

What spurred John Martin to Paint elemental catastrophe and divine retribution?

Introduction

On my first visit to the Tate I was completely unprepared for the room of the three awesome and enormous John Martin Paintings. I am also going to compare and contrast the three paintings with works I found on a school trip to Berlin. In this essay, I intend to focus on the three judgement paintings by John Martin. I am going to explore the ways in which Martin found inspiration for his art, his reasons for painting elemental catastrophe and divine retribution, what made him stand out from other artists of the same generation and why his work made him one of the most popular and successful British artists of the 19th Century.

The three judgement paintings were Martin's last major works produced before his death in 1854 and are thought by some critics to be his masterpieces. During the late 18th Century, assumptions about what was acceptable began to change meaning that artists were able to paint anything that appealed to their imaginations. Writers and artists began to explore the artistic and emotional qualities of immensity, darkness and terror. The word '*Sublime*' was used to describe the feelings resulting from the representation of these qualities. JMW Turner highlighted the power of nature compared with the helplessness of mankind, and used landscape to evoke heightened emotional states. Turner's ideas were developed and exaggerated by John Martin. Martin's paintings were dismissed as vulgar by the Royal Academy, but were however extremely popular with the public. The highlight of this success was his Judgement Series, completed in 1853 and exhibited across Britain and the United States for twenty years after his death.

The Great Day of His Wrath

John Martin's magnificent painting of the Apocalypse, The Great Day of His Wrath, really caught my eye. As an onlooker I found myself being swept, confused and disorientated into the middle of the painting towards some perspectival vanishing point – a black hole. This painting is a total contrast to 'The Plains of Heaven'. It is nothing less than the end of the world. Mountains crumbling, fires raging and bolts of lightning fall as God takes his final revenge on mankind. The painting presents his most disastrous idea of destruction, including an entire city being torn up and thrown into the deep hole. In the centre, tiny naked figures are being sucked into the empty space.

Artist Dan Graham declares his passion for the three John Martin's works. *'The colour is absolutely unbelievable. I guess you can compare in some ways to Turner but Turner is more about steam and industrial revolution as it got going whereas this was the first terror of the industrial revolution which many people thought was the end of the world.'*
(Pod cast - Dan Graham on the paintings of John Martin- Tate.org)

John Martin's use of colour helps to illustrate the dark and gloomy atmosphere of the painting. The blood – red glow casts a frightening feel over the scene as well as creating a dramatic atmosphere. The painting contains Martin's most characteristic qualities, including his surprising control of scale and his skill in combining areas of gestural paint with precise, stylized detail. However, the painting in the Tate was too high up for me to see detail clearly which I found very frustrating.

As I looked up, I noticed that the painting has areas of impasto, as the light shone on the painting the texture was revealed, if I were to touch it the surface would be quite rough. The composition of the painting is engaging and makes you feel like you are actually there.

There may be a correlation between the mood of this painting and events in John Martin's life, such as the mayhem and destruction of the Napoleonic war. His subject matter may also be linked to Northumberland, the area that he lived in, as it was always prone to floods and other natural disasters. Another influence may be his forceful mother who taught Martin to relate all to the Bible. However artist Dan Graham says that The Great Day of His Wrath reminds him of the Vietnam War and Apocalypse now. I found this interesting because this shows that the painting still has some kind of resonance today.

The Great Day of His Wrath is very lurid and reminds me of science fiction like paintings. Martin was influenced by both William Blake's visionary art and poetry and Mary Shelley's early sci-fi novel, The Last Man (1826). His painting is a vision of hell on earth leading to an apocalyptic disaster. According to Frances Carey, Deputy Keeper in the Department of Prints and Drawings, the painting shows the "destruction of Babylon and the material world by natural cataclysm". (Frances Carey, *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* p .269)

However, according to the Tate, Martin got his aspiration from The Book of Revelation. What is, what has been, and what is to come is the central focus of the revelation. The book contains visionary descriptions of heaven, conflicts between good and evil and the end of the world. After reading chapters from the book, I discovered that

there is resemblance and similarity between the artwork and the text from Revelation 6. To support my discovery I have summarised the chapter.

The Book of Revelation is sealed with seven seals. As each seal is broken by Jesus, mysterious and terrifying events occur. Martin follows the biblical description closely, but adds his own sensational effects. A great earthquake rocked the earth. This earthquake may have activated volcanoes being the reason why the sunlight is blocked and the painting is left with a red glow- the ash filled the sky so that the sun could not be seen. Could the darkness be an act of God? – I remember that this happened in Egypt in the days of Moses.

“Untimely figs”(Revelation 6- The Seven Seals) refers to the fact that this terrible destruction came suddenly and was totally unexpected. Everyone on earth is in fear and totally panic stricken. It appears that they are trying to hide in shelters, dens and caves to protect themselves from what is happening.

People are praying that the mountains would fall on them. I think it is amazing that they know that God is behind all of this pain and destruction. Almost everyone at this time would have believed in God. They had heard that there was a coming judgement and the end of the world, but they had dismissed it and mocked those who spoke of it. They had refused to accept that God would punish them for their sins, but now they know that such a day of judgement had arrived.

The painting has also been used on the cover of Bombs, a past single by Faithless. This would not have such a visual impact as the scale was much smaller and the format was different. The single generated moderate controversy with its music video, as demonstrated by MTV refusing to air it. The video for the song is an anti- war affair by

Howard Greenhalgh, put next to harmless images of everyday life with guns being fired and soldiers being attacked, often in the same shot creating a montage, symbolizing the presence of war all around us. For example, a family are skipping along a beach while a mushroom cloud grows on the horizon. Using the painting for this different purpose changes it's meaning from large biblical subjects to the subject of war. The director of the music video Howard Greenhalgh says, "War infects all our lives; recently it feels that this has increasingly become 'our way of life'". The lyrics 'Everywhere is noise, panic and confusion' can be visually linked to the painting The Great Day of His Wrath. However, it was the lyric's; 'But to some, another fun day in Babylon' that really caught my attention as the word Babylon has come up before in my research.

The Last Judgement

In the central canvas, The Last Judgement, John Martin's most ambitious use of composition separates the good and evil by a great gorge just off centre. The sloping curves lead from each side towards the central empty space. Similarly to The Great Day of His Wrath, The Last Judgement illustrates the central event of the Book of Revelation, and Martin assembles his scene from passages in the story. The last bridge over the valley of Jehoshaphat is collapsing and a handful of figures dash across it, to the security of Jerusalem. Sinners beg as the world falls apart. The damned, on the right, include a young woman known as Herodias's daughter and the whore of Babylon, dressed in purple and scarlet, with a rosary bracelet dangling from her wrist, pleading in vain, others still clinging to their ceremonial dress- a crown and crucifix – as they scramble for survival (figure 3). The forces of evil commanded by Satan are defeated and the armies of Gog and Magog identified as the nations in the four corners of the earth, (New Testament, Book of Revelation) tumble into the bottomless pit.

Meanwhile, across the great divide, above the crystal palaces of the New Jerusalem, is God on a throne in heaven sitting in judgement, surrounded by the twenty four elders seated on benches wearing crowns and dressed in pure white robes, while they witness the passing of judgement (Chapter 4). The four angels are posted at the corners of the throne having sounded their trumpets after the opening of the seventh seal (Chapter 8).

The scene carries over from The Great Day of His Wrath, among the damned on the right foreground John Martin has included a bishop and a king and on the far left on a mountain are the good or blessed people including artists and poets. The bishop and king symbolises the church and the monarchy, to me these people are wealthy and are important in running the country. However, John Martin sees them as evil. They are shown in despair and pain, in an atmosphere of destruction. He obviously has a strong opinion that poets and other artists like himself are more important and 'good' and should therefore deserve to run the country instead. On the left are nameless figures of worthy women and harmless children, victims and patrons, and, in the foreground, portraits of the famous. As described in Chapter 20, 'the dead, small and great, stand before God'. Among the portraits of the famous are Raphael, Rubens, Leonardo, Michelangelo and Titian. (Figure 4)

I found the use of colour engaging. For me the dark black areas of the painting create terror; however, the white of the elder's gowns signifies innocence and purity, but also stand out against the dark background. Martin's use of colour also helps create the dramatic atmosphere of the scene; for example, the deep red sun or moon. The right and evil side of the painting is dark and deadly in subject and in colour, which is a total comparison and draws attention to the left side of the canvas. There appears to be a confusion of scales between the angel and the good on the slopes of Mount Zion, the angel is bigger than the figures in the foreground even though the angel is more distant. This may signify the importance of this angel. Next to this angel seems to be a demon like creature with a human-like face and hair like a woman flying around. His presence is rather terrifying.

As I had a Closer examination of the painting I could see that several areas in the foreground are made up of small pieces of paper, stuck on to the canvas and painted over. I can not tell if these changes were made by Martin himself or by someone else after he died.

The Plains of Heaven

The Plains of Heaven is the last of the three judgement paintings in the series by John Martin. However, in the Tate the painting is positioned on the left meaning as an onlooker I looked at this painting first. Hanging on the left of The Last Judgement, The Plains of Heaven continues the composition and increases the theme of salvation. I really like this painting; it is very iridescent and reminds me of the sixties as this period of time was very involved with iridescent and fluorescent colours. The painting is extremely visionary and the detail is panoramic reminding me of paintings by American artist Thomas Cole. I dismiss the fact that The Plains of Heaven could portray an actual view, the landscape looks too perfect to be real.

The painting may be a dream landscape of Tyne Valley, which he regarded as an 'earthly paradise' (The Art of John Martin by William Feaver). The painting creates an image of natural harmony, recreating the paradise referred to in Chapter 21 of The Book of Revelation- The New Heaven and New Earth. The present earth has just been destroyed and a new earth has been created. There will be no more sickness, pain and death, no more storm, floods or natural disasters. It seems that the earth will be a single land mass as it was in the beginning. "No more sea"(Revelation 21- The New Heavens and New Earth) may mean that there will be no oceans, though there will be lakes and rivers, or that the water will be in a single position rather than having several oceans and seas. This new creation is eternal. The city of New Jerusalem in the distance represents God's presence on earth just as it did when the first earthly temple was built. This city

does not seem to be a part of the earth, but is descending from Heaven. Everything of the old earth will be forgotten. Life will be perfect on the new earth, Sin and suffering will be unknown.

John Martin included a number of poets and artists among the good, who are gathered like white clouds on the top of the hill in the foreground of the painting (figure 6). The figures are dressed in white representing purity and goodness and the flowers act as a compositional device, pointing like arrows towards this goodness. The flowers also act as a device to link the foreground to the beautiful scenery, increasing the impact of the view and acting as a gateway to the plains of heaven. Behind is the deep blue area of lake and distant waterfalls, surrounded by beautiful mountain surroundings. The other two judgement paintings represent the wilderness and darkness which borders this paradise.

Lucas Cranach d.A (nach Hieronymus Bosch): Flügelaltar mit dem Jungsten

Gericht = The Last Judgement

Undoubtedly the first thing I noticed about the paintings was the large scale; even though they weren't as large as Martin's Judgement paintings they still made a huge impact when first entering the room. Similar to John Martin the three paintings form a triptych linking together to form a story. I noticed that the layout of the paintings were the same as John Martin's. However, they are set out in a portrait format rather than landscape.

The panel on the left is similar to Martin's The plains of Heaven with mountains and sea representing what looks like paradise (figure 12) and the representation of the story of Adam and Eve at the tree. Cranach's use of cool colours helps create this paradise feel. Nevertheless, the scene is not totally peaceful with evil looking creatures in the sky (figure 7) and an angel wearing a red cloak and knife chasing after its victim (figure 17).

Looking at the middle panel, I firstly noticed the figure sitting in heaven in Judgement with people begging for forgiveness (figure 9 and 18). I also spotted the four angels playing trumpets which represented the opening of the seventh seal in Martin's The Last Judgement. Compared to Martin, Cranach used inhuman beasts that look to be taking over the earth and killing mankind (figure 15).

The darkness of the last panel was similar to The Great Day of His Wrath creating the feeling of the ending of the world. I noticed the crowd of people screaming (figure 13), the facial expressions help create the dark and horrible atmosphere of the painting. However, Martin used the crowds of people in a different context, with his images of the Blessed in The Last Judgement (figure 4).

The panels were not as high up on the wall but the reflection of the lights made it hard for me to see some areas, for this reason some of my photographs are blurred. In my opinion, the figures are larger and the overall paintings are busier with a lot more going on.

Conclusion

The beginning of the 19th Century was the period of the Romantic Movement which meant that it was a period of change and revolution in human rights. As a result of the French revolution previously, artists began to rebel against Neo-classical and traditions and look more into their own experience and imagination. John Martin had other possible influences, he developed and exaggerated Turner's ideas, was influenced by Mary Shelley's sci-fi novel, *The Last Man* and William Blake's visionary art and poetry.

William Feaver says that Martin's Painting is designed to draw our attention to the dangers of great social concern at the time, of 'over population', as well as to 'themes of empires rotten at the core' (Feaver p71- *The Art of John Martin*). Other events in Martin's life such as the mayhem and destruction of the Napoleonic war may have had some kind of impact on his work. However I believe he added his own references from *The Book of Revelation* linking contemporary life with biblical events. Martin was taught by his mother to relate everything to the Bible and scenes from the Bible was a popular subject matter at that period of time.

Martin became the most popular British artist of his age gaining approval from the public throughout Europe. Thomas Lawrence referred to Martin as the 'most popular painter of the day'. The fact that his successful Judgement series are being exhibited even after his death, shows how popular he was and still is now. *The Great Day of His Wrath* has also been used on the front cover of 'Bombs', a single by Faithless this shows that the large canvas remain effective and still have an impact on contemporary life.

Appendix

Visits to the Tate Britain gallery in London

The taking of photographs was forbidden so I had to use internet images and photocopies from books.

Visit to the Gemaldegalerie in Berlin

Photographs and post cards

Internet resources:

www.wikipedia.org

www.google.co.uk/images

www.youtube.com

www.thetate.org

Books and other research resources:

The Art of John Martin- William Feaver