

German Version English Version

--- St. John at the Last Supper ---

With the huge commercial success of Dan Brown's novel "The Da Vinci Code", some of the theories from this book became very popular. One of them says that Leonardo da Vinci placed Mary Magdalene and not St. John next to Jesus in his Last Supper painting. I saw a lot of people taking this assumption for real - they look at the painting and shout: "Oh yes, it's a woman!" They seem to believe that Leonardo's version of that famous scene would be unique. Fact is, that many other artist gave St. John, who was called "the beloved disciple" in the Bible, a certain look, which is now considered by many people as "feminine", but not necessarily five centuries ago. Since ancient times he was believed to be very young, so young that he did not even have a real growth of beard. You can also see his long hair and the devoted gestures on many other paintings of the Renaissance. This hairstyle was very fashionable for young Italians at the time of Leonardo. It should be noted that even other apostles were sometimes depicted in the same way.

We must try to understand the viewpoint of these artists, who grew up in an androcentric environment - men and boys had a far more important position in this society than in the western world of today. The ideal of beauty since the 19th century became very gynocentric - a cute face is since then usually interpreted as "feminine", although most traits of a woman aren't specifically female. Compare the face of a pretty actress with the ones of young boys and you see it yourself: what still remains of the so called "Kindchenschema" makes most people believe that women would be the beautiful gender. Since St. John was considered to be very young, he was simply not old enough to look very adult. That is the reason, why people mistake him for a female, just like many long haired boys were mistaken for girls in the 70s by elderly people. They were not used to that look just like most readers of Dan Brown's novel are not familiar with depictions of St. John, done by other artists. I decided to show you some examples to underline my arguments.



Duccio di Buoninsegna
1308 - 1311



Jaume Baço Jacomart
c. 1450

Giotto di Bondone
1320 - 1325



Dieric Bouts the elder
1464 - 1467

Jaume Serra
1370 - 1400



Jaume Huguet
c. 1470

Bertram von Minden
1390 - 1400



Cosimo Rosselli
1481 - 1482

Andrea del Castagno
c. 1447



Domenico Ghirlandaio
c. 1486



Luca Signorelli
1502



Hans Schäufelin
1515



Andrea del Sarto
1520 - 1525



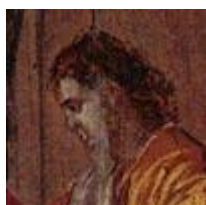
Hans Holbein the younger
1524 - 1525



Jacobo Bassano
1542



Juan de Juanes
c. 1560



El Greco
1568



Daniele Cresspi
1624 - 1625



Valentin de Boulogne
1625 - 1626



Philippe de Champaigne
1630

--- Other depictions of the Apostle ---

The following paintings present the apostle in another context. Like in the Last Supper, he was depicted by most artists as a long haired teenager. Other painters, especially those from Germany and the Netherlands, gave him an older appearance, but even there he is almost always beardless. Again you'll see that Leonardo's way to portray him was hardly so unusual as Dan Brown wants us to believe. Even artists, who couldn't see Leonardo's "Last Supper" before they started doing their own work, depicted the apostle like that, so everybody, who claims they just copied Leonardo's idea, is therefore wrong.



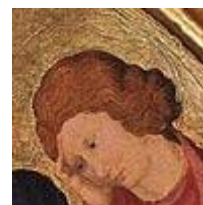
Duccio di Buoninsegna
"Washing of the feet"
1308 - 1311



unknown Artist
"Jesus Christ and the Apostle
John"
c. 1320



Andrea da Firenze
"Crucifixion"
1370 - 1377



Jean Malouel
"Pietà"
1400 - 1410



Antonio da Firenze
"Crucifixion"
1400 - 1450



Fra Angelico
"Entombment"
1438 - 1440



Dieric Bouts the elder
"Christ in the House of
Simon"
c. 1440



Andrea del Castagno
"Crucifixion"
1440 - 1441



Sandro Botticelli
"Pietà"
c. 1490



Perugino
"Transfiguration"
c. 1498



Raffaello
"Crucifixion"
1502 - 1503



Gerard David
"Deposition"
1510 - 1515



Cornelis Engebrechtsz.
"Christ taking leave
of his mother"
c. 1515



Albrecht Altdorfer
"Crucifixion"
1520



El Greco
"Crucifixion"
1588

--- St. John the Evangelist ---

According to the Christian tradition, the Apostle John and John the Evangelist would be one and the same person. It doesn't matter, whether modern experts share that idea, since artists from medieval times, the Renaissance and the Baroque era only knew, what everybody was told back then. That is why the Evangelist is often depicted in the same way as the Apostle. Sometimes we see a bearded John the Evangelist, especially when the artist wants to show how he looked at the end of his life as he was said to have died at a very old age.



Pietro Lorenzetti
c. 1320



Jan van Eyck
1432



Juan de Juanes
1445 - 1450



Master of Ulm
c. 1470



Martin Schongauer
1470 - 1475



Hans Memling
1475



Veit Stoss
1477 - 1489



Hieronymus Bosch
c. 1490



Fra Bartolommeo
1504



Gerard David
1505



Hans Baldung
c. 1515



Andrea del Sarto
1517



Correggio
1520 - 1524



El Greco
1594 - 1604



El Greco
c. 1608



Joachim A. Wtewael
1610 - 1615



Jacob Jordaens
c. 1620



Alessandro Algardi
1629



Francesco Furini
c. 1630



Alonso Cano
1646 - 1650

--- Pictures of young males by Leonardo and other Renaissance artists ---

Here are some other examples that give you a good idea, how young males were usually depicted in the art of the Renaissance. As I said before, these faces look "feminine" to modern eyes, but not to the sculptors and painters themselves. They looked for a higher, eternally youthful ideal of beauty, which could be described as "angelic". You can see that very well at these five angels that are displayed here. It is interesting to note that during the 19th century, angels really became women, as they now had female breasts, because of the different (more bourgeois and heterosexual orientated) zeitgeist, while the angels of the Renaissance still had a flat chest.

Following Dan Brown's logic, a sketch for St. Philip would also "clearly show a woman". His assumption that Leonardo would have replaced John with Mary Magdalene is getting even more absurd, when you keep in mind that many biographers, for example Serge Bramly, tend to think that Leonardo and several other Renaissance artists were mainly, if not exclusively attracted to these beardless young males - their students and models. In the case of Leonardo, one of them was nicknamed "Salai" (Gian Giacomo Caprotti da Oreno). It's possible that he even modelled for "The Last Supper" as he was in his mid teens, when Leonardo did this famous wall-painting.



Leonardo
"Study of a naked Man
with a stab"
1476 - 1480



Leonardo
"Head of a young man
with curly hair"
c. 1478



Leonardo
"Studies of Heads
in Profile"
1478 - 1480



Leonardo
"Sketch of St. Philip
for The Last Supper"
c. 1495



Leonardo
"Heads of an old Man
and a Youth"
1495 - 1500



after Leonardo
"Bacchus"
1510 - 1516



Leonardo
"St. John the Baptist"
1513 - 1516



Leonardo
"Study of a Young boy"
(Salai?)
undated



Leonardo (?)
"Portrait of Salai" (?)
undated



Leonardo
"Young Bacchus"
undated



Jaume Huguet
"The Archangel
St. Michael"
1456



Domenico Ghirlandaio
"Madonna in Glory with
Saints" (Michael)
1490 - 96



Perugino
"Tobias with the Angel
Raphael"
1500 - 1505



Luca Signorelli
"The Trinity, the Virgin
& Two Saints" (Michael)
1510



Luca Signorelli
"The Trinity, the Virgin
& Two Saints" (Gabriel)
1510



Donatello
"David"
c. 1440



Verrocchio
"David"
1475



Sandro Botticelli
"Portrait of a young Man"
c. 1477



Sandro Botticelli
"Portrait of a Youth"
c. 1482 - 1483



Pinturicchio
"Portrait of a Boy"
1482 - 1485



Giovanni Bellini
"Madonna with Child and
St. Peter & St. Sebastian"
c. 1487



Domenico Ghirlandaio
"Adoration of the Magi"
1488



Perugino
"Portrait of a Youth"
1495



Luca Signorelli
"Resurrection of the Flesh"
1499 - 1502



Raffaello
"Portrait of Pietro Bembo"
c. 1504

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