

Brought Before the Inquisition, 1573

It was the summer of 1573 and Venetian painter Paolo Veronese was in trouble. Earlier in the year, Veronese had been commissioned to paint a depiction of the Last Supper for a convent in the city of Venice. The result was an extravagant rendering measuring fifteen feet in height and thirty-six feet in width. In addition to Christ and his disciples at dinner, the scene included jesters, dogs, cats, and Germans while excluding the presence of Mary Magdalene. The liberties that the artist took in interpreting an occasion fundamental to Christian faith triggered the displeasure of the city's Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition. Charged with the task of maintaining the orthodoxy of the Church, the Tribunal summoned Paolo to appear before it on July 18 in order to explain his actions and to answer the charge of heresy.



Self Portrait
This is believed to be an image of Paolo Veronese that he placed in an earlier painting

As he stood before his accusers, Paolo was acutely aware that he had to be careful in his response to their questions. His career and possibly his life were in jeopardy. The opening questions centered on the artist's placing of a dog at the Last Supper instead of the usual depiction of Mary Magdalene. Paolo's defense throughout his ordeal was that he was an artist and therefore included images at the periphery of his scene based on their visual and artistic contribution to his work and not on religious orthodoxy. At the conclusion of his interrogation, the Tribunal ordered the artist to change the elements of his painting that it found offensive.

Chastised, Veronese nonetheless balked at the order to repaint the elements of his work deemed offensive. The artist sensed that the fundamental criticism of the Inquisition was that his painting trivialized a critical event in the New Testament. His solution was to change the title of his painting from *The Last Supper* to *The Feast in the House of Levi* without making any of the specific changes he had been ordered to make. He was apparently successful for he was not bothered again.

"Do you know the reasons why you have been called here?"

The original transcript of Paolo's interrogation provides insight into the working of the Inquisition. We join Paolo as his interrogation begins:

"This day, the eighteenth July, 1573. Called to the Holy Office before the Sacred Tribunal, Paolo Galliari Veronese, residing in the parish of S. Samuel, and being asked his name and surname, replied as above.

Being asked as to his profession:

Answer: I paint and make figures.

Question: Do you know the reasons why you have been called here?

Answer: No.

Q. Can you imagine what these reasons may be?

A. I can well imagine

Q. Say what you think about them.

A. I fancy that it concerns what was said to me by the reverend fathers, or rather by the prior of the monastery of San Giovanni e Paolo, whose name I did not know, but who informed me, that he had been here, and that your Most illustrious Lordships had ordered him to cause to be placed in the picture a Magdalen instead of the dog; and I answered him that very readily I would do all that was needful for my reputation and for the advantage of the picture; but that I did not understand what this figure of the Magdalen could be doing here.



The Feast in the House of Levi

Click image to enlarge and view some of
of what the artist was ordered to remove

Q. What picture is that which you have named?

A. It is the picture representing the last supper that Jesus took with his disciples in the house of Simon.

Q. In this supper of Our Lord, have you painted any attendants?

A. Yes, my lord

Q. Say how many attendants and what each is doing.

A. First, the master of the house, Simon; besides, I have placed below him a server, who I have supposed to have come for his own amusement to see the arrangement of the table. There are besides several others, which as there are so many figures in the picture, I do not recollect.

Q. What is the meaning of the men dressed in the German fashion each with a halberd in his hand?

A. It is now necessary I should say a few words.

Q. Say on.

A. We painters use the same license that is permitted to poets and jesters. I have placed these two halberdiers, one of them eating, the other drinking, by the staircase, but both ready to perform any duty that may be required of them: it seemed to me quite fitting that the master of such a house, who was as rich and as great as I have been told, should have such attendants.

Q. And the one who is dressed like a buffoon with a parrot on his wrist - why did you introduce *him* into the canvas?

A. For ornament, as is usually done.

Q. Who are the people at the table of Our Lord?

A. The twelve Apostles.

Q. What is St. Peter doing, who is the first?

A. He is carving a lamb to send to the other end of the table.

Q. What is the one doing who comes next?

A. He is holding a plate to see what St. Peter will give him?

Q. What is he doing who is next to this last?

A. He is picking his teeth with a fork.

Q. Who do you really think were present at this supper?

A. I believe Christ and his Apostles were present; but in the foreground of the picture I have placed figures as ornaments, of my own invention.

Q. Were you commissioned to paint Germans and buffoons and such like figures in this picture?

A. No, my lord: but I was commissioned to ornament the picture as I thought best, which, being large, to my mind requires many figures. . .

Q. Does it not appear to you that. . . you have [not] done right in painting the picture in this manner, and that it can [not] be proved right and decent?

A. illustrious lord, I do not defend it; but I thought I was doing right.

The judges pronounced that the aforesaid Paolo should be obliged to correct the picture within three months from the date of the reprimand according to the judgments and the decision of the said Sacred Court, and altogether at the expense of the said Paolo.