

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANGELS

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A blog article for a client



The English word *angel* is derived from the Greek “*aggelos*,” or “messenger.” Angels have long been the stuff of religion and myth, and these other-worldly beings, responsible for delivering communications between heaven and earth, are represented in western art and popular imagination in the form of beautiful men and women with wings, wearing flowing robes. But it is not only *angels* that we humans characterize in this way.

In ancient pagan myth, for example, several Greek gods and goddesses are depicted as beautiful, winged humans in elegant garments, among them Hermes the messenger god; Nike, the goddess of victory; and Eros the god of love (his Roman counterpart is *Cupid*).

Interestingly, Eros/Cupid, that be-winged, chubby baby with a bow and arrow who mediates between lovers, has not always been so adorable. Cupid in modern parlance is likened to a Cherub – an incorrect association – for Cherubs are members of the *Cherubim* class of heavenly angels in the Christian, not the pagan, tradition. Far from being cuddly, plump lovebugs, real Cherubs are griffin-like, with four wings and four faces representing the strongest and most intelligent of earthly beasts: the lion, the eagle, the ox and the human. The



Cherubim need this strength and intelligence, for their role is to serve the Lord himself in the realms of Heaven.

The only other angels depicted in Holy Scripture as having wings are the Seraphim, strange-looking creatures indeed, with six wings and covered, outside and inside, with eyes. Unlike the Seraphim and Cherubim (and unlike the pagan gods of ancient times), most of the other angels in Heaven are given few attributes: they are described in Scripture simply as having a male human form (never female), as flying and as wearing white. That's about all we are given: angels are not described in the manner in which artists throughout history have portrayed them (i.e., with splendid outfits and elegant wings).



So, as it stands, the spectacular images of angels we see today, bedecked in golden tunics and wrapped about in flowing fabric, armed with swords and arrows and other symbols of heavenly-earthly protection, are wrought solely from the imaginations of Medieval and Renaissance artists. Indeed, the exquisite-looking angels we see in paintings and sculpture are *human renderings*, meant to honor and glorify the wondrous beings of holy texts.

The shapes and forms of angels today are simply *fantasy*: our own mystical, magical portrayals of supernatural beings. But it makes sense that this is so: angels are supra-natural beings that can neither be described in words nor portrayed in art. For how can we human beings, here in the mundane physical world, describe something so awe-inspiring, so spiritual, that it surpasses human understanding and transcends human expression? We can only *try*. So, our angels are composites – their characteristics a combination of ancient pagan statuary, mythical art from the Classical period, and the Christian angels of spiritual record.

Are angels *real*? Yes! There have been too many angelic sightings and stories of angelic visitations reported over the centuries to deny that they are. But our depictions of angels are *unreal* – over centuries, out of fanciful imagination, rendered by human creativity, have come beautiful depictions of what these glorious creatures *might* look like.



These age-old images have captivated the popular imagination and we all agree, collectively, that this is what angels look like: they are beautiful, majestic, they wear robes and always, they have wings. These heavenly hosts, these watchers, these Divine spirits are mediators – they carry our messages, our hopes and our dreams to the ears of the Divine, on wings of glory and human imagination.



About the Author:

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