



## Jesus Washing Peter's Feet

**Ford Madox Brown**

Art facts:

Artist: Ford Madox Brown

Currently, at Tate British Museum

Original size: 1168 x 1333 mm

This work is linked to John 13

Jesus got up from the table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist. He then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing.

He came to Simon Peter who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand." "Never!" said Peter; "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus replied, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said, "Well then, Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus said, "No one who has had a bath needs washing, such a person is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are." He knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said, "though not all of you are."

When he had washed their feet and put on his garments again he went back to the table. "Do you understand", he said, "what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you. In all truth I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the one who sent him." G38

Ford Madox Brown has chosen the scene of the Last Supper in which Jesus washes Peter's feet for one of his major paintings. The picture dates from 1851 to 1856, for Brown repainted several details. The scene represents the conventional white clothed table and the apostles, but Brown gave the view an unusually deep angle of view. A surprisingly old and worn-out Peter is sitting in front of Jesus. Brown has painted in Peter a portrait of William Holman Hunt, another Pre-Raphaelite painter of religious scenes. William Holman Hunt was most loyal to the Pre-Raphaelite concepts of painting. He was also the most true to religion. He had been to the Holy Land and made several pictures with a heavy moral message. Ford Madox Brown could choose no better image, nor better a figure, for his Peter.

Peter holds his hands in prayer. He is looking intently at Jesus, in abhorrence of the act. Jesus is a slender, romantic figure. He is using the towel as John recounted. The towel is knotted around Jesus' waist. Jesus is shown as a very humble, noble figure. He bends his head in abject humility. Jesus bows his head to Peter. The apostles are around the table. Remark how Brown has depicted the heads low, just above the surface of the table, caught between the upper side of the table and the border of the frame in a very unconventional view. This kind of depiction pushes the heads of the apostles down as if the skies all weigh on the figures. The composition is very unusual, original, and proves how a theme, even one so well known, is never exhausted.



The apostles are not so much astonished as sad. They are horrified at the sight of the act of Jesus. One apostle holds his head in his hands, another even bites on his hand. It seems as if the end of the world is coming. Maybe indeed the end of their world, more of their illusions, was near. Either the apostles feared the wrath of Jesus after the washing or they suddenly understood that this Jesus would not be the King of the Jews after all. Desolation is on the faces of the disciples. Yet, the next apostle, to the left of the table, unlaces his shoes.

Ford Madox Brown's picture is very unconventional in composition, in detail and in style of colours. It is a religious scene of the Victorian age, which was the period also of French Classicism, Realism and beginning Impressionism. But the Pre-Raphaelites sought the themes

of more spirituality again, like the later French Symbolists. They were drawn to the spirituality of Christianity as some of the French Romantics.

Ford Madox Brown's way of painting is somewhat rough here, in hard colours. Brown has used the splendid dark brown for Peter, dark green beneath and hard red behind Peter. But a golden cloth makes the transition to the pure white of the table. This white then introduces Jesus in lighter green.

Brown has added traditional details like a pitcher under the table and a halo around Jesus' head. A purse lies on the table next to the disciple who is unwinding his sandals, a symbol of Judas. There is much talk of Judas in John's account; Judas seems to have always been in Jesus' mind during the Last Supper. Judas also in Brown's painting is the only apostle who seems to be insensible to the general horror.

Above the table, the background is completely black and some of the faces emerge only with difficulty out of the shadows. Ford Madox Brown painted in full realism. Some of the faces are portraits. Thus, the bearded disciple just to the left of Peter's head is Dante Gabriel Rossetti, another of the very first Pre-Raphaelites. Brown's figures are ordinary people. Even but for his halo, Jesus could be an ordinary young worker.

Ford Madox Brown adhered to socialist thought. In his later years he taught at the 'Working Men's College'. He made several social paintings such as 'Work' and 'The Last of England'. The first picture, 'Work', shows workers of various professions of manual labour; the latter shows poor emigrants leaving an England of unemployment. Brown worked in towns like Liverpool and Manchester. He made murals for the Manchester City Hall. Thus, he was a witness to the misery of the peak of the industrial revolution in England. He was a witness of all the spiritual poverty that was brought along by the exploitation of workers and of the miserable conditions in which they lived. The Pre-Raphaelites tried to escape this world in Romanticism. But Brown did not escape. He did not close his eyes to the misery. He treated subjects of social realism. His 'Christ washing Peter's feet can also be seen in this perspective. The realism suits the theme. Brown has caught and shown feelings in the disciples and in Jesus as might really have happened, though in more drama than was necessary. Other interpretations to how the disciples reacted can and were given, but Brown certainly has given much thought to the Gospel scene and he must have wanted particularly to stress the sentiments of the apostles.