The Picture Book of St. Anthony: The Medieval Way to Tell a Story

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THE PICTURE BOOK OF ST. ANTHONY:

The Medieval Way to tell a Story

JOANNA LACE examines the "Picture Book of St Anthony the Abbot" and in particular the choice of colour used in the illustrations.

In an earlier 'Treasures' article Albert Abela gave us a fascinating account of the Malta Library's treasured possession: the beautiful "Picture Book of St Anthony Abbot" of 1426, with illustrations by the artist Robin Fournier, copied from a painted linen hanging belonging to the Abbey Church of St. Antoine de Viennois (Isère), France.[1] A particularly striking feature of the scenes of St. Anthony's life is their brilliant red background. To the modern eye, drawn into the activities of what appears to be a plausible fifteenth-century world, painted mainly in soft monochrome, this startling red appears as a puzzling aberration, somehow at odds with the realistic narrative beneath. In some scenes the artist has been at pains to include even the narrowest of red strips along the upper edge of the panel. Should we read these areas as 'sky'? And why red? Should we look for some symbolic meaning?

The answers to these questions are part of the history of illustration itself, and more specifically that of the *istoria* or *histoire* - terms given to a series of paintings illustrating a chain of events, such as the Picture Book presents. For as we trace the development of the medieval *istoria* we find that by 1426 what the modern eye sees as 'red sky', is actually part of an age-long convention for narrative, that stems from a visual conception of the event that was fundamentally different from our own. In effect, the medieval artist saw the area of his panel as resembling a stage space, divided into two parts; a ground plane, upon

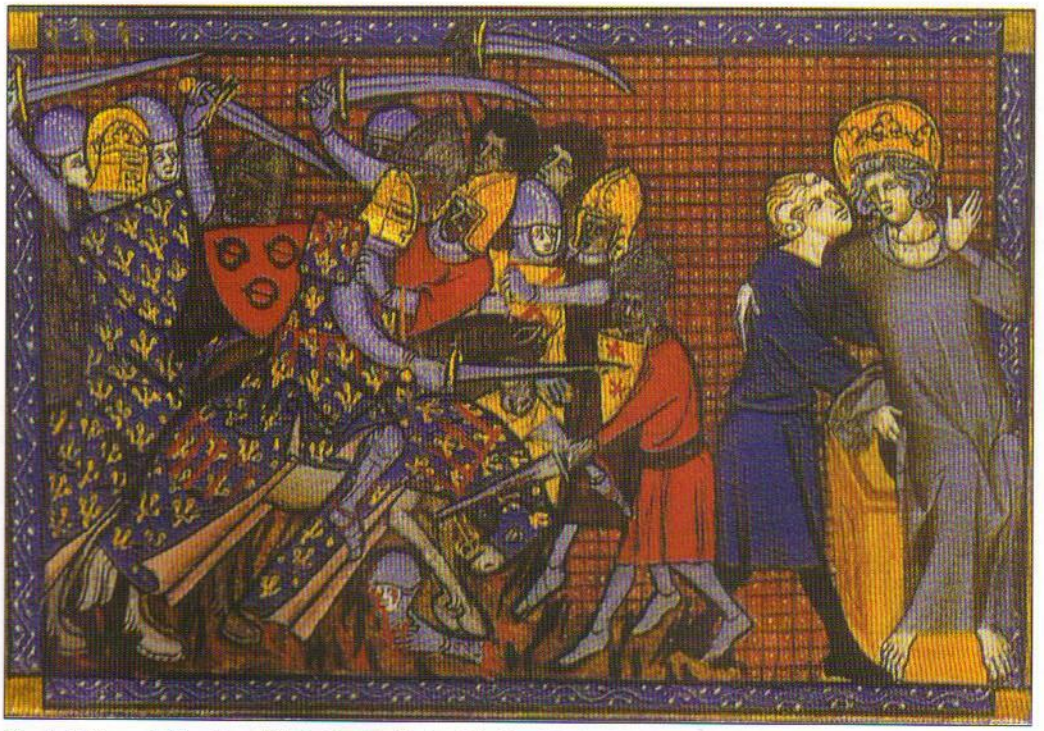

Fig. 1 Life and Miracles of Saint Louis: Paris, Bib Nat.Ms.fr.5716, fol. 199: The King wins a difficult victory; c. 1330-1340.

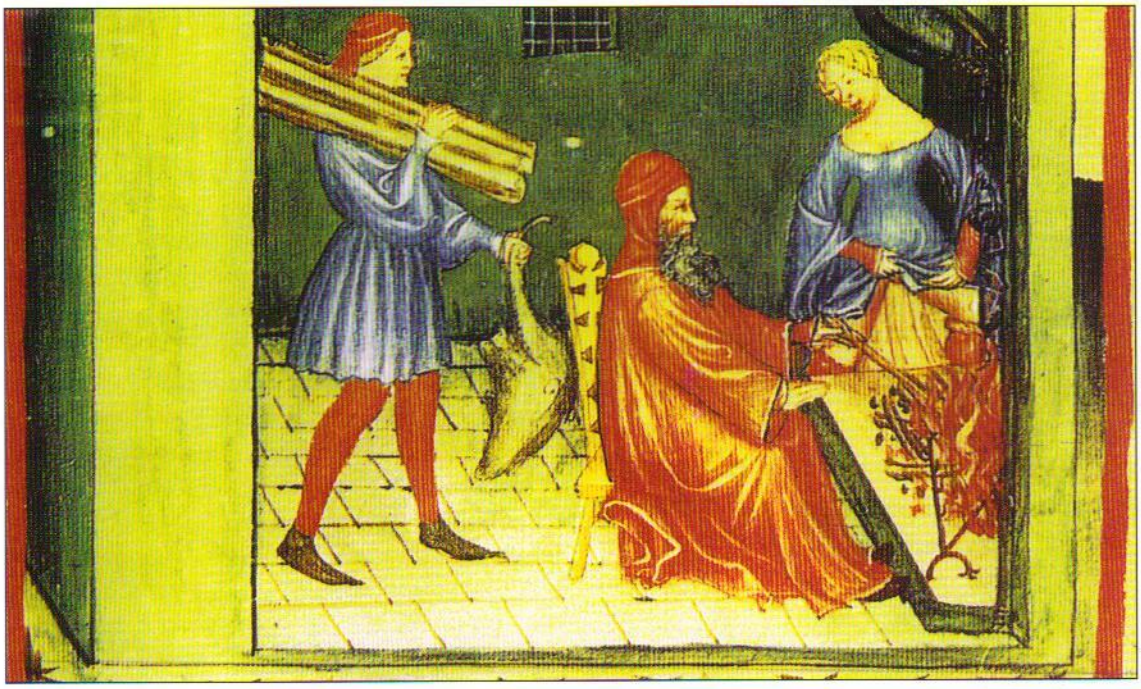

Fig. 2 Tacuinum Sanitatis in Medicina, Vienna, Ms.Series Nova 2644, fol. 55: Hyemps (winter) c.1390 (*detail*)

which the figures were arranged, and a vertical background - sometimes gold- which served as a decorative surface behind them. This basic 'stage' concept of ground plan and background survived long after artists had begun to surround the main protagonists of the event with landscape - mountains, trees - and/or buildings, further figures, in order to provide a naturalistic setting. The ground plan merely became enlarged to accommodate the additional objects, and it was seen as expanding vertically, perpendicular to the screen wall. The Picture Book illustrations are thus quite consistent with prevailing spatial conventions: a ground plan - extended as required, to embrace any extra detail - and areas of vivid red that represent the continuing presence of the decorative vertical background, which in the early fifteenth century was still considered the proper way to 'seal off' a representation.

Certain other stylistic features of the Picture Book prove to be modifications of far earlier versions of the medieval 'stage' *istoria*. The earliest examples show the ground plane as a narrow strip. This meant that where the story required a crowd - for the drama of a battle scene for example - any arms, legs, weapons, that the artist wished to show at ground level, were closely packed together, and with some ingenuity. (fig. 1) at the same time one particularly long-lived convention - stemming from the works of Italo-Byzantine artists - was to show the forward edge of this strip as a row of rocks, close together and often roughly rectangular, giving the impression of a platform (fig. 2) This notion of a rocky platform persisted: it was deemed proper that in outdoor scenes, when the ground plan became extended upwards in order to accommodate more circumstantial details, objects, or groups of objects, should be given their individual ledge. Accordingly we find further rocks, or rocky mounds, inserted at strategic intervals for this purpose. Sometimes a ledge is inserted to support a tree, or group of trees, merely to add symmetry to a design (fig. 3). It must be said that their insertion accorded well with the jagged rocks and mountains that often persisted as another legacy from Byzantine artists, to

Fig. 3 Boccaccio's De mulieribus claris, Paris, Bib. Nat. Ms.fr.12420, fol. 39: The Story of Procris; 1403-1404, by an assistant to the "Coronation Master".

Fig. 4 The Picture Book of St. Anthony, fol. cv: St. Anthony receives the Picture Book from the Donor.

whom they had suggested the inhospitable landscape of the Sinai desert.

At this point we turn to the Picture Book, and have no trouble in identifying the extended ground strip, and the rocks and rocky ledges. Firstly, the ground - shown here as grass - is duly extended upwards to varying degrees according to the objects the artist wishes to include in his illustration. For example, where the scene is confined to a single building, as in 'St Anthony with the Donor' (fig. 4), the ground strip is merely extended to accommodate the base of the building. In 'St. Anthony and the Martyrs' on the other hand, two episodes were required in the same panel: St. Anthony within the city walls, watching the busy scene of martyrdom (the main event), but also at an earlier moment, in an area duly separated off to express the time difference, when he is washing his white robe by the riverside in preparation for the event (fig. 5, bottom right). This crowded illustration has entailed extending the ground plan almost to the upper edge of the panel. It was nevertheless considered essential to complete the 'stage' view by giving a brief glimpse of its vertical background. Thus background areas vary throughout the Picture Book according to the need for ground space. We notice incidentally that this spatial system never admits of a horizon: as it spreads upwards, the ground area is finally blocked by architecture or, in outdoor scenes, by trees or mountains, resembling, in fact, stage scenery set flat against the solid back wall.

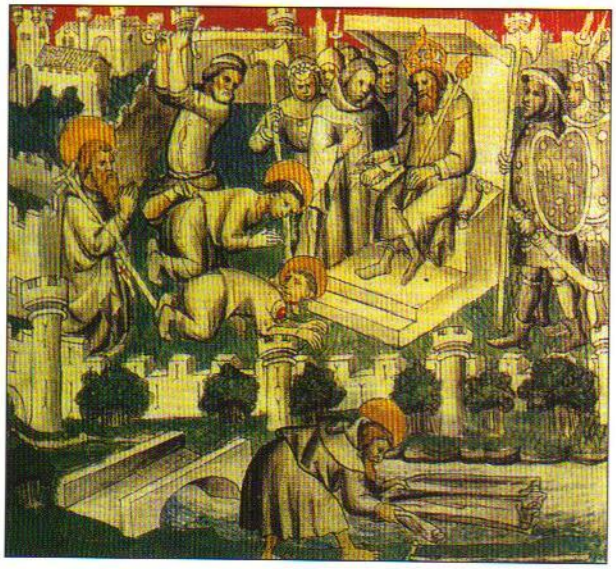

Fig. 5 The Picture Book of St. Anthony, fol. xxx: St. Anthony and the martyrs.

Secondly, concerning the rocks of earlier times: the row

Fig. 6 The Picture Book of St. Anthony, fol xcix: The Death of St. Anthony.

that still defined the forward edges of many contemporary panels has been disregarded, so that the platform effect is lost, but at the same time there is no mistaking the origin of the ledges abounding everywhere else in outdoor scenes: the individual rocks are no longer jagged but soft in outline, and have merged to form the smooth banks of all rivers, streams and sea cliffs, as well as small ledges supporting clumps of trees, and the more extensive demarcation lines between different episodes, for example in 'The Death of St. Anthony' (fig. 6). On a larger scale they are piled up to form stepped mountain shapes, and here the merging of individual rocks is often incomplete, to give the impression of the awesome clefts and crevices of the wild desert landscape. All in all we are seeing the survival of a stylistic tradition that has been modified and manipulated so as to accommodate early fifteenth-century ideas of narration.

With the backdrop recognised for what it is - a construct, a presentational device, no part of the event being illustrated - we may go on to consider Robin Fournier's choice of a brilliant colour red. Did he wish to convey a particular message?

This part of our investigation was stimulated by an outstanding exhibition of modern paintings held recently at London's Royal Academy: "Masters of Colour"[2]. And it has coincided with recent studies, in particular those by the eminent colour theorist John Gage[3], who reminds us that medieval conceptions of colour at the time of the Picture Book were very different to ours, and are often misunderstood. In the first place, medieval colour terminology was not, like the modern system, primarily based on hue, that is to say, upon specific colour identification, but on qualities of light and dark, and was focussed on material that had been dyed. The concept stemmed from an unstable colour technology, where light and dark were the only fixed points. The scale went from white to black, and beauty lay in luminosity, brightness or *claritas*. The brightest dyestuffs were therefore the most costly.

Secondly, the iconology of colour - its symbolism - was not understood as universally valid. We may summarize the extensive literature on the subject by pointing out that symbols were fluid, varied from region to region, and could

Fig. 7 The Picture Book of St. Anthony, Flor. Bib. Laur. MS. Med. Pal. 143: The Legend of Patras.

change markedly over time.[4] So in the case of the colours used in the Picture Book, as with other contemporary works, we need to turn to the local context and to the artist, bearing in mind that findings can only be assumptions.

We do not know whether the artist repeated the colours used on the linen cloth he was copying, which the sources suggest had been completed just a few years earlier.[5] Certainly the cloth would have been hung in the Abbey Church of St. Anthony on great feasts, particularly on that of St. Anthony (17th January), and on Ascension Day, when the General Chapter of the Order met, so that as a liturgical colour, red may well have been prominent. However, for the background of a manuscript illumination, the choice of red also echoes a preference during this period, and one not necessarily based on a specific symbolic meaning. It was often more a matter of 'market forces', given the exigencies of current colour technology: we have evidence that in France the wealthy patron of an opulent illuminated manuscript could order a particular pattern for the background - known as the *champaign de l'histoire*.[6] This could be a variation of a chequerboard, or a grid (perhaps made up of tiny alternating gold, blue or red squares), or large golden *rinceaux* over deep monochrome. And as the fifteenth century progressed, in Western Europe as a whole there was an acute shortage of gold, and in addition a growing aversion to ostentation in some quarters.[7] Accordingly, when gold was absent, a monochrome surface applied with maximum saturation or intensity, was thought to give the required *claritas* -that brightness wherein lay a beauty more important than individual hue.

In such cases we may still ask whether the choice of red, in particular, was significant? And we find that red had in fact long been dominant for the walls and hangings of church interiors. Colour technologists have now explained this by the fact that "except for *red*, colour did not hold well", and thus it was that for religious objects in general it became "the colour par excellence which best permit[ed] man to vanquish fear of the shadows.....the contrary of white and at the same time opposed to black.[8] Indeed contemporary evidence includes illuminated manuscripts, along with frescoes, dossals and crucifixes, so that although we know little of Robin Fournier - and no other work by him appears to have survived - we can say that in this particular choice of colour he was following the general precepts of his day. It is interesting to note here that the one other record of him that we have, dated a few months after his completion of the Picture Book, is a contract to paint the case of a new organ in the cathedral church of Grenoble, and the colour chosen for the background was "a fine vermilion".[9]

So far we have placed the Picture Book within the broad mainstream of late medieval painting. A strict chronology of styles for the early fifteenth century is impracticable, given the enormous quantity of illuminated books that have survived, with some artists adventurous, others more conservative, and sometimes more than one artist working on a manuscript. Scholarship has centred upon workshops, upon the interchange between them and the influences they exerted. Dominant for at least fifty years - between c.1375-1425 - were those under royal patronage, centred on Paris, and it is in prestigious works of the first years of the fifteenth century from this so-called Paris School that we find features used by Robin in 1426, in copying the earlier work. Even details in his paintings that reflect works of the Rhineland and northern Italy, such as the haloes depicted as solid gold discs, and the distinctive S-shaped trumpet (fig. 7), may well be due to the exceptional numbers of foreign artists arriving in Paris around the turn of the century.[10] But above all he has used the same basic medieval techniques of those early years, and though a detailed analysis lies beyond the scope of this article, a few examples will establish the connection. For instance, medieval artists did not conceive of a single external light source, but, as in the Picture Book, light and dark shading is applied to each object individually. Such is also the case in the version of c.1402 of Christine de Pizan's *Des cleres et nobles femmes*,[11] where in addition the French architecture includes the unusual round tower found in the Picture Book (fig. 8).[12] And in both works the artists have followed the practice, in accordance with the well-publicised treatise of Cennino Cennini (c.1390)[13], of darkening the colour of a ground surface as it recedes upwards towards the dense backdrop (for example the floor of St. Anthony's canopy in fig 4). Again, the use of grass is particularly interesting at this time: it had a unifying function, filling in a 'no-man's land' between different sites of an illustration and surrounding any architectural features. Grass was given

Fig. 8 The Picture Book of St. Anthony, fol. lxvii: St. Anthony visits his sister.

an all-over pattern of little brush strokes (as were other natural elements such as fur, water and wood), and it is worth noticing here that the criss-cross strokes that are characteristic of the Picture Book grass are also seen in a *Bible Historiale* from the *Cité des Dames* workshop - the same one producing illuminated books for Christine de Pizan from c. 1405-1410.[14]

Returning to questions of colour, we should mention that the colour ranged in the Picture Book illustrations follows a common medieval practice whereby certain pairs of colours were seen as basic units, explained as "harmonies", the most frequent and prestigious of these being blue-and-red, and green-and-red.[15] Accordingly, where the figures and buildings are painted in various colours, as in 'The Death of St. Anthony' (fig. 6), the host of angels has been picked out in blue and red; and where they are painted in grisaille, the "harmony" lies in the pairing of the green of the grass and foliage with the red background. This colouring system has a unifying effect, and seems in keeping with the uniformity of the figure style. Events certainly move along, backgrounds change, but persons appear without emotion, as if part of a continuum: gestures minimal, facial features unaltered - even, for example, when St. Anthony "visits his sister and finds her *grown old* as a virgin and mistress of other virgins, and is filled with *exaltation*." (fig. 8) It is a redeemed world, calm, unchanging and timeless, We are reminded that the Picture Book, rather than seeking to overturn the norm - to impart the miraculous like a fresco on a wall - has been created in order to recall and to celebrate what is already known. It was an object of veneration in itself, carried from the aumbry on special occasions, and seen, it is suggested, by King Charles VII in 1434 and King Rene of Anjou in 1458, among other privileged visitors.[16]

This brief survey has placed Malta's 'treasure' within the sphere of the greatest early fifteenth century French illuminated texts, and at an interesting stage in what was a gradual and somewhat complex progression of artists towards compositions with a single viewpoint. Within just a few years of its completion, in fact, their attempts were to be epitomized in the instructions concerning perspective, and other rules for creating a convincing *istoria*, by Leon Battista Alberti, in his influential *Della Pittura* of 1436 - with the subsequent opening of possibilities that were to reach to the Renaissance and far beyond.

NOTES

1. See *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Christmas 1995), pp. 9-14.
2. 'Masters of Colour: Derain to Kandinsky - 80 Masterpieces from the Merzbacher Collection', Royal Academy of Arts, London, 26th July to 17th November 2002.
3. For example (with extensive bibliographies), J. Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, London and New York, 1993; *idem, Colour and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*, London, 1999; and *idem*, 'Colour, Theory and Colour Practice in early Twentieth Century Art' in *Masters of Colour*, London, 2002.
4. See J. Gage, *Colour and Culture*, op.cit, note 3 above, especially Chapters 5, 6 and 7; Gage explains the lack of distinction, for example, between purple and red; and points to different choices for the Virgin's robe, where scarlet, purple, vermillion, crimson, ultramarine were "united in symbolic value by their beauty, rarity and extraordinary cost." The following are also useful: J. Andre, Etudes sur les Termes de Couleur dans la Langue Latine, Pais, 1949, p. 75 ff, 260 ff; J.R. Ackerman, *On Early Renaissance Colour Theory and Practice*, 1980. Examples of early symbolism (red) include: ancient Greeks: air (one of the four elements); Romans: youth and spring (Virgil), and later, military, authority, and divinity (Pliny); the 1st century A.D. Jewish writer Flavius Josephus: the Temple curtain (emblem of the universe); the 13th-century Roman Church: martyrdom (the cardinal's hat).
5. See Rose Graham, *A picture Book of the life of St. Anthony the Abbot*, Society of Antiquaries, February 1933. For evidence of other artists of the period who painted on cloth and were also associated with the painting of miniatures, see F.Bologna, *I Pittori alla Corte Angioina di Napoli, 1266-1414*, Rome, 1969, p. 305 ff.
6. See B. Buettner, *Boccaccio's Des Cleres et nobles femmes: Systems of Significations in an Illuminated Manuscript*, 1996, p. 88 ff.
7. See M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford, 1978, p.14 ff.
8. See M. Pastoureau, *Étude sur la Symbolique*, 1986, pp. 51-54.
9. See Rose Graham, op.cit. above (note 5), pp. 27-28. For the derivations and use of the work 'vermilion', see A. Albus, *The Art of Arts: Rediscovering Painting*, 2001, p.318 ff.
10. The influx of foreigners was perhaps due to the signing of a statute by Charles VI prohibiting the import of art works "faked or of bad quality", see Buettner, op.cit. above (note 6), p.11, note 59. The S-shaped trumpet was developed from the buisine. Imported from the Near East (French name: '*cor sarrazinois*'), it was used by city watchmen, and in 1372 was forbidden in Paris after curfew except at weddings.
11. Paris, Bibl. Nat. MS fr. 12420, with miniatures by the Coronation Master and associates; sold to Philip the Bold.
12. See op.cit above (note 11), fol.18v, Worshipping of Queen Libya; illustrated in Buettner, op.cit above (note 6), Fig. 11.
13. See D.V. Thompson, The Craftsman's Handbook (Libro dell'arte), New York, 1954.
14. Paris, Bib.Nat.fr.9; e.g. fol.13, The Building of the Ark, illustrated in M. Meiss, *The De Lévis Hours and the Bedford Workshop*, Yale, 1972, Fig. 55.
15. See Buettner, op.cit above (note 6), p.76.
16. See Rose Graham, op.cit above (note 5), pp. 7-8.