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The Gestures of Judas Iscariot in “The Last Supper” Icons from 15th – 18th Century’s in Ukrainian Art

Andriy Lesiv

Young Research Fellow, Department of Art Criticism, Ethnology Institute of NAS, Ukraine

Abstract:

In this article review of the most common gestures of Judas Iscariot in “The Last Supper” icons in Ukrainian art is presented. The period 15th – 18th centuries is considered. The main author’s conclusions are as follows. The gesture in the iconography of Judas Iscariot promotes expression of the main content and substance the idea of the composition. Some of the Judas’ gestures based on the narratives of Scripture, other gestures have symbolic value and are not described in the Gospels. Quite common gestures of Judas in the iconography of “the Last Supper” are pointing gestures. A common symbol that often accompanies the image of Judas in the iconography of the “Last Supper” is a knife – as a symbol of Judas betrayal of Jesus. Gestures of Judas also closely related to his main attribute – pouch of coins. It can be attached to a Judas belt, or Judas holds a pouch in his hand.

Keywords: *Gesture, Judas, Iscariot, the last supper, icon, Ukrainian art, knife*

1. Introduction

Gestures were an important instrument of nonverbal communication in the canonical iconography. The presence of gestures in icons was not accidental and had a profound symbolic meaning. As the face, hands and feet of the saints express the divine presence in figures depicted in the icon, as gesture in icon express emotions of the characters. Particularly, it was used to represent semantic bounds among the image characters.

The origins of gestures in iconography lay in the early Christian sacred art. In the background of Christian iconography is an ancient culture. Early Christian art borrowed some gestures from ancient oratorical tradition: Greek and Roman orators accompanied their speeches with a special set of gestures. Marcus Fabius Quintilianus in the "Institutio Oratoria" describes the set of gestures of hand and fingers, which then were partially used in the Christian iconography. These basic principles of nonverbal rhetoric and gestures of hand and fingers are reflected in Christian iconography, for example – in the iconography of the Savior, the images of saints and martyrs, in the "The Annunciation" and so on.

The meaning of gesture had special importance in the Medieval period in Europe. This made a special context for the interpretation of gestures, particularly in the iconography of "The Last Supper" story. According to monastic statutes, in the monasteries of the Western Europe in the Middle Ages, the Holy Bible was reading during the meal. None of the participants could talk or make noise so as not to disturb others hearing a lecturer. Most monastic laws relied on the doctrine of St. Benedict – Catholic father of monasticism. He said, that everyone should keep most silent in the dining hall, no voice, nor even a whisper should be heard. If necessary, everyone at the dining table should communicate by signs, not words. Medieval monastic manuscripts *Signa Loquendi* certify that the monks had developed a whole system of gestures to communicate at the table in meal time.

Judas Iscariot’s gestures are very important for the study of its image in Ukrainian 15th – 18th century sacral art. Gesturing additionally, reflect emotions and psychology of the image. In the figure of Judas Iscariot hand gestures, facial expressions and body posture are distinctive. In this paper I will try to determine the most characteristic gestures of Judas Iscariot’s image in Ukrainian 15th – 18th century sacral art.

2. Judas Reaches to the Bowl on the Table

One of the most characteristic Iscariot’s gestures in the eastern iconography of the Last Supper. It is associated with the description of the Last Supper in Gospels. It tells about a moment when by dipping a piece of bread into a bowl and passing it to Judas, Jesus showed that a traitor is among the apostles. Then Judas dipped the piece of bread into a bowl on the table with his hand and ate it. This Judas’s gesture of reaching hand into a bowl became canonical in the Byzantine for “the Last Supper” iconography. On the numerous art scenes of “the Last Supper” in Eastern and Southern Europe the figure of Judas is clearly distinguished due to his gesture of reaching the vessel on the table. Often Judas strongly leans over the table reaching the vessel, which is in front of Jesus. This gesture of Judas is

very common in the Last Supper in a monumental and in easel Ukrainian paintings, for example, murals in Lublin Castle Chapel, the church in Posada Rybotycka, numerous icons and graphics

3. Judas Lays His Hand Down on the Bread

A common gesture, often depicted in icons "The Last Supper" from the 17th-century. Bread at the Last Supper connects with the symbol of Eucharistic Body of Jesus. In this sense, the gesture of Judas has important semantic meaning. Judas betrayed Jesus and sacrilegiously raised his hand on Jesus' holy body, demonstrating his assault on the sanctity and even in Jesus' life.

In the 17th-century "Last Supper" icon from the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Gorajec (now – Poland) Judas is sitting in front of the table. He puts down his left hand to the loaf on the table just in front of Jesus. Judas' eyes are focused toward viewer. The "Last Supper" icon from the Church of the Holy Spirit in Potelych (1620–1640) shows Judas sitting at a table, last in the line on the left from Christ, and puts his right hand on the bread on table. Suchlike compositions are used in numbers of "the Last Supper" icons in 17th – 18th centuries.

4. Judas Hides His Hand behind His Back

A symbolic gesture in the iconography of "Last Supper", which means hiding the truth, detachment, closeness and evil intentions of Judas Iscariot. Judas is depicted hiding his hand behind his back, turning palm outwards, often keeping his main attribute – a pouch with coins. Sometimes the pouch can be attached to a belt on the back of Judas, and his empty hand is hidden behind.

This gesture was common in the image of Judas in Ukrainian iconography of the 16th – 18th centuries. In the "Last Supper" icon from Pentecost Church in Rohatyn (1650) Judas is shown with such a gesture – left hand bended in elbow and hidden behind the Apostle's back, the palm is fully opened out. The "Last Supper" icon from the village Vereshchytsia (1680) shows Judas' left hand hidden behind his back with palm opened. The "Last Supper" icon by Yov Kondzelevych (late 17th-century, private collection) portrays Judas as well – left hand hidden behind his back and palm is opened out. Another Kondzelevych's "Last Supper" – from the Maniava Hermitage Iconostasis (1698-1705, National Art Museum, Lviv, Ukraine) depicted Judas with his hand hidden behind his back, while Kondzelevych puts in Iscariot's hand a pouch of coins.

5. Judas Raises Hand with Straightened Index Finger (Pointing Gesture)

Some of the "Last Supper" icons show Judas raising his hand with his index finger pointing, straightened out. Judas points toward Jesus, or toward the chalice, which is often depicted on the table in front of Jesus or in Jesus hand.

The gesture of the index finger is very eloquent, especially in rhetoric, where it is defined as a call to action, accusation or demand of attention. While in artworks this gesture often means the will that manifests itself. The character draws the viewer's attention to a specific object, or to another character. The gesture of the index finger could be a manifestation of accusation, or asserting of power. Index finger raised up reveals the will of a higher power, or, on the contrary, it means challenge.

Pointing gesture of Judas is reflected in a number of "The Last Supper" icons, for example, in the 18th-century icon from the village Solina (the collection of the Museum of Folk Architecture, Sanok, Poland) – Judas raises his hand and points on the chalice in hands of Jesus. Another «Last Supper» icon (17th-century, private collection) shows Judas sitting in the foreground and pointing his finger over his head toward Jesus.

This gesture of Judas can be interpreted as an expression of God's will in the act of Judas' betrayal. For completion of Jesus mission on earth, Judas had to sacrifice himself and to condemn his soul for eternal torment in hell. This interpretation of described gesture can be affirmed by depiction of Judas, pointing at the chalice – a symbol of the Eucharist and the sacrificial mission of Jesus. Another words, Judas notes its passive role in betraying Jesus, being a symbolic "tool" in God's hands.

On the other hand, when Judas points directly to Jesus such a gesture can be understood from a different perspective. It can be interpreted like Judas's challenge to God and God's Providence or as an act of indicting.

6. Judas is pointing on Himself

In "The Last Supper" icons Judas sometimes is depicted pointing at himself with one hand and holding a pouch of coins in the other hand. This gesture is like a question – when Jesus told the Apostles that there is a traitor among them, Judas asks non verbally: "Is it me?" Judas' eyes are usually focused on Jesus.

The late 17th-century "Last Supper" icon from the Javornik village (Historical Museum, Sanok, Poland) depicts Jesus and the Apostles spaced evenly around the table, unlike traditional composition scheme. Judas sitting in front of table's left edge. Five Apostles are sitting, foreground and Judas is extreme left among them, pictured sideways. Judas is holding a pouch of money in his right hand and puts his left hand to his chest, as if pointing to himself. His look directed to Jesus. The "Last Supper" from Rownia village (second half of 18th-century, collection of the Historical Museum, Sanok, Poland) served similar composition scheme. Four Apostles are sitting in the foreground; Judas is sitting among them, second from the right. In his left hand Judas is holding a pouch and puts his right hand to his chest, pointing to himself. Judas' head is slightly raised and his eyes directed toward Jesus.

7. Judas Holds a Knife

The knife often accompanies the image of Judas Iscariot in the iconography of "The Last Supper". One of the first artworks in which there is a knife near Judas Iscariot is "The Last Supper" – a late 15th-century mural painting by Leonardo da Vinci in the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. At first glance, Peter holds a knife. However, the position of the hand shows that this may not be the hand of Peter. Here Leonardo painted a symbol – the hand with a knife, which actually does not belong to any of the

apostles at the table, but is shown along with Judas Iscariot and symbolizes betrayal and his hostile intentions concerning Jesus. The knife lying on the table near Judas is represented in few of "The Last Supper" engravings by Albrecht Dürer. In one of these engravings (1510) a knife is shown next to Judas and its edge is directed to Jesus. In other Dürer's "The Last Supper" engraving (1511) a knife lying next to the hand of Judas on the table, but the knife edge is directed toward Judas, pointing a traitor.

In the sculptural composition "The Last Supper" in the Chapel of the Boim family in Lviv two blades are depicted on the table in front of Judas and both knife edges are directed towards Judas' chest. It might be the symbol of Judas' double betrayal: his betrayal of Jesus to the chief priests and his second symbolic betrayal of God's Law – suicide.

In Ukrainian icons of 16th – 18th centuries Judas often depicted with a knife in his hand, or a knife lying on the table in front of Judas, knife edge usually is directed toward Jesus. In the engraving "The Last Supper" from the Piscator's Bible (Theatrum Biblicum Novi Testamenti, 1674) the symbol of knife is associated with Iscariot. Judas sits in front of the table and in his appearance expresses the complete detachment from Jesus and the Apostles. Only one knife is on the table and it is lying in front of Iscariot. A knife edge directs toward Judas, not toward Jesus. This knife is like a symbol of doubts and evil thoughts which cut Judas' heart.

On "The Last Supper" icons often knives and other cutlery are presented on the table, but they are usually depicted randomly placed. In the 17th-century icon "The Last Supper" (unknown origin, private collection) many knives and forks clearly direct edges toward Jesus. Yov Kondzelevych in his icon "The Last Supper" from The Maniava Hermitage Iconostasis (1698-1705, National Art Museum, Lviv, Ukraine) puts a knife in the right hand of Iscariot, who sits in the foreground on the extreme left place from Jesus. A knife lies on a flat plate and Judas keeps it by the handle. And his left hand is hidden behind his back, holding a pouch of coins. The "Last Supper" icon by Yov Kondzelevych (late 17th-century, private collection) depicts a knife also, but in this composition it lies on the table in front of Judas, directs its edge toward Jesus. Judas holds in the right hand a pouch of coins and left hand hides behind his back, with an opened palm outward. A similar position of Judas and the knife on the table in front of him is depicted in the 18th-century icon «The Last Supper» from the collection National Art Museum named after Andrei Shepticki in Lviv, Ukraine.

Gestures of Judas Iscariot described in this paper are not complete, marked only the most common ones. This paper is a first attempt to systematize the study of the Judas Iscariot's gestures in the iconography of the "Last Supper" in 15th – 18th century Ukrainian art.

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