The Transfiguration of the Visible.
Leonardo's 'Last Supper'

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Abstract

What else can be said about Leonardo Da Vinci's 'Last Supper'? An image so thoroughly analysed, interpreted and reinterpreted by historians, writers, researchers and artists or filmmakers. But still, it proves itself to be inexhaustible.

The experimental technique used by Leonardo Da Vinci in his masterpiece 'The Last Supper' offers us an example of how materials respond to the way in which they are used, and the opportunity to discuss about the inherent vice from dematerialization to transfiguration of the image, using a phenomenological approach. We will also analyse how the visible integrates and interferes with the invisible until the nature of the image changes, generating a different aesthetic.

The aim of this study is to highlight the dynamic role of materials in changing the nature of the image, even beyond the act of creation, and to provide a look from inside image to outside, to better understand its form, physiognomy, and this ambiguity between offering and hiding itself to us, in the same time.

***Keywords:** `Last Supper`, Da Vinci, materiality, dematerialization, transfiguration, image, visible, invisible, inherent vice.*

About The Last Supper vastly has already been written, especially from an iconological and iconographic point of view, proving an inexhaustible source of inspiration for historians, writers, and researchers. The delicate conservation state of the work is well known, the aesthetic of degradation integrating and interfering with the figurative until changing the nature of the image, thus generating a new aesthetic. Today, the image of the painting can no longer be separated from this particularity. Our study highlights the dynamic role of pictorial matter in changing the nature of the image beyond the act of creation, conferring it another layer of significance, the aesthetic of this work being partly influenced by its fragility.

Leonardo had been in the service of the Duke of Milan, Lodovico Maria Sforza, also known as Lodovico il Moro, as early as the year 1482, when he was entrusted with the mission of decorating the Dominican Brothers' Dining Room (*Refettorio*) in the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, which was built between the years 1466-1490 by architect Guiniforte Solari. As a place of paramount importance for the Sforza family, the entire Dominican complex had been rehabilitated and magnified, an endeavour to which architect Donato Bramante took part in 1492. The iconographic program for refectory was fixed on the topic of the Christian sacrifice[1], comprising the Crucifixion and the Last Supper scenes, to be carried out on two opposite walls.

In 1495, Giovanni Donato da Montorfano finished painting the Crucifixion scene, which had been commissioned by Lodovico Sforza. The features in which Montorfano approached this scene remained within the boundaries of tradition. The fresco was masterfully accomplished according to all the rules of tradition. Pinin Brambilla Barcilon, who restores this fresco in the year 1977, recalls: 'To study this painting was as if you had read the pages of the Treatise of Painting, by Cennino Cennini, the most important treatise on artistic techniques written in Quattrocento'[2]. Montorfano's fresco is executed by the book, although certain parts seem to have been made in *a secco* technique, needing conservation.

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[1] LauraMesina,'Ultimul Cenacolo' in *13 abordări ale imaginii,* Ileana Marin (coord.), Constanța, 'Ovidius' University Press, 2003, p. 38.
[2] Pinin Brambilla Barcilon, *La mia vita con Leonardo,* Milano, Mondadori Electa, 2015, p. 18.

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In contrast and besides the Crucifixion scene, a model of technical execution, Da Vinci would paint the portraits of the ducal family: Beatrice D'Este, Lodovico Sforza and children Massimiliano and Francesco, today 'almost entirely invisible'[3], due to the fragility of the technique (painting in tempera similar to that used in 'The Last Supper') and damage caused by the bombing of 1943. 'The Last Supper' would be painted between the years 1495-1498, size 460 cm x 880 cm, offering Leonardo an excellent opportunity to experience and implement his research from the recent period.

For Leonardo, claims Rodolfo Papa, painting is a science, the science of painting[4], not just a mere representation but an instrument of knowledge[5]. Leonardo's *Libro di pittura*, or *Il Trattato di Pittura*, is a posthumous reenactment of his manuscripts including theoretical and practical aspects, his vision of painting. The arrangement of this painting treaty is attributed to Francesco Melzi, the apprentice of Da Vinci, to whom he would allegedly have left his manuscripts. Leonardo's treaty should not be understood as Cennino Cennini's 'Treatise on Painting', as it is not a painting recipe, but a way of combining theory and practice. Simone Casu said that the Treatise is not addressed to the craftsman, but to the intellectual and the artist, the Perceptive Observer who examines the world scientifically[6]. In Leonardo's vision, painting is not just a craft, but a complex process combining manual ability, reason, intellect and experience. Da Vinci settled certain principles of painting, talked about an aerial perspective by adjusting the foreground and distant colour tones, the study of the human figure, from anatomy to expression and psychological analysis, and elaborated on the superiority of Painting over Sculpture and Poetry.

The Last Supper is a popular and very important theme of the Christian world, as it represents the foundation of The Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. Giotto painted it between 1303 and 1305, then Duccio (1308-1311), Andrea del Castagno (1447), Perugino (1493), Ghirlandaio, *Il Cenacolo di Ognisanti* (1480), Cosimo Rosselli and Biagio D`Antonio (1481-1482). These are the most important versions of The Last Supper, made before Leonardo. None of them, however, enjoyed a greater success as the Da Vincian version, despite its fragile material that would affect its visibility.

Da Vinci used an experimental technique to make this painting, perhaps adapted to his slow workmanship and especially to that delicate *chiaroscuro*, specific Da Vincian, with infinite transparency and light effects, as well as the exigency to resume work on figures and to change gestures and expressions, which in the fresco technique would not have been possible. This artistic experiment comes with a structural failure from a technical flaw. The inherent vice refers to the tendency of an object or material to deteriorate due to intrinsic characteristics (the incompatibility of different materials, poor quality or material instability)[7]. This structural fragility is compounded by environmental conditions and inadequate restorations.

Da Vinci broke free from the tradition. The favourite technique at that time for mural paintings was the *fresco*. The pigments are incorporated into the crust formed by the carbonation of calcium hydroxide, which is in the plaster layer (*intonaco*), making the painting resistant in time. The disadvantage of this technique lies in the need for rapid execution, before the plaster dries, so the main condition is the work on wet plaster, for the carbonation reaction of calcium hydroxide, which will conserve the pigments, to take place. Another drawback of this technique is that it does not support adding and corrections.

Leonardo Da Vinci uses a mixed technique of panel, tempera with organic binder, which proves to be incompatible with the wall and, therefore, vulnerable. 'The Last Supper' was created between 1495 and 1498, and just few years later, it showed the first signs of degradation, as noted in his diary by Antonio de Beatis, the secretary of Cardinal Luigi d'Aragona[8]. In 1566, Vasari described the work as a blurred stain[9], and the testimonies upon the evolution of the degradation process continued in the successive years. Thus makes us believe that the

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[3]*Ibid.,* p. 18, 'quasi del tutto invisibili'.

[4] Rodolfo Papa, *Leonardo. La tecnica pittorica*, Milano, Giunti, 2011. p. 5.

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 8.

[6]Simone Casu, in *Il Trattato della pittura di Leonardo da Vinci*, translated in Italian from Ancient Italian language by Simone Casu, Cesena, Macro Edizioni, 2013, p. 6.

[7]Jessica S. Johnson, 'Museum Collections Environment' in National Parks Service Museum Handbook, Part. I, Washington DC, 1999, chapter 4, p. 7.

[8]Pietro C. Marani, 'Il Cenacolo di Leonardo e i suoi restauri', in *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, The University of Chicago Press, vol. 7, 1997, p. 199.

[9]*Ibid.* p.199.

vulnerability of this work is inscribed in the experimental technique of rendering the visible.

The last restoration revealed a *sinopia* red in the lines of the basic drawing, and over *intonaco*, a preparatory yellowish layer, about one and a half millimetre thick, which had suffered serious deterioration, most likely being the initial cause of the dramatic situation of this painting[10] massively covered by cracks in all the constituent layers. Over these preparatory layers, Leonardo used the tempera with organic binder, which was mainly for painting on the wooden panel, and which in the given context, proved particularly fragile to moisture and environmental factors. In the opinion of the restorer Pinin Brambilla Barcilon the incompatibility between the various layers of the painting, may be one of the causes of its fragility. In an attempt to understand Leonardo's indifference in using a traditional technique, he says: 'With a choice like this, research should be most likely privileged, seeking a certain pictorial effect, rather than the duration of time'[11].

In 1968, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler talked for the first time about 'dematerialization of art' in their work 'The Dematerialization of Art', published in the *Art International*[12] magazine. As with the emergence of conceptual art, an even greater importance is attached to the idea or concept. The material becomes secondary, being just a witness, at best, along the documentation process. The two authors put forward the concept of dematerialization commencing with conceptual art, which emphasizes almost exclusively the thinking process, the object becoming obsolete, the artists losing their interest in the physical evolution of the art object[13]. The dematerialization suggested by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler places on a secondary plan the physics of the object, the care for the craft, and even the aesthetic in producing the work of art. The material aspect of the art object loses importance in favour of the concept. A minimization of the importance of materiality 'translated' by the two authors through dematerialization. The concept of dematerialization may also have another so-

little-explored meaning, a proper sense, that of the loss of some parts of the artwork caused by its material structure.

In 'The Last Supper', the dematerialization is due to a dynamic disintegration of the pictorial layer, springing from inherent vice. The dematerialization process, the loss of the colour layer, does have consequences upon the image. The detachments may be in the form of scales and sometimes pulverulent, giving a certain texture to the surface. The image loses its concreteness, presence, contrast and colour. It continues to be present, yet in a diminished, almost unreal form. Through this game between the presence and the absence of the pictorial layer, the image changes its appearance, it transforms itself. This is also due to the uneven way of the surface to capture and reflect light, thus giving the work another appearance beyond the figurative. The image seems to us as transfigured. It retains its size but not the weight of the figures represented. By losing the material consistency, the characters are almost like a halo to compensate for the absence of the halo that Leonardo deprived them of.

The transfiguration may bear various meanings. In the Christian religion, Transfiguration or Transfiguration of the Lord refers to the episode on Mount Tabor, where Jesus reveals His divine nature by showing Himself in a bright light.

In the book 'The transfiguration of the Commonplace'[14], Arthur Danto conceives the transfiguration in a metaphorical sense. The fact that the subject represented in a painting retains its identity in all respects and is recognized as such, for example Saskia by Rembrandt, is part of the metaphorical transfiguration structure, stating that it is more a transfiguration rather than transformation[15]. The metaphor is relative to a certain force of the work, claims Danto, the work of art becomes a metaphor of life, and life is transfigured[16]. We grasp, however, that transfiguration is more than a metaphor, it becomes the mirror of a vision of the world. As the same author argues, the Brillo Box, as a work of art, intends more than merely asserting that it is a Brillo Box with surprising

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[10]Barcilon, *La mia vita*, p. 38.

[11]*Ibid.*, p. 18, 'Una scelta di questo genere dovette probabilmente privilegiare la ricerca di un effetto pittorico particolare piuttosto che la durata nel tempo'.

[12]Lucy Lippard, John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art' in *Art International*, 12:2, 1968.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 46.

[14] Arthur Danto, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art, Harvard University Press, 1983.

[15]Arthur Danto 'Metaforă, expresie și stil', in *Transfigurarea locului comun. O filosofie a artei*, translated by Vlad Morariu, Cluj-Napoca, Idea Design & Print, 2012, p. 223.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 228.

metaphorical attributes. It achieves what the works of art have always achieved, it outlines a way of envisioning the world, expressing the inside of a cultural period[17].

In this paper we understand the transfiguration both in the metaphorical sense and as affecting the visible by dematerialisation, as a passage of the image from visible to invisible, with the image acquiring a new aesthetic. Beyond the visible, at its foundation, there is a whole invisible world[18]. The image retains certain characteristics, but appears in another light, gains some transparency, by the way the visible and the invisible interfere. The image becomes a crossing area and finds itself stuck in it, thus altering its nature. It externalizes such aesthetics beyond the artist's intention. The dynamics of materiality comes with changes in the visible, but only these changes would not suffice to transfigure the image without a certain power of the work. The transfigured image is a ghostly one, yet an image.

In his 'Last Supper', Leonardo Da Vinci reveals a dramatic moment, the moment immediately following the assertion of Jesus that one of the disciples would betray Him, noticing and analysing the annoyance and agitation of the apostles, on both sides of the solitary melancholic figure of Jesus. The lines of perspective lead us to a trinity of windows and to the invisible sky, made visible. The invisible attracts the visible from the foreground. And we will see that the lines of the perspective to these windows are not the only way the visible glides into the invisible. We will not insist here on an iconographic analysis.

In the next section, we analyse how the work presents to the beholder of our days. What we are looking at today is not exactly what Da Vinci originally created. The last twenty-two-years restoration (from 1977 to 1999), by removing all re-painting added over the time, revealed that little remains of the original painting. The image appears to us 'aired' by the visible through dematerialisation, through the loss of matter. It keeps 'only the minimum of matter necessary for its communication'[19]. A painting, a picture, claims Jean-Luc Marion in his book 'La croisée du visible (Quadrige. Essais,

débats)'[20] is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order. To actually see what it is to be seen, the visible must form, take shape by invisible grace[21], through this painting game, as Marion also states, between the two extreme terms of intentionality: experiences, perceived, felt and real, on one hand, and the object intentionally targeted, seen invisibly and ideally, on the other hand[22].

The technique used by Da Vinci is a requirement by which the unseen longs for a shape, a means of interpreting sensitive matter, thereby giving visibility to the not-ever-seen. It is supposed to be a mediator of imposing the visible. The technicality of the execution mark the work. As the idea rises from a spiritual depth, the means of execution surfaces from a vital depth[23].The visible of the work is inseparable from this weakness, the inherent vice, is a condition of its existence and ruin alike. We cannot conceive 'The Last Supper' without its particularity, part of it since the creation. It is impossible to separate things from their way of appearing[24], Maurice Merleau-Ponty tells us, of the way the work appears today, we add. What we admire today is not the final stage of Da Vinci's work, but comes from an unpredictable development after creation (latent in the structure of the work), which provided for dematerialization, change of the visible. It is a sort of 'attempt' to remove the object from the visible, through the autonomy of the matter to it, but also through the autonomy of the matter to the artist's gaze. In this way generating another aesthetic.

The relationship between visible and invisible is illustrated by Jean-Luc Marion by the example of impressionism that makes 'the usually visible objective disappear from the visible, and it can not plunge into the invisible unless this invisible itself becomes visible (intentionally to an extent) and reverts to invisible, because the invisible (the environment, the experience directly felt) has destituted it

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[17]*Ibid.*, p. 271.

[18]François Aubral,'Variațiuni figurale', in Laura Marin (coord.) *Figura – corp, artă, spațiu, limbaj. Antologie de texte teoretice*, EUB, 2017, p. 77.

[19]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* translated by Colin Smith, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 323.

[20] Jean-Luc Marion, *La croisée du visible (Quadrige. Essais, débats)*, France University Press, 2007.

[21]Jean-Luc Marion, *Crucea vizibilului. Tablou, televiziune, icoană - o privire fenomenologică*, translated by Neamțu, Mihail, Sibiu, Deisis, 2000. p. 34.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 36.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 86.

[24]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, translated by Oliver Davis, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 93.

from the visible'[25]. In 'The Last Supper', this easy transition of the visible into the invisible resides precisely in the matter of painting, but not by making visible the invisible as in Monet's cathedrals, but by the disintegration of the materiality, by a transfiguration of the visible.

Even if a work is dematerialized, Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes, reduced to a visual structure of form, colour, light and shadow, these still retain a support called the 'visual thing'. 'It loses its materiality, empties itself, and is reduced to a visual structure of form, colour, light and shade. But the form, colour, light and shade are not in a void, for they still retain a point of support, namely the visual thing'[26]. The visible diminishes in favour of the invisible, or in favour of that 'visual thing', in shapes or 'shadows' of the absence of the visible, as in the last figure to the right where we know that Simon Zelot is located. From the way visual thing interferes with the visible, a different aesthetic of the painting arises.

To appear is to give/offer/donate itself in order to be seen[27].What fascinates in this work is the way in which the image does not fully appear or is hidden from everything, as the visible is offered and refused at the same time, in the way it exists and does not exist. We are confronted with an ambiguity of the object perceived, given and refused, present by its formal characteristics still preserved and slightly denying the visible. Hence the ambiguity of meaning, should we consider what Mikel Dufrenne says, that the meaning is entirely immanent to the presence[28].

The content and form, what it is said and the way it is said, can only exist together. The current state of the work also affects the form and content, which becomes inseparable from the work. It is something that adds to the figures or deprives them of the visible. Consequently, how does this feature contribute to changing the meaning of the work? The shape, through the drawing, creates a compositional order and balance, and the colour fulfils the form of the object. The pigment, the material itself, acquires form and meaning. From an aesthetic point of view, explains Mikel Dufrenne, the material does not emerge only as material, but also as a support of the sensitive, it is there for emergence and, in the process, it is denied as a thing[29]. The material tends to represent the object, denying itself as a thing.

The meaning is not free, confesses Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but attached to the substance, the prisoner of all the signs and details that reveal it to us[30]. Accordingly, by changing the visible signs and details, the meaning is changed, but the work imposes even if the visibility is altered. Richard Wollheim believes that the physical object changes with time, but the work remains incorruptible, its character does not change[31].

In 'The Last Supper' there is no accurate drawing, the contours melt in the background, and the shape is blurred. Colour does not fulfil the form anymore, it appears like an airy fabric that no longer tends to represent the object (for example in the blue robe of Jesus), but to be constituted as small islands of colour, matter, pigmenting here and there a ghostly form. The paradox comes from the fact that the material, the pigment in its scarcity, in its isolation, gains autonomy from shape and object, unlike the initial situation in which it covered the entire surface of the form, denying itself in favour of the representation of the object. The power to represent itself comes from its scarcity. There is a betrayal of the visible through the independence of the painting layer, through its autonomy towards the form and, consequently, to the object. Hence the difficulty of attributing to the object the virtues of the material, so the sensitive, and in such case, the process of restoration plays an important role.

During the last restoration, completed in 1999, the gaps were integrated with watercolour, a reversible material, so from a certain distance the colour appears uniform and, at a closer look, the original colour can be distinguished from the intervention. Through this process, there is a mediation between colour and shape to re-affirm the visible object. The colour that integrates the gaps is designed to neutralize the visual thing, but with no consistency of the

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[25]*Ibid.,* p.38, 'obiectivul vizibil în mod comun să dispară din vizibil; şi el nu poate să se prăbuşească în invizibil decât în măsura în care însuşi acest invizibil devenit vizibil (obiect intenţional) redevine invizibil, pentru că invizibilul (mediul, trăirea nemijlocit resimţită) l-a destituit din vizibil'.

[26]Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 324, translated by Colin Smith.

[27]Marion, *Crucea,* p. 74, 'a apărea înseamnă a (se) da/dărui/dona spre a fi văzut'.

[28]Mikel Dufrenne, *Fenomenologia experienţei estetice. Obiectul estetic,* vol 1, translated by Matei Dumitru, Bucureşti, Meridiane, 1976, p. 284.

[29]Dufrenne, *Fenomenologia,* p. 400. '[materialul] apărînd, el se neagă ca lucru'.

[30]Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 95.

[31]Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects,* Second Edition, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 121.

original matter, it passes into a background of the visible, serving almost as a background to the original colour layer. And if we add Jean-Luc Marion's consideration that 'the background is the not(ever)seen from the point of view of the visible'[32], it would appear that the not-ever-seen is seen as a background by the visible object itself, and the original colour layer becomes a visibly abstract object in this background. These visible ruins that we perceive from the work can serve as a catalyst for the imaginary[33] being able to direct it to the original image, but not to limit it. The imaginary grows over these ruins of the visible. And here comes another ambiguity. Do we have an illusory image in the sense of mental reconstitution that we make on the basis of the visible left? Or is the image losing its illusory power, the ability to represent the visible object? In fact, visible and invisible interfere to such an extent that we can see the visible through invisible (now visible) and vice versa. By invisible, the visible gets a slight transparency. In 'The Last Supper', dematerialization is not total, but neutralized by conservation.

The image is locked in a transition area between visible and invisible, thus getting the dimension of a spiritual body. And, as it illustrates a Biblical theme, we could compare the image with the body of Christ after the Resurrection, inviting us, like Thomas was, to touch His 'wounds' and believe in the veracity of such existence. 'The Last Supper' emanates a slightly cold light, as when the things are just beginning to reveal themselves. A twilight from which new meanings are constantly coming out. Because nothing hides better the life of this work, the visible and the invisible, than its diffused light.

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[32]Marion, *Crucea vizibilului,* p. 67,'fondul este ne(mai)văzutul văzut din punctul de vedere al vizibilului'.
[33]Dufrenne, *Fenomenologia,* p. 283, 'drept catalizator imaginarului'.

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