THE LAST JUDGMENT
IN CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY

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Public lecture given in the University of Cambridge, 1987

I gave this lecture many years ago as part of my doctoral research into the iconography of Dante’s Divine Comedy, using slides to illustrate the subject matter. Thanks to digital technology it is now possible to create an illustrated version. The text remains in the original lecture form – in other words full references are not given. Illustrations are in the public domain, and acknowledged where appropriate; some are my own photographs. If I were giving this lecture today I would want to include material from eastern Europe which was not readily accessible at the time. But I hope this may serve by way of an introduction to the subject.

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A. INTRODUCTION

1. Christian belief concerning the Last Judgment

The subject of this lecture is the representation of the Last Judgment in Christian iconography. I would like therefore to begin by reminding you what it is that Christians believe about the Last Judgment.

Throughout the centuries people have turned to the Gospel of Matthew as their main authority concerning the end of time. In chapter 25 Matthew records these words spoken by Jesus on the Mount of Olives:

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. (...) Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (...) And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Details concerning exactly how the dead are to be gathered are provided by Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

Finally, part of the Book of Revelation was commonly taken to describe the Last Judgment:

‘Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit (...) Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. (...) This is the first resurrection. (...) Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done (...) This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if anyone’s name were not found written in the book of life he was thrown into the lake of fire.’

Other than these three passages the New Testament gives very little information about the Last Judgment, and so artists turned to the Old Testament and particularly to the prophetic books such as Ezekiel and Daniel. So
although we find that the earliest representations of the Last Judgment stick fairly closely to the New Testament texts, gradually we find that other iconographical motifs are added from the Old Testament, and eventually from a wide variety of sources, Christian and non-Christian.

2. Portrayals of the Last Judgment in Christian iconography

So we come to the representations themselves. Three fundamental questions arise: WHEN were these images of judgment created, WHERE were they created, and WHY were they created?

a) When

Firstly, then, let us look at the question of when they were created. There is some debate as to what constitutes the first Christian representation on of the Last Judgment but it is generally agreed to have appeared some time between the 4th and 6th centuries.

But the Last Judgment only became an established subject for the visual arts in Europe in the eleventh century. It became increasingly common in the twelfth, and by the thirteenth century it was almost standard practice to decorate the West wall of churches with a painting of the Last Judgment, often as part of an overall decorative scheme.

The church of Pomposa abbey in NE Italy was built between the eighth and the twelfth centuries but the frescoes date from the 14th and are attributed to the painter Vital da Bologna. Scenes from the Old and New Testaments decorate the walls of the nave; the fresco in the apse at the Eastern end of the church shows Christ in glory and the West wall shows the Last Judgment:

![Image of the Last Judgment fresco at Pomposa abbey]

This is the central part of the fresco. It shows Christ in judgment as described by Matthew, with the apostles seated to each side of him. Angels sound the trumpet, as promised by Paul. On Christ’s right at the bottom of the picture (the left hand side as we face it) are the elect; on the left are the damned.

The Last Judgment continued to be painted in the fifteenth century but its character changed. Many of the iconographical motifs built up in the Middle Ages, particularly in the representation of Hel I, were abandoned in favour of a more classical approach in harmony with the age.

The climax to the tradition, however, comes with Michelangelo in the sixteenth century, and we shall end with his painting of the Last Judgment in the Sistine chapel.
b) Where

Our second question was this: where, or in what medium, was the Last Judgment depicted?

We have already seen that it was commonly represented in fresco on the West wall of churches. Another common medium used in Italian churches between the sixth and twelfth centuries was that of mosaic, according to techniques learned from Byzantine artists. We will look at two examples in the course of the lecture.

In France, where the vast windows and externally supported stonework of the gothic cathedrals left little room for wall paintings, the Last Judgment was frequently represented in sculpture on the tympana of the portals. This is the only example of such a portal carved in Italy, at Ferrara:

Another common location for the depiction of the Last Judgment was on wooden altarpieces. This is a 14th century Italian altarpiece now in Bologna:
There are a number of other possible locations for the depiction of the Last Judgment. It was often illustrated in illuminated books, the Psalter being the most widespread. This is the 13th century Psalter of William of Brailes:

During the Middle Ages the Last Judgment was also carved in ivory, on the side panels of pulpits, and in bas-reliefs.

c) Why

Finally, we come to the question of why the Last Judgment was so commonly represented. It was originally intended as a means of teaching the faithful, most of whom would have been unable to read. It was meant to direct their feet down the narrow path which leads to salvation, and not down the broad highway of perdition.

But we cannot really understand the thought that lay behind these images unless we can recapture the attitude that their creators had towards death itself. We live in a society where death is something detached from life, something which we expect to happen to us at a time in the distant future, something we prefer not to think about. We put the terminally ill in hospital, and protect our children from exposure to the funeral. But think yourself back six hundred years. In 1348 bubonic plague wiped out a third of the population of Europe. There were no antiseptics, no penicillin, no antibiotics, no anaesthetics. Death was unpredictable. It was as likely to strike at the young as the old. It could not be concealed, hidden away, ignored. It couldn't come as a tragedy or as a surprise. It was part of life, and it was the most important moment of your life, not just that which ended it. And when you died, you would be judged. And the question which the church wanted to keep constantly in your mind was this: on that last day, when the great judgment would take place, where would you be? To Christ's right, here, by Fra Angelico in a 15th century altarpiece:
Or to his left, here, as illustrated in a 15th century French treatise on life after death:

B. THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE LAST JUDGMENT

1. Earliest Representations of the Last Judgment in Western Art

Now we have some idea of when, where and why the Last Judgment was represented in art, let’s go back to the beginning of the Christian era.

Until about the year 200 AD there was no Christian art at all. The first Christian images seem to have been those painted in the Roman catacombs at about this time, and they include representations of Paradise, in the form of a garden. We know that from about the year 240 onwards Manes, the founder of the Manichean religion, did use images of the Last Judgment as a missionary tool, and that these showed the judge, the good rewarded and the evil damned. But the Last Judgment does not seem to have been represented in Christian art until the fourth or fifth century.

Sometimes regarded as the first Christian representation of the Last Judgment, the Barberini terracotta was made in the 4th or 5th century AD. It represents a Roman tribunal, but there are a number of clues which suggest that the true subject is the Last Judgment. Over the top of the picture is written the word ‘victoria’ or victory. The elders to the right hand of the central figure (our left) are labelled as the ‘elect’ or chosen, and those on the other side are labelled as the ‘reprobi’ or rejected. At the feet of the elect are two money bags on which a cross and the monogram of Christ are depicted. At the feet of the damned, on the other hand, are instruments of punishment, including a whip. It seems reasonable to conclude that the central figure, the Roman Judge, represents Christ.

Another of the earliest representations of the Last Judgment is to be found in Ravenna in the church of S Apollinare Nuovo.

Ravenna was an important Roman city until the 5th century, when the Western Roman Empire finally disintegrated. Italy was invaded at the end of the century by Theodore the Ostrogoth who built, among other things, this church. Theodore died in 526, and shortly afterwards Justinian, Emperor of the still flourishing Eastern Empire, began his reconquest of the West, establishing himself in 540 at Ravenna. The city thus came under the influence of Eastern art. The mosaics were begun under Theodoric and finished under Justinian, and show both classical and Byzantine inspiration.
The existing mosaics may be divided into 3 horizontal zones. The lowest zone shows a procession of martyrs and virgins (L). The middle zone shows prophets. The top zone depicts scenes from the life of Christ, alternating with decorative scenes.

Among the scenes from the life of Christ there is a depiction of the Last Judgment according to the Gospel of Matthew.

This is the most literal of all the representations of the Last Judgment, in the sense that it sticks most closely to the description in Matthew. Jesus is seated in the centre, and separates the sheep from the goats. He is assisted by 2 angels, dressed in red for the good, and in blue for the bad.

2. Carolingian Last Judgments

The next three centuries were a period of great political instability, and we have no evidence to suggest that the Last Judgment was the subject of artistic representation in the West. By the 9th century the Byzantine empire had retreated eastwards, and Charlemagne established a new empire in the North.

During the Carolingian and Ottonian period the Last Judgment reappears in churches, only this time it was given much greater prominence. It is during this period that the simple literal representation of Ravenna is developed, and a prototype established that was to last until the Renaissance.

a) St Gall school

The two earliest examples were painted in fresco in churches connected with the influential St Gall monastery in Saxony. For the first time, the symbolism of the sheep and the goats was abandoned in favour of a direct representation of the wicked in hell and the blessed in heaven. And also for the first time, the fresco is located on the west wall of the church.

b) School of Richenau

2 other frescoes were painted in churches connected with the monastery of Reichenau, in Germany.

The first fresco comes from the church of St Michael in Burgfelden. It was painted at the end of the 11th century on the east wall of the church. You can just make out Christ in the middle, sitting on a throne of Judgment. Two angels support a huge cross in front of his body. Beneath him we see the resurrection of the dead. On Christ's left the damned are driven to hell by an angel with a lance and a little devil; on his right are the blessed. St. Michael stands at what was once the gate of Paradise, wearing armour and holding a spear and shield.
The second fresco comes from St George in Oberzell. It is also painted on the east wall of the church. The painting is divided into 2 levels. The upper shows Christ the judge with an angel at his side holding the cross. Mary stands on the other side. Angels blow trumpets as promised by Paul, and below them are seated the 12 apostles. The lower level shows the resurrection of the dead. The fresco dates from about 1100.

Iconographical Sources

The basic iconography of the Last Judgment as it was to remain for the next 4 centuries is now complete: the enthroned Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and scenes from heaven and hell. The question is, where did this iconography come from? In a sense the answer is obvious: it came from the Biblical texts with which we began. But why should it suddenly appear in Germany in the form in which it did? Were there any intermediate sources?

There are two main theories which seek to explain this. One looks to Western sources, the other to the East.

a) Western sources

Let's look first of all at possible sources in Western art for this iconography, and consider the figure of Christ.

Although Christ had not been represented in Judgment before, the subjects of Christ in glory and the Second Coming were common both in fresco and MS illumination. And the apostles are often shown seated to each side of Christ, assisting in judgment as the Book of Revelation anticipated. Christ in Majesty was commonly
illustrated in early gospel books, as were the saints in heaven. The Book of Acts tells us that ‘this Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’. And so the iconography of the Second Coming is similar to that of the Ascension.

This is a 6th century illustration of the Ascension from the Rabula Gospels:

Illustrations like these therefore offer a model for the iconography of Christ which was to be transposed onto the scene of the Last Judgment. All that was left was to show the resurrection of the dead, as described by Paul, and scenes from heaven and hell, as promised by Matthew.

**b) Eastern sources**

For these we must go to another possible source – the East. Early Syrian manuscripts show a number of illustrations of the Last Judgment, and we know that some of these were copied in the West.

This is from a 9th century copy of a 6th century manuscript known as Cosmas Indicopleustes, now in the Vatican:

It shows Christ, depicted according to the traditional iconography of the Ascension, and the resurrected dead. Carolingian artists may well have taken their basic iconography from manuscripts like this one; or alternatively the two traditions may have developed independently. Nobody knows.
3. Byzantine Iconography of the Last Judgment

In the tenth century Constantinople was established as the main centre in the Eastern Empire, and Byzantine art developed to the point where it was recognized in the West as superior. As a result it became very influential on Western art.

One of the subjects commonly illustrated by Byzantine artists from the 11th century onwards was the Last Judgment.

This is an 11th century Byzantine ivory now in the V&A, you can see that the iconography of the LH is now much more complicated. A number of new scenes have been added which from now on become standard motifs in the illustration of the LH in the East. Their presence in subsequent Western representations denotes some degree of Eastern influence.

Looking at the ivory then, at the top

- Christ descends in judgment
- he is flanked by the VM and JtheB who intercede for sinners: the apostles sit on thrones on each side of him, according to Mt 19.28 – ‘when the Son of Man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. The figures behind them are angels
- river of fire flows from Christ’s feet, according to Daniel’s prophetic vision of the Ancient of Days in Judgment
- the middle band shows the blessed to Christ’s right and the damned to his left
- at the bottom in the middle are the symbols of Passion, and next to them an angel blowing his trumpet to summon the dead and the living, as Paul said he would in 1 Corinthians and Thessalonians
- to the right are the compartments of Hell
- and to the left are an archangel, the Good Thief (whom Jesus told would be with him today in Paradise), Mary, and Abraham. Luke 16 tells of the death of Lazarus and how he was gathered into Abraham’s bosom, and so Abraham is used here to symbolise Paradise. You can just make out 3 little figures sitting in his lap!

Now this detailed iconography did not develop suddenly or haphazardly. It came from a written source. One of the greatest writers and preachers who was especially concerned with the Last Judgment was Ephraim the Syrian, who lived in the 4th century. He wrote a series of sermons on the Antichrist, the Second coming and the Last Judgment; these sermons became very well known throughout the Eastern church, and it is on them that this new iconography of the Last Judgment was based. Ephraim stresses a number of essential events which would occur on the Day of Judgment; and they are identical with the various scenes shown on the ivory.
4. Byzantine influence in the West: the 11th and 12th Centuries

There are a number of Western Last Judgments from the 11th and 12th centuries which are dependent at least in part on this Eastern iconography.

**Vatican altarpiece**

This is an 11th century altarpiece now in the Vatican. It bears the names of Niccolo and Giovanni.

It is divided into 5 horizontal bands. At the top we see Christ seated on a rainbow and holding a globe and a cross. The 4 winged figures beside him are seraphim as described by the prophet Isaiah, who wrote ‘above him stood the seraphim; each had 6 wings: with 2 he covered his face, and with 2 he covered his feet and with 2 he flew’. But Niccolo and Giovanni have added a detail from Ezekiel, who described the cherubim as follows: the cherubim appeared to have the form of a human hand under their wings. And I looked, and behold, there were 4 wheels beside the cherubim, one beside each cherub. These angels are imitated directly from Byzantine models. This is a ceiling mosaic in the cathedral of Cefalu in Sicily. It dates from the 12th century and was executed by Greek artists.

Between them is Christ in glory, holding a globe and the cross.
On the second level we see Christ again, flanked by 2 more angels and the 12 apostles. Byzantine Last Judgment
s usually represent him as the same size as the apostles, Western as larger.

The third level is unique; it illustrates Christ's words in Matthew 25 the believer visits the sick, and the
imprisoned, and clothes the poor.

The fourth level is taken from a passage in Ephraim's Sermon in which he describes the resurrection of the dead,
and is typical of the Byzantine iconography. He wrote: 'they who had been devoured by the sea, consumed by
the beasts, torn to pieces by the beasts of prey, reduced to ashes by flames - they all will awaken at the
appointed time, throw off the mantle of death, and announce themselves.' On the right the angels announce the
judgment with their trumpets.

**S Angelo in Formis**

The reverse is true for the first large scale representation of the Last Judgment in Italy, which was painted in the
church of S Angelo in Formis, near Capua in S Italy.

The church was built in the 11th century by the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Montecassino. We know
that close links existed between Montecassino and the East: it received an annual pension from the emperor,
and its abbot Desiderius had travelled to Constantinople. When he became abbot in 1058, Desiderius began the
rebuilding of the monastery, and to do this he employed specialist craftsmen from Constantinople, also sending
local artists there for training. Montecassino thus became an artistic and cultural centre, and exerted a great
influence on the decoration of other Benedictine churches in the region, including S Angelo.

The frescoes in S Angelo were painted over a period which may be as much as a
century. The Last Judgment is the most recent, and is thought to date from about the
year 1100. The church is decorated with approximately a hundred scenes from the Old
and New Testaments and from the lives of the saints, and so here as elsewhere the Last
Judgment is not independent but the culminating part of a well-worked out scheme.

You can see at first glance that the fresco is divided into a number of horizontal bands,
clearly separate one from another. Between the window at the top are 4 angels with
trumpets.
The second band shows angels in adoration of Christ:

Their elongated figures, and the stylisation of the folds of their clothes are typically Byzantine. The globe in the hand of the angel closest to Christ also comes from Byzantine models. The third band shows the 12 apostles, dressed in white and seated on thrones:

The fourth and fifth bands show the blessed and the damned. The blessed are on the left as we look at it:

Here the painter limits himself to the reproduction of a small number of types, which again is characteristically Byzantine, as is the symmetry of their faces.

So the style of the fresco is strongly Byzantine. The decorative scheme of the church, however, is not. Byzantine churches were decorated according to the ecclesiastical calendar, and not according to Biblical texts as we have here. And the Last Judgment itself was never represented in churches, being confined to refectories, manuscript illustration and ivories. The only precedent for the location of a Last Judgment on the West wall of a church is found in the Carolingian frescoes.

The question of the sources for the iconography of this painting is one on which scholars do not agree. Some of the Eastern motifs are present - the trumpeting angels in particular, and the opposition of the blessed and the damned. But the major motifs are missing. The style may be largely Byzantine, but the iconography is mostly Western. It has been suggested that it was painted by western pupils of Byzantine artists.
Torcello cathedral

So far we have looked at one Last Judgment which is Western in style but Eastern in iconography, and at one which is Eastern in style but western in iconography. The next major Western representation of the Last Judgment is Eastern in both style and iconography.

This mosaic decorates the west wall of Torcello cathedral. Torcello is an island in the lagoon of Venice. The cathedral was built between the 7th and 11th centuries, and the mosaic was executed in the 12th. Although by the 12th century Torcello was no longer part of the Byzantine empire as it was when the cathedral was begun, close trade links were maintained between Venice and the East, and Eastern artists may have been employed to do the work.

As in the altarpiece and at S Angelo, the Torcello Last Judgment is divided into 5 horizontal registers.

The top register shows Christ’s descent into Limbo, the place where the righteous dead have been waiting. Here Christ breaks down the door and pulls Adam out by the hand.

In the second register Christ is seated in glory within a mandorla, and on a rainbow, in accordance with the description in Apocalypse chapter 4. The Virgin Mary and John the Baptists stand beside him, and at his feet are the cherubim of Ezekiel’s vision. The 12 apostles are seated to each side of him, according to Matthew 19.

In the third register angels blow their trumpets and the dead are released from the sea and from the earth, according to Ephraim’s interpretation of Apocalypse 20. In the centre Adam and Eve kneel at the foot of the empty throne of judgment; the book of life lies on the throne. The cross stands behind, and to one side an angel rolls up the scroll of the firmament. All this is typically Byzantine and derives from Ephraim. His source for the empty throne was Psalm 9: ‘the Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for judgment.’ The role of the cross on the Day of Judgment is explained in Matthew 24: ‘then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven (...) and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call.’

In the 4th register we see the weighing of souls, where an angel and a devil place records of good and bad deeds on the scales. To the right (our left) stand those whose good deeds have prevailed, and to the left angels drive the damned into hell. The flames which engulf them flow from Christ’s feet according to Daniel’s vision.
The damned include an emperor, a bishop, a Princess, Mohammed, a barbarian general and several other secular leaders.

To the left is the tree of Paradise, Abraham, Peter with his keys, the Good Thief and a door guarded by a cherub which is the entrance to Paradise. It is clear that this bottom register, on both sides, is intended to be symbolic rather than purely narrative.

5. Development of a Western Iconography of the Last Judgment

i) Change in tone

Now you might be forgiven for wondering what was going on in the rest of Europe - was the Byzantine Last Judgment the only model available in the West?

Well, what in fact happened was that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries an entirely independent set of motifs developed in Europe. These are much less theological and more popular in nature. By that I mean that whereas Byzantine artists: tended to turn to difficult Biblical books such as Revelation, Daniel and Ezekiel, European artists now began to draw on popular legend and to abandon stylisation and symbolism for a realistic portrayal of the torment of hell and the peace of heaven.

ii) Background changes

Before we go on to look at some of these new Western representations, we must look for a moment at the social and cultural changes which made them possible.

Apocalypse to Last Judgment

Until the 12th century, people thought about the end of time largely in terms of the description of the celestial Jerusalem given in the Apocalypse. It was thought that the entire Christian community would be admitted into this city Paradise, and so very little thought was given to the idea of judgment. But during the 12th century a number of changes took place, and people began to regard themselves less as part of a collectivity and more as
independent individuals. This had all sorts of repercussions, but the one which concerns us is that much greater attention was paid to the idea of the judgment of the individual at death.

The easiest way to see this change in concrete terms is on the portals of the great French cathedrals. Whereas until the mid-12th century, the portals had depicted the end of time in terms of the Second Coming according to the Apocalypse, now this scene of salvation was replaced by the Last Judgment And so we see this:

Here Christ is enthroned as before, but this time beside the Cross displaying the stigmata; and judgment is represented by the presence of the archangel Michael who holds a pair of scales, while Paradise and Hell are symbolised by the motifs of Abraham’s bosom and the monster Leviathan.

Vision Literature

So, the new concentration is on judgment. And we have to ask ourselves the question: where might Western artists turn for ideas on how to represent heaven and hell?

I think the answer lies at least partly in the popular vision literature of the period. For many centuries, monks had been recording visions experienced by themselves or by those in their care. Many of these visions describe a Journey undertaken by the visionary, typically while ill and unconscious, through the other world. Now we find that far more of these visions survive from the 12th century than from any other, that they are copied all over Europe, and that they are longer and more detailed than ever before. In particular, great attention is paid to the torments of hell. Like the paintings of the Last Judgment, their purpose is primarily didactic.

What is striking from our point of view about these visions is that many of the details which we find in the 13th and 14th century paintings of the Last Judgment correspond exactly to the scenes described in the visions.

New Western motifs

a) The cauldron

One of the earliest and most common motifs used to represent hell is that of the cauldron. It is to be found in the Book of Job, in the description of the monster Leviathan. Leviathan was commonly taken to be a figure of hell, which often appears in art as the mouth of a monster, like this illustration from the 12th century Winchester Psalter:
Job describes the mouth of Leviathan as being full of fire, and smoking like a boiling pot. Artists therefore began to depict hell in terms of a cauldron placed over the mouth of a monster.

This is how hell is represented at Ferrara in 1300.

The same motif is shown in the 13th century Psalter of St Louis:

Notice too the motif of Abraham's bosom, also present in Eastern art but commonly used in the West to symbolise Paradise in tandem with the cauldron.

Soon the mouth of the monster was forgotten, and the cauldron was depicted alone. This is part of the Last Judgment at Rheims, carved in about 1230. Notice the different headgear of the chained sinners, denoting their different stations in life:

The scenes depicted here are also described in the vision literature. IN the 13th century Etienne de Bourbon describes the punishment in Hell for adultery: ‘they led him into a dark building. Here he saw horrible devils bringing a copper cauldron, into which they threw a man from his town together with somebody else's wife. Here they burned and melted like boiling metal.’
Here it is. This is a 15th century illustration to Augustine’s City of God:

Once the cauldron had become established, the motif developed further – notice that immediately above the cauldron is a spit, on which a sinner is being slowly turned.

The popular visions of hell also take things further, adding a note of drama. The Boy William, who had a vision in the 12th century, describes the devils as infernal cooks, and their victims as pieces of meat: ‘he saw the devils throw into the cauldrons pieces of meat in the shape of human bodies. They were submerged, reappeared and were plunged once again into the cauldrons.’ A 13th century Franciscan describes the attempts of one sinner to escape his fate in the infernal kitchen; he is hotly pursued by a squad of devils brandishing forks, caught and served up to Satan. So there were many sources on which the artists could draw.

b) Avarice

As the iconography developed, images for hell became more diversified. Some sins were given a specific iconography. An example of this is the sin of avarice, or its related form usury. At Ferrara this is symbolised by a money bag which hangs around the sinner’s neck.
This is how Dante describes the usurers he sees on his Journey through hell, illustrated in a 15th century miniature by Priamo della Quercia:

The other way in which sins connected with money were represented was by the enforced swallowing of red-hot coins. The monk of Eynsham, who recounts a vision experienced in 1196, meets a goldsmith in hell. The goldsmith explains: “for in gold working, in which art I in my life-time committed many frauds, I now make most severe atonement, since I am frequently thrown into a heap of burning money, and most intolerably scorched; being often compelled to swallow with gaping mouth those very coins, which consume my internal parts”. We shall see some examples of this later.

The same rule is applied to other sins: sexual sin is represented by some form of torment of the genitals; greed is punished by force-feeding and so on. Here the Western artists allowed their imaginations free rein.

c) The tombs of the dead

We saw in the Eastern iconography that the resurrected dead are traditionally shown emerging from the sea and the earth and from the mouths of fish and animals which have swallowed them. The Western pattern is quite different. This is the portal at Ferrara where 4 tombs along the base of the tympana represent the resurrection of the dead:

This is a century later, and is a bas-relief on the facade of Orvieto cathedral:
d) Satan

One of the most interesting aspects of the Western Last Judgment s is the way in which they represent Satan himself. We know from the Apocalypse that before the world ends Satan described as "the dragon, that ancient serpent' will be chained and thrown into a Pit. Elsewhere in the Bible he is referred to as the 'prince of this world' and as a fallen angel.

The Eastern Last Judgments give very little prominence to Satan, whereas he is a central figure in the Western representations. He is shown according to the descriptions given by the visionaries whose accounts were written down.

Tundale, a 12th-century Irish knight, described Satan like this: 'a beast, pitch black like a crow, with a human shape from the feet up to the head, except that he had lots of hands and a tail'. He is chained to an iron grid at the bottom of hell. This illustration of Tundale's Satan comes from the 15th century Book of Hours painted by the Limbourg brothers. He lacks the many hands, but otherwise the picture is accurate. Notice the activities of all Satan's minions:

Elsewhere Satan chews sinners in his mouth, of which he often has several. This comes from the 14th century Last Judgment in the abbey of Viboldone, which is near Milan:

The Satan of the frescos is also described by Dante. Dante's Satan is a sort of giant, furry bat, with six wings and three heads. Most of the visionaries insist on his great stature; the Vision of Paul puts it at 70 cubits. An extra mouth is often added where one imagines the genitals might be, as in this fresco painted in the Cemetery of Pisa cathedral in the 14th century.
e) The weighing of Souls

I would like to look at just one more motif before we move on to the frescoes of the 13th and 14th centuries. It is not strictly speaking a Western motif, because it is found also in the Eastern Judgments. But it occupies a much more prominent position in the West, and is developed with the same degree of imagination as the other motifs of hell. This is the motif of the weighing of souls.

The connection between weighing and justice is not new; the figure of Justice is often identifiable by the scales she carries. But the idea of the weighing of the souls of the dead seems to originate from Egypt.

In the Papyrus of Ani, now in the British Museum, the dead man is brought by the god Anubis (left) to the hall of Judgment. His heart, representing his conscience, is to be weighed against the feather of truth of the goddess Meit Amemet, the Devourer of souls, waits hungrily below the scales. But the soul passes the verdict is recorded by Thoth (right), and the soul led onwards.

Scales are used as a metaphor a number of times in the Bible. Job asks ‘let me be weighed in a just balance, and let God know my integrity.’ Daniel tells Belshazzar ‘you, have been weighed in the balances and found wanting’. The apocryphal Testament of Abraham describes an angel at the Judgment scene with a balance in his hand, and from here the motif passed into the 13th century vision of Thurkill.

But it also appears independently on the cathedral capitals. This is Bourges in the 13th century. The soul looks particularly confident, as his bad deeds rise and his good deeds win the day. See the devil waiting behind him:

This is a Spanish altar frontal from the 13th century; again the devils are trying to cheat, but nonetheless the soul passes the test and is admitted to Paradise by Peter, who you see on the right with his keys. The weigher is almost always the archangel Michael, who in Revelation Chapter 12 leads the overthrow of Satan.
6. Amalgamation of East and West: 13-14th century in Italy

So, by the 13th century the Last Judgment was well established as an appropriate subject for the decoration of churches. Artists in Europe had two sets of traditions to draw upon: the Eastern, represented particularly at Torcello, and the Western, shown most clearly on the French gothic cathedral portals. Each of these traditions is characterised by its own set of iconographical motifs.

A large number of frescoes of the Last Judgment survive from the late 13th century and throughout the 14th. Some survive in England, though usually they are in a pretty poor state. The nearest is in the church of St Andrews, Chesterton. But most of them are in Italy, and it is at these that I would like us to look.

The Florence Baptistry

The first example is found in the baptistry of Florence cathedral. Nobody seems quite sure how old it is, although it probably dates from the 8th or 9th century. Inside, the ceiling is covered with a vast golden mosaic:

![Photo of the Florence Baptistry mosaic](image)

This we can date with greater certainty. It was finished in about 1270, and involved many artists, first of all Florentines trained in Byzantine techniques, and then their pupils. The Last Judgment is the work of Coppo di Marcovaldo. Into this one ceiling has been packed the kind of decorative scheme normally used for whole churches. In the middle we see the 9 orders of angels. The innermost band, running round 2/3rds of the mosaic in a horseshoe shape, illustrates the book of Genesis. The second band shows scenes from the OT; the third and fourth depict scenes from the NT, including the life of Christ.

But one third of the ceiling is reserved for Coppo’s Last Judgment. The gigantic figure of Christ, 12m high, dominates the scene. Notice the position of Christ’s hands: with his right hand he welcomes the elect, with his left he pushes away the damned. This is the normal Byzantine position. The rest of the mosaic is divided, as in previous representations, into a number of horizontal registers. At the top the angels blow their trumpets, and beneath the feet of Christ you can see the dead arising from their tombs in conformity with the Western tradition.
Other angels crowd forward; they are curved, elongated figures with the characteristic stylised draperies of Byzantine art - this band, in fact, is very similar to its equivalent at S Angelo in Formis. As promised in Matthew 24 they carry the signs of Christ - the sponge and the spear, the whip, the communion cup on the right, the nails and the Cross on the left.

The next register recalls the 11th century Byzantine ivory we looked at earlier. The 12 apostles are seated 6 to each side of Christ; behind them are more angels. The innermost figures are John the Baptist (on the right) and Mary (on the left).

The bottom register shows heaven (to Christ’s right hand, our left) and hell (to Christ’s left). On the right we see a crowd of the saved to one side, and the three patriarchs Abraham, Jacob and Isaac to the other. They hold the souls of the elect in their bosoms. This is pure Byzantine: the Western tradition often shows Abraham, but never all three. And in between these two scenes an angel unlocks the door of Paradise.

On the other side we see the damned. Here the realism which characterises the Western Last Judgment s begins to emerge. On the left you can see a little black devil with a pitchfork, carrying a couple of souls flung over his shoulder. At the bottom on the right, the cookery motif is developed: a sinner is stretched on a spit and basted over flames. And in the middle sits Satan, three-headed at the top, with two more heads further down, in conformity with the descriptions of the 12th century visions.
**S Cecilia in Trastevere**

The next major representation of the Last Judgment was painted in the church of S Cecilia in Trastevere in Rome by Pietro Cavallini. He painted it between 1289 and 1293, right at the end of the century. It is thought that his patron was the French cardinal Jean Cholet, who would certainly have been familiar with the Last Judgment s of French cathedrals.

With Cavallini Italian art begins to be transformed. He is the first painter to abandon the Byzantine style in favour of a new realism. Most of his Last Judgment is now lost, but the central figure of Christ and the 12 apostles seated to each side of him survive.

Notice that the thrones of the apostles are real solid things; look at the way the draperies seem to fall over real limbs This is achieved mostly through the use of subtle gradations of light and shade. Cavallini shows his apostles illuminated from a single source of light, here falling from the right - although the apostles on the other side are lit from the left. Another innovation is that instead of holding books or scrolls, the apostles carry the instruments of their martyrdom. This is unprecedented in the Mediterranean Last Judgment s, but common on the French cathedral portals.

The Virgin stands to Christ's left, and John the Baptist to his right, and his throne is surrounded by angels. At the top is a cherub, below are two archangels, and at the bottom is an angel. As in the Florentine baptistry, the orders are clearly differentiated.

Below are the instruments of the Passion and 4 trumpeting angels, in accordance with Byzantine iconography Three more angels drive the damned into hell on the right, and three escort the blessed into heaven on the left.

Here then we have a painting which, although it retains much of the traditional Byzantine iconography, is also linked to the Western iconography of the French cathedral portals And as 'far as the style ii concerned, a breakthrough is achieved.

**Giotto in the Scrovegni chapel**

But the painter who made his name with this new realistic style was not Cavallini but the Florentine Giotto.

The best preserved of Giotto's work is his decoration of the Arena Chapel in Padua in the years leading up to its consecration in 1305. The chapel is dedicated to the Virgin, and Giotto was commissioned to illustrate her life and that of Christ on the walls. He completed the scheme with a fresco of the Last Judgment in its by now conventional position on the west wall.

This fresco is striking in 2 particular respects. Firstly, Giotto continues the approach begun by Cavallini in seeking to represent realistic three dimensional figures in a 2 dimensional space. These figures are not just symbolic or stylised; here we are looking at real solid people who occupy real space.
The second innovation concerns the arrangement of the scenes of which the Last Judgment is composed. All previous representations had divided the Last Judgment up into a number of compartmentalised scenes, each of which was separated from the others. Here Giotto for the first time shows the Last Judgment as one event, with every part of the fresco relating spatially to the focal point which is Christ.

Let's look then at the various parts of the fresco one by one. At the top we see 2 angels rolling back the scroll of the firmament to reveal the jewelled walls of the heavenly Jerusalem behind. The sun and moon are shown one on each side.

This is a familiar Byzantine motif, but has never been shown in this way before. It illustrates the promise of Revelation that the old heaven and earth will pass away and be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth.

As we continue downwards, we come to the 9 orders of angels, shown in serried ranks 3 abreast. As in the Florentine baptistry, the orders are clearly differentiated. These are identifiable as the Virtues, Dominations, Thrones and Cherubim. Below them are seated the 12 apostles.

Below them are two groups of the elect, led by Mary and 4 angels towards Christ. This is the part of the fresco which survives least well, but nonetheless a number of figures have been identified. The lower group, without haloes, is made up of later saints. At the front are founders of orders, such as Dominic, Francis and Benedict.
Further back are clerics of one kind or another, and behind them come 18 female saints in white led by one in red. Others follow.

Returning now to the middle of the fresco, we see that Christ is shown much as in Florence, with one hand welcoming the elect and the other dismissing the damned. The archangels sound their trumpets according to 1 Thessalonians 4, and a river of fire flows from his feet according to Ezekiel and Daniel, and in conformity with Byzantine iconography. Below the throne angels hold up the cross as a sign, again in conformity with the Byzantine tradition.

But let's have a look at hell. As elsewhere in the West, hell is depicted with vivid imagination and considerable realism. The figure of Satan is modelled on the Florentine baptistry.

Notice how his position parallels that of Christ; both are seated, with one hand raised and one lowered. Many different punishments can be observed but two sins in particular stand out. The first is adultery, the punishment for which is usually represented in horrifying detail. Here is no exception. At the top those guilty of sexual sin are hung by their hair or genitals; just below to the left a devil appears to be attacking his victim’s penis with a pair of pliers. Punishment by hanging is very common in the vision literature.

The other sin shown several times is avarice, which most commonly takes the form of usury. We have already looked at some of the ways this sin is punished. Here we see a re-enactment of the money-lending, supervised this time by devils.
And in another part of the fresco three men hang by the strings of their money-bags, which hang beside them as an eternal reminder.

There may be a reason for this inordinate concentration on sins connected with money. Here, at the foot of the cross, is the portrait of the man who paid for the chapel and commissioned the artist

He is Enrico Scrovegni, whose wealth derived from his father’s immensely successful career as a usurer. Do you remember we looked at an illustration from Dante’s Comedy, showing three usurers sitting in hell with their purses round their necks? The one in the middle was none other than Rinaldo Scrovegni, the man whose illicit earnings paid for this chapel. Was his son seeking forgiveness for his father’s sins in presenting this chapel to the Virgin?

Other 14th century Last Judgments in Italy

These three representations of the Last Judgment were taken as prototypes and widely imitated throughout Italy. I haven’t time to show you very many of the frescoes based on them, but let’s look briefly at two.

S Maria Novella

The first was painted by another Florentine, Nardo di Cione, the brother of the more famous painter Orcagna. It is in the church of SM Novella. He had a whole chapel to fill, so he separated the act of judgment from the representation of heaven and hell, turning the single fresco of his predecessors into three.

The Last Judgment itself is painted on the central wall, most of which is
taken up with windows. Christ is in the centre, with 6 apostles on each side. Notice that while some of the apostles are identified according to the Easter tradition with books, others also hold their emblems, following the example of Cavallini. The easiest to identify is Peter with his keys.

Below are the blessed, with the latest arrivals being helped out of their tombs. On the other side are the damned, not yet in Hell, but filled with despair and regret.

The left wall shows Paradise represented rather boringly as rows of saints

Hell, on the other hand, is shown according to the description given by Dante in the Divine Comedy.

It is a subterranean pit divided into various areas corresponding to the different sins. We have noted earlier affinities between the written accounts of the other world and the details of hell in the visual representation of the Last Judgment, but this is the first time an artist has set out to systematically illustrate a written account.

Here is a close-up of one of the compartments of Dante's hell. The twisted bushes are the souls of those who committed suicide; they are preyed upon by the Harpies of Virgil's Aeneid.
San Gimignano

The last 14th century representation of the Last Judgment I would like to show you is the work of Taddeo di Bartolo; it was painted in the collegiate church of San Gimignano, Tuscany, in the 1390’s. Like Nardo di Cione, Taddeo separated the act of Judgment from the representation of heaven and hell. And in his representation of hell he enters into the greatest detail yet seen.

At the top of the fresco sits Satan, monarch of all he surveys

He is rather like Dante’s Satan: two bat-like wings, and three mouths which chew sinners. Notice too that the sinners all wear convenient little hats labelling their sin. This is vital to Taddeo’s scheme, because he divides hell into seven main areas according to the 7 capital vices. Within each area are grouped all the sins which stem from that particular capital vice. And for the first time too, some of the sinners are named: the one receiving the attention of the red devil at the bottom is labelled Herod.

Here are details from two of the compartments. On the left are punished sins stemming from the vice of avarice - see the label ‘avaro’. Both the traditional punishments are present. A miser is strangled by two devils with the strings of the money bag he is forced to wear round his neck, and at the bottom a usurer is force-fed burning coins.

On the right are punished sins stemming from the vice of luxuria, roughly translatable as lust or sexual sins. The lady about to be raped by a lustful devil is conveniently labelled ‘adultera’, adulteress. The gentleman being whipped in the middle is labelled ‘ruffiano’, or pimp, as we would say; a nice reversal of the method of mortifying the flesh. The chap with the iron bar through him at the bottom is labelled a sodomite.
7. The Last Judgment in Renaissance Art

We come now to the 15th and 14th centuries the period usually referred to as the Renaissance. And we find that a great change occurs not just in style but also in iconography. The medieval painters of the Last Judgment combined Byzantine with Western elements even through the 14th century. But when we reach the 15th century the Byzantine iconography is abandoned and the dramatic realism which is the hallmark of Renaissance art appears. The result is dynamic, fluid representations whose tone is completely different. These developments can be followed in two very different artistic environments.

The Netherlands

a) Van Eyck

Let’s start with the Netherlands and the painter Jan Van Eyck. The 15th century saw a tremendous desire to finish what Giotto had begun and to represent the world in as realistic a manner as possible. This was attempted in two ways. The way of the North, and of Van Eyck in particular, was to concentrate on filling the picture with numerous details – flowers, jewels, animals, distant buildings. And this is exactly what we find in his painting of the Last Judgment.

This painting of the Last Judgment is thought to be one of Jan’s earliest works, dating from 1420-25. It forms the right hand panel of a triptych. It will give you an idea of how much detail Jan has packed into it if I tell you that the original is only 19 cm high - about 7 inches.

Jan is a northern European, and we would expect his basic scheme to be similar to that of the French portals. And it is. Christ is enthroned at top, with the Virgin and John the Baptist interceding beside him. The 12 apostles are seated on benches, dressed in white like the elders of the Apocalypse. The figure in the middle is Michael, represented not with his scales but according to Apocalypse 12: ‘Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan.’
The dead arise from fissures in the ground and from the sea - but they are real men and women, not symbols. Hell is an amazing knot of naked bodies being devoured by a motley collection of spiky little devils and beasts which look as though Jan found them in the less cuddly parts of the zoo. Satan himself is a skeleton, a common subject in 14th and 13th century representations of Death.

b) Stefan Lochner

Another Northern painter who produced a Last Judgment was Stefan Lochner, active in the middle of the century in Cologne.

This is the central panel of his altarpiece; it is much larger-than Van Eyck’s, measuring 176cm across -- about 5 feet. Here the same basic iconography prevails, but Paradise to the right of Christ is represented as a 15th century church, and Hell to his left as a burning city. Angels carry the symbols of the Passion. Below is the same struggle depicted by Van Eyck, as monstrous little devils torment the damned. Look at this airborne battle between angels and devils for a soul:

Italy

So much for Flanders. Now we must look back to Italy, where painters shared the same aim of increased realism in their art, but set about achieving it in a quite different way. Whereas the Northern painters had sought to make their pictures lifelike by the accumulation of details, the Italians discovered the mathematical laws governing perspective and concentrated on bold outlines and the accurate depiction of the human body.

Fra Angelico

One of the earliest artists to paint the Last Judgment in the light of these innovations was Fra Angelico. It was painted in the 1430s for the church of S Maria degli Angeli in Florence, and is striking for the way Fra Angelico combines the new with the old. Notice for example that the whole picture is based on a system of one-point perspective determined by the positioning of the tombs; the eye is led to a point in the centre of the picture below Christ's feet.
In other respects, the iconography is traditional. The tombs themselves are a standard motif, although they have never been shown like this. Notice the trumpeting angels and the Cross.

Hell is shown on the right of the picture. There is nothing new here. Notice the punishment of the gluttons as at S Gimignano, the cauldron, the hanging sinners at the top. Satan too is the normal medieval black devil crunching 3 sinners in his mouth. At the top on the right you can just see a sinner being fed into the jaws of Leviathan. And to the left of the cauldron are those guilty of avarice; the devils here seem to be having a particularly nice time...

Paradise is shown on the other side of the picture. It is an idyllic scene, with angels and saints dancing in the garden which stands outside the gate of the eternal city. Friends and relations greet one another in delight as they come together.

Signorelli

In 1447 Fra Angelico was commissioned to decorate a chapel in Orvieto cathedral. His theme was to be the Last Judgment. He began with the ceiling, where he painted the figure of Christ in Judgment But Fra Angelico died in 1455, and for nearly 50 years the chapel stood untouched. Then in 1499 the commission was given to Luca Signorelli, who completed the cycle in 1504. Signorelli developed a bold and original scheme for the fresco.
cycle, and departed radically from the traditional iconography. On the entrance wall he painted the end of the world. On the left wall we see first of all the resurrection of the body:

![Resurrection](image)

This is a far cry from the symbolic regurgitations of the dead as in the Byzantine tradition and from the open tombs of the Western tradition. Here the inspiration is the prophet Ezekiel, who foretells that God will command the bones of the dead to rise up from out of the ground and clothe themselves with sinews and flesh. Here's a detail. Notice the anatomical accuracy of the figures.

![Detail](image)

Also on the left wall Signorelli shows us the damned. Here there is no background detail at all. Harsh colours set the tone; the medieval devils have become perverted human forms; the writhing of the damned shows the emotion of the scene. Among them is a woman popularly supposed to have been a mistress who left him.

On the right wall are two more scenes: the coming of the Antichrist, and the Coronation of the elect. Finally, on the altar wall, we see the blessed and the damned on their way to heaven and hell. Ante hell is again taken from Dante's Comedy. Those running behind the white flag are the lukewarm, whilst others are ferried by Charon across the Styx.
Michelangelo

Signorelli died in 1523. Ten years later, and only 6 years after the Sack of Rome by Imperial Troops, the Pope commissioned Michelangelo to complete his decoration of the ceiling with a fresco of the Last Judgment.

The ceiling shows scenes from Genesis by Michelangelo, and the walls scenes from the Old and New Testament by earlier painters, including Signorelli. Notice that the fresco is not situated on the comparatively unobtrusive West wall as were earlier Last Judgments; it fills the altar wall and thus occupies a position of great prominence.

Much of the iconography is traditional; but what strikes you immediately is the mood. The peace and assurance of Giotto’s Last Judgment has gone; we are now in the troubled 16th century, listening to the warnings of Savanarola and recovering from the Sack of the papal city.

The fresco is dominated by the central figure of Christ; he seems about to leap down into the chapel itself in his wrath. Only the Madonna beside him seems to have any kind of peace. Above him to right and left angels hold up the symbols of the Passion - but they are the first angels in the history of the Last Judgment without haloes and wings.

The whole of the rest of the fresco is caught up in a whirlpool of energy centred on the figure of Christ. He is surrounded by saints, martyrs, apostles, prophets and virgins, rising up around him to the left and falling downwards to the right. Many of them are identifiable by their attributes:

The chap with the gridiron is St Lawrence, who was martyred on it. To Christ's left is Peter with a key. The one holding the skin is Bartholomew, who was flayed alive. The skin itself is a portrait of Michelangelo.
Below Christ’s feet are the usual angels with trumpets, although a very human amount of effort seems to be going into making them sound. Two of them hold the books in which are written the names of the blessed and the damned.

To the right and below, the blessed pull themselves up from the earth and ascend, though again it seems to be pretty hard work. And to the left the damned fall downwards in despair, tugged by devils who wrench them away from their guardian angels. Charon unloads others from his boat, and they are greeted by Minos, described by Dante as the authority who determines their destination in hell. Here he is with his tail wrapped round him. His features are those of the Pope’s master of ceremonies, who had criticised the nudity of Michelangelo’s figures. ..

This painting is the climax to the representation of the Last Judgment in Western Art. I would like to close by quoting to you the words of Vasari:

‘The Last Judgment must be recognized as the great exemplar of the grand manner of painting, directly inspired by God and enabling mankind to see the fateful results when an artist of sublime intellect infused with divine grace and knowledge appears on earth. Behind this work, bound in chains, follow all those who believe they have mastered the art of painting.’

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