

What spurred john
martin to paint
elemental
catastrophe and
divine retribution es...



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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*.

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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 its 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 lyrics; '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 scuffle 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.

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(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.