

Imaging the Word: *Art and Theology*

The book of Revelation is known for its wild and vivid imagery—images of heaven and the throne of God, of scrolls, lamps and plagues, of a great battle between a dragon and angels, of the renewal of creation and the coming of a new Jerusalem, for example. But for all its visual content, the imagery contained in the book defies artistic depiction. This is because, for one, the content of the visions is highly symbolic, referring in many cases to abstractions or spiritual dimensions of reality, which if taken literally not only miss the point but also result in grotesque depictions. Hence, the reluctance of artists to devote their craft to depicting a seven-eyed, seven-horned lamb and a seven-headed, ten-horned bear-leopard-lion beast! Another reason, however, is that the images related to us in words have to then be re-translated from a verbal to the visual. In such a case, the artist faces a situation not unlike the childhood game of 'telephone' where the message is lost in transmission, or rather translation. But that hasn't stopped artists from the Medieval Age to today from offering their 'take' on the Apocalypse. Here are two scenes described in the lessons from Revelations appointed for this Sunday:

"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

—Revelation 21:2–5a



Jacques "Sassandra" Richard (French, 1932–), [The New Jerusalem](#) (Rev. 21:1–4a), 1970–80

Born in 1932 to a French missionary family in Sassandra, Ivory Coast, Richard studied art upon returning to France, followed by theology, and soon became an art teacher in Paris public schools while also maintaining a studio art practice of drawing, painting, collaging, and woodblock printing.

This image is the last of thirty-four collages in his Apocalypse series, compiled in the beautifully produced book *Apocalypse: A travers le dernier livre de la Bible | Bilder zum letzten Buch der Bibel* (Apocalypse: Through from the Last Book of the Bible) (1980), with text from Revelation in French and German. View selections from the book [here](#).

It shows the hands of God lovingly lowering the heavenly city to earth—the two realms reunited at last. The cross is at the center, forming the trunk of the tree of life, and the Holy Spirit spreads her wings over all.

Two other artistic portrayals:



Alexander Sorsher (Russian), *New Jerusalem Revealed*, 2014



Jacqui Parkinson (British), *Revelation 21*, part of the 'Threads through Revelation' exhibit, 2016

LOOK: *The New Jerusalem* by Slavujac Darlene:

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. "

—Revelation 22:1–2



Slavujac Darlene, *The New Jerusalem*, 1993

In this surrealist depiction of the new Jerusalem, the artist centers our attention on the "River of Life" that flows from the throne of God and from the Lamb" (Rev 22:1-2). This river flows here from God's throne off in the distance, yet at the same time it erupts in the middle of the picture in something like a fountain. Two women kneel beside the fountain, with young children in their arms, as if performing a baptism. An angel in the right foreground points another child to the fountain in invitation. As described in Revelation, on both sides of the river are trees, "the Tree of Life," bearing various fruit, and beneath it are great crowds of people. These are the "nations" which John says will be "healed" by the "leaves" of the Tree of Life. The scene is framed by the walls of the city, portrayed in transparent 'shadows' above, and on the left by a white hemisphere, suggestive of the "pearly gates" that John notes, which have here been rolled back to reveal the heavenly scene. The whole thing is a lively, beautiful, joyous scene, one which attractively evokes the hope we have for when God unites heaven to earth in the end.