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Gospel Evangelist Portraits: Exemplars of an Enduring Christian Motif

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ABSTRACT

The Bible's Gospel books offer accounts of the life of Jesus Christ and consequently they have been considered among the most important texts from antiquity onward. This essay uses iconographic methodology and historical contextualization to analyze a selective group of portraits and depictions of the Bible's four Gospel Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Art historical literature has addressed Evangelist portraits, but has tended to focus on formal characteristics. This essay presents these visual relics in new contexts. The chosen Evangelist portraits come from a variety of sources: thousand-year-old Byzantine lectionaries, medieval illuminated manuscripts produced in the scriptoria of the Abbeys of Cluney and Helmarshausen, and Italian and French missals and books of hours. The essay also examines Northern Renaissance and Symbolist print cycles portraying the martyrdom of the Evangelist John and visions he described in his Apocalypse, or book of Revelation. This brief examination of select exemplars demonstrates the enduring significance of Evangelist portraits in Christian iconography and western art history, and suggests the variety of messages Evangelist portraits can convey. This essay's findings and conclusions may lead to further, related research concerning the ways theologians and artists have used biblical portraits to comment both on religious and secular issues.

Keywords: Author Portrait, Gospel Evangelist, Illuminated Manuscript, Martyrdom, Apocalypse.
JEL Codes: N93, Z10, Z11, Z12

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1. Introduction

Art historians have occasionally written about Evangelist portraits (see, for example, McKendrick& Doyle, 2016; Klein, 2007; Stein, 2000), but these studies tend to focus on formal analysis and stylistic characteristics. This essay positions Evangelist portraits within new contexts, such as the antique author portrait genre, medieval liturgy, and Northern Renaissance and Symbolist apocalyptic imagery. Iconographic methodology and precise historical contextualization are used to help the reader understand the content and meaning of these visual relics. The essay is arranged chronologically,

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beginning with the Evangelists themselves, followed by their representations through history, from the ancient world to the modern era.

2. The four Evangelists and the Gospel canon

The Gospels are the first four books of the Christian Bible's New Testament. They record the events of Jesus' life and his teachings. The term gospel comes from two Old English words: gōd, meaning "good," and spel, meaning "news" or "a story." Thus, the term gospel indicates the first four books of the New Testament record the "good news" about Jesus, or the good news that Jesus taught. Christian tradition asserts Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—collectively, the four Evangelists—wrote the four Gospels (the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, and so on). The term Evangelist is from the Greek word euangelistēs, meaning "those who bring good news."

In 1965, the Roman Catholic Church reiterated its long-standing position on the origin of the four Gospels:

The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the Apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. … [The four Gospels] faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven ... Indeed, after the Ascension of the Lord the Apostles handed on to their hearers what He had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed … after they had been instructed by the glorious events of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth (Catholic Church, 1965).

The apostles, from the Greek words apostolos and apostellein, meaning "messenger" and "send forth," respectively, were the disciples Jesus handpicked to spread his good news, or gospel message. Two of the four Evangelists were apostles, namely Matthew and John (Matthew 10:2-4, The King James Version), and the two other Evangelists were closely associated with apostles, namely Mark, who was an associate of Peter, and Luke, who was an associate of Paul. The Christian Church established the four-gospel canon of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John by c. 140 A.D., at the latest (Hannah, 2008). By the middle of the second century, Christian liturgical meetings featured public readings of each of the four Gospels (Justin Martyr, 1885).

The importance of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John's Gospels derived from their apostolic authority. Other apocryphal or heretical "gospels" existed that did not have apostolic authority. The early Christian scholar and apologist, Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–253) wrote, "The Church has four gospels, the heretics have very many; among these one has been written 'according to the Egyptians,' another 'according to the twelve Apostles.' … I know of a gospel called 'according to Thomas' and 'according to Matthias,' and we read many others" (see Lienhard, 1998). Irenaeus (c. 120-200), a theologian who helped establish an authoritative list of Christian scriptures, wrote, "He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit" (Irenaeus, 1885). In 397, the Council of Carthage conclusively recognized an authoritative canon of biblical scripture (the Old and New Testaments), which included the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Codex, 1881).

3. Author portraits

The first Christians copied biblical texts almost exclusively onto scrolls until the end of first century, when codices, a prototype of today's book consisting of folded sheets that were tied together, came into common usage. Biblical scrolls and the earliest codices featured both representational and decorative illustrations.

Since antiquity, artists have produced portraits of authors. Even though ancient author portraits may not have accurately recorded authentic appearances, they nonetheless said something crucial about how readers imagined authors (see Durham, 2014). Most ancient author portraits accompanied secular texts, and they were frequently the only illustrations in the texts. See, for example, the portrait of the Roman poet Virgil (PubliusVergiliusMaro, ca. 70-19 B.C.), which accompanied the fifth century text VergiliusRomanus (Figure 1). Many surviving ancient author portraits resemble Late Antique

Roman consular portraits: portrayals of the person holding the highest political office in the Roman Republic.

4. Byzantine lectionaries

In 330 A.D., Constantine I (c. 280-337), the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, moved the seat of the empire from Rome to Byzantium. Byzantium occupied a strategically significant location near the geographic center of the Roman Empire, between the Mediterranean and Black Seas. It sat at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Constantine renamed Byzantium Constantinople, and it became Nova Roma Constantinopolitana, or the "New Rome of Constantinople." Although the city served relatively briefly as the capital of the Western Roman Empire, it was the capital of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire for approximately a millennium, until 1453. During the early Byzantine Empire, the Christian Church grew rapidly.

Figure 1. Portrait of Virgil. VergiliusRomanus. c. 450.BibliotecaApostolica, Vatican City. Public Domain

Between the fifth and eleventh centuries, the Christian bishops and churches of Constantinople, Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch were particularly prominent. Over time, and for various distinct reasons, Alexandria and Antioch declined in influence, and Constantinople and Rome emerged as competing centers of Christian authority. Disagreements over doctrine and liturgy progressively intensified and the Schism of 1054, or East-West Schism, signaled the separation of the Church centered in Constantinople and the Church centered in Rome.

Constantinople was Europe's largest and wealthiest city during the medieval period. It was also a cultural power, with important churches and monasteries that housed major scriptoria and manuscript libraries. In the sixth century, the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (c. 482-565) built Hagia Sophia (also known as the Church of the Holy Wisdom). For a thousand years, Hagia Sophia was the Cathedral of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the focal point of Byzantine Christianity. The Byzantine lectionary developed at Hagia Sophia in the seventh century and has remained virtually unchanged since then.

Byzantine lectionaries (from the Latin term lēctiōn, meaning "to read") contain textual cycles of biblical scriptures that are read during the Divine Liturgy over the course of the one-year liturgical cycle (Byzantine Catholic Church, 2013). The scriptural cycles are taken from the Gospels (or euangélion) and from the New Testament letters written by apostles (or apostólepistola). The annual cycle of Gospel readings proceeds from the Gospel of John (from Pascha until Pentecost), to the Gospel of Matthew (following Pentecost), to the Gospel of Luke (following the Elevation of the Holy Cross), to the Gospel of Mark (during the Lenten period).

The earliest Byzantine lectionaries were illuminated manuscripts; in other words, they were illustrated or otherwise embellished and their texts were hand-written, usually in Greek. Well-trained professional scribes transcribed lectionaries' texts and specialized artists and artisans produced elaborate illuminations, which added considerably to their value. Figures 2 and 3 are leaves (or individual pages) from lectionaries with imaginative portraits of the Evangelists Matthew and Luke. Evangelist portraits were the most common subject of Byzantine religious illumination. Christians considered the Evangelists to be "eyewitnesses to the texts they wrote," and their portraits served to "authenticate" their Gospel accounts (Klein, 2007). The empress Katherine Komnene (dates uncertain) presented the lectionary that contained Figures 2 and 3 to Constantinople's Holy Trinity Monastery at Chalke in 1063 (Evans & Wixom, 1997). By that time, the lectionary had replaced Gospels as the primary texts used in Eastern churches.

In Figure 2, Matthew's white beard and flowing ancient garments, a blue chiton and brown himation, are reminiscent of a Greek philosopher. Matthew has arranged the implements needed by a scribe, such as a stylus sharpener and glass inkbottle, on the table in front of him. On the parchment he holds, Matthew writes the first word of his Gospel: biblos (meaning "book") in Greek. The Gospel of Matthew begins with the words, "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ ... " (Matthew 1:1).

Figure 2. Leaf from a Lectionary with St. Matthew, c. 1057-1063.The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

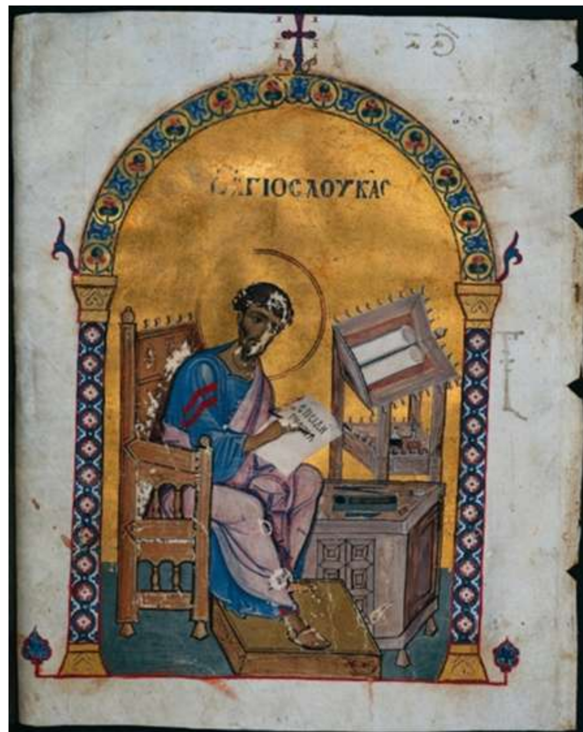

Figure 3. Leaf from a Lectionary with St. Luke, c. 1057-1063.The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

5. Scriptoria

Scriptoria (a Latin term meaning "places for writing") were early medieval workshops, often located in monasteries, where communities of skilled monks, nuns, and clerics wrote and illustrated (or illuminated) religious texts. English abbot Aefric of Eynsham (c. 955-1010), philosopher Adelhard of Bath (c. 1080-1152), and French theologian Peter Abelard (1079-1142) were among the first to use the term scriptorium to describe a specific room for writing (Charles du Fresnesieur du Cange, 1678). A scriptorium usually consisted of a simple single room, containing workbenches and desks for the scribes (Stones, 2014).

6. The abbey of Cluny

The Benedictine Abbey of Cluny in eastern France was a cultural center that reached the height of its influence during the tenth and eleventh centuries. The Abbey was renowned for its beautiful, cutting-edge architecture, particularly its enormous Romanesque basilica. The Abbey also had one of Europe's most productive medieval scriptoria, and employed perhaps two dozen copyists and artists who continually produced manuscripts. Cluny's library was a storehouse of valuable illuminated manuscripts. Many were produced in-house; others were donated or collected from leading scriptoria around Europe or from the Near East. By the twelfth century, Cluny owned over 570 volumes.

Figure 4 shows a miniature illumination taken from a Latin Bible produced in the Abbey of Cluny's scriptorium. The image portrays the Evangelist Luke and it preceded the Latin Bible's Gospel of Luke. The Cluny portrait follows the style of Byzantine painting very closely (see Figures 2 and 3), and it was probably copied from a lectionary brought to Cluny from Constantinople. Alternatively, a Mediterranean artist who was working at Cluny but familiar with the Byzantine style may have painted

it (The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1969). Very few northern European artists of the twelfth century would have had the opportunity or resources to travel to or study in the Byzantine East. The significance of the symbolic winged ox reclining behind Luke's workbench will be addressed shortly.

Figure 4. Miniature from a Latin Bible: St. Luke. C. 1100. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

7. The Abbey of Helmarshausen

Like the Abbey of Cluny, the Benedictine Abbey of Helmarshausen also prospered during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Helmarshausen Abbey was in a small town near Frankfurt am Main, an important German-speaking city in the Holy Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Emperor bestowed a privileged political status (or reichsunmittelbar) on Helmarshausen and it was designated an Imperial Abbey. Roger of Helmarshausen (c. 1110-1140) was a Benedictine monk and talented silver and goldsmith. Although there is some debate, in all probability Roger authored the most important primary treatise on medieval artisanship, De DiversisArtibus (c. 1120) (Freise, 1981). De DiversisArtibus described in detail the techniques of all of the medieval crafts practiced during the twelfth century. In 1107, Roger established Helmarshausen's scriptorium, which produced richly decorated illuminated liturgical books and manuscripts using the most expensive materials.

Figures 5 and 6 are the recto (front side) and verso (back side) of a single leaf excised from a Gospel manuscript produced at Helmarshausen. The otherwise intact Gospel manuscript is currently preserved in the library of the Trier Cathedral Treasury, a museum of Christian art in Trier, Germany. The two images were produced on vellum using very valuable sheets of gold and silver and lapis lazuli. Lapis lazuli is an intensely blue semi-precious stone that artisans used in ancient Egypt and the ancient Near East. It was imported into Europe during the Middle Ages and was considered the finest blue pigment. In its original setting, Figure 5 introduced the Gospel of Matthew with a portrait of the Evangelist. The lower register of Figure 6 shows a regal nativity scene. In the center, Mary reclines attired in a modest stola, a long draped ceremonial robe worn by Roman and Byzantine empresses. She reaches out gracefully toward the baby Jesus, who is wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. An imaginative pink ox and blue (lapis lazuli) donkey lie in the background behind the baby.

Figure 5. Leaf from Gospel Book with Initial L[ibergenerationis and St. Matthew's portrait (verso). c. 1190.The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

Figure 6. Leaf from a Gospel Book with The Nativity (recto). c. 1190.The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

8. Creative decorations and symbols for the beginnings of texts

The illustrators of medieval manuscripts emphasized the beginnings of liturgical and Gospel texts with lavishly decorated letters and/or author portraits (Figures 7, 8) (see Morrison, 2007; Hendrix &Vignau-Wilberg, 1997). In Figure 7, naked babies commonly used for decorative purposes in Renaissance art, called putti, attend to tangled foliage and ripe fruit above and below the letter "T." The T is the first letter in the Latin phrase Teigiturclementissime Pater (meaning "Thee, therefore, most merciful Father …"), the first words of a prayer of the Roman Canon recited during the celebration of the Catholic Mass.

The leaf shown in Figure 8 introduces the Gospel of Luke with an Evangelist portrait. The illuminator showed Luke holding his Gospel book above a representation of his traditional symbol, the winged ox. The Gospel of Luke begins with the story of the angel Gabriel announcing to the priest Zacharias that his son John the Baptist would be born. When Gabriel made his announcement, Zacharias

Figure 7. Bartolommeo and GiapecoCaporali. Missal leaf with decorated Initial T[e igitur]. 1469.The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

was offering incense at the temple, where priests often sacrificed oxen (Luke 1:8-17). This helps explain both the origin of Luke's symbol and why the illuminator chose to depict the ox at the beginning of Luke's text.

The other Evangelists also have traditional symbols: Matthew's divine man, Mark's winged lion, and John's rising eagle. Many believe certain biblical passages refer to the Evangelists with these symbols. During the fifth century B.C., the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar took ten thousand Jews captive, including the prophet Ezekiel. In Babylonia, Ezekiel "saw visions of God," of "four [winged] living creatures" with the faces of a man (Matthew), a lion (Mark), an ox (Luke), and an eagle (John) (Ezekiel 1:5-6, 10,). In the book of Revelation, the Evangelist John also describes his visions through a door "opened in heaven." John described a throne surrounded by elders wearing white clothes and golden crowns. In and around the throne were four beasts, "and the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle" (Revelation 4: 1-2, 4, 6-7). The ancient theologian Irenaeus wrote on the significance and meaning of the Evangelists' symbols in AdversusHaereses (or "Against Heresies"), of c. 180 A.D. (Irenaeus, 1885).

Figure 8. Bartolommeo and GiapecoCaporali. Missal leaf with a portrait of St. Luke and bull symbol. 1469.The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

9. Missal and book of hour illuminations

During the Middle Ages, illuminators decorated many types of manuscripts that were used in the Roman Rite or liturgy: 1) antiphonaries (collections of chant texts), 2) Psalters (texts of the Old Testament Psalms), 3) collectars (collections of prayers), 4) martyrologies and the Liber Vitae (narratives of Christian martyrs and living monastic patrons), and 5) missals or breviaries (single volumes containing both the spoken and sung portions of the Roman Rite). Artists also provided imagery for books of hours, a type of abbreviated breviary commonly used for private devotion.

BartolomeoCaporali (c. 1420-1505) and his brother GiapecoCaporali (died 1478) were Renaissance artists who were active in the Umbrian region of central Italy. They created full-page and miniature manuscript illuminations. Figures 7 and 8 were originally in a missal made for the Franciscan church of San Francesco in Montone, near Perugia. During the late-medieval and Renaissance eras, churches across Europe seemed to compete with each other to see which one could own the largest and most lavishly decorated missal (see, for example, The British Library, 2019; The Morgan Library, 2019).

Missals contain prayers, chants, and other texts used during the celebration of the Roman Catholic mass (Thurston, 1911). The Middle English terms missal and mass derive from the Latin terms missale and missa. By the thirteenth century, the single volume Missale plenum (or "full Missal") had supplanted the collection of specialized books previously used by the various participants in the liturgy (such as the lectionary, sacramentary, cantatorium, and ordo).

By the fourth century, medieval monastic life centered on the daily celebration of the Divine Office (or Liturgy of the Hours), which marked eight canonical hours of each day that were to be set aside for devotion with prayers, scriptures, and hymns. RegulaBenedicti (or "the Rule of Saint Benedict"), written in 516 by Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-550), described the organization and activities of monks living communally under an abbot's authority. RegulaBenedicti, which regulated the Divine Office and offered insightful details on the eight canonical hours, was a powerful influence on medieval monastic life.

Celebration of the Liturgy of Hours was obligatory for those living in monastic communities, but secular (non-monastic) laity also joined in, celebrating with priests, among themselves, or individually. The book of hours, which became very popular in the thirteenth century, contained fixed-hour canonical prayers recited by individual members of the laity. Canonical prayers were said at lauds (around 6:00 am), prime, terce, sext (noon), none, vespers, compline (around 6:00 pm), and at nighttime vigils. Whereas missals were used in communal public worship, books of hours were for personal use. Some of the most important medieval art appears in books of hours.

Books of hours contained sets of hand-written gospel scriptures and lessons. The more elaborately decorated (and expensive) books of hours also often featured Evangelist portraits (see, for example, The Metropolitan Museum, 2019), and illuminations depicting important moments in the lives of the Evangelists, apostles, and other saints (Stein, 2000). Figures 9 and 10 are Renaissance portraits of Mark and Luke from a French book of hours. They were produced by Guillaume le Rouge in his Parisian workshop, which was located on Rue Neuve-Notre-Dame, a now-lost road that once ran through the Île de la Cité in front of Notre-Dame Cathedral. Figure 10 shows the Evangelist Luke painting a portrait of the Virgin Mary, the mother ofjesus.

Figure 9. Guillaume Le Rouge. Book of Hours leaf with portrait of St. Mark and his symbol the lion. 1510.The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0)

Figure 10. Guillaume Le Rouge. Book of Hours leaf with portrait of St. Luke painting Mary's portrait. 1510.The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

10. Luke the painter

Since antiquity, Christian tradition has identified Luke the Evangelist as the first painter of Christian icons (Figure 10) (Bacci, 1998). According to this tradition, after Jesus' crucifixion Mary went

to live in the home of the apostle John in Jerusalem. During this time, a group of women asked the Evangelist Luke to paint Mary's portrait, to memorialize her image. As he painted her portrait, Luke listened to Mary speak of Jesus and he incorporated her statements into his Gospel. Many Christians maintain Luke's now-lost portrait of Mary was of the Hodegetria type (a Greek term translated "she who shows the way") (Hall, 1983). The apparently original Hodegetria icon was displayed in the fifth century Monastery of the PanaghiaHodegetria in Constantinople. Others believe a painting entitled SalusPopuli Romani, which is kept at Rome's Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, is Luke's portrait of Mary (Wolf 2005).

The Roman Catholic Church venerates, or greatly reveres, Luke the Evangelist. Roman Catholics recognize Luke as the patron saint of artists, meaning he "has been assigned by a venerable tradition … as [artists'] special intercessor with God" (Parkinson, 1911). During the late medieval and Renaissance periods, when Guillaume Le Rouge created Figure 10, northern European painters and manuscript illuminators were banding together into professional organizations, which they named the Guilds of Saint Luke. Guillaume Le Rouge was a member of one such guild.

11. Mourning John

In Christianity's best-known icon, the Crucifixion, the Evangelist John is also shown with Mary, the mother of Jesus (Figure 11). The scriptures say that as Jesus hung on the cross he "saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved [apparently a reference to John. And], he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home" (John 19:26-27).

Traditional Crucifixion compositions show the central figure of Christ on the cross, with John and Mary standing on either side. Almost invariably, medieval and Renaissance painters, illuminators, and sculptors represented the Crucifixion in three or four primary modes based on the "gestures by which John and Mary express[ed] their grief" (Shorr, 1940; Millet, 1916). One of John's standard poses was leaning his head to the side and supporting it with one hand while holding his Gospel manuscript in the other hand (Figures 12, 13). Early Byzantine artists borrowed this posture of mourning, or resignation, directly from ancient Greek and Roman grave relief carvings and the pose began to appear in western European Carolingian Renaissance carvings during the ninth century (Shorr, 1940). John (and Mary's) gestures invite the viewer to reflect on Christ's suffering.

Figure 11. Lucas Cranach. Christ on the Cross, between the Virgin and St. John. 1503. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0)

For centuries, Christians have pondered Mary and John's reactions to Jesus' crucifixion. Birgitta of Sweden (1303-1373), a Christian mystic and saint venerated by the Roman Catholic Church, began having visions of the crucifixion when she was ten years old. In her visions, Birgitta saw Mary swoon or faint at the foot of the cross, overcome with emotion (The Prophecies, 2019; Neff, 1998). Flemish Counter-Reformation theologian, JoannesMolanus (1533–1585), and others, questioned Birgitta's account, pointing out the Gospel of John specifically says Mary "stood by the cross [rather than fainted]" (John 19:25). Birgitta's doubters maintain Mary was a model of strength and "virility"

(Molanus, 1963), refusing to "cast herself to the ground, or betray any sign of a weakness of spirit" (Stracke, 2019).

In Crucifixion scenes artists often showed John distraught and sobbing, even though, according to historians Mia Korpiola and AnuLahtinen most later medieval societies considered public crying to be a sign of weakness. Korpiola and Lahtinen write, "uncontrollable demonstrations and outbursts of grief that had been associated with the epic masculine laments of knightly culture were increasingly perceived as unmanly expressions of feminine passion and thus unsuitable for men" (Korpiola&Lahtinen, 2015).

Figure 12. Mourning St. John and Mourning Virgin. c. 1250-1275. Kingdom of Castile and Leon, Spain. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0)

Figure 13. Mourning St. John. c. 1240-1260. Region of Salzburg, Austria. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

12. The martyrdom of John and the book of Revelation

John the Evangelist was one of Jesus' earliest disciples. Jesus called John and his brother James to follow him when the brothers and their father Zebedee were fishing on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:19-20). James and John stayed with Jesus throughout his ministry and, along with Peter (another Galilean fisherman), they formed Jesus' earthly inner circle. Jesus gave the brothers the surname Boanerges, an Aramaic term meaning "sons of thunder," indicating their fervent spirit (Mark 3:17).

Christian history indicates Herod Agrippa executed James by beheading in Jerusalem in 42 A.D. James was the first martyred apostle. On the other hand, John lived a long life and apparently died from natural causes in Ephesus around the year 100 (Kelly, 2016). John suffered for his faith though. Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1228-1298), archbishop of Genoa, compiled The Golden Legend or Legendaaurea (c. 1265), a collection of hagiographies, or biographies of the saints. According to The Golden Legend, when Domitian (51-96) was the Roman emperor he had John brought to Rome, and made him to be cast into a vat or a ton full of hot oil in the presence of the senators, of which he issued out, by the help of God, more pure and more fair, without feeling of any more heat or chauffing, than he entered in. After this that emperor saw that he ceased not to preach the Christian faith, he sent him into exile unto an isle called Patmos. There was S. John alone, and was visited of angels and governed; there wrote he by the revelation of our Lord the Apocalypse, which contained the secrets of holy church and of the world to come (Jacobus de Voragine, 1483).

On the Isle of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, John wrote down the visions he experienced during his martyrdom, which provided the content of his Apocalypse (from a Greek word meaning an "unveiling"), which is also known as the book of Revelation. Revelation symbolically describes the end of the world and the coming of the Kingdom of God. It is the final book of the New Testament and the final book of the Christian Bible.

13. Albrecht Dürer

Artists frequently depicted Domitian's torment of John and the Evangelist's apocalyptic visions during the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Reformation (or Counter-Reformation), of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The leading artist of the Northern Renaissance, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) published a cycle of fifteen woodcuts in 1498 entitled The Apocalypse of St. John. The cycle, which included Dürer's most famous print, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, proved to be very popular and lucrative. Dürer printed the entire text of John's book of Revelation on the back of his oversized images. The first issue featured traditional Latin text and a later issue, of 1511, included vernacular German. The large format enabled Dürer to insert very detailed narratives in his pictorial spaces (The National Gallery of Art, 2019).

The first print of Dürer's Apocalypse series shows the martyrdom of St. John (Figure 14), even though the book of Revelation does not mention the event. Dürer used the martyrdom scene, at the start of the series, to identify John as the author of the Apocalypse, an attribution that has never been universally accepted. Dürer shows John sitting naked in a cooking vat as Domitian's servants pour oil over his body and fan the flames. The witnesses wear a variety of Renaissance-era European costumes and uniforms. Domitian sits to the left watching the awful spectacle, wearing the garb of a Turkish sultan. In fact, Domitian very much resembles contemporaneous depictions of Mehmed the Conqueror (1432-1481), the Ottoman sultan who captured Constantinople in 1453 (see The National Gallery, London, 2019). Islam was the Ottoman Empire's official religion, and the capture of Constantinople sent shockwaves through European Christendom.

Figure 14. Albrecht Dürer. Revelation of St. John: Martyrdom of St. John. 1498/1511. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

Albrecht Dürer lived in Nuremberg a FreieReichsstadt (or "free imperial city") within the Holy Roman Empire, in the southern German region of Franconia. When he created Figure 14, the Holy Roman Empire felt the threat of the advancing Ottoman forces. By transposing John's martyrdom to his own time and locale and by portraying Domitian as the Islamic ruler, Dürer made a political and religious statement concerning the perceived threat the Ottomans presented to European culture and European Christianity (The Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019).

14. Odilon Redon's modern Apocalypse

John the Evangelist's apocalyptic visions continued to interest western artists in recent cultural eras. Visual artists and poets of the loosely organized Symbolist movement were especially preoccupied with apocalyptic imagery.

The French painter and printmaker, Odilon Redon (1840-1916) established his prominent position in modern art with imaginative images based on poetic and religious themes. During his long career, Redon produced over two hundred individual lithographs and several lithographic series, such as In the Dream (1879), the surreal To Edgar Allan Poe (1882), The Temptation of Saint Anthony (1888), and The Apocalypse de Saint-Jean [of St. John] (1889) (Figures 16, 17). AmbroiseVollard (1865-1939), the art dealer who helped establish the careers of Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, published Redon's Temptation of Saint Anthony and Apocalypse of St. John. Vollard and Redon were important contributors to the late-nineteenth century revival in European printmaking.

Figure 17.Odilon Redon. Apocalypse de Saint-Jean: C'estmoi, Jean, qui ai vu et qui aiouïces choses. 1899. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

The poetic style and marvelous textual imagery of John's Apocalypse fascinated and inspired Redon, as had the bizarre writings of Edgar Allan Poe. Redon's art celebrated ambiguity and the idiosyncratic (see Zahra, 2016; Facos, 2009). Rather than producing traditional illustrations, which might serve as visual equivalents for texts, Redon created mystical, visual poems that complemented religious texts. "My drawings inspire without defining themselves. They determine nothing. They take us, just like music, to the ambiguous world of the indeterminate," he wrote (Kerr, 2018).

As Albrecht Dürer had done four centuries earlier, Odilon Redon included a portrayal of John in his Apocalypse series (Figure 16). In the final chapter of the book of Revelation, after communicating his visions, the author states, "I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things" (Revelation 22:8). This was the fourth time that John identified himself as the author of the book of Revelation (see also, Revelation 1:1, 1:4, 1:9). Redon used this final proclamation, "C'estmoi, Jean, qui ai vu et qui aiouïces choses," as the caption for Figure 16. In Redon's portrait, the descending lines of John's hair envelope his pensive, profiled face and the lines lead the viewer's eyes downward to the Evangelist's hands, which he raises reverently in prayer.

Figure 18.Odilon Redon. Apocalypse de Saint-Jean: celui qui étaitmontédessus se nommait la Mort. 1899. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

John's Apocalypse describes a series of events that will occur in the end times involving four symbolic horsemen.

And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer. … And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword. … And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. … And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth (Revelation 6:2, 4-5, 8,).

Figure 17, which has the caption "… et celui qui étaitmontédessus se nommait la Mort," depicts Death, in the guise of a skeleton, riding on a pale horse preparing to deliver a fatal thrust. When Redon created his Apocalypse series in 1899, at the end of the century, or fin-de-siècle, France was gripped by a widespread fear of an impending apocalypse (Stokes, 1992). The end of the century, people thought, might mean the end of the world (or, at the least, the end of a phase of civilization). Redon, and his perceptive publisher Vollard, may have been hoping to capitalize on the pervasive fin-de-siècle premonitions when they selected the topic of John's Apocalypse. Over time, illustrations of the Evangelists, and their writings, have been used for a myriad of purposes.

15. Conclusion and research implications

This essay has offered only a quick overview of a few exemplary historical portrayals of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. From anonymous medieval artisans to famed modern masters, artists have represented the Evangelists in a rich variety of ways, depending on the intended purposes and messages of their imagery. The earliest Evangelist portraits were simply a new sub-genre of the antique author portrait. Later, Evangelist portraits took on more theological and liturgical significance as they were regarded as artistic stand-ins for the eyewitnesses of the Gospel accounts. Finally, artists such as Albrecht Dürer and Odilon Redon used portraits of John the Evangelist to express social and cultural fears and apocalyptic premonitions.

This essay's findings and conclusions may lead to further, related research concerning the ways theologians and artists have used biblical portraits to comment both on religious and secular issues. Perhaps in the future a scholar will write a comprehensive survey that addresses the enduring significance of the Gospel Evangelist motif. An extensive investigation is needed to position these important visual relics into their proper place within the histories of art, Christianity, and western society.

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