

Green Wonder

A meteorite strikes Alsace on November 7, 1492, setting a forest ablaze.

Columbus, moored on the north coast of Cuba, believes he is in Japan, and intends to depart that very day in search of China, the mainland. But the wind prevents him.

Modernity begins with a bang, a message born between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, War and Power, from that disk of debris ringing the sun, awakening a new age of wonders and horrors.

Albrecht Dürer, heaven's witness, paints the streak of light across the sky on the back of his portrait of St. Jerome.

At times, the thin gauze separating earth and sky wears threadbare, and the alien messages inscribed beyond speak more urgently.

While the seafaring kingdoms began the plunder of a new world, a new order emerged in Europe's interior. A false religion would be toppled, and the true installed, read the pamphlets inked at the first printing houses of Augsburg, Nuremberg, and Leipzig.

Why, in times of crisis on earth, do we look to the sky for signs? Of hope or apocalypse? The sky: space of science, superstition, and the spiritual?

Unlike the stars, fixed forever to the dome of the sky, turning together, the planets are animate, each with its own path among the stars: an illusion of orbit, but a fact on earth.

Astronomy, old and new, deciphered the secret of their movements. Astrology confirmed their influence on life below.

Even after Rome's fall, Rome's gods lived on in astrology's pantheon.

Each planet was imbued with certain powers, linked to terrestrial life. Saturn, god of agriculture and the peasant; god of the earth and time and melancholy. Jupiter, the supreme authority of the Church. Mars, military might.

The meeting of these planets in the night sky intensified their effects, and in 1524, a long-anticipated conjunction would occur. Jupiter and Saturn would meet, and all known planets would fit within the space of an outstretched hand. Worse still, this event would occur under the watery sign of Pisces, foreboding calamitous floods.

Within the frontispiece of *Prognosticatio*, by the astrologer Johann Carion, a comet brightens the sky, preceding a catastrophic deluge. Storms bring the towers of a city tumbling to the ground. A violent scene unfolds below. A knight in armor grips the head of the pope in his left hand and raises a sword in his right. An armed peasant glances sideways at a cardinal who throws up his arms in fright, sorrow, or supplication. The bejeweled emperor hides his face in disgust or fear. This image fascinated the art historian Aby Warburg. It gives personhood to the impending celestial

conjunction: “Sol is the emperor, Jupiter the pope, Mars the nobility; and the man with the sword is an ill-characterized Saturn, the peasant.”

In 1524, the floods did not arrive. But the predicted social upheaval did. At harvest time, peasants across central Europe rose up against their feudal lords in a bloody Saturnalia.

In May of 1525, Martin Luther, dismayed by the violence and the threat to earthly order, called for the peasants to be slaughtered like mad dogs.

By month's end, Thomas Müntzer, the spiritual leader of the uprising, was beheaded and knights on horseback had crushed the bands of peasants and townspeople.

In early June, Dürer wakes from a vivid dream which he records in billowy watercolor and hasty script. He sees great columns of rain crash to earth across a vast and barren landscape instantly inundated amidst the roar of wind.

Why, in times of crisis on earth, do we look to the sky for signs? Of hope or apocalypse?

In early 1967, a course offering appears on bulletin boards across MIT: “In June 1968, the asteroid Icarus, a dark boulder a mile or so in diameter, will pass by earth at a relative velocity of about 100,000 fps and a distance of 4 million miles. The project to be handled by the Advanced Space Systems Engineering students this term assumes that Icarus will, in fact, collide with the earth.”

The U.S.A., U.S.S.R. and U.K. have just signed a treaty banning weapons in outer space. But at MIT, the students decide a nuclear warhead is the only defense against their celestial adversary.

Six Saturn rockets would lift from the Florida coast, each equipped with a 100-megaton hydrogen bomb. The mission is named Project Icarus.

In April, Martin Luther King Jr., appalled by the violence in Vietnam and at home, called for a new order, a “revolution of values” that rejects “The privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments.” “What do the peasants think,” King asks his nation, “As we ally ourselves with the landlords?”

In May, the MIT students announce their plan. *Time* magazine covers the proposal as: “Avoiding an Asteroid,” printing it alongside an old engraving of wing-shorn Icarus from myth tumbling into the sea.

In June, the Bauhaus-reared artist György Kepes announces the formation of a new arts center at MIT. The German artist Otto Piene is among the first Fellows. He had been an anti-aircraft gunner in WWII, aiming at Allied planes. “The blue sky,” he wrote, “had been a symbol of terror in the aerial war.” Bombs fell on clear days. But now, he dreams of an aerial art. “We want to exhibit in the sky...to enter new space peacefully...not as slaves of war technology.”

1968, the year of Icarus. The Mai Lai massacre: 504 Vietnamese civilians are murdered by U.S. troops in three hours. Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated. Across the United States, Black people rise up in mourning and outrage against the injustice of his murder. In France, student protests, brutally suppressed, inspire a general strike of 10 million workers.

At the strike's zenith in May, Otto Piene, across the Atlantic, launches his first work of Sky Art. An arching inflatable sculpture arose in the field next to the auditorium at MIT where Project Icarus had been presented exactly one year prior.

On June 14th, 1968, Icarus misses the earth.

The movement against the war in Vietnam reaches MIT. Students demand an end to military research. Otto Piene launches inflatables spray-painted with "Peace," "Pace," "Pax" at a gathering of one hundred thousand. Science for the People confronts Charles Stark Draper, Project Icarus's liaison to the space program, with the slogan "Rockets in Space, Slums on Earth."

Why, in times of crisis on earth, do we look to the sky for signs? The sky, now, a space for both art and war? What signs do we affix there? And what threats?

A new wonder, both aerial and earthly, is neither natural nor divine. A Green Wonder, the color of the living earth, yet suspended like the stars.

Linking earthly plenitude and heavenly perfection, the seer Hildegard of Bingen sang: "O noblest green viridity, you're rooted in the sun, and in the clear bright calm you shine within a wheel no earthly excellence can comprehend."

Is a drone a weapon, a tool, or a toy? Does a missile aim to deflect or destroy? Scientists believe meteorites brought life-giving water to the early earth: A flood, like Dürer's dream, from outer space.

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