



Peter Darcy

# Awesome Angel Art

Through the Ages

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

3-4 – Intro – The Good and the Bad in Angel Art

## **5 –The Mother of All Icons**

6 – Andrei Rublev (ca. 1370–1430), *Trinity*

## **7 - Italian Angels**

8 – Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337), *Lamentation*

9 – Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469), *Annunciation*

10 – Fra Angelico (1431–35), *Coronation of the Virgin*

## **11 – French Angels**

12 – Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), *Angels of Sodom*

13 – James Tissot (1836-1902), *Satan Tempts Christ*

14 – Eugene Thirion (1839-1910), *Joan of Arc Listening to the Voices*

## **15 – Teutonic Angels**

16 – Jan Van Eyck (Flemish, 1395-1441), *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*

17 – Peter Breugel (Dutch, 1525-1569), *Fall of the Rebel Angels*

18 – Benjamin Gerritsz Cuyp (Dutch, 1612–1652), *Annunciation to Shepherds*

## **19 – English Angels**

20 – William Blake (1757-1827), *Resurrection: Angels Rolling Away the Stone from the Sepulchre*

21 – J.M.W. Turner (1789-1862), *The Angel, Standing in the Sun*

22 – Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), *The Star of Bethlehem*

## **23 – American Angels**

24 – Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933), *Guiding Angel*

25 – Henry O. Tanner (1859-1937), *The Annunciation*

26 – Thomas Blackshear II (1955-present), *Watchers in the Night*

27 – Our Lady's Praetorian Guard

28-29 – Conclusion and Image Credits

# INTRO – THE GOOD AND THE BAD IN ANGEL ART

Most people misunderstand angels. That's because we have all been influenced by bad ideas about them.

Our culture tries to turn angels into happy, comfy, non-judgmental creatures made in our own image and likeness.

## A REALITY CHECK

- Angels are not fluffy images on holy cards.
- They're not chubby babies with wings or teenage girls playing violins.
- Their primary job is not to hover over children to keep them from falling off rickety bridges into rushing streams.
- According to the Bible, most of them don't even have wings!

Angels are incandescent fire – spiritual fire – for purifying and enlightening.

What you'll learn from this e-book is how the best angel art in the long Judeo-Christian tradition has emphasized this spiritual and powerful aspect of angels, not their fluffiness!

## THE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD ANGEL ART

There is good angel art and bad angel art. We already hinted at the bad ideas about them. In a nutshell:

- If art makes angels into cartoonish, buffoonish, childish, garish, or sentimentalized creatures, it's BAD angel art.

On the other hand:

- Any art that represents angels as truly spiritual beings in their powerful nature as servants of God and man is GOOD angel art.





Let's not minimize this challenge for artists. How can artists accurately represent purely spiritual, invisible beings on canvas or paper?

Angels are mysterious creatures, but any concept we have of them has to use material images to portray them. There's the dilemma.

Despite all this, the best artists always find ways of depicting angels in some recognizable form but also effectively highlighting something about their spiritual nature that tells you clearly that they are not human.

Angel art is not for amateurs. Only the best artists find that delicate fusion of the spiritual and the material when portraying angels.

### **ARTISTS AND PERIODS**

Due to space limitations we can only present a few select artists from history in our survey, but we consider the seventeen in this book to be among the most stunning examples of angel art from the Middle Ages to modern times.

The short explanations about the artists and imagery will hopefully whet your appetite to find out more about them!

The artists featured in these pages are the best of their periods: Russian, French, Germanic, English, and even American!

### **NATURES OF FIRE**

Many of the insights in these pages are drawn from Peter Darcy's 2021 book, *Natures of Fire: God's Magnificent Angels*, about which we'll have more to say at the end.

Enjoy this e-book as a brief glimpse into heaven and into the wonder of God's most glorious creatures.



**THE MOTHER OF ALL ICONS**



# RUBLEV'S *TRINITY*

Andrei Rublev (ca. 1370–1430), is Russia's premier iconographer. His art had a profound influence on icon painting in the late Middle Ages and beyond. His masterpiece, the Trinity, can be seen today in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and is considered the mother of all holy icons.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

The three angels who visited Abraham (Genesis 18) are depicted as representatives of the Trinity. They are identical in their facial features indicating the unity of the One God but dressed and positioned differently to indicate their distinctions of Persons. God the Father is on the left in the gold of divinity; God the Son is in the center blessing the Eucharistic cup; God the Holy Spirit is on the far right dressed in the colors of air, water, and nature: He is the source of all life.

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Rublev captures the sublime mystery of angels in theologically-accurate images. His icon is a window into the divine life itself.

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# ITALIAN ANGELS

# GIOTTO'S *LAMENTATION*

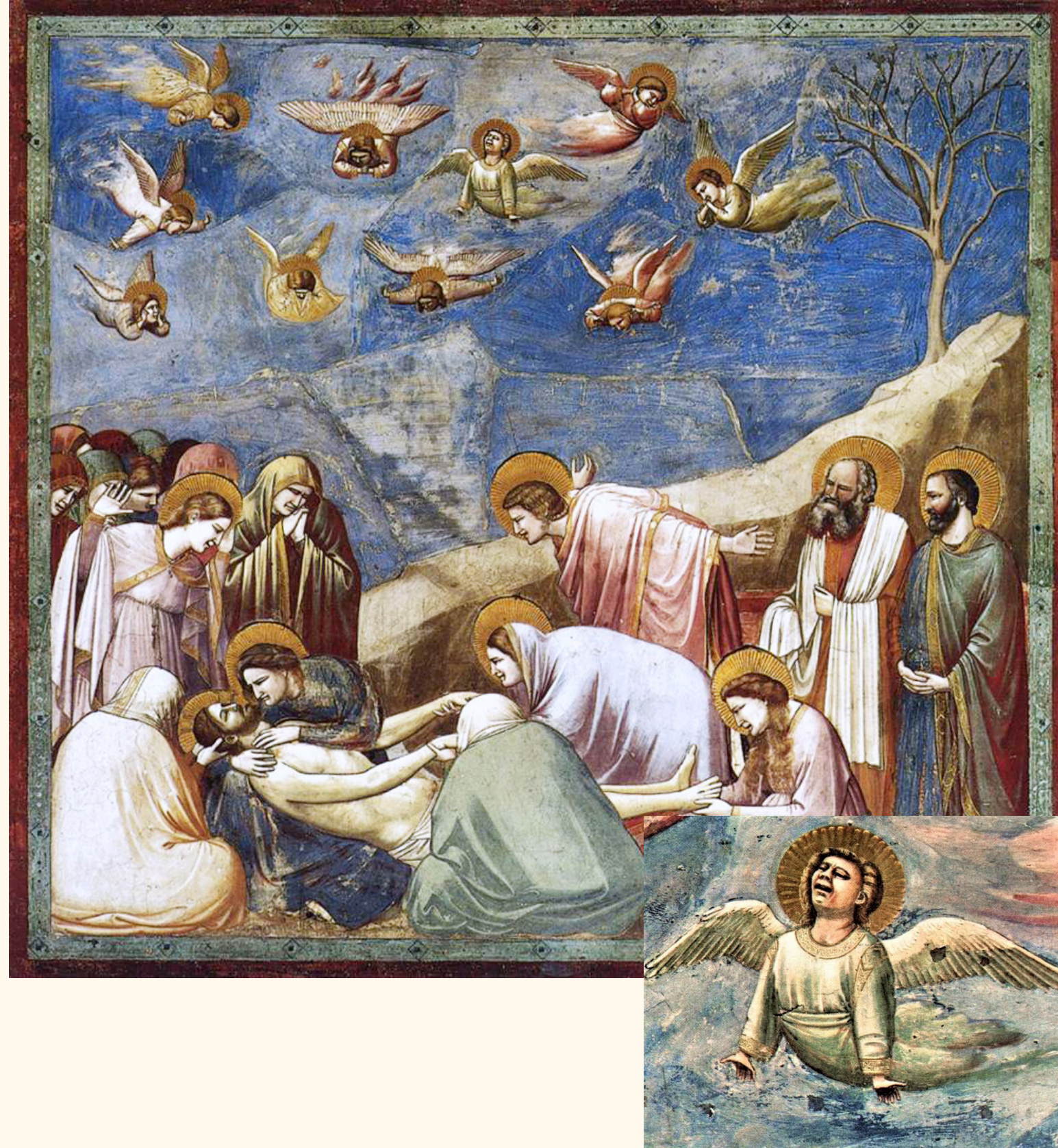
Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337), was a Florentine painter and architect whose thirty-nine extraordinary frescoes for the Arena Chapel in Padua established him as the preeminent artist of his day. Giotto also worked on the frescoes in the Basilica of St. Francis, in Assisi, where he is buried.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

As the Blessed Mother cradles the figure of her lifeless Son after the Crucifixion, the angels hovering above the scene express their sorrow in an intense lamentation. Giotto gives the angels realistic expressions of grief through facial and hand gestures, which draw the reader into their pathos. We don't often imagine angels weeping!

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Giotto conveys the angels' intimate involvement in the drama of salvation, not only for our Savior but for each of us as well. *Detail: Angel weeping.*



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# FRA FILIPPO LIPPI'S *ANNUNCIATION*

Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) was a Franciscan priest and one of the key artists of the Early Renaissance. He was a “colorful” figure in many ways. As a young man he was abducted by Muslims and held as a slave until he painted a portrait of his captor!

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

St. Gabriel is depicted as a handsome young man with curly hair and an innocent face. He bows his head in the presence of his Queen. Gabriel’s name means “strength of God” in Hebrew, so he is dressed in the garb of a military man with stiff collar, breast-plate, and shoulder epaulets. His other colors symbolize heaven: tunic (white), mantle (red), halo (gold). His blessing mirrors the Father’s hand that extends down from heaven at the top of the scene.



## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Lippi’s Gabriel is the perfect messenger, who communicates the strength of God and deep angelic beauty through the holy missions of announcing and blessing – all work of angels.

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# FRA ANGELICO'S *CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN*

Fra Angelico (1431–35) prayed and fasted each time he took up his brush to paint. His innumerable renderings of Jesus Christ with saints and angels decorate churches throughout Italy. Perhaps his favorite artistic subject was the Blessed Virgin Mary.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

This detail of angels comes from Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* and shows the angels playing heavenly instruments in honor of their Queen. The whole painting is rendered in gold and exudes the glory of the heavenly host. These angels are members of the "communion of saints" encompassing both the angels and saints in heaven and the members of the Church on earth.

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Fra Angelico captures the innocence (spiritual purity) of the angels by making them all appear as children. The angels as music-makers points to their vocation as ministers of divine beauty.



*Above: Detail of angels  
Right: Full painting*

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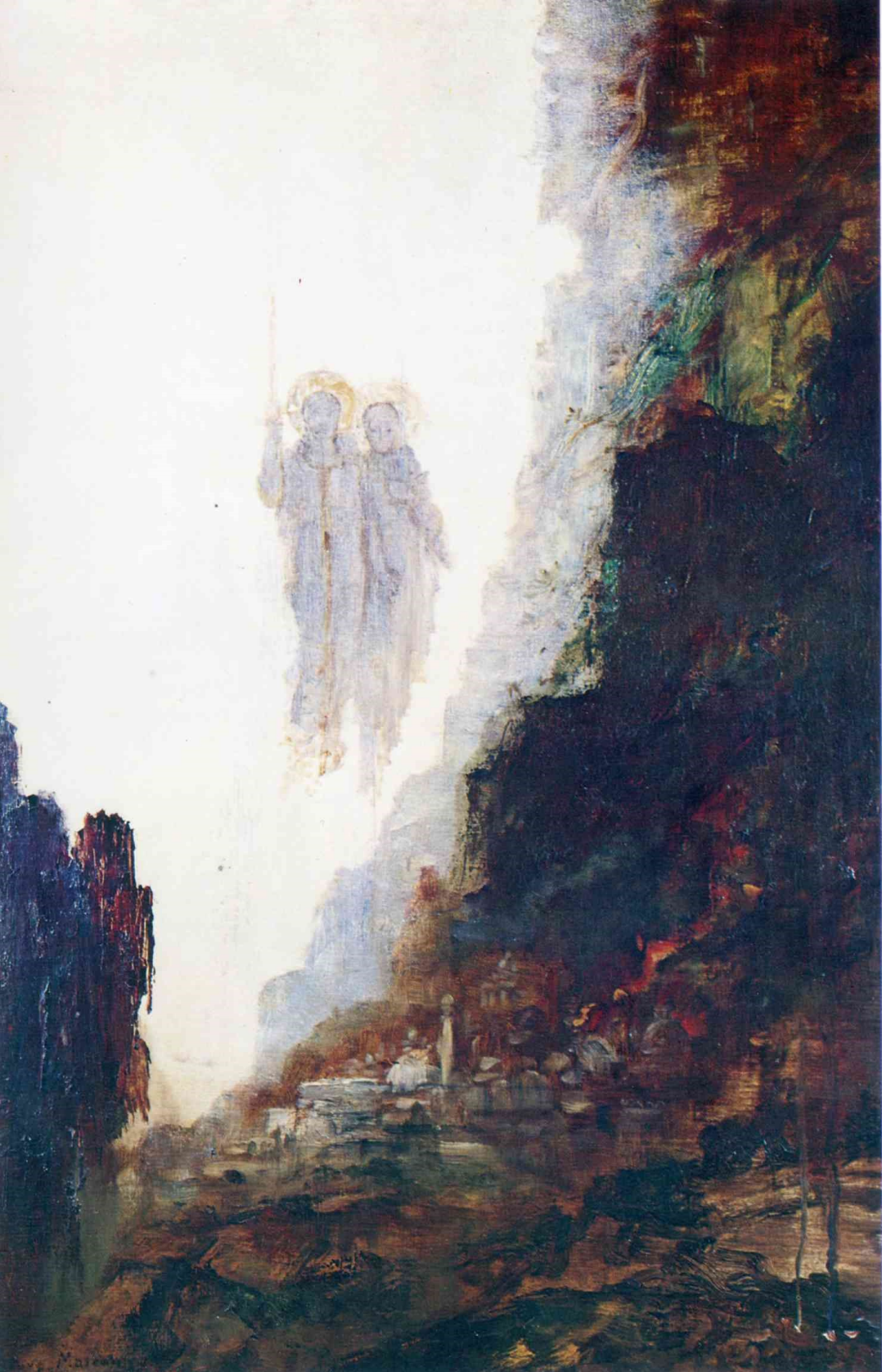
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# FRENCH ANGELS



# MOREAU'S *ANGELS OF SODOM*

Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) was a Symbolist painter of the 19th century who specialized in mythical and religious themes. He was remarkably prolific: in his lifetime he produced over 15,000 paintings, watercolors, and drawings!

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

The angels who hover over Sodom as it burns (Genesis 19) are angels of wrath who figure prominently in several other places in the Old Testament (particularly in Exodus 12 and 2 Kings 19). Appropriately, they take on a spectral form in this scene, displaying the same colors as the rising smoke. We know they are holy angels because they have haloes. The raised sword indicates that the angels have faithfully carried out their mission and are returning to God.

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Moreau's striking scene highlights one of the functions of angels: executing divine judgment. The image communicates, in remarkable imagery, that angels are ethereal, powerful, holy, separated from all wickedness, and ministers of God's implacable will.

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# TISSOT'S *SATAN TEMPTS JESUS*

James Tissot (1836-1902) was a popular French painter in his day. He experienced a reversion to his Catholic faith in 1885 and afterward traveled to the Holy Land to paint a series of 350 watercolors about the life of Christ. The images are remarkable, among other things, for their highly authentic depictions of Middle Eastern people and places.

## **WHAT TO LOOK FOR:**

The frightening image of Christ's Temptation shows an angelic being, Satan, transporting Jesus to the Parapet of the Temple (Luke 4:9). The evil one is transparent but visible, hideous in appearance, and huge compared to the human Jesus. Satan is shown as a winged creature (with bat wings) and total mobility in flight, indicating he is a fallen angel of a superior status.

## **WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:**

Tissot's Temptation scene exhorts us never to forget that Satan still has immense, malicious power in his angelic nature. He is capable of tempting even God Himself.



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## THIRION'S *JOAN OF ARC LISTENING TO THE VOICES*

The 19th century French painter, Eugène Thirion (1839-1910), followed the artistic trends of his day and painted mostly mythological and religious art. His family was influential in French society, and his uncle served as President of Venezuela in the 1840s.

### **WHAT TO LOOK FOR:**

Here, St. Michael the Archangel descends from on high and floats on a cloud behind the young Joan of Arc, whispering in her ear. He holds a sword in one hand and points in the direction of a distant battlefield with the other. His outstretched hand extends to the brightest spot of light on the canvas. A second angelic being towers above them – with armor, banner, and trumpet – calling Joan to war.

### **WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:**

Angels often call people to their true vocations. Joan letting drop the spindle from her left hand indicates that she is abandoning her human occupations to obey the angel's message, which is God's will for her.

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# TEUTONIC ANGELS

# VAN EYCK'S *ADORATION OF THE MYSTIC LAMB*

Jan Van Eyck (Flemish, 1395-1441) initiated what is called the “Northern Renaissance” in Europe which focused on religious simplicity and humble, human scenes, a counterpoint to the much more expressive Italian Renaissance. Jan and his brother Hubert painted the huge Ghent Altarpiece, from which this detail is taken.

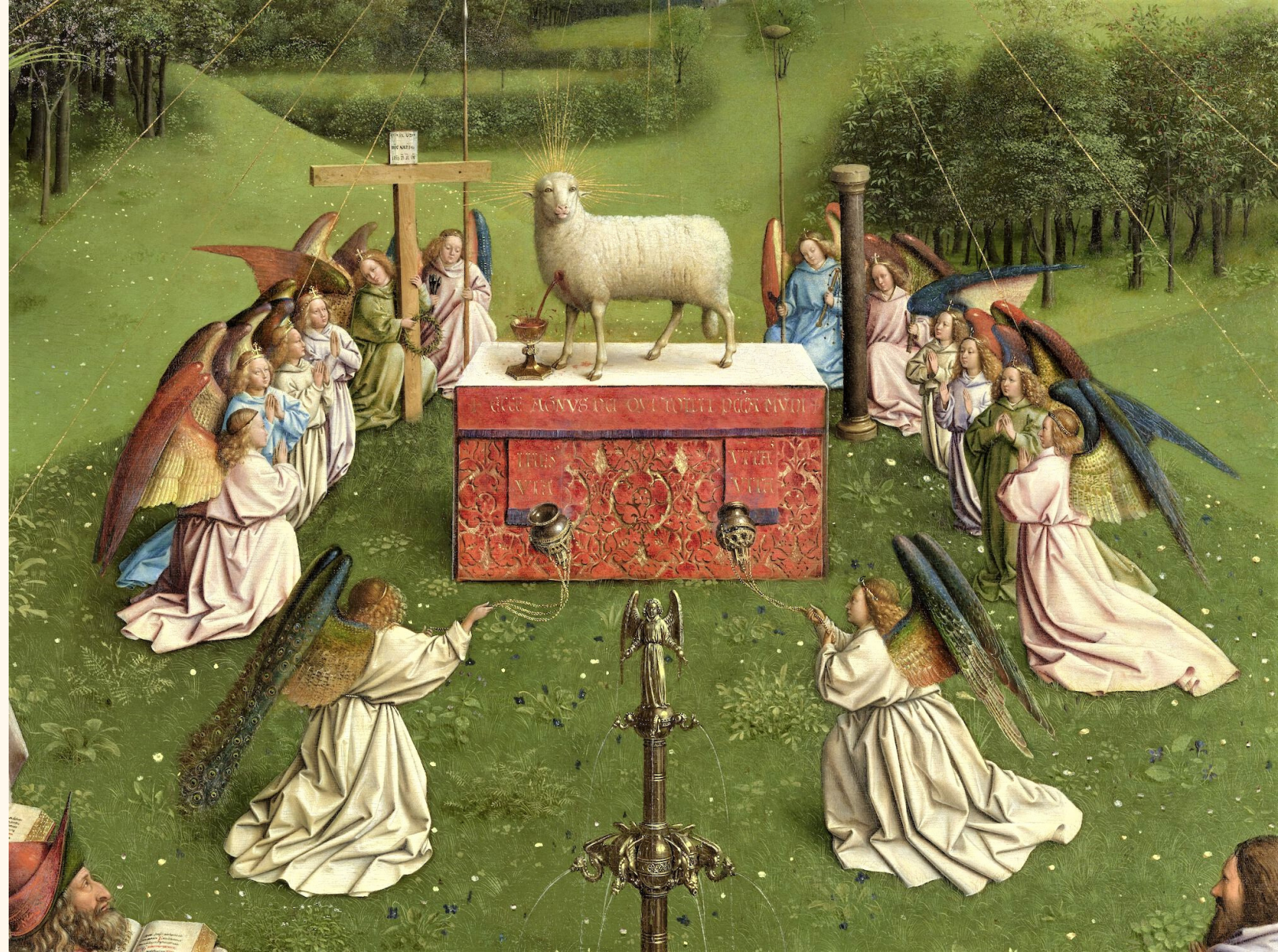
## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Fourteen angels surround the altar in this scene. The four in back hold symbols of the passion, the four on either side fold their hands in prayer, and the two in front swing thuribles with incense in the direction of the Lamb. These angels with different colored garments and a variety of wing styles form the inner circle of heavenly worship.

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Van Eyck shows angels doing what angels do best: they worship God.

[View the amazing 100 billion pixel restoration project of the Ghent Altarpiece: [Closer to Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece Restored.](#)]



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# BREUGEL'S *FALL OF THE REBEL ANGELS*

Peter Breugel, the Elder (1525-1569) was a Dutch Renaissance painter who is known for his fantastic imagery and sometimes grotesque depictions of evil. Breugel's "Fall of the Rebel Angels" (1562) follows in the line of the more famous "Garden of Earthly Delights" (ca. 1510) of the earlier Dutch artist, Hieronymous Bosch.

## **WHAT TO LOOK FOR:**

The good angels, backlit by bright sun and sky, occupy the top half of this painting as they skewer and cast the deformed figures of fallen angels into

the darkness (see Revelation 12). St. Michael occupies center stage with majestic blue robe, armor, and sword. The two large angels in white are the other Archangels, Gabriel and Raphael. Notice the trumpeting angels at the top of the canvas dressed in priestly garments. They are announcing the expulsion of Satan and the apostate angels from heaven.

## **WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:**

Breugel's angels show the stark contrast between light and darkness, good and evil, in the angelic world. There is no middle ground.

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# CUYP'S *ANNUNCIATION TO SHEPHERDS*

The Dutch Golden Age occurred during the 1600s, following the Italian Renaissance. The more famous Dutch artist, Rembrandt, predated Benjamin Gerritsz Cuyp (1612–1652) by half a generation but Cuyp's style resembled that of the great master. For such a short life, Cuyp left an amazing number of quality paintings, including his *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, a theme he painted more than two dozen times.

## **WHAT TO LOOK FOR:**

The dark-light style of Baroque Era painting (known as *chiaroscuro*) is on full display here with the angel as the centerpiece whose light illuminates the figures below to various degrees. We can even see vague outlines of the sheep, several of whom seem to look up curiously at the angel.

## **WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:**

Cuyp captures angels as mysterious messengers of divine light piercing the darkness of this world. Being light-bearers is part-and-parcel of their role of carrying enlightening messages to men – and apparently to animals as well!



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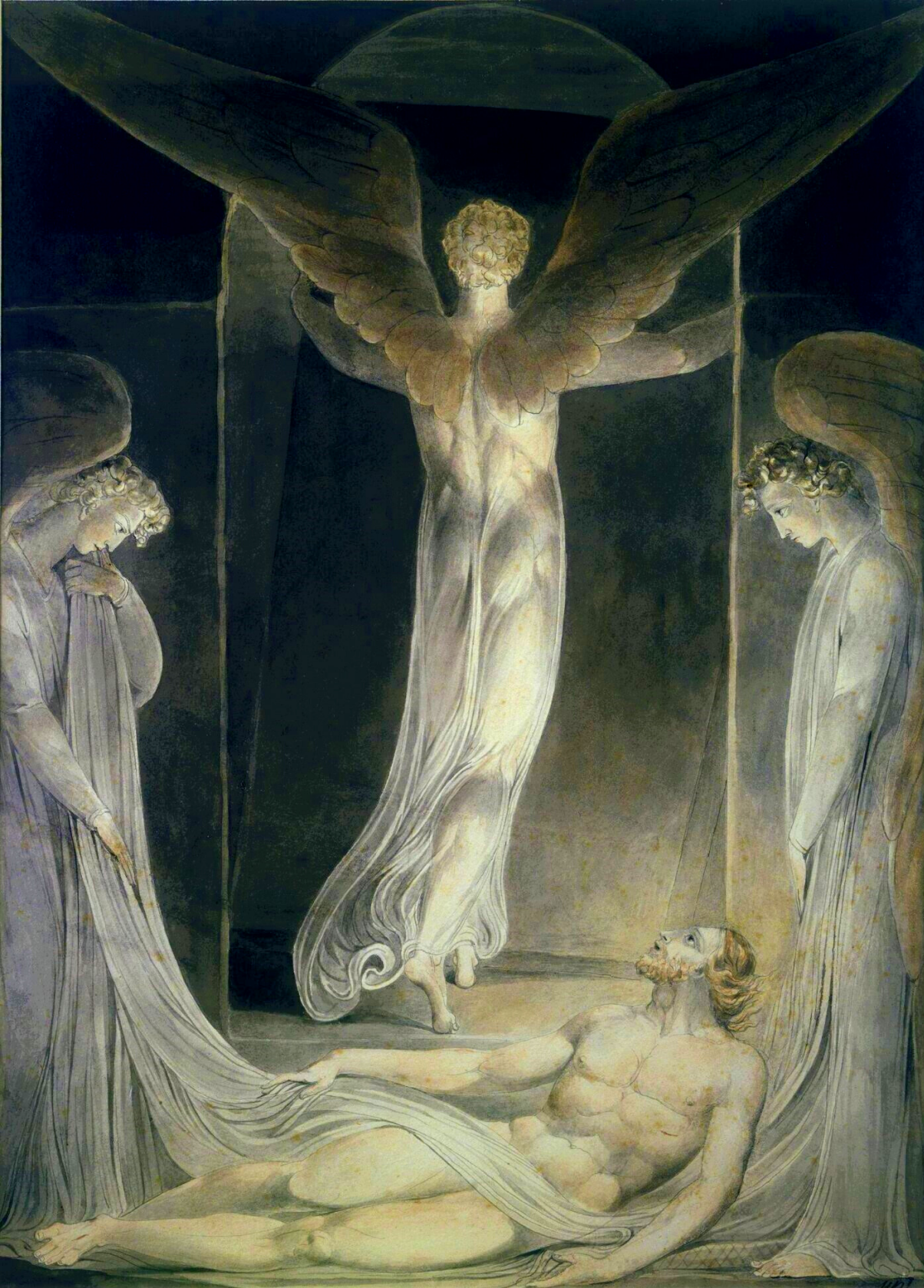
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# ENGLISH ANGELS



## BLAKE'S *RESURRECTION: ANGELS ROLLING AWAY THE STONE FROM THE SEPULCHRE*

English poet, artist, and illustrator, William Blake (1757-1827), was a young man at the time of the American Revolution and was a friend of Thomas Paine. Blake believed he was gifted with mystical visions from his youth and translated many of those visions into voluminous works of religious art and poetry.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

The Gospel of Matthew (28:2-4) provides a glorious glimpse of the angel who descended from heaven like lightning and rolled away the stone from Christ's tomb. In an ingenious twist on Matthew's account, Blake shows the mighty angel opening the tomb from the inside. Our Lord, at the moment of His awakening, is flanked by two reverent angels, who are mentioned by the three other gospels.

### WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Blake's image expresses a fundamental truth of our faith: "Christ is the center of the angelic world. They are his angels" (*Catechism*, 331). They serve Him devotedly and without reserve.

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# TURNER'S *THE ANGEL, STANDING IN THE SUN*

Historian Paul Johnson considered the English Romantic artist, J.M.W. Turner (1789-1862), to have no master. Turner was utterly unique in his ability to use color and light, eventually paving the way for the French Impressionists in the latter half of the 19th century. Turner is most famous for his vast seascapes and landscapes, but his *Angel, Standing in the Sun* may very literally be called a heaven-scape.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

The Book of Revelation speaks of a mysterious angel who announces the final battle of Armageddon. He is standing in the sun itself. With sword upraised, the angel summons the birds (above) to feast on the spoils of war (see Rev 19:17-18). The obscurity of the imagery and the horrified humans (below) reflect the chaos and terror of the End Times.

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Pure spiritual beings are not of this world. A being who can literally stand in the sun is more powerful than any earthly force.



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# BURNE-JONES'S *STAR OF BETHLEHEM*

Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) was a member of the short-lived Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1850s) in England, whose adherents sought to revolutionize the over-stylized art of the Romantic period by a return to realism and traditional religious themes. His *Star of Bethlehem* holds the distinction as the largest watercolor painting in the world.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

The Holy Family is assembled on the left, and the Magi with their crowns and gifts on the right. In the very center, unnoticed by the humans, is a majestic angel cradling the star that guided the Wise Men to Jesus.

Notice that this angel in priestly garb does not stand on the ground but hovers over the scene. He who holds the star in his hands also adores the Christ Child.

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Burne-Jones expresses the truth that God has given His angels custody over the elements of the celestial world. It has been suggested elsewhere that the *Star of Bethlehem* is actually an angel.

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# AMERICAN ANGELS

# TIFFANY'S *GUIDING ANGEL*

One of America's greatest creative geniuses was Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) whose shimmering stained glass creations decorate churches and homes throughout this country. He inherited the famous jewelry business, Tiffany and Co., from his father in 1902 and expanded the work to include every manner of art and craft.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Tiffany's Guiding Angel depicts the role of guardian angels in the life of every soul created by God. This angel's radiant wings surround and encompass his charge, symbolizing his silent protection of body and soul. The girl places her hand in his and looks upwards to heaven, her final destination. The angel is literally leading her by the hand while keeping his eyes on the road ahead.

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Tiffany's image effectively expresses our guardian angels' guidance on the perilous journey through life. Their guiding influence is real even when we cannot see them at our side.



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# TANNER'S *THE ANNUNCIATION*

The first African-American artist who received recognition in the US was Henry O. Tanner (1859-1937). His mother was born into slavery but fled to the free north where she married his father, a Methodist preacher. These elements of Tanner's personal history would find their way into his vivid artistic style. Tanner lived most of his adult life in Paris, where he was highly influenced by the Impressionist school.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Tanner's *Annunciation* is striking in the way it depicts the Archangel Gabriel as a single vertical bar or flash of light, without earthly features. The Virgin is not overwhelmed by the light but sits with a concave, receptive posture totally fixed on the messenger. She has clearly Semitic features and sits

against a backdrop of red, anticipating her future experience of the Passion.

## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Tanner's portrayal emphasizes the mystical and mysterious nature of angels, which is beautifully rendered as spiritual fire and light.

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# BLACKSHEAR'S *WATCHERS IN THE NIGHT*

Since the late '70s, Thomas Blackshear II (1955-present) has been the illustrator for at least six major series of postage stamps commissioned by the United States Postal Service. Blackshear pioneered the genre called Western Nouveau art with his exquisite series of Native American figures.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Holding a flame and a spear, this angel stands with military bearing over a sleeping child. The child is unaware of his “watcher in the night” yet, his spiritual guardian remains vigilant at all times to protect him from the power of evil. The angel is featured as a young man in his prime, the symbol of strength. The girded belt around his waist indicates he is ever ready for battle.



## WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

Blackshear captures the essence of angelic attentiveness, power, and generosity in this image. The devil “never sleeps” in his urge to destroy God’s children, so these spiritual beings are constantly awake and do more than we will ever know to protect our souls.

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## OUR LADY'S *PRAETORIAN GUARD*

Standing sentinel on Tepeyac Hill overlooking Mexico City are four monumental sculptures of the Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael. The fourth is Uriel, a name that means "Light of God." Tepeyac is the hill on which the Virgin Mary, known as Our Lady of Guadalupe, appeared to an Aztec Indian named Juan Diego in 1531.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

This statute of Michael the Archangel holds pride of place on this platform. He is magnificent and strong, with grim determination in his features fitting the task in which he is engaged. His sword is not earthly. It issues in fire as it pierces the open mouth of the dragon. He is an angel to reckon with. Michael vindicates the rights of God and protects the Church on earth.

### WHY THIS IS GOOD ANGEL ART:

This sculpture communicates the angelic nature of spiritual fire: it is for enlightening the good and purging the bad. The four archangels together form a sort of praetorian guard of the holy place that was touched by the Queen of Angels.

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# CONCLUSION

Hopefully, this brief glimpse into the spiritual nature of angels – as illustrated by some of history’s greatest artists – will inflame your heart with a deep love for God’s most magnificent creations. Our silent companions on the spiritual journey are usually more intent on getting us to heaven than we are!

If you’ve enjoyed this e-book, feel free to pass it on – spiritual fire is contagious. And be assured of my prayers. ~ Peter Darcy, 2022.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Darcy is an avid writer and editor who spent thirty years as a missionary and teacher. His great passion is educating others about the power of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. In 2020 he launched the Sacred Windows initiative for this purpose.

Peter is the author of ten books, of which *Natures of Fire: God’s Magnificent Angels* (2021) is his most recent. He also published *The Seven Leadership Virtues of Joan of Arc* and *No-Nonsense Non-Profit: Leadership Principles for Church & Charity* in 2020.

## Follow Peter on the Web

Author website: <https://peterdarcywriting.com/> | Sacred Windows: <https://sacredwindows.com/>

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Natures of Fire: God’s Magnificent Angels* was published on Easter of 2021 and explains in a more comprehensive way the powerful nature of angels. It draws on the Church’s vast and rich theological Tradition about angels.

It is written for the common believer, not the theologian, so everyone will find something of value in its pages. The book’s final chapters deal with some of the art we have summarized in this e-book.

You can order *Natures of Fire* at Peter Darcy’s Amazon Author Page [here](#).



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