Between Carnival and Dream: St. Anthony, Gustave Flaubert, and the Arts in Fin de Siècle Europe

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The surprisingly large number, power, and diversity of fin de siècle paintings, prints, and drawings representing the life and temptation of St. Anthony, the early Christian Egyptian anchorite (251-345 C.E.), were fueled by two contemporary phenomena: the growing popularity of Gustave Flaubert’s text, La tentation de Saint Antoine (1874) – a decidedly uncanonical version of the saint’s life – and the ironic, elitist and introspective nature of fin de siècle artistic sensibilities. Gustave Flaubert, customarily linked to French 19th-century Realism, also inhabited a second autobiographical literary universe. While in it, he transformed the life of Anthony buffeted between temptation and repression in the ancient desert into one marked both by carnavalesque comedy and fantasy and by ordinary human weakness. The similarities and differences between the early modernist St. Anthony of Flaubert, fin de siècle art both in its elitist and in its populist forms, and the original 4th-century anchorite as described by his biographers offer revealing insights into fin de siècle culture and morality. Like the Symbolist artists, St. Anthony disdained the world of matter and men and lived in his mind. Like them, he had a surreal and fantastic imagination that tried his physical strength and even challenged his sanity. But unlike them St. Anthony was an exemplary, even a faultless, Christian. This research considers the sources and metaphors that largely secular, sometimes mystical, fin de siècle artists used to represent the life and temptations of this ancient and holy anchorite.

Anthony’s earliest biographers were his contemporaries, St. Athanasius the influential bishop of Alexandria (Athanasius, Life of Saint Anthony, trans. Meyer) and St. Jerome the scholar and translator (The Desert Fathers). Their biographies were written in the form of exempla virtuta, records of one man’s stalwart and lifelong resistance to the worldly temptations that invaded his waking and sleeping hours in the form of dreams and hallucinations. The specific readers of St. Athanasius’s text, written in Greek c. 360 and translated into Latin by Evragius of Antioch in 374,
were the growing number of anchorites and cloistered monastic communities in Western Europe. St. Jerome had written about Anthony within the narrative of his biography of Paul of Thebes, an aged Egyptian anchorite who Anthony visited. Other authors followed these two with shorter chronicles and commentaries, attaching new chapters and characters to the first idealized ones in order to serve their own purposes and audiences. These early texts constituted the rationale for the translation of the saint’s bones to the priory church of La Motte-aux-Bois in the Dauphiné in southeastern France in the 11th century from a deserted church in Constantinople where they had been deposited in 635 after the Arabs took over the Egyptian city of Alexandria. From the devotion of a few at this reliquary site in France, a charitable order dedicated to St. Anthony (hospitaliers) expanded in numbers geometrically throughout the late Middle Ages. It was converted to an Order of Augustinian Canons in 1297 by Pope Boniface VIII. The single penitential task of these male and female Canons was to care for the tens of thousands in Europe and the Near East suffering from crippling diseases, particularly ergotism, an often fatal disease with leprosy-like symptoms caused by the consumption of bread made with polluted rye flour, which plagued Europe in the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. St. Anthony, on the strength of their devotion, became the patron saint of plagues and incurable diseases (fig. 1).

Throughout Western art history, artists had shaped and refined the saga of Anthony, finding their inspiration in the ancient and timeless desert landscapes in which he lived, in his penitential Christian denial and masochism, in his fearful and repeated visions of devils and monsters, and in the relation of his cult to the crippling illness of St. Anthony’s fire. In art, Anthony is dressed in a monk’s habit and wears either a soft cloche hat or a monk’s hood. He carries a potence, the staff of the pilgrim. He is accompanied by a pig wearing a bell. His tormenters are not only devils and monsters represented by variously combined human, animal, and vegetal organisms but also people crippled and disfigured as if by ergotism (fig. 2).

On his black vestments is a light blue Tau or Greek T. Sometimes the handle of his staff (potence) forms a T. He sometimes stands on a snarling little dragon to suggest his ability to overcome the devil, sometimes on a bonfire to denote either his hellish torments or the disease of ergotism whose patron saint he was (and for which one of the more popular names was St. Anthony’s fire or le feu de saint Antoine).

Fragments of Antonite frescos exist in the narthex of the 12th-century Norman Byzantine church of Sant’ Angelo in Formis in Calabria, on