ANGELS

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By Nancy Grubb

Angels in a multitude of guises have been portrayed over the centuries by artists ranging from Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Botticelli to Rembrandt, Rossetti, Manet, and Howard Finster.

With nearly 300 radiant images, *Angels* surveys every aspect of artists' long-time fascination with this irresistible subject. Included are angels from the first millennium to contemporary times, depicted in frescoes, oil paintings, mosaics, prints, stained glass, tapestries, manuscript illuminations, and sculpture. Divided into seven chapters—Angel Portraits, Heavenly Messengers, Hosts of Angels, Cherubs, Patterns of Flight, Battles of Good and Evil (which includes the fallen angels), and Guardian Angels and Com-

(continued on back flap)

281 full-color illustrations

(continued from front flap)

panions—this captivating little book offers a fresh look at an ancient and eternally popular subject.

About the Author

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FRONT COVER: Detail of Lorenzo Lotto (c. 1480–1556). *Madonna and Child with Saints Catherine and James*, c. 1527–33. See page 288. BACK COVER: Detail of Giotto (1266/67–1337). *The Flight into Egypt*, c. 1305–13. See page 190. SPINE: *Angel from "Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière,"* c. 1180. Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France. See page 102. FRONTISPIECE: Detail of Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464). *The Annunciation*, c. 1435. See page 58. PAGE 6: Detail of Studio of Fra Angelico. *Adoration of an Angel*, 1st part of 15th century. Tempera on wood, 14⅜ x 9⅛ in. (37 x 23 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris. PAGE 18: *Archangel Raphael*. Naples, Italy; late 16th century. Polychromed wood, 70 x 39⅜ in. (177.8 x 100 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Purchased with funds given by Anna Bing Arnold. PAGE 47: Detail of Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510). *The Annunciation*, c. 1489–90. See page 64. PAGE 92: Guariento di Arpo (c. 1338–1377). Enthroned Angels, 1354. Oil on board, 46¾ x 42 in. (119 x 107 cm). Musei Civici, Padua, Italy. PAGES 152 AND 186: Details of Raphael (1483–1520). *Madonna del Baldacchino*, c. 1507. See page 208. PAGE 222: Domenico da Tolmezzo (1448–1507). *Angel Armed with Sword*, n.d. Oil on canvas. Museo Civico, Udine, Italy. PAGE 271: Guariento di Arpo (c. 1338–1377). *Angel*, 1354. Wood, 32⅜ x 19¾ in. (82 x 50 cm). Musei Civici, Padua, Italy

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INTRODUCTION

I saw a myriad host
Of angels, festive all, with wings unfurled.
Each one distinct in brightness and in kind.

Dante, *Paradiso*, canto 31

Theologians, mystics, and poets have argued for centuries over what angels look like and even whether they can be seen at all. Thomas Aquinas, writing about angels with a philosopher's precision during the thirteenth century, declared them to be pure intellect and hence without any physical form. But for artists, angels must be made visible, and the conventions for depicting them have evolved as art and society have changed over the millennia.

Images of winged beings—man, woman, and beast—can be found in many ancient cultures. Some of the most familiar of these "proto-angels" are the monumental winged figures on Assyrian palaces, wall paintings of various Greco-Roman spirits (page 8), and particularly the goddess of Victory portrayed in classical sculpture (page 9). In some cases the differences between such prototypes and the later Judeo-Christian angels are greater than the similarities. The lightly draped Victories, for example, are all unabashedly female, whereas angels were predominantly envisioned as asexual, androgynous, or male until the nineteenth century.

Winged Spirit. Roman, 3d quarter of 1st century B.C. From the villa of Publius Fannius Sinistor, Pompeii. Painted mural, 49¾ x 28 in. (126 x 71 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris.

The Winged Victory of Samothrace, c. 190 B.C.
Marble and limestone, height: 129 in. (328 cm).
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Angels come in many categories, and much confusion has developed regarding the names, functions, and characteristics of the different types. One often-cited source is Dionysius the Areopagite's *Celestial Hierarchy,* written about A.D. 500, in which he identifies nine orders of angels. These can be grouped into three ranks (or choirs) in descending order of power: (1) seraphim, cherubim, and ophanim (also known as thrones and often portrayed as flaming wheels); (2) dominions, powers, and authorities; and (3) principalities, archangels, and angels. Thomas Aquinas later illuminated this three-part hierarchy by assigning each rank a certain relationship to God and man. The first rank is dedicated to face-to-face worship of God; the second rank to knowing God through contemplation of the universe; and the third to human affairs. Within that third rank, the principalities watch over nations; the archangels interact with humans in extraordinary circumstances; and the angels function as guardians to individuals.

Artists—especially in the Middle Ages, when angels were newly popular in art and before certain visual conventions had been established—often found more explicit guidance from such written reports of angels than from the work of other artists, to which they had limited access. Vivid descriptions of angels appear in the Old and New Testaments but are even more plentiful in the traditional Legends of the Saints and in the Apoc-

rypha (ancient religious texts accepted by the early church fathers and the Roman Catholic church as Holy Scripture but ultimately excluded from both the Hebrew and the Protestant canons). Particularly notable for their elaborate details are the biblical Book of Revelation and the noncanonical Book of the Secrets of Enoch (believed to be a compilation of texts written by several authors during the last two centuries B.C.). The latter is said to chronicle the patriarch Enoch's observations of heaven, where he encountered

> the archangels who are above angels . . . and the angels who are appointed over seasons and years, the angels who are over rivers and sea, and who are over the fruits of the earth, and the angels who are over every grass, giving food to all, to every living thing, and the angels who write all the souls of men . . . ; in their midst are six Phoenixes and six Cherubim and six six-winged ones continually with one voice singing one voice. (The Secrets of Enoch 19:3)

Although many incidents from the Bible and the Apocrypha were originally known primarily to literate and learned monks, certain episodes eventually became familiar to all worshipers, and these scenes became essential elements first of church decoration and illuminated

manuscripts, then later of freestanding works of art. Some of these subjects provided especially apt occasions for painting angels, such as the Sacrifice of Isaac, Daniel in the Lions' Den, the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Resurrection of Christ, the Assumption of the Virgin, and the Last Judgment. Angels also play a prominent role in Islamic scripture, and artists who belonged to the Shiite branch of Islam, which did not prohibit the representation of human form, depicted angels in scenes such as the *Ascension of Muhammed on Buraq, His Mule, Guided by the Angel Gabriel* (page 283).

Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1308–21) and, much later, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) also conjured up elaborate visions of angels (and fallen angels) that became part of the vernacular and inspired generations of artists. By the time the Romantic poet Lord Byron wrote his satiric *Vision of Judgment* (1821), about the arrival of King George III in heaven, angels had become nearly a cliché:

> 'Twas the archangel Michael; all men know
> The make of angels and archangels, since
> There's scarce a scribbler has not one to show,
> From the fiends' leader to the angels' prince;
> There also are some altar-pieces, though
> I really can't say that they much evince
> One's inner notions of immortal spirits;
> But let the connoisseurs explain *their* merits.

Conventions for portraying angels were slow to develop and, once established, were slow to change. Certain elements became codified, offering an easy way to identify the named angels in any given scene. For example, the archangel Gabriel carries a staff or a lily when making his annunciatory visit to the Virgin Mary but a trumpet when heralding the Last Judgment; Michael almost invariably brandishes a sword with which to battle the forces of evil.

Angel imagery has steadily progressed over the centuries from the ethereal to the fleshy, paralleling Western culture's progression from faith in the unseen to reliance on direct observation and documentation. Even the early Florentine artist Giotto, who was such a pivotal figure in the transition from the medieval to the modern, still portrayed many of his angels as only quasiphysical, with their lower halves delineated more as disembodied suggestions of flight than as flesh and blood. (See, for example, the angel in the section on Joachim's dream in the Arena Chapel, page 189.) As Renaissance artists became increasingly dedicated to depicting the natural world accurately, angels became more and more three-dimensional—no longer the flat, almost translucent creatures of medieval art. Compare, for example, Simone Martini's fourteenth-century *Annunciation* (page 49) with the fifteenth-century one by Filippo Lippi (page 62), noting how the angels are situated in their surroundings.

Medieval angels were frequently placed flat against an unmodulated surface that was often painted gold to signify heavenly light. Starting in the Renaissance, angels were shown in more detailed and more convincingly familiar backgrounds, such as the Virgin Mary's book-filled bedroom or a grassy, flower-bedecked paradise. By the Baroque period, angels had become not only recognizably human but even sensual, with their wings and bodies painted or sculpted in caressingly explicit detail.

After the eighteenth century, it seemed that the less wholeheartedly people believed in angels, the more believably they were portrayed. The trend toward this paradoxically realistic depiction of angels eventually became a source of contention between the nineteenth-century Realist Gustave Courbet and the proto-Impressionist Edouard Manet regarding the latter's painting *Christ with Angels* (opposite). Courbet was known for his fierce advocacy of uncompromising realism in art. "Art in painting consists only of representations of objects visible and tangible to the artist," he wrote. "An *abstract* object, not visible, not existing, is not within the realm of painting." Given this unyielding stance, it is not surprising that Courbet greeted Manet's painting of Christ and the angels with scorn, despite the fact that its unromanticized corpse and unidealized angels had scandalized contemporary critics.