

The Beginning and The End: Images of the Universe

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The Beginning

Creation and Last Judgment? Or Big Bang and Gravitational Collapse/‘endless nothingness’? Explanations of the beginning and end - of the universe, the planet and humanity have been attempted since time immemorial by philosophers, theologians and scientists. Pictorial images can also interpret, in visual terms, these great mysteries.

Taking a thematic rather than chronological approach (and focussed on the Western tradition), images of the biggest questions (‘the beginning’ and ‘the end’) vary from the universe emerging from chaos or from nothing (‘ex nihilo’); narratives; measured and mathematical visions; symbolic or abstract versions; and those with a more scientific approach. Images of ‘the end’ also seem to vary in response to unfolding scientific discoveries and thought on the big questions of humanity, life and the universe itself.



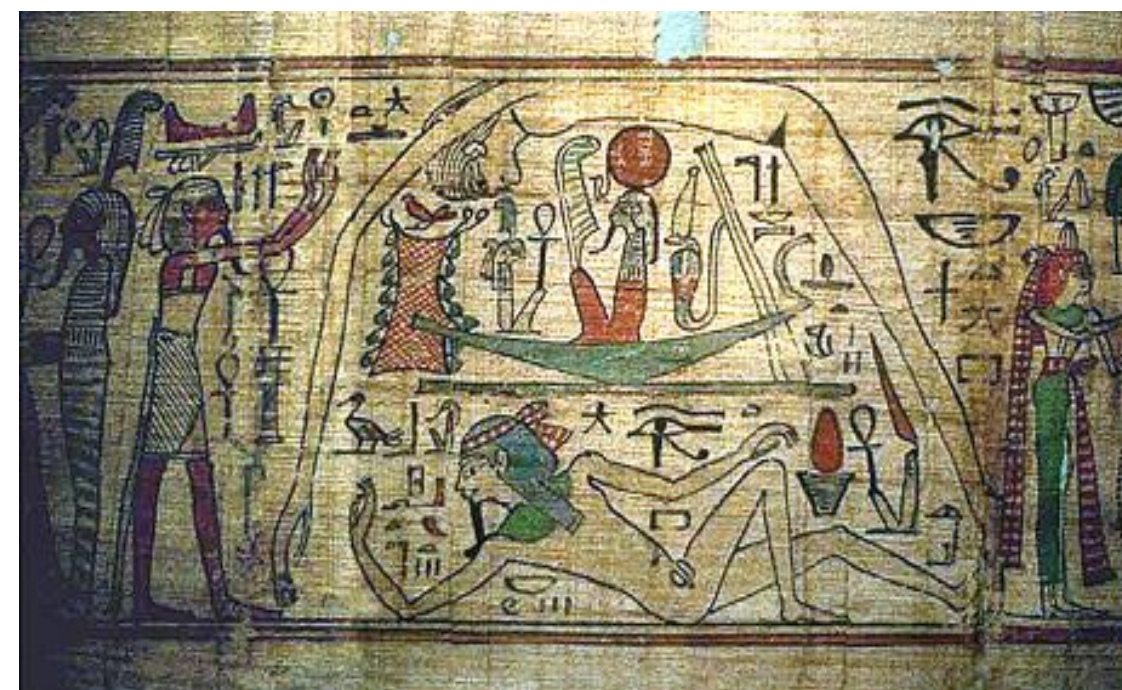
The Sistine Chapel (with Michelangelo’s Creation on the Ceiling and Last Judgment, altar wall), is one of the few places where cosmological images of the ‘Beginning’ and ‘The End’ are shown together.

Ancient concepts

The *Enuma Elish* (1800-1600 BC) describes the creation, as do myths of Ancient Egypt. Both traditions might have influenced the Judao-Christian accounts in Genesis.



Babylonian Cylinder seal of the Sun God, c 2300 BC



Egyptian papyrus with Nut arched over the earth-god Geb, 11th Cent BC

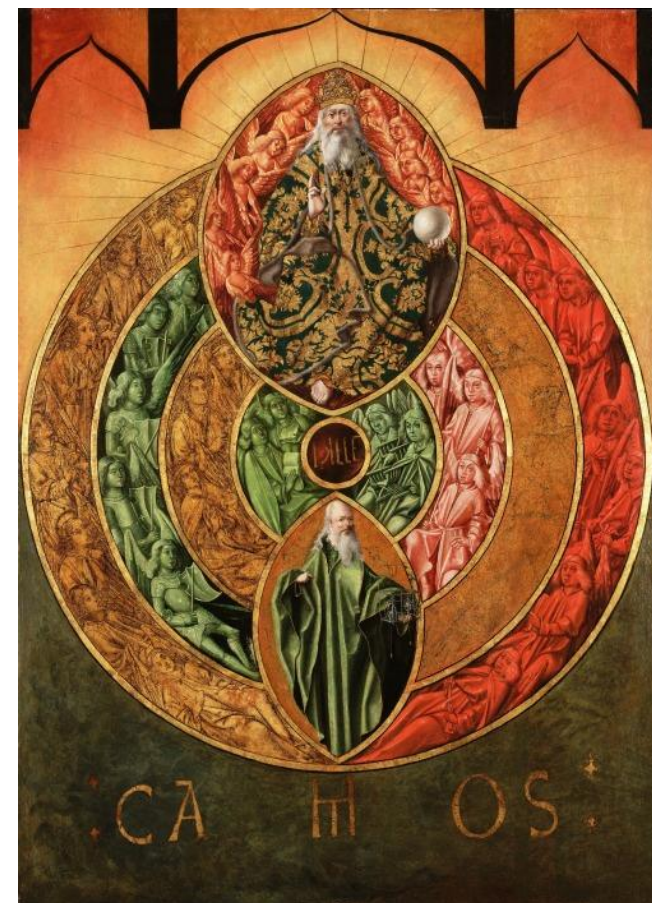
Ex Nihilo or from Chaos?

Images of the Genesis Creation may reflect the idea of creation ‘out of nothing’ (Monreale, *God creating the Universe*, 1175) below.



Or from Chaos, as indicated on the right.

Fernando Gallego, 1488,



Icon or Narrative? (or both)

The Creation mosaic of St Mark’s Venice (1215-60) is a prime example of a narrative approach to the events of the Genesis account of creation., serving as the ‘Bible of the illiterate’.



Other examples of a narrative approach include many manuscripts like the *Biblia Vulgare Istoriata* (Venice 1471). Images reflect the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic view that held sway in the Middle Ages

Measured and Mathematical

As scientific theory and experiment developed, a more scientific, measured and mathematical approach becomes evident – as in manuscripts such as the 13th century *Bible Moralisée* (below left).

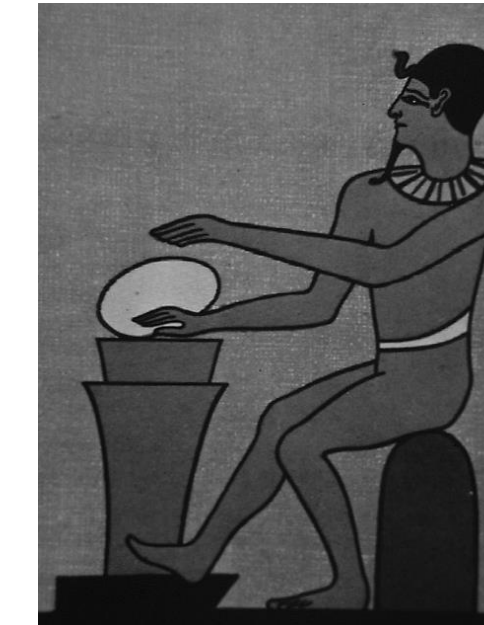


This tradition, of God as master builder or architect, was also pursued by William Blake in his *‘Ancient of Days*, 1794 (right).

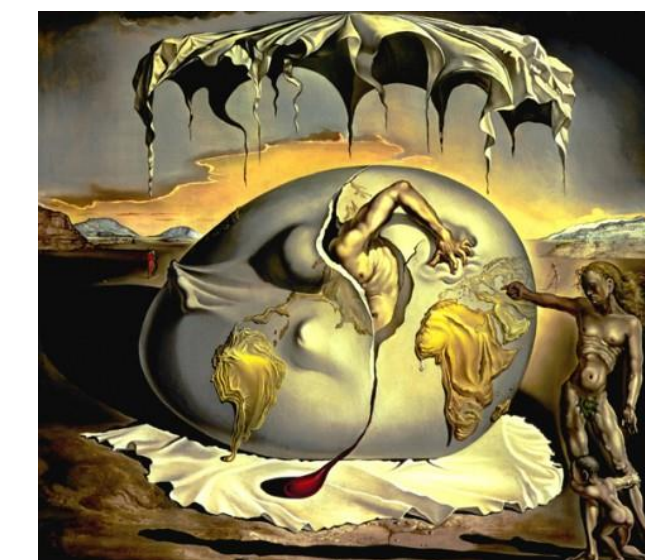


Symbolic

One image that has proved very popular as a symbol of the creation, is the motif of an egg. This occurs in ancient Egyptian and Orphic examples – such as the god Ptah creating the universe from the cosmic egg (right, from E A Budge, *Studies in Egyptian Mythology* 1904).

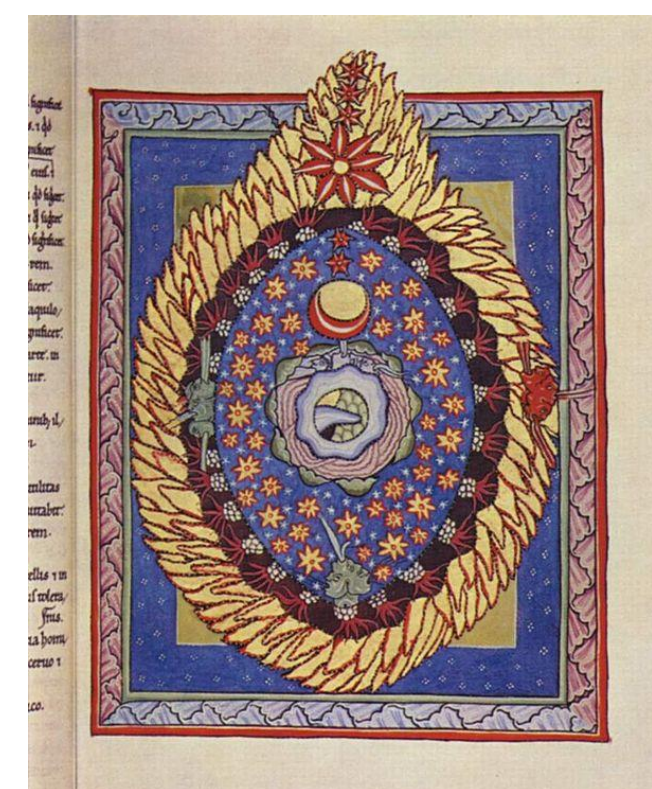


The symbol recurs in works by Brancusi, *Beginning of the World*, 1924 (below left), and Dali (right)



Abstract

Abstract interpretations of the days of Creation are not exclusively modern, as seen in the images of the Genesis creation by Hildegard of Bingen (12th century, below left) and in the Nuremberg Chronicles (1493, right).



The Renaissance

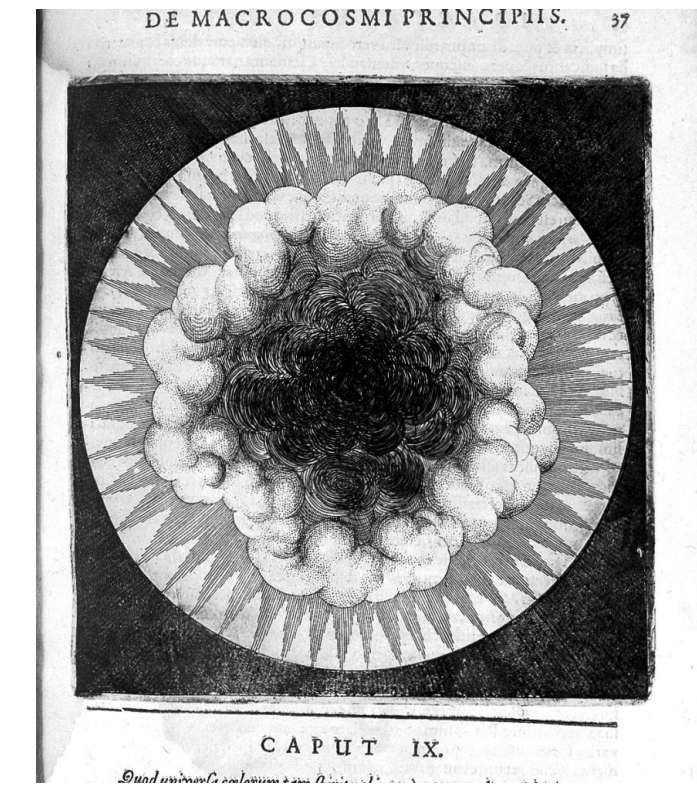
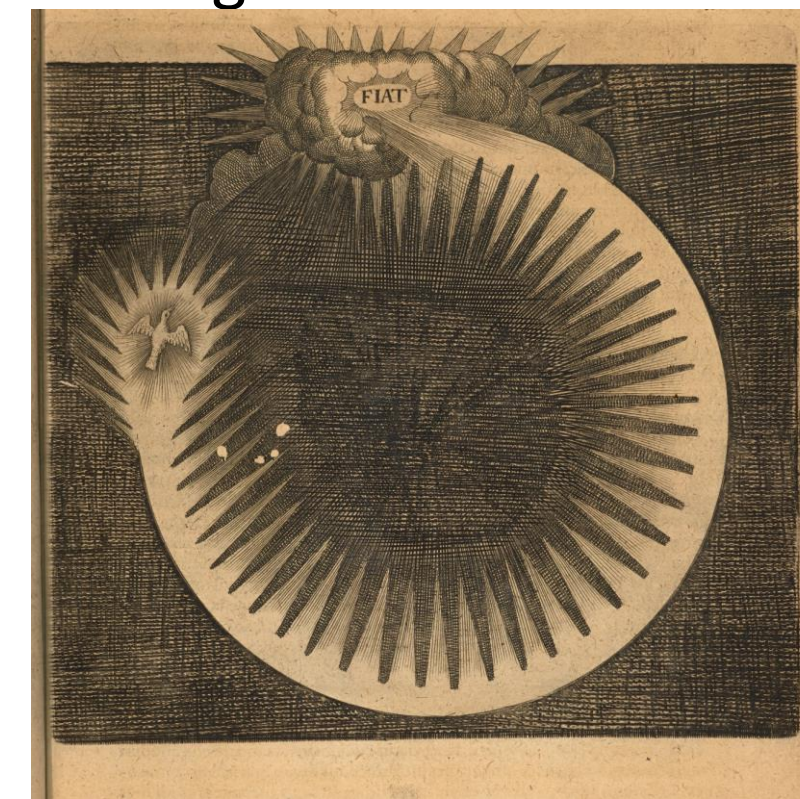
The Renaissance work of Giovanni di Paolo, 1445 (below left) reflects the burgeoning scientific interests of the age, being based on the revival of the work of Sacrobosco (right).



Influenced by humanism, Renaissance images of Genesis lie more on the creation of humanity and the account of Adam and Eve. However, Michelangelo’s own frescoes related not only to the Genesis account, but also to contemporary cosmological ideas, since he changed the order of events - with sun and moon (4th day) preceding planets and vegetation.

The Age of Enlightenment

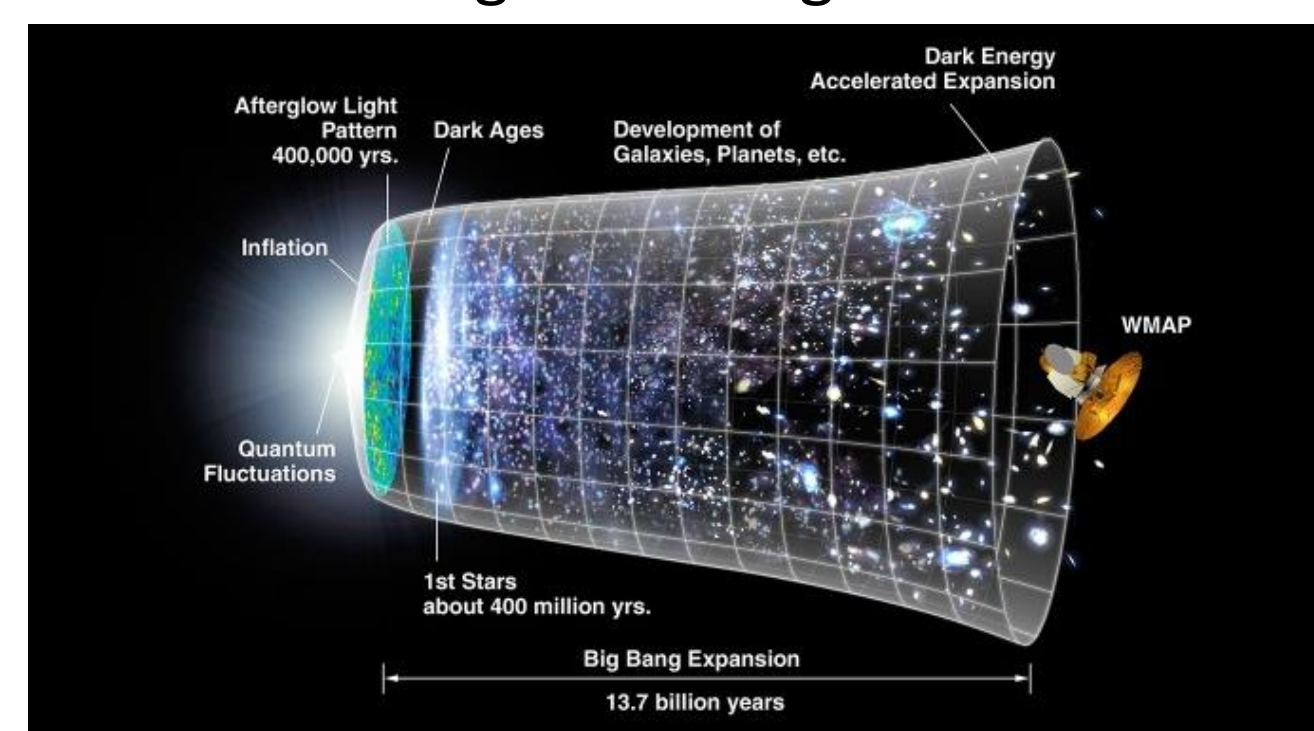
Following the great changes of the 16th and early 17th century, with the advancements in cosmology and astronomy of Copernicus and Galileo, direct images of the Creation account in Genesis become rarer.



Robert Fludd’s images (1617, above) seem to depict versions of a 17th century ‘Big Bang’.

Modern scientific images

Space does not allow discussion of visual images of the 20th and 21st century interpretations of the Beginning of the universe. Suffice it to say that many scientific drawings and images exist. But are these ‘art’?



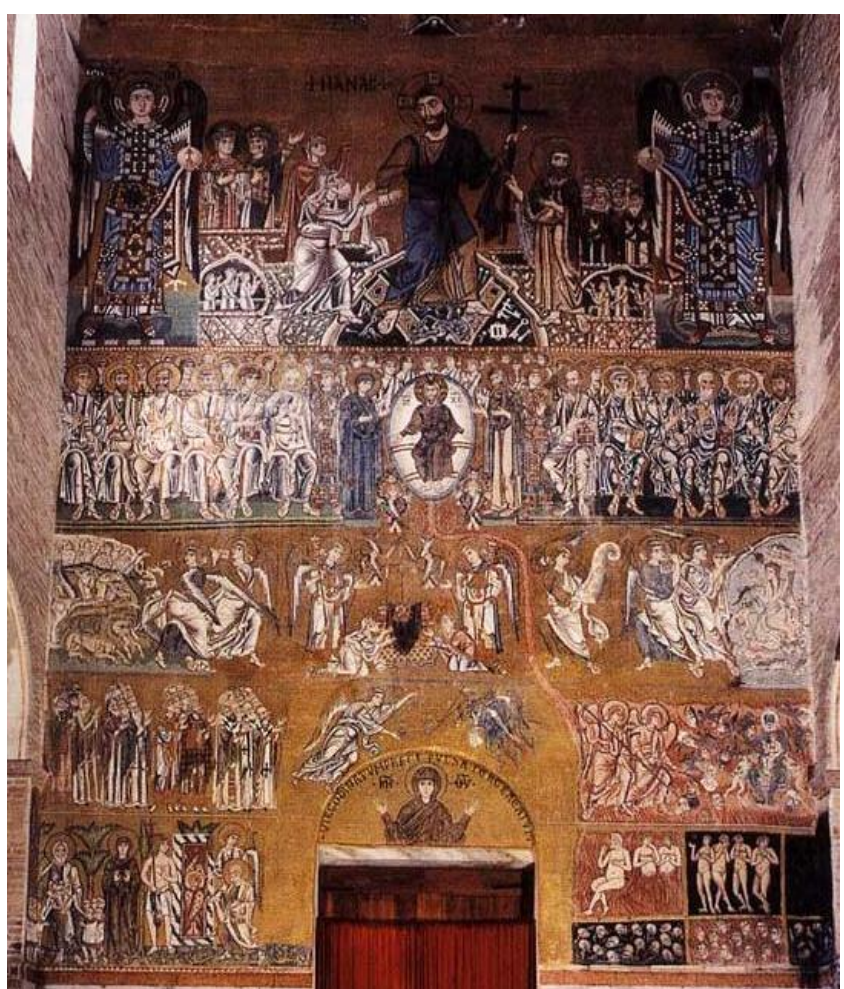
The well-known scientific NASA image, 2012, seems to be the modern equivalent of the Sistine Ceiling - and clearly has aesthetic and artistic merit. The order of events is virtually the same as in Genesis I.

The End

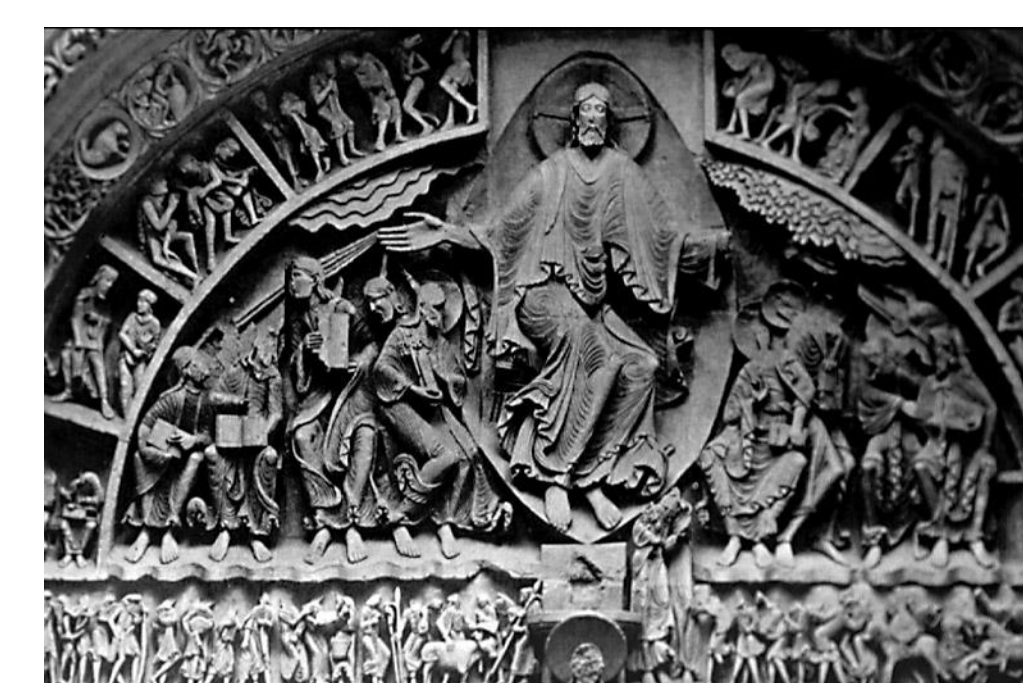
Just as visual images of the Creation or beginning of the universe show a range of approaches (sometimes influenced by contemporary world-view or scientific theory), images of the end of the universe also vary. Depictions of the ‘The beginning’ focus on the creation of the universe, planet and humanity. For ‘The End’, there seems little concern about the end of the universe but growing concern about the fate of the planet, and its inhabitants. People always worry about the end of ‘me’.

Byzantine

The Italo-Byzantine mosaic of the Last Judgment at Torcello, late 11th century (right) is an example of where the three parts of the universe (Heaven, Earth and Hell) are shown together. The scheme relates to the scriptural flat earth approach, in layers as the ‘good’ go up to heaven, while the ‘Bad’ go down to Hell. The concept of Judgment at the End of the world was used as disciplinary propaganda in the absence of effective judicial systems.



Medieval



Even if most educated people realised the earth was spherical by medieval times., the idea of the flat earth covered by the dome of heaven (in accordance with scriptural sources) persisted and was reflected in the tympana of the great French Cathedrals (Vezelay, 1125, left).

Renaissance

The cosmological approach to the ‘end’ or Last Judgment, is also demonstrated in Giotto’s fresco in the Scrovegni Chapel (1305), with angels rolling out the heavens as described in Revelation 6:14 (below left).



Michelangelo’s revolutionary circular design for the Sistine *Last Judgment* (1536-41) clearly related to the heliocentric view of his contemporary, Copernicus, in its circular arrangement around the Sun-Christ rather than a layered composition.



Modern images of the End of the World

Moving away from the Biblical foundations for ‘The End’, Ludwig Meidner’s series, *Apocalyptic Landscape*, 1912-16 foreshadows the apocalypse of the First World War, (below left)



Scenes from films like ‘2012’ also visualise the end of the world (as in the ‘still’ above right).

Conclusions

From biblical times (and before) astronomy and cosmology have exerted a huge influence on the foundation of human spiritual thought and inspiration. Cosmology and theology were perceived as one and the same thing (as ‘knowledge’ or ‘history’) and were not ‘separated out’ until the early modern period. In all this discussion and analysis, whether spiritual or scientific, visual images have always been used to convey complex ideas. (Alberto Ruggieri, b 1963 - right)



This is a very brief summary of some previous and ongoing work where the ideas and conclusions examined are illustrated in full (aspiring to an eventual comprehensive publication) – of which this poster is only the merest overview.

An earlier version is at Gresham College lecture (video and transcript) <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-beginning-and-the-end-images-of-the-universe>

Wikimedia comms (for illustrations)

www.valereshrimplin.com