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A Lifelike Fly in Margins of Manuscripts - a Symbol as Trompe L'Oleil

Illusory rendering of the fly on the borders of manuscripts first appeared at the very end of the 14th century in Northern Italy, in manuscripts of Bohemian origin flies were painted soon after the year 1400. How to interpret such a depiction, not immediately bound up with the accompanying text? Does this involve Plinian imitation of nature designed to deceive a credulous viewer? Did the painter try to prove his artistic skills in this way? Can such a representation be connected with the topos of many Renaissance anecdotes about an apprentice secretly painting a fly on the painting of his master who - deceived by the perfection of rendering - tried to brush it away from the picture? The textual and pictorial context of the rendering unequivocally proves that the illusorily painted fly has its own symbolic meaning. The symbolic meaning of the fly is derived primarily from the text of Bible (Ex 8:16-20; Ps 77:45; 104:31; Sap. 16:9 Is7:18; Eccl. 10:1). Interpretation of the fly is to be found in a number of medieval Encyclopaedias, the mentioned Biblical verses have since been commented on by a number of exegetes. According to the biblical exegesis the fly soils, contaminates and depreciates a sacrifice, symbolizing the Devil, corporeality, sin, vices, our mind, death, the heretics and idolaters. The relationship between the fly and the accompanying text in different manuscripts shows, that the meaning of this insect invariably depend on the context. The deceitful, illusory way of painting of the fly is part of the message, directly epitomizing the period idea of the Devil whose characteristic property is, precisely, illusion and deception. A faithfully depicted fly often stands in contrast to a more schematic rendering of the other scenes on which the insect seems to be sitting. It is probable that in this manner the painter implies that the fly belongs to the earthly, real and transient world, while the main scene is treated in a “perspective of salvation“, outside space and time.

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