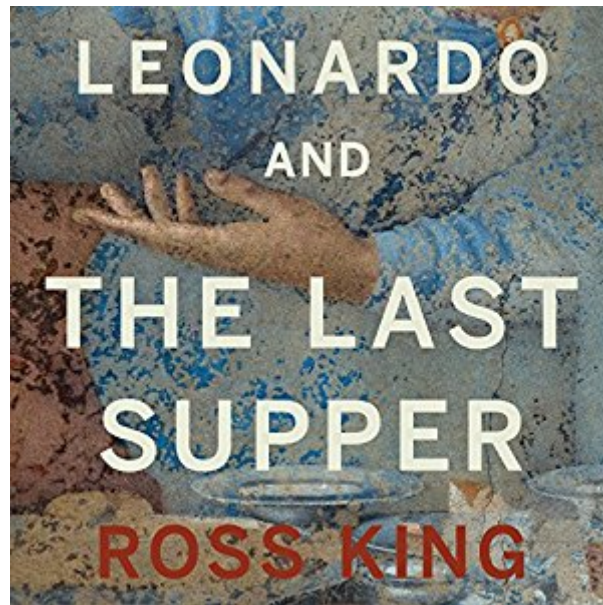


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Leonardo And The Last Supper



Synopsis

Early in 1495, Leonardo da Vinci began work in Milan on what would become one of history's most influential and beloved works of art - The Last Supper. After a dozen years at the court of Lodovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan, Leonardo was at a low point personally and professionally: at 43, in an era when he had almost reached the average life expectancy, he had failed, despite a number of prestigious commissions, to complete anything that truly fulfilled his astonishing promise. His latest failure was a giant bronze horse to honor Sforza's father: His 75 tons of bronze had been expropriated to be turned into cannons to help repel a French invasion of Italy. The commission to paint The Last Supper in the refectory of a Dominican convent was a small compensation, and his odds of completing it were not promising: Not only had he never worked on a painting of such a large size - 15' high x 30' wide - but he had no experience in the extremely difficult medium of fresco. In his compelling new book, Ross King explores how - amid war and the political and religious turmoil around him, and beset by his own insecurities and frustrations - Leonardo created the masterpiece that would forever define him. King unveils dozens of stories that are embedded in the painting. Examining who served as the models for the Apostles, he makes a unique claim: that Leonardo modeled two of them on himself. Reviewing Leonardo's religious beliefs, King paints a much more complex picture than the received wisdom that he was a heretic. The food that Leonardo, a famous vegetarian, placed on the table reveals as much as do the numerous hand gestures of those at Christ's banquet. As King explains, many of the myths that have grown up around The Last Supper are wrong, but its true story is ever more interesting. Bringing to life a fascinating period in European history, Ross King presents an original portrait of one of the world's greatest geniuses through the lens of his most famous work.

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Customer Reviews

All that survives of Leonardo da Vinci's work are about fifteen paintings and a collection of notebooks and sketches. The Last Supper is the most famous of those works, along with the Mona Lisa. In the first half of his book, Ross King tells us the story of Leonardo's first forty years - his childhood, and apprenticeship, his work as an artist in Lorenzo de Medici's court, his move to Milan and his work for Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan. The second half concentrates on the three years that Leonardo spent planning and painting the Last Supper. The final two decades of Leonardo's life, and the continuing life of The Last Supper, are summarized in the final chapter. The story of Leonardo's life is a familiar one, but Ross King weaves new tidbits among the well-known stories. For instance, Leonardo was an excellent student at school, but he was unable to conquer pesky Latin verbs. And a possible clue to his accent is in his spelling. Spelling was less regimented than it is today, in Italian as well as in English (remember Shakespeare's many spellings of his own name.) Leonardo's spelling Venezia as "Vinegia" may approximate his pronunciation of the city's name. The Last Supper mural is a story all by itself. Leonardo had no experience painting frescos and had never painted anything as large as this was to be. He hadn't volunteered for the project, and the wall to be painted was in a refectory, a dining room for the friars, not exactly prime real estate for a painting Leonardo hoped would add to his reputation. But money talks and the Duke of Milan had offered Leonardo a huge commission to paint the wall.

No one is better than Ross King in creating fascinating and beautifully detailed histories of artistic genius. In *Leonardo and the Last Supper* King has surpassed even his earlier "Brunelleschi's Dome" and "Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling", presenting us with a wonderful history of one of the great Leonardo da Vinci's best known works and a detailed biography of the artist and his turbulent time period. While Leonardo was without doubt one of the towering geniuses of all time, he was also one of the most easily distractable and dilatory. He simply boiled over with enormous numbers of ideas which he either never had time to complete, never even got started on, or never could convince anyone with sufficient resources to back him on. Another major problem with Leonardo was that he wasn't satisfied to do anything the way everybody else did. He always had to try new techniques and new materials, which sometimes worked out splendidly but more often

disappointed. Leonardo painted The Last Supper as one of the many projects assigned him by the great Ludovico Sforza, charismatic military leader and ruler of Milan, including what would have been a majestic equestrian statue. Unfortunately Sforza was heavily embroiled in the endless turmoil of Italian politics, which led to two separate French invasions and massive conflict. Eventually Sforza was overthrown and imprisoned, but not before Leonardo had created the marvelous painting of The Last Supper on the refectory wall of a monastery. I found King's descriptions of the painstaking work that went into the creation of The Last Supper and his analysis of so many aspects of the painting, such as the meanings behind the positions of the various Apostles' hands, fascinating.

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