

Art, Art History and The Da Vinci Code

“I know of no serious scholar who has proposed this notion.”

-Joseph Forte, an art historian at Sarah Lawrence College, responding to speculation that Leonard’s artwork secretly depicts a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Introduction

Interview with Matt Lauer on *The Today Show* (June 9, 2003)

Lauer: How much of this is based on reality in terms of things that actually occurred? I know you did a lot of research for the book.

Mr. Brown: Absolutely all of it. Obviously, there are—Robert Langdon is fictional, but all of the art, architecture, secret rituals, secret societies, all of that is historical fact.

Lauer: So what’d you do? You traveled the world, you know, running into museums and—and ...

Mr. Brown: Essentially, yeah.

Lauer: ...interviewing a lot of historians.

Mr. Brown: My—well, I’m very fortunate. I married an art historian who, you know, with whom I travel, and we have a great time.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

1. He was a “flamboyant homosexual.”

Response: In 1476, he and three other young men were charged with sodomy involving a seventeen-year-old male prostitute. The charges were dropped after two hearings for lack of evidence. Sherwin B. Nuland, author of *Leonardo da Vinci* (2000) writes, “This episode is the only hint of sexual activity by Leonardo, and those who have been the most painstaking students of his life assume it never happened.” If he was a homosexual, he most definitely was not flamboyant.

2. He is “an awkward subject for historians,” especially Christian historians.

Response-A search on amazon.com for books about Leonardo turns up nearly five thousand titles.

3. He was also a “worshipper of Nature’s divine order.”

Response-Leonardo undoubtedly had a fascination, even love, for nature, evidenced by his numerous sketches of landscapes, plants, and animals. But his fascination seems to

have been mostly devoid of a supernatural or religious element. “Leonardo was not a very religious man, but he was not antagonistic to religion or even to the Church,” state art scholar D. M. Fields.

4. He produced an “enormous” amount of “breathtaking Christian art.”

Response-Leonardo was infamous for his meager production of finished artwork. According to the *Encyclopedia of World Art*, “Leonardo’s output of paintings was unusually small. A total of seventeen commonly accepted works has been preserved, and of this total, four are unfinished.” Many of Leonardo’s notebooks have been preserved, filled with sketches and drawings of human anatomy, buildings, architectural ideas, plants, animals, weapons, and advanced technological concepts.

5. He had a reputation for “spiritual hypocrisy.”

Response-This is hyperbole on the part of Brown, who is apparently portraying the artist as something of a hedonistic, neo-pagan playboy.

6. Fache tells Langdon that the symbologist must be “aware that Leonardo da Vinci had a tendency towards the darker arts.” (45)

Response-“Leonardo was severely critical of the pseudo-sciences and the occult: astrology, necromancy, chiromancy, and alchemy,” says Alessandro Vezzosi. “Yet, he acknowledged that the latter was respectable when it approached chemistry.”

7. His famous journals were written in “illegible reverse handwriting.”

Response-While it is true that he did write at times in reverse handwriting, the writing could not have been illegible or we could not have translated it.

8. Langdon also remarks that Leonardo’s “inventions included horrific, never-before-imagined weapons of war and torture.” (45)

Response-Here, at last, the novel is closer to the truth. He did devise several new weapons of war. However, there are no torture devices. Plus, if he is a practitioner of the “sacred feminine” why is he so preoccupied with designing instruments of war. If Brown’s version of Da Vinci is true then we do have someone who is living a life full of “spiritual hypocrisy.”

The Virgin of the Rocks

1. The novel correctly notes that there are two versions of this painting—the earlier one is in the Louvre in Paris and the later one is housed at the National Gallery in London.

2. The painting is a depiction of a legend taken from the early events in Jesus’ life. This legend, unknown prior to the fourteenth century, “described the meeting between the

Holy family and the future John the Baptist in the desert under the protection of the angel Uriel, after they had fled to escape King Herod's slaughter of the innocents.

3. Art historians and scholars have always understood that the infant on the left, under the right arm of the Virgin Mary, is John the Baptist; the infant on the right, next to the angel Uriel, is Jesus. The angel supports the Christ child, "emphasizing his divinity"; he also sits closest to the water, prefiguring the baptism he will receive as an adult from the John the Baptist. His cousin kneels in adoration, while Mary acts as both a compositional and a theological mediator, the biological tie between the two children.

4. Why does Brown transpose the identities of the two infants? So he can write that instead of the "usual" depiction of Jesus blessing John, "it was John who was blessing Jesus...and Jesus was submitting to his authority!" (138) Brown offers no explanation.

5. Describing the painting in the Louvre, Brown writes about Mary's hand, placed over the head of Jesus (whom Brown identifies as John), as "making a decidedly threatening gesture—her fingers looking like eagle's talons, gripping an invisible head" (139) Uriel's hand is making "a cutting gesture ... as if slicing the neck of the invisible head gripped by Mary's claw-like hand" (139). Whose head? Why? What is the point? No explanation is given by Brown.

6. Uriel's finger (pointing to John the Baptist in the first painting) is lowered in the second one, but Mary's hand is still in the same position over Jesus' head. "Claw-like," or is it in a maternal position, protectively placed above her son.

Mona Lisa

1. Brown connects this idea to the Gnostic ideal of androgyny, writing that Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* is not male or female but "carries a subtle message of androgyny. It is a fusing of both" (120).

2. Langdon tells us that Mona Lisa's "name is an anagram of the divine union of male and female"—that is the reason for the smile (121).

3. Granted, there are numerous theories about who Mona Lisa was or was not, what her relationship was to Leonardo, and what her smile means or does not mean. But the less sensational answer is that "Mona Lisa" comes from *Mona*, "M'lady"—a common title of respect in Florence in the sixteenth century—and "Lisa," possibly the wife of a local merchant.

The Last Supper

1. The Missing Chalice—at the urging of Teabing, Sophie looks at *The Last Supper* and sees that there is "no chalice in the painting. No Holy Grail" (236).

Response-The absence of a large chalice with bold letters declaring it is the Holy Grail is important only if we assume that that is what the scene should include—an assumption the reader is pushed toward by Teabing’s remarks. But why should we assume that Leonardo would depict Jesus’ cup as being different from that used by the apostles? In fact, an examination of the painting reveals that each of the figures, including Jesus, has a cup and a piece of bread before him; Jesus’ cup is next to his left hand, his right hand raised over the bread.

The Apostle John vs. Mary Magdalene?

1. The identity of the three apostles to Jesus’ right has never been in doubt. In *The Last Supper*, Leo Steinberg writes, St. Andrew (from left to right) “is followed by Peter, Judas, and John, the three whose identity in the mural was never doubted.”
 - a. Peter holds a knife-figuring his use of the sword in the Garden.
 - b. Judas recoiling and grasping the bag of money.
 - c. John’s youthful appearance and contemplative pose.
2. There is also physical evidence. A parish church of Ponte Capriasca near Lake Lugano contains a mid-sixteenth-century fresco copy of *The Last Supper*. On that fresco are the names of the twelve apostles, left to right.
3. It seems that the grouping of John, Judas, and Peter is purposeful. Steinberg points out that it is this cluster “of three who are destined for roles in the Passion.” Judas betrays Jesus, Peter denies Jesus, and John was the only apostle to stand at Jesus’ Cross.
4. John is undoubtedly painted in an effeminate manner, as Leonardo depicted the youthful John in the early fifteenth-century Florence style. This approach can be seen in other paintings of the period, including Leonardo’s own *Saint John the Baptist*, which depicts a young man who is quite effeminate in appearance and also has flowing hair and delicate hands.
5. As for the “hint of bosom,” it can only be found in the feverish imagination of those subscribing to Brown’s theory.
6. Teabing states that a “V” shape representing the Grail and the female womb is “at the focal point” of *The Last Supper* (244). The figure of Christ is clearly the focal point of the painting; the entire composition is based around his figure and his silhouetted head.

Peter and the Dagger

1. Pointing the a hand holding a dagger, Langdon tells Sophie that it is “disembodied” and that a count of the arms will reveal that it belongs to “no one at all” (248). If one looks to Christ’s right there are six bodies and twelve arms.
2. The dagger is being held by Peter; it represents the sword he will use a few hours later in the garden to cut off the ear of a slave who is with the arresting army. Apparently

Brown wants us to think that Peter is threatening “Mary M.” because she has been chosen to lead the apostles.

The Holy Grail

1. The Grail debuts in medieval literature even before it has become “the Holy Grail.” In *Perceval*, a French poem by Chretien de Troyes from the second half of the twelfth century, the *grail* is a large jeweled dish containing the single Mass wafer that a beautiful maiden carries at a banquet. The maimed king who presides over the gathering cannot be healed until the poem’s naïve hero Perceval starts asking questions about the Grail.
2. Chretien’s poem remained unfinished and the dish unexplained until about 1200, when a Burgundian poet named Robert de Boron expanded the story. Robert turns the dish into the cup of the Last Supper and has the king wounded by the Holy Lance of Longinus that had pierced the side of Jesus. Following adventures in the Near East, Joseph brings the Grail to England, where his relatives become the hereditary Grail-keepers and the ancestors of Perceval.
3. The Grail myth grew from here to include King Arthur, Sir Galahad and a whole host of adventurers.
4. The Grail of the medieval romance is firmly grounded in Catholic faith and devotion. There is nothing to support Dan Brown’s claim that the stories were coded quests for the “lost sacred feminine.”

Opus Dei (“Work of God”

1. From Brown’s fact page: The Vatican prelature [office] known as Opus Dei is a deeply devout Catholic sect that has been the topic of recent controversy due to reports of brainwashing, coercion, and a dangerous practice known as “corporal mortification.” Opus Dei has just completed construction of a \$47 million National Headquarters at 243 Lexington Avenue in New York City.
2. The novel goes on to describe Opus Dei as “a Catholic Church” and portrays it as an order of monks with members serving as assassins, one of whom (a “hulking albino” named Silas) is a key character in the book.

Response: The real Opus Dei was founded in Spain in 1928 by a Catholic priest, St. Josemaria Escriva, with the purpose of promoting lay holiness. In 1982, John Paul II established it as a personal prelature of the Catholic Church. The culmination of the Church’s support for Opus Dei and its message came with the 2002 canonization of its founder. It has approximately 85,000 members.

1. Opus Dei has no monks, nor any members like Silas. Its mission is to help lay people seek holiness in their daily lives. In fact, helps people grown closer to God in and through their ordinary secular activities. “Numerary” members of Opus Dei—a

minority—choose a vocation of celibacy in order to be available to organize the activities of Opus Dei. Some Opus Dei members make use of the Cilice, a type of mortification of the flesh that has always had a place in the Catholic tradition because of their symbolic reference to Christ's Passion. This worn on the upper thigh for up to two hours a day.

2. The idea that Opus Dei entered a corrupt bargain with Pope John Paul II—bailing out the Vatican Bank in exchange for status as a personal prelature—has no basis in reality.

3. The prime directive of Opus Dei is the sanctification of work...they'll use that work as a means of redeeming the world, bringing a distinctively Christian approach to law or politics.