

SACRED LANDSCAPES

NATURE IN RENAISSANCE MANUSCRIPTS

The environmental concerns of the postindustrial world to preserve nature's verdancy are not so distant from the attitudes of artists, intellectuals, and pious members of society in Renaissance Europe. Both within the walls of the city and in the countryside beyond, nature provided inspiration and guidance for contemplation of the divine, even during a period characterized by scholarly ambitions and advances in the natural sciences. Elements of nature—including rocks, trees, flowers, waterways, mountains, and even the atmosphere—could be combined in paintings, drawings, and manuscript illuminations to create expansive landscapes and vistas, which often formed the setting for a range of texts. Landscapes are ever-changing yet eternal, and this exhibition explores the genre of landscape painting in works created for personal or communal devotion. The objects in this gallery invite close looking to witness the development of this genre of painting during one of the most fertile periods in the history of art.



Gardens and Cultivated Earth

Gardens embody the human endeavor to control nature. In Renaissance devotional manuscripts, gardens and farmlands provided stunning settings or backdrops for a range of narratives centered on the theme of salvation or sanctity. Artists visualized these green spaces either as well-planted terrains or as

modest plots suitable for a home or monastery. Within the tradition of landscape painting, the art of verdancy, or greenery, presents an idealized view of nature in perfect harmony, a metaphor that premodern Christians equated with paradise in heaven.

Wilderness and the Land beyond the City

Many people experience a sense of peace and calm or even wonder when out in nature. During the Renaissance, people looked to the natural world to heighten their religious experiences. Hermits and some monks and nuns lived in isolation from civilization, free from distractions,

hoping to achieve a more authentic and pure relationship with God. Artists of the time often depicted these harsh rocky terrains or woodland spaces in religious artworks to both highlight humankind's inability to master the wilds of nature and to express the wondrous richness of God's creation.

Elements and Symbols of the Natural World

Nature abounds with meaning and metaphor. During the Renaissance, artists used temporal phenomena—such as wind, rain, thunderstorms, and snowfall—to evoke a range of moods and to engage the spectator in the experience of the landscape. The tiniest insect to the most foreboding mountain could hold deep significance for Christian devotees.

The works in this section highlight the many meanings behind individual aspects of a landscape composition, from flowers and rocks to water and sky, and explore the ways in which each actively participates in the narrative and contributes to the prayers, songs, or meditations of devotees.

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