

Angels

*from Dante Rossetti
to Paul Klee*







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Angels *in* the Art *and* Culture *of the* Nineteenth Century

Angels are indeed incorporeal beings, and yet Man has always been tempted by the idea of trying to imagine what these heavenly creatures look like. Even in classical times we find winged goddesses of victory, Nikes and Victories, who would later become the prototype for Christian angels. The cupids of antiquity have also found their way into Christian art in the form of cherubs or *putti*.

These models were important because the stories in the Bible provide us with very few details regarding the appearance of the divine messengers. They are often described as masculine and sometimes as wearing white robes; winged creatures are only mentioned in con-

nection with cherubim and seraphim. Angels are not defined so much by their appearance as by their function as the messengers of God – and indeed the name is derived from the Greek word *angeloi* – “messenger.” The best-known example of the angel as messenger is the Archangel Gabriel, who brings the Virgin Mary the news of the birth of the Messiah. There are also reports of angels intervening in events here on Earth: thus in one scene in the Old Testament, an angel stands in the path of the prophet Balaam and prevents his passage (see fig. p. 5). Angels act as mediators between God and Man, between the visible and the invisible world, between the here-and-now and the world beyond. Wings appear to be a useful accessory

“How presumptuous to give a form to a disembodied being! And yet we are attracted by the idea of imagining a heavenly creature in our mind’s eye.”¹

(NEILOS SCHOLASTIKOS, 6TH CENTURY
Epigram on an Archangel)

for this role as go-between, but it was not until about AD 400 that angels began to be represented with wings. Until then they were mostly depicted simply as men in white robes. By the nineteenth century artists could draw on a long and rich tradition of pictorial representations of angels. Nonetheless, the spiritual assumptions behind their portrayals differed fundamentally from those of previous centuries. Secularization and the Enlightenment had led to a questioning of the religious thought which had hitherto provided essential guidance, and the weakened position of the Church exacerbated the problems in this respect. Many people experienced doubts as a result of the increasing influence of capitalism, scientific positivism, industrialization, and the attendant urbanization, not to mention the new theories such as those of Darwin and Freud. At the same time the crisis also led to a new search for the transcendental, because many people were not prepared to accept a concept of humanity that could exist without a spiritual link to the divine. Thus the Christian religion became topical again – albeit in a different way – and at the same time other religions and esoteric groupings gained increasing numbers of supporters. In the wake of the Enlightenment, angels or demons were relegated by nineteenth-century theology to a secondary position in the realms of



Balaam Stopped by the Angel
(Mid 4th century)
Mural in sepulchral niche
Catacombs of the Via
Latina, Rome
*In the first centuries of
Christianity, angels were
represented without wings.
Here, an angel armed with
a knife blocks the prophet
Balaam’s path.*



**MORITZ VON
SCHWIND**

*“The Dream of Erwin von
Steinbach” (c. 1845)*

Oil on cardboard,
36.4 x 25.3 cm

Bayerische Staatsgemälde-
sammlungen, Munich,
Sammlung Schack

salem by Titus (see fig. pp. 42/43). People also encountered large numbers of winged spirits on public monuments and memorials, where they harked back to the goddesses of antiquity and represented Victory or Peace. Angels appeared regularly on tombs and gravestones during the nineteenth century. Here they can be traced back to a concept familiar from antiquity: the idea that the soul of the deceased was accompanied into the hereafter by an angel. Nineteenth-century angels were influenced by classicism and generally expressed mourning and an elegiac mood (see fig. p. 59).

Romantic art can be seen as a forerunner of Symbolism. Romantic artists sought “salvation from a reality torn apart by mechanistic reason, a world which had been transformed during the Enlightenment into machinery and cogs.”⁴ They saw it as their task to open people’s eyes to the world “behind” what could actually be seen, to understand pictures as expressions of subjective moods. In his cycle of the four Times of Day (*Morning, Day, Evening, Night*, see fig. p. 31) Philipp Otto Runge achieved a synthesis of models derived from both Christianity and antiquity. In the picture of *Morning*, cherubs, familiar from antiquity as cupids, surround Aurora as the symbol of the day which is just dawning. They create a roundelay as they mediate between the earthly and the heavenly spheres, ending in a gloriol of angels. Thus they make visible the totality of the divine creation – and the creation as divine.

As a representative of Late Romanticism, the Munich artist Moritz von Schwind presents us with an angel hovering in a Gothic church

the fairy tale and pious legends. They were described as “metaphysical bats,” and as such were relevant only for poets and painters.² Yet despite – or perhaps because of – this lack of attention paid to the winged messenger within the Church, angels continued to play an important role in nineteenth-century culture. On the one hand they became part of the expanding esoteric-mystic movements like those of Helena Blavatsky or Rudolf Steiner, and on the other they also cropped up in everyday culture and public life. In the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century, angels now fulfilled people’s longing for the transcendental, without being directly tied to the Church and its dogma. “Thus angels become symbols of a denied desire, of a longing which the enlightened world had banished into the realm of the irrational.”³ At the same time, there was a real renaissance in the belief in guardian angels. Children in particular were portrayed in the company of their personal guardian angel, for example when saying their prayers at night.

Angels also played a part in history painting. They not infrequently contributed to the Christian interpretation of history, as in the dramatic scene portrayed by Wilhelm von Kaulbach in the monumental painting *The Destruction of Jeru-*

JULIUS SCHNORR VON CAROLSFELD

"The Lord Appears to Elijah on Mount Horeb"

From: *"Die Bibel in Bildern"* (The Bible in Pictures), 240 illustrations, designed and painted on wood, Wiegand (1860)
God the Father appears to Elijah in a gloriole of cherub heads, while the other angels illustrate the violence of the forces of nature (wind, earthquake and fire).



(see fig. p. 6). In his right hand he holds a lily, which identifies him as the Angel Gabriel in the scene of the Annunciation. With his left hand he holds that of the master builder Erwin von Steinbach; the latter was seen as the epitome of the Gothic architect, thanks to Goethe's work *On German Architecture*. The picture shows the process of inspiration, which took place while the architect was asleep. The angel becomes a genius who tells him in a dream how he should build Strasbourg Cathedral. Von Schwind thus linked the concept of genius with the Angel of the Annunciation and at the same time with the figure of the guardian angel spreading his wings out above Man.

The aim of the Nazarenes was the renewal of art through a return to older artistic styles. They were an association of painters who took as their models the works of artists from medieval Germany and the early Italian Renaissance. The latter period embodied, in their view, an ideal of authenticity. One of the members of the group was Peter von Cornelius (see fig. p. 34), who created a fresco of the Last Judgment in the Ludwigskirche (Church of St. Louis) in Munich, one of the largest and most impressive altar frescoes ever painted.

The angels created by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld are equally impressive. In his monumental Bible, illustrated with 240 woodcuts (see fig. above), the scenes showing angels influenced the image of angels during this time. In France, Gustave Doré (see figs. pp. 8, 52) was highly successful with his atmospheric Bible illustrations.

Another of the most important precursors of the new image of the angel was the English artist William Blake (see figs. pp. 9, 28). He created completely new and powerful angelic figures based on the art of antiquity and Michelangelo, evoking a noble vision of artistic inspiration. As in early Christianity, Blake's angels are sometimes shown without wings.

In a painting by the English artist J. M. W. Turner, the angel appears closely linked with the powers of nature (see fig. p. 41). The picture shows an angel completely surrounded by divine light. Painted in a manner which



GUSTAVE DORÉ | “*Jacob’s Dream*” (1866)

Woodcut, 35 x 25 cm

From: *Illustrated Bible*, Mame & Fils, Tours

In a dream, God the Father appears to Jacob. A ladder (depicted here as a staircase) on which angels ascend and descend leads towards him (Genesis 28).

was extraordinarily pastose for the time, it seems as if the contours have been almost entirely dissolved. The close connection between angels and light, the concept of the angel as a “shining light,” is repeated in numerous pictures during the nineteenth century. Light is the immaterial substance par excellence, permitting all material objects to be seen in the first place. But at the same time it also stands for the Light of God, and Christ is also often described as the bringer of light.

ANGELS IN SYMBOLIST ART

Symbolist art developed during the period around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The Berlin art critic Max Osborn described the particular mood it evoked very aptly: “The mystic and the magical became attractive once more. Everything which was focused towards the hereafter was taken up with enthusiasm. Large, sect-like communities like those of the theosophists and anthroposophists, raised their heads. And over everything hovered a glowing new sympathy for the problems of religion. The metaphysical need, having suddenly been reawakened, grasped every means it could catch hold of.”⁵

Like Romanticism, Symbolism regarded itself as a counter-movement to the materialist-rationalist thought which was seen as being embodied in realist and naturalist art, as well as in Impressionism. The realist artist Gustave Courbet was convinced that it was just not possible to depict angels because they could not be seen. Standing in front of the representations of angels by Eugène Delacroix in the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris (see fig. p. 37), he reputedly said: “Show me an angel and I’ll paint it.” It is possible that his fellow artist Édouard Manet, working in the naturalist idiom, painted his picture of the dead Christ being carried by angels (see fig. p. 51) as a pictorial answer to this observation.

Symbolism began as a literary trend in France but soon manifested itself in art as well and went on to acquire numerous followers throughout Europe. The universal exhibitions contributed in no small measure to this expansion. They attracted a great deal of attention and provided a stage on which the works of Symbolist artists were shown. The beginning of the movement in the strict sense is seen as coinciding with the *Symbolist Manifesto* by the French poet Jean Moréas. He wrote in *Le Figaro* in 1886: “The goal of Symbolist art is never to express an ideal, but its sole purpose is to express itself for the sake of being expressed.”⁶ Thus the symbol ultimately remains ambivalent; it is suggestive and thus leaves scope for the imagination.

In contrast to the naturalist and realist artists, the Symbolists were concerned with the expression of the subconscious, the dream, the supernatural, the irrational, and the fantastic and – repeatedly – the spiritual. They created a link to the religious without being tied to the



WILLIAM BLAKE
*“The Whirlwind: Ezekiel’s
Vision of the Cherubim
and Eyed Wheels”*
(c. 1803–1805)

Pen, ink and watercolor
on paper, 39.5 x 29 cm
Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston

dogma of the Church. Angels, as creatures from the immaterial afterlife, accordingly proved an ideal subject for paintings, as they represented an ideal antithesis to the visible, scientifically explorable reality. The divine messengers were employed by some artists in the sense of a renewal of Christian art; they frequently also served as bearers of subjective moods.

THE PRE-RAPHAELITES



The English Pre-Raphaelites are among the principal forerunners of the Symbolists. Edward Burne-Jones, often considered to be a Symbolist painter, produced the most impressive portrayals of angels of the era.

In 1848 the artists William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and others formed a casual association in London known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In a second phase, beginning in 1857, they were joined by other artists including William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Simeon Solomon. Like the Nazarenes, whom they greatly admired, the Pre-Raphaelites aimed to renew art beyond the boundaries set by the formal academies. They, too, were searching for a “primal,” pure, unspoiled art which they found represented in the works produced during the early Italian Renaissance before Raphael, and in the Middle Ages. They considered these early forms of art to be the expression of direct religious emotions. At the same time, the Pre-Raphaelites wanted to create with their art an alternative to Victorian society, to industrialization and unregulated greed for profit. The English artists created dream worlds, in which angels played an important part. As Edward Burne-Jones explained: “... the more materialistic science becomes, the more I shall paint angels: their wings are my protest in favour of the immortality of the soul.”⁷

Like the later French Symbolists, the Pre-Raphaelites found inspiration in the literature of their time and sought a new direction for their art through this source. Dante Gabriel

Rossetti was the driving force within the group, particularly during the early phase. His enthusiasm for the culture of the Middle Ages did not apply solely to art, but also lay in the poetry of that era. Thus Rossetti translated Dante’s partly autobiographical *Vita Nuova*, identifying himself with the personality of the Italian poet. This fascination found artistic expression in works like *Dante’s Dream* and *Dante’s Amor* (see figs. pp. 46, 47).

Rossetti’s presentation of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary was regarded by his contemporaries as being highly provocative. In the picture *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (see fig. p. 44), the Virgin crouches on her bed in the corner of the room, totally alarmed by the appearance of the angel. In one hand Gabriel holds a lily, which forms part of the traditional iconography, but the stalk is directed precisely towards the Virgin’s lap, thereby creating a sexual, almost aggressive tension. In his portrayal of the angel we can clearly see Rossetti’s attempt to return to a representation which he saw as being Christian in origin: as in early Christian art he presented the angel without wings and clad in a white, antique-style tunic.

With its light color scheme and the clear, symmetrical composition, this picture revealed the influence of early Italian Renaissance art. A picture by John Everett Millais (see fig. p. 12), on the other hand, demonstrates the way the Pre-Raphaelites also found inspiration in Gothic art. They regarded that era as a particularly spiritual one: the Gothic revival aimed to help bring about a renewal of Christian values, through the adoption of forms that were to appeal directly to both the emotions and the intellect. Millais's design harked back to the building of a church. Through the interweaving of the Gothic architecture with figures of angels, the spirituality of the Gothic age was demonstrated in a highly individual manner.

Many of the works by Edward Burne-Jones, the most important English artist in this context, were also inspired by medieval art. More than any of the other Pre-Raphaelites, his prime interest lay in the renewal of Christian art. Before devoting himself to art, Burne-Jones studied Theology at Oxford, where he met William Morris. He joined the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in London and became a pupil of Rossetti. Like Rossetti, he worked from 1861 as a designer for William Morris's newly founded company *Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.* Morris's goal was to produce high-quality objects modeled on medieval crafts which would also satisfy the highest artistic requirements. He saw these works of "genuine and attractive nature"⁸ as the opposite of industrially manufactured goods. Thus the company made stained-glass windows for churches and private rooms, tapestries, ceramics, book illustrations, wallpaper, and fabrics. In the field of stained-glass windows in particular, Morris initiated a renewal of the genre with designs by Burne-Jones, Rossetti and other artists which harked back to medieval models (see figs. pp. 13, 54).

Among the tapestries, it was the *Adoration of the Magi* (see fig. pp. 78/79) which was in greatest demand. The first commission for the tapestry was issued in 1886 by the Rector of Exeter College in Oxford, where William Morris had studied.

In contrast with the traditional iconography, which describes the Three Kings as following the star, here an angel is holding the star in his hand like a precious object. Together with the Kings he gazes quietly and reverently at the newborn Infant. Hovering just above the ground and dressed in a light-colored liturgical robe, he is the central figure in the picture and provides a vertical division within the composition. The statue-like interpretation of the picture as a whole is very much in the tradition

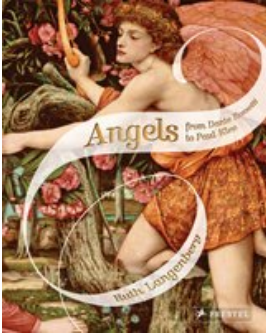


SIMEON SOLOMON

"Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego" (1863)

Watercolor, 33 x 23 cm
The Hearn Family Trust,
New York

In this scene from the Book of Daniel, one of God's angels saves Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from death in a furnace. King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to burn them alive because they refused to worship his god.



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