

The Art Of Imagining UFOs

The Search for Images Of Spaceships In European Paintings Provides An Important Lesson For All Paranormal Enthusiasts—*Do Your Homework*

D I E G O C U O G H I

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“Meanwhile the average man had become progressively less able to recognize the subjects or understand the meaning of the works of art of the past. Fewer people had read the classics of Greek and Roman literature, and relatively few people read the Bible with the same diligence that their parents had done. It comes as a shock to an elderly man to find how many biblical references have become completely incomprehensible to the present generation.”

—Kenneth Clark, introduction to *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* by James Hall.

AROUND THE WORLD, MILLIONS OF PEOPLE believe that alien spacecraft routinely visit our planet.¹ This belief has been fueled by 60 years of reported UFO sightings and thousands of anecdotal claims. A growing number of print² and web³ sources argue that there is solid documentary proof that UFOs have been visiting us for hundreds of years, painted into the skies of the European art of centuries past.

While it's true that some pretty strange things appear in the backgrounds of old paintings, they only look odd to modern viewers. A working knowledge of the complex artistic and symbolic conventions used by Classical, Medieval, or Renaissance painters reveals that these strange details meant something quite different to the artists who painted them, and the audience they painted for. A painting's place in history influences how objects in it are depicted, and that contextual information is necessary to correctly identify those objects. Regrettably, the authors who have discovered alleged UFOs in old paintings have little knowledge of the meaning or context of the items which they have selected as candidates for alien spacecraft.

Strangely enough, one of the motives for seeking UFOs in old paintings was a particular observation about which skeptics and UFO enthusiasts partially agreed. Skeptics have long found it suspicious that thousands of UFOs apparently started arriving only after the advent of science fiction.

This is hardly the most devastating or scientific criticism of belief in UFOs, but it certainly makes a valid point: once people started to write about fictional alien spacecraft, people suddenly began to see them.

Some UFOlogists also felt uneasy about this coincidence. If the “alien spaceship” hypothesis is correct, surely there would have been UFOs in our skies before science fiction writers started imagining aliens; and, if they've been visiting us for centuries, historical records of extraterrestrial spacecraft should exist. After all, people have been watching the skies for a very long time.

So, where's the evidence of pre-Sci-Fi visitations? Where are the accounts of saucers seen by medieval peasants, or of vast silvery disks hovering over Roman garrisons? The truth is, there are no historical records of anything matching the

1. Adoration of the Extraterrestrials

descriptions of modern UFOs.⁴ This has prompted many UFOlogists to comb through ancient sources for obscure or hidden signs of premodern UFOs. Perhaps, they reason, ancient observers, lacking the conceptual framework provided by modern science (and science fiction) actually did record spacecraft sightings—but without understanding what they were seeing.

As *Skeptic* readers know, there is now a decades-long tradition of pseudo-historical research devoted to uncovering cryptic signs of alien “ancient astronauts” in the records, monuments, and artwork of ancient cultures (Egyptian, Aztec, and so on). Since the 1970s, many have been convinced (by writers such as Andrew Tomas or Erich von Däniken) that ancient, lost, or non-European cultures did record prehistoric contact with aliens. If, as these “paleo-astronautic” theorists imagine, aliens have visited here for millennia, and if they were recorded by ancient non-European cultures, isn’t it reasonable to hypothesize that similar evidence of their presence should also be contained in the art of European societies as well?

Although the idea is reasonable enough, the conclusions they have drawn so far have been seriously flawed.

The Art

A virtual cottage industry has emerged on the Internet to showcase and discuss the many UFOs that have been “discovered” in the works of long-dead painters. In one sense, the authors of these sites are correct: if you search the back-grounds of enough old paintings saucer-like objects can be found. Some examples are extremely convincing, even to a skeptical eye.

A quick comparison of UFO websites reveals that the images offered are generally the same ones. Once a new image appears on one site, the others immediately pick it up, usually with the commentary that goes along with it.

For web surfers with even a little knowledge of art history, the first impression of these sites is that a very simplistic methodology was used to compile them. To all appearances, the standard practice is simply this: pick up an art book, preferably one dealing with work from the 17th-century or earlier (religious art is favored because it is crowded with odd objects). Browse through the book for any strange detail with a circular,

ellipsoid or saucer-like shape. That’s it. This system obviously makes it quite easy to discover puzzling objects and declare them “alien” or “unidentified” without bothering to consider what they might have symbolized in the period in which they appear.

It’s clearly foolish to publish anything (even on the web) on subjects one knows nothing about. These authors err not just because they misinterpret the symbolism, but because they don’t even realize that it’s symbolism they’re looking at. The visual vocabularies they are puzzling over are centuries (or even millennia) old. Those archaic iconographic vocabularies are no more familiar in the TV age than is Homer’s Greek or Virgil’s Latin. We shouldn’t be too hard on UFOlogists for their mistakes in this unfamiliar arena, perhaps, but we should feel free to debunk their poorly founded claims.

Another misunderstanding of these web UFO searchers is presuming that the social role of the artist back then was the same as it is today. Authors frequently make the anachronistic assumption that the artists who executed these expensive, commissioned paintings had the power or license to add details as they chose. It’s a mistake to think that religious painters of, say, the 15th-century, were free to record events they had personally witnessed, or that they would have been allowed to add any non-canonical or un-codified elements whatsoever.

The idea that artists should freely express themselves in their work is a completely modern one. In past times, the patrons who choose the subject and supervised the execution of the artwork (in these cases, religious institutions or powerful nobility) would never have allowed artists to insert stray elements from outside of previously established conventions—especially in the case of religious subjects. Artists were, in those times, skilled workers who were paid to do things in the prescribed way, and only that way; they could no more insert flying saucers into their commissions than your lawyer can add jokes or personal commentary to your will. Even for master painters, tinkering with the schematic conventions of their times could have been dangerous. Personal editorializing would have been a publicly scandalous affront to their patrons (who frequently held the powers of life and death, in addition to controlling the prosperity of artists).⁵

Examples

Oddly, a striking failure of this UFOlogical fishing trip is the relatively small number of examples it has managed to net. At this point, one may be forgiven for wondering whether these authors, in the course of their investigations, ever actually entered a museum or a church. If they had, they would have been astonished to discover the staggering array of strange objects depicted in old paintings, statues, and other works of art!

So, what exactly is it that these web sites are showcasing? What does art history have to say about the discovery of UFOs in centuries-old paintings? Here are four examples. I include a critique of each one to illustrate the shortcomings of their reasoning.

1. *The Adoration of the Extraterrestrials*

Carlo Crivelli, *Annunciazione* (1486).

Anyone familiar with 15th-century religious painting will find it absurd that the authors of some UFOlogy web sites are astonished by the object in the sky of the *Annunciation* by Carlo Crivelli (now at the National Gallery of London).

What they consider most surprising is the fact that there is a ray of light coming down from this “flying object” to touch the head of the Virgin Mary. This ray, it is claimed, comes from a saucer-like UFO hovering among the clouds. Unfortunately, casual web surfers will find that posted reproductions of the key detail (the “saucer,” actually a circle of clouds in the sky) are small, blurred, or pixilated to the point of being indecipherable. (No one seems to have searched for a better reproduction, and identical poor-quality versions continue to spread from site to site).

On the Edicolaweb site,⁶ the commentary is quite restrained: “Painting by Carlo Crivelli, known as *The Annunciation*, shown at the National Gallery of London. In the sky hovers a large, bright circle, from which a beam of light descends, reaching the crown worn by Mary.”

By contrast, a site called The UFOs of Crivelli⁷ gets right to the point: “What most attracts our attention is the peculiarity of the cloud shape: indeed it appears to be quite solid, with a circular structure, and clearly different from any other cloud surrounding it. It may be either the sun circle (direct emanation of the divine energy) or an object really seen and thus represented by Crivelli himself. As evidence of this latter hypothesis stands the ‘thickness’ of the object, which is not an abstract entity: in addition the resemblance of the ‘cloud’ to a UFO recently seen in Veneto [a northern region of Italy] in January 1999 is clear. The reader may judge for himself.” Of course, the reader can’t judge without a sharp detail of the cloud, but the blowup

provided is of even lower quality than is typical.

Had those publishing this claim bothered to become familiar with the art of the period, they would know that there are a vast number of Annunciations in which a ray reaches from a circular cloud to the head of the Madonna. This scene is, like most religious scenes, an established genre rendered in similar ways many times by many people. These various Annunciations speak a specialized iconographic language that modern viewers no longer understand.

For example, the Crivelli painting represents divine power in a very common way: an object in the sky, formed by a radiant circle of clouds containing two circles of small angels. In close-up, individual angels are clearly visible, peeking their little heads and golden wings out over the clouds on which they sit. This same cloud-with-rings-of-angels device is used in Annunciations by Luca Signorelli, Pietro Alamanno, and others (as well as in many Medieval and Renaissance paintings of related subject matter) to depict the presence of God. Sometimes this device is a small detail, an anchor at the divine end of a thread that connects a holy person to God; at other times it is the central image, a vast vortex of heavenly power.

If the beam emanating from the radiant cloud in Crivelli’s painting were actually intended to represent the action of a technological device—a *Star Trek* transporter, perhaps, or some sort of laser communications system—it would seem extremely odd that this advanced technology was employed, apparently, for the purpose of beaming a bird onto the head of the Virgin. In the context of Christian religious iconography the little white bird is far less bizarre. In fact, painters routinely placed doves in such beams of light, with these doves representing the Holy Spirit and divine guidance descending to the blessed contactee.

The practice of representing the Holy Spirit as a dove is familiar to Christians; indeed, it predates the word “Christian.” For example, the oldest of the New Testament Gospels, Mark, recounts that at his baptism, Jesus saw “the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove.”⁸ Today, American churches and chapels are commonly named “Holy Dove,” and the tradition thrives worldwide in both visual art and hymns.

In high-resolution reproductions, the identity of Crivelli’s “UFO” is clear, but UFOlogy sites typically offer

only hazy, ambiguous, low-resolution smudges. Crivelli no more saw a UFO with his own eyes than cartoonists see clouds emerging from people’s heads when they are thinking; in both cases, these artists simply utilized established conventions for representing abstract or non-visual concepts. The only mysteries here are why some UFOlogists are so quick to leap to unwarranted conclusions, and so slow to provide their readers with the information needed to honestly evaluate the “evidence.”

2. The Shepherd's Vision

Madonna Col Bambino e San Giovannino (end of 15th century). (*Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John*.)

Attributed to Sebastiano Mainardi or Jacopo del Sellaio. *The Madonna and Child with the Infant St. John*, on display in the Sala d’Ercole in Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, has been attributed to at least three painters active in Florence at the end of the 1400s. For convenience we’ll refer to this as a work by the general favorite, Sebastiano Mainardi.⁹

This painting has excited UFOlogists more than any other. Many see proof of a “close encounter” with a UFO in the upper-right background behind the Madonna. In the depiction, a far-off character shields his eyes while beholding an apparition in the sky (his dog is equally interested).

Daniele Bedini writes in *Notiziario UFO*,¹⁰ “We clearly see the presence of an airborne object, leaden in color and inclined to port, sporting a ‘dome’ or ‘turret,’ apparently identifiable as an oval-shaped moving flying device.”

Once again, with a few keystrokes, a radiant cloud painted half a millennium ago has become a flying saucer. But this odd cloud is not the only peculiarity of the painting: to the upper left, we see the Nativity Star with three other small stars (or perhaps flames) below it. These particulars—three clustered stars, a luminous cloud—tell us that this painting follows an ancient iconography, an austere and rigid way for interpreting not only sacred subjects but also city life itself.

When this work was created, Florence was under the theocratic sway of the infamous Fra’ (‘Brother’) Girolamo Savonarola. This passionate fire-and-brimstone monk had gained great popular influence with his powerful, persuasive sermons linking the corruption he saw in the ruling Florentine Medici family with the coming judgment foretold in the Book of Revelation. Like many people throughout history, Savonarola believed that greed, decadence, and immorality were destroying his society (and his church), and he called forcefully for a return to traditional Catholic values. When, under the pressure of an advancing

French invasion the Medici family was eventually driven out, Florence declared itself a Republic—with Christ himself as titular king. Although Savonarola had no official political power in this new Republic, his opinions were the authoritative foundation for a Florence reinvented with both civil law and social norms based on Christian ideology. The resulting theocratic state featured pervasive surveillance of the people and control over their everyday lives (one could draw parallels with the modern fundamentalists of Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic Republic of Iran).

Under the grip of both popular religious fervor and a theocratic regime, Florentines, while pursuing their cultural revolution, invented a famous expression that still resonates today: the so-called “bonfires of the vanities.” In these huge street fires, symbols of the degenerate corruption associated with the old Florence were gathered and publicly burned. Gambling paraphernalia (like cards and dice) were fed to the flames along with symbols of material greed (wigs and fineries, together with trinkets and baubles), and symbols of moral decadence—“obscene” books, art, and precious objects.

Savonarola fell from grace within a few years, having angered both the Vatican and the people of Florence. Ultimately he was captured by a mob, arrested, tried, tortured, hanged, and then burned for good measure. Soon, after ascending to the Papal throne in Rome, the Medici family returned to power in Florence as well.

During the Savonarola years, the dangerous cultural atmosphere of suspicion and condemnation born from his preaching greatly influenced the work of artists. Several, including Sandro Botticelli (whose patrons had been the Medici family), soon denounced their own earlier work as heathen, and proclaimed themselves ready to represent mystical subjects in a “purer” (but also more rigid, archaic and didactic) style. Others, like Florentine sculptor Michelangelo (another Medici-affiliated artist),

simply fled the city.

Rejecting the “degenerate” artistic practices that had emerged from the humanism and Neo-Platonism popular among the Medici circles, Mainardi’s *Madonna* reflected the reactionary trend to return to older, safer iconographic conventions.¹¹ For example, three stars often appear in the paintings of the previous century, and in far earlier Byzantine icons of the Madonna. Often, these stars are painted on her veil, on her shoulders, or on her forehead. Sometimes three rays stand in for the stars, but by any variant they represent the “threefold virginity” of the Madonna (i.e. before, during, and after the virgin birth).

Despite extraterrestrial speculations, Mainardi’s “UFO” is actually an element found in a great many Nativities of the 1400 and 1500s: the announcement to the shepherds, as told in the Gospel of St. Luke: “And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around about them: and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy.’”¹²

Elements of Mainardi’s *Madonna* are found in many other paintings of the Nativity or the Adoration of the Child (by artists such as Foppa, Pinturicchio, Aspertini, Di Credi, Bronzino, Luini, Ghirlandaio, Van Der Goes, and so on). Each of these includes the same angelic visitation scene—either a luminous cloud, or an angelic figure, or an angelic figure emerging from a luminous cloud. In almost all versions, a lone shepherd holds a hand to his forehead, as if shielding his eyes from the shining “glory of the Lord” described by Luke. Often, the shepherd’s dog also marvels at the apparition.

It’s clear that Mainardi’s “UFO sighting” scene can be confidently identified as the then-standard announcement scene. But one might wonder, since there is no specific mention of “luminous clouds” in Luke, where did this particular convention come from?

Renaissance sacred art took scenes not only from the four canonical Gospels, but also from apocryphal sources and contemporary devotional texts containing popular characters. We owe Giotto’s *Mary’s Presentation to the Temple* (or *The Virgin’s Wedding*), the encounter between Jesus as a child and St. John the Baptist by Leonardo, and other favorites to sources extraneous to the canonical Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke or

John. Painters (and their employers, who chose the subjects) also routinely mixed scenes and situations from heterogeneous texts.

One of the apocryphal gospels most heavily drawn on by artists of this period was James’ Protogospel, which features a description of the Nativity in which no angels appear. Instead, a cloud of light attends the birth: “...and behold! a luminous cloud over-shadowed the cave. And the mid-wife said: ‘My soul has been magnified this day, because mine eyes have seen wondrous things: that salvation has been brought forth to Israel.’ And immediately the cloud disappeared out of the cave, and such a great light shone in the cave that the eyes could not bear it.”¹³

While Luke merely notes, “and the glory of the Lord shone round about them,” the author of James’ Protogospel adds that, “the eyes could not bear it.” And behold! Most paintings illustrate the announcement scene with the shepherd shielding his eyes. In the case of Mainardi’s *Madonna*, the angel is depicted as in this apocryphal Gospel: a luminous cloud. This was hardly an innovation.

Discussing angel iconography, Marco Bussagli’s *History of Angels*¹⁴ quotes the 5th-century mystic Pseudo-Dionysus: “The Holy Scriptures represent [angels] in the form of clouds to indicate that the holy entities are filled with a hidden light in an above-mundane way.” In the catalogue of *Wings of God*, Bussagli writes, “All things considered, the Middle Ages turned out to be a central period for the development of the Angelic iconography, whose solutions were to be re-interpreted in a markedly naturalistic way by the later cultures of the Renaissance and the Baroque. Such is the case of the ‘Cloud Angels’ that would be later propounded as winged figures over soft cushions of vapor.”¹⁵

We can, then, firmly link Mainardi’s *Madonna* to political events and iconographic traditions reigning at the end of the 1400s in Florence, but not to alien spacecraft. The three smaller stars under the great Nativity Star are symbols of the triple virginity of Mary (before, during and after childbirth); the shepherd with his hand on his forehead is a standard detail found in dozens of Nativity or Adoration paintings of the same age; and the luminous cloud, symbolic of God’s glory expressed through his angelic agents, comes from the narration of the nativity in the Protogospel of James.

3. *Unidentified Fluffy Objects*

Il Miracolo Della Neve (c. 1428). Masolino da Panicale. (Napoli, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte.) Promoted in the Italian press since the early 1970s, this is one of the most commonly cited “UFOlogic paintings.”¹⁶ Illustrating a 13th-century legend regarding an alleged 4th-century supernatural event, Masolino da Panicale (a.k.a. Tommaso di Cristoforo Fini) painted *The Miracle of the Snow* as the central panel for an altarpiece triptych for the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome around 1428. A web author summarizes the legend:

According to historical tradition, Pope Liberius was ordered by Angels to construct a new church in the exact place where miraculous snowing would soon be manifested. The day after, a strange substance similar to snow fell from the sky in one warm day of August. The phenomenon was limited to the single zone of Rome in which was then constructed the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore.... What was the cause of this impossible snowing? Masolino from Panicale, in his painting, represents a detailed scene of the event, with snow falling from a ‘large and lengthened cloud,’ grayish and with the shape of a cigar. Under this cloud are many other smaller clouds. Careful examination of these reveals that they do not seem like normal clouds. They are, in fact, all clearly delineated in their contours and not vaporous, and are represented in identical pairs with only the upper portion illuminated, as are many ‘flying saucers.’¹⁷

Although this modern UFOlogical retelling refers to a “strange substance similar to snow,” the original legend speaks of literal snow falling on Rome miraculously in August of the year 352 CE. According to the legend, apparently first told by Fra Bartolomeo from Trento in the first half of 13th-century in the *Liber Epilogorum* in Gesta Sanctorum,

...in the morning...the inhabitants of the Esquiline hill got a strange surprise: during the night snow had fallen, and a soft mantle of it covered the soil. With such a miracle the Virgin Mary indicated to a noble called Giovanni and his wife that she wanted a shrine built there in her honor. For a long time the old couple, who had no sons, had desired to employ their riches in a work that honored the Mother of God and, to such an aim, prayed with

fervor so great that she showed them the way in which they could fulfill their wish. The Virgin appeared to them in a dream, telling them to build a church dedicated to Mary in the place where the following morning would reveal that snow had fallen miraculously during the night. Astonished by the miracle, the couple went to Pope Liberius, to tell him what happened; but the pope had, during the night, dreamed the same thing! Liberius, followed by Giovanni and a crowd, went up the Esquiline hill and found that the still intact snow marked the outline of the new church—which was soon constructed at the expense of Giovanni and his wife.¹⁸

Historically, things seem to have happened differently. The foundation of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore on the Esquiline hill was actually laid during the reign of Pope Sixtus III in the middle of the 5th-century. It was the first church dedicated to the Virgin Mary (officially defined as the “Mother of God” in Ephesus in 431 CE by the Third Ecumenical Council). Esquiline may have been chosen in order to eliminate the old pagan cult of Juno Lucina¹⁹ (a Roman goddess associated with light and child-birth), which had a temple on the same hill.

Because the Miracle of the Snow captured the popular imagination, many artists represented the scene (and various churches dedicated to the Madonna of the Snow were constructed elsewhere in Italy). In Florence we find the miracle represented in a fresco in the church of Santa Felicita, and in a 14th-century stained-glass window in the palace of Orsanmichele.

As far as we know, the story was first narrated a millennium after the legendary event. Another century passed before Masolino painted the miracle scene with those strange “UFO-clouds.” But how unusual really are those clouds in the context of 15th-century art? Not unusual at all, it turns out, because Masolino painted similar clouds in other projects, including a Madonna with Child. Other painters of the time, including Benozzo Gozzoli, also represented clouds in the same stylized way.

Obviously, these clouds are schematically stylized, and aspire to less realism than earlier sacred art from the first half of 15th-century; equally obviously, they are still clouds. Here, realism is set aside in favor of simplicity, but most audiences have no trouble identifying the cloud elements

correctly. Admittedly, these clouds do somewhat resemble modern flying saucer images, but this was no more the intent of Masolino than of his contemporaries who used the same convention. The major cloud element aids our identification of the object as a cloud, if any aid is needed, with its billowy, frankly cloud-like upper surface. And, the simplified (but nonetheless obvious) amorphous asymmetry of the other clouds confirms that these are not meant by the painter to be similar technological artifacts. It may be worth pointing out that we have no reason whatsoever to suspect that Masolino ever personally saw a flying saucer, a giant Jesus gesturing from a gargantuan medalion in the sky, or, for that matter, a sky made from gold leaf.

The snow legend itself could, conceivably, have been a oral-historical record of a real atmospheric occurrence. Independent accounts indicate that while snow in Rome during August would certainly have been extraordinary, it could actually have happened. Exceptional atmospheric events of this kind have been recorded more recently. For example, in June of 1491 snow piled up to a foot high in Bologna. Three days later, snow covered Ferrara as well. Snow is documented to have fallen on the coasts of the Calabria in May of 1755, and in Lunigiana in July of 1756. Prato is a fine modern example of a city whitened in August: in 2000 it became covered in hail (in certain points, almost 30cm deep).

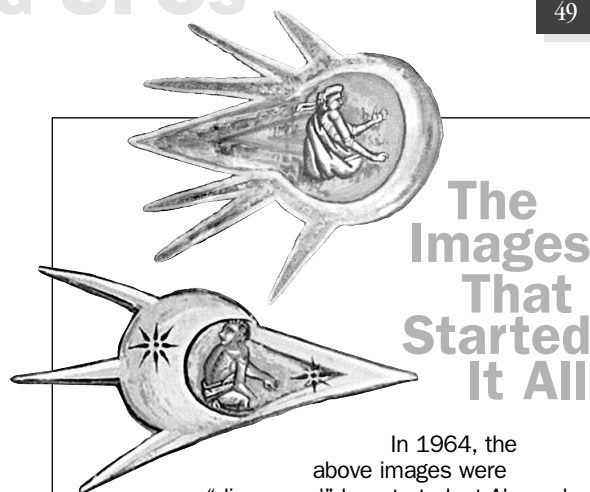
It's not impossible, therefore, that such an extraordinary event could have occurred. Distant memories, passed along orally for centuries, picking up rich legendary details could have eventually transformed into the "Miracle of the Snow."

Whether the legend is "true" in this sense is beside the point. For our purposes, it is sufficient to conclude that Masolino illustrated a then-current legendary narrative, according to mainstream conventions of his time, at a church whose miraculous foundation was the subject of that very tale. There is no reason to speculate that he personally witnessed an alien invasion, and no way that he could have witnessed the original "miraculous" event (if it ever occurred); further, there's no hint anywhere that the original legend recorded either alien contact or the sighting of UFOs.

4. The Crimson Disk

Other examples abound, and many of them are decidedly weird. Of these, the most amusing might easily be the "UFO" identified in Paolo Uccello's *Scene di Vita Eremitica* (*Scenes of Monastic Life*), circa 1460-1465.²⁰ That UFO is, no doubt, a large red hat.

The painting is a montage of various key scenes of monastic life: at the bottom left, the Virgin appears to St. Bernard; above, a group of monks flagellate themselves in front of the Crucifix; at the bottom right, a saint (probably St. Romuald) preaches; while at the top, St. Francis kneels down and receives the Stigmata. In the middle, in a large cave, St. Jerome prays before the crucified Christ. Beside him is his hat.



In 1964, the above images were "discovered" by art student Alexandar Paunovitch in a 16th-century fresco of the crucifixion of Christ, located on the wall of the Visoki Decani Monastery in Kosovo, Yugoslavia. The French magazine *Sputnik* printed them, and they have been featured in many books and web pages ever since as "spaceships with a crew."

While a layperson might be completely mystified by these suggestive images, a Medieval art historian would only need to know that they were located in the upper corners of a depiction of Christ's crucifixion to identify them.

Many crucifixion paintings and mosaics done in the Byzantine style show the same odd "objects" on either side of the cross. They are the Sun and the Moon, often represented with a human face or figure, a common iconographic tradition in the art of the Middle Ages.

James Hall, author of the *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols In Art* writes:

"The sun and moon, one on each side of the cross, are a regular feature of Medieval crucifixion [paintings]. They survived into the early Renaissance but are seldom seen after the 15th century. Their origin is very ancient. It was the custom to represent the Sun and Moon in images of the pagan sun gods of Persia and Greece, a practice that was carried over into Roman times on coins depicting the emperors.

...[T]he sun is [sometimes represented as] simply a man's bust with a radiant halo, the moon [as] a woman's, with the crescent of Diana. Later they are reduced to two plain disks. The moon having a crescent within the circle, may be borne by angels. The sun appears on Christ's right, the moon on his left."

The Sun and Moon are depicted as anything from a flat disk to a hollow comet-tailed ball. The figures within vary from a simple face to elaborate depictions of Apollo and Diana in their chariots driving horses or oxen. The Sun and Moon are also featured on crucifixions painted by Dürer, Crivelli, Raphael, and Bramantino.

For crucifixion paintings featuring the Sun and Moon, and more examples of UFOs in art not covered in this article go to:

www.sprezzatura.it/Arte/Arte_UFO.htm

According to one author on a UFOlogy site, this “is a saucer object, suspended in the air and surmounted by a red domed top. Red in color, the object comes out over the dark background by contrast. The dynamic movement of the flying object is rendered by means of light brush strokes, again red in color, which provide the effect of a sudden turn.”²¹

But the object is plausible as a saucer only if our view is restricted to a small section of the painting. Viewing the entire painting makes clear that the “saucer object” is located inside the cave, on the ground beneath the crucifix, beside the kneeling St. Jerome. It is also clearly quite small.

At this point, most Catholics, and many people with even minimal knowledge of art history should easily recognize this red object as a traditional Catholic cardinal’s hat—red, rounded, broad-brimmed, and trailing tasseled cords.

According to tradition, St. Jerome became an eremite (a hermitic monk) after renouncing his ecclesiastic career. By the time of Uccello, Jerome was a standard subject of religious art, and standard ways of presenting him had evolved. “According to one of the most common iconographical modules, Jerome in the desert flagellates his chest with a stone while kneeling down in front of a Crucifix.”²² In this iconographic scheme (one of three or so main types for this saint), Jerome “is represented as an elderly man with white hair and beard, his cardinal hat close to him...As a penitent, dressed with skins or poor garments.”²³

The small animal Uccello places with the saint is actual-

ly a lion. According to an archetypal legend, Jerome saved and then tamed a wild lion by extracting a thorn from its paw.²⁴ Despite widespread association of a tamed lion with St. Jerome in art and tradition, many web sites promoting UFOs continue to quote an article by Umberto Telarico²⁵ in which the animal is described as a “little dog.”

A biography of St. Jerome from around 1348 “gave artists the following instructions, which became canonical, about the saint’s iconography: ‘*Cum capello, quo nun cardinales utuntur, deposito, et leone mansueto*’ [‘with a hat, the kind used by cardinals, not worn but set aside, and the tamed lion’].” The hat at issue is the cardinal’s hat present in so many representations of Saint Jerome, together with the lion. The fact that the saint was never a cardinal, and never met a wounded lion does not matter. Once representations of Jerome acquired these arbitrary characteristics, they became part of the “facts” to be conveyed to posterity—fortunately by means of wonderful masterpieces.²⁶

Other artists freely employed these guidelines before and after Uccello. In less panoramic paintings, the traditional hat element was generally illustrated at a size sufficient to prevent its misinterpretation as a UFO. In the *Scenes of Monastic Life*, however, it is merely a small identification code for the saint. Although it fails to identify Jerome for modern UFOlogists, Uccello would have assumed his 15th-century audience to be as casually familiar with this vocabulary as we might be with such cultural icons as Lincoln’s beard, “The Force,” or the phrase “D’oh!”

Conclusion

There are important topics on which skeptical empiricists and Christians of various denominations are sometimes divided: did such-and-such a miracle occur as a literal historical event? Is there a place for biblical creationism in public schools? What are the demarcation lines between issues of faith and issues of falsifiable fact?

On the issue of UFOlogical hijacking of Christian artistic masterpieces, however, they have solid common ground. It’s clear that projecting modern concepts of alien visitation onto ancient European canvasses is unwarranted. The examples offered by web and book authors to date have sometimes been superficially striking, but all have proven completely vacuous upon even moderately close examination.

From either a Christian or an art historical perspective, seeing UFOs in ancient paintings represents a distortion of both the true meaning of that art and the intention of its devout creators. Many Christians are likely to find offensive (or at least bemusing) unfounded suggestions that some of history’s greatest artistic expressions of the Christian faith,

in fact, instead record alien visitation. The willfully ignorant confusion of depictions of the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit, or other religious symbolism for aliens themselves is even less likely to sit well with believers.²⁷

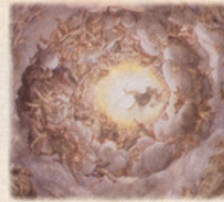
Why do some people believe UFOs are represented in these paintings? The passage of time is partly to blame. Perhaps UFOlogists cannot be faulted for incorrectly translating the visual languages of centuries past. Time transforms languages, a fact all high school English students realize when they find they need to translate archaic words and expressions in order to understand Shakespeare. There is even a core of commendable curiosity, an undisciplined sort of scientific inquiry, behind some of these projects.

Despite this, however, it is fair to conclude that UFOlogists have been far too quick to draw conclusions from their misunderstandings of odd details in old paintings. Their failure to seek alternative explanations for UFO-like objects has led them to exhibit sloppy thinking, to diminish great works of historical piety, and to be distracted from more promising candidates (if there are any) when seeking proof of alien visitation. ▼

References

1. Although belief in alien visitation fluctuates, about 1/3 of American adults agree that some UFOs contain extraterrestrial beings. Using the 2001 figures from the National Science Foundation Surveys of Public Understanding of Science and Technology, in which 29% of American adults agreed that UFOs represent an alien presence, and assuming that the U.S. has a population of about 293 million people, we can estimate that 85 million Americans believe—a number more than four times greater than the total population of Australia. While 29% of Americans believe in UFOs, incidentally, according to other polling data “just 9% know what a molecule is.” For more on U.S. belief in the paranormal see Susan Carol Losh et al., “What Does Education Really Do? Educational Dimensions and Pseudoscience Support in the American General Public, 1979-2001.” *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 27, No. 5, September/October 2003. Amherst, NY. For thoughts on science illiteracy, see the source for the above quote about molecules: Norman Augustine, “What We Don’t Know Does Hurt Us. How Scientific Illiteracy Hobbles Society.” *Science*, Vol. 279, No. 5357, Issue of 13 Mar 1998, pp.1640-1641.
2. See, for example, S. Boncompagni, *Clypeus* #29, 1970; D. Bedini, *Notiziario UFO* #81, 1979; and, Mass, the Newspaper of the Mysteries #107, 1980. (All Italian language sources.)
3. Here are a few typical examples, with Italian language sites in italics. Where quotes from these or other Italian sources are used elsewhere in this article, they have been translated, edited for English comprehension, and corrected for typesetting. <http://www.ufoartwork.com/>; <http://www.crystalinks.com/ufohistory.html>; <http://www.geocities.com/jilaens/renai.htm>; <http://www.soulcounseling.com/jul2001.html>; <http://www.clydelewis.com/dis/sungods/sungods.html>; <http://www.etcontact.net/AncientAstronauts.htm>; http://www.ufoarea.com/gallery_aas.html; <http://www.marsearthconnection.com/ancientart.html>; <http://www.bibleufo.com/anapaint1.htm>; <http://www.edicolaweb.net/edic042a.htm>; http://www.edicolaweb.net/nonsoloufo/arte_i.htm; <http://digilander.libero.it/mysterica/Ufocrivelli.htm>
4. There are, however, enough similarities between some abduction accounts and certain forms of ‘demonic’ harassment as subjective, experiential events to merit investigation into the possibility that similar brain activities are responsible for some subset of both. Victims of ‘aliens’ and ‘demons’ clearly describe different sorts of creatures (effectively ruling out the possibility that both sorts of event were caused by the same, objectively existing alien species), but often describe similar symptoms of paralysis, a weight on their chest, and so on. See, for example, Andrew D. Reisner, “A Psychological Case Study of ‘Demon’ and ‘Alien’ Visitation,” *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 25, No. 2, March/April 2001, Amherst, NY.
5. An amusing expression of the power of an aristocratic patron took place in Florence in 1494. Piero de’ Medici, inspired by a heavy snowfall, called for the sculptor Michelangelo to come at once and execute a commission. This commission was a snowman. Michelangelo, of course, did what he was told. (Nathaniel Harris, 1981. *The Art of Michelangelo*, Optimum Books, Twickenham, England, 1987.)
6. http://www.edicolaweb.net/ufo_a04g.htm (English translation by Diego Cuoghi; translated text edited for English comprehension by Daniel Loxton.)
7. <http://digilander.libero.it/mysterica/Ufocrivelli.htm> (English translation by Diego Cuoghi; translated text edited for English comprehension by Daniel Loxton.)
8. Mark 1:10 (Revised Standard Version). Matthew 3:16 also describes the Spirit in this scene as “descending like a dove, and alighting on” Jesus. Luke 3:21 is still more literal, insisting that the “Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove.” Finally, John 1:32 tells us that the Baptist “saw the Spirit descend as a dove...”
9. The Museum tag identifies the artist as “Jacopo del Sellaio,” but the catalog entry under No. 00292620 asserts that the painting is best attributed to Sebastiano Mainardi (1450-1513), member of the clique of Ghirlandaio that worked in Florence at the end of the 1400s, but also notes that elements of this painting (especially in the figure of the Madonna) bear remarkable resemblances to elements of works by Lorenzo di Credi.
10. Daniele Bedini, *Notiziario UFO* #7 (Jul-Aug 1996).
11. The archaic detail of the three stars symbolizing the threefold virginity of Mary, and the rendering of the Angel not as an anthropomorphic character, but as a “cloud of light,” all suggest that the painter was (willingly or unwillingly) following the teachings of Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican monk who preached a return to tradition and purity in the arts as well as in city life. The catalogue entry of the Palazzo Vecchio Museum for this painting notes that it shares “striking similarities” with the works of Lorenzo di Credi. And it may be worthy of note that Lorenzo di Credi was one of the most devout among the followers of Savonarola, attending the burning of every nude he ever drew, before finally becoming a monk himself.
12. Luke 2:10, Revised Standard Version.
13. *Apocryphal Gospels* edited by Marcello Craveri, Torino, 1969, p. 21. Italian edition.
14. Marco Bussagli, *History of Angels*. Rusconi, 1991.
15. Marco Bussagli, catalogue *Wings of God*.
16. See, for example, S. Boncompagni, *Clypeus* #29, 1970; D. Bedini, *Notiziario UFO* #81, 1979; and, Mass, the Newspaper of the Mysteries #107, 1980.
17. R. Pinotti, <http://www.notizieufo.com>
18. Andrea Lonardo. 2000. *The Jubileum Places in Rome*. San Paolo Publishing. (Automatic translation by Altavista-Babelfish; translated text edited for English comprehension by Daniel Loxton.)
19. Juno was the Roman counterpart to the Greek goddess Hera. Her husband was Jupiter, the Roman version of the supreme Greek god Zeus.
20. *Scenes of Monastic Life (Scene di Vita Eremitica)*, also known as *La Tebaide*. (Now at the Gallerie Dell’Accademia, Firenze.)
21. <http://www.edicolaweb.net/edic042a.htm> (English translation by Diego Cuoghi; translated text edited for English comprehension by Daniel Loxton.)
22. <http://www.cini.it/palazzocini/testi/ferraro/gero.html> (English translation by Diego Cuoghi; translated text edited for English comprehension by Daniel Loxton.) No longer posted.
23. http://www.thanatos.it/cultura/personaggi/san_girolamo.htm (English translation by Diego Cuoghi; translated text edited for English comprehension by Daniel Loxton.) No longer posted.
24. The lion is also the symbol of evangelist St. Mark (patron saint of Venice), and thus of the Republic of Venice. St. Jerome was said to have been born in Dalmatia, a territory of Venice. Uccello himself had important Venetian patrons.
25. *Notiziario UFO* #8 (1996).
26. From an article in FMR (the art magazine edited by Franco Maria Ricci), by Erminio Caprotti. Here, Caprotti quotes Andrea from Bologna about the iconography of Saint Jerome. FMR #94, September 1992. (English translation by Diego Cuoghi; translated text edited for English comprehension by Daniel Loxton.)
27. Many UFOlogical speculations about these paintings actually go deeper than those dealt with in this article: some believe that the Bible itself records either a few encounters with aliens or a vast history of such contacts. From this perspective, presumably, biblical miracles would be technological actions, visible heavenly phenomena would be spacecraft in flight, and prophetic or messianic messages would come from other literal extra-solar worlds. Websites flirting with these arguments have an unlikely, unfalsifiable, and more or less bulletproof answer to skeptics who point out that these paintings were meant to depict miraculous biblical events: they simply claim that those events really were spacecraft sightings by the biblical authors, and that later artworks of these scenes are therefore UFO paintings after all.

1. THE ADORATION OF THE EXTRATERRESTRIALS



The heavenly vortex and holy dove are standard devices found in many annunciation scenes.



2. THE SHEPHERD'S VISION



Nativity paintings commonly include this standard vignette of a shepherd beholding a radiant angelic cloud.



3. UNIDENTIFIED FLUFFY OBJECTS



Similar disk-like clouds routinely serve as platforms for angels or other holy presences in religious paintings of this period.

4. THE CRIMSON DISK



Saint Jerome as he is typically represented by other artists: a kneeling penitent with a cardinal's hat on the ground beside him.

