

# Apocalypse

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Through me the way into the suffering city,  
Through me the way to the eternal pain,  
Through me the way that runs among the lost.  
Justice urged on my high artificer;  
My maker was divine authority,  
The highest wisdom, and the primal love.  
Before me nothing but eternal things were made,  
And I endure eternally.  
Abandon every hope, ye who enter here.

– Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*  
Inscription on the Gate to Hell, Canto III

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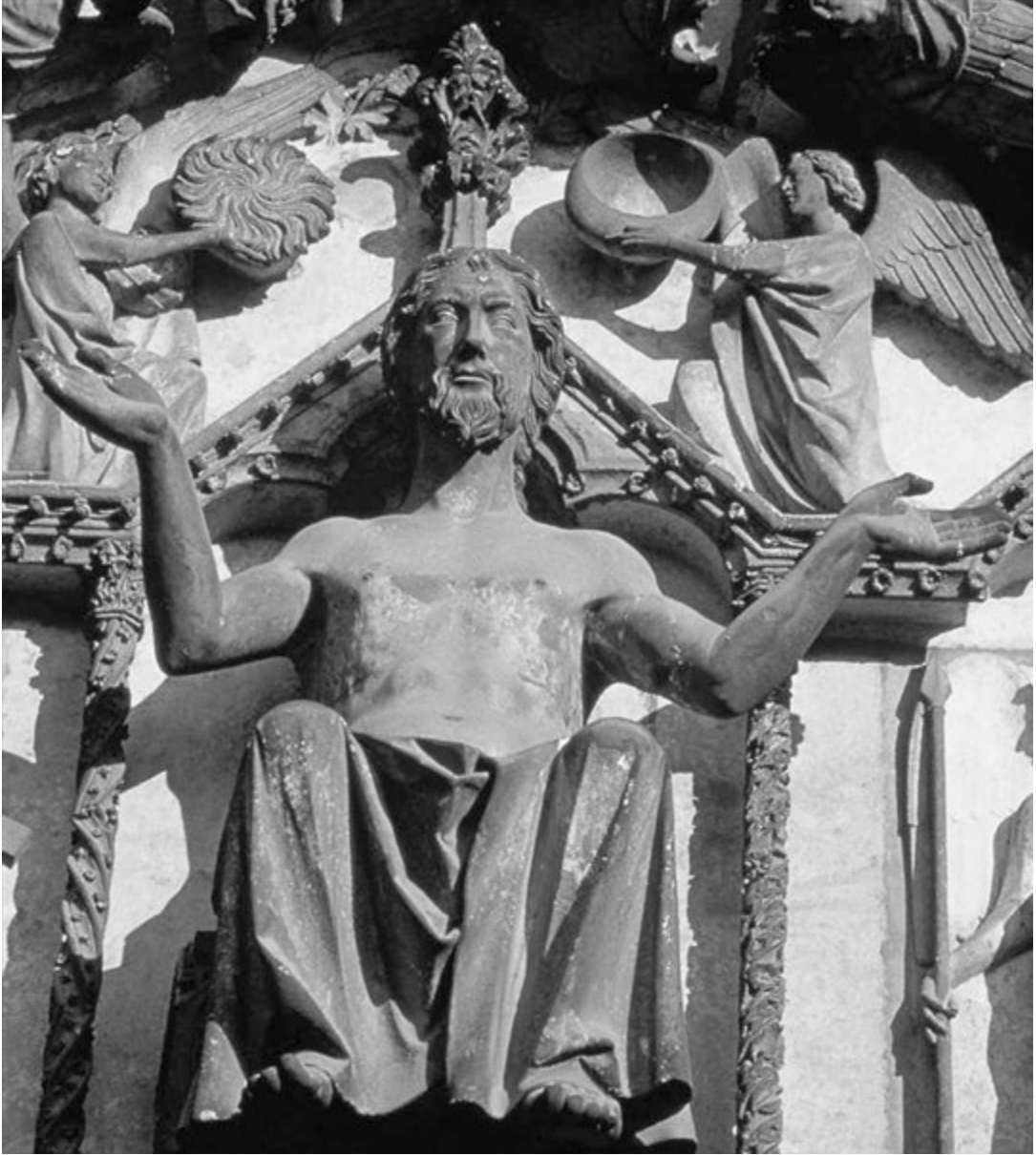
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# Selected Dates of Apocalyptic Predictions

- c. 34 CE The first Christian church awaits the return of Jesus Christ, basing their expectation on Jesus' own words: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."
- 31 December 999 At the end of the first millennium a wave of panic and apocalyptic gloom swept through the Christian West. Pope Sylvester II supposedly celebrated a fearful mass on the eve of the New Year, fully expecting the world to end.
- 1000 Taking the year 0 as the beginning of God's millennial kingdom, apocalypticists expected the year 1000 to bring the return of Satan and his last rebellion. Again, Europe was swept by mass hysteria and panic.
- 1033 Monk and chronicler Rodulfus Glaber of Burgundy modified the calculations of previous apocalypticists, using the year of Jesus' death as the beginning of God's kingdom on earth and wrote about the coming end-times. His expectation was strongly fuelled by his observations of society: a drought plagued Europe and the result was something that many saw as a "decline of civilisation". This era saw many reports about cannibalism, heretical activities, and satanic worship.
- 1186 In 1184, a strange letter made its rounds through intellectual circles, announcing that the world would be severely depopulated two years later due to natural catastrophes caused by a specific constellation of planets. Variants of the so-called "Toledo Letter" were still circulated, even centuries later.

- 1666 The obvious numerical connection of this date to the number of the beast leads many believers once more to assume that the apocalypse would finally begin. In the front row of these believers was Christopher Columbus, who thought that his last voyage would carry him to paradise. A severe drought in England and the Great Fire of London added to the apocalyptic mood of 1666.
- 1874 The Jehovah's Witnesses, who had recently emerged from the Bible Student Movement, starts a long series of apocalypse predictions with announcing the end for 1874. Before the central council distanced itself from any kind of prediction, several more years were marked for Armageddon and rapture: 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1941, 1974, 1981 and 1999.
- 18 May 1910 The reappearance of Halley's Comet, which was rumoured to destroy humanity by releasing cyanide gas into earth's atmosphere, causes panic once more. A few con-men used this fully unfounded fear to sell "comet pills" to unassuming people with the promise that they would protect them from the poisonous gas.
- 1969 Infamous hippy-sectarian Charles Manson was obsessed by the idea that the world was determined to end in a full-scale race war. Not only did he prophesise these events, but he actively attempted to make them come to pass by commanding his disciples to commit high-profile murders and blame African Americans for the crimes. Manson is currently serving a life-sentence in a Californian jail.



**Hieronymus Bosch**

*The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (triptych, central panel)

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1505-1506

Oil on panel

Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

1999-2000 Similarly to the years 999 and 1000, the years before the third millennium brought a flood of apocalyptic forecasts and revisions of old predictions. Meteors hitting earth, natural catastrophes destroying large parts of the world, the usual religiously inspired raptures or aliens visiting/invading the planet – these are just some of the possible scenarios that were named. Well-known prophets of doom were Nostradamus, Isaac Newton and fashion designer Paco Rabanne.

21 March 2011 Radio-preacher Harold Camping, after having failed with his apocalypse-prediction for 1994, announces rapture again for 21 May 2011. Although this announcement was met with general derision, his followers quit their jobs and donated large sums of money to help finance an awareness-campaign for the coming Judgement Day.

21/23 December 2012 According to the counting-system of the Mayan calendar, 21 or 23 December 2012 sees the reappearance of a specific date that also marks the first day of creation. Many esoteric and pseudo-scientific interpretations assume this to be an indicator of yet another apocalypse. These theories were made popular by the catastrophe movie *2012*.

2076 The writings of Beda Venerabilis, a Northumbrian monk, foretell that the 6000<sup>th</sup> year since the biblical creation will be the year 2076. Believing that God created the world only to last 6000 years, he assumed this to be the final year on earth. Correspondingly, 2076 also marks the year 1500 in the Islamic calendar which holds an apocalyptic relevance for some Sufi-groups.





## **Beliefs about the end of the world through the ages**

Here we will explore the curious phenomenon of the fear of the end of the world which has repeatedly appeared throughout the ages. All over the world and in every language, there has never been a more widely discussed subject.



### **The Angel of the Abyss and Locusts**

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Magius, c. 950

From the Morgan Beatus manuscript  
of the Commentary on the Apocalypse  
Manuscript on parchment, 38.1 x 28.2 cm  
The Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York





As to the dogma “Credo Resurrectionem Carnis”, the addresses of the fathers of the Church before the council assembled in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, were, on the whole, in accord with the opinion expressed by the cardinal archbishop of Paris. The clause “et vitam setemam” was tacitly ignored in view of the possible discoveries in astronomy and psychology.



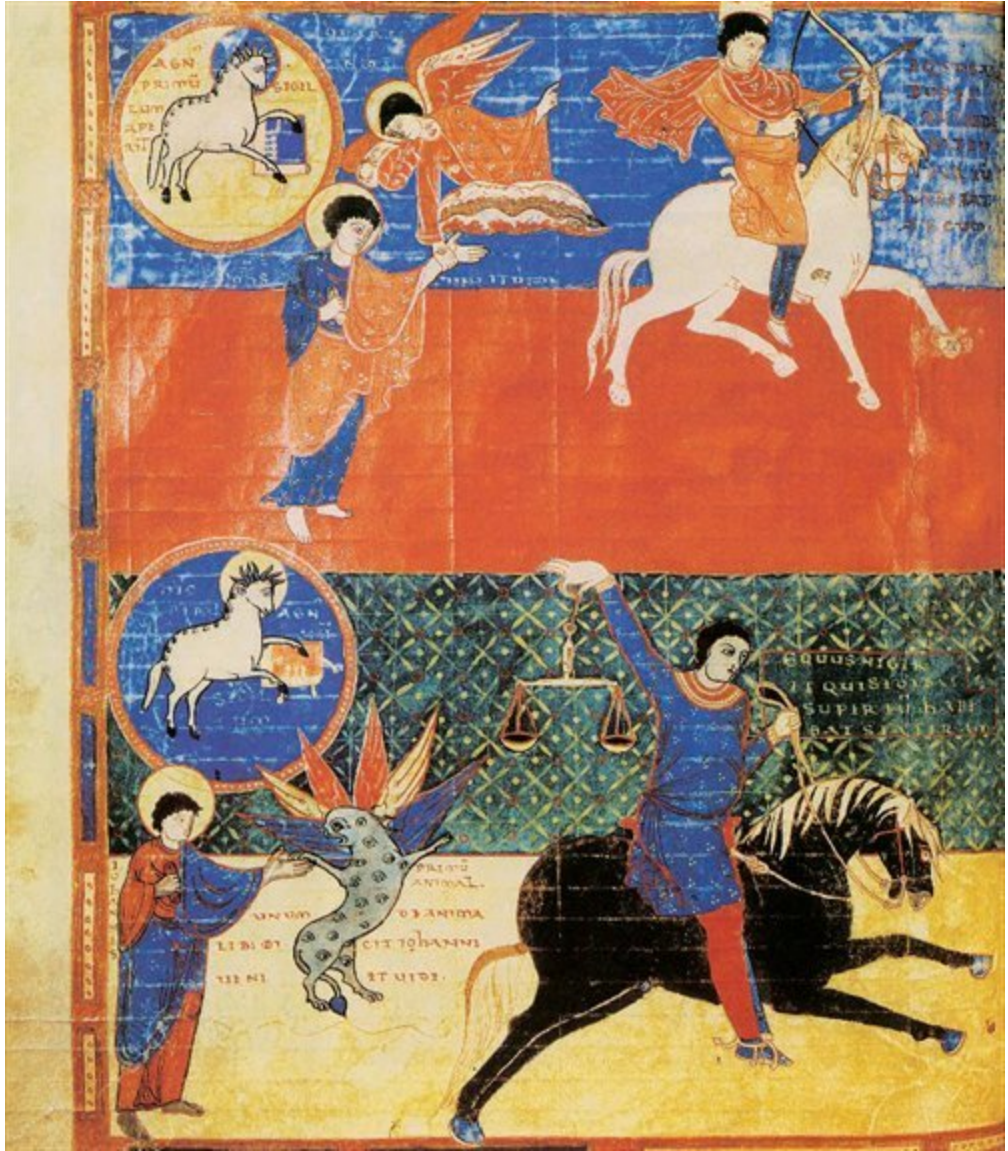
### The Four Horsemen Appear at the Opening of the First Four Seals

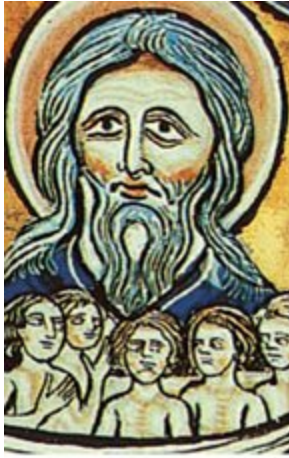
Attributed to Stephanus Garsia Placidus,  
c. 1060

Illustration from the Beatus of Saint-Sever  
manuscript

Illumination on parchment

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris





As it were, these addresses epitomised the history of the doctrine of the end of the world as held by the Christian Church throughout the centuries.

This history is interesting, for it is also the history of the human mind face to face with its own destiny, and we believe it of sufficient importance to devote ample attention to it.



Page from the Psalter of Blanche of Castile

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c. 1230

Illuminated manuscript, 28 x 22 cm

Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris





The existence of a profound and tenacious faith is as old as the centuries, and it is a notable fact that all religions, irrespective of Christian dogma, have opened the same door from this mortal life upon the unknown which lies beyond, it is the door in the *Divine Comedy* by Dante, although the conceptions of paradise, hell, and purgatory peculiar to the Christian Church, are not universal.



### John on Patmos Woken by the Angel

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Illustration from “The Douce Apocalypse”,  
c. 1270

Illumination

University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford







Zoroaster and the Zend-Avesta taught that the world would perish by fire. The same idea is found in the Epistle of St Peter. It seems that the traditions of Noah and of Deucalion, according to which the first great disaster to humanity came by flood, indicated that the second great disaster would be of an exactly opposite character.



The Angel Proclaims “Who is worthy?” –  
John Consoled by the Ancient

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Illustration from “The Douce Apocalypse”,  
c. 1270

Illumination

University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford





Among the Romans, Lucretius, Cicero, Virgil, and Ovid all also announce the future destruction of Earth by fire.

According to Jesus, the generation which he addressed would not die before the previously mentioned disaster occurred.



### The Second Seal – The Red Horse

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Illustration from “The Douce Apocalypse”,  
c. 1270

Illumination

University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford





St Paul, the real founder of Christianity, believed deeply in the resurrection and the coming end of the world, making it a fundamental dogma of the new church. He referenced it eight or nine times in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

Unfortunately for the prophecy, Jesus' disciples, whom he had assured would not die before his accession, died one after the other under the common law.



### The Third Seal – The Black Horse

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Illustration from “The Douce Apocalypse”,  
c. 1270

Illumination

University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford





St Paul, who did not know Jesus personally, but was a staunch supporter of the fledgling Christian church, was believed to have lived until the Great Commission (Jesus' appearance to his eleven disciples on Galilee). Naturally, however, they all died, and thus the end of the world, as predicted by the definitive coming of the Messiah, did not happen.



### The Third Trumpet – A Burning Star Falls from the Heavens

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Illustration from “The Douce Apocalypse”,  
c. 1270

Illumination

University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford







Belief in the end of the world did not simply disappear, however. Believers decided to stop taking the prediction literally, seeking instead new interpretations. However, belief in the Gospel suffered as a result. We devoutly buried the dead, laid out in coffins with reverence rather than being burned by fire, and it was written on their tombs that they would rest there until the resurrection.



The Angel of the Sixth Seal and The Four  
Angels at the Four Corners of the Earth

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Cimabue  
Fresco

Basilica di San Francesco d'Assisi, Assisi





Jesus would “soon” return to judge “the living and the dead”. The Christian word of recognition was *Maran atha*, “the Lord will come”.

The apostles Peter and Paul most likely died in the year 64 CE, during the horrible slaughter ordered by Nero after the burning of Rome, set on fire at his command and whose destruction he attributed to the Christians so that he might have a pretext for new persecutions.



### The Locusts Riding

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Illustration from “The Douce Apocalypse”,  
c. 1270

Illumination

University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford





St John wrote his *Apocalypse* (The Book of Revelation) in the year 69 CE. The reign of Nero was a bloody one, and martyrdom seemed to be the natural consequence of a virtuous life. Prodigies appeared on every hand; there were comets, falling stars, eclipses, showers of blood, monsters, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, and above all, there was the Jewish war and the destruction of Jerusalem.



### The War in Heaven

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Illustration from “The Douce Apocalypse”,  
c. 1270

Illumination

University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford





Never, perhaps, were so many horrors, so much cruelty and madness, so many catastrophes, crowded into so short a period as in the years 64-69 CE. The little church of Christ was apparently dispersed. It was impossible to remain in Jerusalem.



The Dragon Delegates Power to the Beast  
Who Comes from the Sea

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Illustration from “The Douce Apocalypse”,  
c. 1270

Illumination

University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford







The horrors of the reign of terror of 1793 and of the Commune of 1871 were nothing in comparison with those of the Jewish civil war. The Jesus' family was obliged to leave the Holy City and to seek safety in flight. False prophets appeared, thus verifying former prophecies. Vesuvius was preparing the terrible eruption of the year 79 CE, and already, in 63 CE, Pompeii had been destroyed by an earthquake.



The False Prophet Rises from the Earth,  
Calls Down Fire and Orders the Worship of  
the Beast

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Illustration from "The Douce Apocalypse",  
c. 1270

Illumination  
University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford





There was every indication that the end of the world was at hand. Nothing was wanting. The *Apocalypse* announced that Jesus would descend on a throne of clouds and the martyrs would rise first. The Angel of Mercy would await God's command.



### The Dragon, Who is Satan, Comes Forth Again

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Illustration from "The Douce Apocalypse",  
c. 1270

Illumination  
University of Oxford, Bodleian Library,  
Oxford





But a calm followed the storm. The terrible Jewish war came to an end; Nero fell before Galba; under Vespasian and Titus, peace, in the year 71 CE succeeded war, and – the end of the world still did not come to pass.

Once more, it became necessary to reinterpret the words of the evangelists. The coming of Christ was put off until after the fall of the Roman Empire, and thus considerable margin was given to the commentator.



### The Infernal Chaos around Satan

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Atributed to Coppo di Marcovaldo, c. 1270

Mosaic

Battistero di San Giovanni, Florence





A firm belief in a final and even an imminent catastrophe persisted, but it was embedded in vague terms, which robbed the spirit as well as the letter of the prophecy of all precision. Still, the conviction remained.

St Augustine devotes the 20<sup>th</sup> book of the *City of God* (426) to the regeneration of the world, the resurrection, the last judgement, and the New Jerusalem;



Last Judgement (tympanum, west portal,  
detail)

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Gislebertus, c. 1120-1135  
Cathédrale Saint-Lazare, Autun







in the 21<sup>st</sup> book he describes the everlasting torments of hell-fire. A witness to the fall of Rome and the Empire, the Bishop of Carthage believed these events to be the first act of the drama. But the Kingdom of God would continue for a thousand more years before the rise of Satan.



Last Judgement (tympanum),  
Bourges Cathedral

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c. 1270  
Sculpture  
Cathédrale Saint-Étienne de Bourges,  
Bourges





St Gregory, Bishop of Tours (573), the first historian of the Franks, began his history as follows:

As I am about to relate the wars of the kings with hostile nations, I feel impelled to declare my belief. The terror with which men await the end of the world decides me to chronicle the years already passed, that thus one may know exactly how many have elapsed since the beginning of the world.



Last Judgement, Christ Enthroned

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c. 1270

Sculpture

Cathédrale Saint-Étienne de Bourges,

Bourges





The saviour had come to deliver mankind. What was he waiting for, transportation to Heaven?

This Christian tradition was perpetuated year on year and century on century, despite nature's evidence to the contrary.



### The Demons Are Cast out of Arezzo (detail)

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Giotto di Bondone, 1296-1297  
Fresco

Basilica San Francesco d'Assisi, Assisi





Every catastrophe, earthquake, epidemic, famine, and flood, every phenomenon, eclipse, comet, storm, sudden darkness, and tempest, was regarded as the forerunner and herald of the final cataclysm.



### The Last Judgement (detail)

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Giotto di Bondone, 1302-1305

Fresco

Capella degli Scrovegni (Arena Chapel),

Padua







Trembling like leaves agitated by the wind, the faithful awaited the coming judgement while preachers successfully maintained this dreaded fear which was so deeply rooted in every heart.

But, as generation after generation passed, it became necessary to redefine, once again, the wide-spread theory, and it was around this time that the idea of a millennium took form in the minds of commentators.



## The Last Judgement

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14<sup>th</sup> century  
Illuminated manuscript

Estoria del iorn del iudici en qual manera se iudicaron los ánimas



el iudicio del iudicio

el iudicio del iudicio



el iudicio de los buenos

el iudicio de los malos

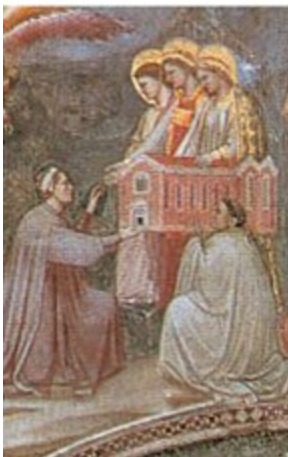


qui seculi iudicabitur  
omnis iudicabitur  
boni iudicabitur  
in aeternum

qui seculi iudicabitur  
omnis iudicabitur  
boni iudicabitur  
in aeternum



There were many sects which believed that Christ would reign with the saints on Earth a thousand years before the Day of Judgement. St Irenaeus, St Papias, and St Sulpicius Severus shared this belief, which became exaggerated and overblown in the minds of many who looked forward to a day of general rejoicing for the elect and a reign of pleasure.



## The Last Judgement

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Giotto di Bondone, 1303-1305

Fresco

Capella degli Scrovegni (Arena Chapel),  
Padua





St Jerome and St Augustine did much to discredit these views, but did not attack the central doctrine of a resurrection. Comments about the apocalypse continued to flourish through the sombre darkness of the Middle Ages, and in the 10<sup>th</sup> century the belief gained ground that the year 1000 was to usher in the great change.



## Christ in Glory Among the Saints or The Last Judgement

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Andrea di Cione Orcagna, 1354-1357

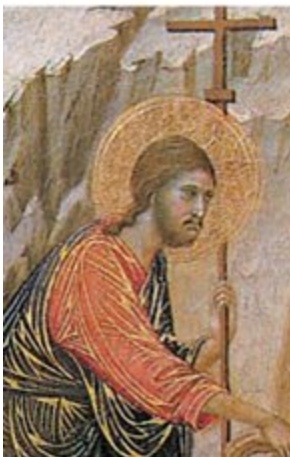
Fresco

Cappella Strozzi, Santa Maria Novella,  
Florence





This conviction of an approaching end of the world, if not universal, was at least very general. Several charters of the period began with *Termino mundi appropinquante* – the end of the world drawing near. In spite of some exceptions, it seems difficult not to share the opinion of historians, notably of Michelet, Henry Martin, Guizot, and Duruy, regarding the prevalence of this belief throughout Christendom.



Descent to Hell, back panel of the Maestà

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Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1308-1311  
Tempera on wood, 51 x 53.5 cm  
Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del  
Duomo, Sienna







Undoubtedly, neither the French monk Gerbert, at that time Pope Sylvester II, nor King Robert of France, regulated their lives by their superstition, but it, nevertheless, had penetrated the conscience of the faint-hearted, and many a sermon was preached from this text of the Apocalypse:



### The Opening of the Fourth Seal (detail)

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Nicolas de Bataille and Jean Bondol  
(design), c. 1373-1381

From The Apocalypse of Angers  
Tapestry

Musée des Tapisseries, Angers





And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth ... and another book was opened, which is the Book of Life ... and the sea gave up the dead which were in it:



### The Orchard of Drunkenness or The Orchard of the Consolation

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12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries

Illuminated manuscript, 44 x 30 cm  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris





and death and hell gave up the dead which were in them and they were judged every man according to his works ... and I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

Bernard, a hermit of Thuringia, had taken these very words of Revelation as the text of his preaching, and in about the year 960 he publicly announced that the end of the world was at hand.



## The Last Judgement

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End of the 14<sup>th</sup> century

Oil on wood mounted on canvas

Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris





He even fixed the fatal day itself, as that on which “The Annunciation” and Holy Friday should fall on the same day, a coincidence which occurred in 992.

Druthmar, a monk of Corbie, prophesied the end of the world for 24 March 1000. In many cities, popular terror was so great on that day that people sought refuge in the churches,



### The Last Judgement (detail)

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Jan Van Eyck, c. 1430

Oil on wood mounted on canvas,

56.5 x 19.7 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,

New York







remaining until midnight, prostrate before the relics of the saints in order to await the last sing of Judgement and die at the foot of the cross.

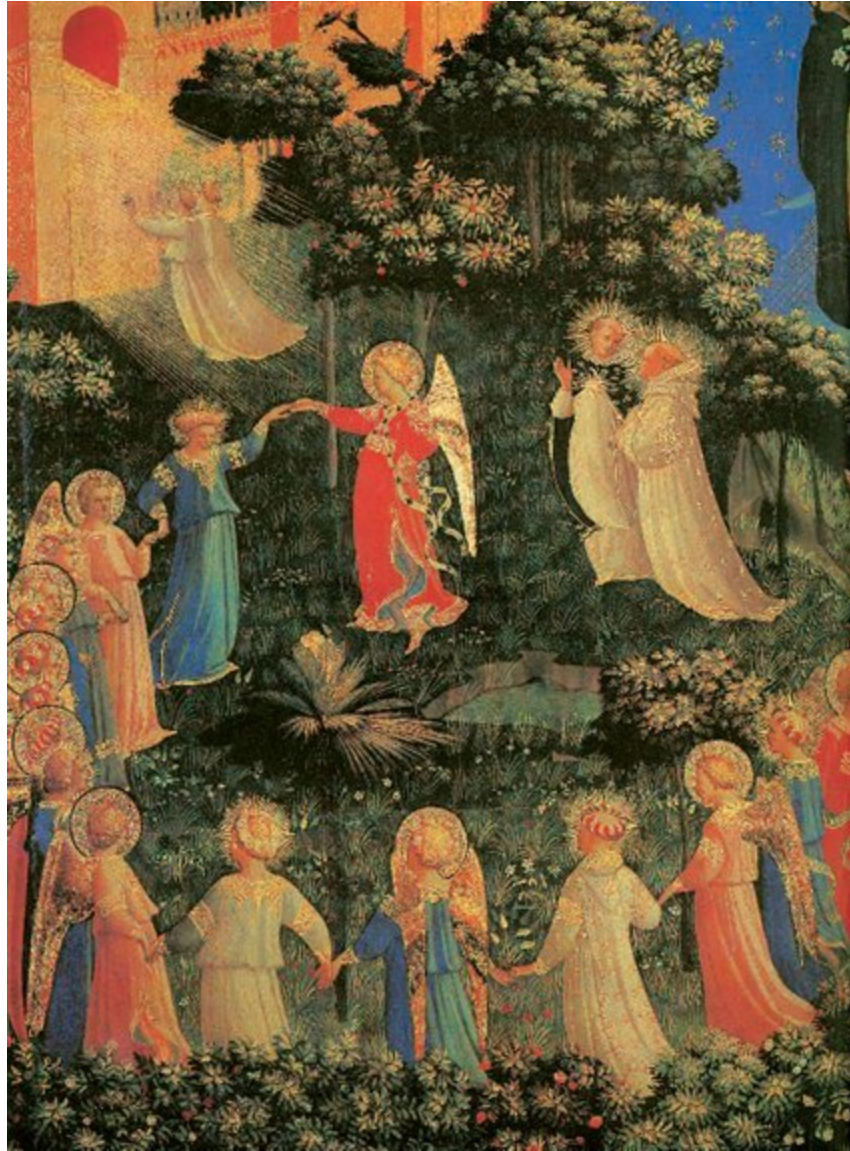
Many gifts to the Church date to this epoch. Lands and goods were given to the monasteries. In fact, an authentic and very interesting document is preserved,



The Last Judgement (detail), The Elect

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Fra Angelico, c. 1431  
Tempera on wood, 105 x 210 cm  
Museo di San Marco, Florence





written in the year 1000 by a certain monk, Raoul Glaber, on whose first pages we find: “Satan will soon be unloosed, as prophesied by St John, the thousand years having been accomplished. It is of these years that we are to speak.”

The end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century was a truly strange and fearful period. From 980 to 1040 it seemed as if the Angel of Death had spread his wings over the world.



### The Last Judgement

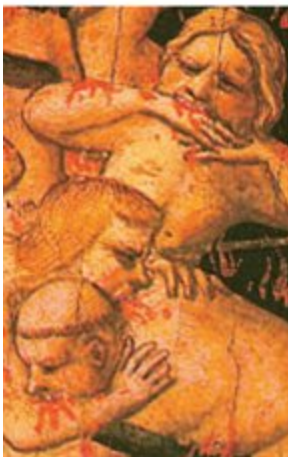
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Fra Angelico, 1432-1435  
Tempera and gold on wood panel,  
105 x 210 cm  
Museo di San Marco, Florence





Famine and pestilence desolated the length and breadth of Europe. Firstly there was *Saint Anthony's fire*, or Ergotism, a gangrenous disease causing limbs to fall off its victims and flesh to decay and fall from the bones, consuming the body like fire.

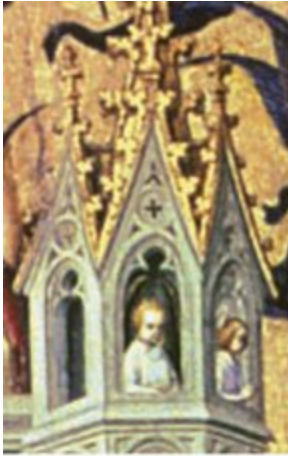


### The Last Judgement (detail)

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Fra Angelico, 1432-1435  
Tempera and gold on wood panel,  
105 x 210 cm  
Museo di San Marco, Florence





Wretches thus afflicted thronged the roads leading to the shrines and besieged the churches, filling them with terrible odours, and dying before the relics of the saints. The terrible plague reaped more than 40,000 victims in the Aquitaine region, and devastated the southern portions of France.



### The Last Judgement

---

Stephan Lochner, 1435

Oil on wood, 124 x 172 cm

Wallraff-Richartz-Museum, Cologne







Then came famine, ravaging a large part of Christendom. Of the 73 years between 987 and 1060, 48 were years of famine and pestilence. The invasion of the Hungarians, between 910 and 945, revived the horrors of Attila, and the soil was so laid waste by wars between domains and provinces that it ceased to be cultivated.



### Christ in Limbo

---

Fra Angelico, c. 1450

One of 35 paintings for the Silver Treasury  
of Santissima Annunziata

Tempera on wood, 39 x 39 cm

Museo di San Marco, Florence

EDUXIT EOS DE NEBRIS ET UMBRA MORTIS ET VINCVLA EORVM DIRVPIT. PS. CVI.



REDEMISTI NOS DEVS IN SANGVINE TVO EX OMNI TRIBV LIQVA ET PPLQ. APOCAL. V. C.



For three years rain fell continuously; it was impossible either to sow or to reap. The earth became barren and was abandoned.

The price of a hogshead of wheat [equivalent to a quarter of a long ton] rose to sixty gold sous; the rich waxed thin and pale;



## The Last Judgement

---

Fra Angelico, c. 1450

One of 35 paintings for the Silver Treasury  
of the Santissima Annunziata

Tempera on wood panel, 39 x 78 cm

Museo di San Marco, Florence





the poor gnawed the roots of trees, and many were in such extremity as to devour human flesh. The strong seized the weak in the public highways, tore them in pieces, and roasted them for food. Children were enticed by an egg or some fruit into alleyways, where they were then devoured by a predator.



## The Last Judgement

---

Fra Angelico  
Tempera and gold on wood panel,  
106.5 x 131.5 cm  
Private collection





This frenzy of hunger was such that the beast was safer than man. Famished children killed their parents, and mothers feasted upon their children. One person exposed human flesh for sale in the market place of Toumus as if it were a staple article of food.



### The Last Judgement

---

Rogier van der Weyden, 1445-1450

Oil on oak

Musée de l'Hôtel-Dieu, Beaune







He did not deny that he had done this and was burned at the stake. Another, stealing this flesh by night from the spot where it had been buried, was also burned alive.

This testimony, by Raoul Glaber, was written first hand, as he was often an eye witness to what he describes. On every side, people were perishing of hunger and did not scruple to eat reptiles, unclean animals, and even human flesh.



### The Last Judgement (triptych)

---

Hans Memling, c. 1467-1471

Oil on wood, 242 x 360 cm

Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku, Gdansk





In the depths of the forest of Macon, in the vicinity of a church dedicated to St John, a wretch had built a hut in which he strangled pilgrims and wayfarers. One day, a traveller entering the hut with his wife to seek rest, saw the heads of men, women, and children strewn about.



The Last Judgement (triptych, central panel)

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Hans Memling, c. 1467-1471  
Oil on wood, 242 x 360 cm  
Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku, Gdansk





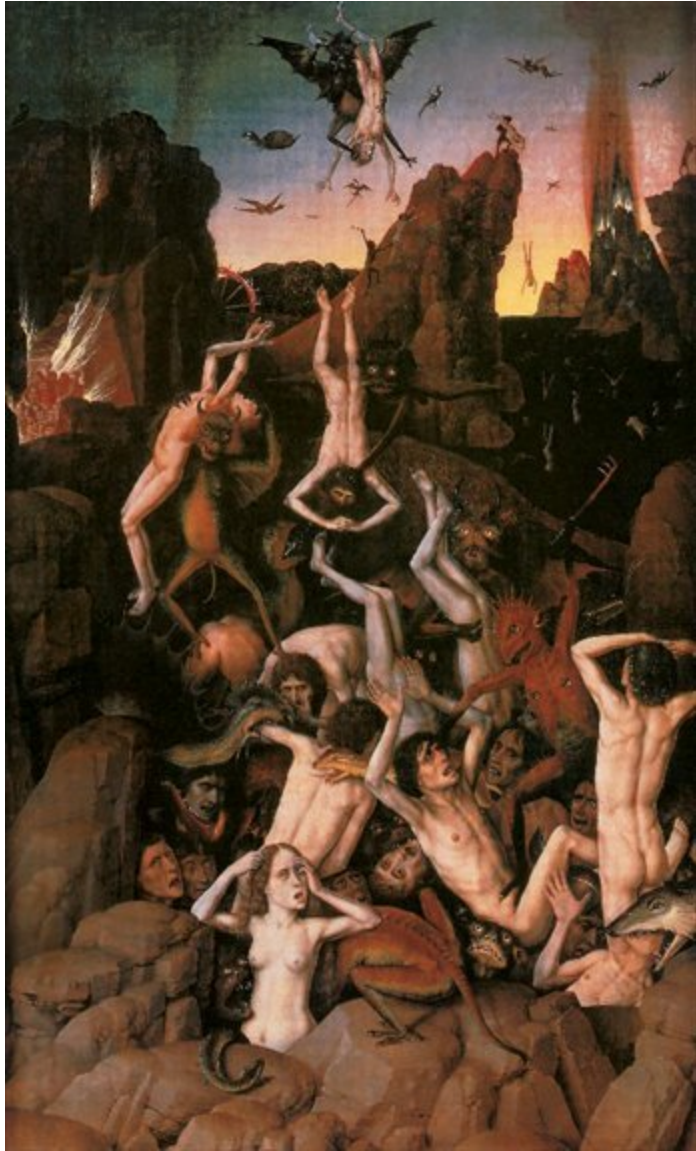
Attempting to escape, they were detained by their host; however, they managed to escape, and on reaching Macon, explained what they had seen. Soldiers were sent to the bloody spot, where they counted forty-eight human heads. The murderer was dragged to the town and burned alive.



The Fall of the Damned right panel of a  
Last Judgement triptych

---

Dieric Bouts the Elder, c. 1470  
Oil on wood, 116 x 71 cm  
Palais des Beaux Arts, Lille





Glaber saw the hut and the ashes of the funeral pyre. Burial was impossible, as the corpses were so numerous; disease followed close upon famine. Hordes of wolves preyed upon the unburied. Never before had such misery been known.



### Table of the Mortal Sins

---

Hieronymus Bosch, 1475-1480  
Oil on panel, 120 x 150 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid







War and pillage were the universal rule, but these plagues from heaven made men somewhat more reasonable; the bishops came together and it was agreed that a truce would be established for four days a week, from Wednesday night to Monday morning. This was known as the Truce of God.

It is not strange that the end of so miserable a world was both the hope and the terror of this terrible period.



### The Last Judgement

Alaert Du Hamel, 1478-1509  
Engraving, 24.5 x 35.2 cm  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam





The year 1000, however, passed like its predecessors, and the world continued to exist. Were the prophets wrong again, or did the thousand years of Christendom point to the year 1033? The world waited and hoped. In that very year occurred a total eclipse of the sun; “The orb of light became saffron coloured;



### The Opening of the Third Seal

---

3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 15<sup>th</sup> century

From Commentary on the Apocalypse  
Manuscript on vellum page, 35.6 x 25.3 cm  
The Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York





gazing into each others faces, men saw that they were pale as death; every object presented a livid hue; stupor seized upon every heart and a general catastrophe was expected.” But the end of the world had not yet come to pass.

It is to this critical period that we owe the construction of the magnificent cathedrals which have survived the ravages of time and excited the wonder of centuries.

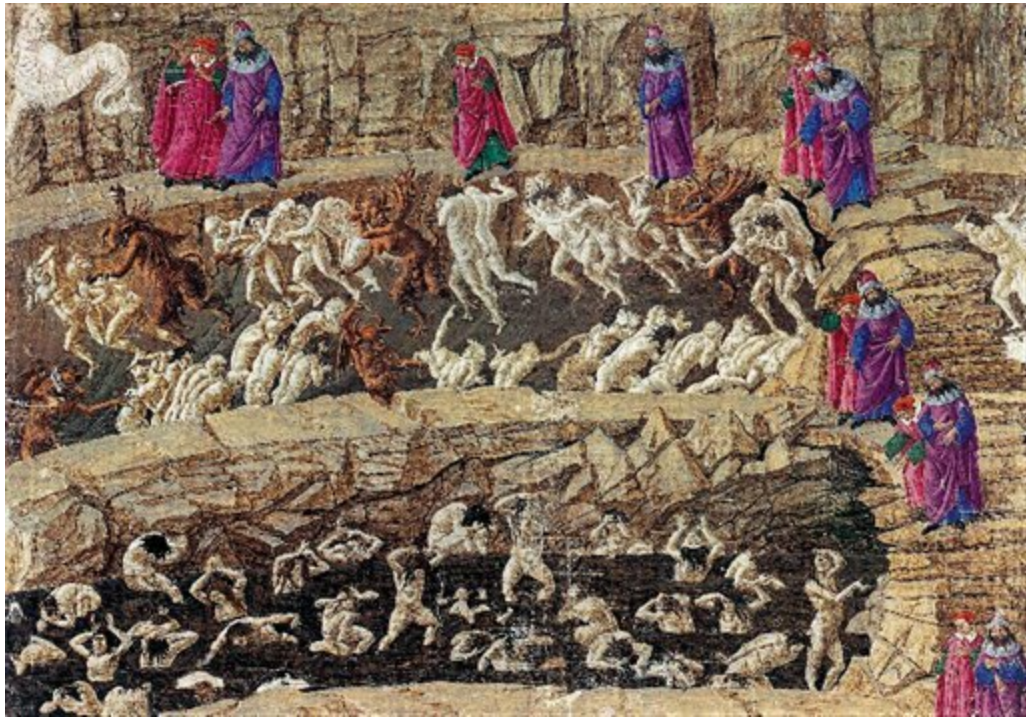


Inferno: Canto XVIII – 8<sup>th</sup> Circle  
(Malebolge) and the Punishment of  
Seducers, Pimps and Prostitutes

---

c. 1480

Drawing, pen and coloured ink  
on parchment, 32.3 x 47 cm  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin





Immense wealth had been lavished upon the clergy, and their riches increased by donations and inheritance. A new era seemed to be at hand. Raoul Glaber continues:

After the year 1000, the holy basilicas throughout the world were entirely renovated, especially in Italy and Gaul, although for the most part they were in no need of repair.



### The Last Judgement (triptych)

---

Hieronymus Bosch, after 1482

Oil on wood, 163.7 x 127 cm

(central panel)

163.7 x 60 cm (side panels)

Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna







Christian nations vied with each other in the erection of magnificent churches. It seemed as if the entire world, animated by a common impulse, shook off the rags of the past to put on a new garment;



15<sup>th</sup> Century Missal with an Illustration of  
the The Last Judgement

---

1490

Illuminated manuscript, 37.5 x 27.5 cm  
Russian National Library, St Petersburg





and the faithful were not content to rebuild nearly all the Episcopal churches, but also embellished the monasteries dedicated to the various saints, and even the chapels in the smaller villages.

The sombre year 1000 had followed the vanished centuries into the past, but through what troubled times the Church had passed!



### Altarpiece of the Hermits

---

Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1490-1499  
Oil on panel, 86.5 x 60 cm (central panel)  
86.5 x 29 cm (side panels)  
Palazzo Ducale, Venice





The popes were the puppets of the rival Saxon emperors and the princes of Latium. All Christendom was in an indescribable mess. The crisis had passed, but the problem of the end of the world remained, and credence of this dreadful event, though uncertain and vague, was fostered by that profound belief in the devil and in miracles which was yet to endure for centuries in the foundations of popular superstitions.



### Purgatory: Canto XXX

---

Sandro Botticelli, early 1490s  
Illustration for Dante's Divine Comedy  
Preliminary sketch with silverpoint  
on parchment, retraced in ink, 32 x 47 cm  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin





The final scene of the Supreme Judgement was sculpted over the portals of every cathedral, and on entering the sanctuary of the church, one passed under the balance of the archangel, which, on the left, showed images of the devils and the damned writhing in strange and fantastic convulsions, being thrown into the eternal flames of hell.



### Purgatory: Canto XXXIII

---

Sandro Botticelli, early 1490s  
Illustration for Dante's Divine Comedy  
Preliminary sketch with silverpoint  
on parchment, retraced in ink, 32 x 47 cm  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin







But the idea that the world was to end was not confined to the Church. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, astrologers terrified Europe with the announcement of a conjunction of all the planets in the constellation of the scales.



### Inferno: Canto X

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Illustration for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, c.  
1480-1490

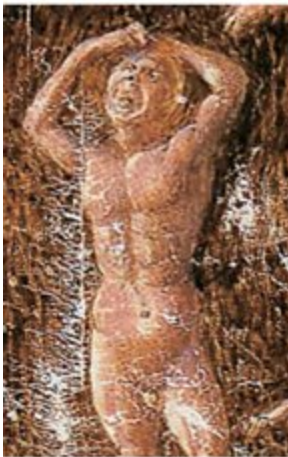
Preliminary sketch with silverpoint  
on parchment, retraced in ink, 32 x 47 cm  
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,  
Vatican City





This conjunction actually occurred, for on 15 September all the planets were found between the 180<sup>th</sup> and 190<sup>th</sup> degrees of longitude. But, alas, the end of the world did not come.

The celebrated alchemist, Arnould de Villeneuve, predicted it again for the year 1335.

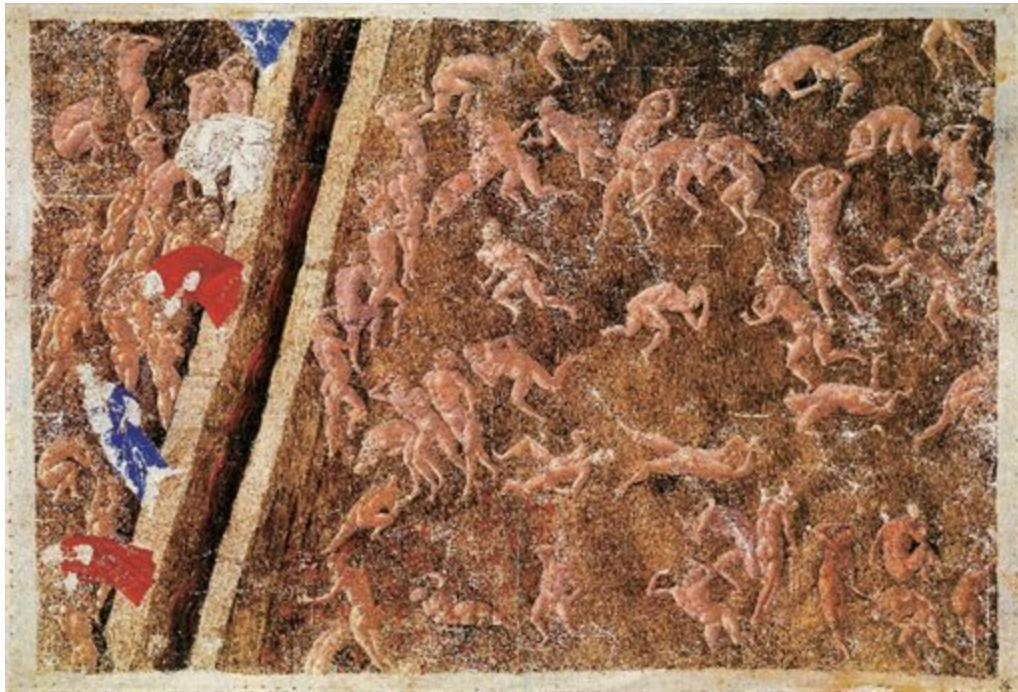


### Inferno: Canto XV

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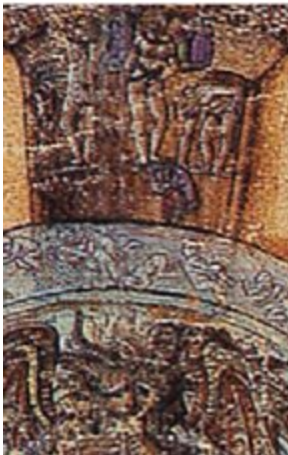
Illustration for Dante's Divine Comedy,  
c. 1480-1490

Preliminary sketch with silverpoint  
on parchment, retraced in ink, 32 x 47 cm  
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,  
Vatican City





In 1406, under Charles VI, an eclipse of the sun, occurring on 16 June, produced a general panic, which was chronicled by Juvenal of the Ursuline Order: “It is a pitiable sight,” he says, “to see people taking refuge in the churches as if the world were about to perish.”



### The Abyss of Hell

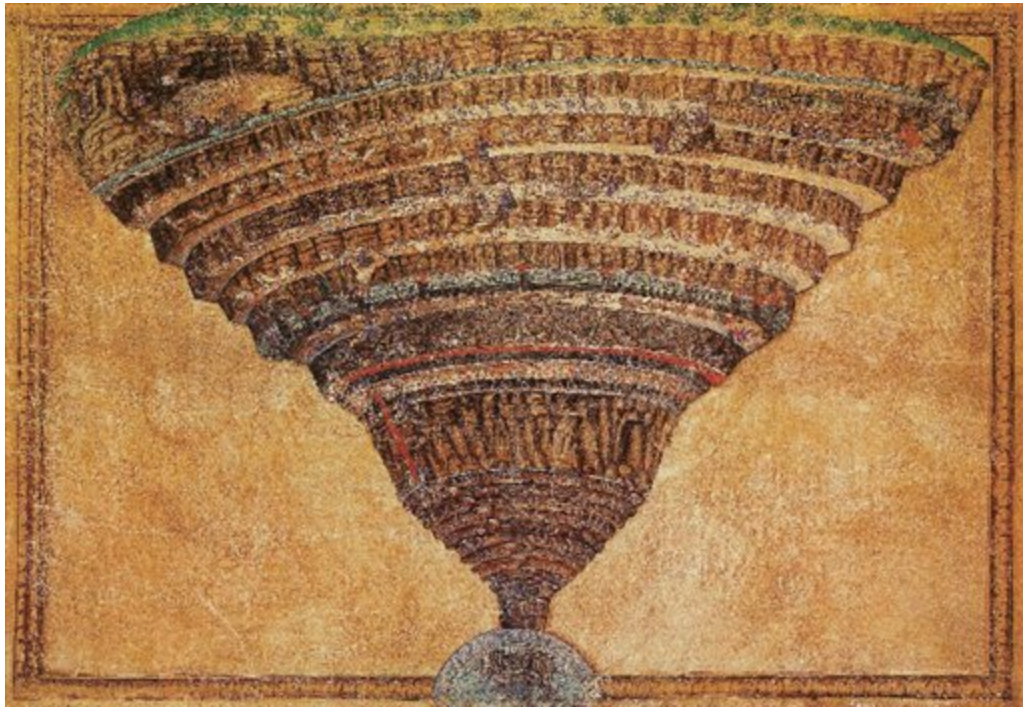
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Illustration for Dante’s Divine Comedy,  
c. 1490

Preliminary sketch with silverpoint on  
parchment

retraced in ink and coloured, 33 x 47.5 cm

Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,  
Vatican City





In 1491, St Vincent Ferrier wrote a treatise entitled “De la Fin du Monde et de la Science Spirituelle”. He allows Christendom as many years of life as there are verses in the Psalter, namely, 2537.

Then a German astrologer by the name of Stoffler, predicted that on 20 February 1524, a general deluge would result from a conjunction of the planets. He was very widely believed, and the panic was extreme.



### The Falling of the Damned into Hell

---

Hieronymus Bosch, before 1490

Oil on panel, 86.5 x 39.5 cm

Palazzo Ducale, Venice







Property situated in valleys, along river banks, or near the sea, was sold to the less credulous for essentially nothing. A certain doctor, Auriol of Toulouse, had an ark built for himself, his family, and his friends, and Bodin asserts that he was not the only one who took this precaution.



### The Ascent into the Empyrean or Highest Heaven

---

Hieronymus Bosch, 15<sup>th</sup> century  
Oil on panel, 86.5 x 39.5 cm  
Palazzo Ducale, Venice





There were few sceptics. The grand chancellor of Charles V sought the advice of Pierre Martyr, who told him that the event would not be as fatal as was feared, but that the conjunction of the planets would undoubtedly occasion grave disasters. The fatal day arrived ... and never had the month of February been so dry!



### The Whore of Babylon

---

Scene from the Revelation of St John

Albrecht Dürer, c. 1496-1497

Engraving, 39.2 x 28.1 cm

Musée du Petit Palais, Paris





But this did not prevent new predictions for the year 1532, by the astrologer of the elector of Brandenburg, Jean Carion; and again for the year 1584, by the astrologer Cyprian Lëowitz. It was again a question of a deluge, due to planetary conjunctions.



### The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Albrecht Dürer, 1497-1498

Woodcut, 39.9 x 28.6 cm

Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Kunsthalle,  
Karlsruhe





“The terror of the populace,” writes a contemporary, Louis Guyon, “was extreme, and the churches could not hold the multitudes which fled to them for refuge; many made their wills without stopping to think that this availed little if the world was really to perish; others donated their goods to the clergy, in the hope that their prayers would put off the day of judgement.”



### The Apocalypse (detail)

---

Albrecht Dürer, 1498

Coloured woodcut

Library of the Museo Correr, Venice







In 1588, there was another astrological prediction, couched in apocalyptic language: The eighth year following the fifteen hundred and eightieth anniversary of the birth of Christ will be a year of prodigies and terror. If in this terrible year the globe be not dissolved in dust, and the land and the sea be not destroyed, every kingdom will be overthrown and humanity will travail in pain.



The Last Judgement (detail),  
The Damned Taken to Hell

---

Luca Signorelli, 1499-1502  
Fresco  
Duomo di Orvieto, Orvieto





As might be expected, the celebrated soothsayer, Nostradamus, is found among these prophets of evil. In his book of rhymed prophecies, entitled *Centuries*, we find the following quatrain, which excited much speculation:

Quand Georges Dieu crucifiera,  
Que Marc le ressuscitera,  
Et que St Jean le portera,  
La fin du monde arrivera.



### The Preaching and Acts of the Anti-Christ

---

Luca Signorelli, 1499-1502

Fresco

San Brizio Chapel, Duomo di Orvieto,  
Orvieto





The meaning of which is, that when Easter falls on 25 April (St Mark's day). Holy Friday will fall on 23 April (St George's day), and Corpus Christi on 24 June (St John's day), and the end of the world will come.



### The Damned (detail)

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Luca Signorelli, 1499-1502

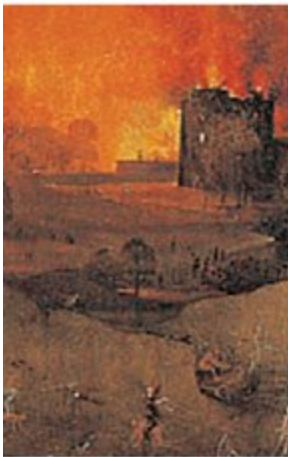
Fresco

Cappella di San Brizio, Duomo di Orvieto,  
Orvieto





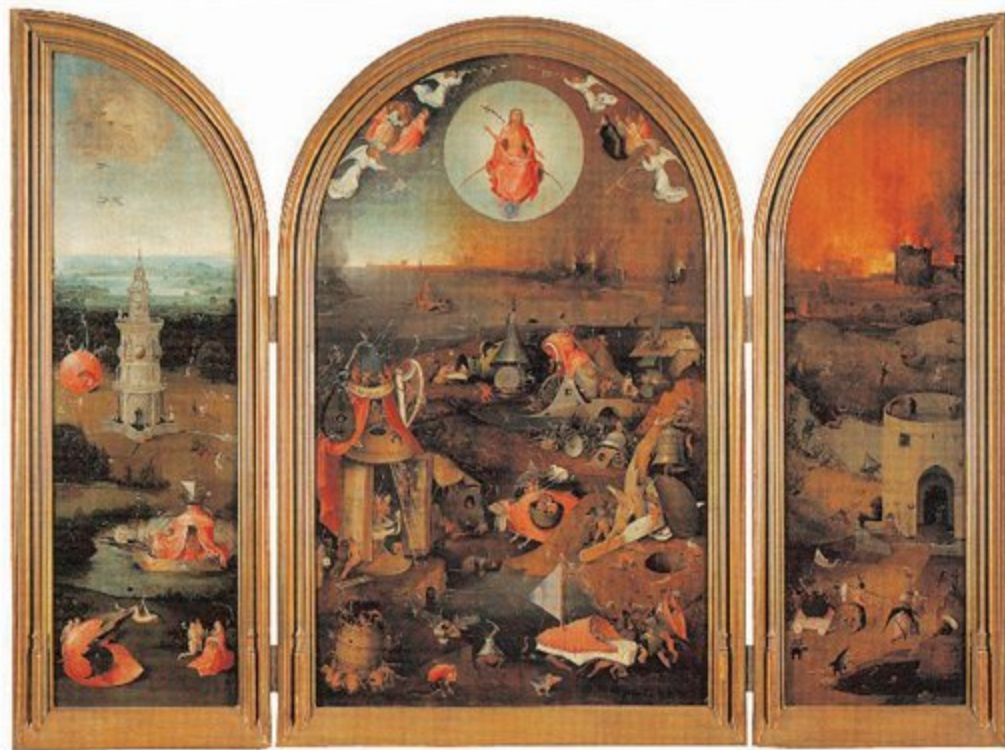
This verse was not without malice, for at this time (Nostradamus died in 1556) the calendar had not been reformed; this was not done until 1582, and it was impossible for Easter to fall on 25 April. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 25 April corresponded to the 15.



### The Last Judgement (triptych)

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Hieronymus Bosch, 1486  
Oil on panel, 99.5 × 117.5 cm  
Groeninge Museum, Bruges







After the introduction of the Gregorian calendar, Easter might fall on 25 April, its latest possible date, and this was or will be the case in 1666, 1734, 1886, 1942, 2038, 2190, and so on, the end of the world, however, not being a necessary consequence of this coincidence.



The Garden of Delights, Hell (right panel)

---

Hieronymus Bosch, 1503-1504  
Oil on panel, 220 x 97 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid





Planetary conjunctions, eclipses, and comets all share dire prophecies of evil. Among the most memorable historical comets in this regard, we may mention that of William the Conqueror, which appeared in 1066, and which is pictured on the tapestry of Queen Matilda of Bayeux; that of 1264, which, it is said, disappeared on the day of the death of Pope Urban IV; that of 1337, one of the largest and most imposing ever seen, which “presaged” the death of Frederick, king of Sicily;



### The Last Judgement (fragment)

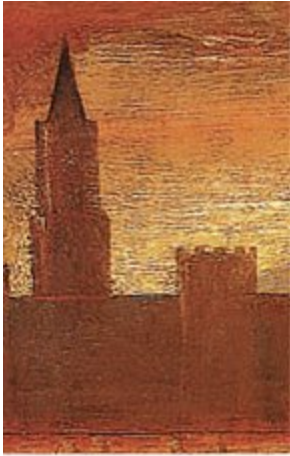
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Hieronymus Bosch, 1506-1508

Oil on oak, 59.4 x 112.9 cm

Alte Pinakothek, Munich





that of 1399, which Juvenal the Ursuline, described as “the harbinger of coming evil”; that of 1402, to which was ascribed the death of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, duke of Milan; that of 1456, which filled all Christendom with terror under Pope Calixtus III, during the war with the Turks, and which is associated with the history of the Angelus;



Saint Michael and the Demon known as  
The Small Saint Michael

---

Raffaello Sanzio (Raphael), c. 1503-1505  
Oil on wood, 30 x 26 cm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris





and that of 1472, which preceded the death of the brother of Louis XI. There were also others which were associated, like the ones before, with catastrophes and wars, and especially with the dreaded last hours of the human race. That of 1527 is described by Ambroise Paré and Simon Goulart, as consisting of severed heads, daggers, and bloody clouds.



## The Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand

---

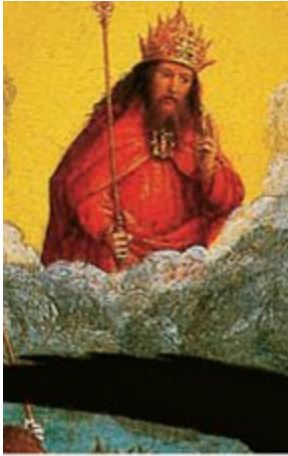
Albrecht Dürer, 1508

Oil on wood transferred to canvas,  
99 x 87 cm

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna







The comet of 1531 was thought to herald the death of Princess Louise of Savoy, mother of Francis I, who shared the popular superstition in reference to evil stars: “Behold!” she exclaimed from her bed, on perceiving the comet through the window, “behold an omen which is not given to one of low degree.



The Archangel St Michael (central panel of the Michael Altar)

---

Gérard David, c. 1510

Oil on oak, 66 x 53 cm

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna





God sends it as a warning to us. Let us prepare to meet death.” Three days later, she died. But the famous comet of Charles V, appearing in 1556, was perhaps the most memorable of all. It had been identified as the comet of 1264, and its return was announced for 1848. But it did not reappear.



### St Michael Fighting the Dragon

---

Albrecht Dürer, 1498  
Woodcut, 39.5 x 28.6 cm  
Library of Congress Prints and  
Photographs Division  
Washington, D.C.





The comets of 1577, 1607, 1652, and 1665 were the subjects of endless commentaries, forming a library by themselves. At the last of these, King Alphonso VI of Portugal, angrily discharged his pistol with the most grotesque defiance.



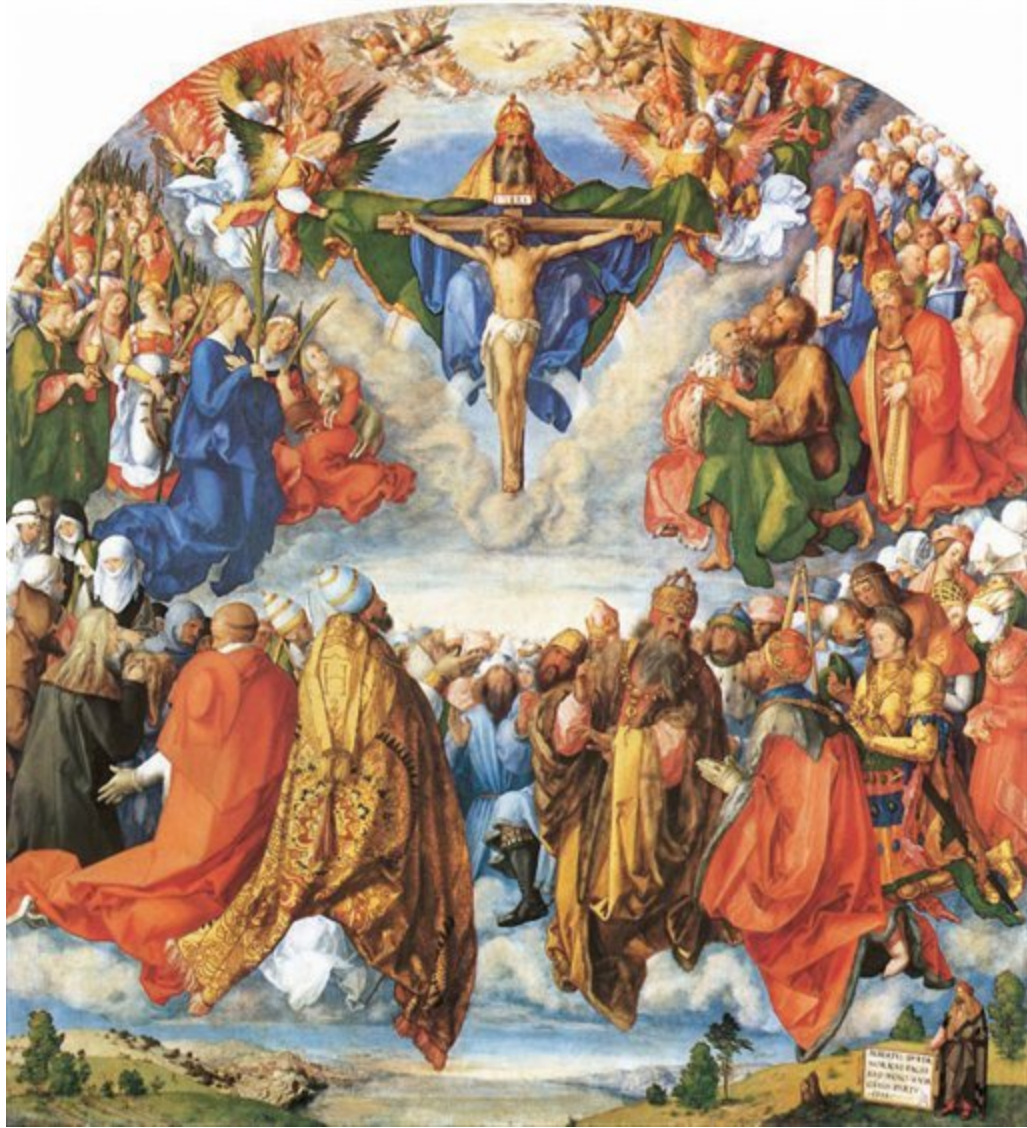
### All Saints Day

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Albrecht Dürer, 1511

Oil on panel, 135 x 123.4 cm

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna





Pierre Petit, by order of Louis XIV, published a work designed to counteract the foolish and political apprehensions excited by comets. This illustrious king desired to be without a rival, only the sun, *nec pluribus impar!*, and would not admit the supposition that the glory of France could be imperilled even by a celestial phenomenon.



### The Knight, Death, and the Devil

---

Albrecht Dürer, 1513

Engraving, 25 x 19.6 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York







One of the greatest comets which ever struck the imagination of men was assuredly the famous comet of 1680, to which Newton devoted so much attention. Lemonier attests:

It issued with a frightful velocity from the depths of space and seemed falling directly into the sun and was seen to vanish with an equal velocity. It was visible for four months. It approached quite near to the earth, and Whiston ascribed the flood to its former appearance.



### The Haywain (triptych)

---

Hieronymus Bosch, 1515

Oil on panel, 140 x 232 cm

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid





Bayle wrote a treatise to prove the absurdity of beliefs founded on these portents. Madame de Sévigné writing to her cousin, Count de Bussy-Rabutin, says:

We have a comet of enormous size; its tail is the most beautiful object conceivable. Every person of note is alarmed and believes that heaven, interested in their fate, sends them a warning in this comet.



### A Deluge

---

Leonardo da Vinci, 1517-1518  
Black chalk, 16.2 x 20.3 cm  
Royal Library, Windsor Castle





They say that the courtiers of Cardinal Mazarin, who is despaired of by his physicians believe this prodigy is in honour of his passing away, and tell him of the terror with which it has inspired them. He had the sense to laugh at them, and to reply facetiously that the comet did him too much honour.



### St Michael Slaying the Devil

---

Raffaello Sanzio (Raphael), c. 1518  
Oil on wood transferred onto canvas,  
268 x 160 cm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris





In truth we ought all to agree with him, for human pride assumes too much when it believes that death is attended by such signs from heaven.

We see that comets were gradually losing their prestige. Yet we read in a treatise of the astronomer Bemouilli this singular remark: “If the head of the comet be not a visible sign of the anger of God, the tail may well be.”



### The Witches' Procession (Lo Stregozzo)

---

Marcantonio Raimondi, Agostino

Veneziano

after 1520

Copper engraving on ivory-coloured paper

31.4 x 65.2 cm

Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart







Fear of the end of the world was reawakened by the appearance of comets in 1773; a great panic spread throughout Europe, and Paris itself was alarmed. Here is an extract from the memoirs of Bachaumont, accessible to every reader:



### Seven-Headed Serpent from the Book of Revelation

---

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century Luther Bible, c. 1530  
Coloured woodcut  
Bible Society, London





6 May 1773. In the last public meeting of the Academy of Sciences, M. de Lalande was to read by far the most interesting paper of all; this, however, he was not able to do, for lack of time. It concerned the comets which, by approaching the earth, may cause revolutions, and dealt especially with that one whose return is expected in eighteen years.



Ride to the Witches' Sabbath detail from  
An Allegory of Melancholy

---

Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1532  
Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar





But although he affirmed that it was not one of those which would harm the earth, and that, moreover, he had observed that one could not fix, with any exactness, the order of such occurrences, there exists, nevertheless, a very general anxiety.



The Key of the Abyss, from Luther's Bible

---

Workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder,  
c. 1534

Coloured woodcut  
Stadtarchiv, Zerbst





9 May. The cabinet of M. de Lalande is filled with the curious who come to question him concerning the above memoir, and, in order to reassure those who have been alarmed by the exaggerated rumours circulated about it, he will undoubtedly be forced to make it public.



### The Last Judgement (full view)

---

Michelangelo, 1536-1541  
Fresco after restoration, 1.37 x 1.22 m  
Sistine Chapel, Vatican City







The excitement has been so great that some ignorant fanatics have besought the archbishop to institute prayers for forty hours, in order to avert the deluge which menaces us; and this prelate would have authorised these prayers, had not the Academy shown him the ridicule which such a step would produce.



The Last Judgement (detail)  
A Group Fighting Damned

---

Michelangelo, 1534-1541  
Fresco after restoration, 13.7 x 12.2 m  
Sistine Chapel, Vatican City





14 May. The memoir of M. de Lalande has appeared. He says that it is his opinion that, of the sixty known comets, eight, by their near approach to the earth, might produce a pressure such that the sea would leave its bed and cover a part of the world.



The Last Judgement (detail)  
Damned with Figures of the Underworld

---

Michelangelo, 1534-1541  
Fresco after restoration, 13.7 x 12.2 m  
Sistine Chapel, Vatican City





In time, the excitement died away. The fear of comets assumed a new form. They were no longer regarded as indications of the anger of God, but their collision with the earth was discussed from a scientific point of view, and these collisions were not considered free of danger.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, predictions concerning the end of the world were associated with the appearance of comets several times over.



### The Last Judgement

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1558  
Pen and brown ink, 23 x 30 cm  
Graphische Sammlung, Albertina, Vienna



Compt oft alrederde mpon. Vaederen. Hier \* En aect oft doemalgede in dat eenwigh. Dier



It was announced that the comet of Biela, for example, would intersect the earth's orbit on 29 October 1832, which it did, as predicted. There was great excitement. Once more the end of things was declared at hand. Humanity was threatened. What was going to happen?



### Netherlandish Proverbs

---

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1559  
Oil on oak, 117 x 163.5 cm  
Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin







The orbit, that is to say the path, of the earth was confused with the earth itself. The latter was not to reach that point of its orbit traversed by the comet until 30 November, more than a month after the comet's passage, and the comet was at no time to be within 20,000,000 leagues of us. Once more we got off with a fright.



### Dulle Griet or Mad Meg

---

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1561  
Oil on wood, 117.4 x 162 cm  
Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp





It was the same in 1857. Some prophet of doom had declared that the famous comet of Charles V, whose periodic time was thought to be three centuries, would return on 13 June of that year. More than one timid soul was rendered anxious, and the confessionals of Paris were more than usually crowded with penitents. Another prediction was made public in 1872, in the name of an astronomer, M. Plantamour, director of the Geneva observator, who was not, however, responsible for it.



### Agony in the Garden

Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), 1562  
Oil on canvas, 176 x 136 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid





As in the case of comets, so with other unusual phenomena, such as total solar eclipses, mysterious suns appearing suddenly in the skies, showers of shooting stars, great volcanic eruptions accompanied with the darkness of night and seeming to threaten the burial of the world in ashes,



## The Fall of the Rebel Angels

---

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1562  
Oil on wood, 118.5 x 162.5 cm  
Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten  
van België  
Brussels





earthquakes overthrowing and engulfing houses and cities – all these grand and terrible events have been connected with the fear of an immediate and universal end of men and things.

The history of eclipses alone would suffice to fill a volume no less interesting than the history of comets.



### The Triumph of Death

---

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, c. 1562  
Oil on wood, 117 x 162 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid







Let us now confine our attention to a total eclipse of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that was visible in France on 12 August 1654, which was predicted by astronomers and whose announcement produced great alarm. For some it meant the overthrow of states and the fall of Rome; for others it signified a new deluge;



### Juno in the Underworld

---

Jan Brueghel the Elder, c. 1598  
Oil on copper, 25.5 x 35.5 cm  
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen  
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden





there were those who believed that nothing less than the destruction of the world by fire was inevitable; while the more collected anticipated the poisoning of the atmosphere. Belief in these dreaded results was so widespread, that, in order to escape them, and by the express order of physicians, many terrified people shut themselves up in closed cellars, warmed and perfumed. We refer the reader, especially to the second evening, of *Les Mondes of Fontenelle*.



### The Flood with Noah's Ark

---

Jan Brueghel the Elder, 1601

Oil on copper, 26.5 x 36 cm

Gift of Betty and David M. Koetser,

Kunsthhaus, Zurich





Another writer of the same century, Petit, wrote in his *Dissertation on the Nature of Comets* that the consternation steadily increased up to the fatal day, and that a country priest, unable to hear the confessions of all who believed their last hour was at hand,



## The Tempest

---

Pieter Bruegel the Elder  
or Joos de Momper the Younger, 1610-1615  
Oil on wood, 70.5 x 97 cm  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna





told his parishioners during his sermon not to be in such haste, for the eclipse had been put off for a fortnight; and these good people were as ready to believe in the postponement of the eclipse as they had been to believe in its malign influence.



## The Massacre of the Innocents

---

Guido Reni, 1611

Oil on canvas, 268 x 170 cm

Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, Bologna







At the time of the total solar eclipses visible in France, namely those of 12 May 1706; 22 May 1724, and 8 July 1842, as also of the partial ones of 9 October 1847; 28 July 1851; 15 March 1858; 18 July 1860, and 22 December 1870, there was more or less apprehension on the part of the timid.



### The Betrayal of Christ

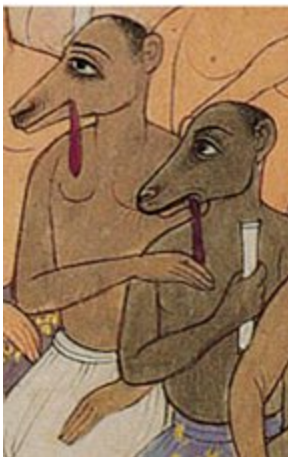
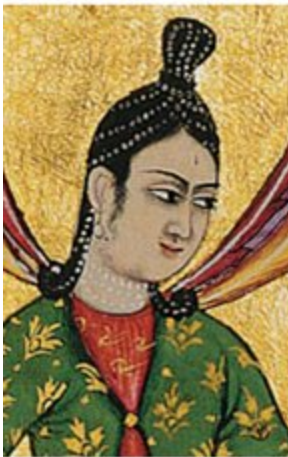
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Anthony Van Dyck, c. 1621  
Oil on canvas, 344 x 249 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid





At least, we know, from trustworthy sources, that in each of these cases these natural phenomena were interpreted by a certain class in Europe as possible signs of divine wrath, and in several religious educational establishments the pupils were requested to offer up prayers as the time of the eclipse drew near. This mystical interpretation of the order of nature is slowly disappearing among enlightened nations.



### The Last Judgement

---

Illumination from a Falnama  
(ancient Islamic book of omens), c. 1610-  
1630

Ink, gouache, gold, and silver on paper,  
41 x 28.4 cm

Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul





Among less civilised people, these phenomena still excited the same terror which was once more prevalent around the world. This fact was frequently attested by travellers, especially in Africa. During the eclipse of 18 July 1860, in Algeria, men and women resorted to prayer or fled, frightened, to their homes.



### The Fall of the Rebel Angels

---

Luca Giordano, 1660-1665  
Oil on canvas, 419 x 283 cm  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna





During the eclipse of 29 July 1878, which was a totality in the United States, a black man, suddenly crazed with terror, and persuaded that the end of the world was coming, cut the throats of his wife and children.

It must be admitted that such phenomena are well calculated to overwhelm the imagination.



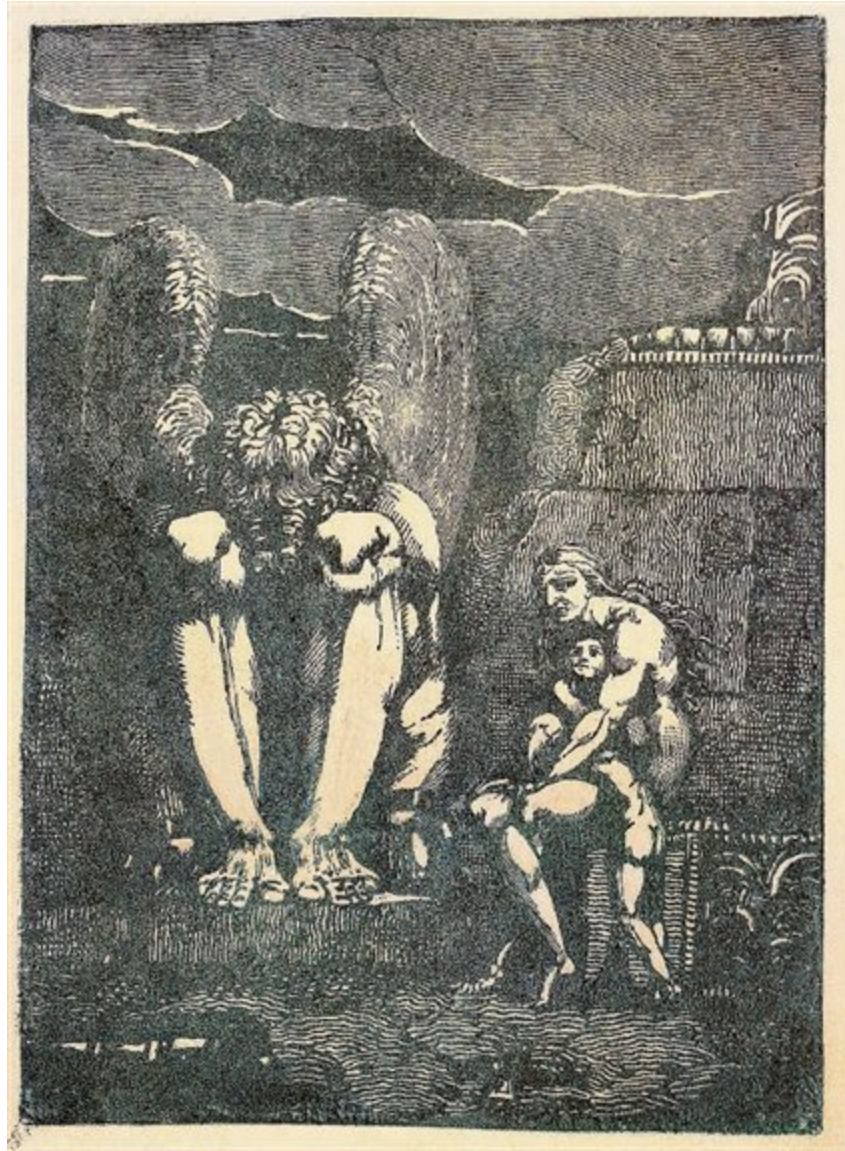
### America, a Prophecy (frontispiece)

---

William Blake, 1793

Relief etching, with some wash,  
23.4 x 16.9 cm

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge







The sun, the god of day, the star upon whose light we are dependent, grows dim and, just before it becomes extinguished, takes on a sickly and mournful hue. The light of the sky pales, the animal creation is stricken with terror, the beast of burden falters at his task, the dog flees to its master, the hen retreats with her brood to the coop, the birds cease their songs, and have even been seen to drop dead with fright.



### Europe, a Prophecy

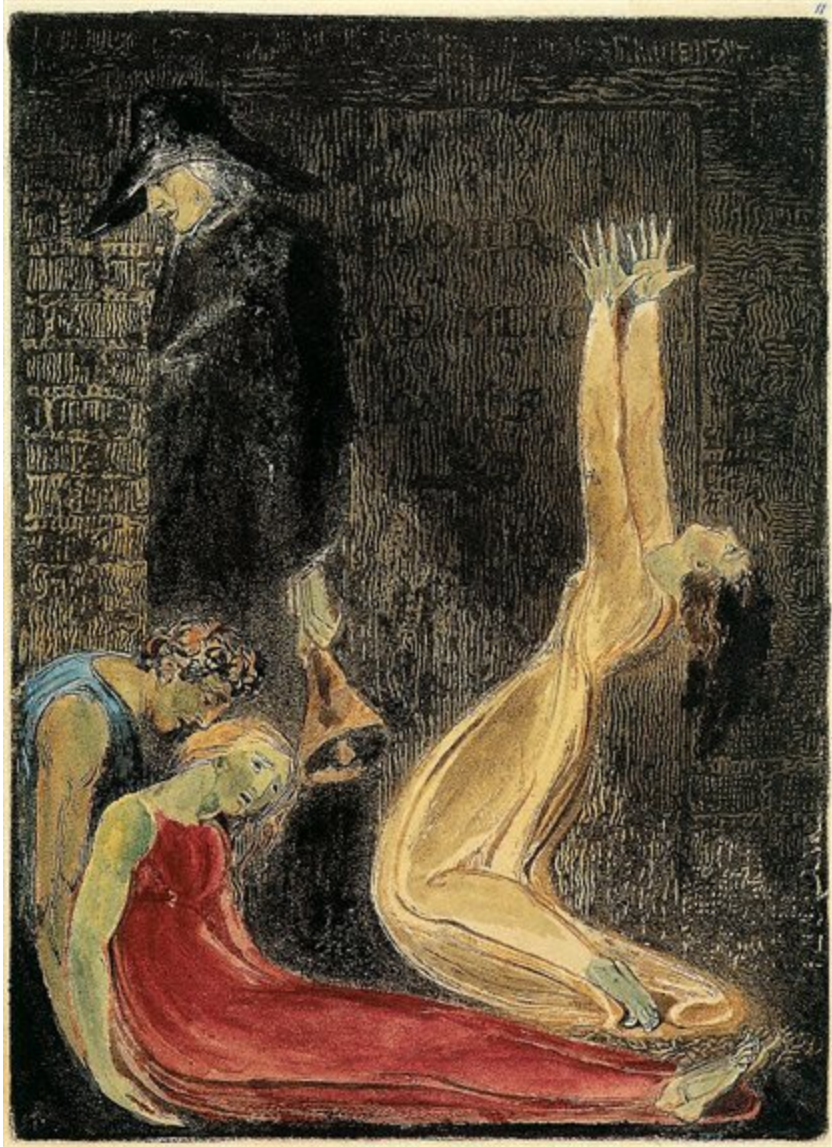
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William Blake, 1794

Relief and white-line etching with colour printing

and hand colouring, 37.3 x 26.7 cm

University of Glasgow Library, Glasgow





Arago relates that during the total eclipse of the sun at Perpignan, on 8 July 1842, 20,000 spectators were assembled, forming an impressive spectacle.

When the solar disc was nearly obscured, an irresistible anxiety took possession of everybody; each felt the need of sharing his impressions with his neighbour.



Illustration from *The First Book of Urizen*

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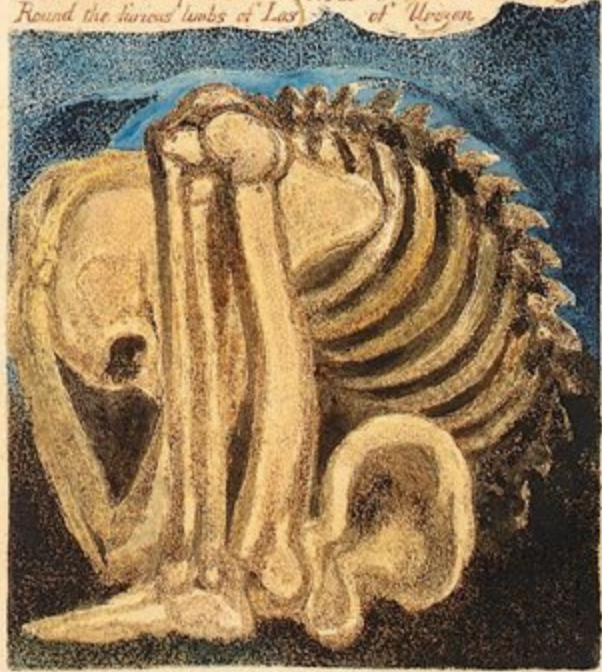
William Blake, 1794

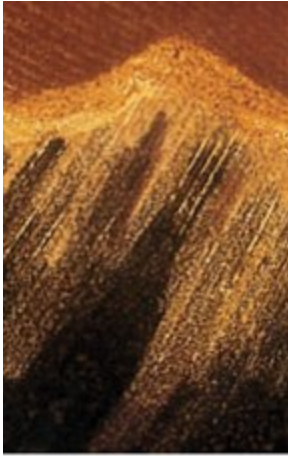
Colour relief etching, with added  
hand colouring

15.1 x 10 cm

British Museum, London

Chap: IV: *mont* 4. And Los formed nets of gyas  
 1. Los scatten with astonish And threw the nets round about  
 Frightend at the hurling bon  
 2 And at the surging sulphure 5 He watchid in shuddring fear  
 The dark changes & bound every  
 ons change  
 Perturbed immortal was razing With roots of iron & brals  
 3: In whirlwinds & pitch & nitre 6. And these were the changes  
 Round the furious loobs of Los of Urogen





A deep murmur arose, like that of the far-away sea after a storm. This murmur deepened as the crescent of light grew less, and when it had disappeared and sudden darkness had supervened, the silence which ensued marked this phase of the eclipse as accurately as the pendulum of our astronomical clock.



Illustration from *Europe, a Prophecy*  
(frontispiece)

---

William Blake, 1794  
Etching, 37.5 x 27 cm

University of Glasgow Library, Glasgow





The magnificence of the spectacle triumphed over the petulance of youth, over the frivolity which some people mistake for a sign of superiority, over the indifference which the soldier frequently assumes. A profound silence reigned also in the sky: the birds had ceased their songs.



## Pity

---

William Blake, c. 1795

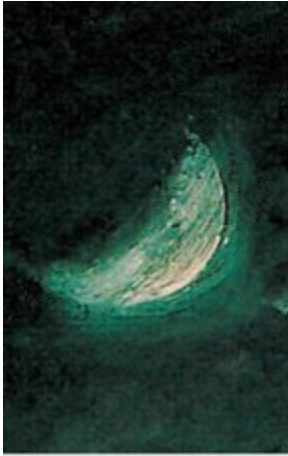
Colour print finished in ink and watercolour  
on paper

42.5 x 53.9 cm

Tate Gallery, London







After a solemn interval of about two minutes, joyous transports and frantic applause greeted with the same spontaneity the first reappearance of the solar rays, and the melancholy and indefinable sense of depression gave way to a deep and unfeigned exultation which no one sought to moderate or repress.



### El Aquelarre (The Witches Sabbath)

---

Francisco Goya, 1797-1798  
Oil on canvas, 43.3 x 30.5 cm  
Museo Lazaro Galdiano, Madrid





Everyone who witnessed this phenomenon, one of the most sublime which nature offers, was profoundly moved, and took away with him an impression never to be forgotten. The peasants were especially terrified by the darkness, as they believed that they were losing their sight.



Icon: Archangel Michael  
Leader of the Heavenly Host

---

End of 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Distemper and paint on lime,  
44.5 x 36.5 x 3.5 cm  
State Historical Museum, Moscow





A poor child, tending his flock, completely ignorant of what was coming, saw the sun slowly growing dim in a cloudless sky. When its light disappeared entirely, the poor child, completely carried away by terror, began to cry and call for help. His tears flowed again when the first ray of light reappeared. Reassured, he clasped his hands, crying, “O, beautiful sun!”



## Death on a Pale Horse

---

William Blake, 1800

Watercolour with pen and ink over pencil  
on paper

39.5 x 31.1 cm

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge





Is not the cry of this child the cry of humanity?

So long as eclipses were not known to be the natural consequences of the motion of the moon about the earth, and before it was understood that their occurrence could be predicted with the utmost precision, it was natural that they should have produced a deep impression and been associated with the idea of the end of the world.



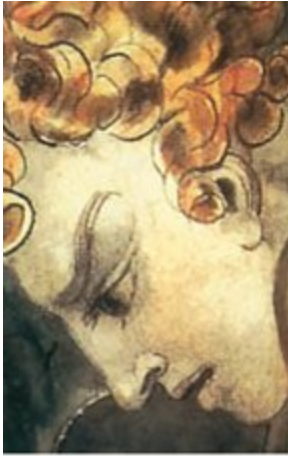
The Spiritual Form of Nelson  
Guiding Leviathan

---

William Blake, c. 1805-1809  
Tempera on canvas, 76.2 x 62.5 cm  
Tate Gallery, London







The same is true of other celestial phenomena and notably of the sudden appearance of unknown suns, an event much rarer than an eclipse.

The most celebrated of these appearances was that of 1572. On 9 November of that year, about a month after the massacre of St Bartholomew, a brilliant star of the first magnitude suddenly appeared in the constellation of Cassiopeia.



The Angel Michael Binding Satan (“He Cast Him into the Bottomless Pit, and Shut Him Up”)

---

William Blake, c. 1805

Drawing with watercolours, black ink  
and graphite on off-white paper,

35.9 x 32.5 cm

Frogg Art Museum, Harvard University  
Art Museums





The stupefaction was general, not only on the part of the public, to which it was visible every night in the sky, but also on the part of scientists, who could not explain its appearance. Astrologers found a solution of the enigma in the assertion that it was the star of the Magi, whose reappearance announced the return of the Son of God, the Final Judgement, and the resurrection.



### Death on a Pale Horse

---

Benjamin West, 1817

Oil on canvas, 447 x 764 cm

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,  
Philadelphia





This statement made a deep impression upon all classes of society. The star gradually diminished in splendour, and at the end of about eighteen months went out, without having caused any other disaster than that which human folly itself adds to the misery of a none too prosperous planet.



### The Colossus

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Asensio Juliá (wrongly attributed to Goya),  
c. 1818-1825

Oil on canvas, 116 x 105 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid





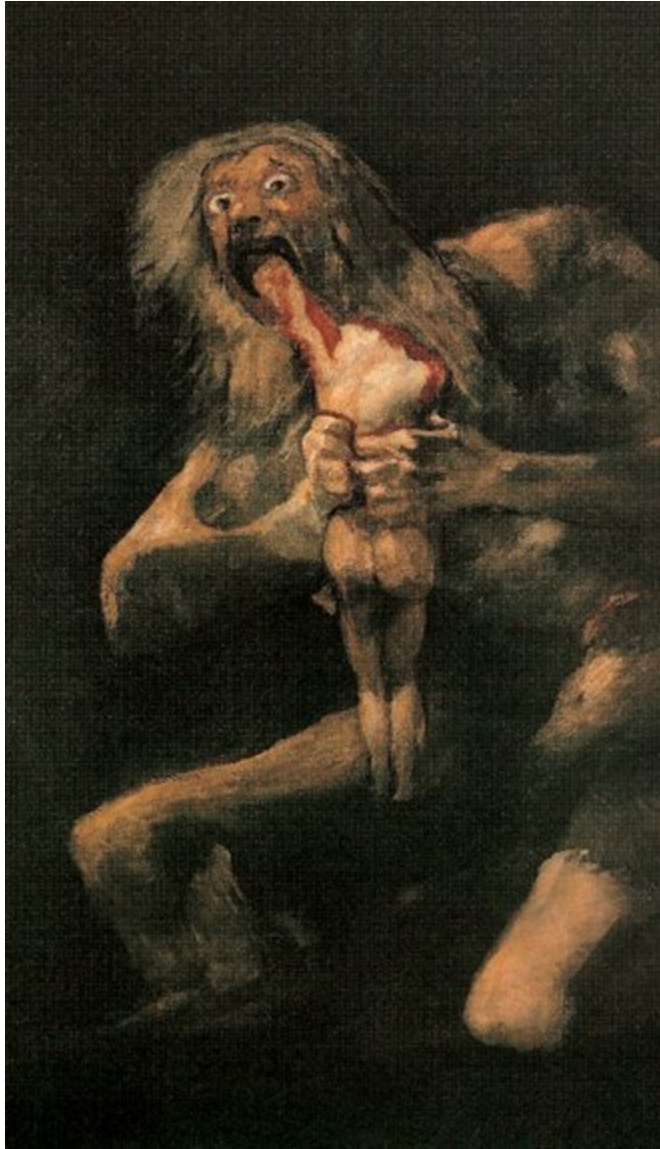
Science records several apparitions of this nature, but the above was the most remarkable. A like agitation has accompanied all the grand phenomena of nature, especially those which have been unforeseen. In the chronicles of the Middle Ages, and even in more recent memoirs, we read of the terror which the aurora borealis, showers of shooting stars and the fall of meteorites, have all produced among the alarmed spectators.



### Saturn Devouring his Children

---

Francisco Goya, 1820-1823  
Oil on canvas, 146 x 83 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid







During the meteor shower of 27 November 1872, when the sky was filled with more than 40,000 meteorites belonging to the dispersed comet of Biela, women of the lower classes, especially in Nice and Rome, in their excitement, sought information of those whom they thought able to explain the cause of these celestial fireworks,



Dante and Virgil in Hell  
called The Barque of Dante

---

Eugène Delacroix, 1822  
Oil on canvas, 189 x 241 cm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris





which they had at once associated with the end of the world and with the fall of the stars, which it was foretold would usher in that last great event.

Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions have sometimes attained such proportions as to lead to the fear that the end of the world was at hand. Imagine the state of mind of the inhabitants of Herculaneum and of Pompeii when the eruption of Vesuvius buried them in showers of ashes!



## The Deluge

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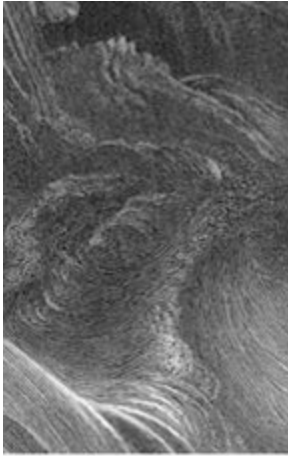
Gustave Doré, 1866

Illustration from The Holy Bible  
with illustrations by Gustave Doré

Engraving

Private collection





Was this, for them, not the end of the world? Were those who witnessed the more recent eruption of Krakatoa not of the same opinion? Impenetrable darkness lasting eighteen hours, an atmosphere like a furnace, filling the eyes, nose, and ears with ashes,



## The Deluge

---

William Miller (after John Martin), 1844  
From the The Imperial Family Bible  
According to the Authorised Version  
Engraving  
Private collection





the deep and incessant cannonade of the volcano, the falling of pumice stones from the black sky, the terrible scene illuminated only at intervals by the lurid lightning or the fire-balls on the spars and rigging of vessels, the thunder echoing from cloud and sea with an infernal musketry, and the shower of ashes turning into a deluge of mud.



## The Great Day of His Wrath

---

John Martin, 1851-1853  
Oil on canvas, 196.5 x 303.2 cm  
Tate Gallery, London







Thus was the experience of the passengers of a Java vessel during the night of eighteen hours, from 26 to 28 August 1883, when a portion of the island of Krakatoa was hurled into the air, and the sea, after having first retreated, swept upon the shore, with waves over a hundred feet high, to a distance of up to six miles inland over a coastline over 300 miles long,



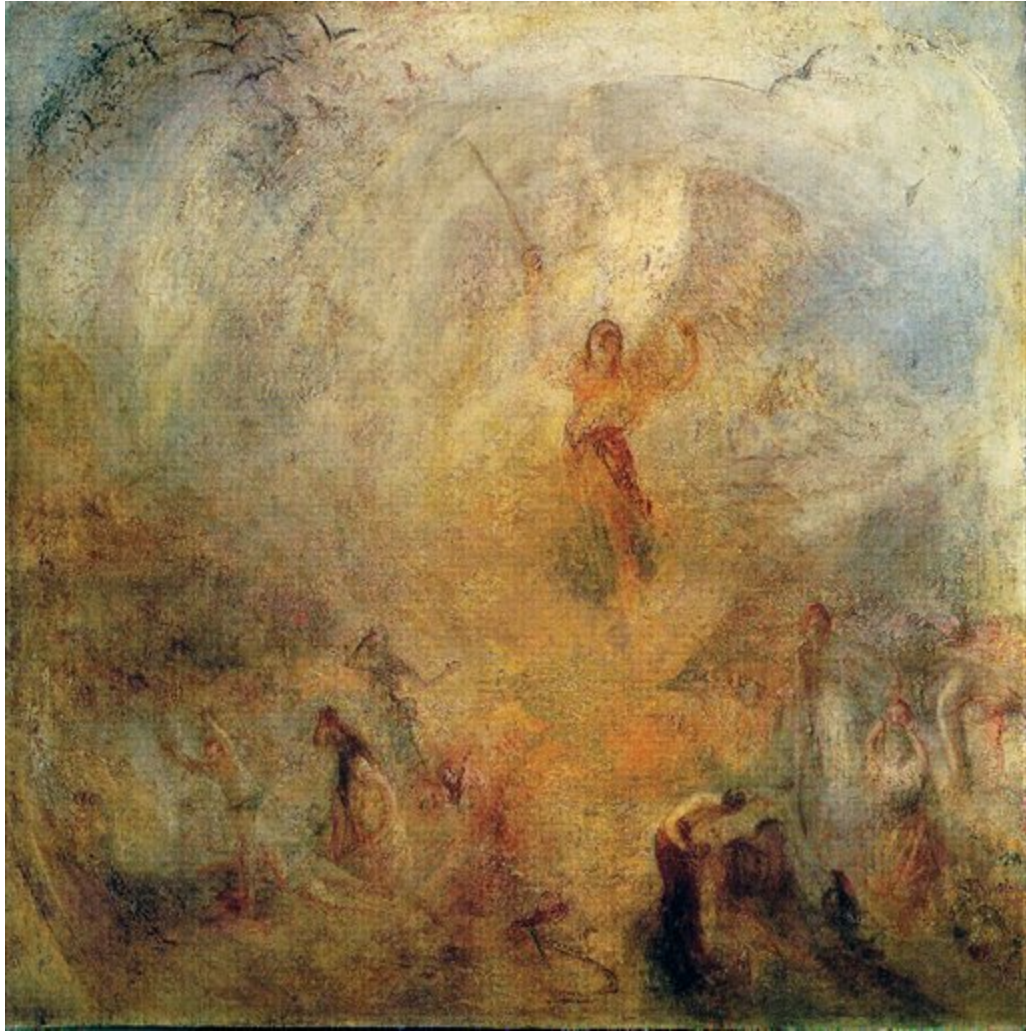
### The Angel Standing in the Sun

---

Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1846

Oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.7 cm

The Clore Collection, Tate Gallery, London





and in the reflux carried away with it the four cities, Tjiringin, Méрак, Telok-Bétong, and Anjer, and the entire population of the region, more than 40,000 souls. For a long time the progress of vessels was hindered by floating bodies inextricably interlaced; and weeks later human fingers, with their nails, and fragments of scalps, with their hair, were found in the stomachs of fishes.



## The Vision of the Four Beasts

---

Gustave Doré, 1866

Illustration from The Holy Bible  
with Illustrations by Gustave Doré

Engraving

Private collection





Those who escaped, or who saw the catastrophe from some vessel, and lived to welcome again the light of day, which had seemed forever extinguished, relate in terror with what resignation they expected the end of the world, persuaded that its very foundations were giving way and that the knell of a universal doom had sounded.



## The Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones

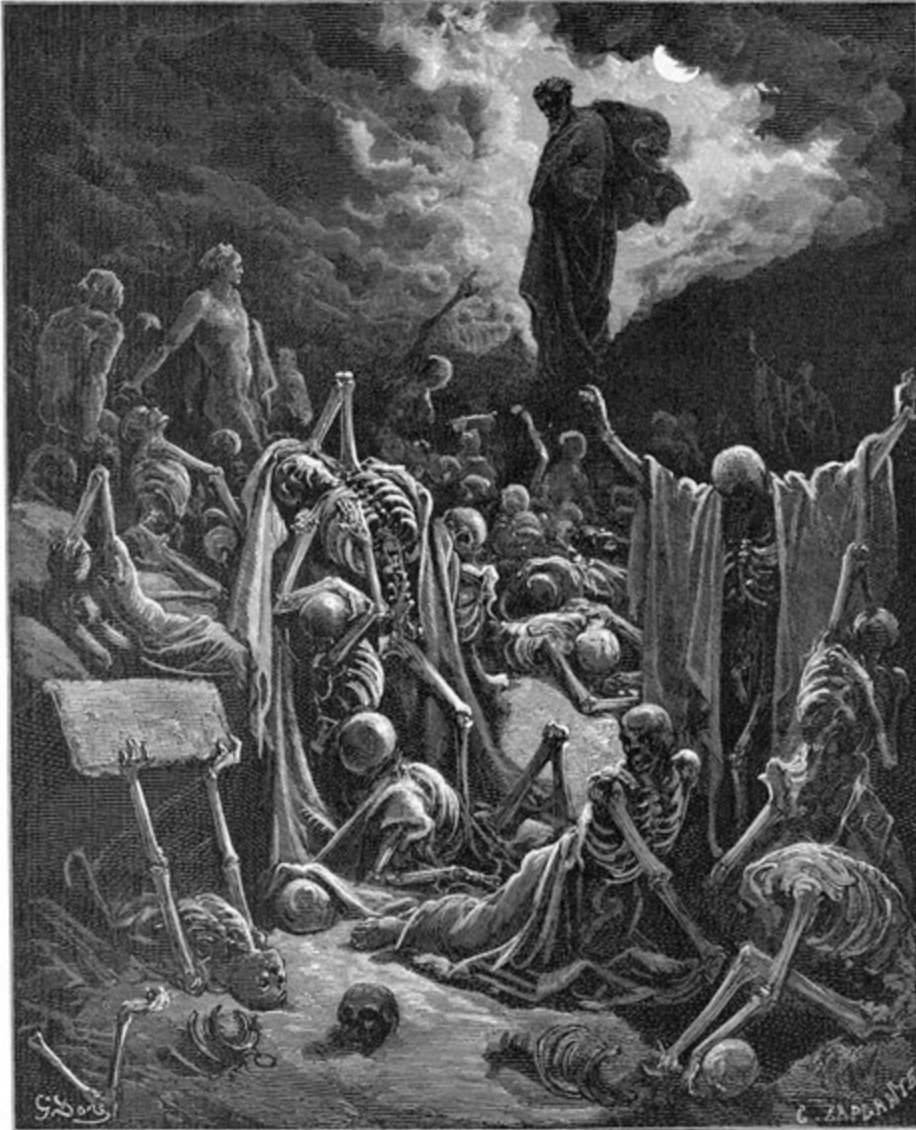
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Gustave Doré, 1866

Illustration from The Holy Bible  
with illustrations by Gustave Doré

Engraving

Private collection





One eye-witness assures us that he would not again pass through such an experience for all the wealth that could be imagined. The sun was extinguished and death seemed to reign sovereign over nature. This eruption, moreover, was of such terrific violence that it was heard through the earth at the antipodes;



## The Last Judgement

---

Gustave Doré, 1866  
Illustration from The Holy Bible  
with illustrations by Gustave Doré  
Engraving  
Private collection







the resulting ash cloud reached an altitude of over 65,000 feet, circling the entire globe in 35 hours (the barometer fell four millimetres in Paris even), and left a fine dust in the upper layers of the atmosphere for more than a year which, illumined by the sun, gave rise to those magnificent twilight displays admired so much throughout the world.



### The Gates of Hell

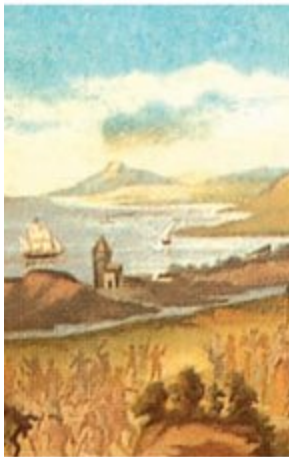
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Auguste Rodin, 1880-1917  
Bronze, 635 x 400 x 85 cm  
Musée Rodin, Paris





These are formidable disturbances, partial ends of the world. Certain earthquakes deserve citation with these terrible volcanic eruptions, as their consequences have been so disastrous. In the earthquake of Lisbon, 1 November 1755, 30,000 people perished;



### Hell and the Seven Deadly Sins

---

Published by La Bonne Presse, end of 19<sup>th</sup>  
century  
Private collection





the shock was felt over an area four times as large as that of Europe. When Lima was destroyed, on 28 October 1724, the sea rose 88 feet above its ordinary level, rushed upon the city, and erased it so completely that not a single house was left. Vessels were found in the fields several miles from the shore.



## Apocalyptic City

---

Ludwig Meidner, 1913

Oil on canvas, 79 x 119 cm

Landesmuseum für Kunst und  
Kulturgeschichte, Münster





On 10 December 1869, inhabitants of the city of Onlah, in Asia Minor, alarmed by subterranean noises and a first violent trembling of the earth, took refuge on a neighbouring hilltop, whence, to their stupefaction, they saw several crevasses open in the city which within a few moments entirely disappeared in the bowels of the earth.



## Angel

---

Giovanni Boldini, 1924  
Oil on canvas, 82 x 100 cm  
Collezione Boldini, Pistoia







We have direct evidence that under circumstances far less dramatic, as for example on the occasion of the earthquake in Nice, 23 February 1887, the idea of the end of the world was the very first to come to mind.

The history of the earth could offer us a remarkable number of similar tragedies, partial cataclysms and threats of final destruction.



### The Flame

---

Jackson Pollock, 1934-1938  
Oil on canvas mounted on fiberboard,  
51.1 x 76.2 cm  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York





It is fitting that we should devote a moment to the consideration of these great phenomena, as also to the history of the belief in the end of the world which has appeared in every age, though modified by the advancement of human knowledge. Faith has in part disappeared; mystery and superstition, which struck the imagination of our ancestors and has so curiously been represented in the portals of our great cathedrals,



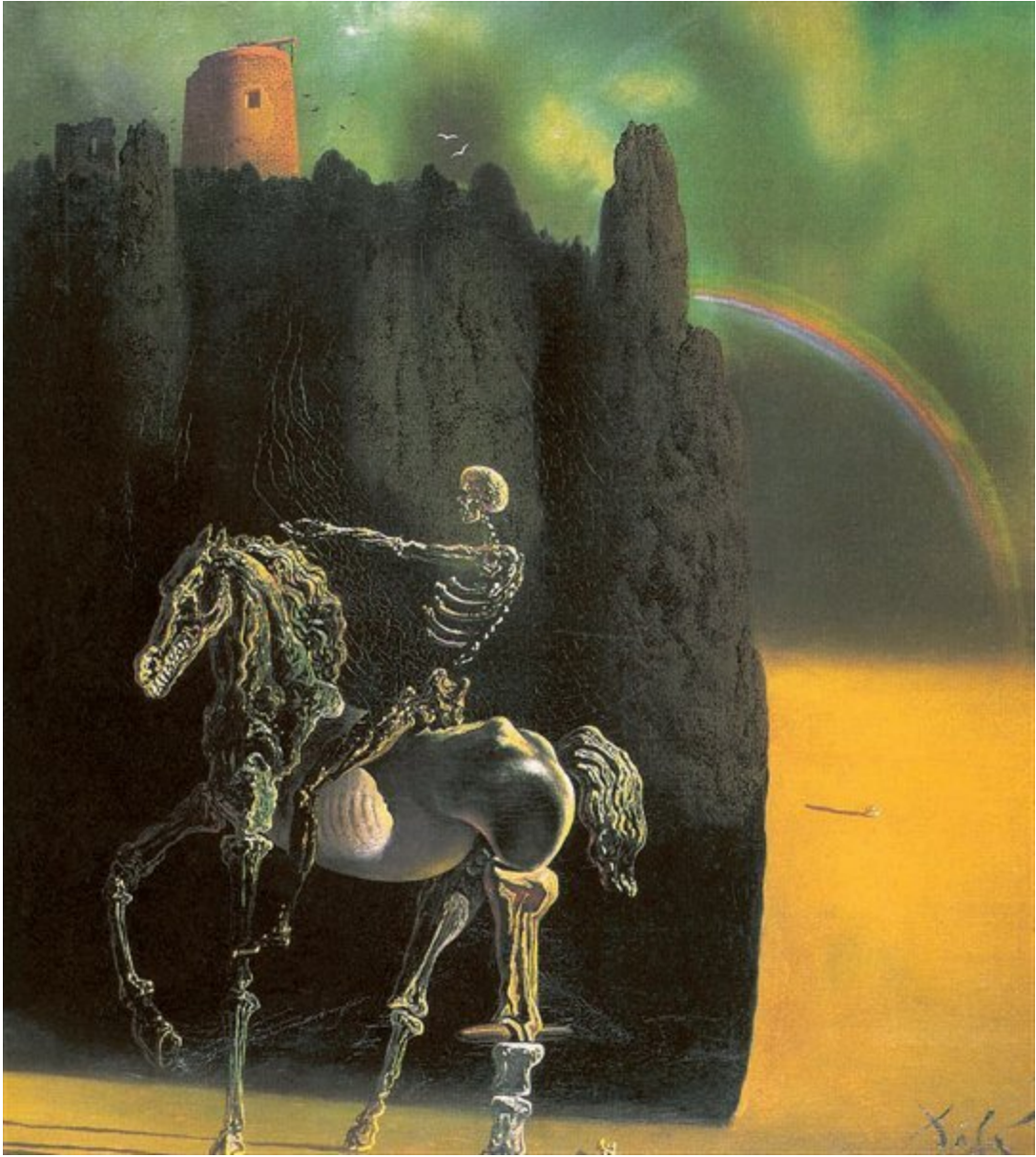
### The Horseman of Death

---

Salvador Dalí, 1935

Oil on canvas, 54 x 64 cm

The André-François Petit Collection, Paris





and in the sculptures and paintings inspired by Christian traditions, this theological aspect of the last day of the earth has given way to the scientific study of the duration of our solar system. The geocentric and anthropocentric concepts of the universe, which makes man the centre and end of creation, has gradually transformed and eventually disappeared,



Untitled drawing with cataclysmic theme

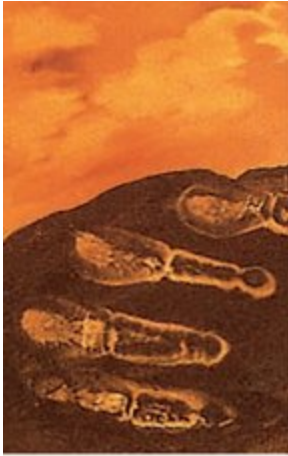
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Frida Kahlo, 1946

Sepia ink on paper, 18 x 26.7 cm

Private collection





for we know that our humble planet is but an island in the infinite, that human history has thus far been founded on pure illusions, and that the dignity of man lies in his intellectual and moral worth. Is the destiny and sovereign end of the human mind, the exact knowledge of things, not the search for Truth?



### Visage of War

---

Salvador Dalí, 1940

Oil on canvas, 64 x 79 cm

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen,  
Rotterdam

