

PRELUDE

AUGUST 16, 1943

Padre Acerbi, a veteran of the Great War, passed another humid night in a Milan air-raid shelter with his Dominican brothers. He hoped the terrifying events of previous evenings would not be repeated. It was Sunday, August 15, 1943. That day he and his fellow citizens had held celebrations for the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, *Ferragosto*, one of Italy's most important national holidays. But the festivities had been muted. Acerbi prayed for a halt in the attacks, even if just for a few hours. The weary citizens of Milan needed sleep; so did his fellow monks.

At half past midnight, as the full moon began emerging from a partial lunar eclipse, the dreaded but familiar drone of the air-raid sirens began again. Previous raids had already caused hundreds of thousands of Milanese to evacuate. Twenty minutes after the sounding of sirens, they heard the airplanes overhead, then the muffled thunder of the first bombs. The ground tremored beneath them, louder and more violent as the initial wave of Royal Air Force Lancasters approached the city center. Flashes in the distance made the luminescent sky even brighter.

Fires charged the air with an acrid odor. A single four-thousand-pound bomb detonated near Acerbi's shelter with a deafening explosion.

Several nights earlier, bombs hit the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie and its Refectory.* Surprisingly, none had damaged the jewel of Milan, the dining companion of the Dominican friars: Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. It had been a centuries-old tradition that the friars would share their meals in front of the north wall on which Leonardo had painted the twelve apostles preparing to eat theirs. But as dawn emerged, Padre Acerbi could see that the explosion had suspended that tradition, perhaps forever.

Leonardo took a contemplative and deliberate approach to the painting of *The Last Supper*. Matteo Bandello, a young monk who later became a famous writer of novellas, observed Leonardo "go early in the morning to work on the platform before *The Last Supper*; and there he would stay from sunrise till darkness, never laying down the brush, but continuing to paint without eating or drinking. Then three or four days would pass without his touching the work, yet each day he would spend several hours examining it and criticising the figures to himself."

Upon its completion in 1498, viewers were astonished. The standard depiction of the subject, from the catacomb paintings in the fifth and sixth century through more recent works by Taddeo Gaddi (c. 1350), Andrea del Castagno (c. 1447), Domenico Ghirlandaio (c. 1480), and Pietro Perugino (c. 1493) had emphasized the story of the Eucharist. These and other artists typically placed the twelve apostles at the dining table as Christ prepared the offering of consecrated bread and wine. The setting of each work depicted figures that were static, void of emotion. Judas often had been placed alone, across the table from Jesus and his followers.

But Leonardo, a keen observer of nature with a physician's under-

*A February 14, 1943, air raid caused minor damage to the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie and the vault of the Refectory. Another raid during the night of August 13–14, 1943, resulted in damage to the church but not to the Refectory.

standing of the human body, broke with tradition by fusing the ceremony of the Eucharist with the dramatic moment when Christ announced to those gathered: “Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.” Having once noted, “the movement of men are as varied as are the emotions which pass through their minds,” Leonardo thus portrayed the reaction of each apostle to this shocking news. Philip sorrowfully places his hands on his chest in a plea of innocence. James the Greater gestures wildly with indignation. Bartholomew, with his eyes fixed on Christ, leans forward with his weight on the end of the table, while the shadowy figure of Judas, having knocked over the salt, recoils defensively, clutching a small bag, perhaps of silver. The master’s use of color, and the lifelike appearances of the apostles, engaged the viewer as a participant in Leonardo’s dramatic storytelling. Now it appeared the painting might never be seen again.

The bomb had slammed into the center of the Cloister of the Dead, a small, grassy courtyard east of the Refectory and north of the church. The blast had obliterated a covered walkway through which the friars, garbed in white habits and sandals, passed each day. Had Padre Acerbi not relocated his fellow Dominicans from their refuge in the convent basement to a shelter outside the church walls several days earlier, they, too, would have perished.* The only clues that the long arcades ever existed were the stumps of wood that once supported the graceful arches and frescoed plaster leading to the main church buildings.

The explosion reduced the east wall of the Refectory to rubble, bringing the roof down with it. The wooden A-frame girders crushed the thin plaster vault of the Refectory ceiling like a hammer hitting an egg. In 1940, local art officials concerned about this very possibility had installed sandbags, pine scaffolding, and metal bracing on both sides of the north wall. Only this precaution had prevented Leonardo’s masterpiece from

*The anti-aircraft shelter used by the Dominicans can still be found today on Via Caradosso, across the street from Santa Maria delle Grazie and identified by two painted arrows on either side of “U.S.,” meaning “*Uscita di Sicurezza*” or “Emergency Exit.”

collapsing. While no one could immediately confirm the condition of *The Last Supper*, Padre Acerbi considered it miraculous that the painting might have survived a bomb that exploded some eighty feet away.

Leonardo painted *The Last Supper* using an experimental technique. Rather than applying pigment to wet plaster in the traditional manner of fresco painting, the master painted on a dry wall, hoping to achieve a more complex palette. This approach also complemented Leonardo's slow, meditative style of work. It took him about three years to complete the painting. When finished, it measured some fifteen feet in height by twenty-nine feet across, almost the entire width of the Refectory. But Leonardo's experiment failed; in less than two decades, the painted surface showed deterioration. By 1726, well-intended restorers had begun the first in a continuous series of documented and undocumented interventions. Too often, such efforts had less to do with reattaching Leonardo's work to the perpetually damp north wall than the restorer's desire to attach his work—and name—to the historic image. As one art expert in Milan observed, "There is no work in the entire world that has been more venerated by the public and [yet] offended by the scholars." The bomb blast of August 16, 1943, was only the most recent and certainly the most drastic offense.

The humidity of the north wall had always concerned caretakers. Now the sudden exposure to the elements created new risks. The loss of the east wall and roof dissipated the delicate microclimate inside the Refectory, and Milan's summer heat increased the moisture in the wall, causing portions of the painted surface to swell and then lift. The bomb blast had also dislodged sandbags, tossing some of them against the painted surface. A summer rainstorm could easily wash away whole sections of the work. A severely damaged low-rise building attached to the back side of the Refectory threatened to collapse. Just the vibration, much less a direct hit, from another Allied bombing mission might be enough to cause the north wall to crumble. Even if the north wall survived further damage or movement, Leonardo's signal work faced great peril.

ITALY HAS LONG been identified by its cultural treasures; Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* is but one. Its ancient cities—Rome, Syracuse, and Pompeii; jewel-box towns—Venice, San Gimignano, and Urbino; places of worship—St. Peter's Basilica, Florence's Duomo (Santa Maria del Fiore), and Padua's Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel; and iconic monuments—the Colosseum, Leaning Tower, and Ponte Vecchio, have been so studied and admired through literature, verse, and image that they have become the shared heritage of all mankind.

As events in Milan demonstrated, World War II and the new technology of aerial bombardment—in particular, incendiary weapons—posed history's most lethal threat to that heritage. When the Allies landed in Sicily on the night of July 9–10, 1943, another threat emerged: ground warfare. The Germans were determined to concede not an inch of Italian soil. How many more monuments, churches, libraries, and immovable works of art lay in the path of war? Even then, as the bombing of *The Last Supper* illustrated, the Western Allies were not immune from mistakes in judgment and execution.

War is many things, but above all, it is messy. Rarely does it unfold as planned. Prime Minister Winston Churchill once observed: "Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter." Ethical dilemmas arise. Loyalties are tested, but loyalties to whom? Country, cause, or self? The effort to protect Italy's cultural treasures during war lived up to Churchill's admonition. Few wartime voyages provide such a strange and fascinating story.

During World War II, the task of saving Italy's artistic and cultural treasures fell to a diverse and often surprising cast of characters, including army commanders, Italian cultural officials, leaders of the Catholic Church, German diplomats and art historians, Nazi SS officers, OSS operatives, and partisans. Motives ran the gamut. Not everyone behaved as expected—far from it.

But there was also a little-known group of American and British

men—museum directors, curators, artists, archivists, educators, librarians, and architects—who volunteered to save Europe’s rich patrimony. They became known as “Monuments Men.” This middle-aged group of scholar-soldiers faced a seemingly impossible task: minimize damage to Europe’s single greatest concentration of art, architecture, and history from the ravages of a world war; effect repairs when possible; and locate and return stolen works of art to their rightful owners. Their mission constituted an experiment dreamed up by men who at the time occupied offices far away from war. Nothing like this had ever been tried on such a large scale.

At the core of the group were two men whose destinies became intertwined not just with the fate of a nation but also with the survival of civilization’s cultural heritage. Deane Keller, a patriotic forty-two-year-old artist and teacher with a wife and three-year-old son, seemed to be everywhere and nowhere, constantly on the move from town to town. Fred Hartt, an impetuous but brilliantly gifted twenty-nine-year-old art historian, became so deeply entrenched in the cultural heartbeat of Florence that saving the city’s art became his personal quest, the mission of a lifetime. Thrust together by the democracy of military service, they struggled to survive war, its destructiveness, and, at times, each other.