INNOVATION and EXPERIMENTATION:
ART of the EARLY and HIGH RENAISSANCE
(Leonardo’s Last Supper)
HIGH RENAISSANCE: Leonardo’s Last Supper

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Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), the illegitimate son of the notary Ser Piero and a peasant girl known only as Caterina, was born in the village of Vinci, outside Florence. He was apprenticed in the shop of the painter and sculptor Verrocchio until about 1476.

After a few years on his own, Leonardo traveled to Milan in 1482 or 1483 to work for the Sforza court. In fact, Leonardo spent much of his time in Milan on military and civil engineering projects, including an urban-renewal plan for the city.

The *Virgin of the Rocks* was painted around 1508 for a lay brotherhood, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, of San Francesco in Milan. Two versions survive, an earlier one, begun 1483, in the Louvre, and a later one of c. 1508 in the National Gallery in London.

There is no general agreement, but the majority of scholars concede that the Louvre panel is earlier and entirely by Leonardo, whereas the London panel, even if designed by the master, shows passages of pupils’ work consistent with the date of 1506, when there was a controversy between the artists and the confraternity.
The patron confraternity was devoted to the Immaculate Conception, the doctrine that Mary was conceived without sex and free of all stain of original sin. This belief, promulgated in papal bulls written by Pope Sixtus IV close to the date when Leonardo painted the picture, was represented in a sculptured image at the same altar (above or below the painting) and has infiltrated the meaning of Leonardo’s painting.

According to tradition, the cave associated with the Nativity was mystically identified with the cave of the Sepulcher. The dove may be interpreted as a reference to the Virgin Mary, and perhaps the shadowy caves are intended to suggest humanity’s dark mortality, which needs the divine light that enters through Mary as the immaculate vessel of God’s purpose.
The composition of the figures create the unified pyramid that will be the basis of High Renaissance compositional practice. The most extraordinary aspect of the painting is its dark and gloomy background, a wilderness of jagged rocks rising almost to the apex of an arch.

The softening of all sharp contours and clear delineations, known as sfumato, creates the mood of a freer painterly representation, in which the paint seems to adapt itself to the qualities of places and things - day and night, lightness and darkness become important components of the painting.

The word *cartoon* is derived from the Italian “cartone” meaning a large sheet of paper on which the artist drew an image that served as a kind of template for the finished painting or fresco, using pricking the contours with a sharp instrument. Charcoal dust would then be brushed over the holes so that the outline of the cartoon could be transferred to the wall or wood panel. This cartoon dates from the mid-1490s and is in black chalk, highlighted with white, on several sheets of reddish buff paper. It was in fact never pricked, so it is possible that it was intended for a painting but was considered by Leonardo as complete in itself.
Leonardo da Vinci. *Last Supper* from the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie (Milan), c. 1495-98, fresco (oil and tempera on plaster) (View during latest restoration)

*The Last Supper* was commissioned by Lodovico Sforza of Milan. As Lodovico’s court artist, Leonardo’s duties included constructing theatrical devices for pageants and designing weapons that could be used against the enemies of Milan— including the artist’s Florentine compatriots.
The recently completed cleaning of Leonardo’s *Last Supper* has revealed its relatively poor condition, which is due to a disastrous technical experiment on Leonardo’s part. An artist as sensitive as Leonardo to the slightest throb of light in atmosphere was bound to be impatient with the fresco method, which could not allow the time needed to establish his customary shadowy unity to the painting his perfect luminous finish to the details.

After preparing the wall with a base layer covered with a thin layer of lead white, Leonardo built up his composition and colors using layers in a manner resembling tempera painting on panel; dampness between the layers prevented them from drying properly and the paint eventually began to flake off the wall.
Above: After Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper (about 1515) by Giampietrino who was active about 1500–1550
Right: The Last Supper photographed in 1900
Leonardo refers to the text from Luke, for Judas’s hand is on the table, stretching after the bread. Because Christ’s hands gesture toward the bread and the wine, the picture also refers to the institution of the Eucharist. Leonardo has fused this episode with yet another moment—never before represented—as recounted by Matthew, Mark, and Luke: “Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. And they were exceedingly sorrowful, and began every one to say unto him, Lord, is it I?” Instead of designating the betrayer, Leonardo has shown how the announcement sparked astonishment on the part of the apostles and the searching of their own souls.
Sassetta (Stefano di Giovanni), *The Last Supper*, 1423, tempera on panel
This work, also known as the *Altarpiece of the Holy Sacrament*, painted between 1464-7 and located in St Peters Church, Louvain, is one of the key works of Northern Renaissance art. The central panel represents The Last Supper and it is surrounded by 4 smaller panels depicting scenes from the Old Testament. In his *Last Supper*, Dirk Bouts breaks with convention by depicting Christ giving the Eucharist, rather than announcing the betrayal of Judas, as had hitherto been the tradition.
Scholars believe this may in fact be the first Flemish panel painting to depict the Last Supper and to use a single vanishing point of linear perspective. All the orthogonals in the room (imagined lines perpendicular to the picture plane) converge and vanish in a point just above Christ's head.

Through a window to the right of Christ's head, a landscape can be glimpsed, which has its own vanishing point. The complexity of the painting is increased by the inclusion of 4 servants, painted in Flemish clothes.

At first it was thought they may have been the artist and his sons, but it is more likely they are the portraits of the donors who commissioned the altarpiece.
Tilman Riemenschneider belonged to the first generation of sculptors who occasionally abandoned the customary practice of decorating their works with pigments and metal foil, producing instead uncolored sculpture. The development of monochromy, in which the wood is visible through a translucent glaze, imposed new demands on the artist, since he had to rely on sculptural means alone to reach the desired level of expressiveness. The popularity of the graphic arts in Germany in the fifteenth century contributed to the acceptance of uncolored sculpture.

Riemenschneider’s figures contain rich contrasts between florid and quiet passages, which create a complex play of light and dark. Their broad tonal range brings to mind the subtleties of Martin Schongauer’s engravings, which Riemenschneider often took as a point of departure for his own compositions.
Although Riemenschneider was among the first sculptors to produce monochrome sculpture, a large portion of his oeuvre was originally brightly colored or polychrome. Much of it fell victim to the nineteenth-century antipathy toward color in sculpture and was stripped of its decoration to reveal the bare wood. The polychromy of wood sculpture, which was often not carried out in the sculptor’s workshop but left to painters, relied on much the same technique as panel painting.

A glue sizing was applied to the wood to close the pores and prevent the absorption of paint media, and knots and joints were covered with textile or plant fibers. The figure then received several layers of a chalk-based ground, which served as a support for metal leaf and for opaque and translucent layers of pigment. The painter could achieve highly illusionistic effects, especially in the rendering of textiles and the treatment of flesh tones, which greatly enhanced the immediacy of sculpture.
Riemenschneider’s favored material, limewood, or linden, is especially suitable for sculpture, since it has a homogeneous texture, making it easier to carve than oak and other woods with a pronounced ray structure. A standing figure was typically carved from a halved section of a tree trunk, clamped horizontally in an adjustable workbench that allowed the block to be rotated. Working from this angle, the sculptor saw the figure in strong foreshortening, much as the viewer would when the finished work was installed above eye level, thus he could compensate for visual distortions by adjusting the proportions and modeling.

Certain parts of a figure, such as hands, attributes, and protruding folds of a drapery were carved separately and attached to the figure with dowels. The backs of figures were normally hollowed out to prevent the wood’s cracking as it aged. The carvings were meticulously finished with knives and scrapers, exploiting the contrast between broad, smooth areas and incised details.
The Altar of the Holy Blood, located at the church of Saint James (St. Jakobskirche), Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany, is named for the rare relic it contains: a small sample of Christ’s blood. The relic, encased in rock crystal, is set in a cross held aloft by two carved angels, enshrined above the corpus (central panel). The altarpiece itself is a masterpiece of woodcarving created by the Würzburg sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider between 1501 and 1505. In the medieval period, the church of Saint James, named for the patron saint of pilgrims, was an important stop on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and the Holy Blood (Heilig Blut) relic was an object of intense devotion. Today, the Altar of the Holy Blood, as well as the church’s other great altarpiece, the Twelve Apostles Altar, continue to draw visitors to the church of Saint James and the picturesque, medieval town of Rothenburg.
The central panel of the Altar of the Holy Blood depicts the Last Supper, although the figure of Christ, who is normally portrayed at the center of such scenes, has been supplanted by Judas, the Apostle who would later betray Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. In *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany, 1475-1525*, Michael Baxandall writes, “Judas is Riemenschneider’s protagonist, displacing Christ from the centre of the Corpus. . . . The emphasis on poor Judas invites meditation, though its significances are unlikely to be arcane: Judas might, for instance, be taken to stand for the lack of discrimination with which God offers grace.” Citing a sermon from the 1490s by Johannes Pauli, a Franciscan writer, Baxandall observes, “Judas . . . can be a signal of hope to pilgrims poor in spirit.”
Andrea del Castagno. *Last Supper*, Refectory at Sant’Apollonia, Florence, 1447, fresco
In 1447 Andrea del Castagno worked in the refectory of Sant'Apollonia in Florence, painting, in the lower part, the *Last Supper* fresco, accompanied by other scenes portraying the *Deposition*, *Resurrection*, and *Crucifixion*, which are now damaged. He also painted a lunette in the cloister, depicting a *Pietà*. The end wall of the *refectory* (dining hall) was decorated with frescoes, although these were never discovered due to the nuns strict enclosure.

The suppression of the convent in 1860 revealed the existence of only one fresco representing the Last Supper (the upper section had been whitewashed), which was initially attributed to Paolo Uccello and then to the real author Andrea del Castagno (1421-1457), who worked on it after his return from Venice in 1444.
Castagno used his paint to create the rich marble panels that checkerboard the trompe-l'oeil walls and broke up the long white tablecloth with the dark figure of Judas the Betrayer, whose face is painted to resemble a satyr, an ancient symbol of evil.

The arrangement of balanced figures in an architectural setting is particularly noted. For instance, Saint John's posture of innocent slumber neatly contrasts Jude the Betrayer's tense, upright pose, and the hand positions of the final pair of apostles on either end of the fresco mirror each other with accomplished realism. The colors of the apostles' robes and their postures contribute to the balance of the piece.
Other three frescoes were discovered above this one, representing respectively the Resurrection, Crucifixion and Entombment of Christ. At the time of the restoration in 1952, the three frescoes were removed to be preserved, thus allowing the recovery of the splendid sinopites.

All scholars agree in praising the sober architectural structure of the room where the scene of the Last Supper is taking place: a room in the austere style of Alberti, with the lavish colored marble panels functioning as a backdrop to the heavy and solemn scene of the banquet. Notice also the beauty of some of the minor details, such as the gold highlights in some of the characters' hair or the haloes depicted in perfect perspective.

The detail and naturalism of this fresco portray the ways in which del Castagno departed from earlier artistic styles. The highly detailed marble walls hearken back to Roman "First Style" wall paintings, and that the pillars and statues recall Classical sculpture and preface trompe l'oeil painting. Furthermore, the color highlights in the hair of the figures, flowing robes, and a credible perspective in the halos foreshadow advancements to come.
Domenico Ghirlandaio. *The Last Supper*, Cenacolo di Ognissanti, Florence, 1480, fresco
The large refectory of the church of Ognissanti is located between the first and second cloister of the old convent. The room on the opposite wall gives access to a splendid stone door in pietra serena, with two basins, built in 1480, on each side. The central fresco, is the work of Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494), who produced with this work one of the best examples of his art, representing a serene yet dramatic episode of the Last Supper. The apostles are painted in the moment in which Jesus announces that one of them will betray him. Following the requests of the monks who commissioned the painting, Ghirlandaio picked out a large number of apparently decorative details, which are in reality a precise symbolic reference to the drama of the Passion and Redemption of Christ, as for instance the evergreen plants, the flight of quails, the oranges, the cherries, the dove and the peacock.
He has, in fact, composed the apostles’ reactions in accordance with his own view of psychology, thus revealing the underlying mathematical unity of all life. As if by inexorable law, the revelation of betrayal factors the number twelve into four groups of three each. This grouping about the axial figure of Christ establishes a symmetrical order that subsumes the figurative variety of the individual apostles.

In addition, Leonardo was certainly aware of the symbolic meaning of these numbers in Christian and human tradition. Three, the number of the Trinity, is the most sacred, while four conveys the essence of matter in the elements of the earth, air, fire, and water. Leonardo thus joins the components of creation, spirit, and matter. More complex numerical symbolism has also been seen here, for there are three Theological Virtues and four is the number of the Gospels, the Cardinal Virtues, the Rivers of Paradise, the seasons of the year, and the times of the day.
A study for *The Last Supper* from Leonardo's notebooks showing nine apostles identified by names written above their heads.
Although Leonardo’s perspective is consistent, there is no place in the refectory where spectators can stand so that their eyes are on the same level as the vanishing point. The walls of the upper chamber in Jerusalem cannot be read as continuations of the real walls of the refectory, and the Albertian role of the picture as a vertical intersection through the visual pyramid has been abandoned. This is perfect perspective, which could not be seen by any pair of human eyes standing the refectory.

Within this perspective, larger-than-life human beings exist and act on a grander plane, above our experience. Ideal masses inhabit ideal space to expound an idea, replacing the delight of the Quattrocento in visual reality and vivid anecdote. We are now truly in the High Renaissance, whose basic idea is Leonardo’s single-handed creation and which will be adopted later by Michelangelo, Fra Bartolommeo, Raphael, and Andrea del Sarto.

Andrea del Sarto. *Madonna of the Harpies*
Charles VII (depicted to the right) entered Italy with 25,000 men (including 8,000 Swiss mercenaries) in 1494 and marched across the peninsula, reaching Naples on 22 February 1495. The French army subdued Florence in passing and took Naples without a pitched battle or siege. Alfonso was expelled and Charles was crowned King of Naples.

It is noteworthy that this new and grander vision of ideal reality is expressed at just the moment when the reality of the Italian political situation was recognized as hopeless. After the French invasion of Italy and the Battle of the Taro in 1495, it was clear that no matter who claimed victory in that disastrous encounter, Italy was divided and would remain impotent in the face of the unified monarchies of Western Europe.

Despite the appeals of Machiavelli and others, it was only a matter of time before the Italian states— with the exception of the Genoese and Venetian republics— would be overwhelmed by the forces of foreign tyranny. Florence and the papacy, however, would be allowed to maintain a shadowy independence.
Tintoretto. *Last Supper*, 1594, oil on canvas, Giorgio Maggiore, Venice
In the middle and late Cinquecento, Tintoretto and Veronese disputed the leadership of the Venetian School with Titian. The older and more dramatic of these younger artists is Jacopo Robusti (1518-94), called Tintoretto after his father’s trade as a dyer. Fruitless attempts have been made to identify Tintoretto’s teacher, a matter perhaps of slight importance considering the originality of his style from the beginning of his career to its end. But Carlo Ridolfi, who wrote about Tintoretto in the seventeenth century and had access to local traditions, records that he worked in the studio of Titian until the great man saw one of the boy’s drawings, inquired who did it, and ejected him from his house. To the end of his days, however, Tintoretto had an unrequited admiration for Titian, whom he considered his true teacher.
Tintoretto’s final major work, *The Last Supper*, seems to deny the classic values of Leonardo’s version, painted almost exactly a century before. Christ, to be sure, is still at the center of the composition, but his small figure in the middle distance is distinguished mainly by the brilliant halo.

In fact, this arrangement was designed to relate the scene to the space of the chancel of the church of San Giorgio Maggiore, for which it was commissioned. The painting was seen on the right wall by the faithful as they knelt to receive Communion, so that it receded less sharply than when viewed head on.
Instead of Leonardo’s closed and logical space with massive figures reacting in individual ways to Jesus’ statement, Tintoretto’s viewer observes the room from a corner, with the vanishing point on a high horizon line at the far right side. The table, coffered ceiling, and inlaid floor all seem to plunge dramatically into the distance.

The figures, although still large bodies modeled by flowing draperies, turn and move in a continuous serpentine line that unites apostles, servants, and angels.
Tintoretto has gone to great lengths to give the event an everyday setting. The scene is cluttered with attendants, containers of food and drink, and animals. There are also celestial attendants who converge upon Christ just as he offers his body and blood, in the form of bread and wine, to the disciples. The smoke from the blazing oil lamp miraculously turns into clouds of angels, blurring the distinction between the natural and the supernatural and turning the scene into a magnificently orchestrated vision.
Tintoretto barely hints at the human drama of Judas’ betrayal, so important to Leonardo. Judas can be seen isolated on the near side of the table, but his role is so insignificant that he could almost be mistaken for an attendant. The artist’s main concern has been to make visible the miracle of the Eucharist - the transubstantiation of earthly into divine food. The central importance of this institution to Catholic doctrine was forcefully reasserted during the Counter-Reformation.
Tintoretto uses two light sources: one real, the other supernatural. Light streams from the oil lamp flaring dangerously over the near end of the table; angels seem to swirl out from the flame and smoke. A second light emanates from Jesus himself and is repeated in the modest glow of the apostles’ halos. The mood of intense spirituality is enhanced by deep colors flashed with bright highlights, as well as elongated figures - treatments that reflect both the Byzantine art of Venice and the Mannerist aesthetic that was beginning to emerge.
INNOVATION and EXPERIMENTATION: ART of the EARLY and HIGH RENAISSANCE (Leonardo’s *Last Supper*) ACTIVITIES and REVIEW
PRESENTATION #1:

Both of these works were created during the 15th century. In what ways does the depiction of the Last Supper created by Dieric Boots from the early Northern Renaissance differ from the depiction of the Last Supper by Andrea del Castagno from the early Italian Renaissance? What factors might account for these differences?
PRESENTATION #2:

Leonardo’s *Last Supper* was created in Milan at approximately the same time that the *Last Supper* by Tilman Riemenschneider was created in Rothenberg. Compare and contrast the two works in regard to each artist’s interest in experimentation and innovation.
Identify the art historical period of each of these images of the Last Supper. Place the images in chronological order.
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