

She has a halo

For centuries, artists have evoked shimmering circles of light above saintly figures to dignify the outstanding and the divine. The National Gallery's Caroline Campbell takes a closer look at the most dazzling depictions of haloes in great paintings

AS anyone who has prepared for or performed in a Nativity play knows, making a halo is a troublesome business. I have hazy recollections of tinsel falling off a wire coat hanger, roughly shaped into a circlet that sat uncomfortably around my head. My own children probably have equally unflattering memories of the haloes I attempted to create for them.

The difficulty of making a human child into an angel, however briefly, is easy when compared with the magical combination of circumstance and chance that produces haloes in the natural world. In this context, a halo is an optical effect created by the refraction of light through various weather effects, such as dew drops, mist and clouds. Blink, and you'll have missed it. A natural halo is so special and so rare that we all remember where and when we've been fortunate enough to see one.

All the more reason, then, for artists through the centuries to have evoked these flukes of Nature in their work to dignify the outstanding and the divine. From Pharaonic Egypt, Attic Greece and Buddhist Asia, to Renaissance Europe and Industrial Britain, artists of many faiths have used haloes as a means of identifying something that is part of our world, but, at the same time, ineffable and beyond mere human understanding.

The formal origins of the halo as an artistic idea probably lie in Ancient Egypt, where solar discs were used as part of the headdress of the sun god, Ra. Yet the iconography of the sun god crowned with rays of light apparently began in Greece during the 5th century BC. One of the earliest surviving examples of this imagery appears on a ceramic red-figure vase now in the British Museum.

Right: The Virgin and Child with Saints Dominic and Aurea, 1312–15, by Duccio.

Facing page: The Resurrection of Christ, from the Isenheim Altarpiece, about 1512–16, by Grünewald

The vase in question was made in Attica, but excavated in Puglia, southern Italy, and shows in the round the rising of the sun and the setting of the moon. The sun god Helios, riding his chariot from east to west through the sky, is identified by a circle around his head. From this, rays shoot out across the black surface of the vase. Here, the god is light, expelling darkness and replacing it with a dazzling brightness.

‘The idea of a halo was so revolutionary and compelling that it’s not surprising it spread’

This idea was so revolutionary, compelling and effective that it's not surprising it spread. By the time of Christ's birth, Helios's radiating halo was also being used to represent the divinity of some Greco-Roman Emperors. In east and central Asia, a simpler circular ring of light around the Buddha's head came to convey his awakening to knowledge and wisdom. In each of these cases, the circumstances were different, but the need to dignify a figure, and the artistic means by which this was done, were essentially the same.

Initially, Christians were concerned about using a symbol associated with paganism to represent Christ's unique divinity. Haloes, after all, are never mentioned in the Bible—give or take the light that illuminated Moses's face when he came into God's presence and that which surrounded Christ in the Book of Revelations. The difficulty, however, of finding another powerful visual shorthand to convey to the illiterate the message that God is light—and hence enlightenment—meant that these scruples were soon banished.

In medieval and Renaissance Europe, where most painters spent the largest part of their working lives producing pictures of Christian subjects, the halo became a commonplace. It also became increasingly varied. Christ's halo, for example, often incorporated a cross, a symbol that prefigured the Crucifixion. There were triangular haloes for images of God in reference to the Trinity and even polygonal and square ones as well.

Artists showed their skill in illusionism and their craft through the beauty and complexity of the haloes they depicted. Nowhere was this more true than 14th-century Siena. Before the Black Death, this was one of the most prosperous and influential cities in Europe. Situated on one of the key travel routes (the Via Francigena) between northern and southern Europe, Siena was celebrated for its banks and its craftsmen's ability to work in gold. Small wonder, therefore, that the city's painters were masters of the halo.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the work of Siena's leading painter, Duccio. In his *The*

Virgin and Child with Saints Dominic and Aurea—a small portable altarpiece made for a cardinal living in France—the haloes are made with strikingly different techniques. Leaves, tendrils, flowers, curling swirls of gold, diamonds and fine concentric rings are hatched, cross-hatched, incised or punched into the gold-leaf background. As a result, the painting ➤





looks different from every angle. It shimmers and glistens with gold—an effect exaggerated in the candlelit interior of a chapel—and the sacred figures seem to move and become alive before the viewer's eyes.

The tools used in Siena to produce such dazzling effects were exported and copied elsewhere, even by the town's greatest rivals, the artists in the neighbouring city of Florence. By the following century, such conventions had become widespread and a new generation of inventive artists, perhaps bored with endlessly producing golden haloes, played with these effects in different ways.

‘With its bright halo, it is a symbol of optimism, of triumph over adversity and of perseverance’

Look at the *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen* by a follower of the Belgian painter Robert Campin. Mary is breastfeeding her child in a private room. So far, so normal. However, examine the woven firescreen that protects her from the extreme heat of the fire. It's not a coincidence that its circular shape and decoration with willow wands recalls the intricate patterning of haloes such as Duccio's. This is completely different, however. The strikingly natural halo, as well as the Virgin's relatively informal demeanour and dress, shows that this queen's place isn't in Heaven, but among us.



Left: *The Light of the World*, St Paul's Cathedral. Above: *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*

In *The Resurrection of Christ*, the Franco-German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald tries an even more revolutionary take on the halo. For me, it's the most memorable part of his dazzling Isenheim Altarpiece, in Colmar in the corner of Alsace. In the Resurrection panel, Grünewald shows Christ not striding from His tomb, but rising out of it. His head seems to be a source of brilliant light that illuminates the whole night-time scene. The Roman soldiers lie as if dead. It's as if all the life has been knocked out of them by the sheer energy and light that Christ exudes.

This particular midwinter, when we are starved of so much, including light, the gleaming halo takes on a peculiar resonance. The painting that comes most unprompted to my mind is one I've known in one form or other for most of my life—illustrated in numerous Bibles and tracts, hung on the walls of homes—and which I can see not far from my house, in the Middlesex Chapel of St Paul's Cathedral (there is a magnificent version in the chapel at Keble College, Oxford, and another smaller one in Manchester Art Gallery).

Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* is sometimes vilified by art historians, but, by any account, it's a remarkable work. Completed in 1904, when the artist was blind and infirm, 50 years after he'd first painted the subject, it made a worldwide sensation, touring to three continents, which made it one of the most travelled works of art in history. Hunt shows Christ knocking on a door choked with weeds, asking permission to enter.

The door represents both the human soul and Christ Himself, as the route to Heaven. A lantern, representing the light of conscience, guides Christ's way, but a mystical light also emanates from His head. For Hunt, this denoted salvation, which could only come from the soul's embrace of Christ and His message. For this reason, the painting, with its bright halo, is also a symbol of optimism, of triumph over adversity and of perseverance. This Christmastide, it seems like a salient message for us all.

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