Gestures in Renaissance Art Depictions and Their Psychological Importance for the Subjects-Taking *The Last Supper* As An Example

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Abstract. This investigation looks into the gestures and psychology behind Renaissance painting. By looking at the gestures, postures and facial expressions of painted figures in *The Last Supper*, the author will strive to cast a glimpse into the psychological activities of the characters which in turn will reveal the messages that the painter intended to convey. The author extrapolates psychological theories onto the artwork by Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Last Supper*. The method for investigation will mainly focus on the case study and literature review, through which the author will look into other people's studies on the subjects of the painting, the use and depiction of gestures during the Renaissance period and other periods. The result of the investigation is that behavioral psychology could be traced back to the Renaissance and the gestures used in artworks such as *The Last Supper* convey a multi-layers of meanings. For example, Jesus' tranquility fits into both the dynamic narration of the biblical story and the static rendition (painting) of it. Psychology is indeed something both explanatory and the basis for delivering certain messages in painting as evidenced in the artwork of interest.

Keywords: Gestures, Behavior Psychology, Renaissance painting, Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Last Supper*.

1. Introduction

Psychology has a long history of development but it was classified as a formal discipline only recently. Indeed, behavioral psychology and psychoanalysis are constantly present in literature and in art throughout their respective histories. It is indeed the case that art, literature and psychology can be analyzed and seen through each other's lenses. This way of cross-disciplinary examination opens up new perspectives on painting and art history. In the process of which the mentality, as well as motivations of the painters and the authors, will be revealed. Painting is a universal symbolic activity of (wo)men, and the science of painting involves mastery over sign usage [1]. The gesture is a second perspective, a psychic perspective and a psycho-physiological perspective [2]. As Leonardo Da Vinci has said himself: "The art of gesture, which having formed as mute eloquence, or in other words a garrulous silence."

This study of *The Last Supper* that people are about to embark on reading is doing exactly this. The main subject of the study is Leonardo Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*, but the author will cover more than that. The theories and the practical experience of psychology will be channeled in as the author herself is a licensed counsellor. She will bridge the close reading of Leonardo Da Vinci's work with holistic psychological theories, so that readers will have an intertwined and deeper understanding of both disciplines.

The method for investigation will be a case study. There are 13 characters in the painting *The Last Supper*. The author will go through most of their gestures and body postures as examples to illustrate the use of gestures in Renaissance painting and the messages that they convey. The author will strive to parse out the meaning behind the gestures of the figures in the painting and explore their significance under the lights of behavioral psychology and psychoanalysis. Through this analysis, the author aims to bridge art history with psychology and create a synergy between them that will lead to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of both.

2. Introduction of The Last Supper

The mural that marked the height of Renaissance artistic achievements, *The Last Supper*, by Leonardo Da Vinci is truly a spectacle. The secco painting technique led to the painting's rapid encroachment [3]. Even though it has lost a large percentage of its content, people can nevertheless have a glimpse of its former glory through what is left of it.

The theme of the painting is that of religion. *The Last Supper* depicts the last scene of Jesus Christ's life, the moment before he is betrayed by one of his disciples, Judas. Apart from Judas, the other 12 apostles are also present, they are Bartholomew, James, Less, Andrew, Peter, John, Thomas, James, Philip, Jude Thaddeus, Matthew and Simon. In the painting, they are either surprised by Jesus' announcement that he is about to be betrayed by one of his disciples, or confused and looking for answers from their peers. Their facial expressions are that of anger, horrified or shock. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, remains tranquil and seems to be able to openly accept his fate. The purpose of expressive gestures is to arouse a reaction in the audience, and they are a reference for people both familiar and not familiar with the painting. Gestures are codified from daily life [2].

3. Gesture in Art

Renaissance means "rebirth". It is going back to classical antiquity for inspiration and for knowledge. Using gestures in art as a means of communication in itself demonstrates the core spirit of the Renaissance for two reasons. First, gestures, such as the index finger pointing right up to heaven are a common sighting in classical painting and sculpture, and movements and gestures can oftentimes reflect the psychology of the objects of the art. Such detailed depictions of figures are not common in Middle Ages artworks. The second reason being is the attention paid to the human side of the figure. One prominent feature of Renaissance artwork is that they value realistic depictions of nature and (wo)men above everything else. Depicting gestures mark the general attitude of this artistic period: Focusing on (wo)man's body and mentality. Their earthy lives and spiritual aspirations both matter. Gestures in art indeed originate from natural human expressions and movements [4]. They have gone through the process of visualization and acquired and meaning in the process.

The psychology behind the gestures is the subject of debate for decades among scholars. Darwinian point of view is that gestures are not a good representation of a person's inner thoughts because gestures, unlike facial movements, can be manipulated. The pushback for this point of view is that Darwinian psychology was an evolutionist in nature. Even though gestures can be manipulated or historically conditioned even, it is an inseparable part of human communication and it is universal, transcending time and culture [4].

3.1. Body Language in the Painting and Analysis

Body language in painting deserves attention since artistic expression is a form of communication. Art is just like dreams in the sense that they are both pathways to artists' subconscious. In some cases, they can even reflect the collective subconsciousness of a culture. Gestures represent the first step in the study of emotions [5]. It is true that trying to extrapolate the modern psychoanalytical framework onto Leonardo Da Vinci's works runs the risk of anachronism. It is nevertheless a worthy undertaking because body languages and facial expressions are largely universal. One can often find cases in which people from different cultural and historical backgrounds are able to empathize with one another through these common grounds of human universals. In art, if a viewer knows the subject he will be appreciative of gestures depicted in art; if not he can resort to gestures to understand [2]. It is also not uncommon for people to resort to body language when they are in a culture whose language they are not familiar with.

The body language presented in *The Last Supper* has individualized features unique to each figure, but at the same time, there are traceable qualities shared by groups in the figure formation. To be more specific, the figures in *The Last Supper* can be grouped in four, from left to right: Group 1 – Bartholomew, James, son of Alphaeus, and Andrew; Group 2 – Judas Iscariot, Peter, and John Jesus;

Group 3- Thomas, James the Greater, and Philip; Group 4 – Matthew, Jude Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot [6]. The grouping is based on the formation of the painting, where characters in the same group are pulled together.

The subject of the painting is one chapter in scripture, where Jesus pronounced that one of his disciples will betray him: "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." This announcement provokes anger, fear and confusion among his apostles [6]. The groups that are closest to Jesus experience the percussion of his words with the strongest intensity, while the outer group appeared to be a little bit more composed comparatively. Leonardo Da Vinci chose to focus on a very human aspect of the evening, which was experimental and exploratory [6]. The reaction, gestures and body postures consist of the center of the visual narrative, which is unprecedented. The previous depictions of the subject are mostly rigid with Judas sitting across on the other side of the table, singling him out as the traitor and leaving no room for imagination or deduction [3].

3.2. Jesus Christ

In the painting, Jesus Christ lays both of his hands on the table, with his right palm facing downward and his left hand facing upward [7]. His hands are what some scholars called "palm epistemic", meaning the palm faces upward and moves the hands apart, showing epistemic meaning [8]. The left hand of Christ indicates a sacramental message and his arm is directed toward the wineglass. His arms stretch out and form a triangular shape, he centers on his apostles and offers them communion [9]. Hands on the table often times suggest frankness and amicableness in behavioral psychology. Da Vinci depicts Jesus this way conveying at least two messages: the first being that Jesus views death as something to be welcome, because through his death he will purge the sins of mankind. It is his duty to come down to earth. He is the perfect lamb to be sacrificed for the sake of humans and he has no attachments to what he possesses. This welcoming attitude towards his fate is embodied in his gestures.

Christ the arms and body form a triangular shape which isolates him pictorially and psychologically from the near apostles [3]. He is at the center, he is at peace and looks almost resigned spiritually, removed from actions around him. The author believes the reason that Jesus is tranquil is that he fully accepts his fate and he has a divine mission that he knows too well, no to mention that the message he announced is familiar to him and so he is not surprised. The very reason that Leonardo Da Vinci chose this very moment of confusion and agitation of the evening is that he is trying to take the divine beings down from the pedestal. He wanted to assign them with human qualities. Christ indeed is in everyone's soul and he is our role model to emulate.

3.3. Judas

In the painting, Judas is depicted as having visible sinisterness. This does not only refer to him holding a purse and having his hand on the bread, but also refers to his turned face and backwardly leaned body. This conveys the message that Judas has secrets to hide and he is being defensive of himself. In behavioral psychology, arms or objects like cushions, for example, are what people tend to put in front of their bodies as protection when they are lying or feeling uneasy. In the construction of the character Judas, Da Vinci created ample personal space for him, a way suggesting that Judas is in fact the traitor.

In the painting, Judas is two seats away from Christ with a plate between them [7]. Christ's right hand must target either the Judas dish or the wine. This detail is often interpreted as a sign that Judas is the traitor. The author believes that they have sufficient reason to name it so, but here the author would like to raise another possibility. That is, Jesus does not despise the moral degradation in men, on the contrary, he empathizes with it. The author came to this conclusion from the fact that Jesus is willing to share the same dish with the person who betrays him.

3.4. Peter

Peter in this painting is holding a dagger. He is actually the only person in the entire construction that holds a weapon. This of course corresponds with the biblical story of him attacking the party that arrests Jesus. But on the other hand, the dagger in psychoanalysis is a classic phallic symbol. Here the author is merely proposing a hypothesis as to why Da Vinci would depict Peter in this way, apart from trying to play along with the biblical story.

Renaissance is all about going back to classical antiquity and draws inspiration from humanism from there. Theology is reinterpreted and redefined under this particular historical context, and therefore it is beneficial if people extrapolate the system of psychoanalysis here. After all, both psychology and Renaissance are manifestations of humanism, since they put the human at the center of the stage and see human lives as matter and deserve investigation.

The dagger has one important purpose in the painting. First, it accentuates individualism of Peter. Even though he is only an apostle, he has full agency. Jesus no doubt is the father figure in the scene, but Peter is the one holding the weapon, the phallic symbol. In this sense, Da Vinci is closing the ranks between Jesus and his disciples. They are leaders and followers but also equals as human beings.

3.5. Thomas

Thomas in point upward in the painting. It is worth mentioning that pointing upward is very iconographical for Da Vinci. It is used in more than one of his artistic creations, and this gesture is a topic that has been widely discussed by art historical scholars. From a behavior psychology point of view, pointing upward may indicate surprise. It can also mean one being declarative and indicative. In the context of *The Last Supper* Thomas is clearly surprised by Jesus' words, but unlike Peter, he is calm and trying to figure out who is the one that will betray them, judging from his gesture. This simple gesture is also telling of Thomas' character: He tends to use his wits when facing danger, for he is invoking the logical and analytical faculties of his mind.

Pointing upward in some cases indicates referencing things heavenly [10]. This is plausible in paintings like *The School of Athens* for this explanation fits well into the narrative. In *The Last Supper* it stretches rather a bit thin. In this moment of shock and horror, Thomas has no obvious reasons to engage in philosophical discussions with Jesus.

3.6. Andrew

Andrew has both of his hands open in front of his chest. This is a sign of surprise and defense. It is also useful to keep in mind that hands moved to the site of the heart means a response to emotions that quickens or slows its rhythm [4]. He might try to convey that he is not a traitor, which is an obvious association. It is very interesting that compared to Andrew, Judas appears to be more composed. People can discern the personality here: Judas is shameless and unapologetic while Andrew is sinless and susceptible to the surroundings.

3.7. James Major

James Major's arms and torso also form a triangular shape. Just like Jesus, the difference is that they are facing different directions: Jesus is facing the beholder while James Major is facing Jesus. From behavior psychology, when someone opens his(her) arms to another person, that means this person is very open and has nothing to hide. They are being genuine. The author fully accepts the possibility rose by the Darwinian school that gestures can be affected [4]. But she does hold that it is not applicable here. Thomas and Philip are behind James Major and his open-arm gestures protect them from the immediate shock wave sends by Jesus' announcement.

This arrangement is not accidental. James Major contrasts starkly with John who is pushed away from Jesus by shock. James Major's first reaction is to show Jesus that he is loyal to him with his open arms, meaning that he has nothing to hide, and at the same time he tries to protect his fellow apostles. At the moment of confusion, fear and agitation, James Major does not forget to be kind, giving, caring and serving, just the values Jesus and Christianity promote.

3.8. James Minor, Bartholomew and Matthew

Bartholomew has both of his hands press on the table and with his body leaned forward. Body leaning forward in behavior psychology means that the subject is attentive and non-defensive.

James Minor, Bartholomew and Matthew are in the same group. Their heads are close together, as if discussing about the disturbing news. The depiction of James Minor is minimal, people can only see that his head is turned to Jesus as the other two apostles in his group.

3.9. John

John is pushed away from Jesus and has his hand on the table, fingers folded and linked together. Putting the gesture under the context of the painting, John could be interpreted as anxious. This is because when people feel anxious, people tend to massage their peripheral limbs such as their hands since the blood is sent back to their torso to maintain the heartbeat and the function of other major organs. John's character could be glimpsed into here. He is afraid of the news brought by Jesus, which is why he is pushed away. The news made him uncomfortable physically to say the least. He is also anxious and overwhelmed about the entire situation that he does not react in the ways that would consciously pronounce his innocence.

3.10. Philip

Philip's both hands are placed in front of his chest, which might indicate that his heart is racing fast. His fingers are also pointing towards himself which is a way of indication. He might be saying that he is innocent with his handing indicating himself.

It is worth mentioning that the color composition of Philip is that of reverse from Jesus. This color composition could be intentional since Philip could not wear the exact same color as Jesus both from a theological and from an aesthetic point of view. But he has the divine in himself, just like every one of us and this is an inner attribute reflected outwardly.

4. Conclusion

Gestures in art are a topic for continuous discussion and investigation. By looking at the gestures of Renaissance painting, people can have a dialogue with the figures in art and with the artists alike. Visual art is a form of philosophy during the Renaissance time because it is a form of creation. Artists emulate God in the sense that they also create even though their creations are imperfect unlike that of God.

Combing psychology with visual art from a relatively distant past and from the different socio-historical backgrounds is in itself a form of humanism, because it acknowledges the universality of human kindness. It is true that humans are creations of society and people are influenced by the collective unconsciousness and ideology of the society. Indeed, some gestures are culturally driven, but others are universal human expressions. In e future studies, the author will look further into the association between gestures, culture and psychology. She will examine more paintings from Renaissance artists and decode their artwork from a psychological point of view.

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