use the same pattern when looking at other things. This is probably why the red is on the left, not the right, as we view Jesus. As we 'read' Christ our eyes travel left-to-right, so the right hand edge of the large patch of bright red sweeps up in a firm but gentle curve so that it *also* leads our eyes to the face of Christ.

10. Finally, Jesus is set aside by his attitude. While all the Apostles twist and turn and gesticulate in shock/anger/panic at Jesus's prediction of betrayal, Jesus is still. Visually he is triangular: a favourite shape throughout the history of Western Art to depict dignity, poise and stillness. Given a mighty gust of wind that caught the Apostles unawares some look as if they could keel over. Not so Jesus.

(This stillness is deeply Biblical because as the days of Jesus's death approached, he switched from being active and taking the initiative to a passive mode. As he offered himself for death in obedience to his heavenly Father, he submitted with no reaction to all those who had a role in it: Judas, the guards, the High Priest, the Jewish Council, Pontius Pilate, Herod the King, and the Roman soldiers.)

So much for Leonardo's visual techniques to establish the complete centrality of Jesus Christ. If you look at a reproduction it is not by chance that you keep looking at Christ – it is, in the most literal sense, 'by design' – and a very complex and clever design at that!

Let's turn to the Apostles.



## The Twelve Apostles

A painting of thirteen people is an enormous challenge for an artist, if they are not to look like a row of playing cards (to use a traditional analogy).

To avoid having thirteen faces in a line, like a queue along the side of a doctor's waiting room, Leonardo not only split the twelve Apostles into two distinct halves, but then divided them again so that he had four manageable groups of three.

Leonardo first established the picture's perfect poise and balance by the strong level white of the gigantic table-cloth. He makes the table-legs visible at each end to underline its solidity and to counteract any impression that it might see-saw. At its exact centre he places the immovable triangle of the Christ-figure.

Once that solidity is established Leonardo then lets-rip by causing as much visual movement and action as is possible within a line-up of supposedly-seated figures!

In avoiding the solemn moment of the Institution of the Lord's Supper, and opting for the moment when Jesus predicts his betrayal, Leonardo was free to paint all the Twelve reacting in shock and surprise, and in different ways according to temperament. (To Judas it comes as no surprise or shock so he does not react at all, as we shall see.)

The painting is not unlike a massive pair of scales – utterly still because of a perfect balance of 'weight' in each of its containers, but full of lively movement because in each hanging container are six puppies! That is an odd image I know, but I can think of none better for a painting that is a phenomenal mixture of peace and tension, of stillness and movement, and of rest and restlessness.

Leonardo begins by turning the figures at each end (Apostles numbers 1 and 12) so that they act a little like bookends and prevent the 'movement' of the strong white horizontal design from spreading outwards like spilt milk. The vertical patterns of the cloth at either end serve the same purpose.

A quick impression as we 'read' the Apostles from left to right would run like this:

**No.1** is perhaps leaping to his feet.

**No.2** is reaching behind No.3 to get the attention of the middle Apostle (No.5) in the next group.

**No.3** has his hands up in horror.

**No.4** (head in shadow leaning on the table) seems not to be moving.

**No.5** is leaning right over from the fourth seat to speak to No.6 and pointing to Jesus.

**No.6** is listening closely to No.5.

**Jesus Christ.** Having just spoken, he speaks to no one. His left hand (on the right as we look at him) is relaxed and open and nowadays might be accompanied by a remark like 'Well, there you have it!' Resigned and offering himself.

Christ's right hand, in contrast, is active and arched and seemingly about to grab something. (See later).

**No.7** (who has been pushed back by the vigorous arm movement of No.8) is using his right hand, clearly seen between the central and right hand windows,...perhaps to ask a question (see below).

**No.8** is thrusting himself forward and flings wide his arms right across Nos.7 and 9.

**No.9** in contrast, is adopting the quiet attitude of a penitent with hands on heart, although he has to stand to make himself seen around No.8's obtrusive display!

**No.10** is pointing both arms to Jesus and talking animatedly about him to No.12.

**No.11** (Self-portrait?) is also talking to No.12, but his hand seems to be grappling with a question.

**No.12** is responding to the other two in his group with hands that manage to point to Jesus but also are in the almost universal gesture indicating - 'I don't know!'

The above is nothing more than an immediate impression – but it does indicate that there is a lot going on! For visual dynamic reasons and for interest Leonardo made each of the four groups of three Apostles as different as possible from the others!

Having established the strong level table, Leonardo composes the four groups to make two waves: first group *up*, second group *down*, third group *up*, fourth group *down*. Importantly they do *not* mirror one another. This means that the group to the left of Christ (as we view them) is the lowest so does not block the window behind. The group to the right of Christ (as we view them) is, in contrast, the highest group and manages to block the view of the landscape behind.

Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, having wrongly claimed that Leonardo was a Grand Master of the Priory of Sion, –

- attaches great symbolic importance to the 'V-shaped' gap between the second Group and Jesus,
- and
- claims that Apostle number 6 is not St. John but St. Mary Magdelene.

## Peter, Judas, John or Mary Magdalene.



This group is where something quite specific is happening.

Since Leonardo was using the New Testament account as the basis for the picture, it is not surprising that the text makes everything perfectly clear. St. John's Gospel [Chapter 13, verses 21 to 26] describes the event in these words:

Jesus said:

*'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'*

*The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.*

*One of his disciples – the one whom Jesus loved [John] – was reclining next to him;*

*Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.*

*So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?'*

*Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.'*

*So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas...*

The other Gospel accounts are very similar to one another and will have been familiar to the friars as they ate, and to Leonardo. They add the detail -

*Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.*

[Luke 22:23]

In addition, both Mark and Matthew record the question *'Surely, not I?'*

Leonardo naturally incorporates this detail which dovetails so neatly with St. John's account, and such questioning is most apparent in the Apostles on the right, numbers 7, 9 and 11.

### **The Key Group**

The three in the second and visually 'lowest' group are:

**Judas** the Treasurer and Traitor

**Simon Peter** the Leader

**John** ('the disciple whom Jesus loved') or, according to the *Da Vinci Code*, **St. Mary Magdalene**.

They are a fascinating bunch, and are worth close attention.

#### **a) Judas, the Treasurer and Traitor**

Judas, was the '*keeper of the purse*', i.e. the Apostles' treasurer. He is the odd one out in the company, but at this stage he is not yet known to be the traitor by the other Apostles.

Leonardo had a complex set of requirements to meet.

- i) He had to identify Judas for the viewer.
- ii) He had to make Judas's position close enough to Jesus so that Jesus, moments later, can give him the piece of dipped bread as St. John's Gospel records.
- iii) He had somehow to set Judas apart, but without jumping-the-gun and depicting him as the Traitor.

Leonardo accomplishes this in six ways:

- Judas is the only Apostle identified by his traditional symbol. In his case it is always a leather money-purse: he holds it in his right hand as he rests his arm on the table.
- As Judas has to be able to receive the dipped bread from Jesus, his other arm is stretched out along the table towards Jesus's hand.
- With his hands and arms clearly well onto the table, this position enables Judas to be nearer us than the other Apostles are. Visually Judas is on a different plane from the rest, and views Jesus differently – this is theologically true also.
- Judas is able to look *back* at Jesus. While the other Apostles are in the light, Judas's face is in comparative darkness because of his very different position. His face in shadow acts as a camouflage, and Leonardo does his best to merge Judas into his background (which happens to be Simon Peter).
- Judas's head is lower than all the others. He is given a green outer robe (in contrast to Jesus's red garment), and his hair is darker than most.
- Leonardo depicts Judas's face in even *less* than full profile.

These factors combine with considerable effect. Anyone who was asked quickly to count the number of Apostles' might easily see only eleven at first glance.



### **b) Simon Peter, the Leader**

The next Apostle in the irregular row of heads is Peter. He is primarily identified by what he is doing – although he is also portrayed with his traditional short beard and receding hair. He is visually emphasised by Leonardo's placing of him so that the line of the rear corner of the room 'points' down to him.

In St. John's account '*Peter motioned to him* [John] *to ask Jesus.*' Peter, being the leader, acts as spokesman for them all.

Peter's left hand is visible just below John's face and points to Jesus. This is what is being said at the moment that Leonardo chose to depict, and so is of the utmost importance.

Apostles 10, 11 and 12 seem also to be talking, but it is what Jesus has just said (made clear by the shock of the Apostles) and what Peter is saying to John that constitute the event.

To make this clear to the viewer Leonardo places Peter's and John's heads *extremely* close and visually uses Peter's pointing hand to link them even tighter. Ask the casual observer 'Who is obviously speaking?' and 'Who is obviously listening?' and they cannot but point to Peter and John in the second group, because Leonardo's visual signals are so strong.

Having had to place Peter and John so close, Leonardo was faced with the problem of the composition of this group. Judas's position made his head much lower than anyone else's. To unite this second group of Apostles, Leonardo has to get Peter's, John's and Judas's heads more closely related.

Leonardo accomplishes this with an amazing visual trick. He paints the bodies of Peter and Judas in such a way that Peter, who occupies the fourth seat, ends up as head number 5, and Judas in the fifth seat ends up as head number 4!

Leonardo *crosses* the two bodies of Peter and Judas; two so 'diametrically opposed' followers as we might say. One is craning forward towards Jesus while the other is leaning away from him and not reacting at all.

This results in lowering Peter's head, so John in turn has to lean down towards Peter to listen to him.

In addition, John's leaning to hear Peter above the hubbub caused by Jesus's prediction, stops John blocking the viewer's sight of the first window. This serves Leonardo well because he did not want a mirror image of the two outside windows, and he intended to block the right hand one. The leaning of John clears the view to see the Tuscan countryside 'beyond', and this stops the extended room from becoming claustrophobic.

The 'V' of the composition that Dan Brown claims is so important is caused simply by Leonardo's solutions to these many demands.

**Basically it is John's leaning to listen to the leaning Peter that creates the 'V' gap between Jesus and the second trio of Apostles.** (There is a notable, but flatter, 'V-gap' between the third and fourth groups of Apostles.)

While Brown emphasises the 'V-space' of what is *not* there, I expect Leonardo would stress the importance of what *is* there in the two side-by-side triangles that create the empty 'V': Jesus on the right, and the figures of Judas, Peter and John on the left. The meaning of the painting, what is happening and why, is almost all indicated by Jesus and the Judas-Peter-John group.

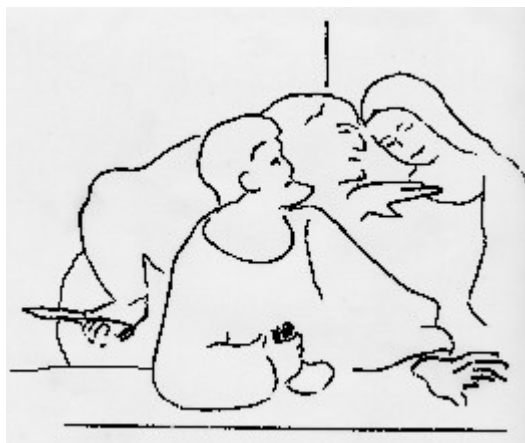
On the right side of the mural there is less happening, but just as Leonardo used the line of the left-hand far corner of the room to point us to Peter, so he uses the right hand corner to point us to Philip. Leonardo uses other means to draw our attention to him. He is the only one in bright red on the right hand side, and he is the highest figure in the composition - the most 'up' member of the most 'up' group.

His impressive stance, with both hands on his heart, is the traditional - and obvious - one to indicate penitence and sorrow. Philip is the focus of the question that struck the hearts of all present (except Judas): ***'Is it I?'*** (To use the old and more familiar translation).

Leonardo goes well towards capturing the sheer anguish that must have laid behind the terrible question. It is well to be reminded that Judas committed suicide after his betrayal of Jesus - such was the weight of the dreadful deed. When Jesus declared that someone would betray him - that potential weight fell on all of them. This is the moment that Leonardo depicts - immediately before the answer is given - and why there is such consternation portrayed among the Apostles.

### **Is this a dagger...?**

There is a further detail regarding Peter.



In the same Gospel account we read how Jesus and the disciples left and went to the Garden they knew well (Gethsemane). There Judas arrived with armed soldiers and police. Jesus, with Judas by him, steps forward three times to declare that he is the one they are looking for.

Finally he says:

*'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.'...*

*Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it,  
struck the high priest's slave,  
and cut off his right ear.  
The slave's name was Malchus.*

*Jesus said to Peter,  
'Put your sword back into its sheath...'*

It is probably Peter's impetuosity and eagerness to fight for Jesus that led Leonardo to place a knife in Peter's right hand. In size it is ambiguously both a large knife and a short sword. It would also, perhaps, strengthen Peter's identity for the regular monastic diners for whom the picture was painted, and who would know – almost by heart – the Gospel accounts. The friars' greater familiarity with the Gospel text would enable them to make links instantly that most of us Christians nowadays would only manage to make more slowly!

Readers must realise that the painting is now in a safe but terrible condition. The patchiness of the surviving paint-work makes it look nowadays as if the knife might not be held by Peter but by a disembodied arm! – as Dan Brown believes. In fact Peter's right wrist is doubled-back on his hip. Leonardo's preparatory drawing for the arm is in Windsor and shows the sharply bent wrist clearly. I have just replicated Peter's arm in front of a mirror while holding a bread-knife! Leonardo is accurate as always. There's no need for any 'third arm' theory!

The knife is apparent just behind Judas's back, but it is safely pointing *away* from him. Although not a very 'natural' position it is difficult to see in what other way Peter could plausibly have held it and have made it visible to the viewers.

(However, the knife inadvertently points rather threateningly to Apostle number 3 in the adjoining group! At first sight his two hands may be raised in horror at Jesus's prediction of his betrayal. However his lowered eyelids suggest to me that he may have just looked down and reacted in horror at the knife – the blade of which appears all-too-close to his stomach as Peter suddenly lurches forward to speak to John. It is only a possibility, and is of no importance.)

Dan Brown sees Peter thrusting the edge of his hand blade-like across St. Mary Magdalene's neck as an expression of his jealousy that Mary would become the leader of the Church, as described in the Apocryphal *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.

### **John and Mary - Identity Crisis?**

Virtually everything that I have described, not least the Scriptural account that Leonardo was using, points to the third figure being the Apostle John. These factors should outweigh any casual 'impressions' of the figure divorced from Leonardo's intentions, divorced from the Scriptural account or divorced from the style of painting at the time.

Any theorist who wished to replace the Apostle John by St. Mary Magdalene would have first to prove that Leonardo was not using the New Testament basis that I have outlined.

Secondly, if he wished St. John's figure to be St. Mary Magdalene – where is St. John? There are not thirteen Apostles, only twelve. Any credible removal of St. John from Leonardo's intentions and from the scene altogether would (in the light of what I have written) be a near-impossible task.

St. John is usually depicted beardless because he traditionally lived to a ripe old age towards the close of the first century, when he wrote the New Testament book 'The Revelation of St. John'. St. John has always, therefore, been viewed as one of Jesus's younger followers. His long hair is no sign of being effeminate in a period when most men wore their hair long. Leonardo's famous etched self-portrait shows him rugged and aged, but with long flowing hair. (Apostle number 11 may be a self-portrait of the artist.)

Leonardo painted a picture of John the Baptist with a head of long curly hair and, by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards, somewhat effeminate features. But we can be certain that he did not believe that the eater of locusts and wild honey who lived and survived in the desert was a woman!

Perhaps the most relevant thing that can be said about the face of the Apostle John whom Jesus loved, is that Leonardo made him most like Jesus.

Dan Brown has Teabing say of the Apostle number 6 that the figure is "without doubt" female! This illustrates a number of things. Perhaps the most worrying is that it shows Dan Brown's compulsive need to state anything and everything as a proven certainty.

If some wish to believe that Apostle number 6 is St. Mary Magdalene, they may. What they cannot do is to claim – as Brown/Teabing does – that the figure is '*without doubt* female'.

There is very *considerable doubt* that the figure is female, and it is blatant dishonesty – even in a work of fiction – to claim that there is not.



### **The Meaning in Focus**

To draw together in summary the main points, here are the eight items of the Scriptural account and an indication of where and how Leonardo contrived directly or indirectly to include them.

1. Jesus says ***One of you will betray me.***
  - Judas (Apostle 4) is unmoved.
  - Jesus's left arm indicates that he has just spoken.
  - The apostles' chaotic reaction indicates the horror of Jesus's comment.
  
2. The disciples ***look at one another uncertain of whom he is speaking.***
  - Group 4 on the far right.
  
3. ***One of the disciples who Jesus loved [John] was reclining next to him.***
  - Apostle 6, who was sitting close to Jesus but who has swung across to hear Peter. [Note: The habit of eating reclining in the 1st century is modified by Leonardo to have them sitting so that they eat their meal in the same style as those present are eating.]
  
4. ***Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.***
  - Peter (Apostle 5) has got John's attention,
  - is speaking to him, and
  - points to Jesus.
  
5. ***So while reclining next to Jesus, he [John] asks him. 'Lord who is it?'***
  - John cannot be depicted both as listening to Peter and asking Jesus, so Leonardo incorporates details from the other Gospels (6 & 7 below).
  
6. ***They began to ask one another which of them it would be who would do this.***
  - Group 4 on the far right in particular.



7. *Is it I?*

- The first Apostle on the right (number 7) and his raised finger.
- Especially Philip (Apostle 9 - the focus of the right hand side) with his anguished expression and poise.

8. *Jesus answered [John] 'It is the one to whom I shall give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.'*

- Jesus's right arm is about to grab hold of the bread.
- Judas's left arm is already outstretched to receive it.

**Leonardo was utterly Scripture-based in what he painted; any explanation of the picture that is itself not first and foremost utterly Scripture-based cannot be sound.**