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“Art of the Vinegar Bible”

Christ Episcopal Church in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, holds one of the eighteen “Vinegar Bibles” in the United States. This rare type of bible was made by John Baskett in 1717 while he served as the printer to the British monarchy. Though appreciated for its design, the Vinegar Bible does have a handful of typos, which eventually lead to Baskett’s quick decline as a publisher. The most famous mistake in the bible is the page containing Luke 20:9; a page that should read as “Parable of the Vineyard” instead reads as “Parable of the Vinegar,” giving the bible its name. Beyond the typos in this 40-pound bible, 151 intricately illustrated prints represent numerous moments from biblical narratives. Throughout history, and still today, art is something that is ever changing with new methods and styles emerging. Through my analysis of the images and research on 18<sup>th</sup> century England, I have concluded that these pieces were created in an early Neoclassical style. After providing some more technical details about the Vinegar Bible, today I will demonstrate what I mean by this art historical designation.

Two large full page images mark the beginning and middle of the bible. The full page image that marks the middle of the bible can be found on the first page of your pamphlet. Though this piece does not have an attributed artist, it provides a good example of the intricate detailing and naturalistic qualities that can be seen throughout all the other works in the bible. It is also important to note that the two full page images in this bible mark the beginning and

middle of the book. Each one would have represented the beginning of two separate volumes, but it was later decided to make it one whole bible. Every book in the Vinegar bible also contains a small image, marking the first letter of the chapter text, a head piece at the beginning of the book, and a tail piece at the end. Some books and chapters varied whether or not they contain all of these, for example, the shorter books tend to not have a header, and longer books sometimes do not have tails. The images placed above a book header would be the largest of the three. The image within a letter box would be much smaller, but most of the time contained its own small scene. The tailpiece images varied in sizes, but usually contained an intricate frame around each scene.

I also looked at things such as the title of the book in which the images appear, and the name of the artist and engraver, if they were indicated. If an image had an attributed artist, the name would appear in a small hand written signature in the bottom left hand corner below the image. Since these images are prints, an engraver translated the work of the artist onto a plate, making it easily replicable. The engraver's name appears in the bottom right hand corner. The illustrations in the Vinegar Bible identify three known artists that I have uncovered through the signatures that accompany the images: Sir James Thornhill, Louis Cheron, and Louis Laguerre. These three men were premiere religious artists in England during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and had their own accomplishments separate from the Vinegar Bible.

When identifying the artist's name, after their signature the initial "inv" or even "invent" would follow. This was a common term used in print making during the time to distinguish between the artist and the engraver. "Inv" notes the artist as the "inventor." The engraver would have the initials "sculp" or "sculptist," or even sometimes just "s" meaning sculptor.

Thus, the prints themselves, or at least most of the prints, tell us who would have designed the full composition originally- the artist- and who would translate that composition to meet the characteristics of engraving. (Ottley)

While a few questions about use of media remain, I believe the type of printing used in this bible is engraving. This technique became popular in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as artists like William Hogarth became notable printmakers. Once the artist creates his image, the engraver recreates the work on a metal plate by scratching lines onto the surface, creating texture. Though I do not know the exact type of plate used to print the images in the Vinegar Bible, the types of metal plates most commonly used in this practice would be either copper, aluminum, zinc, or magnesium (Petardi). When looking at the images in the bible, it is easy to see the lines the engravers used to create depth and variety in tone, for engravers can only use small overlapping lines to create clear values. Once the engraver carves the plate, the printer rolled ink onto the surface which falls into the lower recesses created by the lines. Once the ink sets, the artist can press the image onto their support material like paper, and when he pulls it off, the image will appear. The engraver then cleans the plate, and uses it to replicate the image many, many times. This method would be very beneficial in the bible making, because it made it easy to have consistency across the different editions.

To discuss the style used in the Vinegar Bible, we should note that “Neoclassicism” contains two parts: “neo” and “classicism.” Neo is the Greek word for “new” or “revived from” while classicism references Classical Art. Examples of true Classical Art would be work coming out of Ancient Greece and Rome. Their work paid great attention to proportion and all-around accuracy while the scenes often depicted have an overall feeling of calm, often representing the

moment after or before something happened, such as a battle. The Renaissance is our first “rebirth” of classicism because artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo began to revive classical ideals in their work in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. An iconic example from the Renaissance would be Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Last Supper* completed in 1494 for works again in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. An example includes French Revolutionary painter Jacques-Louis David’s *Oath of Horatti* which he created in 1784 shortly after the printing of the Vinegar bible.

Neoclassicism came to England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when art academies began having their students try and replicate the work of the old masters after more and more art was being discovered. Artists studying these old masters began to have “renewed interest in harmony, simplicity, and proportion, an interest that gained momentum as the new science of archaeology brought forth spectacular remnants of a buried world of great beauty” (Gontor). By being exposed to all this historical classical work, artists became inspired and with help from their schooling, began bringing the style back. A major factor in this was also the Grand Tour. This was a practice introduced during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century which allowed men from England, Germany, Scandinavia and even Americans to travel to France and Italy to experience first hands the artwork from their classical education. Then, after time, Neoclassicism became popular among the wealthiest people, and they started requesting it from their artists. I believe that this was the case with the Vinegar Bible.

As I mentioned previously, three main artists contributed to the neoclassical illustrations in the Vinegar Bible. The first, and most important, was Sir James Thornhill (1675-1734). I assumed that Thornhill would be the least important artist in the book due to the fact that he only had three known images out of the 142. Then, after researching, I come to find that he was

the most famous of the three. Best known for his work on St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Thornhill was one of the leading mural and historical painters of the time. He was also the father-in-law of William Hogarth, one of the leading printmakers in England. Thornhill was not known for his bible illustrations, but he did do quite a few of them. Besides the Vinegar Bible that I studied, Thornhill contributed to the "Kitto Bible," which can be found in the Huntington Library in California. What is interesting is that in the Vinegar Bible, none of Thornhill's drawings appear in the New Testament, while in the Kitto Bible, he illustrated for the entire New Testament (Baker, 323).

The image I found to be most compelling and demonstrably of neoclassical ideals out of Thornhill's illustrations was the head piece for The Book of Joshua. The image depicts numerous figures fumbling around rocks, a body of water, and two priests who appear to be carrying something heavy. This image directly relates to the third and fourth chapters in Joshua. They recall an instance when God spoke to Joshua, telling him to instruct the priests to carry the Ark of the Covenant to the Jordan River. He tells them that when their feet touch the ground, the water will part, thus giving Joshua credibility as a prophet. In Thornhill's image, the water pulls back from the priest's bare feet. This is supported by verse 13 in the third chapter of Joshua: "It shall come about when the soles of the feet of the priests who carry the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan will be cut off, *and* the waters which are flowing down from above will stand in one heap" Joshua 3:13. This verse describes when Joshua tried to lead the people across the Jordan river. The priests were in charge of carrying the Ark of the Covenant, and God came to Joshua telling him what would happen with their feet touched the Jordan. The main narrative in the image, however, is

the men carrying rocks. This can be determined because that is what the majority of the people in the image are doing and they are in the center foreground. This depiction also illustrates the fourth chapter of Joshua versus 2-3:

Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, and command them, saying, "Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet are standing firm, and carry them over with you and lay them down in the lodging place where you will lodge tonight.

From an art historical standpoint, the neoclassical influences can be seen throughout this image. For example, the defined musculature in all the men carrying rocks goes along with the classical ideals of the "ideal form." The men's muscles, combined with the naturalistic drapery hanging over the figures, adds a sense of naturalistic accuracy. The image depicts the scene just as the water is beginning to move away from the priest's feet and right before the men start moving the rocks. As mentioned previously, the idea of showing a scene before or after an act of potential chaos is something typical of classical style.

Another example of Thornhill's work in the Vinegar Bible is his head piece above Genesis. The image depicts two nude figures surrounded by numerous animals and angels as the sun shines down on them. Hebrew script floats in the center of the light. Genesis refers to the creation of everything, and this image clearly references Adam and Eve. However, this scene specifically appears at the moment of Eve's creation when Adam sees her for the first time. The line in Genesis that relates to this reads:

Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought *them* to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. Genesis 2:19-22

To illustrate these verses, Thornhill represented Adam surrounded by the numerous animals God placed around him as companions. You can almost sense his prior disappointment as he is seated on the rock, then his surprise and instant admiration he feels for Eve as she comes into being before him.

Thornhill's classically styled Eve draws to mind Botticelli's Renaissance *Birth of Venus*, completed in the mid 1480s. The way that Thornhill drew Eve in this illustration is almost identical to Venus in Botticelli's painting. Both Eve and Venus stand in the typical classical contraposto pose, an s-curve or weight shift with one knee bent slightly- as their long hair falls over their naked bodies. The compositional choices Thornhill used and historical references to Venus's birth as she rises from the water help to showcase Eve's own birth.

The next artist in the Vinegar Bible is Louis Laguerre (1663-1721). Laguerre, unlike Thornhill, was a French painter who focused mainly on decorative arts, especially for the homes of the elite. However, Laguerre was actually in the running along with Thornhill to win the commission to paint a mural in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral after the cathedral was rebuilt

from the medieval gothic style into a classical building in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Laguerre almost beat Thornhill. Some of Laguerre's most famous works include three large paintings of battles in the Duke of Marlborough's victorious campaign in the War of Spanish Succession (Brisby). The paintings are currently displayed in Grimsthope Castle in England.

Of the 142 images in the Vinegar Bible, ten are attributed to Laguerre. One is the head piece on The Gospel according to St. Matthew. The image contains numerous figures waiting to give gifts to the baby Jesus. This image references the second chapter of Matthew when high ranking officials under King Herod are sent to find this baby born in Bethlehem. The second chapter describes their meeting as: "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matthew 2:10-11). The reference to the star can also be seen in the top left hand corner of the image with a beam of light shining down in the direction of the baby.

This image has many similar classical influences as Thornhill's designs. Once again, the drapery of the figures' clothes is realistic with dark shading to add a greater sense of depth. A classical technique used in this work is the way that things placed further in the background have less detail than things closer to the front, a technique called atmospheric perspective. In this illustration, you can see the detail put into the figures in the front, but the further back you go, the people's faces are less developed and even the mountains do not receive the same level of attention. This helps to imply depth or dimension to the piece. A similar classical style can be seen in Pietro Perugino's *The Delivery of the Keys to Saint Peter*, completed in 1482. In this

piece, like Laguerre's image, the people in the background are less detailed than those in the foreground to add depth. This famous example also contains linear perspective and the use of overlapping planes; techniques seen throughout all the Vinegar Bible prints as well. Linear perspective helps give a flat surface the illusion of moving backwards in space. It does this by having all the lines in a piece move back towards a single vanishing point. Overlapping planes can also be seen in both pieces. For example, in the print from Matthew, the first and front most plane contains the main figures bowing before the baby Jesus and waiting to give him gifts, the next plane contains the men waiting in line behind them, and the final plane would be the background of mountains.

Another image by Laguerre is the head piece of The Second Book of the Kings. The image shows a scene of chaos as numerous men destroy different statues due to what seems to be the order of the King, who is standing on the higher ground wearing a crown. I believe this piece is referencing the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter in the second Book of Kings in regards to Hezekiah's rule over Judah. The line most directly related reads: "He removed the high places and broke down the *sacred* pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan" (2 Kings 18:4). Based on this verse, you can see the men tearing down the statues and even the bronze serpent that the text references.

This image uses various types of classical methods such as the use of placing the figure of greatest importance in the center of the image, usually on a platform raising him or her higher than everyone else. In this case, the king is centrally located with different clothing than the rest of the figures, drawing the viewer's eye to him and creating a balanced composition.

Besides that, examples of classical architecture and even the sculptures that they are destroying are strewn throughout. You can see a similar use of this emphasis in Botticelli's *Primavera* completed in the late 1480s during the Renaissance, where the central figure is placed slightly above all the rest of the figures in the scene.

The last and most present artist in the Vinegar Bible is Louis Cheron (1660-1725). In the Vinegar Bible, Cheron has twenty-six images attributed to him. Like Laguerre, Cheron was a French painter and competed against him and Thornhill in the contest for the Saint Paul's dome commission. Cheron studied art in France and admired Raphael incorporating some of his style into his own work. While much of the scant writing about Cheron I found is in broken French, it discusses some sort of case where Cheron was charged for not following his church and leaving France. He also is known to have switched back and forth between Protestantism and Catholicism. (N.W)

One of Cheron's more intricate images is his head piece at the beginning of the Book Ezra. On the surface, the image contains seven figures all gathered around a large platform where a priest is reaching towards a large bull to his left. I have determined this is an image that represents the altar numerous men living in Jerusalem made in the temple for Cyrus King of Persia in order to present offerings daily to the Lord. This is supported in the third chapter of Ezra:

So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and *offered* the fixed

number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required. Ezra 3:3-4

Like the illustration taken from Joshua, this piece contains many of classical ideals. Similar to one of Thornhill's images, this scene represents the moment right before chaos. Chaos, in this sense, would be the slaughtering of the bull. The men in the image are preparing the surface to slaughter the beast and everyone, including the bull, appear rather calm. This is an interesting image juxtaposed next to Laguerre's tail piece in the First Book of Kings that depicts the moment right after a bull was slaughtered and is burning on the same type of pedestal in a separate scene. Both images depict a calmness before and after a major event, which was very typical classical style.

The tail piece of the Book of Ezra is also by Cheron and tells a different story. The image contains seven figures, three or four men and three females. The women are trying to get away from the men, and most of the men are moving away from the women. I believe this image is in reference to the ninth and tenth chapters of Ezra. This section discusses the time when the men of Israel were marrying foreign women and even women of their own family. "For they have taken some of their daughters *as wives* for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness" (Ezra 9:2). Then in the tenth chapter it reads:

Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. "Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives." Ezra 10:10-11

Based on these excerpts, it can be assumed that the content of the image shows these “foreign wives” and their husbands separating. Another thing that I noticed was between two of the women there appears to be a small figure who looks like a child. During this time, it was common for artists to work off of adult male models when creating the human form making children appear heftier and not as proportional to a realistic child, giving this figure its more muscular shape.

The women in this scene are represented partially exposed and in a curvaceous form. An example in classical art that goes along with this type of representation would be Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, completed in 1538. This painting shows a woman lying nude who was supposed to represent the utmost of beauty. She is depicted with a smaller head and a curvaceous body to represent sexuality and fertility. In this image at the tail end of Ezra, the women are all clothed to some degree but are exposed in ways such as a breast or bare back showing. This goes along with the classical ideal that woman, especially lower ranking woman, were seen as sexual objects. Since the *Venus of Urbino* is assumed to be a prostitute, and the women in this image are the “foreign women,” it makes sense that they would be displayed provocatively. The women depicted also have a similar body type to the *Venus of Urbino* with their thicker arms and smaller heads.

To conclude, although James Thornhill, Louis Laguerre and Louis Cheron were different, their prints in the Vinegar Bible all fall together in a common style to create a complete whole and sense of unity across the book. Based on my research I was able to determine the artists and artistic style used in these prints, but there is still much more work that could be done on this project. For example, the iconography in each image is something another scholar could

delve into further. But to conclude my work, based on my research and analysis, neoclassicism was very much present in the images of this 18<sup>th</sup> century Vinegar Bible. The focus on a moment right before or after a major event would take place, ideal human form, numerous classical references, and implying depth through the use of linear and atmospheric perspective, along with many other aspects, link these works to that of their classical predecessors.

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