

## Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie

In *The Lives of Artists*, Vasari tells that Ludovico il Moro was fascinated by Leonardo da Vinci's prodigious abilities having listened to his "marvellous reasoning." Despite his fascination, he sometimes forgot to pay up. Accordingly, in 1494, Leonardo accepted the commission offered to him by the friars of Santa Maria delle Grazie to paint a mural of the Last Supper.

The Prior complained several times to Ludovico il Moro about the leisurely pace with which, as always, Leonardo carried out his work, and was scandalized that the artist could go absent for days at a time, or spend an entire day just to add a single brushstroke. Leonardo, "knowing the prince to be acute and intelligent, was ready to discuss the matter with him, which he would not do with the prior. He reasoned about art, and showed him that men of genius may be working when they seem to be doing the least, working out inventions in their minds, and forming those perfect ideas which afterwards they express with their hands. He added that he still had two heads to do; that of Christ, which he would not seek for in the world, and which he could not hope that his imagination would be able to conceive of such beauty and celestial grace as was fit for the incarnate divinity. Besides this, that of Judas was wanting, which he was considering, not thinking himself capable of imagining a form to express the face of him who after receiving so many benefits had a soul so evil that he was resolved to betray his Lord and the creator of the world; but this second he was looking for, and if he could find no better there was always the head of this importunate and foolish prior." Ludovico, amused, agreed with him, and warned the prior of the risk he ran if he continued to importune Leonardo.

The convent that is permanent host to *The Last Supper*, one of Leonardo da Vinci's greatest works, was founded by a company of Dominican friars from Pavia. By the end of 1490, the convent, the great Cloister of the Dead, and the church of San Domenico, soon rededicated to the Virgin Mary of the Graces, had already been built. The architect, Guiniforte Solari, was a follower of the Lombard Gothic style. But Ludovico il Moro had set his sights higher, and wanted to compete in pomp with Lorenzo the Magnificent and the Popes. So, with the church having now been completed, he ordered the demolition of the chancel and commissioned Bramante to design a new one for use also as a Sforza mausoleum.

When Ludovico's very young wife died on 3 January 1497 after giving birth, he had her buried in the new chancel of the church and commissioned Giovanni della Porta and Cristoforo Solari to build an ornate tomb for himself and her.

Political events would prevent Ludovico il Moro from following through on his ambitious project. The imposing tomb was dismantled and the slab is now preserved in the Certosa di Pavia. The rich decorations that make the dome one of the greatest masterpieces of the Lombard Renaissance are after a design by Amadeo.

In April 1500, Ludovico il Moro, was definitively defeated by Louis XII of France, taken prisoner and condemned to exile; he died in a castle in the Loire Valley in 1508.

Numerous vicissitudes and misadventures notwithstanding, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* has come down to us, surviving even the bombs that shattered a large part of the building and church that housed it. Even now it remains one of the greatest and most revolutionary masterpieces of all time.

**Piazza di Santa Maria delle Grazie**

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