



8th February 2012

## The Perpetual Restoration of Leonardo's 'Last Supper' – Part 1: The Law of Diminishing Returns

The restoration of Leonardo's "Last Supper" (1977 -1999) was defended last month at the National Gallery [symposium](#) on the artist's methods and influence, by Pietro Marani, the Leonardo scholar who co-directed the restoration from 1993 onwards. When we pointed out that while the previous restoration had been praised for recovering all of Leonardo's authentic paintwork, the last restoration had in fact introduced vast areas of new painting, Marani held that restorers and curators may impose their own generation's values and interpretations. Appeals to the authority of one generation cuts little ice given how happy each proves to be to undo and redo its predecessor's work – and, besides, given that on past form we are already half way along to the next generation's "Last Supper" restoration, the one presently being defended is already approaching its own "sell-by date".

In its early days, the last restoration was presented as a near miraculous liberation of the original and entirely unadulterated handiwork of Leonardo da Vinci, when that claim, far from being a novel one of its day, was, as mentioned, a re-run. In 1958, John Canaday, the art editor and art critic of the New York Times, reported how, following the war-time bombing of the refectory housing the mural in Milan:

"When the sandbags were removed...the 'Last Supper' was in such pitiful condition that historians were ready to list it as a war casualty. But since then the picture has been gone over as definitively as the combination of exhaustive scholarship and high technical skill make it possible to preserve once and for all whatever is discoverable of the original work. The results are better than anyone expected, although the painting still suggests a ghost at best or, at worst, an embalmed relic..."

Taking their cues from restorers, commentators often dismiss past treatments and celebrate more recent scientifically under-pinned "definitive",



Above, Fig. 1: Pinin Brambilla Barcilon (left) and Mauro Pelliccioli (right) at work on Leonardo's "Last Supper".



Above, Fig. 2: The "Last Supper" in the refectory of S. Maria delle Grazie, Milan, in 1900.



“once and for all” and “miraculous” ones. (Just this week, a Rubens – his “Cain Slaying Abel” – that has been restored at the Courtauld Gallery with funding by the Bank of America, is said in a press release to have stabilized the painting for nothing less than “the next one hundred years”.) The “Last Supper” rescue operation took place in two stages in 1947-49 and 1952-54. In the first, the restorer Mauro Pelliccioli (see Fig. 1) supervised by a former Superintendent of Fine Arts in Milan, Fernanda Wittgens, anchored the disintegrating paint with shellac. As Wittgens’ wrote in the Christmas 1954 issue of *Art News*, “This was not ordinary shellac, of course, but an absolutely colourless one recently produced in England by a chemical process that removes all wax.” With this shellac, Wittgens went on, Pelliccioli performed his wonders:

“...it produced the greatest miracle of the entire restoration. The reattachment of the painted surface was achieved to perfection, and the colours acquired a new consistency as though they had been actually rejuvenated by the shellac that made them adhere to the wall...Mauro Pelliccioli, by doing away with all glues soluble in water, had permanently eliminated the danger of mould: he had at last hit upon a tremendously strong, transparent adhesive impervious to humidity.”

When the shellac was settled, Pelliccioli began scraping off the repaints of earlier restorers. Bernard Berenson visited the scaffold and later reported how, with no more than a penknife, a razor and a drop of turpentine, Pelliccioli had “touched bottom” by removing the “multiple restorations of centuries” and allowing the paint of Leonardo, “deteriorated by the centuries but no longer deturpated by incompetent hands” to be seen once more. In his diary note on October 21st 1953 Berenson said that Pelliccioli had known precisely “where to scrape” – a point echoed and amplified in H. H. Pars’ 1957 “Pictures in Peril”:

“Pelliccioli was able to distinguish those parts of the painting where nothing of the original painting was left, and those parts where overpainting and restoration concealed Leonardo’s own brilliant colours. Step by step these were revealed in the now firmly-fixed painting until we are now able to see Leonardo’s ‘Last Supper’ in better preservation than for many generations, deteriorated through the centuries it is true, but no longer marked and deformed by incompetent hands.”

Thus, to everyone’s satisfaction, the work had been physically rescued and what authentic Leonardo paintwork could be exposed to view had been liberated. Earlier restorers’ repainting was left in place only where it covered bare wall. Just twenty-one years later in 1975, Pinin Brambilla



Above, Fig. 3: The “Last Supper” before 1943.



Above, Fig. 4 and below, Fig. 5: The refectory of S. Maria delle Grazie after the bombing of 1943. The wall bearing the “Last Supper” is present behind the tarpaulin seen below.



Barcilon, a former student of Pelliccioli's, reported that fragments of paint were falling off the mural. Two years later, following tests, she began re-securing those parts of the paintwork that were becoming detached. Her minimal and straightforwardly necessary conservation measure was to mushroom, in parallel with the restorations of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes, which began in 1980, and Masaccio's Brancacci Chapel frescoes, which began in 1981, into one the most protracted radically ambitious, corporately-funded and controversial restorations of modern times.

It can now be seen that 1977 marked the high water mark of confidence in the recuperative powers of restorers and in the legitimacy of their increasingly bold and experimental methods. In the previous decade, heroic actions in wake of the floods in Florence had carried restorers to unprecedentedly high levels of public respect (even when they opted to strip frescoes from walls). In Britain, following a spuriously engineered triumph with the restoration of Titian's "Bacchus and Ariadne" at the National Gallery, criticism had been declared dead by the victors. The National Gallery launched its Technical Bulletin in 1977 and in it, the Gallery's head of conservation science, Joyce Plesters, mused complacently: "one or two readers may recall the furore when the cleaning of discoloured varnishes from paintings...began to find critics". In the same year, Kenneth (Lord) Clark published his two volumes memoir "Another Part of the Wood" and "The Other Half" in which he pronounced picture cleaning "a battle won" and claimed credit for having taken the first steps, as director of the National Gallery (1934-1945), by installing a "scientific department with all the latest apparatus". He had done so not because he believed in the "application of science to the problems of cleaning", but because "until quite recently the cleaning of pictures used to arouse extraordinary public indignation and it was therefore advisable to have in the background what purported to be scientific evidence to 'prove' that every precaution had been taken."

Duping the public in such manner occurred in Italy. In 1981, a year after the start of the Sistine Chapel ceiling restoration in Rome, the restoration of the Brancacci Chapel commenced. Speaking of the prior tests made in connection with that restoration, the author Ken Shulman cites an Italian art historian ("[Anatomy of a Restoration](#)", p. 156), who had said:

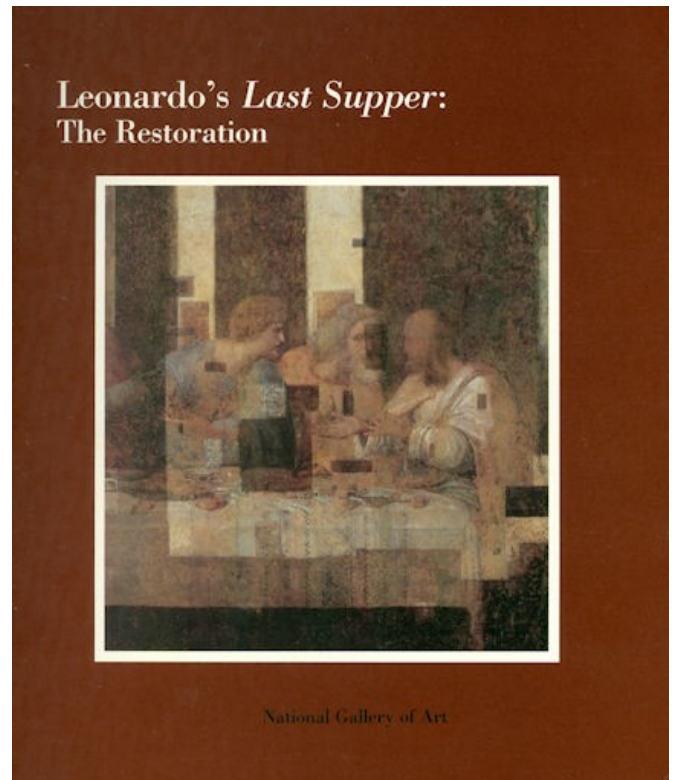
"Let's be honest and admit what all restoration directors will say in private. At the beginning of any restoration, you order as many tests as you can imagine, fully aware that only about five per cent of them will be of any use during the



Above, Fig. 6: The rebuilt refectory with the "last Supper" after Mauro Pelliccioli's interventions of 1947-49 and 1952-54.



Above, Fig. 7: The figure of Christ after Mauro Pelliccioli's restoration.



Above, Fig. 6: The cover of the third part of the catalogue for the 1983 exhibition "Studies for the Last Supper" at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Below, Fig. 7, a de Stijl-esque work by [Cecil Touchon](#) which uncannily echoes the seeming "aesthetic" of the restorer's bewildering method of cutting multiple 'windows' through the skin of the mural during the cleaning.



restoration. The rest of the analyses are merely window dressing.”

With Leonardo’s “Last Supper”, amidst all the preliminary testing, no-one seemed concerned by the fly that was present in the ointment of Pelliccioli’s celebrated reductive, purist restoration: his liberation of Leonardo’s paintwork had come at a cost in terms of artistic legibility. A law of diminishing returns had been set in motion that would (as we will see in Part 2) produce panic and confusion among the restorers and their supervisors.

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