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Diptych with scenes of the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Last Judgement

RISD Museum

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I'm Robert Brinkerhoff. I'm head of the Illustration department. I'm an illustrator and I've been at RISD about 15 years.

This is a really beautiful ivory diptych; very delicately carved. One of the most unusual things about it perhaps in the contemporary sense is that even though it's a narrative and it's a sequential narrative, the reading starts from the bottom left, then moves to the right, and then takes the upper two registers left to right. So rather than reading top to bottom left to right, the whole piece reads bottom to top left to right.

The diptych traces the narrative of the intertwined lives of Christ and his mother the Blessed Mother, from the Annunciation in the lower left where the angel comes in and tells Mary she's about to conceive the Christ child, and then up to the upper right the Last Judgment with Christ in Heaven.

The space is really ingeniously divided.

It's an amazing combination of defined registers, meaning separate portions and seamless simultaneity. Events can seem to happen all at once or in more distinct chunks of time and space, depending on how you look at it.

At the risk of I think making a kind of bold comparison, it might help to understand this work as one using a very familiar contemporary format of sequential register. You see that format of structuring narratives in vehicles such as comics and graphic novels where you have a series of rectangles or visual fields, one following the next in sequence to tell a story. In this case however, the artist has used a very clever architectural device of the Gothic arch to split each quadrant of the carving into two. It's really a very ingenious device to achieve flow and continuity, and at the same time separate each part of the story.

This is illustration. It tells a story with a message and it does that by guiding us sequentially through the pictorial subject matter, and towards some communicative purposeful end. It's worth nothing that illustration or purposeful art existed long before art for art's sake, so I feel, especially as an illustrator and I think everyone in my department would, a terrific sense of connection to work like that which is really deeply embedded in a narrative tradition and is a terrific example for our students to model their own work on.

I'm Sheila Bonde, professor of art and architecture and professor of archaeology at Brown University. I'm going to talk about the ivory diptych of the 13th and early 14th centuries. This object is one that you really have to get close to, and indeed it was intended for close viewing. It was created along with other ivories of the period for a certainly wealthy patron, but created for private, devotional purposes.

Now, there are many ways to read this narrative. It isn't a simple comic strip.

Chronologically, it begins at the lower left corner with the Annunciation, which is shown to us with an angel swooping in from stage left to confront Mary who's quite surprised.

This moment of the Annunciation literally announces to us and to the devotional patron that the story has begun, and that Mary is about to bear not just a child, but a child who is the son of God.

This moment occurs in the next scene with Mary lying on a bed; her head propped a little awkwardly on a pillow, but that pillow is tilted up as on a stage with the Christ child lying next to her, again, tilted forward so that we can see it. Beneath, a couple of cows beneath remind us that this luxurious Gothic bed is in fact in narrative terms found in the stables where Christ was born.

The next frame to the right-hand side continues the story in remarkable fashion. Our eye is led to the scene by the charming little noses of horses which are held in a stable. Those horses carried the three Magi – the Kings – who come kneel and offer their gifts to a Christ child, now grown into childhood, who stands on the knee of his mother, crowned and sitting in front of him.

But, in between the Magi and the horses is a very unusual aspect which became popular in France of the late 13th century; that of showing the groom who took care of the horses in the stables. Now, why include such a figure in this elaborate scene? I think it's yet another way of introducing human interest. How do people feel with this scene? How should we in our private devotions feel about this scene? So it isn't just a royal scene of kings coming to adore the Christ child; there's a human aspect, as well.

Up above on the top left we see the end result of Christ's life. Why does he come down to Earth? Well, he's come to be a sacrifice, and we see the crucifixion scene with his disciples and apostles mourning on either side.

But that moment of grief is superseded with Christ's resurrection which is snuggled right next to this scene in the same register, with Mary crowning Christ and the two of them ruling together in heaven.

The last scene on the right-hand register draws us into heaven. This is divided into two halves with a tiny little register down below in which people are being called at the Last Judgment.

But up above, Christ – now the judge – is enthroned in front of us with donors like us kneeling to either side. An angel carrying the cross reminds us of the history of his life, and other angels trumpet the sound or the call to the Last Judgment.

Today, looking at this object I am most struck by its similarity to a small laptop or a Kindle. These objects today transport us, provide a wealth of images, and we can change them with a swipe of our finger. In the Middle Ages, engagement with objects was in some ways more static, but it reminds us that they, too, had imaginations which were peaked by iconography, stories, and human interest. I think in very similar ways, this object fulfilled the kinds of transportational aspects that Kindles and computers do for us today.