

# Last Supper Frescoes of **Florence**



# Introduction

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Painted onto the walls of monastic dining rooms in the 14th-16th centuries, Florence's Last Supper frescoes were designed to inspire contemplation on the Christian faith's greatest mysteries. Still well preserved and quickly toured on any visit to the city, they hold much of their original magic. They are yours to uncover.

## What's in this guidebook

- **A tour that goes deeper.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we provide a detailed [tour of nine of Florence's most important Last Supper frescoes](#) executed over a 250-year period by artists Gaddi, Orcagna, Ghirlandaio, Castagno, Perugino, Franciabigio, Sarto and Allori. The tour walks you through the highlights, aided by high-resolution images and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **The influence of Leonardo's Last Supper.** We also profile Leonardo da Vinci's iconic Last Supper fresco in Milan (1496-1498), pointing out 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 frescoes before and after its completion, clearly discerning its impact.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook offers logistical advice and provides links to online resources. Plus, we provide our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

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

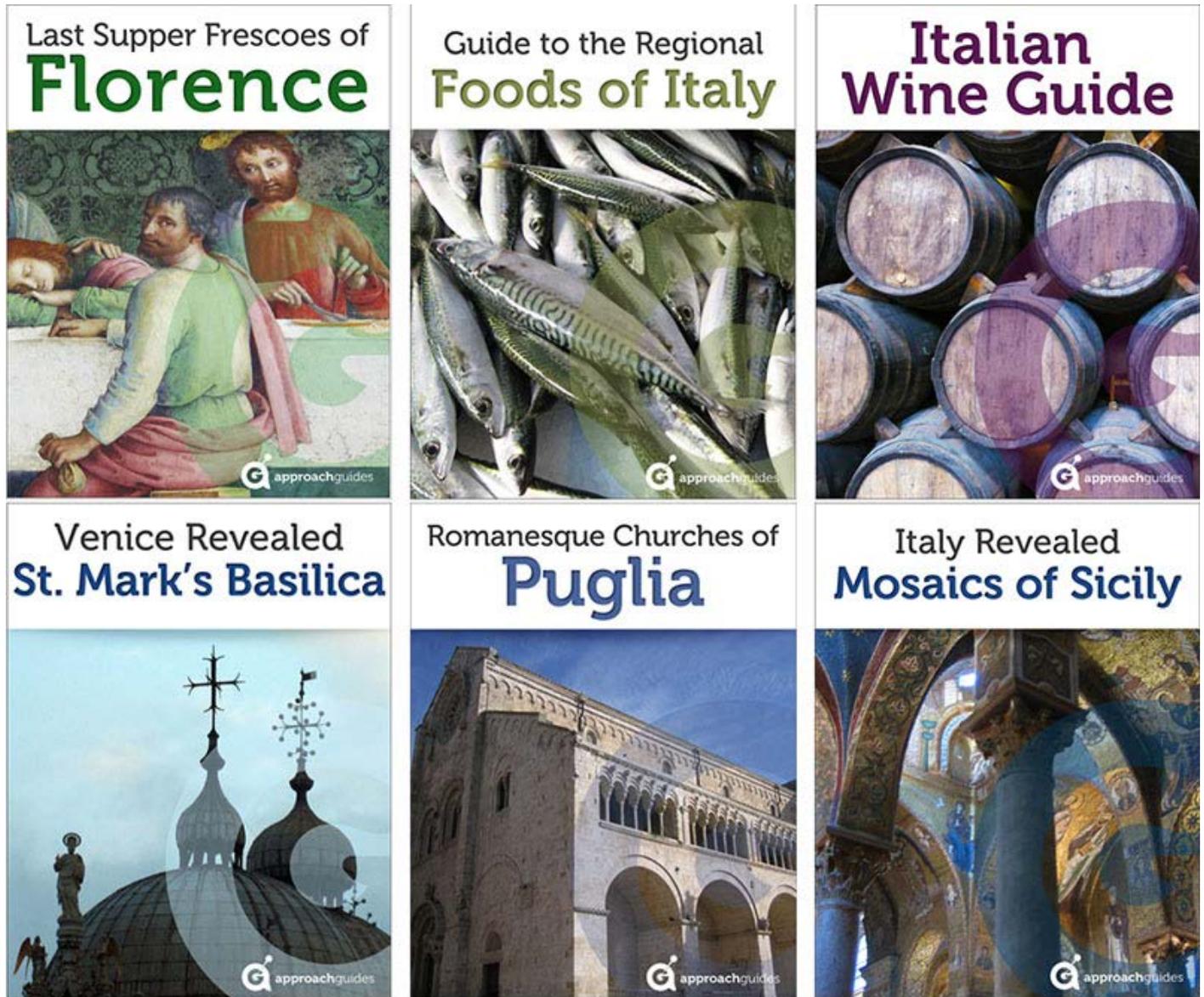
Have a great trip!

David Raezer

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# Last Suppers of Florence

**Version 1.2**

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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—

My children, I will be with you only a little longer.  
You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews,  
so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.  
A new command I give you: Love one another.  
As I have loved you, so you must love one another.  
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,  
if you love one another.”

—

Jesus to his apostles at the Last Supper,  
according to the Gospel of [John 13:33-35](#).

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# The Narratives

## Background

According to the Christian gospels, the Last Supper (l'Ultima Cena in Italian) was the last meal Jesus shared with his apostles before his crucifixion. It was likely a Passover seder meal, undertaken in accordance with Jewish tradition, that is believed to have occurred on [Mount Zion](#), just south of the Old City of Jerusalem.

There are two critical events that occurred at the meal that Last Supper representations aim to communicate: the institution of the eucharist and the announcement of the betrayal. They are the stories the frescoes tell. While some Last Suppers appear to emphasize one story over the other, most leave the narrative focus open, presenting elements of both. We summarize the key points of each narrative below, so that you can look for signs of each in the Last Supper tour that follows.

## Institution of the Eucharist

### The event

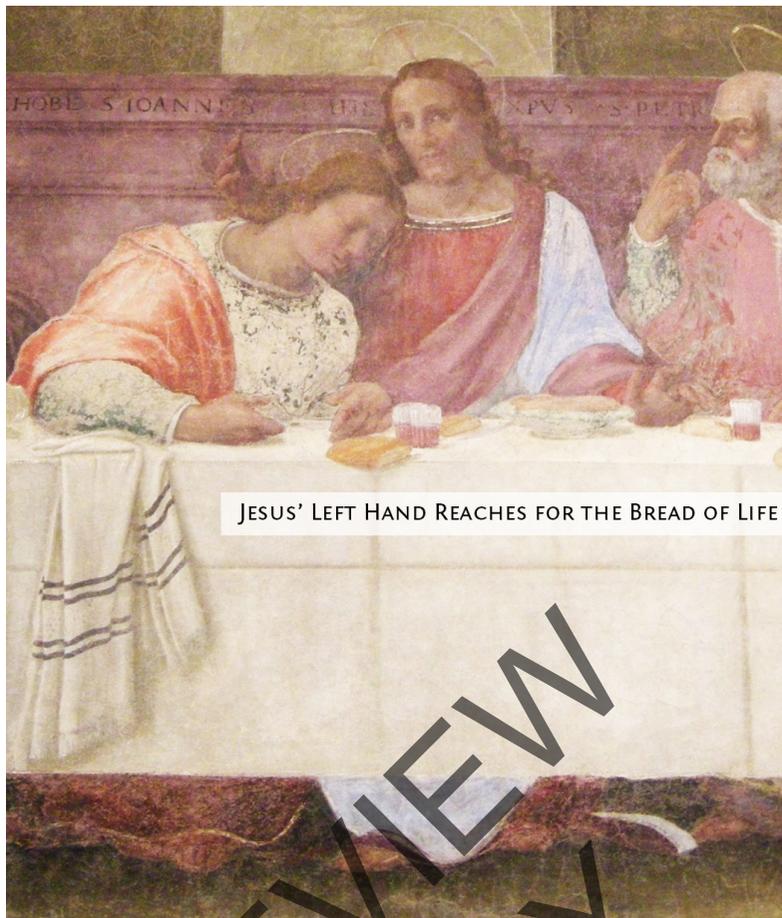
- **According to the gospels.** The details of the event are communicated via four New Testament passages: [Matthew 26:26-28](#), [Mark 14:22-24](#), [Luke 22:19-20](#), [1 Corinthians 11:23-25](#). The Gospel of Matthew reads:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

- **Jesus as redeemer.** The eucharistic conversion of wine into blood and bread into body is the central religious theme of the Last Supper, revealing Jesus' role as a redeemer who will open the gateway to heaven for the faithful. It forms the central feature of the Christian rite.



**Fig. 1.** Institution of the eucharist [Franciabigio's Last Supper at Convento della Calza].

### How to spot it in Florence's frescoes

- **Jesus' actions.** Jesus raises his hand in blessing or points to a glass of wine or bread, as if speaking of the eucharistic conversion (**Fig. 1**).
- **Apostles' reactions.** The apostles appear lost in thought, confusion or wonder as they contemplate the significance of the eucharist and what it means for future salvation.
- **Symbols.** Overt symbols — such as the peacock — are used to convey Jesus' role as savior of humanity through his death and subsequent resurrection.

## Announcement of the Betrayal

### The event

- **According to the gospels.** Jesus' announcement of his betrayal is recounted in the four evangelists' New Testament gospels: [Matthew 26:21-25](#), [Mark 14:17-21](#), [Luke 22:21-23](#) and [John 13:21-30](#). The Gospel of Matthew reads:

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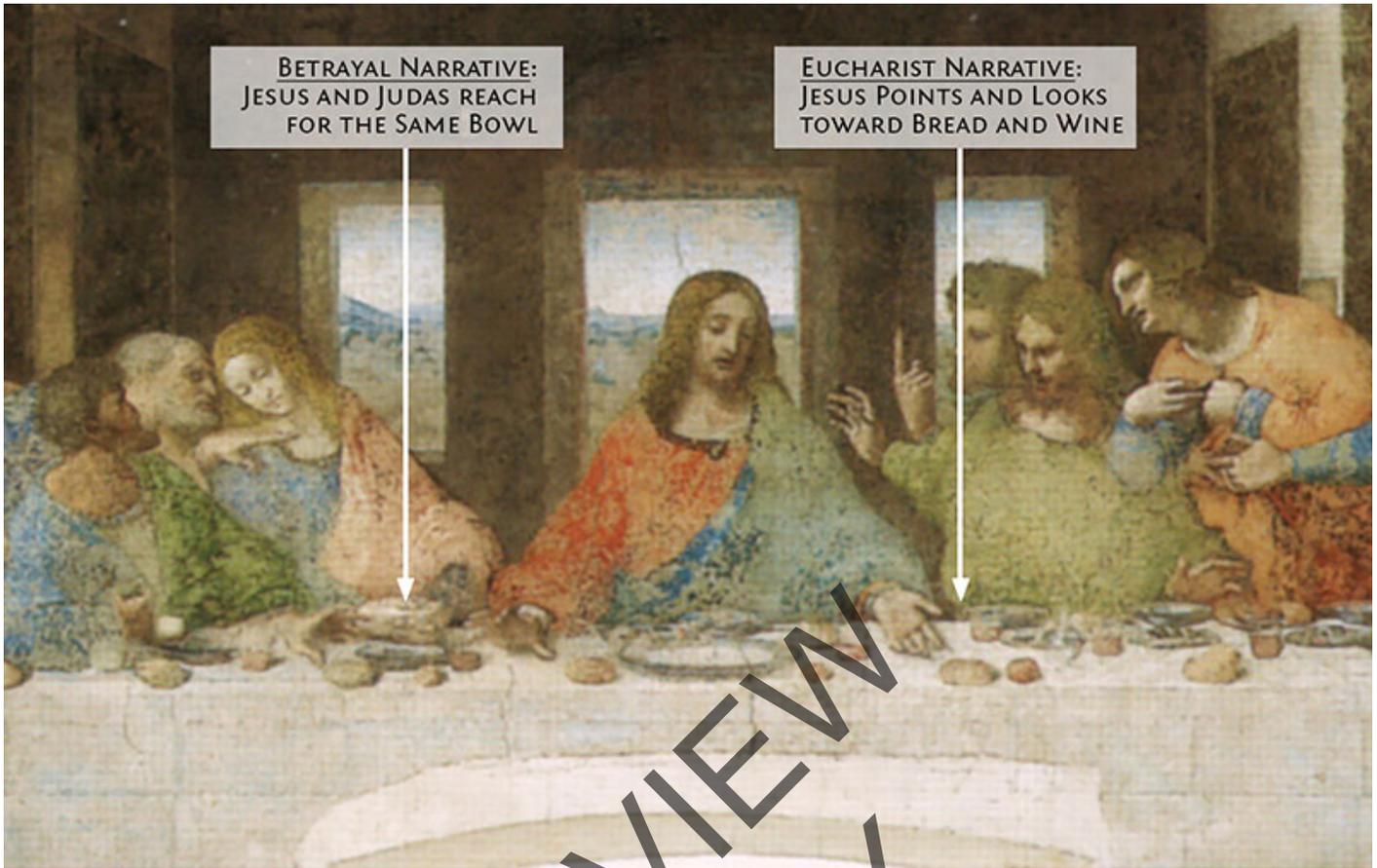


Fig. 6. Dual narratives, Leonardo's Last Supper. Highlights added.

## Narrative Ambiguity

- **The betrayal narrative.** Conventional wisdom has it that Leonardo chose to capture the moment immediately after Jesus' announcement of the betrayal: Jesus' hand on the left side of the fresco reaches toward the same bowl as Judas (Fig. 6) and several apostles appear as if they might be pleading their innocence.
- **... but also the eucharistic narrative.** However, as with many of the Last Suppers we will encounter on our tour, it seems equally plausible that it reflects the eucharistic conversion of wine into blood and bread into body: Jesus' hand on the right side, the focus of his gaze, points at a wine glass and bread (Fig. 6) and the apostle James the Greater seems awestruck at the display.

Further, the depiction might actually not represent a snapshot in time, but rather a time lapse, for many expressions appear to convey chain reactions associated with each narrative.

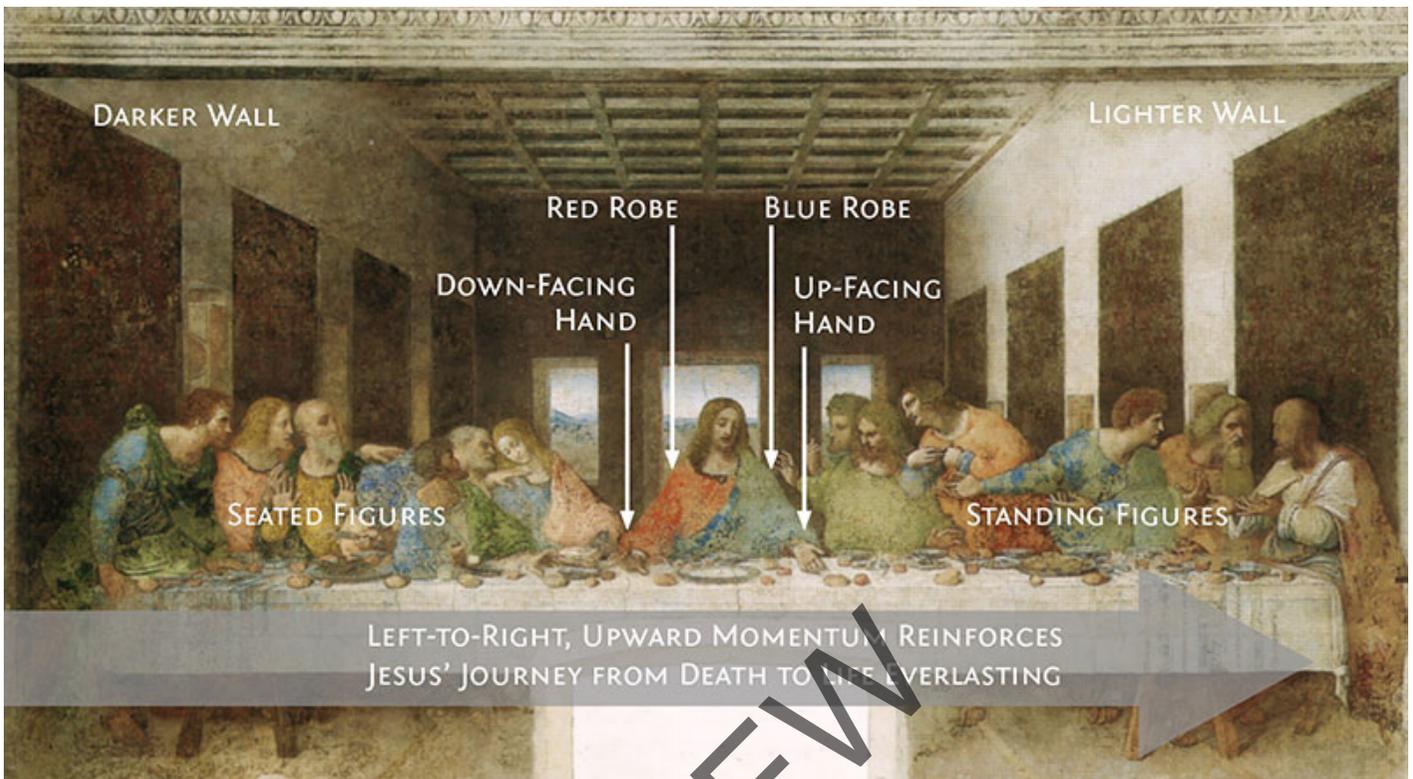


Fig. 7. Symbolism, Leonardo's Last Supper. Highlights added.

## Symbolism

### Jesus' dual nature

The left and right sides of the fresco carry symbolic associations that reveal Jesus' dual nature.

- **Left side as death.** The left side of the painting is symbolically associated with death (Fig. 7): Jesus' hand on the left side faces downward, extending toward the blood red-colored wine; Jesus' red robe shows on the left side, symbolic of his mortal nature, the part that must die to bring salvation to humanity; the color of the left wall is appreciably darker, devoid of life-sustaining light.
- **Right side as everlasting life.** By contrast, the right side carries associations with eternal life (Fig. 7): Jesus' hand on the right side faces upward, extending toward the bread of life; his blue robe sits on the right shoulder, symbolic of his eternal nature; the color of the right wall is much brighter, receiving light from the heavens above.

Both sides — death and life — fuse at the center of the painting in the figure of Jesus, revealing his dual nature as both man and god, sacrifice and savior.

### Directional momentum

The fresco further conveys a left-to-right, upward momentum, consistent with Jesus' hand position-

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# Last Supper Fresco Tour



**Fig. 11.** Last Supper fresco itinerary, Florence. See in [Google Maps](#).

Our Last Supper tour itinerary follows chronological order — listed below with location, artist and date of execution — so as to make the stylistic transformation easier to recognize (Fig. 11). We have marked our favorite Last Suppers with asterisks (\*).

1. **Santa Croce** by Taddeo Gaddi (1335-1340) \*
2. **Santo Spirito** by Orcagna (unknown, but likely 1350s or 1360s)

Stylistic break: Gothic to Renaissance style

3. **Sant'Apollonia** by Andrea del Castagno (1445-1450) \*
4. **Ognissanti** by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1480) \*
5. **San Marco** by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1482)
6. **Fuligno Conservatory** by Perugino (1493-1496) \*

Stylistic break: Leonardo's Last Supper in Milan (1496-1498)

7. **Convento della Calza** by Franciabigio (1514)
8. **San Salvi** by Andrea del Sarto (1519-1526/27) \*
9. **Santa Maria del Carmine** by Alessandro Allori (1582)

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### 3. Sant'Apollonia by Castagno \*

#### Overview

- **Painted:** 1445-1450.
- **Artist:** Andrea del Castagno (1421-1457).
- **Style:** Renaissance.
- **Location:** Museo del Cenacolo di Sant'Apollonia (Via XVII Aprile, 1). See #3 in [Google Maps](#).
- **Visiting hours:** Open every day from 8.15am - 1:50pm. Closed on the 2nd and 4th Monday and 1st, 3rd and 5th Sunday of each month. [Confirm times on museum website](#).

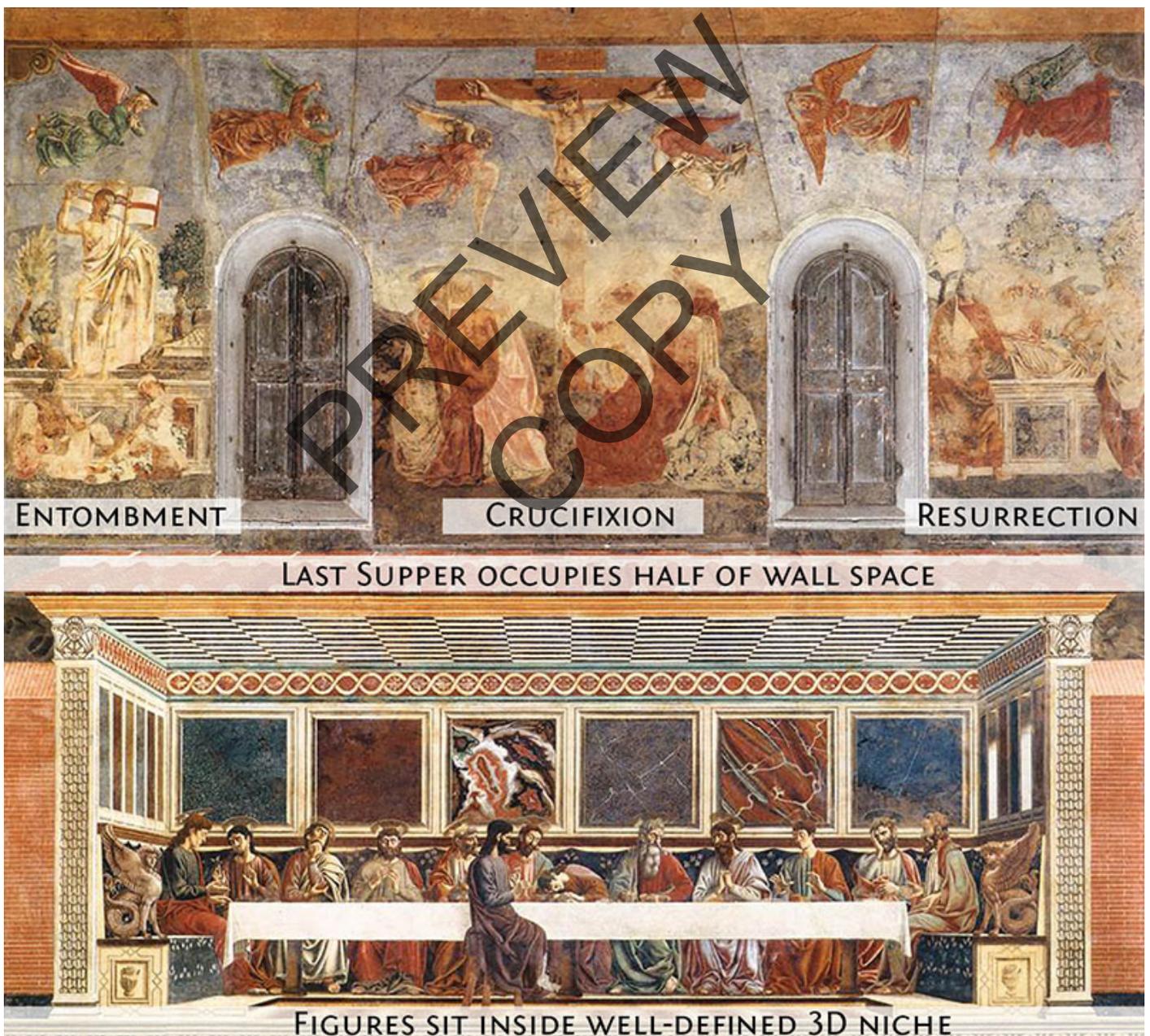


Fig. 16. Castagno's crucifixion and Last Supper. Highlights added.

## Design and Organization

This is the **first Renaissance style Last Supper** in Florence and a very powerful one.

- **Last Supper raised to equal status with crucifixion.** For the first time, the crucifixion scene has lost its dominance, as the Last Supper has assumed an equivalent share of the space on the wall (Fig. 16). Further, the crucifixion is accompanied on the upper wall by two flanking depictions: the entombment and the resurrection. The inclusion of these two incremental scenes humanizes Jesus, consistent with Renaissance thinking.
- **Coherent architectural space.** Also consistent with the Renaissance style, the table and apostles sit in a well-rendered architectural niche (Fig. 16). It is also worth noting that Castagno is the only artist before Leonardo to employ a rectangular table with apostles at the ends, a design that affords both simplicity and depth (Fig. 17).

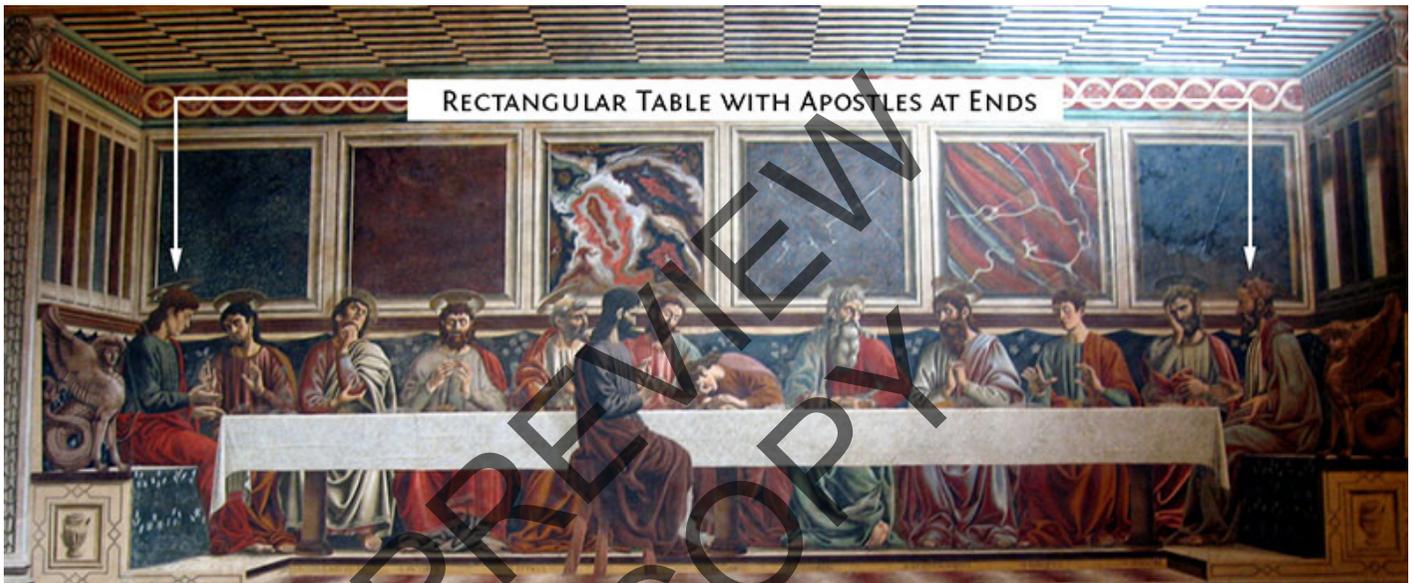


Fig. 17. Castagno's Last Supper.

## Primary Stylistic Features

- **Minimal interaction.** While the poses of the individual figures are powerful, the apparent interaction among figures is minimal and their silhouettes remain largely discrete; they are rendered as a series of individuals rather than parsed into cohesive groups (Fig. 17). We will see this change in post-Leonardo Last Suppers.
- **Bright colors.** The color palette is brighter, sharper and more vibrant than in other depictions, before and after (Fig. 17).
- **Dual narrative.** Like most of Florence's Last Suppers, the specific narrative is ambiguous. It can be read as both the institution of the eucharist and the revelation of a traitor. Favoring a eucharistic reading, Jesus elevates his right hand in the gesture of blessing (Fig. 18) and some apostles appear to be contemplating the profound mystery (Fig. 19). A betrayal reading is supported by Judas' highlighted position (Fig. 18), the less prominent position afforded to bread and wine in front of Jesus (somewhat faded now) and what appear to be facial expressions of pleading for innocence and disappointment in some apostles.

- **Lightning bolt.** A “lightning bolt” in the painted marble panel behind the apostles indicates the figure of Judas, and with it, the shock of Jesus’ revelation of his future betrayal (Fig. 18).



Fig. 18. Castagno’s Last Supper, close up. Highlights added.

- **Sculptural rendering.** The figures are extremely sculptural in form (Fig. 18 and Fig. 19). Castagno was highly influenced by the sculptor Donatello (1386-1466).
- **Three-dimensionality.** Castagno further employs extreme foreshortening, affording the figures great depth and three-dimensionality. For a great example of his masterly foreshortening technique, see the figure of apostle Thomas on the left with his hand on his chin (Fig. 19); the expertly-rendered golden halo completes the aesthetic.

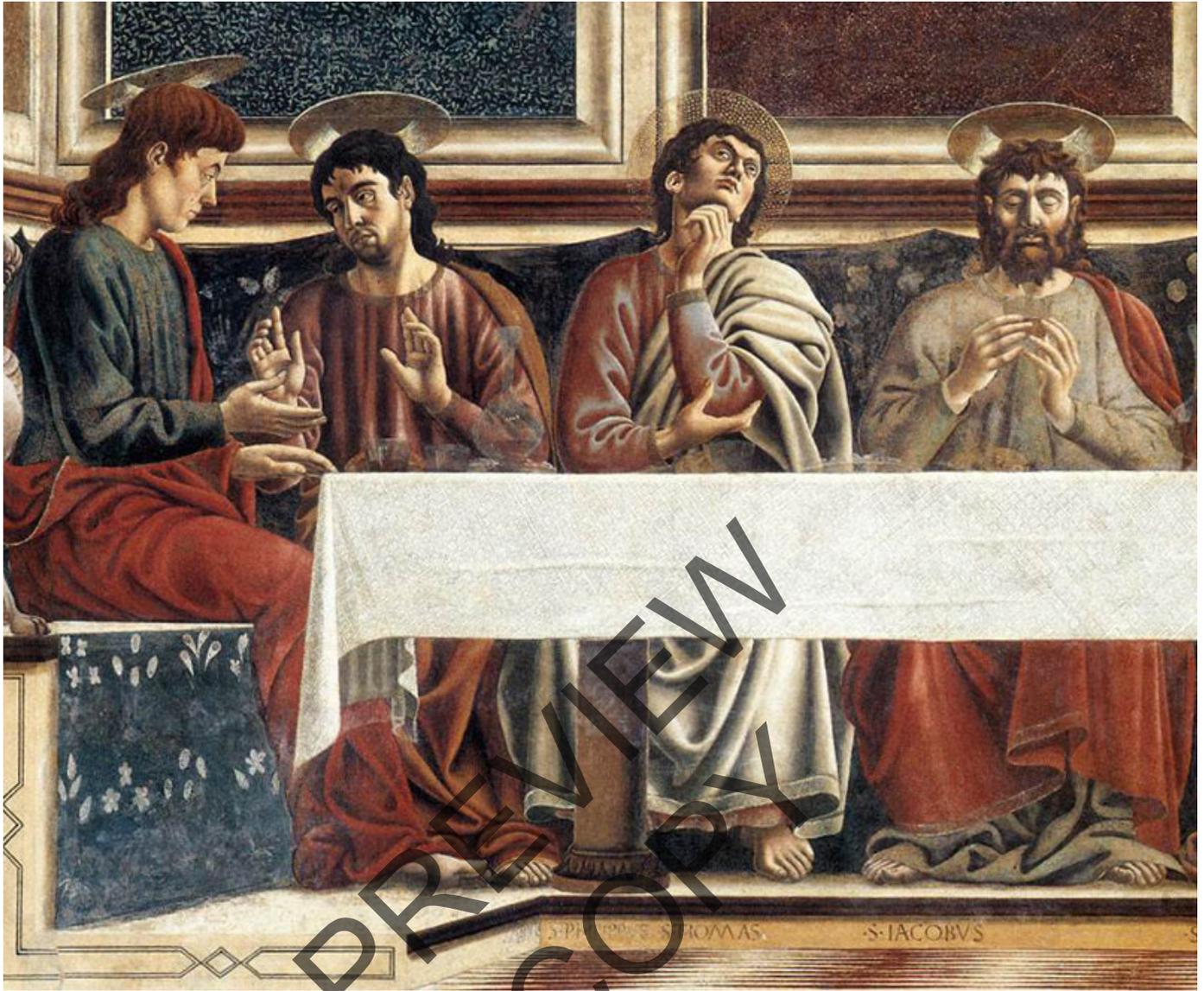


Fig. 19. Castagno's Last Supper, with Thomas' hand raised to his chin.

## Pre-Leonardo Checklist

To review, for the most part, Castagno's pioneering fresco displays classic pre-Leonardo features.

- Judas is on the opposite side of the table.
- John is asleep. For the logic underlying John's sleeping depiction, see the section entitled "Leonardo's Innovations."
- Hand gestures remain generally reserved, as there is greater reliance on facial expressions to convey thoughts and emotions.
- All figures are sitting.
- There is no clustering of apostles.

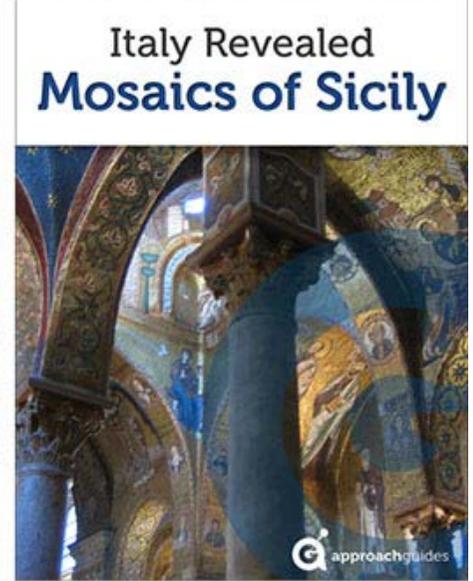
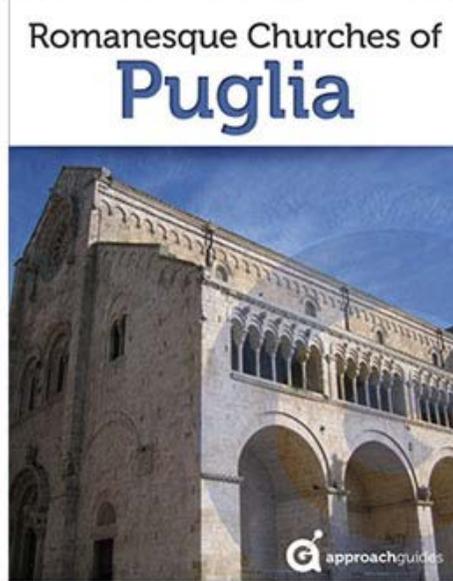
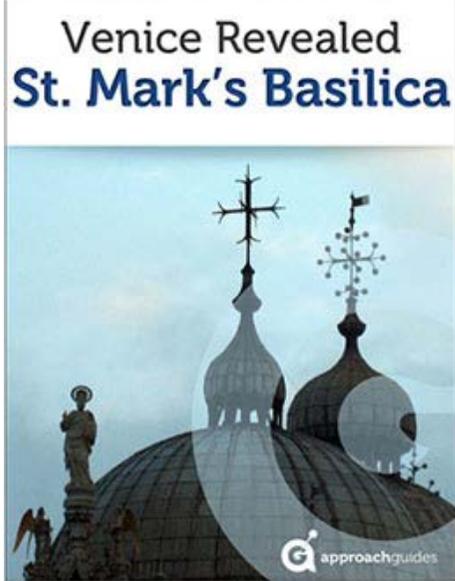
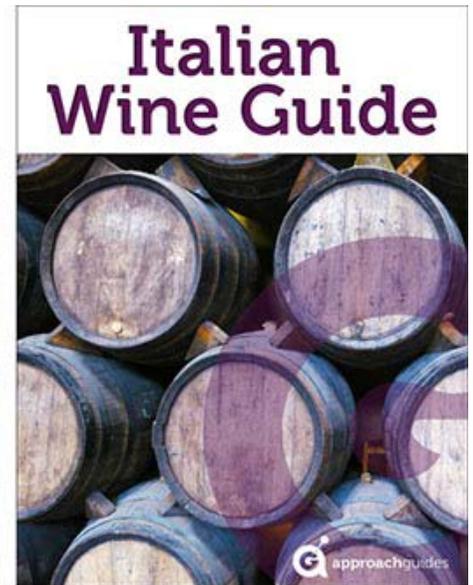
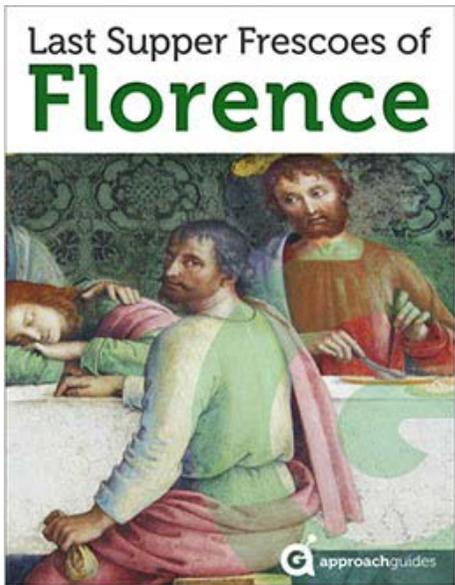
There is **one exception** to the pre-Leonardo framework, however: Castagno uses a rectangular table with apostles at the end (Fig. 16), an arrangement that would later be embraced by Leonardo.

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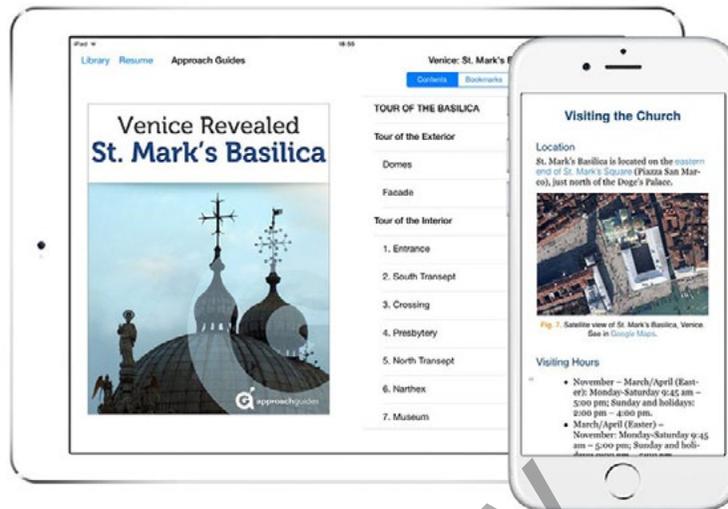
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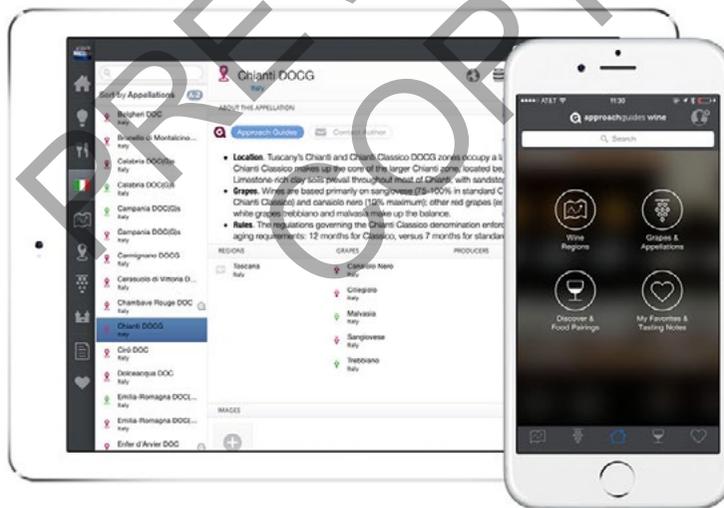
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