

Art Day 2 - looking at pictures for Holy Week

Leonardo Da Vinci: The Last Supper



Leonardo painted the Last Supper around 1495, for the refectory wall in the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. He was trained in the Florentine tradition of disegno, which meant that every picture was meticulously planned and drawn in advance, so that the plan could be traced onto a wall before painting began. This was the opposite of the colorito approach used in the Venetian tradition of painters such as Sebastiano (see yesterday's picture) in which painters used colouring and paint to create the design straight onto the wood or canvas.

So, this was a very carefully planned picture and was also based on geometry and mathematics. The coffered ceiling, panelled walls and far windows show a perfect understanding of perspective, which was still a relatively new discovery in art. Jesus is at the absolute centre, with the vanishing point in the window behind his head. From this vanishing point lines radiate out to the horizontal straight line of the table, so that perfect symmetry is obtained, with the same number of disciples on each side of Jesus. This is no mere mathematical exercise, however, as the intensity of the moment is heightened by the different stances and expressions of the apostles as they react to Jesus telling them that one of them is about to betray him. John is on Jesus' right and leans back against Peter in his distress, but notice that the disciple in front of Peter has a different skin tone, looks straight at Jesus and also reaches for the same piece of bread, hearing the news with defiance. We know at once who this is.

When he painted this Leonardo wanted it to be a meditation, full of thought and care, so he didn't want to use the usual fresco technique for wall painting, which required fast work on wet plaster, using egg tempera. Instead, he tried a new technique, using oil paint, which allowed for greater variation of tone and more subtlety, so he painted on dry plaster taking months over the work. Unfortunately, this technique was not very successful and he had to repair some of the work as the plaster crumbled. For this reason the painting has been much restored over the years, with varying success. The latest restoration in 1999 used new techniques and is, we are told, the most complete and closest to the original. One can now see the feet of the apostles, which were previously painted over, fold marks in the tablecloth and the apostles' expressions as they receive the news.

Due to its fragility, the picture has stayed where it was painted, unlike so much medieval art, and it has suffered in its time. Napoleon's troops used the room as a stables and Milan was bombed during the war, although the painting was preserved behind sandbags.

Visiting it is a meditation and religious experience. Its quiet beauty, solemnity. Immediacy and perfection fill the room with potency and one shares something of the intensity of Leonardo's vision.