

FROM MICHEL LE NOBLETZ'S PAINTED MAPS TO XAVIER DE LANGLAIS' *TAOLENNOU* (17TH–20TH CENTURIES)

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Introduction

At the time of the Catholic Reformation (Counter-Reformation), for the principles of Catholic doctrine to be taught in a more efficient manner, Catholic missionaries promoted an original form of evangelisation in Brittany based on images which served as visual aids during their sermons.

Initiated by the Council of Trent (1545–1563), this was all part of a Europe-wide attempt to introduce new methods of teaching scripture. Seminaries were created in many regions of the Catholic world to ensure the proper training of priests. In churches, the rood screens were gradually removed to allow the congregation to observe the practice of worship that took place in the choir. Pulpits were also installed for the priests to deliver their sermons in the local vernacular language of the congregation. The Holy Scripture was taught in accordance with the Catholic tradition. But these innovations in daily worship were not sufficient. In order to intensify the proper teaching of the Catholic faith and to develop acceptable practices, regional missionary campaigns were launched.

The Jesuits were among the first to implement this new pedagogical approach. Ignatius of Loyola, for instance, wondered whether an illustrated version of his *Exercitia Spiritualia* ('Spiritual Exercises') would have been suitable for teaching the Gospel. In 1593, Pope Clement VIII granted the Flemish publisher Nutius the authorisation to print, over a ten-year period, his *Evangelicae historiae imagines* ('Evangelical History through Images') (Fabre 1996). This work was the brainchild of the Jesuit Jérôme Nadal. At the end of this decade, an increasing number of illustrated religious books were published. Among these was Bartolomeo Ricci's *Vita D.N. Jesu Christi* ('Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ') in 1607 with numerous engravings, some of which were inspired by Loyola's illustrated edition of *Spiritual Exercises*.

In Brittany, Michel Le Nobletz (1577–1652) was a priest from the diocese of Leon in northwestern Brittany and refused being assigned to a fixed parish. Some of Michel Le Nobletz's painted maps were directly inspired by the images produced by Ricci and others. Le Nobletz committed himself to teaching scripture by applying new methods, most notably a new tool of his own invention, that is, painted geographical maps.

Among the best known of his successors were the Jesuit priests, Julien Maunoir (1606–1683) and Vincent Huby (1608–1693) who were entirely devoted to missionary work. The latter developed a distinctive series of paintings known as the *taolennou* (literally meaning 'tables' in Breton). These were religious paintings on parchment that were destined for the largely illiterate Breton-speaking population of Western Brittany. Over a period of centuries, priests belonging to different Catholic communities (the Jesuits, the Montfortians, etc.) also became missionaries and conceived new paintings in a freer, less codified, style.

1. Michel Le Nobletz's painted maps

The youngest son of a family of eleven children, Michel Le Nobletz was born in 1577 in Plouguerneau, in the diocese of Léon. His father enrolled him in Jesuit colleges in Bordeaux and Agen in the southwest of France where he did the classical studies. After completing his studies, he entered the Sorbonne at the age of 29. His spiritual director, Father Coton, was also the confessor of the King of France, Henri IV (1589–1610). Around 1609 he was ordained priest for his diocese back in Brittany. Having benefitted from an excellent classical education, he was acutely aware of the philosophical and intellectual ideas of the time. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, he refused the expected priestly path that was offered to him. Astonished by the religious ignorance of the people, he preferred to undertake a career as an itinerant evangelist which took him to the Breton islands of Sein and Ouessant as well as to the coastal parishes such as Plouguerneau, Le Conquet and, finally, Douarnenez where he spent twenty years of his life. So exalted was his vision of religion that his ascetic lifestyle soon earned him the nickname *arbelegfol en trois mots*, Breton for 'the mad priest'. He then invented an entirely new system for the evangelisation of the people and composed numerous hymns in Breton which were adapted to popular tunes. These addressed all the major points of Catholic doctrine. However, it

was in 1613 that he invented a system of evangelisation based on what he described as ‘painted maps’, that is, visual supports for teaching the Word of Christ.

Le Nobletz surrounded himself with lay people whose sole objective was to teach catechism. The majority of these were devout, well-intentioned women of well-to-do families, of good moral character. His audience learned the commentaries of his enigmatic maps by heart.

Of the estimated 70 to 100 maps that Le Nobletz produced, only twelve of his maps and two copies dating to the same period survive. These are preserved in the archives of the diocese of Quimper (Celton & Trémolières 2021). Of the missing maps, we only have the titles: ‘The Letter of Pythagoras’, ‘The Castle of Truth’ and ‘The Tree of Three Branches’. The maps were made on parchment, that is, on an entire sheep’s skin. Not being an artist himself, Michel Le Nobletz hired Alain Lestobec and François Le Troadec, cartographers of the Conquet port town located to the west of Brest, in Leon, which was one of his places of residence. Other maps were inspired by the books of riddles which were popular at the time.

Some works represent real geographical maps. Leon is represented on four maps, and there are separate maps of Europe, the Mediterranean and the Americas, more specifically, Panama. The Breton cartographer even indicates the specific part of the isthmus where he imagines the construction of the future Panama Canal (fig. 1)!

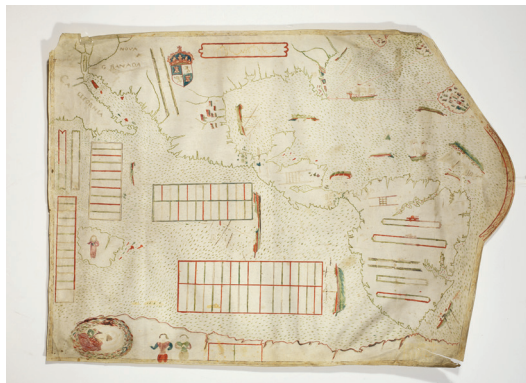


Fig. 1. Workers digging the future Panama Canal and errant ships in the Gulf of Mexico

Considering his origins, what could be more natural for Michel Le Nobletz than to draw up maritime maps? Of course, his maps were not intended for navigation from one port to another but rather to indicate the paths leading to heaven and the manner to save one's soul. A very Breton cultural element which appears on the maps is the metaphorical image of ill-fated ships veering off course. Each map was accompanied by small handwritten booklets (referred to as 'declarations') explaining the map and the meaning of the symbols.

1.1 The map of the cross

The map entitled *la carte de La Croix* ('the map of the Cross') (fig. 2) adopts the principle that there are three pathways to hell or heaven. However, Michel Le Nobletz was not the inventor of this principle. The great Spanish poet and theologian, Saint John of the Cross (Juan de la Cruz, 1545–1591) already evoked the concept in his book *La Montée au Carmel* ('The Ascent of Mont Carmel'). Written between 1584 and 1587, it was finally published in 1618. An engraving illustrates John of the Cross's vision in this 1618 edition which Le Nobletz almost certainly consulted.



Fig. 2. Michel Le Nobletz, *Map of the Cross*, around 1630 (Diocese of Quimper)

‘The map of the Cross’ shows three pathways, two of which are relatively wide and lead straight to hell. The one on the right-hand side, at the bottom, shows two characters that represent the devil, both with green wings and cloven hooves. Just above, the third character stands on the road wearing green livery and holding a book. This is the first known representation of a Protestant in Brittany and the book represented here is the Bible. A hundred years after the publications of Martin Luther ‘the Huguenot’, this image still designates the Protestants as troublemakers and heretics. The fact that he reads the Bible is not considered to be virtuous. On the contrary, at that time the doctrine of the Catholic Church restricted its reading to the members of the clergy. In a statement describing this map, Michel Le Nobletz writes: “you see the Huguenot minister who attempts to study his Bible and to teach the people but, because he misunderstands it, he misleads them, causing them to wander from the true path of the cross...” (*‘vous voyez le ministre huguenot qui se travaille à estudier sa bible et à enseigner le peuple, qui va errant du vray chemin de la croix, parce qu’il est trompé’*).¹

The road to the left presents a less radical message. The character depicted there has received the sacrament of baptism, gives alms to the Church, to the hospital and to the poor, but, nevertheless, finds himself in hell along with other sinners. Here, Le Nobletz condemns the superficial practice of religion by those who do not share the true faith. In his view, it is not enough to attend mass and religious services regularly to be considered a good Christian. One must also believe in the teachings of the Church.

The third path, which is the narrowest, leads to Paradise. Here one sees the priest in the pulpit, a recent invention by the Council of Trent which had just been implemented in Brittany. The principle of the three paths was adopted later in almost all the series of the *taolennou* that followed.

1.2 *The Mirror of the World*

Le Miroir du Monde (‘The Mirror of the World’) is the terrestrial counterpart of the map of *La Croix*. Two paths are traced. To the right are the rich, to the left are the

1 All the related information including the images of the maps is on line: <http://bibliotheque.diocese-quimper.fr/collections/show/91>, consulted on 12 November 2021. See also Erwan Le Pipec’s contribution to this volume.

poor. Several scenes of daily life in Western Brittany are evoked here, one of which shows two newly-weds sitting in a carriage that is being drawn by the devil. One sees scenes of celebrations, meals, the countryside, as well as sea scenes, sights with which audiences from both the rural hinterland and coastal communities could identify. These are the only known iconographic representations of the daily life of the Bretons in the middle of the 17th century.

1.3 The mixed map

But not all the paintings follow the principle of sea or land maps. Thus, at the bottom of a façade or pediment representing God the Father, the *Carte mêlée* ('The Mixed Map') shows a series of twenty-five allegorical vignettes. The scenes are not particularly Breton in character and raise questions regarding the source of the author's inspiration. Michel Le Nobletz travelled often and would communicate with the Jesuits. Besides, he was aware of the ideas (and books) circulating in Europe and specialised in the production of books composed of images. Emblematic art, with its origins in the Middle Ages, was undergoing a complete revival during the Renaissance. *Le Livre des Emblèmes* ('The Book of Emblems'), written by Andrea Alciato (1492–1550), went through multiple editions featuring images linked to a motto and a text facilitating the interpretation of the 'emblem'. If an element was missing, the emblem would lose all its meaning. Le Nobletz was inspired by the image of Icarus falling from the sky, and that of an angel leading a chariot drawn by two lions. He also draws inspiration from other authors, such as Pierre Boaistuau and his *Histoires prodigieuses* ('Prodigious Histories', 1560) and Valeriano and his *Hieroglyphica* (1602) (Celton 2018a, 2018b). In the latter case, the text accompanying the emblem is absent from the map and is explained by the painter himself. Under no circumstances are his painted maps intended to be viewed without a commentary.

1.4 The Daily Exercise for Every Christian

The map of the *Exercice quotidien pour tout homme chrétien* ('The Daily Exercise for Every Christian') consists of the arrangement of the emblems in thirty vignettes, almost all of which are illustrated with a heart containing a character or a symbolic attribute. The iconography of the heart was established during the Renaissance

due, among other things, to advances in surgery and anatomical knowledge. Engravings of the *sacré cœur* ('sacred heart of Jesus') spread during the 16th century and Alciato used this iconography in his work.

In Antwerp, Anton II Wierix (1549–1618) engraved a series of eighteen emblems in 1635, under the title *Cor Jesu amanti sacrum* ('Sacred Heart for the Lover of Jesus') (fig. 3). This was met with great success and was published in multiple editions. Le Nobletz in turn drew inspiration from it to create his map of the 'Daily Exercise'. This iconography of the heart is amplified by the vision that Sister Marguerite-Marie Alacoque had of the 'sacred heart' in 1675 in Paray-Le-Monial (Burgundy). This imagery was adopted and expanded by both Julien Maunoir and Vincent Huby with the latter producing the series of twelve classic *taolennou* showing representations of the heart.

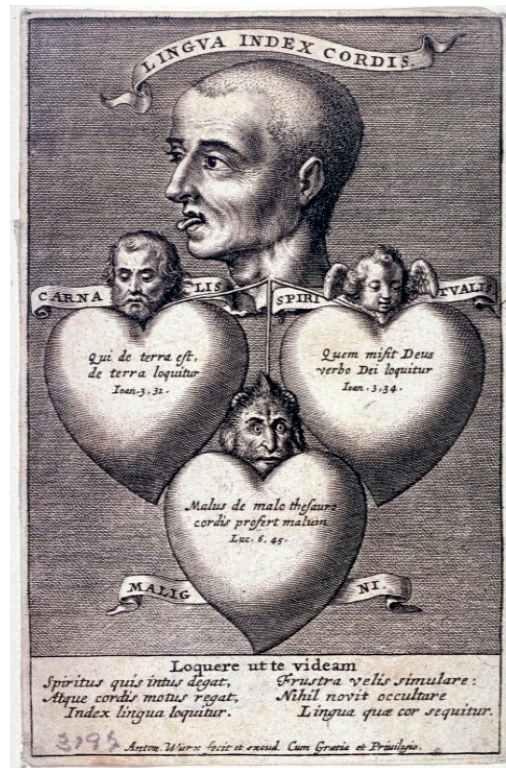


Fig. 3. Antonius II Wierix, *Lingua Index Cordis* (Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco), all rights reserved.

The maps commissioned by Michel Le Nobletz are meticulous, intended to be explained to small groups of people. In the manner of medieval miniatures, they teem with details requiring the artist to have a deep knowledge of the subject. When Michel Le Nobletz died in 1652, he entrusted his maps to his successor, the Jesuit Julien Maunoir. But these were too intellectually dense in meaning to be easily understood and, very quickly, ceased to be used.



Fig. 4. Synoptic map of the place-names mentioned in the present study.

Authors: Ewan Bryce and Anne Hellegouarc'h

2. Julien Maunoir, Le Nobletz's successor

Before discovering his vocation to evangelise Western Brittany, Julien Maunoir had wanted to do missionary work in Canada and it is in Quebec where a '*Tableau synoptique de la doctrine catholique mise à la portée des sauvages qui n'ont encore reçu aucune éducation*' ('Synoptic Table of Catholic Doctrine made accessible to the savages who have not yet received any (formal) education') was put into service. The connection with the New World is clear. The Jesuit Jean Pierron (1631-1700) lived

in Iroquois country from 1667 to 1674 and, in the words of Marie de l'Incarnation, writing in 1669:

[Il] s'est avisé d'une invention admirable que est de faire des figures pour leur faire voir des yeux ce qu'il leur prêche par la parole. Il instruit le jour, et la nuit il fait des tableaux, car il est assez bon peintre.

He came up with an admirable invention which is to make images to make them see with their eyes what he preaches to them in words. He instructs during the day, and at night he makes pictures, because he is quite a good painter.

(Mère Marie de l'Incarnation 1681: 637–638)

The Jesuit superior, Father François-Joseph Le Mercier, acknowledged the Breton origin of these pictures in his annual report of 1668–69 and considered them to be the work of Michel Le Nobletz (Gagnon 1975, Gagnon & Jaenen 2004). Nevertheless, the form taken by these Canadian paintings was different from the Breton ones. In the 19th century, the Abbé Blanchet's *Echelles cathologiques* ('Catholic Scales') were produced (Champagne 1986). These were distant descendants of Pierron's maps and yet another visual and printed representation of Catholic dogma.

2.1 The standard *taolennou*

Among the many spiritual schools of the 17th century, the *École de l'Oraison cordiale* ('School of Heartfelt Prayer') developed the themes of inner prayer and of developing a sense of inner spirituality, with special attention to the heart, that is, the place of God's presence in man. The Breton Maurice Le Gall de Kerdu (1633–1694) published *L'Oratoire du cœur* ('The Oratory of the Heart'), an extremely successful work. This was the first French edition (it had been translated from Latin in 1670). The work is decorated with engravings representing the heart, the seat of the soul, surmounted by a head. This type of illustration is found in Julien Maunoir's *Templ consacret dar Passion Jesus-Christ* ('The Temple of devotion to the Passion of Jesus Christ') published in Breton (fig. 5). Each day of the Passion was illustrated with a heart and each heart was adorned with an eye and a star.



Fig. 5. Julien Maunoir, 1723, *Templ consacret dar Passion Jesus-Christ* (Diocese of Quimper).

Julien Maunoir increased the number of missions, undertaking 439 in 43 years, during which time he quickly surrounded himself with parish priests (Maunoir 1631–1650). Their aim was twofold, the first being to have a greater impact on the population and, secondly, to leave behind a well-trained and educated clergy that would be strengthened in their faith. Unlike Michel Le Nobletz, who was often perceived as a rebel by his hierarchy, Maunoir was a practical man who was well integrated in the local Church. Maunoir profoundly renewed Catholicism in Western Brittany.

The missionaries arrived on horseback, carrying the paintings that were rolled up in their baggage. The twelve paintings were all displayed at the same time in the nave of the church, and high up so that all the faithful could see them clearly. The typical mission lasted a month and lessons were given in the evening after the workday. The missionary specialised in explaining these paintings known

as a *tableauteur* ('map-author') would make specific remarks about them using a long wooden pointer. He could spend up to an hour elucidating the meaning of each painting. The mission would end with a solemn procession which generally included the blessing of a mission cross that remained behind as a souvenir of this important moment in the life of the parish community.

3. Vincent Huby (1608–1693)

These mission paintings were improved by another Jesuit Vincent Huby from Vannes. He produced the so-called 'classic' series which were used from the 17th to the end of the 19th century. Huby was born in Hennebont in 1608 and studied at the college in Rennes. He was taught by Jean Rigoleuc (1596–1658), an important mystic author, with Julien Maunoir among his classmates. All three participated in the missions. However, owing to Huby's frail health, the harsh life of a missionary prevented him from travelling as frequently as he would have liked to.

Along with the Abbot of Kerlivio, he founded the first spiritual retreat for the clergy and the faithful in Vannes in 1658. Since it could welcome up to two thousand people per year, it became a practical extension of the missions. Images were frequently employed in this retreat ranging from simple engravings being made on the walls in the rooms to explanations of the paintings provided during periods of recreation.

Huby may have found his inspiration in Michel Le Nobletz's *Carte des Cœurs* ('Maps of the Hearts'), but especially in the allegorical books by Wierix and Alciato. From Le Gall de Kerdu, he borrowed the idea of the superposition of the head and the heart. Huby's original models have disappeared, but copies have survived. All of these are anonymous. Some variations of decorative and background elements may be observed in these copies. Some series emphasise Breton environment including the portrayal of dances, musical instruments and other elements.

3.1 Huby's classic series

Twelve paintings compose the so-called 'classic' series (fig. 6). The first four show the state of man at the beginning of the mission followed by its initial beneficial effects.

The next four lead to the death of the sinner; the last four concern the death of the righteous. Some series are intended for men, others for women. Guillaume Nicolas, rector of Landudec in the middle of the 18th century, wrote the following:

Dans les tableaux des hommes on représente plusieurs choses qui ne sont point dans les tableaux des femmes et vice-versa, parce que les hommes sont sujets à plusieurs choses que les femmes ne font pas [...] Ainsi il faut différentes figures pour les représenter.

(Nicolas 1754 : 371)

In the paintings for men, several things are represented that are not in the paintings of women and vice versa, because men are subject to a number of activities that women do not do [...] Thus, different figures are needed to represent them.

The iconographic vocabulary is simple and repetitive, facilitating the understanding and subsequent interpretation of the message always written in French. The reason for this is that the commentaries are intended rather for the benefit of than the faithful. The principle is the same as with the banners of the time: the face of the saint portrayed is sufficient to identify the parish, each parish having a patron saint.



3.2 Man in a state of sin

The first of the initial series of four paintings, *Peinture d'un homme en état de péché* ('Painting of a Man in a State of Sin') (Le Floc'h 1993, 2022), features a head representing the physical and external aspects of the person. The proud face exudes a certain arrogance and pretension. The long hair, in the style of King Louis XIV, is well groomed.

Fig. 6. Pierre Gally's engraving of the first taolenn of the classic series, early 18th century (Diocese of Quimper)

Every detail counts: the person portrayed does not even deign to glance at the Holy Spirit, symbolised by the dove, or at the angel to his right who calls out to him. On the outside, the flames of divine love try to penetrate his heart, but in vain. In this type of painting, the heart symbolises the state of his soul.

In the second painting ('Attrition'), the devil appears surrounded by the seven deadly sins. This scene is already encountered in the works of Father Maunoir. Above him are an eye and a star. The eye symbolises man's conscience. The eye is portrayed as open, showing that the man does not exhibit any sign of introspection. The star, which in the first painting was quite dim, symbolises the Christian faith.

In the third one ('Contrition'), the effects of the mission begin to be felt. The man looks at the angel who presents him with a skull, an evocation of his own death. The devil and the deadly sins begin to leave his soul. Good triumphs over evil and the Holy Spirit occupies the entire heart. Outside, the devil flees and an angel now offers the Cross and a devotional book. The countenance of the face becomes more modest.

Finally, the last image of the first series of four paintings ('Penitence'), shows Christ beside the Holy Spirit, residing in the heart of the man. At his side are the symbols of the Passion of Christ.² The devil is absent and the angel holds the palm of victory in his hand. The man's face has become more modest, his hairstyle is plain and he looks ahead without any arrogance. In the background, elements of landscape evoke the daily life of a Christian and contain a chapel, rosaries and mass books.

3.3 Two inevitable outcomes

This image may have concluded the series. In reality, two endings had been normally proposed at this stage indicating the pathway to either heaven or hell. The eye and the star, absent from the previous painting, reappear in the fifth painting. The cross is present, but the instruments of the Passion of Christ are overturned.

² The instruments or *attributs* of the passion are a) the spear that pierced Christ's heart, b) the sponge, dipped in water and vinegar, that a soldier gave to Christ to quench his thirst and finally, c) the chalice in which His blood was collected.

While in the first painting the devil was standing, he now sits enthroned in majesty, adorned with the attributes of a king. The man's face is now puffy, full of conceit and his hair is well-groomed again. The dove of the Holy Spirit leaves this lost soul, while the angel seems to be in despair at not having been able to save it.

In the sixth painting, the iconography of the heart disappears to make way for a more classical composition. The sinner lies in the four-poster bed, a symbol of wealth and opulence, while the devil comes to present him with the list of his sins. In the image of the *Ankou*, a Breton representation of the 'grim-reaper', Death bides its time. This time, the angel, who is normally ever faithful, seems to turn away from him. The sky opens and shows Christ uttering the words of the Last Judgment. Behind the bed, demons await their prey.

The next painting is entitled *Petit crayon de l'état malheureux et éternel d'un damné* ('A Little Pencil Drawing the Unhappy and Eternal State of a Damned Soul'). In this nightmarish vision, the man burns in hell while demons torture him. At a distance, other damned individuals are also cast into the flames of hell.

4. The last series of paintings

Using the same iconographic symbols and the same logic, the last series of four paintings illustrates the pathway to Paradise. In the last one, Man sits enthroned in majesty while angels remove souls from purgatory to welcome them to Heaven. Small booklets presenting engravings of the paintings and a brief report had been normally distributed to the faithful at the end of the mission.

This classic series was used for three centuries in Western Brittany, between the first half of the 17th century until the first half of the 19th century. Some variations existed, however. In Vannes, for instance, nuns from the *Retraite* ('Retreat') painted a series of twelve paintings. A woman, wearing the *coiffe* (Breton head-dress) of the region, holds a piece of cloth in front of her, in the manner of the veil of Saint Veronica, on which the heart is depicted. The series produced by Canon Peyron for the parish of Combrit (southwestern Finistère), at the beginning of the 20th century, is enriched with more regional details showing individuals dancing

a Breton *gavotte*. We can also find depictions of games, drinking, musical instruments, all practices that were condemned by the Church.

The paintings of hearts enjoyed remarkable publishing success and were widely disseminated. Parisian engravers reproduced them from the end of the 17th century onwards. Large formats available in *intaglio* had been printed to be displayed on the walls (Mathis 2015: 224–225).³ Curiously, no Breton image maker seems to have produced a series depicting hearts (Beauducel 2009). Pierre Gallays (1677?–1749), an engraver best known for his portrait of Louis XV and who published under the name of *À saint François de Sales*, working in the rue Saint-Jacques in Paris, specialised in calendars, almanacs, and religious images. Jacques Chiquet (1673–1721) published miniaturised images of women while François-Gérard Jollain (1660–1735?) engraved larger cards in 1697. These engraved images spread in the 18th and 19th centuries to Germany, Russia, Asia and Africa (Sauvy 1989: 235–276) and were also republished by *Images d'Épinal* in the town of Épinal in the Vosges in eastern France. These printers who specialised in popular religious and secular images were renowned for their bright colours.

This series was gradually replaced at the beginning of the 20th century by another style of *taolennou* that had more imposing formats and that were less restrictive in their thematic expression.

5. Contemporary *taolennou*

The third generation of paintings appeared at the end of the 19th century and gradually replaced the hearts. These new, larger *taolennou* were vast panels rolled around two wooden sticks of the size of present-day advertising posters. Intended for a wider audience, they had to be clearly legible. As the duration of the mission became shorter (often a week for a retreat), the production of the series of twelve paintings was gradually reduced to six and, further, to four paintings.

It was the Jesuits who took them up and modified them once again. Father Jean Bourdoulous published an explanatory booklet in 1909, *Taolennou ar Mission renket*

³ See, for example, 'Etat d'un homme en état de péché' ('Man in a state of sin'), *Collections numérisées – Diocèse de Quimper et Léon*, <http://bibliotheque.diocese-quimper.fr/items/show/12227>, consulted on 14 November 2021.

a nevez gant eur missioner Breizad ('The Mission Paintings Rearranged by a Breton Missionary'). Other missionaries promoted the new paintings. Among these were the *oblates*⁴ of Mary Immaculate in Saint-Brieuc, the Montfortians of Guipavas as well as the Capuchins, with Father Médard (*Tad Medar*) at the helm and the painter Xavier de Langlais who illustrated his work, not to mention diocesan priests who specialised in preaching through images.



Fig. 7. Temptation, Paradise and Hell, around 1930 (Diocese of Quimper).

⁴ This community of missionaries was founded by Eurène de Mazenod in 1816.

Like the old engraved placards of the past centuries, several of these *taolennou* were divided into three categories: Temptation, Paradise and Hell (fig. 7).

The one of Hell was the largest one that has survived and measures 1.87m x 1.18 m. It is attributed to the artist Marc Choisnard who taught painting at the *Lycée Stanislas* in Paris, a high school run by the Jesuits. In the centre, earthly life is represented. To the left, an angel attracts a man wearing city clothing while a priest accompanies a worker towards Christ, showing him the way to Heaven. Behind him one can see the Sacré-Cœur of Montmartre, a recent construction which inspired profound devotional fervour during the interwar period.

In the sky we recognize certain figures, biblical characters like Moses holding the tablets of the Commandments, or figures like Thérèse of Lisieux and Joan of Arc. On the other side of the central area, a female devil wearing a red dress attracts a young man while a bourgeois couple head towards a character who is portrayed as the counterpart of Christ: a Jewish usurer. The strong anti-Semitic backdrop of the interwar period is also reflected in the mission paintings, which encapsulate the ideas of the time. The money-lender indicates the pathway to hell.

In this way, a single *taolenn* represents the 'Death of a Just Person' and 'The Death of a Sinner'. Within a hellish decor of flames and bats, important politicians and atheist thinkers of the time such as Marx, Trotsky, Stalin, Lenin and Hitler are portrayed. This is an astonishing and rare representation of identifiable individuals. But, in this case, it is the doctrines that these men defend that are condemned, not necessarily the men themselves. The painter is prohibited from judging their fate, only God has that prerogative. In the centre of the stage, the pendulum of a clock stops and is frozen between 'forever' and 'never', a concept influenced by images used in the teaching of the catechism. This painting does not have a particularly Breton flavour but rather shows the dangers of city life and may have been aimed at young people who had hopes of finding work in Paris (cf. Blanchard 2023 on Julien Godest). In addition, because each Breton parish had identifiable costumes and since the paintings were taken from one parish to another, the use of neutral secular clothing ensured that the faithful

would not be distracted or offended if they recognised the traditional dress of a particular parish.

Gradually, these *taolennou* evolved and began to borrow the iconographic language of another medium used for evangelism, that is, the catechism cards published at the end of the 19th century by Parisian companies such as Tolra (Saint-Martin 2003), not to mention certain still images intended for light projections that were published by La Bonne Presse.

Nevertheless, some *taolennou* do reflect the culture of Brittany. The paintings of Canon Peyron, archivist of the diocese of Quimper, and connoisseur of the maps of Michel Le Nobletz, often represent picturesque details of life in the Western Breton countryside. A large painting (so large that it was certainly never used in the context of a mission) illustrates, in two horizontal bands, life on earth and existence in hell. In the latter case, there is no hope and Paradise is not even represented here. On Earth, life consists solely of conflict; fighting and a subsequent murder and women quarrelling at a washhouse. People dance around a couple of bagpipers who are perched on cider barrels in front of an inn bearing the name of *Au Bon diable* ('To the Good Devil').

On several occasions, the bishop of Quimper, Duparc (1857–1908), condemned traditional Breton dancing and ballroom dancing, the latter being known in Breton as *dansoùkof-ha-kof* ('belly-to-belly dances'). This prohibition was integrated into the mission paintings and reflects the religious mindset of the time. In the end, these activities would lead to damnation and the torments of hell. One of the last creators of the *taolennou* was Canon Peyron who introduced a humorous touch with a demon-painter teaching sinners for eternity the moral lessons represented in the *taolennou* and the seven deadly sins.

At the request of the Montfortians, the last series of paintings was produced during the Second World War by the painter Xavier de Langlais. This Catholic community was founded in 1704 by a priest named Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673–1716) who devoted his entire life to popular missions in Eastern (French and Gallo-speaking) Brittany as well as in Normandy, Poitou and Saintonge.

Already active in the fields of sacred art, de Langlais produced the decoration and the 'path of choice' (i.e. the pathway to heaven) in 1937 for the chapel of the Saint-Joseph secondary school in Lannion. Merging the two previous types of paintings, he placed a heart surmounted by a head at the centre of the painting as the key element of a larger composition. De Langlais was a member of the *Seiz-Breur* (Seven brothers), a Breton artistic movement founded during the interwar period as well as the *Atelier breton d'art chrétien* ('Breton Workshop of Christian Art'). Through the costumes, dance elements or Breton words, he gave a very pronounced Breton character to his paintings.

His *Votadeg* highlights the condemnation of the 'bad' (i.e. leftist) vote and one sees the devil, who has taken the shape of a man, leading a voter by the hand who is wearing the traditional round hat of the Breton farmer. In his *sinema*, he condemns what he views as a new, shameful leisure activity. Gambling is also condemned, as is drunkenness, a recurring theme in his paintings. In another painting the artist adopts the theme of the three paths, a concept initially developed by Michel Le Nobletz in the map of *La Croix*.

In 1946, Father Médard, a Capuchin, commissioned a final series of paintings from Xavier de Langlais. But, by this time, the urbanized post-war society had changed dramatically. With the influence of the Breton language diminishing, the *taolennou* could now be explained in French. The parish missions became less and less popular and, during the 20th century, were replaced by *action catholique* ('Catholic action'), the objective of which was primarily social. Xavier de Langlais, however, remained faithful to the images and subsequently produced numerous woodcuts of Breton saints such as those depicted in the *Bleun-Brug* journal⁵ in 1952 where one sees Michel Le Nobletz holding a collection of hymns in his hands and posing behind a painting: a tribute from the last creator of the *taolennou* to the first of them.

5 *Bleun Brug*, meaning 'heather flower' in Breton, was a religious journal founded by Abbot Perrot in 1905.

Summary and conclusion

The painted maps and *taolennou* are therefore explained only in the context of parish missions, or closed retreats. The first users, such as Michel Le Nobletz, as well as the Jesuits Vincent Huby and Julien Maunoir, made the *taolennou* their specialty. Later, some diocesan priests dedicated to missionary work also used these paintings. Among these were Abbot Nicolas in Landudec (to the west of Quimper), François-Marie Balanant as well as the Canon Jean-François Grall in the Crozon peninsula (south of Brest), or even Abbot Bernard-François Le Teurnier, whose full-length statue, sculpted by Yan Larhantec, stands beside the church of Plougouven, his home parish (south of Morlaix). Engraved in granite, the latter represents the fearful image of hell inspired by Huby's classic series. In addition to their oratory skills, these painter-priests enthralled the faithful for long hours with their explanations of the *taolennou*.

In the *Semaine religieuse de Quimper* ('Religious Week in Quimper') regular reports on these missions were provided. Check, for example, the following report written about a mission in Ploudalmézeau (the westernmost point of the diocese of Leon) on 16 October 1896:

L'explication des tableaux a été suivie avec d'autant plus de plaisir, qu'elle a été donnée pour la première fois dans l'église de Ploudalmézeau. D'ailleurs M. Couloigner, recteur de Plouénan, qui en était chargé la première semaine, et M. L'Helgoualc'h, recteur du Juch, la seconde, sont des orateurs qu'on a toujours plaisir à entendre. L'un parle avec une onction qui pénètre les cœurs les plus endurcis ; l'autre charme son auditoire par sa connaissance profonde et ses peintures si vraies du cœur humain.

(Anon. 1896)

The explanation of the paintings was followed with all the more pleasure, as it was presented for the first time in the church of Ploudalmézeau. Moreover, Mr. Couloigner, rector of Plouénan, who was in charge of the first week, and Mr. L'Helgoualc'h, rector of Juch, who animated the second week, are both speakers whom one always enjoys hearing. The first speaks with a loving kindness that penetrates even the most hardened hearts; the second charms his audience with his deep knowledge and his very honest paintings of the human heart.

Yet another mission report, dated October 11, 1907, is published in this same review and provides an account of the activities that took place in Lennon, in central Cornouaille:

Il fallait voir les bons Lennonnais accourir, longtemps avant l'heure, retenir leurs places, surtout pour écouter les conférences sur le Décalogue de M. Le Sann, recteur de Plougonven, et l'explication des tableaux que M. Balanant, recteur de Penhars, a donnée pendant les quinze jours avec son talent connu et son succès habituel.

(Anon. 1907)

Long before the religious fortnight took place, it was amazing to see the good people of Lennon hurrying to reserve their seats. In particular they looked forward to listening to the conferences on the *Decalogue* ('The Ten Commandments') by Mr. Le Sann, rector of Plougonven, as well as the explanations of the paintings which, for the entire two-weeks, were skilfully presented, with his usual success, by Mr. Balanant, rector of Penhars (a parish of Quimper).

The explanations were often serious, but were occasionally light and humorous. The use of the Breton language allowed for this flexibility and complicity with the parishioners. However, not all priests appreciated this kind of evangelisation, fearing that the painted images would distract the congregation from listening attentively to the messages of their sermons.

It is difficult today to measure the impact of these images on the faithful who were only familiar with the stained-glass windows of their parish churches, or a few rare engravings that were occasionally sold by travelling merchants. The team of missionaries who settled in the parish for a period that varied from a week to a month, drilled worshippers in the principles of Catholic doctrine. This was accomplished not only through the power of their sermons but also the associated maps and, later, images. Taken together, this combined pedagogical approach offered parishioners a veritable audio-visual method of instruction. This kind of preaching is hardly ever attested in Eastern French/Gallo-speaking Brittany or, for that matter, in other regions of France. The paintings were aimed more particularly at rural and Breton-speaking populations who were nearly all illiterate in either Breton or French. The language barrier probably constituted one of the greatest obstacles to more traditional methods of evangelisation.

If the vast majority of the works published in Breton during the 19th century were books on piety and devotion, apart from the clergy and the upper classes of society, only very few people among the Breton population were able to read these books.

The paintings are complementary to the typical Breton calvaries, which served as virtual catechism lessons carved in stone, or the stained-glass windows and the statues and religious ornamentation in the churches. Taken together, these combined artistic representations reinforced the faith of Breton-speaking Christians. They constitute an integral element of the parish civilisation of Western Brittany and remain today a testimony to these methods of evangelisation. For their artistic and ethnological qualities, all the paintings of the diocese of Quimper were classified as “historical monuments” by the French Ministry of Culture (POP 2003).

In the 20th century, however, the clergy lost interest in the *taolennou* as a tool of evangelisation. After the 1950s, Catholicism lost much of its power and influence. The consequence has been that Breton society, just as Western society more generally, has been progressively de-Christianised. Furthermore, in parallel to this, the force of the Breton-language metaphors once used to describe these images were slowly getting lost as the majority of Breton speakers abandoned their language in favour of French. Indeed, the appearance of French-language picture books devoted to the teaching of the catechism, some of which are inspired by the *taolennou*, were now able to replace them. The development of new techniques, such as light projections and ‘film-strips’ during the thirties, the latter being a succession of catechetical images that were projected for patronages (i.e. the religious instruction of the young), played a similar role. Finally, during the second half of the 20th century, the large-scale use of photos in the media and, during the fifties, the arrival of films rendered the use of mission boards obsolete. In this new secular world, it was becoming increasingly difficult to resist the attraction of the John Waynes and Brigitte Bardots of the motion picture screen.

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