

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

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symbol seeking, many "Finnophiles" not only "misrepresent" but "obscure" the virtues of the book, which Furnas prefers to call "an unruly, lopsided, half-inadvertent joy."

After Waldo Frank in *Our America* (1919) deemed Huck "the American epic hero," the grand-comparisons poured forth. Finn rose to near mythic heights. Critic Kenneth Rexroth even proclaimed that Twain *must* "have had Homer constantly in mind" while writing *Huckleberry Finn*, likening Huck to the Greek hero Odysseus. Moreover, observes Furnas, Old Man River became "the world's first 2,348-mile cliché." Lionel Trilling referred to Twain's Mississippi as "a strong brown god"; novelist Norman Mailer called the Muddy Waters "a manifest presence, a demiurge to support the man and the boy, a deity to betray them, feed them, all but drown them." Furnas prefers critic DeLancey Ferguson's more humble evaluation: Twain "simply took a clever and uninhibited boy and let the whole world of the Mississippi happen to him."

Furnas sees the unrestrained accolades as groundless, and finds some appalling critical errors. For example, he takes Mailer to task for asserting that the name of Huck's sidekick is "not Jim but Nigger Jim." Nowhere in the text, Furnas maintains, does Twain use the word "Nigger" as a title. Yet, he adds, "that 'Nigger Jim' distortion is curiously common in the accumulated literature—used by, among others, [Ernest] Hemingway, Ralph Ellison, Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler. It typifies in miniature the liberties so often taken with the book."

To would-be analysts, Furnas recalls the author's own cautionary words of advice. In a foreword to the first edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain warned that "persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot."

OTHER NATIONS

A Red Manila?

"The New Khmer Rouge" by Ross H. Munro, in *Commentary* (Dec. 1985), 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

On the outskirts of Manila these days, Communist insurgency is no longer a minor nuisance inflicted by a handful of lackluster guerrillas. It is a real—and growing—threat on which Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, and Washington, had best keep a watchful eye.

So says Munro, New Delhi bureau chief of Time-Life News Service. In 1974, he notes, members of the New People's Army (NPA) and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) numbered no more than 3,000. Today an estimated 30,000 Party members and 20,000 guerrillas are seeking to transform the country into a People's Democratic Republic. Founded in 1968 by José Maria Sison, a poet and Maoist ideologue,