

Apocalypse now: Our incessant desire to picture the end of the world

By Natasha O'Hear, for CNN

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10 photos: If the apocalypse was right around the corner, could you picture it?



The Last Judgement by John Martin (1853) – For centuries, artists and visionaries have been picturing the apocalypse. Whether it be through paintings, sculptures, movies or interactive installations, this desire to picture the end of the world has existed throughout time, continuing from the earliest days of mankind to this very present moment. Dr Natasha O'Hear selects and explains 10 images depicting the Apocalypse.

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Apocalypse Panel: St John Altarpiece by Hans Memling (1474-1479) – This is perhaps the greatest apocalyptic image of all time. It's Hans Memling's visualization of the entirety of John's vision of the end times (which became the Book of Revelation). Here we see John sitting on the island of Patmos (where he had been exiled to), with his fantastical visions passing before his eyes. The action moves from the heavenly throne room in the top left hand corner of the image (Rev. 4-5), and then down through the Four Horsemen (Rev. 6) and back through the various cycles of natural disasters, plagues, war and famine that characterize much of the narrative of the Book of Revelation. At the top of the image we can see the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev. 12) fighting the Great Red Dragon

(Satan) and on the Horizon we can see a tiny visualization of the Sea-Beast of Rev. 13. The impression we are left with is that the visions will keep appearing over the horizon. What is so striking about this image is the way in which it evokes not only the narrative of the Book of Revelation but in doing so also captures something of the nature of visionary experience itself.

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Apocalypse Series: St. Michael and the Dragon (Rev. 12) by Albrecht Dürer (circa 1498) – Albrecht Dürer's iconic visualisation of the Apocalypse, in which he condensed the narrative of the Book of Revelation into a mere 15 woodcut images (as opposed to the 80 or so images of the illuminated manuscript versions of the text) represents the first serious attempt to exploit the economic potential of the Apocalypse by giving it a "Renaissance-spin." His 'Apocalypse books' were a sellout and went through many more editions during the early 16th Century. While Dürer's Four Horsemen is perhaps the best-known image from this series today, this beautiful image of St Michael and his Angels fighting the Dragon (Rev.12) is a wonderful evocation of the heavenly apocalyptic drama described in this Chapter. And down below, the earthly realm, here depicted by Dürer as late 15th-Century Nuremberg remains oblivious to the fight between good and evil that rages above. A poor imitation artistically, this series, in which the Beasts and the Whore of Babylon are identified as the Pope and the Church, Cranach's series represents the most enduring polemical visualisation of the Apocalypse perhaps ever seen).

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The Immaculate Conception by Diego Velazquez (circa 1618) – In this unusual image, Velazquez, who also painted a companion piece entitled St John the Evangelist on the Island of Patmos, depicts the Woman Clothed with the Sun of Revelation 12 as the Virgin Mary, echoing an interpretative trend that had existed since the 5th century. In the foreground is a fountain, perhaps intended to symbolize the "river of the water of life" of the New Jerusalem of Rev. 21-22, thus implying that the two paintings taken together were intended as an unusual synthesis of the entirety of the Book of Revelation.

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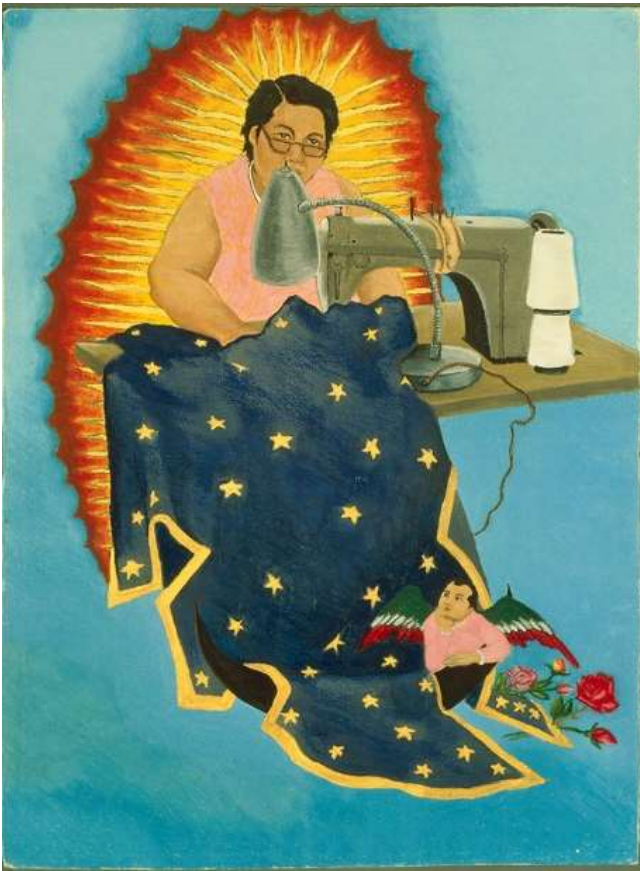


Whore of Babylon by Williams Blake (circa 1809) – Trustees of the British Museum. Although Blake had produced earlier series of illustrations of the Book of Revelation, this striking stand-alone image of the Whore of Babylon encapsulates much of Blake's unique attitude towards the Book of Revelation and the Bible itself. The Whore is worldly and sensuous but also strangely passive, possibly another victim of the Beast who is seen devouring any who have tried to resist him, who are seen fighting in a battle below. The souls whom the Whore has 'seduced' are seen flowing from her cup of abominations (Rev. 17.2) which she holds in her right hand. The Beast itself is well-known from Blake's other images of the Book of Revelation, in which he and Satan are recurring figures.
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10 photos: If the apocalypse was right around the corner, could you picture it?
The Last Judgement by John Martin (1853) – Part of a 'triptych' of images of the Apocalypse produced by Martin in 1853, this iconic image of the Last Judgement was taken on a tour of England and America shortly after Martin's death. In the upper part of the image, God sits on a throne surrounded by the twenty-four elders of Rev. 4-5, in a foreshadowing of the New Jerusalem. Below, in the earthly realm, at God's right hand (in keeping with traditional Last Judgement iconography) are assembled the great and the good, awaiting their entrance to Heaven/New Jerusalem. They include Dante, Washington, Newton, James Watt, Shakespeare and Michelangelo. On the right, in a far more dramatic section of the image, the Whore of Babylon and other "Babylonians" are being swept and pulled down into Hell. A Catholic Bishop and two steam trains (one marked London and the other Paris) are amongst the damned, which remind us of Martin's religious sensibilities as well as his mistrust of industrialization and the modern city.

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YOLANDA LOPEZ/COURTESY THE CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

Margaret F. Stewart: Our Lady of Guadalupe by Yolanda Lopez (1978) – Yolanda Lopez is a Mexican American artist who seeks to challenge the representation of Mexican women in the American media. In her take on the Woman Clothed with the Sun (the image here is part of a series on this theme) the Virgin is represented as Lopez' own mother, depicted at her sewing machine, far from glamorous. But she is a strong, working woman, making her own destiny as she sews the Woman Clothed with the Sun's traditional blue and gold starred cloak. Like the Woman Clothed with the Sun who has been traditionally interpreted in terms of the Virgin Mary or the Church itself, the woman in this image can be seen to represent the bedrock of the Latino community.

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Whore of Babylon Riding on a Beast with Seven Heads by Robert Roberg (1991) – Folk artist Robert Roberg's 1991 image appeared on the front cover of the New York Times in 2005. The Whore, astride the neon-pink Beast, downs a glass of red wine while a shocked-looking elderly John looks on in amazement. This image is a playful attempt to satirize the materialism and sexual immorality that fundamentalist Christians find pervasive in contemporary American society.



River of Bliss by Gordon Cheung (2007) – Cheung is a contemporary British-Chinese artist, here taking John Martin as his starting point, but adding computing technology and a critique of contemporary capitalism to his visualization of the New Jerusalem. We see the towers of the modern city evoked by skyscraper montages of pages from the Financial Times as fire burns in the background. While in the foreground, a John-like figure stands on a rocky outcrop above "Rivers of Bliss", also fashioned out of stock market reports from the financial pages. Although the scene at the foreground of the image is peaceful, this is a rather lonely image of Paradise, and the overall message is somewhat ambiguous, unlike the images of John Martin from which Cheung has drawn inspiration.

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The Rising Tide by Jason deCaires Taylor (2015) – Jason deCaires Taylor's installation of the Four Horseman has been placed near the bankside of Vauxall Bridge. At low-tide the quartet can be seen in their entirety and at high-tide the horses are partially submerged. The piece is an excellent example of the tendency throughout history to interpret the Four Horsemen in contemporary terms and to make bold statements. DeCaires Taylor is using the Four Horsemen and their Horses (whose heads are represented by mechanisms from oil wells, also known as horseheads) to support his environmentalism: "I wanted a piece that was going to be revealed with the tide and worked with the natural environment of the Thames, but also alluded to the industrial nature of the city and its obsessive and damaging focus just on work and construction."

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