

ARTS & LETTERS

Da Vinci's Jesus

"Saving 'The Last Supper'" by Curtis Bill Pepper, in *The New York Times Magazine* (Oct. 13, 1985), 229 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

After eight years of effort by a Milanese art restorer, Leonardo Da Vinci's masterpiece, *The Last Supper*, may once again see the light of day.

Encrusted in grime and the residue left by earlier restorers, Da Vinci's vision of Jesus seated among the Twelve Apostles at his final Passover meal was, until 1977 (when the restoration began), just a shadow of its original self. Today, the 28-by-15-foot mural mounted on a wall inside Santa Maria Delle Grazie (an old Dominican cloister in Milan, Italy) is on its way to recovery. This spring, Pinin Brambilla Barcilon hopes to finish cleaning the now nearly obliterated face of Jesus.

Overshadowing this project, observes Pepper, a former *New York Times* reporter and Renaissance scholar, is the fear that nothing remains of Jesus' original face. Beneath the paint and glue of previously botched touch-ups, Brambilla Barcilon may find only a blank. Over the years, pollution, humidity, and even moisture from the cloister's 200,000 annual visitors have taken their toll on the mural. During World War II, a bomb nearly shattered the wall, which was already perilously thin and weak from centuries of seasonal expansion and contraction.

But Brambilla Barcilon continues undaunted. Gently flaking off old varnish and mold from the painting with a scalpel, she daily restores an area the size of a postage stamp. Even with the aid of infrared cameras and ultrasound machines, she still has five years of labor ahead.

"The uncovering of the 'new' face is expected to mark the most drastic change in a religious image in the history of art, and perhaps to shed new light on the meaning Leonardo intended for the painting," says Pepper. For nearly five centuries, artists and theologians have pondered the meaning of Da Vinci's image. Was Leonardo depicting the moment when Jesus said, "One of you shall betray me" (Matthew 26:21)? Or had that instant passed—leaving Jesus about to begin the Eucharist, the basis for the Christian rite of communion?

The answer, says Pepper, depends on Jesus' expression: If he looks resigned and transcendent, or if he is speaking, many scholars will assume that the Eucharist had begun. Otherwise, they will presume betrayal, the leading interpretation since the turn of the 16th century.

Finnomania

"The Crowded Raft: *Huckleberry Finn* and Its Critics" by J. C. Furnas, in *The American Scholar* (Autumn 1985), Phi Beta Kappa, 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Last spring, *Huckleberry Finn* had its 100th birthday. Since its American debut in 1885, Mark Twain's tale of the teen-age lad and the escaped slave Jim, rafting down the Mississippi River, has spawned a cottage industry of literary criticism.

Furnas, a novelist and Finn-critic himself, contends that worship of Twain's novel has gotten out of hand. Prone to humorless, overzealous