

THE UNVEILED MYSTIQUE: DAN HOWARD'S REVOLUTIONARY INTERPRETATION OF THE LAST SUPPER

by Barb Duncanson, First Lutheran Member

When the eye takes in Dan Howard's dark, swirling painting of the Last Supper, the first element the viewer may see are the familiar components of holy communion – the loaf and the chalice – the only elements in the composition executed representationally and in color. Their prominence is intentional, Howard says, as is his abstract, monochromatic treatment of the figures of Christ and the 12 disciples.

“It was my intention that you can't recognize the figures. I don't want you to,” he said. “But I did include the two sacraments of the Eucharist, the only elements in color, the loaf of bread and the cup of wine.”

Howard, a practicing artist and a member of First Lutheran since 2002, discussed the painting, his influences, his medium and his method of working in a presentation to the Adult Forum on January 30, 2022. Howard and his wife, Barbara, donated the painting to the church during the renovation in 2020, and it hangs prominently in the church Commons.

There, the elements of the Eucharist – surrounded by the dark apostolic figures of loyalty and betrayal – are not only a symbol of Christ's mercy and forgiveness, but also may, for some, evoke the spirit of welcome and inclusiveness central to First Lutheran's renovation project.

The painting is one of a series of works by Howard over the years in which, as a mental and creative exercise, he takes an artwork from the past and gives it a contemporary appearance. Howard's treatment of the Last Supper is grounded in Leonard da Vinci's painting of the same event, which is in the refectory of the monastery Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Italy. The original is approximately 30 feet wide by 15 feet high; Howard's is a third of the size at 10 feet by 4 feet.



Leonardo's Original Painting of the Last Supper

Leonardo worked on his version for approximately three years, from 1495-1498, while Howard painted his in January 2013 in about a week. He painted it so quickly because, as he always does, he did a series of preliminary sketches or studies to determine what he wanted for the actual painting. The final sketch for his Last Supper painting is in the Lead Pastor's office at First Lutheran. It is done in graphite ("a fancy name for pencil") and encapsulates what he intended to do with the painting. The actual painting he describes as "a good deal more liberal and personal" than the sketch, saying, "That's how I intended to treat the subject."



Dan Howard's Painting of the Last Supper

Like Leonardo's original work, Howard's painting includes four groups of three apostles each with the Christ figure and the elements of the Eucharist in the center. Left to right are Batholomew, James the Younger and Andrew, then Judas (the dark figure in Leonardo's painting), Peter and John next to Christ. On the other side are Thomas, James the Elder and Philip, then finally Matthew, Thaddeus and Simon the Zealot. The triangular figure of Christ appears in front of a window, the contiguity forming a perfect rectangle.

It is there the similarities end. Leonardo experimented (not successfully, as it turned out) in his painting with egg tempura and oil on wet plaster, while Howard's painting is done in oil on canvas, the medium to which he has consistently turned to over his 60-year career. Leonardo's figures are representational and recognizable, while Howard's are sweeping monochromatic brush strokes,

meant to convey the sadness and solemnity of the event, and, through contrast, to introduce the elements of the Eucharist.

Interestingly, Leonardo's work almost didn't survive until today. His experiment in the medium he chose did not turn out well, and the picture began disintegrating during his lifetime. He began restoring it himself, also unsuccessfully, before he turned it over to restorers. Later it was almost destroyed during World War II when an allied group tried to bomb a munitions factory a few feet from the refectory where the painting hangs. The impact shattered the wall on which the painting was done, and the painting broke into tiny fragments. It was a four-year process after the war ended to reassemble the fragments and place them back on the wall.

Every decision in Howard's is worked out in advance through the preliminary sketching process. He describes himself as "primarily a draftsman" who learned to be an artist not through painting, but through his pencil. "Drawing is what motivates and mobilizes me into what I do as an artist."

In the Last Supper painting, for example, the decision to move from more compact figures on the left to a looser presentation on the right was made in the sketching stage, as was the variation in the thickness with which the paint was applied to show the versatility of the medium. Also intentional was the transition from more representational figures on the left to more cubistic on the right, a nod to the influence of Picasso and Cezanne.

Even the green color of the chalice is intentional, Howard suggested, "Green speaks to springtime, rebirth, new growth and has something to do with the death and resurrection of Christ," he said.

If the viewer does not care for Howard's work, he is all right with that. "I don't paint for critics. I don't paint for the audience. I paint for myself. If I'm happy with it, I don't care if you are or not. It's a selfish profession." But his work has obviously touched many connoisseurs throughout the U.S. and abroad. The recipient of over 100 prizes, awards and honors, he has been described by The Omaha World-Herald as Nebraska's most highly decorated artist, and his work has been acquired by more than 600 public, corporate and private art collections.

Howard was born and raised in Iowa City, Iowa, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees from the University of Iowa. His first teaching and administrative positions were at Arkansas State and Kansas State universities. In 1974, he joined the University of Nebraska at Lincoln as chairman of the Art and Art History Department, retiring in 1996.

Today, at age 90, Howard is still a producing artist, working in the studio built for him by the University of Nebraska and modeling his disciplined approach to creating art for students and faculty. He acknowledges, however, that the creative process is unique for each artist. He said, "It is not something that you can initially describe; it is something that evolves over time. I have been a

practicing artist for over 60 years. I am still working. As Picasso once said, 'There is no such thing as a retired artist. You're either practicing or you're dead.' I very much subscribe to that."

(You can view Dan Howard's presentation on his Last Supper painting, delivered during the January 2022 Adult Forum, at <https://vimeo.com/673189382>.)