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*Last Judgment Iconography in the Carpathians.*

John-Paul Himka.

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One of the most inspiring themes for Christian artists is the last judgment. Capturing the imaginations of theologians, laity, and artists alike, the last judgment has played a crucial role in shaping not only religious doctrine but also everyday spirituality. Christian conceptions of the event are grounded in the apocalyptic imagery of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, works that promise the end of days to be a time of extreme chaos and complete redemption. As an important chapter in the Christian story, many places of worship include a depiction of the end of times, detailing the punishment of the damned and the glory of the saved. John-Paul Himka's *Last Judgment Iconography in the Carpathians* surveys the images depicting the last judgment within the Carpathian region, reflecting the history and culture of those who commissioned them, his project lasting for ten years.

Written in a straightforward manner, the book offers a fascinating glimpse into the culture and spirituality of the denizens. Through a close examination of more than one hundred icons painted on various mediums, John-Paul Himka explores the history of Carpathian last judgment iconography from the late mediaeval period to the nineteenth century. Through his analysis, Himka attempts to reconstruct not only the cultures and societies that created these religious works of art, but also the lives of patrons. Unlike their Byzantine counterparts, Carpathian patrons were mostly peasants and impoverished monks, and the iconography reflects their understanding of the end of times. Also unlike Byzantine iconography, which relies on colour symbolism, conventional poses, and personal attributes, the changes in Carpathian icons indicates a change in society, and is highly reflective of the time, influences, and status in which the art was produced.

Divided into five chapters and four appendices, the book traces the history of the iconographies from the monastic tradition to the height of its popularity to its steady decline. Chapter One, "Introduction", describes the nature of the project, the author's methodology of comparing the imagery and modes, and gives a brief history into the study of iconography within the region. Chapter Two, aptly named "Origins", takes a look at the origin of the last judgment iconography in the Carpathians beginning from the fifteenth century. From there, Himka details the various influences and characteristics of the icons.

“Further Elaboration”, the following chapter, plots the various forms of practices, theorises about the artists, and shows the progression from simple to more complex iconographies. The fourth chapter, “Disintegration”, describes the latter forms of iconography produced in the final centuries, as well as the evolution of linden boards into canvas as medium, and details the change of practice in murals. The work then concludes with the author’s personal insights into his study.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of the book is that each chapter begins with a brief abstract. Each chapter is divided into clearly defined sections that thoroughly explain the arguments. Also included are comprehensive summaries, reviewing the finer points that may have escaped the reader’s notice. These thoughtful considerations, along with the inclusion of appropriate images, make the book a more enjoyable and more accessible read. John-Paul Himka openly admits that he is not an art historian, yet this lack of specialization does not detract from the depth and expertise of the work. Instead of dissecting motifs and artistic styles or conducting colour analysis - all of which one would find in an art history book - Himka provides a different way at looking at cultures through the changes in iconographical imagery and traditions. This gives his manuscript a much more personal approach to the events and actors in history. The book is less of a narrative and more of a snapshot of an art form that ignores borders and national conventions. It neatly encapsulates a unique art form and the spirituality it represented.

If there is any fault in the text, it lies in the author’s categorisation of the term Carpathians. Geographically, the Carpathians is understood as the areas that encompass the Carpathian Mountains, including parts of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia. John-Paul Himka, however, mostly focuses on icons produced in the Northern Carpathians. Granted, the Carpathian Mountains and its basin is historically a rich melting pot of ethnicities, religions, and traditions, often considered *the* frontier between the East and the West. It is understandable that not all ethnicities could be properly represented in the study, although I would have liked to see more of a cross section representation of the icon producing cultures that inhabit the region along with a comparative analysis. This, I believe, would be much more representative of the Carpathians. While the title has led me to believe that his survey would include *all* of the Carpathians, John-Paul Himka nonetheless manages to provide a glimpse into various regions and cultures that occupied the Carpathians.

Appealing not only to art historians and iconographers but also to all art lovers and history enthusiasts, particularly students of Eastern European history, *Last Judgment Iconography in the Carpathians* is a useful tool for religious scholars specialising in sacred art, offering a unique look into the lives and religiosity of everyday people.

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