Medieval Religious Artwork

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Throughout our history on this planet, modern humans have always been social animals, so it was important to communicate information and spread it to other members of the group. This was whether it was plans for hunting and taking down prey, warning of danger like a bear or an opposing group, or spreading information across the population to instill a specific reaction, or have them rally together for a common goal. The forms in which information spreads has also changed over the centuries. These forms have evolved from cave paintings depicting hunting strategies, to handwritten letters, to machines printing on paper to document transactions for the populous, to finally digital prints and images that are not limited by region or language and can travel across the world in a matter of seconds.

A point in time that has become famous for art and writings is the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages lasted between 1215 and 1440, and sparked some of the most famous art pieces across the world from Britain, France Greece, Germany and many others. During this time in Europe, the church had a massive influence on both the people and the government as a whole, influencing both the art and literature. Several art pieces depicted religious figures such as Jesus, Mother Mary, and The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Meanwhile, literature used the illuminated manuscripts, which were books that were specially crafted with incredibly valuable materials to signify their importance and standing in the given religion. One of these pieces is a set of 15 woodcuts by a man named Albrecht Durer who was a famous German artist, inspired by the Bible’s Book of Revelations. One of these verses from Revelations, chapter 8 verse 12, states, “the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smithed, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars, so that a third part was darkened, and the day shown not for the third part of it, and the night likewise”. This verse describes the second coming of Jesus and how he would judge all the souls on earth as well as those who have already died.

Albrecht Durer was born in Nuremgerg, Germany on May 21, 1471, to a father with the same name who was a renowned gold smith, and to Barbra Hopler, who was the daughter of a well-known historian. He had 17 brothers and sisters. In his early years, Albrecht Durer worked as an apprentice under his father as a goldsmith which gave him a familiarity with different materials like gold, silver, copper and allowed him to gain a familiarity with different tools like engravers and burners. His father also instilled a great faith at an early age which helped spark the fascination with interpreting scripture. After his apprenticeship with his father, he was sent to work under artist Michael Wohlgemuth for three years in 1487. In this time he learned different art techniques and methods such as oil painting, wood carving, and the creation of illuminated manuscripts. After his apprenticeship was finished, he became famous for many works including “The Young hair”, his interpretation of a rhinos, and “The Apocalypse” which were a set of 15 woodcarvings transferred to a manuscript and many other pieces. During this time, Durer was married to a women named Agnes Frey with their marriage being questionable through Durer’s interest in other women and was suspected to have been the cause of his eventual death in1528.

The first piece in Albrecht Durer’s “The Apocalypse” collection is "The Martyrdom of St. John the Evangelist", which was written in 1497 and was his only piece in the series that did not have a direct Biblical connection or was inspired by any verse. The piece depicts St. John seated and naked in a cauldron that is placed in the woods. A fire is burning under the caldron and oil is being poured over St. John’s head. This is done in front of Emperor Dominion and a crowd of people. Durer depicts the Emperor himself in Turkish robes while portraying the crowd in German robes and attire. He also shows a tapestry behind the Emperor which depicts western medieval structures like castles, high walls covered in archers, and what seems like a massive bonfire burning with people surrounding it.

The second wood carving in Durer’s collection of “The Apocalypse” is “St. John's Vision of Christ and the Seven Candlesticks", which was created by Durer in 1498 and was inspired by Revelations 1:10-16. This piece represents the preparation of the apocalypse and how God came to John and told him to warn different churches that the apocalypse is fast approaching, gather as many people as he could for the preparations of when the apocalypse was over, and how they would ascend to heaven. It depicts Christ addressing St. John, commanding him to record a vision he received and send it to all churches in the East of the Roman Empire. The piece also depicts Christ standing in the middle of seven candles which is a reference to his appearance as he is wearing a garment with gold girdle, his hair is white like wool, his eyes like flames of fire, his feet like brass burning in a furnace, and a two-handed sword in his right hand signifying the strength of the sun.

The third piece in Albrecht Durer’s collection was called "St John and the Twenty-four Elders in Heaven" which was created between 1497 and 1498. Durer got his inspiration for the piece from Revelations 4:1-10 and 5:1-8. The piece represents the day Jesus came to St. John again with both an army of spirits as well as the gates of Heaven, and told John that the day of the Lord had arrived, which is another name for the apocalypse. Jesus then asks John to be the one to break the six seals to start the end of the world. The next few pieces by Durer depict what John sees as he breaks each seal and brings about the end of the world. This specific piece depicts Jesus coming through the gates of Heaven sitting on a throne with jaspers and rubies, a rainbow surrounding the throne, depiction of 24 additional thrones occupied by other spirits dressed in white, a flash of light overhead, seven lamps, and seven winged creatures in the shape of an ox, a man, and an eagle.

The fourth piece Durer created was "The Four Riders of the Apocalypse" which was created in 1496 and was inspired by Revelations 6:1–8. The piece represents the beginning of the second coming where Jesus returns to the earth to judge all the souls who are both still alive and those who have already passed. This event is started with the breaking of the first four of seven seals by the Lion of Judah. With the breaking of the four seals, four riders are released corresponding with a catastrophe that will spread across the earth. The four riders include conquest which is released when the first seal is broken, war which is released when the second seal is broken, famine which is released when the third seal is broken, and finally death which is released when the fourth seal is broken. Durer’s piece depicts the rider of conquest as riding a white horse and having a bow and a crown. The rider of war is depicted as riding a red horse and having a sword in his hand. The rider of famine is depicted as riding a black horse and holding a scale. Finally Death was depicted as a malnourished rider carrying a trident and being accompanied by Hades.

The fifth piece in Durer’s series is called "Opening the Fifth and Sixth Seals" which was created in 1498 and was inspired by Revelations 6:9-12. This verse continues with Jesus preparing the earth for judgment by breaking the fifth and sixth seal on the gate of Heaven and what are the final events that will wipe out the rest of humanity on the earth. This piece depicts what St. John sees after breaking the two seals. After breaking of the fifth seal, an army of souls leaves the gates of Heaven all dressed in white. There is also a massive earthquake that devastates the landscape and all the inhabitants. After John breaks the sixth seal, the sun and the moon are destroyed and all the stars in the sky rain down on the earth causing those who remain to seek shelter in caves along the mountain side.

The sixth piece Durer created was the "Four Angels Staying the Winds and Signing the Chosen"which was created in 1497 and was not inspired by any specific Bible verse. The piece is supposed to represent the aftermath of all the seals being broken and destruction and death being spread across the earth. It is the time for each soul, whether they are still alive or have perished, to be judged by Jesus. It depicts four angels standing back-to-back holding swords, in front of a group of people deemed God’s people being escorted by another angel that is holding a large cross. Another angel can be seen addressing the group, and that the winds will no longer be blown on the earth, sea, or trees, and no longer hurt the oceans, the earth or trees.

In conclusion, as shown through Durer’s work, communication through art and literature as been extremely important for us as a species. We have used these forms of communication to relay information food or danger, life or religion. The time frames of human and societal evolution has also had a major impact on what influences the information we share, and how it gets portrayed to others. As a people, we have creatively communicated through depictions of hunting strategies on the walls of a cave, religious images and scripture on paintings and woodcuts, or with political and economic information being spread across technology on the internet.

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