

Last Supper Frescoes of Florence



Last Suppers of Florence

Version 1.1

by David Raezer and Jennifer Raezer

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Introduction

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This Approach Guide profiles the Last Supper frescoes of Florence, a veritable treasure trove of **exceptionally well-preserved, high quality masterpieces** from the Gothic, Renaissance, and Mannerist periods. The result of a thriving monastic community during the years of 1335-1582, the center of Florence holds a large number of Last Supper frescoes painted by some of Italy's most famous artists.

In this guide we trace the **stylistic transformation of these frescoes over a 250-year period** from 1335-1582 by examining nine of the most important Last Supper frescoes by artists Gaddi, Orcagna, Ghirlandaio, Castagno, Perugino, Franciabigio, Sarto, and Allori. For each, we point out what makes it unique, how it was influenced by frescoes that came before, and how it influenced those that followed.

As critical part of this guidebook, we also profile **Leonardo da Vinci's iconic Last Supper fresco in Milan** (1496-98), with a focus on how its innovations went on to shape later Florentine representations. Since Leonardo's work occurs roughly at the midpoint of our timeline of reference, we can assess work before and after its completion, thereby discerning its impact.

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We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique cultural guide to one of Florence's magnificent contributions to the world of art.

Have a great trip!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David and Jennifer Raezer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" being the most prominent.

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides

3. San Apollonia (Castagno) *

Painted: 1447

Artist: Andrea del Castagno

Style: Renaissance

Location: Museo del Cenacolo di San Apollonia (Via XVII Aprile, 1). See map section.



Castagno's Last Supper, San Apollonia.

Highlights

- This is the **first Renaissance style Last Supper representation in Florence** and a very powerful one.
- **The crucifixion scene has lost its dominance, as the Last Supper has assumed an equivalent share of the space on the wall.** It is also worth noting that the crucifixion is also accompanied on the upper wall by two flanking depictions: the entombment and the resurrection. The inclusion of these two incremental depictions serves to humanize the figure of Christ, consistent with Renaissance thinking.
- For the first time, consistent with the Renaissance style, all of the figures are **anchored firmly in architectural space**; Castagno does this by placing the table and apostles within a well-rendered architectural niche.
- Castagno further employs **extreme foreshortening**; for a great example of his masterly foreshortening technique, note the figure on the left with his hand on his chin.
- The **color palette is brighter and more vibrant** than prior depictions; and harsher in tone than later depictions.
- A “lightning bolt” in the painted marble panel behind the apostles indicates the figure of Ju-

das, and with it, the shock of his future betrayal.

- The **figures are extremely masculine and sculptural**. Castagno was highly influenced by the sculptor, Donatello (1386-1466).
- While the poses of the individual figures are powerful, the apparent **interaction among figures is minimal** and they remain largely discrete and non-overlapping; they are rendered as a series of individuals rather than as a cohesive group.

A Leonardo review

As we are keeping score of pre- and post-Leonardo elements, here is a summary:

- Hand gestures are slightly more reserved, as there is greater focus on facial expressions.
- All figures are sitting.
- John is “asleep”.
- Judas is on the opposite side of the table.
- There is no clustering of apostles (discussed above).
- The table is rectangular.



Castagno's Last Supper, close up, San Apollonia.

4. Ognissanti (Ghirlandaio) *

Painted: 1480

Artist: Domenico Ghirlandaio

Style: Renaissance

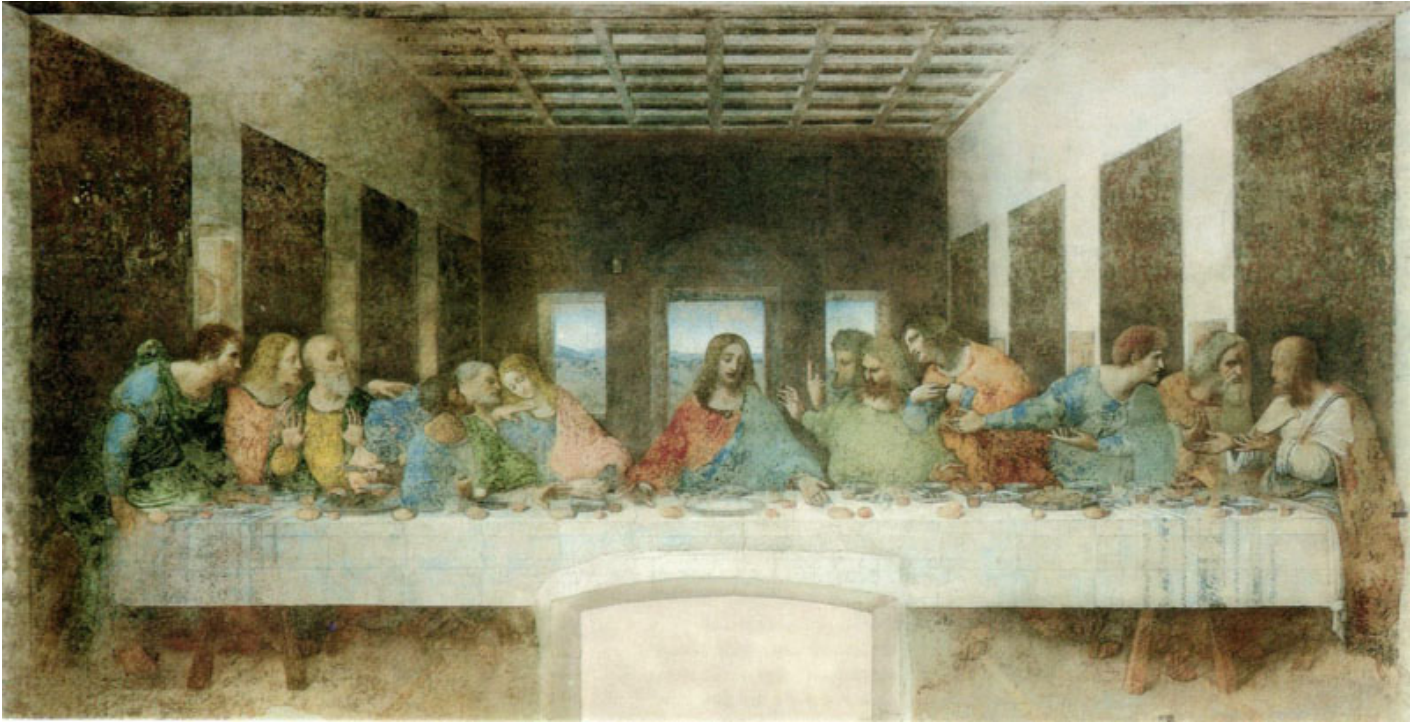
Location: Ognissanti (Borgo Ognissanti, 42). See map section.



Ghirlandaio's Last Supper, Ognissanti.

Highlights

- The **crucifixion has been replaced entirely and the Last Supper stands as the only depiction**. This replacement is final: the crucifixion will not reappear again as part of the Last Supper tradition in Florence.
- **Architectural space assumes a particularly high priority**, with the figures almost relegated to secondary importance. It appears to be an expertly executed exercise in three-dimensional perspective.
- The scene has changed, as the Last Supper now appears to be **occurring in a veranda of sorts, with lush vegetation and wildlife nearby**. This is the first introduction of the natural, outside world into Last Supper depictions. Further, natural light and the open windows are a highlight; in fact, Judas appears to be looking outside.
- **Facial expressions are the primary source of narrative**; hand gestures are mini-



Leonardo's Last Supper, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

A Review

High-resolution image of the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci

<http://aprch.us/leonardo>

Arrangement of figures

The order of figures (by the placement of each person's head), from left to right is the following: Bartholomew, James (son of Alphaeus), Andrew, Judas Iscariot, Peter, John, Jesus, Thomas, James the Greater, Philip, Matthew, Jude Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot.

Ambiguity in duality

- **Betrayal announcement versus Eucharistic conversion.** Although conventional wisdom has it that Leonardo chose to capture the moment immediately after Christ's announcement that "one of you will betray me" (based on the fact that Christ's right hand is portrayed dipping into the same plate as Judas, who recoils), it seems equally plausible that there was a second thing occurring at the same instant: the Eucharistic conversion of wine into blood

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Los Angeles Times