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The Perpetual Restoration of Leonardo’s Last Supper, Part 2: A traumatic production of “a different Leonardo”

The unhappy $8m Olivetti-sponsored restoration of Leonardo’s Last Supper began in 1977 with a repair of small flakes of detaching paint. It morphed, on very grand institutional technical advice, into a promised liberation of all of Leonardo’s surviving original paintwork. It ended after twenty-two years amidst widespread recriminations and as a distinctly mongrel work showing alarmingly little original paint and very much alien “compensatory” and “reintegrating” new paint.

Prospective major restorations are often presented as elegant technical answers to some urgent conservation necessity the resolution of which promises magnificent artistic gains. In reality, the interface between technical intervention and artistic outcomes constitutes art restoration’s fault-line and does so in a field that is notoriously subject to the law of unanticipated consequences. One of the commonest surprises is how greatly the coherence of a work had depended on earlier restoration repairs that were removed on the grounds of being alien impurities. Like Humpty Dumpty, radically stripped works often prove to be wrecks that have to put back together again and many a restorer discovers – too late – that it is easier to take to pieces than to reassemble [see Endnote 1]. The resulting changes made during restorations are often presented as “discoveries”, “recoveries” or “recuperations” when on close examination they prove to have been plain errors. One such unwarranted, unsupported, insupportable case is shown here.

Towards the end, the restorer, Pinin Brambilla Barcilon, expressed the hope (Art News March 1995) that her restoration might be the last because: “The less you restore a work of art, the better its chances of survival. Each time you touch a work, it suffers a trauma, no matter how carefully you operate.” In November 1998 the Art Newspaper reported that when Mrs Brambilla was restoring a crucifixion on the wall opposite the Last Supper in 1978, she noticed that “fragments...
of painting were peeling off Leonardo’s work before her eyes.” The Guardian of July 21 1997 reported she had noticed “bits of painting falling from the Last Supper” and that after experts from Italy’s central institute for restoration in Rome (Istituto Centrale di Restauro) had been called in “the decision to restore the painting was swiftly taken”. Too swiftly, many Italian experts believed.

Although conservation necessities are sometimes exaggerated [see Endnote 2], with paint losses, determining the extent, cause, and remedy must always be the top priority – the equivalent of fixing a building’s leaking roof. As seen in Part 1, when the Last Supper was disintegrating to the touch after the Second World War, the then restorer, Mauro Pelliccioli, fixed the problem by embedding the paint in litres of shellac. He also won some critical praise for uncovering most of Leonardo’s own surviving paint from restorers’ over-paint. Crucially, however, he tackled the disintegrating paint first (during 1947-49). Only when the shellac was settled and the paint completely secure did he begin scraping off restorers’ repainting (during 1952-54). In this most recent restoration, despite the problem of paint detachment, work began with an intended systematic removal of the remaining repaints.

Effectively, in the last restoration the authorities undertook an all- or- nothing gamble with a masterpiece. Against the certainty that shedding the old would be disruptive of the familiar and the still-surviving, they bet that the recovery of some more fragmentary, talismanic relics of Leonardo’s paintwork would outweigh the scale of accompanying losses and newly exposed bare wall. This presumptuous naivety was to prove disastrously wrong-headed. First, as scientific tests of paint fragments (published in Studies in Conservation, August 1979) were to warn, the distinction between original paint and later restorers’ overpaint was not at all easy to establish: “the dividing line is much less clear cut”. (This was hardly surprising given the work’s earlier exposure to corrosive cleaning agents and heated metal rollers.) Second, Pelliccioli had already uncovered most (two thirds, he believed) of what was taken to be Leonardo’s surviving paint. While there was not all that much more to recover, there was, artistically, still very much to lose. Pelliccioli had left repaints in place precisely where they covered only bare wall – which is to say, where they held the image together.

The paradoxical consequence of this pursuit of original material was that the old ill-preserved yet somehow- maintained “theatrical” illusion that Leonardo had originally created was greatly undermined. One narrow specialised purist

Above, Fig. 1: The opening section of TIME magazine’s June 7th 1999 coverage of the unveiled Last Supper. Such reports generated public denunciations of the critics. One, by Georgio Bonsanti in the May 1999 Art Newspaper, targeted this organisation:

“At the root of the controversy are the declamations of the international brigade, Art Watch International, now nearly ten years old, led by the American art historian James Beck and the English journalist [sic] Michael Daley. These crusaders are convinced that masterpieces are being desecrated by poor restoration all over the world but especially in Italy…”

Bonsanti further claimed that Italy’s restorations were being attacked by outsiders because that country “tolerates dissent”, evidently forgetting that James Beck (a professor of art history at Columbia University, who lived in Italy for part of each year, whose wife was Italian and whose children are half Italian) had been hounded simultaneously in several Italian cities on charges of criminal slander (which carried, in addition to horrendous potential financial penalties, the risk of a three-year jail sentence) for criticising the restoration of a masterly piece of sculpture by the subject of his life-long studies, Jacopo della Quercia. (For Michael Daley’s reply, see “Was it necessary?”, the Art Newspaper, July/August 1999.)

In a more specifically abusive vein Bonsanti alleged that:

All standards of accuracy and correctness were laid aside in the scramble to report the supposedly disastrous restoration of the Last Supper… I am not suggesting that critics should be silenced or that a moratorium is desirable, but criticism should be based on observable fact, it should be a technically competent, well-researched and accurate reaction.”

As it happens, all of our criticisms are based on observable, demonstrable (and photographically reproducible) facts. How else, in visual art, might criticisms proceed? As a case in point we discuss and illustrate below a change that was made to the Last Supper and then presented as one of a number of
concern for what was “original” and “authentic” material was set against another larger more elusive aesthetic/artistic concern for what had been intended; for what was yet struggling to survive. Achieving the liberation of fragmentary and injured archaeological material imperfectly adhering to a damaged moisture-prone vertical surface came at the cost of eliminating all that had maintained and prolonged Leonardo’s decaying but originally mesmerising artistic illusion incorporated into the space and fabric of a large room. (Kenneth Clark had spoken fondly of “these ghostly stains upon the wall”). The work was remorselessly stripped down to the sum total of all previously accumulated injuries in order that the resulting wreck might then be put back into some presentable aesthetic form more suited to today’s tastes. The ideological/art historical rationale offered for this purgative exercise was that every age has the right to make its own Leonardo... that the Leonards that had come down to us from the past were somehow deficient, obsolete, culturally-contaminated; that we now simply know better. The preposterous nature and Futurist flavour of this relativist conceit (“Every previous generation has erred, we, standing outside of history – or at its end – will now get things right”) might have been held self-evident. Leo Steinberg, evidently unsettled by this recent spasm of historical/aesthetic cleansing, quoted Jonathan Swift: “Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse.” (“Leonardo’s Incessant Last Supper”, 2001.)

The purist shedding of earlier repaints regardless of their antiquity and artistic functions, necessarily guaranteed that Leonardo’s work would be “altered considerably”, as Carlo Bertelli, the then director of the restoration, acknowledged in the catalogue to the 1983 Washington National Gallery of Art exhibition of Leonardo’s studies for the Last Supper. A later defender of the restoration, Giovanni Romano, not only applauded the creation of “a different Leonardo” during “a great restoration” (Il Giornale dell’arte, April 1999) but fawningly added that he would be “satisfied with a restoration of this sort every year.” Throughout this era of vaultingly high ambition, the restoration community needed the biggest possible “sell”: nothing less than a “New Michelangelo” was said to have emerged during the Sistine Chapel ceiling restoration. It became a commonplace that revolutionary restoration “discoveries” required the very “rewriting of art history”.

There is no mystery about how the latest calamity came about. In the 1983 catalogue, the Washington National Gallery curator, David Allan Brown, duly relayed the twin official reasons for “noteworthy recoveries” when, manifestly, it was not a recovery but an adulteration.

To judge restorations it is necessary to know what was done and what was said to have been done by those in authority. For many of those of us who had the privilege of seeing from the scaffold what was being done to Leonardo’s work, the experience was alarming. The removal of everything except what was deemed original Leonardo paint meant that greatly more “not-Leonardo” was emerging than Leonardo. The second consequence of the stripping was that what little original paint survived, was lost in the visual clamour of the surrounding cracked and discoloured wall preparation layers.

It would have been inconceivable to leave the tiny emerging islands and archipelagos of original paint adrift in the vast sea of ruined wall. At close quarters it was evident that this was not only an extreme restoration, it was also methodologically self-defeating in its dogmatic pursuit of “pure” material. As fast as earlier restorers’ paint was eliminated, fresh paint was needed to ameliorate the losses and impart a pale impression of continuity, coherence and legibility (“The goal of pictorial integration was to achieve a sufficient legibility of gesture, pose and modeling” – Brambilla). The purging of paint and the attendant debilitation of imagery gave rise – as is soften the case with radically deconstructing cleanings – to a misconceived, ahistorical reconstruction that altered the design of the picture – in this case, even, that of Christ himself. While doing so in the name of historical authenticity, historical testimony was defied to a degree that boggles the belief.

The change in question was made to the sleeve of the tunic on Christ’s right arm. It is shown here at Figs. 5-9, as it appears in the “official” published accounts. As seen in Figs. 6 and 8, the alteration was made with fresh paint to stripped areas. On the “evidence” of some fragments of red paint located in a clearly distressed section of the mural, the sleeve drapery was extended by fresh repainting so as to come to rest on the top of the table which it had originally tucked behind – as countless drawn, engraved and painted copies of the Last Supper testify.

By a fluke of publishing, we can show directly comparative photographs that capture the genesis of this alteration. They are found in two books. The first is Pietro Marani’s sumptuous, large format 1999 “Leonardo da Vinci – The Complete Paintings” (hereafter: Marani 1999). In it there is a photograph of Christ (shown here in Figs. 6 & 8). It was taken when the figure had been stripped down and largely but not entirely retouched. The second source is the beautifully photographed and produced 1999 book of the restoration “Leonardo – The Last Supper”, by Pinin Brambilla Barcilon and Pietro C. Marani with Antonio Quattrone’s photographs (hereafter: Brambilla/Marani 1999). In this book there is another photograph of the Christ but this time it is after all the retouching had been completed. This plate is seen at Figs. 7 & 9. The differences between the two states are worth a thousand words. But before discussing their testimony in detail, the status of the many copies of the Last Supper testify should be considered.

We take as fair testimony of Leonardo’s original treatment of the drapery, copies of the Last Supper made in the first eleven decades of its life. Fig. 2 is a detail of an engraving thought to have been made within a couple of years of the Last Supper’s completion. Although primitive in style, it clearly shows that the sleeve drapery is cut off by the table top and does not rest upon it. Over a century later, Rubens (or an associate) made a copy in ink and wash. Here too the sleeve drapery is cut off by the table.
the restoration: that the paint (which, under a microscope, resembled “the scaly skin of a reptile”) had not remained secure; and, that Pelliccioli had not removed all earlier repaints. The repaints had to come off because they were now “threatening the stability of the original colour.” Not explained, was how this was so, or how much original paint had been left by Pelliccioli. In the July 2 1995 New York Times, Bertelli recalled having been “certain that there was enough beneath the additions to warrant this restoration”. He added that “Mrs Brambilla and I had examined the surface with a microscope, and we were surprised to see how much of Leonardo’s original work remained”.

In 1983 Allan Brown noted that “The expectation that a considerable portion of the original might survive [had given] a strong impetus to the decision in the late 1970s by the Superintendency of Fine Arts for Lombardy (at that time directed by Franco Russoli) in consultation with the Istituto Centrale di Restauro, to take up again the unfinished work of cleaning the picture.” This would suggest that so strong was the desire to revive and complete Pelliccioli’s unfinished aesthetic programme that the operation was begun even as the technical solution which had originally made that aesthetic objective possible was said to be failing. Whatever gains might have been hoped for or anticipated, by May 1998, Bertelli admitted (in Art News) that “Now we can see only a few square feet [of original Leonardo paint] but they are by the master” and, on a Channel 4 documentary that year (“The Lost Supper”), he characterised Leonardo’s mural as a “ruin” (“una rovina”). In the November 1998 Art Newspaper Brambilla said, self-contradictorily, that the repaint had had to be removed out of fear that condensation might become trapped between “the artist’s original paint and the successive layers of paint”, and, that constant environmental conservation measures would henceforth be necessary because “the layers of repainting are no longer protecting the original paint.”

Which was the case? If the repaint was protecting the Leonardo paint, what had been causing the original detachments? Given that the 1979 tests mentioned above had established that it was not always possible – even under ideal laboratory conditions – to “decide exactly on the dividing line – both for areas and for layers – between what remains of the original and materials pertaining to later interventions”, how great could the risk have
been of moisture insinuating itself between the original and the subsequent paint layers? On whatever technical premises it rested, when the restoration proper began on the better preserved right-hand side of the mural, the attempted removal of all previous restorers’ repaids and consolidations of paint, inevitably constituted a prolonged and sustained assault on the mural’s fabric – as Brambilla herself candidly described in the March 1995 Art News:

“Here we have a surface that is completely ruined, disintegrated into tiny scales of colour that are falling off the wall. We have to clean each one of these scales six or seven times with a scalpel, working under a microscope... Here I can clean an area one day and still not be finished, because when the solvent dries it brings out more grime from beneath the surface. I often have to clean the same place a second time, or even a third or a fourth. The top section of the painting is impregnated with glue. The middle is filled with wax. There are six different kinds of plaster and several varnishes lacquers and gums. What worked on the top section doesn’t work in the middle. And what worked in the middle won’t work on the bottom. It’s enough to make a person want to shoot herself.”

Could Pelliccioli’s already failing shellac have survived these repeated traumatic assaults with solvents and scalpels on all the glues, waxes, lacquers and gums within the paint-film? Had some new superior quick-acting consolidant been identified or manufactured? What were the structural consequences of this apparent removal of every atom of previous consolidations of the paint? Brambilla has said of the detaching paint “To re-adhere the fragments we used wax-free shellac in alcohol, the same adhesive as Pelliccioli applied during his intervention of 1947”. So, in other words, just some more of the same. If Brambilla’s best English wax-free shellac lasts no longer than Pelliccioli’s, we might expect another restoration within twenty years or so.

One thing is clear: the technical underpinning of the restoration, and the swiftness with which its unquestionably radically transforming methodology was applied, were both challenged by Italian experts. On July 2 1995 the New York Times reported that Mirella Simonetti, a Bologna-based restorer, protested: “There was never any doubt in their minds. They decided how to proceed without even conducting the proper analyses to determine how much of the original painting remained. They didn’t even submit their findings to an international committee of experts.” The Florence-based diagnostician, Maurizio Seracini, who had been called to examine the Last Supper after the restoration began, complained: “I think that Mrs Brambilla has worked in good faith.

http://artwatchuk.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/14-march-2012/
But you don’t decide to restore a masterpiece like the ‘Last Supper’ on the basis of what you see under a microscope. It’s simply irresponsible.” Seracini added “I myself have not seen any definitive scientific proof that restoration was really needed.”

That the authorities had not known how much original Leonardo paint might survive had been tacitly acknowledged as early as 1983, when, with the restoration one third completed, David Allan Brown could speak only in relative terms: “By comparison with other, well-preserved murals of the time, Leonardo’s detailed execution is almost entirely lost.” Even when the restoration was eventually finished (or halted) there was no agreement among the protagonists themselves on how much had survived. Carlo Bertelli, the director of the Brera Art Gallery in Milan, who effectively initiated the restoration, put the figure at 20% Pietro Marani, the prolific Leonardo scholar who advised Brambilla from 1985 and became co-director of the restoration in 1993, once said that “no more than 50% survived and later more ambiguously claimed that 90% had survived “in parts”. Giuseppe Basile (later the director of the restoration of Giotto’s Arena Chapel frescoes) put it at “about half”. Giorgio Bonsanti, the director of the Florence-based laboratory Opificio delle Pietre Dure, put it at “possibly 20%’. Giovanni Urbani, the director of the Istituto Centrale di Restauro between 1973-83, and the director of the Brancacci Chapel restoration, thought 25% had survived.

In 1989 a Milan town councillor, Maria Bonatti, brought an (unsuccessful) action against the restorer for accelerating the mural’s decay – a charge also made by the painter, essayist and paint materials expert Mario Donizetti, who held that it would “disintegrate more rapidly than before.” Ten years before the restoration ended, in November 1989 the Art Newspaper reported “Over the years work has been stopped repeatedly, sometimes following changes at the helm of the Milanese Soprintendenza and the Instituto in Rome, other times simply to allow the whole project to be reconsidered.” Eventually the proceedings quickened dramatically. In his 2001 book, Leo Steinberg recalled encountering the restorer and three young assistants in 1998 “all huddling at lower left scraping away’. On the cleared wall, “more filling was needed – and it had to be done fast (a deadline had been imposed from on high), so that this must-see tourist attraction would show decent finish to the daily sightseers.”
In 1983 Bertelli had said in National Geographic that Brambilla was taking a week to clean an area the size of a postage stamp. He quoted her professional plaint: “It’s difficult. The work is hard and tiring. It creates much physical tension bending over the microscope. After a few hours my eyes grow blurry. I may come every day for months. Then I must take an extended break. There is also the psychological tension. All the eyes of the world that know Leonardo are watching what I do. Some nights I do not sleep.” The pressure intensified as the restorer inched her way towards the central figure of Christ. In April 1998 the Art Newspaper reported that “Hundreds of tourists (mostly Japanese) last month lined up... to visit Leonardo’s Last Supper. The painting was back on view after having been closed for two months to allow restorers to work on the faces of Christ and the apostles.” That report evidently escaped the attention of the National Gallery’s then director, Neil MacGregor, who wrote in his 2000 BBC book “Seeing Salvation”:

“When the latest restoration was unveiled in 1999, all hell broke loose, and the admirably scrupulous restorer in charge was vilified in much of the world’s press...Among the wilder accusations, fears were expressed that the face of Christ had been altered. Happily these proved to be groundless.”

That the unveiling was badly received is beyond dispute, but if vilification was in evidence it was aimed by defenders of the restoration at their critics (see right). The extent to which the face of Christ was altered, and the evolving means by which the restorer came to impose her own distinctive, ahistorical, arguably arbitrary aesthetic reading on the unprecedentedly vast, fully-exposed areas of paint loss in a quest to “bring it back to its original colors and composition”, will be examined in Part 3. Here (right) we examine a single unwarranted change that was made to the design of drapery on Christ’s right arm and then presented as a restoration recovery.

Michael Daley

ENDNOTES

[1] In the 1962- 64 National Gallery Annual Report, the then director, Sir Philip Hendy, described how with the great Uccello panel from the Battle of San Romano series, the stripping down (which had begun and 1959 and was still ongoing) had exposed a greatly damaged surface. As a result, after its characteristic Gallery “complete cleaning”, it was realised that “To restore scrupulously takes carried downwards, overlapping the table cloth before turning upwards so as to terminate behind the wrist, and thereby impart to the sleeve drapery a muff-like (or puffball-like) configuration from the centre of which the forearm now emerges. As well as being an unwarranted falsification of Leonardo’s design, this change insinuates a solecism: in the laws of artistic drapery, material hangs from and partially expresses underlying human forms, it does not provide autonomous enclosing receptacles for them (like pots for a lobster, as it were). As shown below, no authority exists in the painting’s many copies for this change of design.

Above, Fig. 8: An enlarged detail, again showing the sleeve/mantle relationship after some tinted infilling had taken place but before the completion of the restoration. The dark shape in the bottom left corner is the mantle of the apostle John. It would seem that this photograph was taken at the point when the restoration was just about to pass to the left of Christ. It would seem also to confirm that the tinted infills were being made pretty much as the stripping down was taking place. Here we can see that the razor-sharp delineation of the architectural forms is not a happy by-product of the stripping down but is almost entirely a subsequent reconstruction effected with superimposed overall painting on a zone of almost total losses of original paint. It looks as if the tinted brown repaint on the background wall was stopped short of the not-yet stripped drapery of John, thus producing the temporary effect of a coarse outline or halo.
very much longer than to create freely, and the

task of pulling the picture together again could

have been further prolonged.”

[2] With the restoration of Michelangelo’s Sistine
Chapel ceiling it was said in 1986 (six years into
the restoration) that “various checks [had]

ascertained that in several places minute flecks of
colour were lifting” and that this had “necessitated
an immediate restoration.” In 1987 it was said that
extensive areas of flaking were progressively
worsening and threatening an imminently
“uncontrollable situation”. By 1988 Vatican
spokesmen were claiming that the weight of
encrustations upon the paint surface was causing
it to break away from its ground. By 1989 it was
said that the glues had “shrunk and puckered"
causing “scabs” to fall away “pulling pigment with
them”. It was said that this “slow destruction by
glue-pox” was “the Vatican’s principle motivation
for cleaning the ceiling”. When I asked in 1990
how big the puckerings were, a Vatican
spokeswoman said “Oh! Some are as big as your
hand.” Soon after, in 1991, the problem de-
escalated: initial investigations were
acknowledged, once more, to have encountered
“minute desquamations and loss of pigment.”

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Below, Fig. 9: The section at Fig. 8 after completion of
the restoration. Note how the repainted tones on the
architecture have been brought to a sharp and precise
relationship with the contour of the arm drapery. Is that
seeming precision of draughtsmanship authentic or
spurious? How well does it compare with the sleeve/wall
boundary on the two full-size copies shown below? Of
this back wall, Pinin Brambilla Barcilon writes:

“The entire wall, however, was characterised by the
widespread loss of colour…Once the superficial repaint
had been removed, it was clear that we had to press on
with cleaning in order to achieve some sort of visual
coherence between the back wall and the side walls…
Pictorial integration meant that the wall had to be
restored using coats of dark toned water colour to define
the shadows. Obviously the flakes of original colour
remain completely visible…”

Of the sleeve drapery the restorer writes:

“Like the mantle, Christ’s robe also required the removal
of extensive repaint, as the heavy red tone detracted
noticeably from the lovely original vermilion passages.
The thick adhesives made the removal particularly
difficult, so it progressed with the repeated application
of compresses which managed to dissolve the film of

glue completely. The cleaning redefined the original
articulation of the folds, both at the neckline and at the
sleeve cuff. The cuff which had been covered by the
mantle’s repaint now revealed beautiful violet flakes,
composed of a blue base glazed with a crimson lake to
define the shadow area…”

The very concept of “redefining” the original is unsettling
if not oxymoronic. Note that while there is excitement at
the discovery of “beautiful violet flakes” (as seen through
a microscope?) in the stripped down wreckage, there is
no mention of the table cloth or discussion of the
changed drapery/table relationship. The restorer
continues:

“Other noteworthy recoveries included…”
Above, Fig. 10: Detail of the Tongerlo Abbey copy of which Steinberg writes:
“...given its size, its high quality, and general accuracy, the Tongerlo copy ranks with the finest surviving testimonies to the near-lost Leonardo.”

Above, Fig. 11: Detail of the large, c. 1520 copy of Leonardo’s Last Supper that is owned by the Royal Academy and attributed to Giampietrino. In the catalogue to the National Gallery’s recent “Leonardo da Vinci – Painter to the Court of Milan” exhibition, Minna Moore Ede wrote:

“Given the deteriorated state of Leonardo’s Last Supper mural today, the question of which of the early painted copies can be said to be most faithful to the original is of particular and tantalising importance. Always viewed as among the most accurate is this scale copy by Giampietrino... Believed to have been a live-in apprentice of Leonardo’s during his first Milanese period (probably
joining the workshop in the mid 1490s), Giampietrino would have been present during the period when Leonardo was preparing and painting the Last Supper, perhaps even assisting his master.

When told of our objection to the redrawn sleeve of Christ, Pietro Marani reportedly responded: "A small piece of drapery. Oh, my God." and contended that Giampietrino might have misunderstood the position of Leonardo’s drapery.

Click on the images above for larger versions. NOTE: zooming requires the Adobe Flash Plug-in.