

The Gospel of John refers to its writer as the “disciple whom Jesus loved”, an eyewitness to the events described. He has been identified with the apostle John, one of the Twelve disciples, and with the writer of the Book of Revelation, composed on the island of Patmos where he was in exile toward the end of his life around 100 AD.

Taking their cue from early references, and from the very characteristic differences between the other three Gospel writers and John, artists have represented him as a young man, showing divine inspiration in his gaze. Images of John have been very popular throughout Western art – more popular than any other saint with the exception of Peter, both as a single figure and as part of the Gospel narratives, particularly at the Last Supper and standing by the cross, where Jesus entrusts His mother to John.



Among many beautiful and powerful images those of **El Greco** stand out.

His 1609 painting, now in the Prado in Madrid, shows John gesturing to a cup from which emerges a dragon as explained by a French art historian, this detail comes from the Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine, (1228 – 1298) the most popular source for legends of the saints for hundreds of years in Europe:

"Saint John the Evangelist is depicted holding a chalice, an allusion to his being put to the test by the high priest of the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. The high priest said to him: "If you want me to believe in your god, I will give you some poison to drink and, if it does not harm you, it means that your god is the true God." Thus the picture shows Saint John making the gesture of blessing which was to neutralize the poison escaping from the chalice in the form of a small two-headed dragon. He was then able to drink the potion, according to the legend."

The origin of this story probably lies in Mark 16:18

*"These signs will accompany those who have believed: in my name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."*

In Europe, especially Central Europe it was customary to hold a blessing of the wine on St John's day.

Many artists and patrons have also been drawn to represent John's vision on Patmos:

Revelation 1:

<sup>9</sup> *I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*  
<sup>10</sup> *I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet <sup>11</sup> saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."*



**El Greco** represents the opening of the Fifth Seal (Revelation 6:9-11): (1610-14) His striking – and very unconventional – image has been inspirational for other artists, including Picasso, who used it for *The Demoiselles d'Avignon*.



**Bosch** is also noted for his unusual approach, and his painting of John on Patmos (c 1500) has proved a puzzle for historians. There have been various attempts to explain the strange creature behind John – the most convincing is that it refers to Revelation 9 3-7

<sup>3</sup> Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given authority like the authority of scorpions of the earth. <sup>4</sup> They were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone. ....<sup>7</sup> In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces.

In front of the saint is his symbol, the eagle, as the lion is the symbol of Mark.

On the back of the panel is a painting shaped as an **eyeball**, with the Passion of Christ around the rim, representing Christ as our inner guide - as in the old saying, the eyes are the window of the soul- and also suggesting that, through John's testimony, we are able to "have the mind of Christ."

