

The Da Vinci Code: Is it John or Mary Magdalene?

By John Barber, PhD

The Da Vinci Code, and its attack on the Divinity of Christ, has certainly created a stir among Christians worldwide. In an effort to counter the message of the book by Dan Brown, and now the Ron Howard movie, a great many Christians have attempted to defend the Bible, but few have attempted to defend Leonardo da Vinci. This is surprising since much of what the movie portends about Jesus rests in the allegation that the great renaissance master craftily left a “code” within some of his creations that tell the real story of Jesus.

One idea the book presents is that Jesus was secretly married to Mary Magdalene and Leonardo knew this, a fact hinted to in his enduring work *The Last Supper* (1498). It is said that Leonardo shrewdly conveys this idea by painting not the apostle John to the right of Jesus, but Mary – an idea supported by the feminine appearance of the figure. Brown argues that the inclusion of Mary Magdalene among the other disciples helps to prove the major theme of his novel: the pressing need to recover the “sacred feminine” of ancient Christian practice, as it was centered in the worship of a goddess or goddesses, a claim that is totally false.

The question I wish to address is this. “Do the obvious feminine qualities of the figure seated to the immediate right of Jesus support Brown’s notion that it is Mary Magdalene?”

Since Leonardo was a renaissance artist, let’s start by defining the “Renaissance.” This was that great period in Europe, from the early fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, which experienced a revitalized interest in Greco-Roman culture. But renaissance artists did more than recover the Golden Age of antiquity. In many ways artists added their own distinctive personalities to art, creating a new and vibrant medium. In other words, many artists of the time stretched the boundaries of art, introducing elements that did not appear in the classical archetypes.

We see this phenomenon in the work of Donatello (1386-1466), a Florentine sculptor. The first thing to notice about his rendition of *David* (1444-46) is that it is evidence of the rebirth of the classical past, as it is the first freestanding statue since Roman times. But also it represents a *new spirit* that would infuse the Renaissance with a vitality and ingenuity unparalleled in Roman times. Having defeated his enemy, David stands restfully with his sword in his right hand and his left foot on the twisted locks of the severed head of Goliath. So Donatello’s David is a victor. But astonishingly he does not look like the typical Roman victor, but much like a woman, with strikingly feminine features and a stylish, pointed hat! This is not an idealization of trans-reality, but a dramatic quality that pits the reality of the actual scene against the serene elegance of the moment.

The piece is certainly not akin to Donatello's other great masterpiece of St. George (1420) that strikes the eye with its celebration of Christian knighthood, and its small relief below the statue showing St. George on horseback slaying dragons and exalting *virtu*. But what the viewer expects to see and what he does see in *David* are so intensely different, that the effect is to stimulate *within* the viewer a deeper drama of a more personal quality.

Another example of innovation in renaissance art is Donatello's *Saint Mary Magdalen* (1457). It is a woodcarving done for the Florence Baptistery. She is a paradigm of emotion in renaissance art. The work has been both condemned and heralded. The sculpture portrays her, not as the young, graceful Madonna – the ideal of womanhood – but as a painfully emaciated figure in bad health and dressed in an animal skin that appears to be of one piece with her straggled hair that lays recklessly over her shoulders, an effect that creates the overall appearance of primal tragedy. Yet grace shows through. Her face and prayerful hands are alight with the knowledge of pure faith. In both her tragic exterior and her godly interior the onlooker is reminded of the stark duality of the Christian life: the inexorable tragedy of sin leading to death but also of the promise of life eternal found in Christ alone. Like Donatello's *David*, the religious interpretation moves us psychologically and emotionally without manipulating us.

It is with the work of unparalleled polymath, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), that renaissance art stretches the boundaries of classical ideals with greater zeal. As a result not only is Leonardo the “bridge” to the more fertile period of renaissance art, but also he is the source of its undoing, leading to the next and somewhat short-lived period in art history known as “Mannerism.”

One of the best examples of Leonardo's ingenuity is seen in *The Virgin of the Rocks* (1503-06). Here the painter demonstrates an attention to detail that even the atomistic Van Eyck could not touch. Yet Leonardo is not the least bit concerned with perfection of line, much less with classical *virtu* and perfection. Yes, we do see the common triangular device created by the arrangement of the Virgin and her companions, but in this case the measurement is far from exact, not Vitruvian in the least. The unspoiled proportions and architectural precision of classical art are lost to a bold and innovative move, a creative act that reveals nature as the harbinger of a new art. Though his Madonna is that noble woman of the *Pieta* (1498-9), Leonardo's *Virgin* is a young girl that now is one with nature, as if to reach back in time to when Thomas called for a fusion of grace and nature, reason and faith. The bringing together of these two worlds hints at a turning point in art, but one that would need to wait until Mannerism discarded perfect form, and Baroque shocked Europe with glory, and the aristocratic elites of France made their flight from reality in Rococo. After that, Leonardo's archetype would reappear in the Romantic notions of Friedrich and the Transcendentalists. Leonardo was clearly a man well ahead of his time.

Then there is Leonardo's groundbreaking and divergent use of light. The typical fifteenth century painter stressed luminescence in every corner of his work so as to highlight its precision and intellectual clarity. But in *The Virgin* Leonardo places Mary

sitting in a dimly lit cave, with natural light behind her peaking through the crags thus creating a diffused luminosity. But where does the light on her face and on those angelic beings sitting around her emanate from? Is it Divine light? What Leonardo called “soft-edge” painting is what the Baroque masters would call *chiaroscuro*.

This brings us to Leonardo’s *The Last Supper*. The apostles are painted in groups of three. The group of three to the right of Jesus includes Judas Iscariot, Peter, and John. It is important to note that no reputable art historian has ever questioned the authenticity of John in the masterpiece. Indeed, Leonardo’s personal treatise on art, rediscovered in the nineteenth century, lists the apostles by name, including that of John.¹

The work introduces us to more of what makes Leonardo the great renaissance innovator.² For one, we see his famous use of light, as the apostles sit in a diffused light that comes through the windows from behind. Judas is clutching a small bag of silver, given to him as payment to betray Jesus. Again, the moment is conveyed by the artist’s ingenious interplay of light and shadow. Peter looks tense, perhaps a foreshadowing of his denials in Gethsemane. John, the youngest of the apostles, is seated nearest to Jesus, but is leaning away from Christ and appears to swoon.

The inspiration to create John with feminine qualities comes from the biblical record that calls John the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7,20). The amorous portrayal of John creates a more dramatic and realistic effect meant to describe a relationship of intimate union. The innovation is totally in keeping with Leonardo’s other imaginative changes, only some of which are referenced above. That John appears to swoon is confused with the simple fact that he is discussing something with Peter.

Leonardo’s injection of new ideas served to stimulate even greater cleverness among artists. Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557) has been called a mannerist painter, an aberration, if you will, from the otherwise consistency of classicism. But is mannerism a separate movement or is it not the logical working out of Leonardo’s imagination? We must remember that Pontormo was for a brief while a student of Leonardo. Pontormo’s *Deposition* (1525-28) with its airy atmosphere and lack of specific focal point in space gets its quality from the blueprint of the *Virgin* who sits well before the crags of the cave, making it impossible to find the central point of the painting.

Parmigianino (1503-1540) also is a mannerist, but is he? Or does Leonardo inspire him? In the *Virgin* (1506) her hands are too large and her left arm is too long to be classical. Likewise, Parmigianino’s *Madonna of the Long Neck* (1534) reveals a woman whose body is out of proportion and too big for her space. Her hands are like those of the figures in Pontormo’s painting; it is as if both artists’ attention to detail stops at the wrist. What is left for a hand is a trailing symbol of extension. This precise symbol is seen in the hands of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* (1503-06), completed the same year as *The Virgin of*

¹ See *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci* (Dover Publication, 1970), p. 232.

² The composition is not a fresco, as Dan Brown wrongly states in his book, but is a mural using an experimental technique called *tempera*.

the Rocks! So, was there a mannerist movement distinct from the mainstream of renaissance art? Or were these artists simply following the lead of a trend set by Leonardo *within* high renaissance art? If the Renaissance had its aberration, it was not the mannerists, but Leonardo.

In conclusion, Dan Brown is dead wrong to say that the figure to the direct right of Jesus in *The Last Supper* is Mary Magdalene and that her inclusion in the work supports his theory of the “sacred feminine.” Not only did renaissance artists revive the thoroughgoing classicism of the past, they added elements to it that gave it a fresh appeal. Leonardo da Vinci was the master at this approach. The feminization of John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, is a case in point. It was Leonardo’s innovations in particular that stimulated a new era in art history called Mannerism.