

Women at the Table

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The presence of women at the Lord's Table is not a given. In the visual arts, in the exegesis of the scripture, and the practice of the church, the eucharistic feast has often been a place of tradition rather than transformation.

This article will discuss the visual evolution of the image of the Table and the changing historical view. The symbol of the number 12, intended to be a liberating symbol, will be traced as a number which fell captive to exegetical convention. As theologian Nelle Morton stated, images are absorbed; concepts are learned. For images to be changed, they must be shattered.¹ The image of twelve men at the Last Supper is imprinted in the ecclesiastical subconscious and is unbreakable until shattered. Although seminary training and subsequent learning have altered and expanded our concepts of the Lord's Supper in more inclusive ways, the image of twelve men still lurks and extends itself in subtle forms. Throughout history, women have been excluded from this scene not only in the visual arts but in administering the Eucharist. This article explores artistic portrayals of the Table of Jesus Christ and the import of the number twelve as a biblical visual, both of which have implications for preaching.

The story of the Lord's Supper is recounted in all four Gospels, which emphasizes its importance as a seminal event in the history of Christian faith. Both the institution of the sacrament and the announcement of the impending betrayal took place at this gathering. Throughout the history of the church, the image of the Lord's Supper has been painted on hundreds of refectory walls of monasteries and convents, providing a sacramental theme for daily meditations. This image also appears on tombs, on illuminated pages of manuscripts, in mosaics, in architectural carving, and in stained glass windows. These artistic renditions have become visual sermons in stone, tempera, and oil and may have influenced the sermons that have been preached.

Through the centuries, the visual retelling of the story has undergone significant changes in content and style that reflect the cultural climate as well as the liturgical practices of the changing times. Reviewing these changes in the depiction of the Lord's Supper is instructive for our understanding of many historical attitudes, including those concerning the role of women in the church and society in general. This overview also brings up a number of inevitable questions. Who was invited to the actual supper, how many participants were involved, and what role, if any, did women play? How artists have depicted this event throughout the centuries has had tremendous impact on an understanding and application of the gospel event.

Painted scenes of the Last Supper, appearing first on catacombs, generally depict the scene of the first Communion as opposed to the moment of the announcement of the betrayal, emphasized in later periods. One of the earliest representations of the Eucharist is found on the walls of the Catacomb of Callixtus, dated in the first half of the third century CE. The painting shows a grouping of seven participants seated in

a semi-prone position around a c-shaped, or sigma table. Though positive identification is impossible due to the current condition of the painting, it is thought by scholars of early Christian art that the figure seated to the left is Christ. Positioned to his left are six of the apostles. The placement of Christ to the left of a varying number of men remained consistent until medieval representations placed him seated at a table, not reclining as before, and occupying a central position with six men flanking him on either side. Artists of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries decorated the walls of refectories and churches with such an iconographic scheme, the image of twelve men seated with Christ in the center. This image has provided the standard formula in the visual depiction of this event to this day.

When we think of the Lord's Supper, we envision not the images from the scripture, or even the early painted and sculpted versions, but the visual element housed in Milan, that of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. This fresco has become assimilated into our cultural as well as our ecclesiastical subconscious. The work was painted for the refectory of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan between 1492 and 1495. The painting is historically important because it heralded the beginning of the High Renaissance in Italy and because it has programmed the subconscious intellect of the Western world for the last 500 years. It has been as such a constant visual sermon in tempera.

The assimilation of this popular image, reproduced in books and periodicals, on posters, advertisements and even velvet wall hangings, has changed the transformational intent of the scriptural accounts of the Lord's Supper. These biblical passages are now rigidly perceived as a scene of thirteen men seated opposite the viewer behind a long, rectangular table covered in a white cloth. They appear almost as if they were pinned to the refectory wall to be seen as specimens for study. The figures are held separate from the viewer by the presence of the table. Christ sits in the absolute center of the composition; the nail hole used to draw the orthogonals of the composition is still apparent in the center of Christ's forehead. We know this placement of Christ and the twelve apostles does not match the historical accuracy of dining in the Roman world during the time of Christ or the sketchy details of the scriptural accounts of the event and yet Leonardo's image has set our visual paradigm for depictions of the Last Supper.

Leonardo grouped the other figures on either side of Christ into four units of three, thereby underscoring the power of the number twelve. Christ specifically called for twelve, so that number is invested with profound implications. In numerological terms, twelve is divisible by three and four. Three is the number of the Trinity and four is the number of the elements. Therefore, the number twelve mystically fuses earthly matter with spiritual relevance to create the foundation of the church.

The number twelve (12) has been a captivating symbol in the church. It has also held the church captive when it has been confined to its literal and concrete usage only. The number twelve is often a *symbol* and as such has narrative use, reflective use, and hortative use.² While the narrative use is concrete, the reflective leads to theological understanding and the hortative to futuristic or eschatological significance. A look at Luke 8 will reveal these three usages of the symbol twelve and its catalyzing power as a numeral of completion in a cosmic sense.³ The number twelve is used only five times in conjunction with women in both the Old and New Testaments. Two of the five instances occur in Luke 8, the expansive chapter in which Jesus claims that his

family is more extensive than his mother and brothers who were standing on the periphery of the crowd.

The number twelve is used twice in the Old Testament: the Levite's concubine is cut into twelve pieces and sent to the tribes and twelve months were used for feminine beautification in the book of Esther. In the New Testament, other than the two instances in Luke, the person clothed by the sun in Revelation has a crown with twelve stars. "My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). This chapter opens with the acknowledgment that the twelve were with Jesus as well as many women, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna.⁴ The weight of the symbolic value of the number twelve becomes apparent as the "twelve" sons were prefigured by the twelve patriarchs.⁵ After a parable is told in Luke 8, the mention of the disciples is made in clear distinction to the twelve.

The number twelve occurs again in Luke 8 in connection with the woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years, making her doubly despised - first as a female, then as a person defiled by an issue of blood. This double minority is healed by Jesus and called "daughter" (Luke 8:48). Followed by this instance, Jairus's only daughter, who is twelve years old, is raised from the dead by Jesus: "Child arise" (Luke 8: 54). Again, the ministry has included a double minority, this time not only female, but a child. While the number 12 may be literal and concrete, its *reflective* use is to lead to theological rumination on the completeness of Jesus' ministry in a cosmic sense. The *hortative* use achieved by ethical reflection points the reader to an eschatological sense of Jesus' family. Thus, the number twelve is used in the biblical text as if it were a wide-angle lens to broaden the reader's understanding of the radicality of Jesus.

The art historical conventions controlling the depiction of the subject of the Last Supper underwent drastic revision during the period of the Counter-Reformation. Jacopo Robusti, known as Tintoretto, offered a very different view of the event in his rendition of the *Last Supper* painted for the Chancel of S. Giorgio Maggiore in Venice between 1592 and 1594. He enlivened and dramatized the event in accordance with the dictates of the Councils of Trent, which strongly encouraged artists to paint images that would appeal to the questioning masses and draw them back into the church. Thus the paintings from this period were much more emotionally charged in direct contrast to the static, calm visions by earlier artists.

Tintoretto revised the standard formula of thirteen men seated facing the viewer on the far side of a long table which is placed parallel to the picture plane. Instead, he situated the table at an angle, creating a dynamic, asymmetrical composition. The table separates the painting into areas that represent heavenly concerns on the upper left of the canvas and all earthly elements of the theme to the lower right quadrant. The emphasis has again shifted to the sacramental aspect of the biblical passages. Christ stands on the far side of the table, the heavenly side, administering communion to eleven men. A figure who has been identified as Judas is placed opposite Christ, on the earthly side of the table, along with a number of servants who are clearing the debris of the holy meal. The artist increased the number of participants from the standard thirteen to twenty-two. The heads of Christ and the apostles are highlighted against the darkness of the scene by a supernatural light that resembles the penumbra of a solar eclipse. Tintoretto created a vision of mystical wonderment.

In this work the artist has included women enacting the role of servants. The appearance of women in Tintoretto's work coincides with the changing place of

women in European society in the late sixteenth century. Women were assuming a greater role in art and other spheres formerly controlled by men. As evidence of the change, we now know that Tintoretto's daughter, Maria Robusti, was an active member of his large workshop.⁶ Although her talent as a painter was recognized during her lifetime, only one work is attributed to her. It is now believed that many works attributed to her father were instead by her hand. The reputation of many female artists throughout the centuries have been overshadowed by male contemporaries and their works engulfed within the *oeuvres* of male artists as has been widely documented.⁷ In an ecclesiastical parallel, many women who have served the church have also remained unnamed and their work unrecognized.

Veronese, who also lived at the time of the Counter-Reformation, further augmented the conventional image of the Table with even more participants. His version of the *Last Supper*, painted in 1573 for the refectory of a convent in Rome, included "buffoons, drunkards, dwarfs, Germans, and similar vulgarities," as is recorded in the court documents of the Inquisitors. Veronese was tried on grounds of heresy for this work but escaped punishment by changing the title of the work to *The Feast in the House of Levi*, the theme of which was not so stringently controlled by convention. Ironically, though the work was painted for the edification of nuns and included many figures, no women were invited to this feast.

Meanwhile, the power of the symbol of the Twelve is insistent and persistent in both art and action in churches today. Ministers often utilize numbers in preaching and teaching in the narrative use only without unraveling their symbolic, expansive import. Hallways and Sunday school rooms are decorated not only with the classical portrayal of the Lord's Supper such as that of Leonardo da Vinci, but more contemporary paintings of twelve men with Jesus, such as that of Salvador Dali. Alongside enlightened expository work, what messages are given by the visual images and numbers utilized in preaching? For from the table of the twelve at the Last Supper "had come the opinion that Jesus gave the right of breaking the bread and blessing the wine to men only and had therefore intended that only men should serve him in roles of priest and ordained minister. And from that had come a church which reflected the power games of patriarchy much more than a community of those who love and follow Christ."⁸

The power games continue in spite of our raised consciousness and can only be superseded by the power of Jesus Christ who calls out to woman: "Daughter." Women come forward to the eucharistic feast not only with the quickened spirit of Jairus's daughter, but with the boldness of the healed woman. It is at the table as women eat, drink, and consecrate the elements, that the power games are broken. The Table itself can be a radical image. At this Table of transformation, ministers of the Word and Sacrament who administer Holy Communion are invited into the power of the Spirit that shatters the powers that would divide. This eucharistic feast transcends not only the symbolism of numbers, but exceeds even the artist's imagination. It is a completed table where a woman can hear Christ's voice: "Your faith has made you whole." That is, after all, the point of the number twelve, the numeral of completion.

Notes

¹ Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

² W.M.W. Roth, *Numerical Sayings in the Old Testament: A Form Critical Study*, vol. 13 of *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), 98.

³ See Annemarie Schimmel, *Numbers: An Overview*, vol. 2 of *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, (New York: MacMillan), 13-19, for an overview of the religious symbolism of numbers.

⁴ Ethelbert Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel), 253.

⁵ Note: If the twelve are prefigured by the twelve sons of Israel, it is important to acknowledge that there were actually thirteen sons although never more than twelve are named in any one of the eighteen lists. Thus, the symbolic intent of the numeral twelve is underscored.

⁶ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1991), 16.

⁷ Whitney Chadwick, "Women Artists and the Politics of Representation," *Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, and Joanna Frueh (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 169-185.

⁸ Judi Fisher and Janet Wood, ed., *A Place at the Table* (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education, 1993), 13.