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The Last Supper

EVERYONE knows about Leonardo da Vinci's masterpieces, *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*. Many people would have seen the former masterpiece in Paris' world-famous museum, *The Louvre*, but not that many would have had the chance to see the latter, which is housed in the refectory adjacent to the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Italy. Why does the latter piece receive fewer spectators than the former? For one mere principal reason – it is not as easily accessible as compared to the former piece.

When my wife and I were in Milan, we boarded a metro to the nearest station and thence walked to the Basilica, hoping to have a good look at the painting where its replications could be found in every corner of the globe. But alas, to my great disappointment, visits to the refectory were limited to 25 persons each time and each group of visitors were only allowed for a 15-minute visit in the refectory, and all the slots for that day had been taken. Obviously, I had not done my homework well, or else I would have gone on-line back home when I was still in the process of planning the trip, to buy two tickets for our intended visit. In summer, the peak travel season in Europe, one has to book the admission tickets at least one month in advance.

Fortunately, all was not lost. When we were in Mantua on the following day, I had had access to the internet, and to my delight, I found that some tickets were still available for one of the early morning slots two days later. I immediately bought two tickets for that slot at €8 each. Fortunately, Mantua is only about 1 hour and 40 minutes away from Milan by train.

So there we were, at 9.15 in the morning back in Milan, we had finally made it into the refectory, standing face-to-face with the original painting of *The Last Supper*, a painting which has fascinated many spectators all over the world.

Well, the term "original" needs a little qualification here. Leonardo da Vinci, the genius artist, painted *The Last Supper* between 1495 and 1498. He, unfortunately, chose

to use oil paint instead of the more popular fresco technique with watercolours that is faster-drying and longer-lasting, which resulted in the beginning of its disintegration just 5 years later. In the 19th century, Napoleon's soldiers used the wall with the painting on it for target practice. Following that, in 1943, an Allied bomb destroyed the building. But amazingly, the only wall surviving the explosion was the wall where *The Last Supper* was mounted on. Having withstood all those tests of time, the painting finally underwent a 20-year (1978 – 1998) restoration programme based on contemporary descriptions and copies which have made possible for its re-establishment to its original colours.

In the refectory, *The Last Supper* occupied one end wall, and on the other end wall was another masterpiece, *Crucifixion* by Giovanni Donato da Montorfano. Yet, nothing else in the hall was worth the attention of the visitors as compared to *The Last Supper*. Most people just glued their sight on *The Last Supper* throughout the 15 minutes. Photography was strictly prohibited in the refectory. A young European girl was caught stealing a shot of the great painting, and she was immediately reprimanded by the lady officer who had also demanded that the photo be erased right away.

Many artists throughout the ages have depicted the last supper that Jesus Christ had with his 12 disciples, each according to his/her own imagination and interpretation. Leonardo da Vinci had chosen to capture in his painting the moment when Christ announced that one of his disciples would betray him, and this had imbued the work with an unprecedented sense of drama.

In 1980, UNESCO admitted both the Basilica and *The Last Supper* onto its list of World Heritage Sites. ■

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

