



## A jester at the last supper? How Veronese became his era's Ai Weiwei

Called before the Inquisition to justify his jokey take on Christ's final meal, the great Italian painter was defiant. And thanks to a transcript, we have his pugnacious defence word for word

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Veronese was one of the greatest painters ever, as the National Gallery's exhibition of this 16th-century artist makes joyously apparent - see my five-star review [here](#). But he was also a hero of artistic freedom. Veronese was the Ai Weiwei of his time, a brave man who stood up to authority - and won.

Xavier Salomon, the curator of the National Gallery's superb exhibition, told the BBC that Veronese had a dull life dedicated to work. Well, up to a point. But what about the dramatic and well-documented episode when he was hauled up before the Inquisition and accused of disrespect for Christianity?

Veronese developed a unique line in large-scale - in fact, preposterously huge - and lavishly

detailed altar paintings of biblical scenes in which Christ sits down to a meal. It does not seem to matter to Veronese which meal he is portraying. What he loves is the opportunity to show a diverse crowd of diners, waiters and entertainers enjoying a banquet. In reality he is portraying the high life of Venice, the city where he lived. In his epic and comic masterpiece The Wedding Feast at Cana in the Louvre, a host of finely dressed men and women eat, drink and flirt while Veronese portrays himself and Titian as musicians entertaining this glittering company.

An entertainer - that's how Veronese saw himself. Definitely not a preacher. But is it alright to turn religion into entertainment? The Inquisition, the Catholic bureau of investigation charged with suppressing heresy, did not think so. It summoned Veronese to appear on 18 July 1573 to answer some awkward questions. The hearing is perfectly preserved in a word-for-word official transcript: my translations come from Elizabeth Gilmore Holt's reproduction of it in her 1947 book A Documentary History of Art.

Typically, the inquisitor started by asking Veronese why he thought he had been summoned. He claimed he had no idea.

"Can you imagine it?" asked the inquisitor.

"I can well imagine."

A priest, Veronese said, had asked him to replace a dog in his new painting of the last supper with a Magdalene. He refused.

This painting, he explained, was about 17 ft tall and 39 ft wide. So were there other figures in this huge scene, asked the Inquisitor? Veronese described some of them, but it soon became clear the Inquisitor had studied the picture in detail and already knew exactly what details offended him - asking, for example, "What is the significance of the man whose nose is bleeding?"

"I intended to represent a man whose nose was bleeding because of some accident."

You can see why the Church was uneasy. A nosebleed at the Last Supper? That's not in any Gospel.

It got worse.

"And that man dressed as a buffoon with a parrot on his wrist - for what purpose did you paint him?"

Veronese replied that he put the jester in this tragic valedictory supper with Christ "for ornament".

Even one of the supposedly grief-stricken disciples, he admitted, "has a toothpick and cleans his teeth".

Veronese was explicitly accused of profanity. He replied with two defences. For one thing, he pointed out, the great Michelangelo had filled the Sistine chapel with "nudes". And anyway, all

artists deserve complete freedom:

"We painters take the same licence the poets and the jesters take ..."

He went home and merely changed the title of his controversial painting. By calling it *The Feast in the House of Levi* instead of *The Last Supper* he sidestepped the Inquisition in the most contemptuous way possible. He did not change the actual picture.

And he got away with it. Why? Because he was in Venice. This proudly independent republic always resisted the power of the pope. If Rome could rule Venetian minds it might also rule Venetian politics. Venice was a "libertine" city of free thought and free love and Veronese was its perfect artist.

Veronese's painting *The Feast in the House of Levi* can be seen today in the Accademia Galleries in Venice. It is full of jokes, gaudy jesters, drinkers and fashionable people - oh, and Christ is there too, somewhere in the carnival crowd.

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