

Depicting the Bread of the Last Supper

Religious Representation in Italian Renaissance Society

W. R. Albury, University of New England, Australia

G. M. Weisz, University of New South Wales and University of New England, Australia

Abstract

Prior to about 1500 most depictions of the Last Supper in Western art showed unleavened bread on the table, but since then leavened bread has usually been shown. This change involved the abandonment of what was understood at the time to be a historically-accurate representation of the Last Supper, in favor of a historically-inaccurate one. The present article examines the combination of artistic, religious, and social factors that made this development uncontroversial when it occurred and that allowed it to persist during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period when many aspects of religious art became subject to rigorous control.

Introduction

[1] The bread of the Last Supper is an important religious symbol in Christian art, relating both to Christ's prediction of his betrayal and to his institution of the Eucharist. The present discussion is concerned with the way in which artistic representations of this bread changed during the Renaissance period and with the relationship between this development and the society in which it occurred. We approach this topic from the point of view that "social history and art history are continuous, each offering necessary insights into the other" (Baxandall 1972: unpaginated preface). Our focus, therefore, is not the history of art in the narrow sense, but rather the interaction of artistic representation and its social environment.

[2] The Last Supper has been a constant theme in Western art from at least the sixth century (Wessel: 8), with a parallel tradition in Byzantine art going back at least to the fourth century (Borsook: 43n). For the purposes of the present study, it will be convenient to follow the practice of art historians who distinguish three different types among those representations

that have broadly been called Last Suppers. The first two types are liturgical in focus, and during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they typically occur in paintings that were used as altarpieces (Lavin: 1n; Gilbert 1974: 388-89). One of these types is the Communion of the Apostles, which shows Christ (usually standing) administering a communion wafer to each of his disciples (usually kneeling).¹ The other liturgical type is the Institution of the Eucharist, where the figures sit at the Last Supper table, but instead of a meal on the table there is a chalice and one or more communion wafers.²

[3] Our primary concern, however, is with the third type of representation, which may be called a Last Supper in “a strict sense” (Gilbert 1974: 374). Paintings of this type are “representations of the Last Supper as an historical event” rather than “the liturgical representation of Christ as a priest giving communion to the apostles” (Montagu: 311).³ In fifteenth-century Florence and the surrounding Tuscan areas this type of depiction most commonly occurs as a fresco in the refectory of a religious order, and it has as its focus the meal shared by Christ and his disciples, rather than the Eucharist (Gilbert 1974: 391-92). Further north, however, in the Italian regions of Lombardy and the Veneto, Last Supper frescoes are typically found in church sanctuaries during this period rather than in refectories (Rigaux 1989: 195-96).

[4] Although there are earlier precedents, the Renaissance tradition of painting Last Suppers on the walls of refectories seems to have begun in Florence in the fourteenth century (Walker: 4-5). It flourished in that city – first in monasteries and convents, and then extending “to refectories in other religious contexts: in hospitals, canonicates and even to the private dining rooms of abbots” (Walker: 1). In some cases, particularly in Dominican establishments, other themes were chosen for the refectory wall, but overall the Last Supper “appears more frequently than any other single incident” (Walker: 33, cf. 46). By the end of the fifteenth century the tradition began to spread to other parts of Italy and beyond through the work of Florentine artists such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), whose *Last Supper* (1498-1499) in the Dominican refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan was widely known and admired. This Florentine tradition reflected the tastes of urban patrons who had a relatively sophisticated appreciation of artistic skill (Baxandall 1972: 23, 34). The northern Italian Last Supper frescoes, on the other hand, are more vernacular in style, reflecting their rural environment (Rigaux 1989: 200, 285).

¹ For an example, see Fra Angelico (Italian, c. 1400-1455), *Communion of the Apostles*, tempera on wood, c. 1450, Museo di San Marco, Florence. All art works named in this article, except those in footnote 10, can be viewed online at the Web Gallery of Art (<http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>).

² For an example, see Cosimo Rosselli (Italian, 1439-1507), *The Last Supper*, fresco, 1481-1482, Sistine Chapel, Vatican.

³ In some cases a mixed type of representation is found, combining the Institution of the Eucharist with the Last Supper as a historical meal. In these depictions Christ and his disciples are seated at a table that has been laid with food, but Christ is shown with a chalice and a single communion wafer. For an example, see Dieric Bouts the Elder (Flemish, 1415-1475), *Last Supper*, oil on wood, 1464-1467, Sint-Pieterskirk, Leuven. Where bread is clearly shown on the table, as in this work by Bouts, we have included such mixed types in our present analysis.

[5] While all of these non-liturgical paintings of the Last Supper do, of course, allude to the Eucharist, given their setting and the nature of the events depicted (Walker: 55n; Rigaux 1997: 68, 106), they nevertheless tend to emphasize the historical meal itself rather than subsequent liturgical practice. Thus unlike the two liturgically-oriented representations of the Last Supper, where there are clear doctrinal and symbolic reasons for artists to deviate from the Gospel accounts in their depictions of the event, this third type of representation gives the artist scope to portray Christ's final meal just as it is described in the Gospels.

[6] Many details, of course, are omitted from the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, and all four Gospel writers do not agree on everything that they choose to include. But where a particular detail is highlighted as a significant feature of the event, and where there is either agreement among all the Evangelists on that point, or else the Renaissance Church took a definite position to reconcile what was believed to be only an apparent disagreement, then we might expect to find such a feature literally represented in non-liturgical Last Supper paintings. This is the issue that the present article takes up in relation to the bread on the table at the Last Supper.

[7] We note that there was a shift in the representation of Last Supper bread over the period of roughly a century from the mid-Quattrocento to the mid-Cinquecento. Prior to this time, Western artists who included bread in their non-liturgical depictions of the Last Supper predominantly showed unleavened bread, whereas after this time they predominantly showed leavened bread. Such a shift involved the abandonment of a literally-accurate illustration of the Gospel narrative on this point, and the adoption of a literally-inaccurate one. That this change occurred when it did, without controversy, and then persisted through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period, when both Protestant and Catholic authorities placed restrictions on acceptable religious art, must be seen as somewhat surprising. We shall therefore suggest a possible explanation for the occurrence of this shift and its continuing effects.

The Bread of the Last Supper

[8] The pictorial representation of the Last Supper varies throughout the centuries. The table may be round, square, U-shaped (either \cap -rounded or \sqcap -angled), or rectangular. Traditionally, however, the most common forms are either rounded or straight (Loomis: 79-88). The table as seen by the viewer is usually horizontal, occasionally diagonal, or receding from the front plane of the picture to the back. At times, the participants are standing or sitting; some or all of them may be facing the observer, with Christ usually in the center, but occasionally on the side. The table is most often stocked with food, but sometimes it is nearly empty. Both the overall composition and the individual details of the picture may be used by the artist as vehicles for religious symbolism, since many items, including apparently commonplace ones, have traditionally had a symbolic meaning in art (Baxandall 1985: 132; Hall 1974, 1994). But we must also remember that not every religious picture produced during the Renaissance was intended to be interpreted symbolically (Gilbert 1952; 1974: 371-72).

[9] Variations of the kind mentioned above, relating to such matters as the shape of the table or the positioning of the participants, concern aspects of the Last Supper that are not

described in the Gospel narratives.⁴ But unlike these indeterminate features, the presence of bread at the Last Supper is in no way incidental – it is a central element in all four Gospel narratives. In the Synoptic Gospels, Christ uses the bread on the table for the institution of the Eucharist (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19). In the Gospel of John, references to the Eucharist are associated with the miracle of the loaves and fishes rather than with the Last Supper (John 6:48-58), but bread is nevertheless prominent in the Last Supper narrative, in the context of Christ's prediction of his betrayal (John 13:18-27). So our interest is directed to the question of how this bread is represented in non-liturgical paintings of the Last Supper.

[10] According to the Synoptic Gospels, the Last Supper occurred on the first night of the Passover, an important festival in which the Israelites commemorated their escape from Egyptian slavery. In their hurried exodus into the Sinai desert, there was no time for proper food preparation and the bread remained unleavened. As a result, only unleavened bread could thereafter be eaten by Jews at the Passover meal, on the 14th of Nisan, and all leavening or yeast products had to be removed from the home in preparation for this feast (Exodus 12:8-20; Deuteronomy 16:3-8). Because all three Synoptic Gospels describe the Last Supper as the Passover meal, *τό πάσχα* (Matthew 26:19; Mark 14:16; Luke 22:13), one would conclude that the bread of the Last Supper was unleavened.

[11] The Gospel of St John, however, suggests that the Last Supper occurred one night earlier, and thus it appears to disagree with the Synoptic Gospels on this point. The Johannine narrative places the crucifixion of Christ on the day of preparation for the Passover (John 19:14), which is the 13th of Nisan, whereas the Synoptic Gospels place the disciples' preparation for the Last Supper on that day, with the Last Supper itself occurring that evening after sunset, the beginning of the 14th of Nisan, with the crucifixion on the following day – the latter part of the 14th of Nisan.

[12] From the early days of Christianity to the present, religious scholars have proposed many explanations for this discrepancy, including the suggestion that different calendars were being referred to in the Synoptic and Johannine accounts (Weinberg: 321). If the Last Supper was not a Passover meal, then it is possible that leavened rather than unleavened bread may have been eaten on that night (Bernas: 595; Dewan: 601). But even following the chronology given in the Gospel of John, it is still highly probable that the Last Supper would have involved unleavened bread only. To ensure compliance with ritual requirements, "pious householders . . . will have removed all traces of leaven, including leavened bread, *before* the night of the 13th-14th Nisan (the Eve of the 14th), so that, even historically, unleavened bread may well have been eaten by Jesus and the Twelve on the night of the 12th-13th" (Derrett: 375, emphasis in original).

[13] Nevertheless, for our present purposes this ongoing scholarly debate is overshadowed by the fact that during the historical period in which we are interested, the Latin Church had taken a clear position on the matter. The question of whether the Eucharist should be

⁴ The only information given about the seating arrangement is found in John 13:23-25, which indicates that an unnamed "disciple whom Jesus loved" (traditionally identified as John) was reclining next to Jesus, and that this unnamed disciple was someone other than Simon Peter.

celebrated with leavened or unleavened bread was one of the issues that divided Latin and Greek Christians in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, and it was therefore included among the topics for debate at the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438-1439, where representatives of the two Churches met to discuss reunification. In the course of this debate, the Dominican John of Torquemada (1388-1468), who acted as the Pope's spokesman at Florence, expounded the Latin Church's position that "unleavened bread . . . was what Our Saviour used at the Last Supper when the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist was instituted" (Gill 1959: 275).

[14] At this time, then, we should expect artists in Catholic countries to depict the Last Supper bread as unleavened, and in fact this is predominantly what is found. From Medieval times to the end of the Quattrocento, the bread shown on the Last Supper table is almost always of the flat, pita/pancake kind, namely non-fermented, not elevated, not leavened.⁵ This type of bread is in accord with the requirements of the Jewish Passover, and it can be easily identified in the following examples.

- Duccio di Buoninsegna (Italian, 1255-1319), *Last Supper*, back panel of the Maestà, 1308-1311, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena.
- Tadeo Gaddi (Italian, 1300-1366), *Last Supper, Tree of Life and Four Miracle Scenes*, fresco, 1360s, Santa Croce, Florence.
- Jaume Serra (Catalan, d. after 1405), *Last Supper*, tempera on wood, 1370-1400, Museo Nazionale, Palermo.
- Jaume Huguet (Catalan, c. 1415-1492), *Last Supper*, wood panel, c. 1470, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.
- Master of the Housebook (German, active 1475-1490), *Last Supper*, wood panel, c.1480, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

[15] From the mid to late Quattrocento, however, the image of leavened bread on the Last Supper table begins to appear more frequently, and by the mid-Cinquecento it tends to predominate in Last Supper representations,⁶ as shown in the following examples from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century.

- Andrea del Castagno (Italian, 1427-1457), *Last Supper*, fresco, 1447, Sant' Apollonia, Florence.
- Jaume Baço Jacomart (Spanish, 1411-1461), *Last Supper*, panel, 1450s, Cathedral Museum, Segorbe (Spain).
- Dieric Bouts the Elder (Flemish, 1415-1475), *Last Supper*, oil on wood, 1464-1467, Sint-Pieterskirk, Leuven.

⁵ For an exception, see Pietro Lorenzetti (Italian, 1290-1348), *Last Supper*, fresco, c. 1320, Lower Church, San Francesco, Assisi.

⁶ For an exception, see Fray Nicolás Borrás (Spanish, 1530-1610), *Last Supper*, oil on panel, 1570s, private collection.

- Domenico Ghirlandaio (Italian, 1449-1494), *Last Supper*, fresco, 1476, Badia dei Santi Michele e Biagio, Passignano sul Trasimeno; *Last Supper*, fresco, 1480, Ognissanti, Florence; and *Last Supper*, fresco, 1486, San Marco, Florence.
- Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452-1519), *Last Supper*, fresco, 1498-1499, Santa Maria della Grazie, Milan.
- Francisco Henriques (Portuguese, fl. 1502-1518), *Last Supper*, oil on canvas, c. 1508, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon.
- Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471-1528), *The Large Passion: 9. Last Supper*, woodcut, 1510, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.
- Andrea del Sarto (Italian, 1486-1530), *Last Supper*, fresco, 1520-1525, San Salvi, Florence.
- Hans Holbein the Younger (German, 1497-1543), *Last Supper*, limewood, 1524-1525, Kunstmuseum, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basle.
- Joos van Cleve (Flemish, 1485-1540), *Last Supper*, Altarpiece of the Lamentation, oil on wood, before 1540, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
- Jacopo Bassano (Italian, c. 1515-1592), *Last Supper*, oil on canvas, 1542, Galleria Borghese, Rome.
- Pieter Pourbus (Flemish, 1523-1584), *Last Supper*, oil on oak panel, 1548, Groeninge Museum, Bruges.
- Juan de Juanes (Spanish, 1523-1579), *Last Supper*, panel, 1560s, Museo del Prado, Madrid.
- Tintoretto (Italian, 1518-1594), *Last Supper*, oil on canvas, c. 1570, San Polo, Venice.
- Daniele Crespi (Italian, 1590-1630), *Last Supper*, oil on canvas, 1624-1625, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.
- Valentin de Boulogne (French, 1591-1632), *Last Supper*, oil on canvas, 1625-1626, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

[16] This iconographical convention has persisted to the present day, so that typically raised loaves are shown on the table of the Last Supper rather than unleavened bread. Montagu, for example, has noted this fact, commenting, “in representations of the Last Supper . . . the bread often appears to be leavened” (310). But she does not indicate that this type of representation is most commonly found after about 1500 and that unleavened bread is most commonly found before that date.

Renaissance Naturalism and Devotional Identification

[17] In the history of Western religious art there is a constant interplay between religious images and religious texts. The conventions that govern the relationship between image and text have varied with social and cultural changes, however, and within these conventions there have also been variations due to each artist’s stylistic approach.

[18] On the basis of the Last Supper images reviewed above, one can discover a shift in pictorial illustration of the bread on the table in Western art, beginning around the mid-15th century. Broadly speaking, this shift coincides with changes from Medieval to Renaissance conventions of visual representation. Medieval art tended to present flat images, often with emotionally inexpressive – almost identical – faces and immobile figures, set in geometrically ambiguous spatial relationships with each other and with their surroundings (Gadol: 32). Artworks utilizing these conventions also typically showed the Last Supper with unleavened bread.

[19] Renaissance artists, especially in Florence, developed a different approach to visual representation, “renouncing . . . the two-dimensional, hieratic symbolism of the past in order to capture the purely visual aspect of things,” thus seeking to “‘look through’ the picture plane to a natural world of visible objects ‘beyond’ it” (Gadol: 57). These naturalistic images tended to feature mobile figures with expressive faces, set in an unambiguous three-dimensional space defined by geometrical rules of perspective – rules first elaborated by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) in his 1435 treatise *De Pictura* (31-59) and then refined by many subsequent theorists. Representations produced according to these conventions usually showed loaves of leavened bread on the Last Supper table.

[20] It is widely accepted that the primary use of non-liturgical Last Supper paintings in Renaissance Florence was for the decoration of refectories, and that their purpose was to encourage the monks or nuns dining in these refectories to identify themselves with Christ and his disciples as portrayed in the paintings (Gilbert 1974; Wilkins: 407; Walker: 35, 65-66; Rigaux 1997: 69; Rohlmann: 82). This identification served a devotional purpose not only in an inspirational sense but also in an ethical one, by encouraging devout behavior. But a purpose of this kind, whether in refectories or in other religious contexts, presupposed a naturalistic style of painting. “Naturalism was essential to the devotional imagery that was widespread in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance” (Summers: 313).

[21] In order for the viewer to achieve a personal identification with the figures depicted in a Last Supper painting, it is necessary “to think the Last Supper into one’s own environment” (Gilbert 1974: 373). And to facilitate this process, a painting must function as “a window pane” so that “reality in a painting is undifferentiated from reality outside it” (Gilbert 1974: 372; cf. Alberti: 55). By the mid-Quattrocento the expectation for devotional images was “not that they be simply visible, as an icon might also be, but that they be *like* the visible; not that they be encountered, but that they be *as if* encountered, set in a world that, because it was like the present, could carry the imagination and therefore the soul to past and future events” (Summers: 312-13, emphasis in original).

[22] Naturalistic techniques enabled Florentine painters to depict the Last Supper as if it were taking place in a space continuous with the refectory interior (Walker: 35, 65, 68, 71, 180, 187-88; Borsook: 42; Rohlmann: 82-83; Rigaux 1989: 197-98; 1997: 19; Hayum: 246-47). And to further enhance this illusion of presence, many details in frescoes of the Last Supper could be adapted to fit late-Quattrocento or Cinquecento dining practices as a way of assimilating the content of the painting to the viewer’s environment. Thus we can understand why painters would begin to portray Christ and his disciples with the leavened

bread that Italian refectories typically served, rather than with the unleavened bread that would be ritually appropriate for a Passover meal.

[23] This interpretation is supported by the way in which other features of Last Supper paintings were also adapted to the viewer's environment. "The furniture and dishes depicted in the painted suppers reflect actual furniture and dishes of the Trecento and Quattrocento probably used in the real rooms. Benches built into or attached to the wall fronted by long tables as seen in many of the frescoes are typical monastic dining arrangements still used today" (Walker: 36). In Ghirlandaio's *Last Supper* fresco at Ognissanti, the painter even places the monogram of the monastery on the majolica and the carved benches which he depicts (Walker: 71, 179; Borsook: 116).

[24] Ghirlandaio also enhanced all three of his surviving Last Supper frescoes⁷ with attractive exterior backgrounds – depicted with spatial, atmospheric, and color perspectives, and with trees, flowers and birds (Cadogan: 202-3, 213-15, 218-20; Kecks: 11; Prinz and Seidel: 17). These naturalistic backgrounds, however, are not Judean; they are Tuscan or Umbrian. Flushed with light and aesthetically attractive, a landscape of this kind is non-existent around Jerusalem, where the mountains are arid and devoid of vegetation. Nor was Ghirlandaio unique in this respect: devotional handbooks of the time encouraged the faithful to imagine sacred events as taking place in their own familiar environment; and in accordance with this convention "it was not unusual [for painters] to set the religious stories in landscapes that are more or less in the character of the [viewer's] locality" (Baxandall 1985: 124; cf. 1972: 46; Gilbert 1974: 373-74; Rigaux 1997: 63).

[25] Now it is clear that such geographical adaptations were not due to Quattrocento Italian artists' ignorance of the Holy Land's general appearance. They were quite capable of imaginatively reconstructing the arid landscape around Jerusalem when it suited the context of their painting – for example, in the portrayals of Christ's *Agony in the Garden* by Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), tempera on wood, c. 1459, and by Giovanni Bellini (c. 1426-1516), tempera on wood, c. 1465 (both in the National Gallery, London). So we may reasonably conclude that the Italianate ambience of many Last Supper paintings from this period was designed to promote the Italian viewer's devotional identification with the figures shown in the picture. And this same rationale would apply to the portrayal of leavened bread on the Last Supper table.

[26] We have concentrated to this point on the features of Florentine Last Supper frescoes, but similar characteristics are regularly found in the northern Italian Last Supper frescoes, which can be seen as popularized adaptations of Florentine refectory decorations. While the rendering of perspective and other aesthetic effects is less technically adept in these rural frescoes than in their urban counterparts, they also encourage the viewer to identify with the events depicted by such means as presenting items of local cuisine on the table (Rigaux 1989: 200).

⁷ Ghirlandaio's fourth *Last Supper* fresco, in the convent of Santo Donato in Polverosa, was destroyed in 1530 and there are no known copies of it.

The Council of Ferrara-Florence

[27] Our argument thus far is that artistic practice (the adoption of naturalistic representation) and social experience (the customary use of leavened bread) were factors that promoted the depiction of leavened bread as an aid to the viewer's devotional identification with Christ and his disciples at the Last Supper. But a further explanation must be sought for the liberties that artists were able to take, given the theological significance of Eucharistic bread. As noted above, the Latin Church during this period held that Christ had used unleavened bread at the Last Supper when he instituted the Eucharist. On this basis John of Torquemada at the Council of Ferrara-Florence had defended the exclusive use of unleavened bread in Catholic liturgical practice as against the exclusive use of leavened bread in the Greek Church.

[28] Furthermore, to the Latin Church unleavened bread symbolized purity and sacrifice (Chevalier: 118; Tressider: 77), whereas leaven symbolized corruption. This view was supported by Christ's words in the Synoptic Gospels comparing leaven with false doctrine and hypocrisy (Matthew 16:6, 11-12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1) and also by the words of Paul who compared leaven with false doctrine and immoral behavior (Galatians 5:7-10; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Greek Christians, on the other hand, drew on a parable recounted by two of the Synoptic Gospels, in which Christ compared leaven with the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). So for the Greek Church, leavened bread symbolized the community of the faithful vivified by the divine Spirit, and unleavened bread symbolized those who were dead to faith. Hence the plea by the Greek prelate, Mark of Ephesus (1392-1444), at the Council of Ferrara-Florence that the Latin Church's "dead sacrifice in unleavened bread should be abolished to avoid giving scandal to brethren" (Gill 1959: 114).

[29] Notwithstanding these differences of interpretation, the majority of the delegates representing both Churches recognized, "after a long and very toilsome investigation" of this and the other points of disagreement (Tanner: I, 524), that the question of using leavened or unleavened bread for the Eucharist was essentially a matter of ecclesiastical custom or cultural tradition rather than one of fundamental doctrine. Thus in the interest of reunifying the Churches they agreed to the following statement in the Council's decree of union, signed on 5 July 1439 and promulgated in Florence the following day by Pope Eugenius IV (1388?-1447) in the Bull *Laetentur caeli*: "the body of Christ is truly confectioned in both unleavened and leavened wheat bread, and priests should confection the body of Christ in either, that is, each priest according to the custom (*consuetudinem*) of his western or eastern church" (Tanner: I, 527; cf. Gill 1959: 412-15).

[30] Although the reunion of the Latin and Greek Churches proclaimed in *Laetentur caeli* was eventually thwarted by the rearguard action of some important Greek clerics, especially Mark of Ephesus (Gill 1964: 64), and even more decisively by the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453, one should not underestimate the significance attached to this Bull at the time of its promulgation. Eugenius IV, previously driven from Rome by political enemies and threatened with deposition by the schismatic Council of Basle, had now apparently achieved the unification of all Christendom under his Papacy. His Florentine ally, Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464), only recently returned from exile, had been largely responsible for the transfer of the Council from Ferrara to Florence in January 1439 and had

restored the fortunes of his Medici Bank by financing all the Council's operations after the transfer. "The Day of Union, 6 July, was a public holiday in Florence, with all businesses closed and throngs of people massed in the streets around the Duomo, Santa Maria del Fiore," as Eugenius celebrated a pontifical mass and promulgated the decree of union (Brown: 179). Shortly after this date Cosimo, to commemorate the event, had a ceiling fresco painted in his family chapel showing the configuration of the sun, moon, and stars at noon on the Day of Union (Brown: 179-80).

[31] From the Florentine perspective, the principal leaders of Church and State, both of whom had previously been under political threat, had now consolidated their power. Florence, moreover, was for the time being the Papal Seat and the capital of a reunified Christianity (Rigaux 1997: 28), since the Council remained in session to deal with other matters after the departure of the Greek prelates in July 1439 and did not transfer to Rome until February 1443 (Tanner: I, 453). Thus it was only at the beginning of March 1443 that Eugenius IV finally left Florence to take up residence once again in Rome (Rigaux 1997: 30). Given, then, both the religious and the political significance of the Council of Ferrara-Florence, we may fairly conclude that any Florentine who was in a position to commission a major work of art at this time would have been aware of the principal features of *Laetentur caeli*. Certainly there was international interest in the outcome of the Conciliar discussions between the Greeks and Latins, including the decision reached on leavened and unleavened bread (Gill 1959: 300-1), so *a fortiori* we would expect influential Florentines also to be interested in this issue.

[32] It has previously been suggested that controversy over the Eucharist at the Council of Ferrara-Florence led to the appearance in mid-Quattrocento Florence of paintings on the liturgically-oriented theme of the Communion of the Apostles – a theme, it is claimed, which was unknown before that time outside Byzantine religious art (Lavin: 12). But this view is not tenable in the light of a much earlier Florentine predella, from the third quarter of the Trecento, which also shows the Communion of the Apostles (Gilbert 1974: 391). Our current proposal retains the idea that the Council's focus on the Eucharist did have an influence on Western religious art, beginning in Florence and radiating outward from there, but we believe it did so by affecting the representation of bread in non-liturgical depictions of the Last Supper. It did not cause artists to introduce the depiction of unleavened bread for the first time, since there were earlier instances of such depictions, but it did contribute to such depictions becoming a common rather than a rare occurrence.⁸

[33] Although the decree of the Council required priests of the Eastern and Western Churches to celebrate the Eucharist using the form of bread that was customary in their own Church – that is, leavened bread in the Greek rite and unleavened bread in the Latin rite – it also declared in effect that the two forms of bread were theologically equivalent. This view represented a very substantial change in the Catholic position.

⁸ Similarly, one could suggest that Lavin's basic point was not fundamentally mistaken but that it was expressed in too absolute a way – i.e. the Council's discussion of the Eucharist did not cause artists to depict the Communion of the Apostles for the first time, but it may have contributed to such depictions becoming a more common occurrence.

In the previous century, the popes had in practice made acceptance of the Latin rite synonymous with union. Florence distinguished between faith and liturgical rite, and effected union on the basis of identity of faith and diversity of rites, without ever discussing the almost, for that time, revolutionary principle that it was sanctioning by its action (Gill 1964: 291-92).

Thus in a context where it was thought appropriate for non-liturgical Last Supper paintings to reflect, as far as possible, the environment of the viewer – and where artists themselves were striving to create naturalistic representations of the familiar world around them – the decision of the Council removed any theological obstacle to the depiction of leavened bread on the table of Christ and his disciples. The holy figures in the painting could therefore be shown partaking of the same kind of bread as the monks or nuns of Florentine – or the rural laypeople of northern Italy – had before them on their own tables.

[34] To uphold the interpretation suggested here, it is not necessary to assume that late-Quattrocento artists were theological scholars who carefully studied the decrees of Ecumenical Councils in order to discover their pictorial implications. It is only necessary to remember that urban paintings of the Last Supper were commissioned by the senior clergy of monastic orders or by wealthy lay donors acting with the advice of these senior clergy, and that the painters too were often advised by clergymen when they planned to undertake works on religious themes (Rigaux 1989: 156). Given these circumstances, it is easy to see how the decree of the Council of Ferrara-Florence concerning the bread of the Eucharist could have had a relatively prompt influence on Last Supper paintings in Florence, and elsewhere in Europe thereafter.

[35] Our argument, therefore, is that the combined effects of (1) devotional practices stressing the believer's use of visualization to effect a personal identification with holy figures, (2) the development of naturalistic techniques of representation in painting, and (3) the theological and political outcomes of the Council of Ferrara-Florence created the conditions in which the depiction of leavened bread at the Last Supper could become a commonplace and uncontroversial occurrence.⁹ This combination of circumstances was particularly salient in Florence from the 1440s onward, even though it did not apply exclusively to Florence.

The Effect of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation

[36] Despite the representation of leavened bread at the Last Supper being literally inaccurate, so far as the Gospel accounts of this event (as interpreted at the time) were concerned, a greater value seems to have been placed on encouraging the viewer's devotional

⁹ Cf. the study by Loomis of Western representations of the shape of the Last Supper table, in which it is shown that the change from predominantly round or curved tables to predominantly straight tables occurred much earlier than did the change from unleavened to leavened bread. "In the twelfth century, examples of the straight type of Last Supper table become too frequent and too stereotyped to call for complete enumeration" (Loomis: 86). The reasons offered for this change by Loomis are based on social experience and artistic practice (Loomis: 87), but there was no theological issue at stake here, as there was in the representation of Last Supper bread. This comparative point adds weight, we believe, to our suggestion that the decisions of the Council of Ferrara-Florence were a contributing factor to the much later change in the predominant representation of Last Supper bread.

identification with the figures in the picture, than on providing a literal illustration of the Gospel texts. By the mid-Cinquecento this approach to the depiction of Last Supper bread was well-established; and it was not significantly affected by the restrictions placed on religious art by Catholic or Protestant authorities during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period.

[37] The great Eucharistic controversies of this period concerned the nature and meaning of the sacrament itself rather than the type of bread used. Most Protestants held a view similar to the one expressed by John Calvin (1509-1564): “In regard to the external form of the ordinance, . . . whether the bread is to be leavened or unleavened, and the wine to be red or white, is of no consequence. These things are indifferent, and left free to the Church . . .” (II, 599). Richard Hooker (1554-1600), for example, defending Anglican practices against Puritan critics, noted, “In the word of God the use of bread is prescribed, as a thing without which the Eucharist may not be celebrated; but as for the kind of bread it is not denied [by either of the contending parties] to be a thing indifferent” (I, 393). Similarly, the Catholic Church, at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), reaffirmed its doctrine of the Eucharist in a number of decrees and canons, but none of these made any mention of the kind of bread to be used in this sacrament (Tanner: II, 693-98, 726-28, 732-37). For Catholics that matter had been definitively settled by the Council of Ferrara-Florence.

[38] In addition, both Catholics and Protestants encouraged the believer’s personal identification with Christ, while Catholics also continued to encourage identification with saints and other holy persons as well. Hence the value of art for this purpose and for religious education was reaffirmed. On the Catholic side, the Council of Trent held

that the faithful are instructed and strengthened by commemorating and frequently recalling the articles of our faith through the expression in pictures or other likenesses of the stories of the mysteries of our redemption; and that great benefits flow from all sacred images, not only because people are reminded of the gifts and blessings conferred on us by Christ, but because the miracles of God through the saints and their salutary example is [*sic*] put before the eyes of the faithful, who can thank God for them, shape their own lives and conduct in imitation of the saints, and be aroused to adore and love God and to practise devotion (Tanner: II, 775).

To ensure that religious images were suitable for this purpose, the Council required that “no representations of false doctrine should be set up which give occasion of dangerous error to the unlettered” and that “all sensual appeal (*lascivia* [lasciviousness]) must be avoided, so that images are not painted or adorned with seductive charm (*procaci venustate* [wanton beauty])” that might provoke lust in the viewer (Tanner: II, 775-76; cf. the nineteenth-century translation in Waterworth: 235-36).

[39] The works of two notable post-Tridentine Catholic writers on sacred art, *On the Historical Errors and Abuses of the Painters* (1564) by Giovanni Andrea Gilio (fl. 1550-1580, d. 1584) and *Discourse Concerning Sacred and Secular Images* (1582) by Cardinal Gabrielle Paleotti (1522-1597), are usually taken as “the basis for the widespread presentation of Counter-reformation aesthetic, according to which the church surrounded the inventiveness of Renaissance art with precise rules” (Gilbert 1963: 493). Gilio advocated literalism in the

depiction of historical subjects (where “history” means primarily sacred history), calling on painters “to show the pure and simple truth” without fictional or imaginative variation. But he nevertheless allowed that some details could be inaccurate without changing the sense of the historical subject – such as making “the houses of Pilate, of Caiaphas, of Annas or of Herod more beautiful and more ornate than perhaps they were, or Mount Calvary higher or lower, or Jerusalem greater or smaller, and other similar things” (I, 314, our translation).¹⁰

[40] Paliotti emphasized the need for the painter of religious images to be persuasive, like an orator, in order “to move men to proper obedience and subjection to God” by leading them “to penitence, or to willing suffering, or to charity, or to contempt for the world, or other similar virtues – all of which are [used] as instruments to unite men with God, which is the true and principal end that is expected of these images” (I, 334, our translation). Thus painters, like orators, were allowed to embellish their subjects in the interest of persuasiveness, and these embellishments could include inaccuracies so long as they were not contrary to doctrine or morality.

[41] On the Protestant side, Martin Luther (1483-1546) encouraged the depiction of Bible scenes for devotional and educational purposes, excluding only the image of God the Father as something prohibited by the Ten Commandments (Coulton: 408). Calvin, although less sympathetic to the visual arts, nevertheless allowed a place for historical paintings “which give a representation of events” (including events from sacred history), since they were “of some use for instruction or admonition” – but only on the condition that these images were not “perverted to our destruction” by the inclusion of theologically or morally objectionable content, and that they were not placed in churches (I, 100-1). Some other, more radical, Protestant leaders provoked episodes of iconoclasm during which their followers set about indiscriminately destroying religious images, but these outbursts were usually localized and short-lived, destructive though they were while they lasted (Coulton: 408-12). By and large, for most Protestant denominations the depiction of Biblical events retained an important place in religious education, without any attempt being made to control the representation of “things indifferent” such as the bread of the Last Supper.

Conclusion

[42] Throughout the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period Catholics and most Protestants held that the use of leavened or unleavened bread in the Eucharist was theologically indifferent, although the Catholic rite continued to use only unleavened wafers as a matter of ecclesiastical discipline (Dewan: 601). And both sides acknowledged a legitimate role for depictions of Bible scenes so long as they did not contain doctrinal errors

¹⁰ In a similar way the *Spiritual Exercises* (1548) of St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuit Order, encouraged the exercitant, through a process called “composition of place” (53-54, 85, 304-5), to imagine himself present at sacred events such as the Last Supper; but the text does not prescribe how one should mentally represent such details as “the place of the Supper, whether large, or small, whether of one style or another” (136). Jerome Nadal (1507-1580), another leading Jesuit, later arranged for the publication of 153 engraved scenes from the Gospel narratives, to aid the imagination of exercitants in the process of “composition” (Buser: 424-25; Just). Two depictions of the Last Supper included in this collection very clearly show leavened bread on the table: available at <http://catholic-resources.org/Nadal/102.jpg> and <http://catholic-resources.org/Nadal/103.jpg>.

or immoral elements. Historical inaccuracy in the depiction of leavened bread at the Last Supper therefore remained uncontroversial, because it had neither doctrinal nor moral implications. Thus the various Renaissance dynamics noted above, which first made it devotionally appropriate and theologically unobjectionable for artists to place leavened bread on the table of the Last Supper, were not substantially weakened by the Protestant Reformation or the Catholic response to it. As a result, leavened bread has continued to the present time as the most common form of bread shown in Western representations of the Last Supper.

Bibliography

Alberti, L. B.

- 1972 *On Painting and On Sculpture*, the Latin texts of *De Pictura* [1435] and *De Statua* [1464]. Edited and translated by Cecil Grayson. London: Phaidon.

Baxandall, M.

- 1972 *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1985 *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bernas, C.

- 1967 "Eucharist (Biblical Data)." Pp. 594-99 in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume 5. Edited by the Catholic University of America. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Borsook, E.

- 1980 *The Mural Painters of Tuscany from Cimabue to Andrea del Sarto*. Second Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Brown, P. F.

- 1981 "Laetentur Caeli: The Council of Florence and the Astronomical Fresco in the Old Sacristy." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 44: 176-80.

Buser, T.

- 1976 "Jerome Nadal and Early Jesuit Art in Rome." *The Art Bulletin* 58: 424-33.

Cadogan, J. K.

- 2000 *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Calvin, J.

- 1964 *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559]. 2 Volumes. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Chevalier, J.

- 1996 *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: Penguin.

- Coulton, G. G.
1953 *Art and the Reformation* [1928]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Derrett, J. D. M.
1985 "The Upper Room and the Dish." *Heythrop Journal* 26: 373-82.
- Dewan, W. F.
1967 "Eucharist (As Sacrament)." Pp. 599-609 in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume 5. Edited by the Catholic University of America. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Gadol, J.
1969 *Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gilbert, C. E.
1952 "On Subject and Not-Subject in Italian Renaissance Pictures." *The Art Bulletin* 34: 202-16.
1963 "Trattati d'arte del cinquecento, fra manierismo e controriforma." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21: 493-94.
1974 "Last Suppers and their Refectories." Pp. 371-402 in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Mediaeval and Renaissance Religion*. Edited by C. Trinkaus with H. A. Oberman. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Gilio, G. A.
1971-77 *Degli errori e degli abusi de' Pittori circa l'istorie, . . . et in che modo vogilono essere dipinte le Sacre Imagini* [1564]. Pp. 1:303-25 and 1:834-62 (extracts) in *Scritti d'Arte del Cinquecento*. 3 Volumes. Edited by P. Barocchi. Milano/Napoli: Ricciardi Editore.
- Gill, J., S.J.
1959 *The Council of Florence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
1964 *Personalities of the Council of Florence, and Other Essays*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hall, J.
1974 *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. London: John Murray.
1994 *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art*. London: John Murray.
- Hayum, A.
2006 "A Renaissance Audience Considered: The Nuns at S. Apollonia and Castagno's *Last Supper*." *The Art Bulletin* 88: 243-66.
- Hooker, R.
1954 *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* [1593-97]. 2 Volumes. London: Dent.

- Just, F., S.J.
1999-2006 "Illustrations of Gospel Stories from Jerome Nadal, S.J." Available online at <http://catholic-resources.org/Art/Nadal.htm>.
- Kecks, R. G.
1995 *Ghirlandaio: catalogo completo*. Firenze: Octavo Editore.
- Lavin, M. A.
1967 "The Altar of Corpus Domini in Urbino: Paolo Uccello, Joos Van Ghent, Piero della Francesca." *The Art Bulletin* 49: 1-24.
- Loomis, L. H.
1927 "The Table of the Last Supper in Religious and Secular Iconography." *Art Studies* 5: 71-88.
- Loyola, St Ignatius
1953 *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* [1548]. Translated with a commentary by W. H. Longridge. London: A. R. Mowbray.
- Montagu, J.
1961 "The 'Institution of the Eucharist', by Charles Le Brun." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 24: 309-12.
- Paleotti, G.
1971-77 *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane . . .* [1582]. Pp. 1:152-67, 1:326-39, 1:901-22, 3:2639-65, 3:2715-36 (extracts) in *Scritti d'Arte del Cinquecento*. 3 Volumes. Edited by P. Barocchi. Milano/Napoli: Ricciardi Editore.
- Prinz, W. and M. Seidel, editors
1996 *Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1449-1494*. Firenze: Centro Di.
- Rigaux, D.
1989 *À la table du Seigneur: L'Eucharistie chez les Primitifs italiens, 1250-1497*. Paris: Cerf.
1997 *Un banquet pour l'éternité: La Cène d'Andrea del Castagno*. Tournai: Mame.
- Rohlmann, M.
2004 "Sacred Spaces." Pp. 52-86 in *Italian Frescoes: High Renaissance and Mannerism, 1510-1600*. Edited by J. Kliemann and M. Rohlmann. Translated by Steven Lindberg. New York: Abbeville.
- Summers, D.
1987 *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tanner, N. P., S.J., editor

1990 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. 2 Volumes. London: Sheed & Ward.

Tressider, J.

2005 *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Walker, R. S.

1979 *Florentine Painted Refectories, 1350-1500*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International.

Waterworth, J., editor and translator

1848 *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*. London: Dolman. Available online at <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct25.html>.

Weinberg, J.

2000 "Invention and Convention: Jewish and Christian Critique of the Jewish Fixed Calendar." *Jewish History* 14: 317-30.

Wessel, K.

1964 *The Last Supper*. Pictorial Library of Eastern Church Art, Volume 6. Translated by G. Rossetti and M. Buchloh. Recklinghausen: A. Bongers.

Wilkins, D.

1974 "Intervention." Pp. 406-7 in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Mediaeval and Renaissance Religion*. Edited by C. Trinkaus with H. A. Oberman. Leiden: E. J. Brill.