

# Turning the table

Tavares Strachan's arresting sculpture *The First Supper* greets visitors to the RA's exhibition 'Entangled Pasts'. The artist reveals to Aruna D'Souza how Leonardo's famous mural inspired its celebration of Black historical figures





Five years ago, Tavares Strachan made a drawing on a napkin based on an image that had been part of his life since he was five years old: Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. A reproduction of this work – one of the most recognisable in the history of Western art, a symbol of European culture itself in many ways – has hung for decades in his grandmother's dining room in the Bahamas, presiding over the raucous family dinners that have taken place there.

His fascination with Leonardo's iconic mural was precisely the disconnect between its cultural import and the simplicity of what it actually represents. '*The Last Supper* – it's just folks eating,' says the artist, **who divides his time between New York and Nassau**. 'And every culture in the world has people eating around a table. The colonial project would have us think that that image and that activity is owned by white folks, but it's universal.'

Strachan eventually transformed his early sketch into *The First Supper* (2023), a monumental sculpture now installed in front of the Royal Academy in the Annenberg Courtyard as part of the exhibition 'Entangled Pasts'. The site is resonant, to say the least: the Royal Academy's Collection Gallery includes an important copy of Leonardo's masterpiece painted by his pupils 20 years after the original. Strachan's nine-metre-wide sculpture repurposes the *The Last Supper*'s composition to depict an array of celebrated and lesser-known figures from history – including Zumbi dos Palmares, who led a slave resistance in 17th-century Brazil; the American abolitionist Harriet Tubman; Marsha P. Johnson, a self-identified drag queen and gay liberation activist who played a crucial role in 1969's Stonewall uprising; Derek Walcott, the Antillean winner of the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature; and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a guitarist who was a pioneer in the development of rock and roll. At the centre is Haile Selassie, the 20th-century emperor of Ethiopia **seen by some in the Rastafari movement as their messiah**. Strachan himself sits at the end of the table, slightly apart from the rest – the place normally occupied by Judas.

Strachan began the long process of realising the sculpture by gathering people in a room and photographing them **to develop the gestures for his historical figures**, he says. 'I have a deep interest in live performance, and I have been thinking of this tableau through the lens of



Previous pages:  
*The First Supper (Galaxy Black)*, 2023, by Tavares Strachan, at the RA's 'Entangled Pasts'

This page, above:  
detail from Strachan's sculpture showing, from left; Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Harriet Tubman and Shirley Chisholm

Below: a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, c.1515-20, from the RA Collection

West African soap operas. Filmmaking, performance, the collision between the static and the non-static image – these are all things that are important to me.'

'It started off with just bodies in a room and me giving them direction as to how to behave, how to move,' he explains. Using a variety of digital and analogue techniques, his photographic studies were **combined with the features of his chosen historical figures [check] and eventually cast in bronze, patinated in black or covered in gold leaf**. 'If I were making this 500 years ago, it would have taken a lifetime. But with the advent of technology, it has allowed a work like this to exist after only five years.'

In the final work, the figures' attitudes range **from calm and serene to animated in conversation**. The artist chose his characters from one of his ongoing projects, *The Encyclopedia of Invisibility*, a compilation amassed over the past 16 [check] years of hidden people, places and events. The end result has the wit of the familiar parlour game – if you could have dinner with anyone from history,



who would it be? 'You see Marcus Garvey sitting next to Shirley Chisholm [the first Black woman to be elected to the US Congress]. What would they say to each other?' Strachan laughs. 'It's a bunch of folks who might not necessarily want to break bread together.'

'I just was home for the holiday,' he continues, 'and I had people eating around the table, and some of them were quiet and meek and some of them were yelling and screaming at each other. In *The First Supper*, Robert Henry Lawrence [the first African American astronaut] is shouting across the table. I've never seen that in *The Last Supper*, but I've seen it at my grandmother's house.'

On the table is an array of plates, goblets, Italian bread, wine and other vessels that would be at home in Leonardo's original – but also bananas, cornbread, cocoa pods, custard apples, breadfruit and other items particular to the Caribbean. There is even a ship – the *SS Yarmouth*, which became the flagship of Marcus Garvey's back to Africa initiative, the Black Star Line.

In the Bahamas, as with many islands in the Caribbean, the transatlantic slave trade and, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the importation of indentured labourers from Asia, had a profound impact on culinary traditions. 'A lot of my interest in the theme was thinking about the meals I grew up with and how those meals get to be what they are,' Strachan says. 'In Bahamian cooking and Caribbean cooking, there's a lot of African and Indian influences – the curries, the sauces, open-fire cooking. I love food. I cook a lot. So I was thinking, if I was going to create a feast, what were the kinds of things that would make sense to be on that table? And what kind of stories each thing could tell, from the wild black rice, to cassava, to sugar apple to symbolic items, like the helmet of Robert Henry Lawrence or the microphone of Sister Rosetta Tharpe.'

'The prompt was to be playful with the story of how these complex dishes arrived at our dinner tables all across the diaspora,' he explains. 'There's a soup called pea soup and dough that we make in the Bahamas, and there are similar dishes in East Africa. And if you were to blindfold someone and ask them to taste both, they wouldn't be able to tell the difference. And the question is, how does something so complex and layered survive the movement of people over a 600-year period?'

The Leonardo print still hangs above his grandmother's table, but Strachan says he looks at it through many more lenses than he did as a child. 'A lot has happened since the time I was five to now: my interest in evolution, in science, in thinking about the human experience and family life, and thinking about the simplicity and elegance and complexity of a group of people sitting around a table.'

This supper is anything but ordinary, Strachan insists – rather, it's a way of looking at ourselves and each other differently. 'I think within the mundane is the human. And once you can find the mundane, you can find the human, and all of a sudden you're forced to humanise the characters that you're looking at, regardless of their histories.'

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Above: detail from Strachan's sculpture, showing King Tubby and Derek Walcott

Below: Marcus Garvey reaches out



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