



# Picturing the Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation in the Arts over Two Millennia

*By Natasha O'Hear, Anthony O'Hear*

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## **Picturing the Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation in the Arts over Two Millennia** By Natasha O'Hear, Anthony O'Hear

The book of Revelation has been a source of continual fascination for nearly two thousand years. Concepts such as the Lamb of God, the Four Horsemen, the Seventh Seal, the Beasts and Antichrist, the Whore of Babylon, Armageddon, the Millennium, the Last Judgement, the New Jerusalem, and the ubiquitous angels of the Apocalypse have captured the popular imagination. One can hardly open a newspaper or click on a news site without reading about impending financial or climate-change Armageddon, while the concept of the Four Horsemen pervades popular music, gaming, and satire. Yet few people know much about either the basic meaning or original context of these concepts or the multiplicity of different ways in which they have been interpreted by visual artists in particular. The visual history of this most widely illustrated of all the biblical books deserves greater attention.

This book fills these gaps in a striking and original way by means of ten concise thematic chapters which explain the origins of these concepts from the book of Revelation in an accessible way. These explanations are augmented and developed via a carefully selected sample of the ways in which the concepts have been treated by artists through the centuries. The 120 visual examples are drawn from a wide range of time periods and media including the ninth-century Trier Apocalypse, thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman Apocalypse Manuscripts such as the Lambeth and Trinity Apocalypses, the fourteenth-century Angers Apocalypse Tapestry, fifteenth-century Apocalypse altarpieces by Van Eyck and Memling, Dürer and Cranach's sixteenth-century Apocalypse woodcuts, and more recently a range of works by William Blake, J.M.W. Turner, Max Beckmann, as well as film posters and film stills, cartoons, and children's book illustrations. The final chapter demonstrates the continuing resonance of all the themes in contemporary religious, political, and popular thinking, while throughout the book a contrast will be drawn between those readers of Revelation who have seen it in terms of earthly revolutions in the here and now, and those who have adopted a more spiritual, other-worldly approach.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"The Apocalypse is the glorious conclusion to the story of our redemption, or the moment when the Bible soars off into sci-fi: take your pick. The O'Hears, father and daughter, trace the extraordinary imaginative impact of the last book of the Bible on visual artists. While exploring the dynamic power of this final book of Scripture they take us on an exciting journey, from Dürer to D. H. Lawrence and from Memling to Ingmar Bergman. Apocalypse is a text which yields so many interpretations that it is bound to be puzzling, but this gentle, artistic book is a tribute to the visionary of Patmos' abiding power to inspire." --A.N. Wilson

"Revelation, the Bible's one visionary book, is often dismissed either as a fantasy for fundamentalists or as a literary and theological aberration. In this erudite and endlessly fascinating book, Natasha and Anthony O'Hear show that it is in fact one of the great books of the world, a rich source of imagery, metaphor, and moral insight that has inspired artists and thinkers of every age; and should inspire everybody with its message of gentle resistance to malign power." --Bryan Appleyard

"Natasha and Anthony O'Hear are to be congratulated for their book on Revelation, which takes as its starting point its central theme -- its visionary claim. It offers a very necessary reminder that the visual character of this remarkable text can often be best communicated through art, music, and poetry, which they illustrate so well. Not only does it introduce us to the ways in which this apocalyptic text has stimulated some of the most dramatic and inspired paintings down the centuries, but it also helps us get some sense of why this book has grasped the imagination of readers past and present. It is based on the best modern scholarship and presents Revelation to the general reader, primarily through the riches of the art it has inspired. Readers will find much here to treasure which will stimulate further reflection." --Professor Christopher Rowland, Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture, 1991-2014

"This study of the Book of Revelation in the Arts over two millennium is a true blast to the modern mind and imagination." --*Northern Echo*

"Natasha and Anthony O'Hear, a father and daughter team of theologian and philosopher, both fascinated by artistic achievement, [provide] a clear diagram of Revelation's contents; it's worth keeping a bookmark there to keep a handle on John's programme . . . Like the Book of Revelation itself, you don't have to read this study in a linear fashion: you could pick out your favourite artist, composer or novelist from the index, and see how successive episodes of the vision have fired them." --*Times*

"Deliciously prescient and yet extraordinarily civilised . . . father and daughter team Anthony and Natasha

O'Hear really get to grips with all things apocalyptic by dint of applying a beautifully polished magnifying glass to the world's ur-apocalyptic text, Revelation . . . The O'Hears are scrupulously fair-minded and reasonable. They are inclusive. They are erudite (a healthy sprinkling of 'eschatons' 'macro-narratives' litters the text) but never intimidating . . . They are kind. They are measured. And this is what makes *Picturing the Apocalypse* such an engrossing, delightful and ultimately uplifting read . . . Perhaps if one lesson alone might be learned from the O'Hears' thoughtful and thought-provoking enterprise, it's that beauty (and, by extension, art), while in some senses perfectly defenceless, can never fail to bring us closer to the sublime." - *Spectator*, Nicola Barker

"Natasha and Anthony O'Hear have produced a fascinating book on how the Apocalypse or the Book of Revelation has figured in the Arts for 2,000 years." --*The Church of England Newspaper*

#### About the Author

**Natasha O'Hear** specialises in artistic interpretations of the Book of Revelation. She completed a PhD on the subject at Oxford University in 2008 and this led to her first monograph with OUP in 2011 *Contrasting Images of the Book of Revelation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art: A Case Study in Visual Exegesis*. She has also published several articles on the subject. Having formerly held a Lectureship in New Testament Theology at Worcester College, Oxford, she now teaches at Burlington Danes Academy in West London. Natasha has recently been appointed Honorary Lecturer in Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St Andrews

**Anthony O'Hear** is Professor of Philosophy at Buckingham University and Director of the Royal Institute of Philosophy. He has been a government advisor on education to five secretaries of state for education. He has been editor of the journal *Philosophy* since 1995, and is the author of many books and articles including *The Great Books: From The Iliad and The Odyssey to Goethe's Faust: A Journey Through 2,500 Years of the West's Classic Literature* (Icon Books, 2007), *Plato's Children* (Gordon Square, 2005), and *Philosophy in the New Century* (Continuum, 2001).

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