

Visions of the End

Faculty Guide

The exhibition *Visions of the End* features medieval artwork depicting scenes of the end of the world as described in Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation was written by John of Patmos in about 95 A.D. and was the last Book accepted into the most recognized and utilized version of the Christian Bible. The featured work showcases interpretations, predictions, and scenarios of the Apocalypse as imagined by artists and artisans of the medieval period (476–1453 A.D.), with most of the objects dating after 1000 A.D. The exhibition also features some later art, as artists and society continued to be influenced by this rich period of apocalyptic thinking. *Visions of the End* gives visitors a glimpse into the medieval European’s mindset, as well as their strange fascination with the end of the world, and considers how those fears and ideas resonate today.

Pre-Tour

To prepare for a visit to the exhibition, faculty may ask students to consider, explore, and define some key terms:

Apocalypse
Damnation
Death
Evil

Manuscript
Medieval
Mythology
Prophecy

Purgatory
Persecution
Salvation
Visionary

During your Visit

Visions of the End can be explored through one of the following overarching educational themes. Use one or more of to focus a conversation in the gallery, and/or to develop student assignments. Below you will find a brief summary of each theme, related questions to drive dialogue, and a prompt for consideration that goes beyond the exhibition.

Theme 1: Image as communication

The medieval period was ripe with literary development. Great secular tales were written into verse by scholars in Europe, and those grand stories were turned into song for troubadours and performers. Religious stories from the Christian Bible were transcribed in from Latin into Greek and Aramaic as elaborate, illuminated manuscripts. However, since the printing press had yet to be invented, books—including the Book of Revelation—were hand-crafted and therefore, held and maintained by the elite. Rates of literacy were not high—even though scholars, nobility, and other people of means participated in literary culture.

For the everyday person, information was shared through visual art, oral traditions, or performances. Religion was interpreted through sermons by ever-powerful priests, and the imagery that surrounded Church proceedings. Then, even after the printing press was invented 1440, literacy rates stayed low and the tradition of hand-created manuscripts and reliance on oral traditions persisted. Consider the artwork in *Visions of the End* through that lens.

- Very few works of the art in the exhibition were created as discrete objects and nearly all of them served specific ritual or religious roles. Where did the artwork originally reside—was it part of a building, a window, an illustrated manuscript, something else?
- Who was a particular work made for? How was it probably used? Who would have had access to seeing it?
- What message or lesson is being displayed through the imagery? Consider the literal story and the potential everyday lesson.
- How does the use of material change based on audience and the object’s original purpose?
- How was Christianity being interpreted for those who could not read or access books? How was it being interpreted for those who could? Is there a difference?

Beyond the exhibition: The powerful images of the Apocalypse captured the medieval imagination, and visions of end times continue to fascinate us today. Consider the multitude of films, TV shows, books, graphic novels, and video games that imagine a post-apocalyptic world. There are still contemporary references to the Book of Revelation, as shown in the television series, *Good Omens*. However, post-apocalyptic stories are just as likely to consider climate change (*Snowpiercer*), resource depletion (*Mad Max*), disease (*I am Legend*), other-worldly creatures (*The Walking Dead*), and political demise (*The Purge*). Why do people continue to imagine the end of the world? How are these ideas of the Apocalypse in dialogue with the medieval depictions? Think about the *causes* that changed apocalyptic visions over time: the creation of dominant world religions, nuclear threats, massive world wars, disease and famine, millennial concerns, climatic catastrophe. What do these threats tell us about the way we imagine human precarity and access to resources? What do they tell us about shared human experiences worldwide?

Theme 2: War, death, and the end

Around the year of 95 A.D., John of Patmos had his spiritual visions and wrote the Book of Revelation. His writings, in part, reflect his time—which was one of political unrest and when Christians and Jews felt persecuted. The Book of Revelation contains references to historical political issues, and then, John predicts major periods of war in the divine future that will signal the beginning of the Apocalypse. Once end times begin, John also wrote that epic violence and battles continue between good and evil until the true end and final judgement is lodged against humanity.

Hundreds of years later in the medieval period, the violent, politically-driven events written into Revelation were reflected heavily in art. War and persecution prompted dramatic illustrations. This was likely influenced by political upheaval; when Islam and Christianity were in fighting over the Iberian Peninsula, for instance, the Book of Revelation was felt to be particularly relevant in Spain. Also, the Black Plague wiped out a huge percentage of Europe's population in the fourteenth century along with periods of famine, difficult living conditions, and other forms of pestilence which seemed to parallel John's foresight about catastrophes. Even without these direct historical references, the medieval art in *Visions of the End* and the choice to portray the battles and suffering of the Apocalypse, can communicate a lot about the time in which these artists and their benefactors were living.

- How might this art reflect that political realities of life for people in the medieval time period? What class and power structures are being reinforced?
- Are their clues about the daily life of the people who may have created or viewed this art? What might be their concerns for the future? How could thoughts about the end times have influenced their current worries?
- What social or psychological agendas would focusing on the large-scale violence of the apocalypse serve?
- Many of the works you see were created at the bequest of wealthy benefactors. Consider the people who commissioned the artwork versus the audiences' responses to it. Might there have been a difference?

Beyond the exhibition: Artwork has a long history of reflecting political upheaval and social change. It can be a visual display of painful destruction, but it can also showcase times of positive societal reinvention and recreation. Consider the artwork that was created in response to the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. Artists throughout the Middle East created work reflecting the new found ability for expression provided by the protests and uprisings. Street art, especially, revealed the sentiment of the time. Consider the impact of that artwork. What does it say about the mood of the populous? How did the artists capture the politics of their day? What distinguishes work about positive social change from art showing political destruction? Are there any surprising similarities? Where else do you see contemporary politics and largescale societal change in art—visual or otherwise? What is the impact on society?

Theme 3: Art and religion

The artwork within this exhibition was created to originally reside in religious spaces or to facilitate religious reflection by individuals in their homes. The objects may have been architectural elements in churches, illustrated spiritual texts, or even materials for religious ceremonies. They were intended to assist in creating an atmosphere of reflection and piety, and in some

instances, played a role in ritual or spiritual rites. The artists and artisans who crafted the work did so on behalf of the needs and requests of patrons, many of whom belonged to religious organizations.

- In what ways did the pieces function in a religious space? What purposes did they serve? How does their meaning change when placed in a museum?
- Do you consider these objects to be items of religious observation, as works of art, or as historical artifacts? Why? Is there a space that exists where they are able to be all three?
- Some of the most impressive works you may see were a part of books that were hand written and drawn. The rarity of books before the printing press means that these objects would have only been accessible to the wealthy or to those with access to monastic manuscript repositories. What is different about the religious messaging in a book's images compared to the larger sculptural or architectural works? What is the same?
- The wood block prints by Albrecht Durer were more "mass produced" or reproductive than any other form of work in the exhibition. They could exist outside of sacred spaces as objects of personal possession. The same image could also belong to more than one person as copies were made and sold. How is the imagery he created different from the other art you have seen here? What is similar? What might have been their impact?
- Overall, what impact would the images in this exhibition have on the viewer? What is the impact on you? Does your own exposure to the Bible and Christian ideology play a role in your interpretations of the artwork?

Beyond the exhibition: John of Patmos wrote the Book of Revelation based on the visions he had while exiled on the Island of Patmos. Spiritual visions, and those who have them, are not a thing of the past. Consider the work of Howard Finster, whose art is included toward the end of the exhibition. Finster (1916–2001) was a Christian preacher and self-taught artist from Georgia whose artmaking was based off of visions that he believed were sent to him by God. How do we respond to his belief that he was a visionary? Why might that be different to how history has treated John of Patmos? Also, rather than serving as a hired artisan like most of the medieval artists did, Finster created his artwork of his own accord. How do we interpret his artwork in relation to that of the other artists in *Visions of the End*?

Theme 4: Symbols and archetypes

Many of the artworks in *Visions of the End* employ heavy symbolism to denote good or evil, or to portray a particular person or character. There are also fantastic creatures, celestial rainbows, and other-worldly portals. Haloes are around the heads of divine or holy figures. Certain people are depicted as clothed while others are nude. Some clothing is ornate while other garments are plain. Beasts have claws, teeth and multiple heads. These cues, symbols, and archetypes create a powerful visual

language that persists from artwork to artwork through many years and many artisans' hands. Some of the symbolism you see here even carries through to contemporary imagery and archetypes.

- Is there anything that surprises you about the symbols in this artwork? Is it what you expected to see?
- How do similar symbols manifest in today's society? What about their meaning has changed? What has stayed the same? Why?
- How do we use religious iconography today? Is it similar or different to the way the pieces on display were used? How have the images changed and evolved over time?
- What archetypes match contemporary interpretation? Which are different?

Beyond the exhibition: Symbolism has always played a key role in visual communication. Consider other, contemporary platforms where symbols and archetypes might be employed: politics, advertising, sports. How are the various roles communicated through color or graphics? What parallels do you see between the religious imagery of the exhibition and contemporary symbols? What persists? What emotions are those images meant to illicit? Are they effective? Consider the appearance and popularity of public figures. Where do you see taste and choices that might be inspired by the archetypes as presented by the artwork?

Big Picture

- John of Patmos' Book of Revelation was influential in the art and lives of people that lived during medieval times. Artists and artisans created images for religious architecture, manuscripts, or ceremonial garments that depicted apocalyptic themes at the behest of the religious leaders of the time. That said, John's writings were not the only source of artistic and spiritual influence in medieval Europe. Research artwork that portrays images from other source materials. What are some additional stories or texts that were heavily interpreted by medieval artists? How are they similar or different to the works based off of the Book of Revelation? Does it tell you something more about medieval society, or does it reinforce the lessons learned from this exhibition?
- Fear of end times, or even the potential desire to launch end times, has served as a tool for political manipulation or an excuse for violence since the medieval period. The Book of Revelation is credited, in part, for inspiring the Crusades as it was interpreted to unjustly imply cultural superiority. This continued perception of unfounded supremacy continues to inspire

extremism, violence, and even ethnic cleansing. What historic events can be linked to apocalyptic thinking and similar manifestations of false superiority? How has that extremism manifested in contemporary times? Where do you see language used that refers to themes within the Book of Revelation and imagery that is similar to the artwork you saw in the exhibition? How have those images been used as a political tools or excuses for inhumane behavior?

- Many of the works of art in *Visions of the End* depict the fantastic beasts and beings of the Apocalypse. Some of those beasts and symbols exist in other cultures and symbolize something else in a different context. Consider the dragon; in the Book of Revelation, the dragon is malevolent and a harbinger of destruction. However, in other cultures dragons symbolize power, strength, or benevolence. Then, in pop culture, dragons can be portrayed as companions or pets, like “Norbert” from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* or “Puff the Magic Dragon” from the children’s movie and book of the same name. How does the depiction of dragons differ in varying cultures? Where might this change in ideology have come from? What do dragons signify for us today? Why does this particular creature seem universal and persistent?
- Access to information plays heavily into the artwork displayed in this exhibition. There are divides between art made for people based on their education level, wealth, and access. Since art was made to convey messages, there is much to contemplate about how messaging was different (or the same) for different classes of people. Think about the drastic shifts in access to information and control of information in contemporary society. If a person has access to the internet—and not all people have such access—they have a flood of visual and written information at their fingertips. Overall, information seems much less mediated and is open to interpretation than at any other time in human history. However, the delineation of technological access, function of algorithmic data sharing, and media choices by individuals are creating divides in who receives what messaging. How has this change in access influenced contemporary interpretations of good and evil, revitalization and the end of society, wrong and right? Where do you see the influence of information access shaping our art and society now?
- During medieval times there was a macabre fascination with the idea of the Apocalypse and what a post-apocalyptic world may look like. This suggests that our own modern fascination with the Apocalypse is not unique to our time or our generation, but rather spans hundreds if not thousands of years of the human experience. In fact, humans have always been both fascinated and simultaneously terrified with the concept of the end of the world. Why is there a fascination with the end of times? Why do people express it through artistic means? What does the depiction of the apocalypse say about more general, everyday concerns and fears of the time in which artwork was made? Research other religious traditions. How do

those cultures depict and express the end of the world? What is similar or different from what is presented by Euro-centric belief structures?

Additional References

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