




Fall 2018

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Abstract

When the Archangel Gabriel descended from heaven to inform the Virgin Mary of her status as God's chosen vehicle for the birth of Jesus Christ, she was immediately filled with a sense of apprehension. Gabriel's words, "...invenisti enim gratiam apud Deum [you have found favor with God]," reassured the Virgin that she would face no harm, and the scene of the Annunciation (what this moment has come to be called) has forever been immortalized in Christian belief as a watershed moment in the New Testament. While many Byzantine icons of the Medieval period sought to depict this snapshot in time and commemorate its importance, the most notable artistic examples of The Annunciation began to appear in the 15th century as the stylistic and symbolic traditions of the Renaissance began to take shape. While the works of artists such as Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci have come to generally be known as the touchstones of this early Renaissance period, the talents and contributions of northern masters must not be overlooked.

Keywords

Van Eyck, Renaissance, Flemish, Madonna

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Christianity | Painting

Comments

Research paper written for Art History 203: Northern Renaissance Art.

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SUB LEGE TO SUB GRATIA:
An Iconographic Study of Van Eyck's *Annunciation*

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Art History 203: Northern Renaissance Art
October 4th, 2018

When the Archangel Gabriel descended from heaven to inform the Virgin Mary of her status as God's chosen vehicle for the birth of Jesus Christ, she was immediately filled with a sense of apprehension. Gabriel's words, "...invenisti enim gratiam apud Deum [you have found favor with God],"¹ reassured the Virgin that she would face no harm, and the scene of the Annunciation (what this moment has come to be called) has forever been immortalized in Christian belief as a watershed moment in the New Testament. While many Byzantine icons of the Medieval period sought to depict this snapshot in time and commemorate its importance, the most notable artistic examples of The Annunciation began to appear in the 15th century as the stylistic and symbolic traditions of the Renaissance began to take shape. While the works of artists such as Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci have come to generally be known as the touchstones of this early Renaissance period, the talents and contributions of northern masters must not be overlooked.

Especially in the first half of the 15th century, northern European artists began to depict archetypal scenes that would become staples of the Renaissance as a whole. This fact is evident especially in the work of Flemish painter Jan van Eyck, whose style incorporated elements of naturalism and detail that characterized the Northern Renaissance style for decades following his death. In particular, his depiction of *The Annunciation* (painted between 1434-1436) (fig. 1) displays the artist's attention to detail and symbolic elements to present a case-in-point of Early Northern Renaissance style. However, the sheer proliferation of these aspects combine to ensure that *Annunciation* stands out among other Annunciation scenes of the period, including those created in Italy and painted by van Eyck's fellow Flemings. Especially in terms of biblical

¹ "Luke 1:26-6:22," Bible Gateway, , accessed September 27, 2018, [https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke 1:26-38:26&version=!](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%201:26-38:26&version=!)

symbolism, van Eyck's *Annunciation* far surpasses contemporaneous examples from across the continent.

The Washington *Annunciation* is fairly typical in its basic composition, with Gabriel on one side, speaking to the Virgin who is positioned across from the archangel. Both figures are set within a cathedral that combines elements of Romanesque and Gothic architecture, including the rounded, Romanesque clerestory windows and pointed Gothic arches on the ground level. The walls include various stained-glass windows and apparent mosaic scenes, echoed on the floor by scenes depicted in minute detail on the floor in tile. Gabriel, approaching the Virgin from the left side of the composition, is dressed in sumptuous red and gold robes, adorned with precious jewels and gold trim (fig. 2). His robes are emblazoned with a large floral pattern, which is echoed in an additional garment underneath that contains green and gold elements. The angel's wings, folded behind him as he approaches, contain all manner of colors which create a brilliant rainbow effect. Atop a head full of curly blond hair, van Eyck places a vivid gold crown, inlaid with a plethora of small pearls and precious gemstones. The lavish nature of the crown is also reflected in Gabriel's scepter, which seems to be crafted out of gold and crystal due to its transparency and unique refraction of light.

Although the Virgin's dress is not quite as luxuriously complex as that of the archangel, it is nonetheless an intricate and flowing garment (fig. 3). As a juxtaposition to Gabriel's brilliant red robe, perhaps what is most striking to the viewer is the vivid blue of Mary's dress. The intricate lines and folds of the garment flow across the furniture and floor as a waterfall of color, which especially stands out against the warmer tones of the background. As opposed to Gabriel's costume, Mary's is largely devoid of ornamentation, fastened in the middle only by a thin red

belt and trimmed with a hint of ermine around the sleeves and neck. The garment is framed by a narrow gold trim, the color of which is seen again in the small tiara atop the Virgin's head. Like Gabriel, the Virgin possesses a head full of curly golden hair which is framed elegantly by her ultramarine dress.

Perspectivally, the composition does not make use of the developments pioneered by Brunelleschi, as his treatise on linear perspective would not be published in Italy until after van Eyck began the *Annunciation*. The lack of one-point linear perspective is evident especially in the extreme foreground, where the artist has placed a small stool underneath a luxurious cardinal-colored pillow. Since the viewer can clearly see both the top and side of the stool, it is evident that the orientation of the viewer in an actual space was not as important in this composition as in later works of the Renaissance. This is also exemplified in the slope of the floor, which likewise does not follow the guidance of Brunelleschi's orthogonals to create the illusion of recession into the background. Although it may be convenient to simply dismiss this as a lack of understanding of the use of space, it must also be noted that the sheer upward slope of the floor allows the viewer to notice the various intricate scenes in the tiling of the floor, which contain symbolism originating in the Old Testament.

An iconographic analysis of the *Annunciation* reveals both more evident and specific symbolism through depictions of biblical figures and a more covert theme achieved through architectural and biblical progression. The former is exhibited in the floor pavement, which depicts multiple scenes from the life of Samson in the Old Testament (fig. 4). In this case, van Eyck uses various figures as Old Testament allusions to Christ, as these figures all represent a type of redemption over various earthly and spiritual foes. For example, Samson's actions reflect

the later role of Christ in the New Testament; one scene depicted is that of Samson slaying the Philistines, which alludes to Christ's role in the Last Judgement and the defeat of sinful endeavors. The frontmost scene has also been identified as the slaying of Goliath by David, perhaps meant to symbolize the triumph of Christ over Satan.² These scenes are in turn surrounded by stylized columbine flowers and clovers, symbolizing the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity, respectively.³ Found in the corners of each scene are the signs of the zodiac, which were often included in Medieval religious architecture to establish the role of God as the king of all earthly and heavenly bodies.⁴

As the viewer's eye moves up the composition, the footstool stands the object closest to the picture plane. Although its symbolic nature is perhaps not quite as clear as that of the biblical scenes on the floor, it has been interpreted to mirror the theme of the Earth as "the Lord's footstool," or to suggest the empty throne awaiting the return of Christ.⁵ Directly adjacent to this piece of furniture is a bouquet of lilies which, especially due to their close proximity to the Virgin, can be interpreted to represent her purity (fig. 5).⁶ Although little symbolism can be identified in the clothing of the subjects themselves, it is worth noting that the brilliant blue of the Virgin's dress is typical of depictions of Mary. Since ultramarine was the most difficult pigment to obtain in northern Europe throughout the Renaissance, its use was restricted to only the most important figures. Over time, this became a symbol of the Virgin, denoting both the basic identity of the figure but also her importance in compositions such as van Eyck's own

² John Oliver Hand and Martha Wolff, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1986), 80-81.

³ James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1979), 115.

⁴ Hand and Wolff, *ENP*, 80.

⁵ Hand and Wolff, *ENP*, 81.

⁶ Hall, *Subjects & Symbols in Art*, 192.

Altarpiece of the Lamb (Ghent Altarpiece) (fig. 6). The ermine trim of the Virgin's dress may also hold symbolic meaning, as the white pelt of the stoat is often used in the garments of female saints to symbolize purity and virginity.⁷

Above the central figures, van Eyck includes golden rays of light traveling from the highest windows of the church towards the head of the Virgin, which are clearly differentiated from the natural light that bathes the composition as a whole. This light, also demonstrated in the *Merode Altarpiece* (fig. 7) by Robert Campin nearly a decade earlier, is likely meant to represent a heavenly light, symbolizing the presence of God in the Annunciation. This explanation is buttressed by the dove on the longest and most direct golden ray, which certainly represents the Holy Spirit as it does in the lower portion of van Eyck's *Altarpiece of the Lamb* (fig. 8). Adjacent to the Holy Spirit, van Eyck places two roundels on the back wall of the church, which are significantly less conspicuous to the viewer. The artist identifies these figures as Isaac and Jacob through small text on the edge of each roundel, which may refer to a comparison between Jacob's blessing of Isaac and God's blessing of Mary through Gabriel (fig. 9).⁸

Closest to the ceiling, van Eyck places a singular stained glass window in the center of the rear wall (fig. 10). The window depicts a bearded figure surrounded by a mandorla and holding a tablet and scepter, which has led many to interpret this as the God of the Old Testament. The figure also stands on what appears to be globe bearing the inscription "Asia," which perhaps refers to the tradition of depicting God as dominant over the Earth. The window also evokes earlier Romanesque depictions of Christ in Judgment, such as Gislebertus' portal sculpture of the Autun Cathedral (fig. 11). Two murals flank the central window, both depicting

⁷ Hall, *Subjects & Symbols in Art*, 72.

⁸ Hand and Wolff, *ENP*, 80.

scenes from the life of the Old Testament prophet Moses. On the left, the infant Moses is presented to the daughter of the Pharaoh, which parallels the Virgin's motherhood of a child that will eventually bear the covenant of God and mankind. On the opposite side, van Eyck depicts the presentation of the Ten Commandments to Moses, which parallels Moses' reception of the Old Covenant with the Incarnation of Christ as the origin of the New Covenant, from *sub lege* (under law) to *sub gratia* (under grace) (fig. 10). There is also noticeable physical deterioration depicted in the wooden planks of the ceiling, perhaps suggesting the deterioration of the human spirit before the redemption provided by the death of Christ (fig 11).⁹

While the specific symbols presented by the artist are largely meant to draw parallels between Old Testament figures and episodes in the life of Jesus Christ, the setting of the work also serves this purpose. It is rather rare for Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation to be set in an ecclesiastical setting, although the precedent of such a location derives from the use of churches and monasteries in books of hours in the Gothic age (fig. 12).¹⁰ Van Eyck's use of an intricate cathedral for a setting is among the first of such examples in painting, and one of a few such examples in the Renaissance era as a whole. Particularly unique about this ecclesiastical setting is that it seems to progress chronologically from top to bottom rather than the more logical construction over time of older elements near the foundation to newer elements added on top. This seemingly peculiar choice by van Eyck has been identified as very deliberate in the

⁹ Carol Purtle, "Van Eyck's Washington Annunciation: Narrative Time and Metaphoric Tradition," *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 1 (March 1999): 117, doi:10.2307/3051290.

¹⁰ Hand and Wolff, *ENP*, 81.

scheme of the work, which compares the evolution in architectural style to the progression of spirituality wrought by the birth, life, and death of Christ.¹¹

At the top of the structure, the rounded clerestory windows echo the themes of the Old Testament God depicted in stained glass and the aforementioned murals of Moses, as the architectural motifs of the Romanesque era are meant to correspond with the ideas of the Old Testament. Similarly, the pointed Gothic arches on the ground level are meant to signal the evolution in architectural style just as the proclamation of Christ's birth brought an evolution to religion. Echoing this theme is the transition on the back wall from one stained glass window in the clerestory depicting the old God to three larger windows on the ground level, perhaps meant to symbolize the trinity completed by the birth of Christ.¹²

The triforium, present horizontally across the center of the composition may either be used as a third level to provide another reference to the trinity, or may simply be used as a divider between top and bottom. Although the architectural motifs were likely composed as a whole solely in the mind of the artist, there is precedent in actual architecture for the kind of compositions present in *Annunciation*.¹³ For example, the church of Saint Quentin in Tournai (fig. 13) incorporates gothic arches under a triforium, which in turn is under rounded, Romanesque clerestory windows. These transitional buildings between Romanesque and Gothic styles no doubt provided inspiration to the Flemish van Eyck in constructing this fictional interior.¹⁴

¹¹ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (New York, NY: Icon Editions, 1971), 138.

¹² Panofsky, *ENP*, 138.

¹³ Thomas Lyman, "Architectural Portraiture and Jan Van Eyck's Washington *Annunciation*," *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 1 (March 1999): 117, doi:10.2307/3051290.

¹⁴ Lyman, "Architectural Portraiture," 266.

Since works such as van Eyck's *Annunciation* are sometimes overshadowed by those of the Italian Renaissance, it is worthwhile to entertain a brief comparison between examples of both the northern and southern traditions. When discussing the Early Renaissance in Italy, perhaps the most well-known Annunciation scenes are those of Fra Angelico, who was an Italian contemporary of van Eyck. When Cosimo de Medici refurbished the Convent of San Marco, Fra Angelico was commissioned to create decorative murals for the contemplation of the monks.¹⁵ In painting these frescoes, he created some of the earliest examples of Italian Renaissance Annunciation scenes, which continued to typify other Italian examples just as van Eyck's did in the north. Perhaps the most striking difference between the two works is the relative simplicity of Fra Angelico's (fig. 14), especially in regard to the setting. The sumptuous, bejewelled robes of Gabriel and the deep blue, ermine-trimmed dress of the virgin have given way to much simpler, unadorned garb. Although there is an architectural feature in the small vaulted portico that the virgin sits in, said architecture is devoid of ornamentation except the capitals of the columns surrounding the figures. Although symbolism of "hortus conclusus" is present on the left side of the composition, the lack of detail provides Fra Angelico with far fewer opportunities to include symbolism, hidden or otherwise.

In this comparison, the objection may be made that the tone of the work is necessarily different due to its context. While van Eyck's was likely a part of a luxurious northern altarpiece, Fra Angelico's was meant for the relatively spartan world of secluded monks. With this in mind, it is prudent to compare van Eyck's Annunciation to yet another work from Italy, this time from nearly half a century after the prior examples. Andrea del Verrocchio and Leonardo da Vinci's

¹⁵ Paolo Morachiello, *Fra Angelico: The San Marco Frescoes* (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

collaborative *Annunciation* (fig. 15), painted between 1472 and 1475, shows a considerable increase in detail and naturalism from that of Fra Angelico in the 1430s. However, it must be stressed that even this work of Leonardo is different from that of van Eyck in similar ways to the work of Fra Angelico. Leonardo's figures, although exhibiting much more complex drapery, are conservatively dressed compared to van Eyck's figures. The Italian works share the symbolism of "madonna as enclosed garden," but like Angelico's, Leonardo's exhibits little in the way of architectural detail. Although this does mean that Leonardo is able to demonstrate his development of linear and atmospheric perspective, it again leaves little room for the sheer volume of religious symbolism exhibited in van Eyck's version.

Through visual and iconographic analysis, it is clear that Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation* exhibits pictorial and symbolic complexity unrivaled by contemporaneous artists. Through the use of architectural and specific illustrative symbols, van Eyck creates narrative themes that typify his style which is also evident in his other works such as the *Ghent Altarpiece*. In comparison to Italian works on the same subject, both contemporary and later, van Eyck's attention to detail provides a striking contrast. Although he is unable to make use of developments such as linear or atmospheric perspective, the iconographic detail and narrative of van Eyck's work was unparalleled among artists of the Early Renaissance period.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4





Figure 7

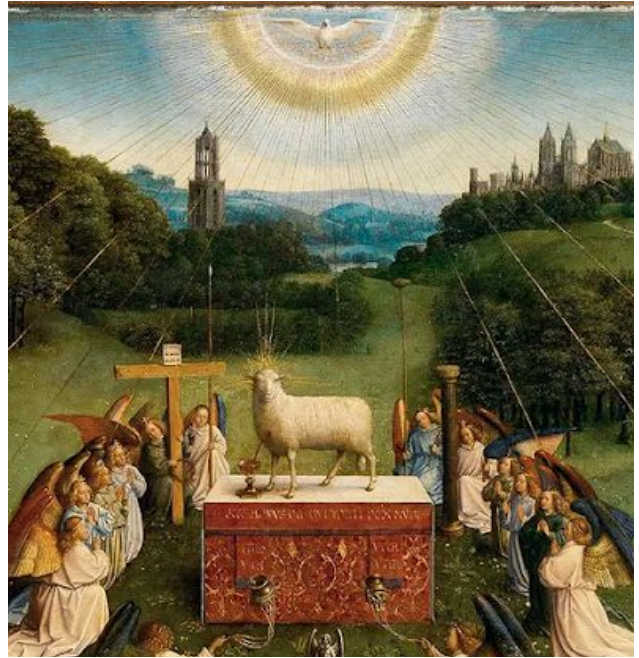


Figure 8

Figure 9

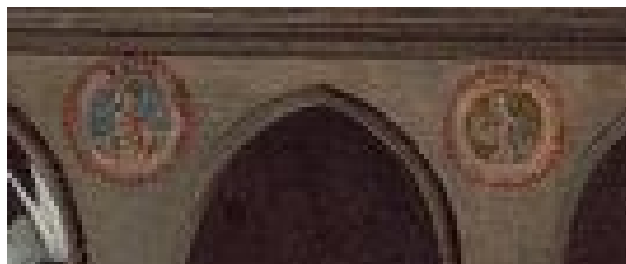


Figure 10



Figure 11

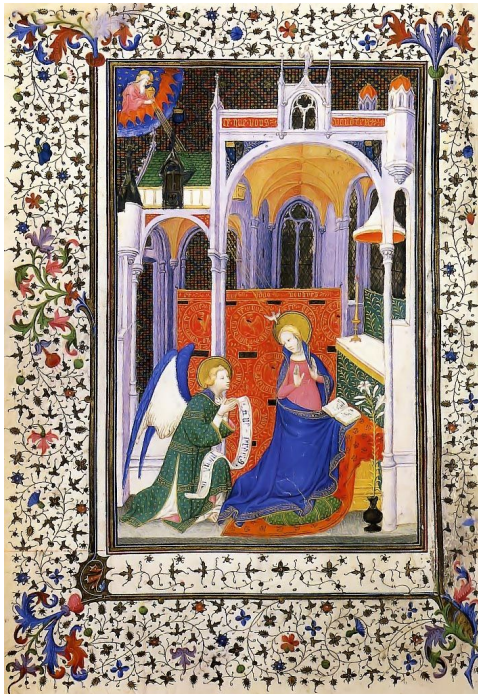


Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

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