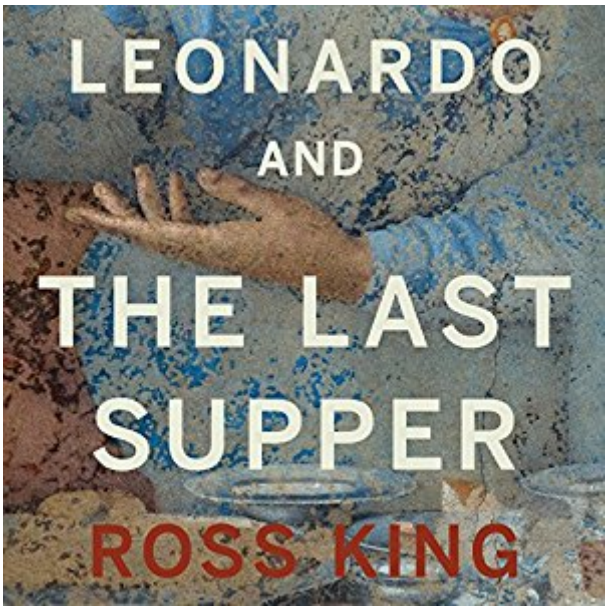
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Leonardo And The Last Supper



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Synopsis

Early in 1495, Leonardo da Vinci began work in Milan on what would become one of history's most influential and beloved works of art - The Last Supper. After a dozen years at the court of Lodovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan, Leonardo was at a low point personally and professionally: at 43, in an era when he had almost reached the average life expectancy, he had failed, despite a number of prestigious commissions, to complete anything that truly fulfilled his astonishing promise. His latest failure was a giant bronze horse to honor Sforza's father: His 75 tons of bronze had been expropriated to be turned into cannons to help repel a French invasion of Italy. The commission to paint The Last Supper in the refectory of a Dominican convent was a small compensation, and his odds of completing it were not promising: Not only had he never worked on a painting of such a large size - 15' high x 30' wide - but he had no experience in the extremely difficult medium of fresco. In his compelling new book, Ross King explores how - amid war and the political and religious turmoil around him, and beset by his own insecurities and frustrations - Leonardo created the masterpiece that would forever define him. King unveils dozens of stories that are embedded in the painting. Examining who served as the models for the Apostles, he makes a unique claim: that Leonardo modeled two of them on himself. Reviewing Leonardo's religious beliefs, King paints a much more complex picture than the received wisdom that he was a heretic. The food that Leonardo, a famous vegetarian, placed on the table reveals as much as do the numerous hand gestures of those at Christ's banquet. As King explains, many of the myths that have grown up around The Last Supper are wrong, but its true story is ever more interesting. Bringing to life a fascinating period in European history, Ross King presents an original portrait of one of the world's greatest geniuses through the lens of his most famous work.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition
Listening Length: 11 hoursÃ Â andÃ Â 18 minutes
Program Type: Audiobook
Version: Unabridged
Publisher: Audible Studios for Bloomsbury
Audible.com Release Date: October 22, 2014
Whispersync for Voice: Ready
Language: English
ASIN: B00OS73YRC

Best Sellers Rank: #114 inÃ Â Books > Audible Audiobooks > Arts & Entertainment > Art #2900 inÃ Â Books > Arts & Photography > Individual Artists #3504 inÃ Â Books > Audible Audiobooks > History

Customer Reviews

I read in another review somewhere that there are no new facts in this book, and yet my sense after reading it is that its author has made all sorts of facts about Leonardo new again. I've read a pile of books on Leonardo and I probably did know most of this story, but King has a novelist's ability to fill in those details around an event in a way that makes it come alive. He also has a very wise nose with which he follows the story exactly where the reader wishes it to go. Questions raised in the back of your own mind somehow are always addressed. King has a real sense of what the reader wants to know and how things must've felt and smelled and looked like in the 15th century. Everyone knows, for instance, that later in life Leonardo had a long beard, but I did not know how rare a long beard was at the time. I did not know that two years after the `discovery' of America Leonardo was buying corn to eat. Most especially I did not know that there was another artist in the room with him while he painted the Last Supper, another artist painting a crucifixion on the opposite wall across from him at the same time. It never occurred to me that there might've been someone standing there saying, "You sure you want to do it like that? It might peel."I found this whole narrative fresh and smart and very well told. King telescopes an entire life into those few years Leonardo was painting the Last Supper. This is that rare biography that brings a giant like Leonardo down to human size, and yet you come away seeing this weird toothless old man as one of the great individuals of modern history. Highly recommended. Buy two.

No one is better than Ross King in creating fascinating and beautifully detailed histories of artistic genius. In Leonardo and the Last Supper King has surpassed even his earlier "Brunelleschi's Dome" and "Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling", presenting us with a wonderful history of one of the great Leonardo da Vinci's best known works and a detailed biography of the artist and his turbulent time period.While Leonardo was without doubt one of the towering geniuses of all time, he was also one of the most easily distractable and dilatory. He simply boiled over with enormous numbers of ideas which he either never had time to complete, never even got started on, or never could convince anyone with sufficient resources to back him on. Another major problem with Leonardo was that he wasn't satisfied to do anything the way everybody else did. He always had to try new techniques and new materials, which sometimes worked out splendidly but more often

disappointed.Leonardo painted The Last Supper as one of the many projects assigned him by the great Ludovico Sforza, charismatic military leader and ruler of Milan, including what would have been a majestic equestrian statue. Unfortunately Sforza was heavily embroiled in the endless turmoil of Italian politics, which led to two separate French invasions and massive conflict. Eventually Sforza was overthrown and imprisoned, but not before Leonardo had created the marvelous painting of The Last Supper on the refectory wall of a monastery.I found King's descriptions of the painstaking work that went into the creation of The Last Supper and his analysis of so many aspects of the painting, such as the meanings behind the positions of the various Apostles' hands, fascinating. I was just as interested in the ins and outs of Italian politics and their effects on Leonardo's work, which King ably describes as well. Most of all I enjoyed the story of Leonardo's life and King's amusing descriptions of the endless numbers of projects and ideas that he kept embarking on, then forgetting about or getting sidetracked onto something else. The Epilogue, in which King details the history of the deterioration and horrible "restorations" of The Last Supper that ultimately did far more harm than good, was also interesting.While Leonardo da Vinci was a fascinating person to be around, he must have been one of the most infuriating as well. Even though at times you'll feel like yelling at Leonardo to "FOCUS!!!," you'll be sorry to come to the end of this able chronicle of this great artist and his world.

Most everybody knows Leonardo da Vinci and most know his painting, "The Last Supper." But as educated a man as I am, I didn't realize how little I really knew ABOUT Leonardo or how little I knew ABOUT "The Last Supper."For instance, while Leonardo was clearly a genius, he also fit the image of the eccentric. He had a hard time completing projects (hence, the relatively small portfolio of Leonardo artworks we have). His true interest wasn't even in art, but in engineering. He was always offering his services to erect bridges, buildings, and military weaponry, but no one was interested. He also was smitten by a young man he brought as an valet/aide into his household whose sticky fingers victimized everyone with whom he came into contact (including Leonardo), but Leonardo had no problem forgiving the great multitude of his sins.As for "The Last Supper," it was considered such a revelation as to have issued in the High Renaissance. This, despite the fact that it was a fresco, and Leonardo had never been schooled in fresco-painting. Ross King details why The Last Supper was a turning-point in art history, and now I understand why. I also learned to look at the painting in a new way, noticing things I had never paid attention to before. (Are those really eels on the table?)One criticism: Ross King may know his art, but he's not well-versed in his biblical scholarship. King spends some time giving the biblical context of the The Last Supper, and he pulls

some real boners (not significant, but nonetheless jarring to a reader like myself who IS schooled in biblical study). For example, King maintains that the earliest gospel in the New Testament in Matthew, when scholarly consensus has long been that it is actually Mark. As for the Mark to whom that gospel is attributed, King notes that he was probably an early disciple who deserted Jesus when Jesus uttered his "hard sayings" recorded in John. I have no idea from whence King drew that theory, as it was a completely new one to me.I'm of course assuming that everything King says about Leonardo and The Last Supper bears no similar inaccuracies, and if so, this was a great book.

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