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**This tenth-century manuscript illumination elaborates
on the Lukan narrative to depict the coming of the Holy
Spirit as a gift of new life to the Christian community.**

Descent of the Holy Spirit

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Depicting the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost has fascinated artists for centuries. The dramatic arrival of the third person of the Trinity – with a sound like a mighty wind from heaven and a tongue of fire appearing to rest on each disciple, then the disciples speaking in various languages and the crowd reacting to this marvel – requires a complex composition. It also allows for an extraordinary level of artistic interpretation and creativity.

These events are recorded in Acts 2:1-4.¹ Generally speaking, the Lukan writings are a useful source for visualizing Christian liturgy since Luke's

vision was one that lent itself to liturgical performance: it became embedded in the daily and yearly cycles of Catholic and Orthodox devotion. And these cycles in turn form the underwater reef which gives their distinctive shape to the iconographic traditions of Eastern and Western religious art.²

This is certainly true in the case of the Pentecost episode. Luke's use of symbolic imagery was widely noted from very early on in biblical interpretation.³

Artists face a particularly difficult problem in visualizing the signs of Pentecost. Images of fire and wind are particularly poignant, as Loveday Alexander observes:

The thing about a flame is that the more you divide it, the more there is to go round: split a flame in half and you get more, not less. So the coming of the Spirit is a gift of new life to the community, which brings out the individual gifts of each member, a gift that brings God's living word to articulate expression in a host of individual tongues.⁴

The four artists represented here interpret in their paintings this dramatic sign of the Spirit's gift of new life.

In comparing these four works of art painted over a period of ten centuries, we should note how compositional organization and formal elements in the

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Figure 2: Duccio (di Buoninsegna) (c.1260-1319). *PENTECOST* (1311). From the upper section of the *Maestà* altarpiece. Tempera on panel. Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana, Siena, Italy. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

images attend to these main narrative and/or iconographical themes: the way the fire is distributed, the presence or absence of Mary in the group, the location of the event, and the symbolic depiction of God the Father.

The manuscript illumination (Figure 1) was produced in one of the greatest monastic centers of the early Middle Ages on the island of Reichenau on Lake Constance in Germany.⁵ The monastery, which was famous for its school and library, was one of the principal patrons of the arts under Otto I (r. 936-973). An important contribution of Ottonian art was the elaboration of pictorial cycles of the life of Jesus that carried a missionary message of salvation. These graphic narratives combined features from early Christian models and contemporary Byzantine manuscripts.⁶ Robert Melzak explains,

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Figure 3: *El Greco* (1541-1614). *THE PENTECOST* (c. 1600). Oil on canvas. 9' x 4'. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The traditional features of the scenes, derived from Early Christian art...are [Christ] performing the miracles with a blessing gesture, the use of conventional architectural motifs with diagonal sides and backgrounds of yellow, blue, and green bands. The figures' expressive poses, however, and the patterns of linear highlights on their draperies enliven the scenes, and the architectural details create spatial illusion while harmonizing with the overall framework.⁷

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Figure 4: Emil Nolde (1867-1956). *PENTECOST* (1909). Oil on canvas. 34" x 42". Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Staatliche Museen / Jorg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The group of twelve are placed evenly and symmetrically (six on one side and six on the other) in a horizontal register in the lower half of the composition. The seated figures are in front of two columns and their feet dangle over the picture frame to show depth in the illumination. Mary is not present and there is some indication that the setting is an interior but not necessarily an upper story. The architectural elements under the blue sky and above the gold background of the apostles seem to convey an interior and exterior. The tongues of fire sit, as if they are hats, attached to the tops of their heads. The hand of God, holding the cross, extends from a round object along with the rays of fire that recede back into the heavens after their delivery to the apostles. The figures are stylized into "types" that are repeated with slight facial variations (facial hair, hair color, and hair style) and right hand gestures (blessing gesture, two fingers and thumb extended, and hand raised with fingers bent at a right angle).

Duccio, a Siennese artist painting just prior to the Italian Renaissance and working about 300 years after the monks produced the Reichenau illumination, chose to include the Virgin Mary, and to place her in the center of this composition. This *Pentecost* scene (Figure 2) was part of a large, multi-paneled, two-sided altarpiece known as a Maestà. The huge altarpiece (approximately 16' x 16') was dedicated to Mary and placed on the high altar of Siena Cathedral, after great procession, on June 9, 1311.⁸ At the pinnacle of the back of the altarpiece, which was dedicated to events in the life of Christ, was this *Pentecost* image.⁹ Although architectural elements are visible, it is difficult to determine if the scene is taking place on an exterior portico or in an interior room. The tongues of fire are centered on each gold halo and still linked to the rays of fire that come from an unknown source outside the composition.

Domenikos Theotokopoulos, better known as El Greco, worked during the sixteenth century in Italy and Spain. His *The Pentecost* (Figure 3), like Duccio's, positions the Virgin Mary in the center of the composition surrounded by the apostles. Mary's presence, not mentioned in scriptural accounts, is symbolic of the Church.¹⁰ The tongues of fire descend from the dove, another symbol of the Holy Spirit, toward the heads of the apostles that are on either side of Mary. The Virgin and apostles appear to be on a stepped throne with a dark background. El Greco is not interested in depicting a precise setting of an upper, interior room.

The Pentecost is located today in the Prado Museum in Madrid, whose website notes that "the bald, bearded Apostle who looks at the viewer from the right of the canvas has been identified as a self-portrait, or as a portrait of the artist's friend, Antonio de Covarrubias." Along with other paintings in the Prado Museum, this work was painted as part of the main altarpiece for the church of the Augustine College of María de Aragón in Madrid. El Greco's signature (redone during an old restoration) is located on the second step in Greek letters.¹¹

El Greco's style is at the end of Mannerism or Late Renaissance and the Baroque. Fernando Marías states,

The tendency towards a special treatment of lighting, and its effect on human forms within vertiginous compositions where mass and space merge is found in the canvases [for this altarpiece]. In these he achieved an extraordinary sense of the miraculous, possibly deriving from the mystical thinking of the preacher Alfonso de Orozco (1500-1591) or perhaps from El Greco's personal vision of the immanence of the divine.¹²

In either case, El Greco gives us a dramatic visual of the descent of the Holy Spirit for continued reflection.

The final version of *Pentecost* (Figure 4) is by the German Expressionist painter, watercolorist, and printmaker, Emil Nolde (1867-1956). Nolde,

primarily known as a colorist, was influenced by the stark landscape of his north German homeland. He produced landscapes but also favored religious subjects.¹³ He interpreted the subjects in his own way with vibrant, bold color and often omitted some of the traditional iconographic elements, as he does in the 1909 *Pentecost*. Three of the four thematic elements that we have been tracing do not exist. Neither the presence of Mary, a symbol of the divine (either a hand or dove), nor the setting is a concern of the artist. Instead, he gives us a powerful painting of intense color with the flames painted in a purple teardrop shape. The viewer is given a space at the table (which without the tongues could easily be confused with a Last Supper) between two apostles who have joined hands in fear or prayer regarding what is happening to them. The eleven apostles seated around the table have mask-like expressions.

This painting was very controversial and became the center of the row that split the Berlin Secession – one of the most advanced exhibiting societies in Germany up until that time, which Nolde joined in 1908.¹⁴ Jill Lloyd comments,

Nolde's primitivist treatment of this religious subject, rendered in glowing colours and bold, Expressionist brushwork, found little favour among the older members of the society, who had grown up in the Impressionist school. When *Pentecost* and the works of most other younger artists were rejected, Nolde attacked the leadership and principles of the Secession in an open letter to its President, Max Liebermann, whereupon he was expelled from the association. Until 1912 he exhibited alongside other rejected artists in the Neue Sezession in Berlin.¹⁵

Nolde would go on to be censored by the Nazis and continue to fight for an expressive and imaginative freedom for artists and individuals alike.

The manuscript illuminator, Duccio, El Greco, and Nolde each interpreted the biblical account of the gift of the Holy Spirit in a way that was exciting and unconventional. Regardless of which traditional narrative or iconographic elements were included or omitted (Mary, the divine, the upper room), all these painters found a way to share their individual artistic and interpretive gifts in depicting the coming of the Spirit as a gift of new life for their community.

NOTES

1 For more on this interpretation of the Pentecost events, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, "Philological and Performative Perspectives on Pentecost," in Steve Walton, Thomas E. Phillips, Lloyd K. Pietersen, and F. Scott Spencer, eds., *Reading Acts Today: Essays in Honour of Loveday C. A. Alexander* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 137-153.

2 Loveday C. A. Alexander, "What If Luke Had Never Met Theophilus?" *Biblical Interpretation*, 8:1 (2000): 161-170, here citing 170.

3 For a discussion of the reception and interpretation of Pentecost, see the forthcoming

Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *The Acts of the Apostles Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2016).

4 Loveday C. A. Alexander, *A Bible Commentary for Every Day*, The People's Bible Commentary (Oxford, UK: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006), 29.

5 Robert Melzak, "Reichenau," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T071196 (accessed March 18, 2015).

6 Michael Norris, *Medieval Art: A Resource for Educators* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005), 14-15.

7 Robert Melzak, "Reichenau."

8 Dillian Gordon, "Duccio," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T023857 (accessed March 18, 2015).

9 A diagram and conjectural reconstruction of the entire altarpiece can be found in Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, seventh edition (Upper Saddle River, NY: Prentice Hall, 2011), 106-107.

10 Herbert Kessler, "The Word Made Flesh in Early Decorated Bibles," in Jeffrey Spier, ed., *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 141-168, here citing 166.

11 "El Greco, *Pentecost*," On-line Gallery, (Museo Nacional del Prado), www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/pentecost/ (accessed March 18, 2015).

12 Fernando Marias, "Greco, El," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T034199 (accessed March 18, 2015).

13 Jill Lloyd, "Nolde, Emil," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T062679 (accessed March 18, 2015).

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.



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