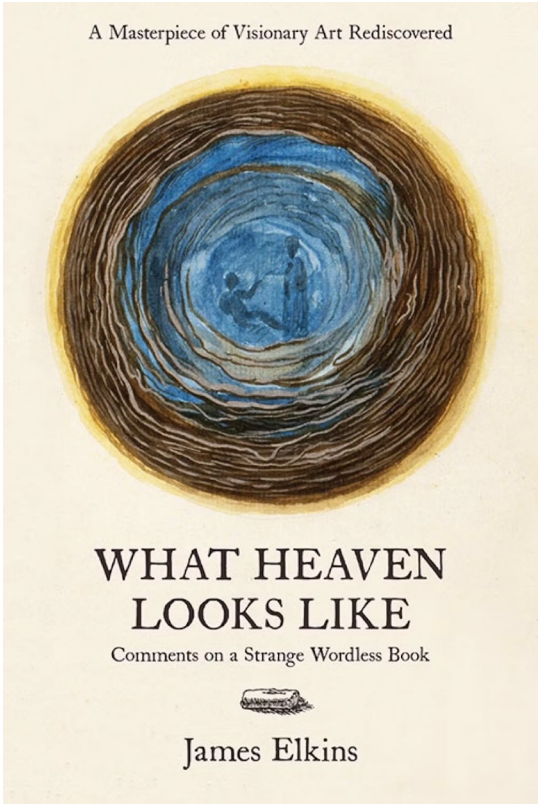
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What Heaven Looks Like

Comments on a Strange Wordless Book

James Elkins

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- An unknown masterpiece of visionary art-as daring as Blake or Goya, but utterly different-reproduced in full colour, with a commentary by one of our most original art historians

Somewhere in Europe—we don't know where—around 1700. An artist is staring at something on the floor next to her worktable. It's just a log from the woodpile, stood on end. The soft, damp bark; the gently raised growth rings; the dark radial cracks—nothing could be more ordinary. But as the artist looks, and looks, colours begin to appear—shapes—even figures. She turns to a sheet of paper and begins to paint. Today this anonymous artist's masterpiece is preserved in the University of Glasgow Library. It is a manuscript in a plain brown binding, whose entire contents, beyond a cryptic title page, are 52 small, round watercolour paintings based on the visions she saw in the ends of firewood logs. This book reproduces the entire sequence of paintings in full colour, together with a meditative commentary by the art historian James Elkins. Sometimes, he writes, we can glimpse the artist's sources—Baroque religious art, genre painting, mythology, alchemical manuscripts, emblem books, optical effects. But always she distorts her images, mixes them together, leaves them incomplete—always she rejects familiar stories and clear-cut meanings. In this daring refusal to make sense, Elkins sees an uncannily modern attitude of doubt and scepticism; he draws a portrait of the artist as an irremediably lonely, amazingly independent soul, inhabiting a distinct historical moment between the faded Renaissance and the overconfident Enlightenment. ***What Heaven Looks Like*** is a rare event: an encounter between a truly perceptive historian of images, and a master conjurer of them.

James Elkins is E. C. Chadbourne Chair of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His scholarship has focused on the history and theory of images in art, science, and nature; his many books *include What Painting Is, Pictures and Tears*, and *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing.* Presently he is working on an experimental novel with images.

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