

## FIGURES IN THE SKY



Flemish Altarpiece 16<sup>th</sup> Century

In a pre-modern, pre-scientific age of Christian Religious belief, when people accepted the literal existence of Angels, it was possible for artists to imagine them and include them flying in the skies of their altarpieces. Nowadays, in a more sceptical scientific age we might think that artists have lost the opportunity to represent human flight, unaided by mechanical devices. That the idea of flying persists in the imagination, and in dreams, is demonstrated by artists from different traditions from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



This Angel in an Islamic Mughal miniature, dates from 16th century



Jacob Peter Gowy,  
*The Flight of Icarus* 1635-37



Jan Gossaert,  
*The adoration of the Kings*  
1510-15



*Lucifer* (the morning star) represented as a winged child pouring light from a jar. Engraving by G. H. Frezza, 1704



17th-century relief with a Cretan labyrinth bottom right

The painting of ceilings, from the Renaissance on, have given artists the opportunity to paint figures in the sky, whether imagining the Ascension of the Virgin or the apotheosis of a king.

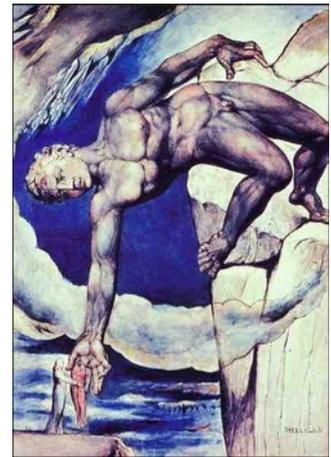
Here we see *The Harmony Between Religion and Science*, a ceiling fresco of the Marble Hall at Seitenstetten Abbey (Lower Austria) by Paul Troger, 1735



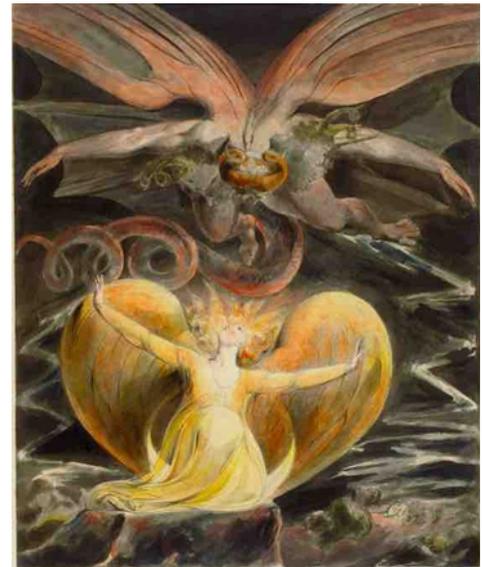


**The Sun, or The Fall of Icarus** by Merry-Joseph **Blondel**, in the Rotunda of Apollo at the Louvre 1819

Poet, painter and printmaker **William Blake** developed a unique method of printing to produce his illustrated books of poems. He illustrated Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and embarked on illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy* but died before completion, leaving us with only a number of watercolour studies. As a visionary artist it was natural for him to portray figures flying, whirling around and falling through space.



**Blake, The Lovers' Whirlwind** illustrates Hell in *Canto V of Dante's Inferno* 1826-27



**Blake, The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in the Sun** 1805-10



**Gustave Doré's** illustration for *Milton's Paradise Lost*. Satan on his way to bring about the fall of man 1866



**Gustave Moreau, The Chimera** 1876



**Gustave Moreau The Chimera** c 1884

**Doré, 12 Book III** – Towards the coast of Earth beneath, down from the Ecliptic, sped with hoped success, throws his steep flight in many an aerie wheel.

French artist Doré is best known for his illustrations: of *Paradise Lost*, a classic of English literature, and of London scenes. Moreau was a Symbolist artist. His richly coloured fantasies influenced younger artists such as Matisse and Rouault, who were among his many students, and Bonnard.



Winged putti frolic with the goddess and fly up like a pink cherubic cloud in this neo-classical fantasy by the French academic artist **Bouguereau**.

Putti, in the ancient classical world of art, were winged infants that were believed to influence human lives. In Renaissance art, the form of the putto was derived in various ways including the Greek Eros or Roman Amor/Cupid, the god of love and companion of Aphrodite or Venus; the Roman, genius, a type of guardian spirit; or sometimes the Greek, daemon, a type of messenger spirit, being halfway between the realms of the human and the divine. Originally limited to profane passions in symbolism, the putto came to represent the sacred cherub (plural cherubim), and in Baroque art the putto came to represent the omnipresence of God. Putti have all but disappeared from art, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, lingering on only in the art of conservative Neo-Classical artists.

**William-Adolphe Bouguereau,**  
*Birth of Venus* 1879

**Rodin** adapted and reused his fragmented forms in many different situations. In this partial figure he has created an almost abstract form evocative of movement and flight.

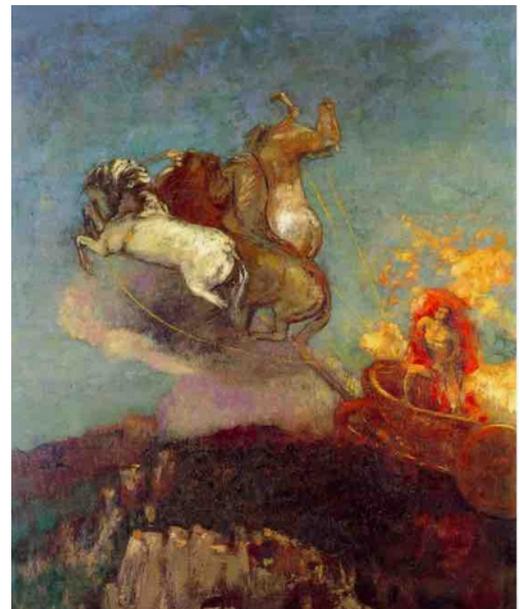


**Rodin, Large Flying Figure** 1891



**Stanislaw Wyspianski, Phosphoros, Hesperos, Helios** 1897

After the impressionists there was a reaction against the painting of mere appearances of the visible world, and a renewed interest in works of the imagination. **Odilon Redon's** mysterious and evocative pictures represent an exploration of his internal feelings and psyche. He himself wanted to place "the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible" He had a keen interest in mythology and in Hindu and Buddhist religion and culture.



**Odilon Redon, Apollo's Chariot** 1909



Klimpt, *Medicine* 1899-1907



Klimpt, *Philosophy* 1899-1907

**Gustave Klimt** was a founding member and president of the Vienna Secession. In 1894, he was commissioned to decorate the ceiling of the Great Hall of the University of Vienna. His three paintings, *Philosophy*, *Medicine* and *Jurisprudence* were criticized for their radical themes and material. He had transformed traditional allegory and symbolism into a new language that was more overtly sexual and hence more disturbing to some. The public outcry came from all quarters—political, aesthetic and religious. As a result, the paintings were not displayed on the ceiling of the Great Hall.

All three paintings were destroyed when retreating German forces burned Schloss Immendorf in May 1945



Matisse, *The Dance* (first version) 1909

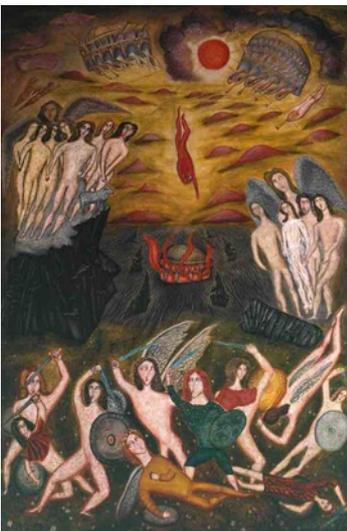
As a student of Moreau **Henri Matisse** had inherited a freedom of form, a playful imagination and a love of bold colour.

Although not strictly flying figures his dancers have a lightness and springing bounce which carries them above the rudimentary indication of the earth-bound green into a boundless sky.

**Stanley Spencer** was an English painter who, although untouched by 'modernism', brought to his art a highly individual and visionary evocation of his religious temperament and Biblical stories that is nevertheless of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

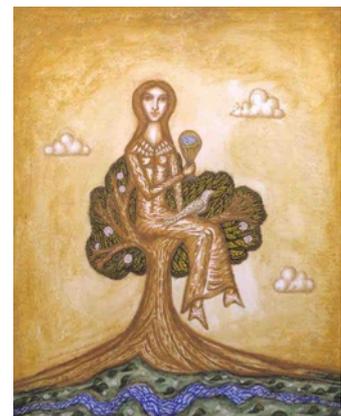


Stanley Spencer, *Angels of the Apocalypse* 1948



Collins, *The Fall of Lucifer* 1933

Another visionary British artist was **Cecil Collins**. (1908-89). In a direct line from William Blake he was one of the few twentieth century artists to continue to paint angels. He is also renowned for his paintings of fools.



Collins, *The Artist's Wife Seated in a Tree* 1976



Chagall, *The Birthday* 1915

Many of his paintings show people, sometimes himself and his wife Bella, floating through the air in a joyous embrace of life. This painting celebrates himself and Bella with his native Vitebsk in the background. He saw his work as "not the dream of one people but of all humanity".



Chagall, *Over the Town* 1918



Chagall, *Song of Songs IV* 1958



Chagall, *Les Maries Dans le ciel de Paris* 1970

Russian artist **Marc Chagall** lived most of his life in France. Living in Paris as a young man he was at the heart of the new ideas: Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism and the bright colours introduced by the Fauves. He is associated with no group but absorbed them all, creating his own very personal style. He is one of the most original and distinctive painters in the whole of Western Art.



Chagall, *The Promenade* 1918



Chagall, *Blue Circus* 1950

Picasso remarked in the 1950s, "When Matisse dies, Chagall will be the only painter left who understands what colour really is".

He also took Biblical stories for the subject of many of his paintings.



Chagall, *Jacob's Dream* 1963

One of Chagall's major contributions to art has been his work with stained glass. This medium allowed him further to express his desire to create intense and fresh colours and had the added benefit of natural light and refraction interacting and constantly changing. In 1964 he created a stained-glass window, entitled *Peace for the United Nations* in honour of Dag Hammerskjöld, the UN's second secretary general who was killed in an airplane crash in Africa in 1961. The window is about 4.6 m wide and 3.7 m high and contains symbols of peace and love along with musical symbols.



*Epstein, St Michael's Victory over the Devil 1958*

**Jacob Epstein** was commissioned to make this sculpture of Saint Michael for the new cathedral in Coventry. The sculpture symbolises the victory of good over evil, and depicts a winged angel with spear, standing with arms and legs spread above the bound figure of the horned devil lying supine. The larger than life statue stands some 7.6 m high, with the angel's wings spreading 7.0 m.

**Chagall, *Peace* 1964**

Superman, the first of the super heroes, created in 1938 on the eve of the Second World War, may be seen as a popular reincarnation of St Michael; flying through the air to defeat evil wherever it occurs.



American artist **Philip Pearlstein** is noted for his realistic paintings of nudes. In his early career he painted in an Abstract Expressionist style. Here he is uniting this with the popular super hero, anticipating the subject matter of Pop Art. It also references Michaelangelo's depiction of *God creating the Sun, Moon and the Planets* in the Sistine Chapel Ceiling.

**Pearlstein, *Superman* 1952**

*Lord Visnu flying on Garuda*



Modern street art, showing Icaria island and falling Icarus, near the village of Evidilos in Icaria, Greece.

**Haring, *Angel Baby Icon* 1990**

