

Imaging the Word

Temptation

In depicting the temptation of Christ, artists face the inherent challenge facing makers of sacred art: how do you depict as visible the intrinsically invisible realities of the spirit? Here, though, the question is acute: How do you depict not just abstract ideas of temptation but also the Tempter himself? This is no small problem—despite the horned caricatures, the Bible gives no physical description of the devil; Satan, we understand, comes in many forms so that he is not so easily recognized and thus rejected.

Medieval artists and contemporary artists alike have made a go of it, showing the Devil to be roughly humanoid, his demonic nature either on display as horns (Peng) or bat wings (Duccio) or monstrously deformed (Arcabas), or else concealed in a dark cloak (Richards).



Duccio di Buoninsegna (Italian, 1255–1319), *Temptation on the Mount*, c1310



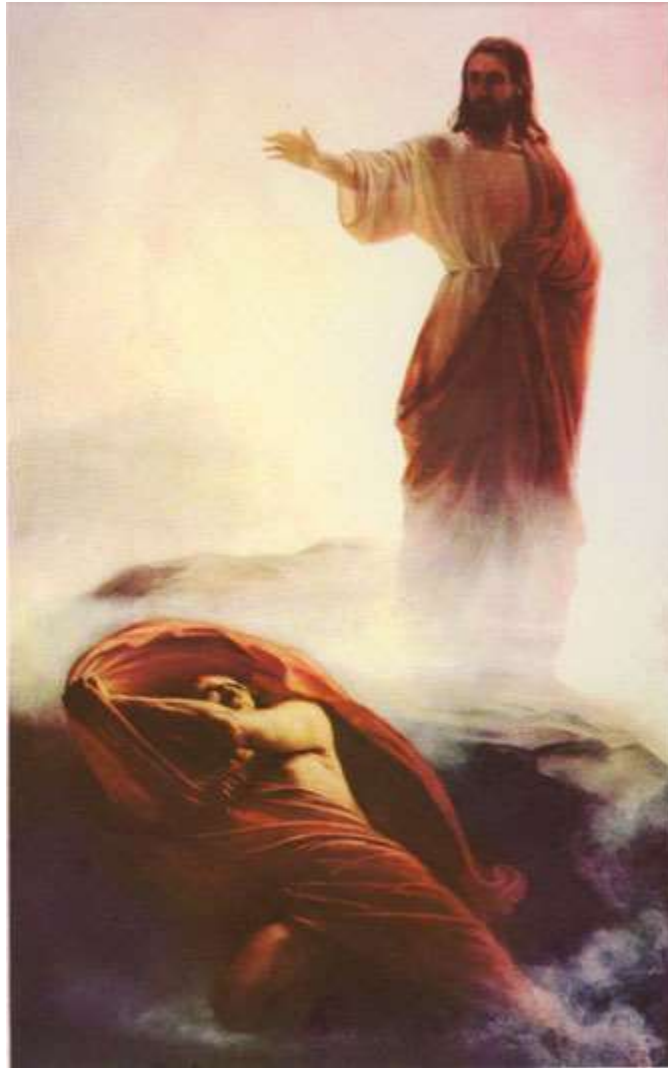
Ong Chew Peng, *Jesus versus the Devil*, 2008



Jean-Marie "Arcabas" Pirot (French, 1926–2018), *Prayer*,



J. Kirk Richards (American, b1976), *The Temptation*, 1999



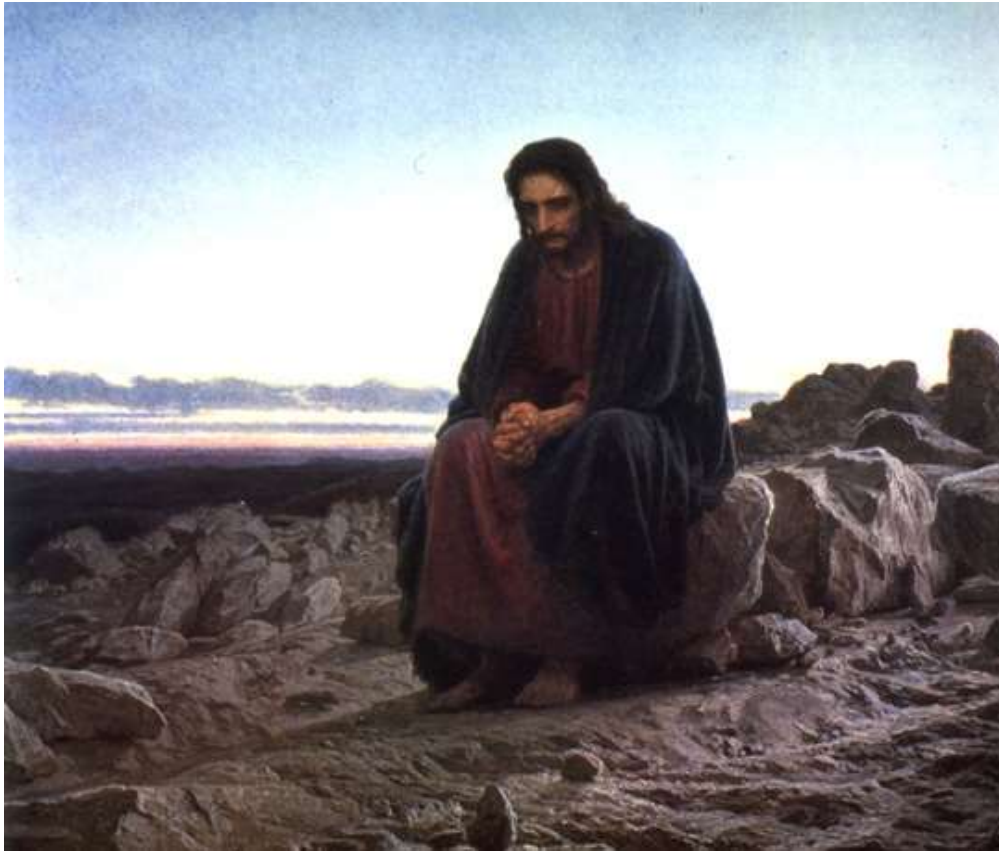
Carl Heinrich Bloch (Danish, 1834-90), *Jesus Tempted*, 1868

In Knippers' painting of the Temptation, the most conspicuous characteristic of the piece is that Jesus is depicted in the nude. This is characteristic of Knippers' paintings in general (one which has at times offended Christian sensibilities). But here the Savior's nudity conveys a sense of vulnerability, as if emphasizing Jesus' humanity, an interpretation reinforced by his languid pose. He has apparently fallen amidst the dark and murky colors hiding demonic creatures, yet is being helped to his feet by two figures (faces) emerging from a kaleidoscope of fractured colors--angels. This Jesus is no superhuman being, standing strong against evil; here is instead a righteous but weak human who is dependent on divine aid just to not collapse.



Edward Knippers (American), *Christ in the Wilderness*, 2011

In this final piece, the one that I find most striking, Russian painter Kramskoi depicts Jesus' Temptation starkly, with Jesus alone amidst the dry and rocky wilderness. No Devil assails him, no heavenly angels attend him. It is just Jesus alone with himself and his doubts, questions, and insecurities. Like Knippers', this painting emphasizes Jesus's human nature and features a mind in struggle, instead of action. The struggle is wholly internal, though it is manifest in Jesus' visage. According to the art critic Ivan Goncharov, "The entire figure seems to have diminished a bit from its natural size, contracted, not from starvation, thirst and bad weather, but from internal, inhuman insight to his thought and will during the struggle of forces of spirit and flesh". He also emphasized that "there is nothing festive, heroic, victorious — the future fate of the world and of all living is concealed in that miserable, small being, in pauper appearance, under the rags, in humble simplicity, inseparable with true majesty and force".



Ivan Kramskoi (Russian, 1837-87), 1872

"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." *Hebrews 4:15-16*

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“Tempted”

Eugene H. Peterson

Still wet behind the ears, he's Spirit-pushed
up Jordan's banks into the wilderness.
Angels hover praying 'round his head.
Animals couch against his knees and ankles
intuiting a better master. The Man

in the middle—new Adam in old Eden—
is up against it, matched with the ancient
Adversary. For forty days and nights
he tests the baptismal blessing and proves to his dismay
the Man is made of sterner stuff than Adam:
the Man will choose to be the Son God made him.

*This poem was originally published in [A Widening Light: Poems of the Incarnation](#), edited by Luci Shaw
(Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1984)*