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Depicting Christ's Friends

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The many and varied depictions of the Last Supper—surely it is one of the best-loved biblical stories depicted in visual art—continue to attract us as viewers not only because of the sacramental importance of the event they depict, but also because they explore the friendships among Christ and the apostles. These two examples allow us to compare the representation of the Last Supper in a Northern Renaissance sculpture from Flanders (on the cover and p. 48) and an Italian Renaissance painting from Florence (see p. 50). In each object we can easily identify, for example, the intimate friendship of Christ and John the Beloved, for the artists follow a visual type for the disciple “whom Jesus loved” based on the scriptural reference of his “lying on Jesus’ breast” (John 13:23, 25, KJV).

Domenico Ghirlandaio painted his fresco, *The Last Supper*, in the refectory or dining area of the Dominican monastery of San Marco in Florence. The monks would be reminded of the Lord’s Supper while they too were at the table during mealtime.

The Ghirlandaio workshop, beginning in the fourteenth century and continuing through the sixteenth century, was well known for attracting the most talented artists and training them well in the techniques of the antique style, drawing from life, and fresco. The workshop made available pattern books of drawings that served as references for artists to study the personal relationships among the apostles through their gestures toward one another, position at the table of the Lord, hair and body types, and other iconographic details. The iconographic details for John the Beloved include being positioned close to Christ at the table, usually on his left, and allowing him to sleep with his head on the table. In both the painted and sculptural examples illustrated here, Christ embraces or lays his left hand over the shoulder and back of the sleeping disciple. Clearly this is a position of intimacy and caring between friends. John is also depicted as unbearded, and younger and more effeminate than the other apostles. We will note other characteristics of the iconographic type of John the Beloved in the Crucifixion scenes discussed in a companion article “Near the Cross of Jesus” (pp. 52-55).

We can identify other apostles and their relationships around the table as well as the precise moment in the narrative. Jesus has just informed his friends, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me” (John 13:21b),

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Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448-1494), THE LAST SUPPER (c. 1482). Fresco. Museo di S. Marco, Florence, Italy. Photo: Daniela Cammilli for Alinari, 1990. Photo: © Alinari / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

and they are wondering “Lord, who is it?” as they discuss this seemingly outrageous statement among themselves. For instance, the favored apostle in both objects is Peter who sits at Jesus’ right hand; he has the most important position in a Renaissance composition, which is to the right of the central figure. The artists give this position of honor to Simon Peter because at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had honored his confession of Jesus’ messianic identity by calling him “Peter” (or Rock) and saying “on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18b-19). In church tradition Peter is said to be the first Bishop of Rome and the source of apostolic succession for the Roman Catholic papacy. Peter is depicted as older, wiser, and bearded; sometimes he has graying hair, as in the Ghirlandaio fresco. In the Flemish sculpture Peter moves his right hand towards his heart as he witnesses Judas’s reaction to Jesus’ words. The other apostles do not seem to notice yet what Peter and Christ see. This is a subtle difference from the Ghirlandaio where even Judas seems to be surprised: he literally “gets his back straightened up” but has not begun to leave his chair as in the sculpture.

The traditional position for Judas in Italian Last Supper paintings (until Leonardo's famous work in Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan) is alone on the other side of the table from the other apostles. Although the circular composition of the Flemish sculpture, as opposed to the rectangular painting, still places Judas on the opposite side from Jesus, his reaction is made more dramatic by our watching the chair about to fall over as Judas gets up quickly.

Visual artists utilize the language of gesture and the body position of figures to convey narrative and reveal details about characters' relationships. The iconographic traditions of Christian art once made it easier for artists to depict and comment on the friendships among Christ and his apostles. John the Beloved was represented as a younger friend who is allowed the very comfortable position of resting on the breast of Jesus, and he is the only apostle Jesus physically touches in the Last Supper scene. Peter was placed on the favored side of Jesus, and his strength to lead could be indicated through his awareness of Jesus' revelation. Judas, the one who isolates himself from his friends and betrays his Lord, was placed across the table from Christ, and often he is alone there.



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