

BIG

IMAGINING
THE
UNIVERSE

BANG

p. 6 **FOREWORD**
Mohamed Ridouani, Luc Sels, Denise Vandevooort,
Bart Raymaekers, Lien De Keukelaere

p. 13 **LIGHT IN
BLACKNESS**
Abdelkader Benali

p. 19 **IMAGINING
THE UNIVERSE**
Barbara Baert

p. 71 **TO
THE EDGE
OF TIME**
Thomas Hertog

p. 103 **CATALOGUE**

p. 104 **IMAGINING
THE UNIVERSE:
ETERNAL
WONDER**
Jan Van der Stock, Hannah Redler Hawes,
Thomas Hertog, Annelies Vogels

p. 298 **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

p. 301 **LENDERS**

p. 302 **COLOPHON**



FIG. 5
The Creation,
11th century,
embroidered textile,
Girona, Museo Tesoro
de la Catedral.

a series of medallions. The first day: the creation of Heaven and Earth and the separation of light and darkness. The second day: the heavens. The third day: the sea, the earth and plants. The fourth day: the stars. The fifth day: the animals of the water. Finally, the sixth day: the animals and man. A medallion with the portrait bust of the Creator Himself has been added above and below. The uppermost contains the *Creator Logos*, or Christ-Creator, shown in an attitude of benediction.

The *Creator Logos* typically holds a book as symbol of the Word made flesh. The miniaturist has replaced this attribute here with a pointing gesture. With his left hand, Christ-Creator indicates the words of the Bible on a sheet of parchment. After all, the book, the Word made flesh, begins as soon as the viewer turns the page and reveals the opening lines of Genesis. Christ thus presents the manuscript that the viewer is holding in their very own hands. In this medallion, the hand of Christ is active, whereas in the lower one, His gesture is passive. In this image, His hand rests on the border: after all, it is now the seventh day.

Words and images are intimately linked in the illumination from the Lambeth Bible. The paintings unfurl vertically down the page, like a scroll, while the text runs from left to right. In Genesis, the Creator is assigned a number of activities, such as *dixit, fecit*

(or *creavit, vidit, vocavit* (or *apellavit*), respectively referring to pronouncing, making, seeing and naming. So interconnected are the words and images in this Bible that *dixit* actually adheres to the medallions. The text emerges from the images and these, in turn, rely upon the words for their expressive power. This entanglement between text and miniature alludes to the so-called *paragone*, or the hierarchical conflict between the medium of the word, *scriptura*, and the medium of the image, *pictura*. This tension is inherent to the creation story itself, for on the one hand there is the image – the Creator Himself – but on the other, there are the words, which report: “In the beginning there was the word, and the word was with God.” Did word arise from image or vice versa? Was the word a prerequisite for sight? The answer lies in the New Testament, in the phrase ‘Word made flesh’, as described at the beginning of St John’s Gospel. Just as there is a marriage between scribe and miniaturist on the folio’s page, as evidenced by the unity between the medallions and the text, so too must we understand the bond between Father and Son, between Old and New Covenant, and between narrativity and medium. Or even more emphatically, between the Creation and the emergence of the arts themselves.

Yet the idea of Christ-Creator as the artistic measure of the world remained precarious. Petrus Lombardus (c. 1100-1160) demonstrated this clearly

when he defended the notion of a sharp distinction between creation (*creare*) and production (*facere*). In his view, the former is a concept that refers to a process of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), just as God created the world. The second pertains to matter (*ex aliqua materia*), for example the artist who creates a sculpture from clay or paints with pigment. The dichotomy accords with the humbleness of human skill and the divine power of creation, as articulated by Theophilus Presbyter (c. 1070-1125) in his *De diversis artibus* (c. 1120): “Through the spirit of wisdom, you know that all created things proceed from God, and without Him nothing is.”

Not only is the creation of the world a cosmological fact, but it is also inscribed as a starting point of the history that leads to God, the so-called eschatology. Certain cycles seek to incorporate this precise historical trajectory into cosmology. The impressive eleventh-century embroidery that is thought to have hung in the central apse of Girona Cathedral (Fig. 5), which measures 5 x 4 metres, is just one example of this tendency. We can see that fabric was torn off at the bottom at some point in time, meaning it was once even larger.

The scenes from Genesis are situated between two circles. In the middle sphere, Christ is seated, holding an open book with the text *s-c-s d-s* (*sanctus Deus*). The aureole contains the words: *R-E-X F-O-R-T-I-S*. The surrounding space is divided into six compartments. Above Christ is the dove, to His left and right, respectively, the angels of darkness and of light. The circular space is divided into the creation of the firmament and the water (above), the creation of Eve (below), followed by Adam who names the animals and, finally, a scene depicting fauna. In the corners between the circle and the square are the personifications of the four winds. The sides contain medallions with the words *DIES SOLIS* on the left and the *DIES [LUNAE]* on the right. In the top centre, on the same axis as the dove and Christ, is a figure with the word *ANNUS* (the Year). *Annus* is an aged man with a time wheel and a rod. The uppermost register contains scenes depicting the seasons. People work in the forest during the summer, in autumn the grapes are harvested, in winter they warm their feet by the fire and in spring the soil is ploughed. To the side are the months, represented by the work typically associated with each period. January, February, November and December have unfortunately been lost. The horizontal strip connecting February and November was torn away. Nevertheless, we can still recognise the scenes from the Legend of the True Cross at the bottom. This is the tale of how, at the beginning of the fourth century, Helena travelled to Jerusalem to retrieve Christ’s cross at the request of her son, the Emperor Constantine. Judas Cyriacus, a Jew, was chosen against his will to accompany the queen to Golgotha. After starving for seven days in an dried-up well, Judas leads Helena to the site. They attempt to identify the correct cross – having found three – by placing the body of a dead boy on each one. When he is restored to life, they know that they have found the True Cross.

The iconographic programme of this Romanesque embroidery is ingenious in that it integrates both the Creation and the history of salvation. The circle symbolises constancy and eternity: the Creator and the personifications of the Sun, the Moon, the world’s rivers and *Annus*. The rectilinear sections can be read as the passage of time: the calendar and the crucifixion legend. Furthermore, the tapestry connects the Jewish history of salvation, which is diachronic, with the Neoplatonic concept of cyclical time.

And doesn’t this embroidery also make time itself movingly palpable? How many hands did it take to transform countless silken filaments into these graphic images? How many endless threads of silk did it consume? Who can begin to comprehend how many hours it took to create this work? All these questions remain unanswered, but there is one thing that I know for certain: the people who created this amazing object were working for God. In the spirit of Petrus Lombardus. And that of Theophilus. *Facere* to *creare*. Humming and handwork. Creation and Creator. A thread like the umbilical cord from the Book of Psalms, or like the *mise en abyme* of this Universe. A tiny needle piercing dust and skin as a *pars pro toto* for the creation of something out of nothing. Such is the simultaneous magnitude and subtlety of this notion, that I could guiltily end my essay here.

Still, I am reminded of Augustine (354-430) and several passages from his *Confessions* that capture the profound melancholy in his musings on time (translation by Gerard Wijdeveld):

“The day is Yours, and the night also is Yours. At Your nod the moments flee by. Grant thereof space for our meditations among the hidden things of Your law, nor close it against us who knock.”

“Therefore You spoke and they were made, and in Your Word You made these things. ... The syllables sounded and passed by, the second after the first, the third after the second, and thence in order, until the last after the rest, and silence after the last.”

“I have heard from a learned man that the motions of the sun, moon, and stars constituted time, and I assented not. For why should not rather the motions of all bodies be time? What if the lights of heaven should cease, and a potter’s wheel run round, would there be no time by which we might measure those revolutions, and say either that it turned with equal pauses, or, if it were moved at one time more slowly, at another more quickly, that some revolutions were longer, others less so?”

“I see that time, then, is a certain extension. But do I see it, or do I seem to see it? Thou, O Light and Truth, will show me.”

Doesn’t this Romanesque iconography, produced on the Spanish shores of the Mediterranean, in a country that welcomed both Jews and Arabs from southern lands – and thus also their newly discovered optical, physical and philosophical knowledge – find a wonderful counterpart in the abstraction of the ancient floor mosaics? Fingers again. Not threads this time but tiles. And an equal amount of time. As much *facere* to *creare*. Patience and bowed heads. Just like the humming embroiderers.



FIG. 6
Floor mosaic, beginning
of the 13th century,
former provost church
St Pankratius, Oberpleis.

In 1974, an interesting thirteenth-century abstract floor mosaic was uncovered in the Sankt Pankratius provost's church in Oberpleis, in the Rhineland (Fig. 6). The *Divina quaternitas*, or the quartet that pervades the medieval cosmos – the seasons, the human temperaments and their humours, the four directions of the wind, the seasons, the colours black, white, red and yellow – are represented in circles. Each of the four circles, one in each corner, contains a letter from the word A-D-A-M. Of course, this refers to the protoplast from Creation, but the letters are also the Greek initials of the cardinal directions: *Anatole* for the east, *Dysis* for the west, *Arktos* for the north and *Mesembra* for the south.

The Universe and humankind, Adam, mirror one another. Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) Vitruvian Man, as a cosmography of the microcosm based on mathematical models of proportion, is world famous. But this scheme was also common in the twelfth century. The iconography is known through the *Liber divinorum operum* (c. 1163-1174) of Hildegard of Bingen (Fig. 7) and a thirteenth-century miscellany, made in Prüfening, near Regensburg (Fig. 8). The four corners of the Prüfening miniature show the elements of nature, which are broken down into three pairs: refined (*subtilis, tenuis*) versus thick (*corpulentis* or *crassus*); sharp (*acutus*) versus blunt (*obtusus*); mobile (*mobilis*) versus immobile (*immobilis*). The world and humankind, as models for nature, are supported on these four- and three-pronged levels. To the Neoplatonic mind, nature was constantly in motion. With the introduction of Aristotelian concepts in the thirteenth century, however, this becomes a problem. Moreover, how could it be reconciled with Creation, which God executes "in the beginning", thus implying a temporal concept? A solution was offered by the scholastic Albertus Magnus (c. 1200-1280). In his view, God is not determined by time. He is *aeternitas*, eternity.

From the moment of its creation, nature is predicated upon *perpetuitas*, or perpetuity. Finally, the movement detected in nature is caused by an intrinsic soul that is created *ex nihilo* by God. That inspiration becomes the secondary cause of every 'something' in nature. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) spoke authoritatively of 'the Unmoved Mover' (God) in relation to this principle, and also of the *ens mobile*, the creation that is forever in motion.

From the twelfth century onwards, views on the physical structure of the world were increasingly influenced by classical texts. Central to this development was Plato's *Timaeus*, a cosmogony described in the form of a speculative dialogue. From the thirteenth century, the texts of Plato's most important pupil, Aristotle, became known and physics was adapted to his views. It goes without saying that a tension arose between the new cosmological science and the Christian creation story. We will see examples of how attempts were made to reconcile the two.

The *Cosmographia* by the twelfth-century poet Bernardus Silvestris (c. 1080-c. 1167) is a consummate example of the Neoplatonic tendency. It takes the form of a dialogue between Natura or Noys (from the Greek *nous*, 'reason' and 'providence') and Yle (from the Greek *hylé*, 'form') or Silva, 'primordial matter'. When Silva was still unformed and chaotic, she was already pregnant with the things of the world, but they swarmed in disorder. Natura asks God to urge Noys to give Silva form, order and beauty (*splendor*). Noys conceives the inner ideas and draws them. A special intervention that places the plastic world at the heart of this creation myth. Silva 'sees' these *species* and arranges them within the quartet of the natural elements. Noys will then form a cosmic soul that Bernardus calls *entelecheia*.

A miniature from the *Clavis physicae* [The Key of Nature] by Honorius Augustodunensis (c. 1080-1154) reflects another Neoplatonic idea concerning



FIG. 7
Hildegard of Bingen,
'Man and the Cosmos',
in: *Liber Divinorum
Operum*, 1170, Lucca,
Biblioteca Statale,
ms. 1942, fol. 9r.



FIG. 8
Microcosm and Macrocosm,
in: compilation manuscript
from the Prüfening
monastery near Regensburg,
12th century, Munich,
Bavarian State Library,
cod. lat. 13002, fol. 7v.

the formation of the world (Fig. 9) and is an adaptation of Johannes Scotus Eriugena's (c. 815-c. 877) *Periphyseon* or *De divisione naturae* [On the Division of Nature]. Scotus posited that the world is either created or creative, within a spectrum that allows for many possible combinations of the two. Creating and 'not created' is only God, who holds the reins of Creation in the lower register as *finis*. Creative and created are the *primordiales causae*. These 'first causes' are at the top of the miniature: Justice, Virtus, Ratio and Veritas, Essentia, Vita and Sapientia, the seven daughters of King Bonitas. They are the eternally shaping essences of the world. Not creating and created are the *natura creata* and the *natura naturans*. The things of nature, namely everything that 'exists' in time and space, are personified in medallions on the left and right. They are 'shaped' by the effects (*effectus causae*) of eternal ideas and can be seen in the second and third registers: the fire of the angels,

the air with the birds, the water with the fish and the earth with humankind and beasts. Between time and space, in the second register, there is a peculiar lump of earth with four profiles and a central eye. The five faces are all-seeing and the 'formation' is present in its potentiality: it is heralded in the as yet unformed primordial matter of *Silva*. Interestingly, the potential earth clod 'sees'. The bizarre fivefold face forms a *mise en abyme*, so to speak, of the miniature. After all, one can only represent Creation *de facto* via the eye that visualises. "Erst wenn die Dinge in die Welt kommen, wenn die Welt Bild geworden IST, kann sie auch abgebildet werden." [Only when things come into the world, when the world IS becoming an image, can it also be depicted.] Finally, what is not creative and not created is the fourth possibility, which also possesses an intrinsic impossibility, and cannot thus be depicted in the miniature. It is the blind *mise en abyme*.



FIG. 9
Honorius Augustodunensis,
'The Shaping of the World',
in: *Clavis physicae*, 12th
century, Paris, Bibliothèque
nationale de France, ms. lat.
6734, fol. 3v.



FIG. 10
'Medieval astronomers',
in: *Psalter of Blanche of
Castile*, c. 1220, Paris,
Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal,
ms. 1186, fol. 1v.

Having surveyed the principles underpinning the relationship between the creation and movement of the world, it is important to contrast them with the astronomical facets of cosmology. The miniature from the thirteenth-century French psalter for Blanche of Castile (1188-1252) depicts a figure with an astrolabe, an instrument for measuring, amongst other things, the height of the heavenly bodies above the horizon (Fig. 10). On the left is a scribe, and to the right is a figure checking some calculations, perhaps a mathematician. The instrument that scans the night sky is known from Antiquity and was probably introduced into Europe by Spanish Arabs in the tenth century. From then on, humans could look even deeper into the Universe and measure it meticulously, but what was the cultural image that accompanied this view? Or better still: how were people's observations filtered through their conceptions of the so-called 'superhuman', or that which extends beyond the Moon? Here again, Plato's *Timaeus* is the primary source, in which the eponymous protagonist reports that the heavenly bodies move in circles around the Earth. The celestial bodies are viewed as levels of concentric circles, which were formulated by the contemporaneous Claudius Ptolemy (c. 100-c. 170) according to geometrical axioms. Aristotle would later call these concentric movements 'spheres'.



FIG. 11
‘The Spherical Construction of the Universe’, in: *De Lisle Psalter*, c. 1308-1340, London, British Library, Arundel MS 83, fol. 123v.



FIG. 12
Cristoforo Orimina, ‘Christ with pencil’, in *Anjou Bible*, 1340, Leuven, KU Leuven Libraries, Maurits Sabbe Library, Ms. 1, fol. 6r.

In a fourteenth-century illustrated commentary on *De sphaera* (before 1220) by Johannes de Sacrobosco (c. 1195-c. 1256), God is enthroned in the immobile sphere of the *empyreum*, which also contains the rotating spheres of the stars and planets (Fig. 11). Those of the netherworld – the circles of fire, air and water – enclose the globe, which sits at the centre. In the heart of the Earth, we see the infernal fires of Hell. The Arabs recorded nine such spheres, rotating from east to west. The ninth, being the most elevated, functioned as a kind of engine that powered the rotations. In the Christian reception of the ‘model nine’, the number nine mirrored the nine levels of angels, each of which was divided into three triads, in the *De Coelesti Hierarchia* [The Celestial Hierarchy] by the fifth-century Neoplatonist, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Within this structure, the first sphere consists of the Seraphim, the Cherubim and the Thrones; the second contains the Dominions, Virtues and Powers; and the third boasts the Principalities, Archangels and Angels. But even within this theory of the spheres, a distinction was made between the twelfth-century Platonic ideas and those of Aristotle, that latter of which were gaining in prominence. According to Plato’s followers, which included Robert Grosseteste (c. 1168-1253), everything that exists – even the superhuman – must be ordered according to the quartet. Aristotle, on the other hand, placed the spheres above the Moon and under the authority of the fifth element, the *quintessence*. The fifth element is unrelated to the four natural elements that surround Man.

And with the end of this chapter, we reach the paradigm shift in iconography of the creation. The scheme used by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) in his *Divina Commedia* is a hybrid one that blends the Neoplatonic model of the spheres with the Aristotelian fifth element. In the last episode of Dante’s journey through Paradise, in which the author loses both his will and his intellectual imagination, he describes how he is consumed with love, the latter being the *quintessence* that moves the Sun and all the other stars.

As humanism emerges, the divine Creator is mirrored by the human creator. Influenced by the ancient philosophies, Christianity gradually became more sensitised to a concept of creation that chimed with the process of creating art. This was inspired, amongst other things, by the *Deus artifex* from Psalm 79, in which God is described as an architect. In the Anjou Bible (c. 1340), which is housed in the Maurits Sabbe Library in Leuven, Christ creates the world using a pen or brush (Fig. 12, see also catalogue p. 120). The creation of the world is viewed here as a counterpart to artistic creation. Christ with the brush evokes the miniaturist himself, who has used just such an implement to create the illumination. Both miniatures bear witness to the burgeoning artistic self-consciousness in Italy, which would culminate years later in the Renaissance of the fifteenth century.

Henceforth, *facere* was finally allowed to coincide with *creare*.

This brings me to the beautiful panel by Giovanni di Paolo (1398-1482) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which depicts the



FIG. 13
Giovanni di Paolo (di Grazia), *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise*, 1445, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Creation of the world and the expulsion from Paradise (Fig. 13). Thronged by a host of radiant blue angels, God creates the world as a set of concentric circles. Inside the central sphere, we see the Earth and up above, in perpendicular alignment, the Sun. The signs of the zodiac can be discerned in the outer circles. The act of Creation flows seamlessly into a representation of Adam and Eve being driven out of Paradise. Like the angels, they too are naked, but the shame associated with their Fall is palpable on an emotional level. The panel forms a succinct summary of the cycle of salvation history. We note the *in principio* of Creation and the beginning of another era, as recounted in Genesis, a time when humankind is devoid of innocence, experiences labour pains and is forced to till the hard ground. But it is also the time of human toil and personal accountability. Henceforth, humans must pursue knowledge independently.

They had brought the curse of the ultimate sin upon themselves, yet it was through this affliction that they acquired the gift of comprehension. The knowledge of the Universe and the mystery of ‘something’ emerging from ‘nothing’ then became an artistic quest, fuelled by nostalgia and tenacity.

“Adam made love to his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, ‘God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him’” (Genesis 4, 25-26). That son, Seth, is the first astronomer.

Today, the consolation for the expulsion from Paradise lies in the hands of those who study the Universe. Of those who look up.

“He will no longer be pre-occupied with himself, but will look up at the face of his friend. In each atom he will see the whole; he will ponder over thousands of bright secrets.”

Persian poet Farid ad-Din Attar, *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*)

In recent iconological studies, the pictorial imitation of rocks and flamed marble is interpreted as a conscious visual undertaking to symbolically 'excavate' the hidden and mysterious properties of the incarnation and – by extension – the visual medium itself. According to this theory, artists integrate marble, mineral and amorphous forms into the iconographic themes that most benefit from a pictorial symbolism of prefiguration, or 'antecedence'. The Annunciation, as an image of the incarnation, the incarnation of Christ by the Virgin, is replete with this very meaning. After all, in the concept of the incarnation, the essential manifestation into matter is realised in its primary form, a form that is analogous to the symbolism of marble.

The material manipulation and pictorial integration of (marble) veins and flecks forces one to consider the relationship between prefigure and figure. An energy is unleashed between visual fields, which constantly shuttles back and forth, as though between the promise of the figure that will emerge from nothing and that which is accomplished and solidifies. According to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, this dynamic forms the basis of (visual) creation. Creation is experienced in the world of *plattomenos* [plasticity] and that of *mimesis* [depiction]. There is a constant shifting from "figure to figure, without assuming substance and therefore focused on the associative, the mysterious, the processual" (Paul Vandebroek, *Matrix Marmorea*, p. 68). The energetic abstraction of the *plattomenos*, the dizzying flames of the marble slabs and, as we saw, the cosmogonic coagulation of the murmuring sea, all testify to the primal visual state in which images 'came-to-be'. It concerns that which flows, coagulates, and is thus the antithesis of the accomplished and the formed.

To conclude, I would like to introduce two researchers who have studied this primal state of visual perception from radically different backgrounds. One is a French philosopher. The other is a British anthropologist. What they have in common, however, is their shared repudiation of the distinction between non-figurative and figurative art.

In his *L'image ouverte* [The Open Image], Georges Didi-Huberman describes the image as a dynamic emotion, as something that opens up for the viewer like a gate. He sees the 'opening' as being launched from the Christian paradigm that humankind is created in God's image. Humans were deprived of that unity, that *resemblance*, after the Fall. The image then becomes a *défiguration*, a *dissemblance*. The history of the image – *la pensée figurée* – is accompanied by an eternal quest to restore this analogy. Art and iconography are characterised as an endless series of traces, of a lost correlation. The closest recovery occurs at the tipping point between the one and the other covenant: the incarnation, or *la promesse de retrouver l'image* [the promise of regaining the image]. The incarnation, however, is inconceivable: *l'image échappe* [the image escapes]. It is a *circoncision de l'image* [circumcision of the image], an image that perpetually escapes its matrix. The history of images is thus the history of an unending desire to coincide with the prototype. The arts are de facto melancholic through their yearning for the lost

paradise. The impossibility of expressing this longing through figuration latches onto nebulous things, such as vortexes and marble.

Tim Ingold, the British anthropologist, is a walker. He looks both upwards and downwards. His thinking and his writing are inspired by wandering along lost paths: ways of mind-walking. Throughout his work, Ingold has fought against dualisms in the human sciences, such as the dichotomy between object and subject, between form and content. Instead, he sees objects as living beings and artists as makers from whose hands objects flow. Ingold therefore rejects Aristotle's exhausted Western hylemorphic model, whereby art is just a passive meeting of form and matter. Ingold replaces this template with an ontology that prioritises the actual formative processes and transformations of materials over, respectively, the finished product and a static definition of form.

Ingold developed this liberation of form and matter through his passion for the oeuvre of Paul Klee (1879-1940). He writes: "To create any thing, Aristotle reasoned, you have to bring together form (*morphe*) and matter (*hyle*). In the subsequent history of western thought, this hylomorphic model of creation became ever more deeply embedded. But it also became increasingly unbalanced. Form came to be seen as imposed, by an agent with a particular end or goal in mind, while matter – thus rendered passive and inert – was that which was imposed upon. To the transformations and blends of materials rather than to the different stages of matter. My ultimate aim, however, is to overthrow the model itself, and to replace it with an ontology that assigns primacy to processes of formation as against their final products, and to flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter ... My aim is to restore things to life and, in so doing, to celebrate the creativity of what Klee (1973, p. 269) called 'form-giving'. This means putting the hylomorphic model into reverse. More specifically, it means reversing a tendency, evident in much of the literature on art and material culture, to read creativity 'backwards'" (Ingold, *The Textility of Making*, p. 97).

Georges Didi-Huberman: the restless melancholic grieving for the lost paradise.
Tim Ingold: the walking phlegmatic who resigns himself to the merging of humankind and environment.
Both stargazers: the diviners of unhindered thought, of backward creativity. From the hummingbirds.

**"I save myself from you
I rejoice in your presence;
With kind, wise words
I tempt you not to exist.
I am not afraid of your face
When I know it, it comes out of nowhere
An accidental lump of myself
Nothing feminine:
This is the only way I can save myself from your
blood;
Because you always scare me
With your approach from nothing to something."**

Sandro Veronesi, *Il colibrì*, p. 181: Luisa's poem to Marco

THE SPIRAL AND THE COLOUR BLACK

**"I transformed myself in the zero of form
and emerged from nothing to creation."**

Kazimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism*, p. 116

The touching graphic simplicity of a circle with a dot at its centre, no more than an ephemeral brushstroke. The circle, powerful and perfect, opens this chapter on the role of ornaments, decoration and pictograms in the representation of the Universe and humankind's creative desire to structure it in the simplest and yet most complex way possible (Fig. 15). What appeals to me at this stage of our journey is how we approach what we all 'abstraction' in art. I do not use this expression to denote a historical period, such as, for example, Abstract Expressionism in mid-twentieth-century America, but as a reference to the most minimal essential form. But no, I must immediately correct myself: in the sense that a form 'suffices' to extract 'something' out of 'nothing' with a single flick of the wrist, or through just one pure colour.

The authoritative Austrian scholar Sir Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich (1909-2001), director of the renowned Warburg Institute in London for many years, is the founding father of the psychology of looking. He wrote *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* in 1979, an ambitious investigation into the roots of the human psyche and people's ability to express their environment through abstract morphologies.

The human mind has hankered after order-creating visual systems since time immemorial and imposes them so as to better understand and structure nature. In this sense, the dichotomy between nature and culture is merely an illusion: the pictogram both comforts and pays homage to the incomprehensible. The creation of the Universe is by far the greatest challenge within this exercise. Pictograms often depart from simple forms that, through ever-expanding and more complex patterns, culminate in graceful ornamentation. But every prototypical form – dot, line, circle, spiral – contains an intrinsic message. Or, as Ernst Gombrich, referring back to the English painter and graphic artist William Hogarth (1697-1764), writes about the line: "The line, with its waves and curves, the simultaneous course of different traces, brings the eye so agreeably to constant variations (if I may put it that way). And by moving in so many different directions, the line embraces a variety of meanings (even if it is the one and the same line)" (Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*, p. 137). In its potential to branch out endlessly in form and to perpetually switch from analogies to related meanings, the line is the image of what the hand, the drawing hand, the *graphè*, is capable of achieving as an act of creation. It is not for nothing that entwined lines or strings are the uniquely recurring pattern in musical waves and those that are still transmitted by the Universe today.

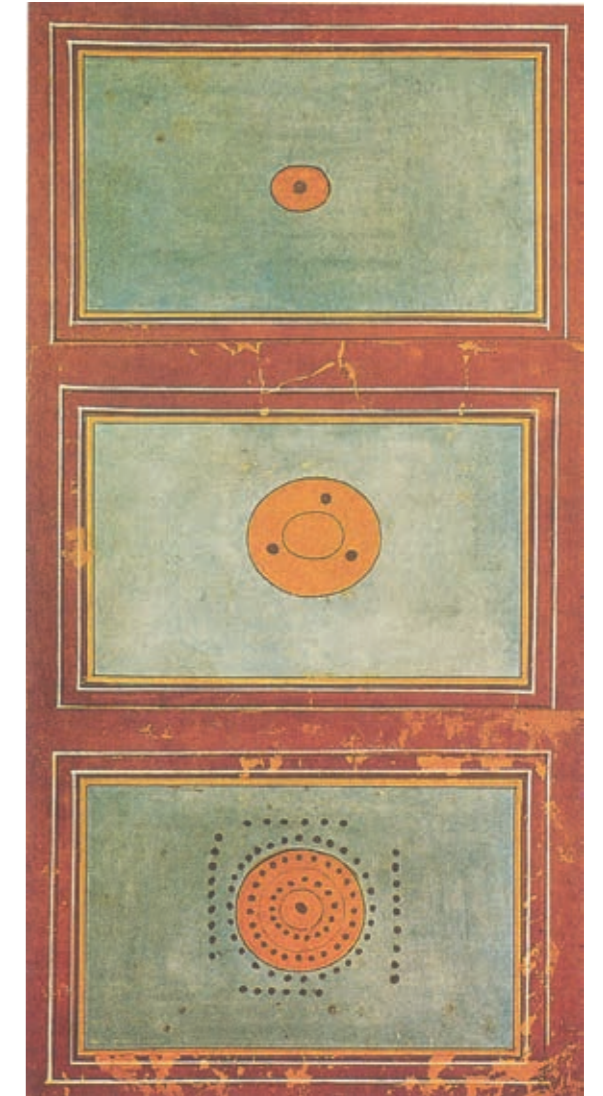


FIG. 15
Tantric symbols (Genesis),
18th century, Rajasthan, India.



FIG. 26
John Carter, *The Mappa
Mundi Triptych*, Hereford,
c. 1780, London, British
Library, ms 29942, fol. 148r.

when closed, revealed the Annunciation (Fig. 26). Created from an enormous sheet of animal skin (velum) and painted with inscriptions in red and black – some of them gilded – the map is crowded with depictions of events, places, and fabled creatures from the history of the world's salvation. Streams and seas were carefully charted. The margins around the spherical earth contain complex annotations, explanatory drawings, and various legends. Richard of Haldingham and Lafford, known as Richard de Bello (d. c. 1278), signed the map. It forms a synthesis of the theological principles of the era and the emergent concepts of cosmography and optics that were advanced by Roger Bacon (c. 1214–c. 1292). Bacon drew on the insights of the Arab scientist, Abu Ali al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham, who was known as Alhazen (965–c. 1040). We are certain that Bacon's ideas were known in Hereford because his work was collected by William Herebert (c. 1270–1333), a Franciscan.

In accordance with the medieval cartographic world view, Jerusalem is at the centre of the map. At the top, in the east, we read: “The Last Judgement, where on one side Christ and his angels beckon you to paradise, while on the other side the devil and the dragon try to lure you to another place.” The Hereford *Mappa Mundi* has its own pictorial *raison d'être*: not only is it a feast for the eyes, but also a memory game that is both time-consuming and educational. This map of the world was long seen as a moralising history of time and space for the edification of the illiterate population. Kupfer adds fresh nuances to this theory, however, which are of particular interest in relation to the cosmic eye. For the map contains an anomaly that has troubled researchers to such an extent that it has only recently been discussed: the gilded inscriptions ASIA, AFRICA and EUROPE are erroneous by modern geographical standards. Europe, as shown on this map, covers the African continent. According to Kupfer, this error, which is not actually an error at all, unravels the entire strategy and purpose of the *Mappa Mundi*. For we must read the map through the eyes of Christ. The *boustrophedon* exerts a different perspective, an inversion. We have to ‘see’ the installation in a radically different way, namely as the distillation of our human and terrestrial view of the world – imperfect, transient and flawed – and that of the all-powerful, all-seeing God who looks down from on high. While we gaze upwards, like frogs, at God's Creation, He gazes down upon the world, like a bird, and as the ultimate Judge. The two perspectives converge in the golden letters of Europe, as though our map were the *zayin*, or the animal skin that is pierced by the divine eye – like an arrow – to prevent us from an overtly mundane reading of the map.

There is also a second nuance. The map seems to play with the notion of *specio* [I observe], a term that shares a semantic and exegetical kinship with *specula* [lookout, watchtower, mountain view] on the one hand and *speculum* [mirror, inner reflection or contemplation] on the other. The Hereford *Mappa Mundi* is a cartographical reflection of a new monastic geography and its attendant visual strategies. Here, visual exegesis engages the gaze from above, the *boustrophedon*. The map is, by definition, the graphic translation of an aerial perspective; the



FIG. 27
Genesis cycle, mosaic, 13th century,
Venice, Saint Mark's Basilica.

starting point of the *kataskopos* [looking down from on high] is God's own gaze. The elevated perspective from the cosmic apex, the *specula* position, can only be adopted by humankind once everything has been knowledgeably ordered into a *speculum*. And in the convergence of the two, the third space and thus the third function arise: contemplation.

Finally, there is the third subtle distinction. Kupfer points to the tension between the *orbis terrarum* [orb of the world], with all its micro-fragmentary details – the domain of *homo ludens* [playful beings] – and the monumental map as such, surrounded by the angel and Mary, depicted of equal height on the side panels. Here, too, the *boustrophedon* comes into play. God gazes downwards, and it is through this encounter that He makes the Eva-Ave inversion in Latin possible. The world lies hidden behind the

Annunciation. Once opened, an incarnate world unfolds, a cartographic ‘shrine’ that connects time and space in a split second, in that single moment of a greeting. When the ancient Word was finally permitted to become Flesh, a cosmic spark entered the passive auditory canal, where it remained, only to grow and swell like *spargao*.

Herbert Kessler adds a particularly subtle note to the cosmic eye and the iconic gaze (Fig. 27) through his exhaustive analysis of the thirteenth-century Genesis cycle in the atrium dome of St Mark's Basilica in Venice. In an unrivalled commentary, he illuminates the various works that have influenced the programme, such as the prototypical *Cotton Genesis* from the fifth century and a fascinating twelfth-century