Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper

Storytelling and enjoyment in new ways

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The project

The year 2019 marks the 500th anniversary of the death of Leonardo da Vinci, a man of genius and universal talent who lived during the Renaissance period and fully embodied the spirit of his era. This is the reason why ETT S.p.A. (International Creative and Digital Industry) created the new mobile App dedicated to an undisputed masterpiece, Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper, for the Polo Museale Regionale della Lombardia (Museums of the Lombardy Region). This mobile App has been designed to increase engagement with various types of audience, through the use of innovative edutainment tools such as augmented reality. Increasing information levels are offered, revealing curiosities and anecdotes on the origin of the painting and its characters. The application is a visit support tool providing information directly to smartphones during every stage of the experience: before, during and after. With this instrument, visitors can really discover the secrets hidden in the Last Supper, one of humanity’s undisputed masterpieces.

The history of the last supper and the app routes

In 1494, Ludovico il Moro commissioned Leonardo to decorate the refectory of the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, a Sforza family religious place. Traditional decorations were chosen for two walls, epitomising the Crucifixion and the Last Supper. Donato Montorfano worked on the Crucifixion, using a traditional setting. On the opposite wall, Leonardo began work on the Last Supper. The artist did not like the fresco technique, as the speed of execution was incompatible with his modus operandi. Colours had to be applied before the plaster dried and fixed them, but Leonardo had continuous second thoughts and was always making additions and small changes. He chose, therefore, to paint on the wall as though it were a tablet, first putting down a rather rough layer of plaster. This experimental technique proved to be unsuitable for the room’s humidity and, for this reason, the painting was in a poor state of conservation for centuries. It was restored, as much as possible, during one of the longest renovations in history, lasting from 1978 to 1999 and employing the most advanced techniques in the sector.

The Last Supper mobile App consists of a series of structured routes, diversified depending on various types of target, as described below:

Perspective and compositional choices

During the latest restoration, a hole was found in Jesus’s temple. This links to the nail used by Leonardo as a vanishing point for lines of perspective (Fig.1). Thanks to augmented reality, we can visually retrace the way the artist set perspective and compositional choices. The lines of perspective converge at the point where the hole was found, revealing how the head of Jesus is the fulcrum of the entire composition. Visitors can, therefore, understand how Leonardo used this illusion to make real architecture coincide with a painted one.

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Restorations and tormented conservation

Augmented reality takes visitors through the conservation history of the work over the centuries. Images appear gradually and are attenuated, giving a sort of Last Supper chronicle in pictures (Fig. 2).

Leonardo’s studies for the Last Supper

The multimedia application shows the preparations for the Last Supper in an interactive way. Starting from the high-resolution image of the painting, touch-screen scrolling enables the user to discover the preparatory drawings of the fresco.

The great iconographic innovation

An audio track recites the famous Gospel passage in which Jesus announces his betrayal, with an explanation of the meaning of some of the details, e.g. Judas’s money bag and Peter’s knife. A gallery with
some pictures relating to other famous fifteenth-century last suppers helps us understand the innovative advance of Leonardo's work.

Leonardo's operational technique and the conservation problems

The audio/video track explains the fresco process, emphasizing the differences from the experimental technique used by Leonardo and revealing the reasons behind its precarious state of conservation. As well as the normal visit routes, the App also includes a route for visitors with accessibility issues and another one for families with children. Automatically activated by a beacon located near a tactile model of the Last Supper, an audio track supplies a narrative for the visually impaired, increasing inclusion.

The route for families with children is of a more playful kind, with gaming to stimulate their curiosity and imagination, such as the one with which a work of art may be created by choosing the technique (fresco, tempera or oil painting) and the colours to be used. Another game leads to the discovery of the colours of the Last Supper, starting from a black and white version of the painting.

Designed in this way, the application is a versatile tool involving various types of the general public. Information is made available also before and after the visit. Routes are diversified, taking into account different user targets and people with accessibility issues, and the multi-language content helps international visitors. Information-gathering profiles collect visitor feedback and strengthen the use of social networks as a sharing and promotional tool.

By using this tool, visitors will be able to discover curiosities and the anecdotes that lie behind one of the most vexing masterpieces in the history of art, which is included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Bibliography

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