

TALK, ANNUNCIATION, 25 March 2021



I shared this Annunciation painting with you at the beginning of February. It's probably by the Netherland artist Robert Campin, painting about 1425, later made into a triptych, a three part painting, by an assistant. We have Mary sitting and reading – a wise young lady, taking in wisdom. She hasn't yet noticed Gabriel is present, or that her candle has just blown out. Coming in through the left hand window is the light of the Spirit, a flying Jesus, holding his cross. That's replaced the light of the candle, and is heading straight for Mary's womb.

On the right we have Joseph – the carpenter at work – and on the left we have the people who had purchased the image. We don't have definite names for them, one source suggests they might be Peter Engelbrecht and his wife Margarete – he was a merchant from Cologne. They have come into the Virgin's garden, the door is open and they are kneeling, watching this scene unfold before them. I wondered last time what Peter and Margarete would think if they knew that 700 years later people in Derby would be looking at their painting on Zoom – perhaps he's current yelling at her, "darling, they've enjoying our painting again."



This painting also has Mary and Gabriel in the centre – I love the sense of perspective and the way the angel is entering the room. God is in the top left hand corner of the painting, and he is looking directly at Mary. Joseph is on the right – apparently he is huddled by the fire to remind us that Jesus will be born in winter. Over on the left we don't have the donors, we have the scene of Adam and Eve being expelled from Paradise – when we celebrated Joseph last week I used “Adam lay ybounden” – the Annunciation is the start of the healing of the sin of Adam and Eve. Even the garden, which became a wilderness, is becoming a garden again – you can probably guess the symbolism of the rabbits, fertility at its best. The artist is *Giovanni di Paolo*, an Italian painter working in Sienna. Born 1403, died 1482 – and this is part of a larger altarpiece.



Let's jump on almost 600 years, and this Annunciation was painted in 2000 by John Collier, an American artist. We have the lily, the symbol of Mary's purity, and she is reading a book. Collier wrote about how he had portrayed Mary as a school girl to remind us she was normal, and when we looked at this on our course everyone else was saying how much they liked it, how the incarnation is so human. I kept quiet, because I don't like it. For me, this Mary is too young – and I find it very unsettling. The Annunciation should unsettle us, but not in this way.



Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859 –1937) was the first African-American painter to gain international acclaim. He moved to Paris in 1891 to study, and painted this in 1897, shortly after returning to Paris from a trip to Egypt and Palestine. The son of a minister, Tanner specialized in religious subjects, and wanted to experience the people, culture, architecture, and light of the Holy Land. Influenced by what he saw, Tanner created an unconventional image of the moment when Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear the Son of God. Mary is shown as an adolescent dressed in rumpled Middle Eastern peasant clothing, without a halo or other holy attributes. Gabriel appears only as a shaft of light, almost Pentecostal in the idea of fire and the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary looks very human, unsettled by the message, but she will say “yes.” I like this image of her.

We see the Annunciation in paintings, in stained glass, and in words. Here is a poem by Malcolm Guite, poet, and chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge

The Annunciation, *Malcolm Guite*

We see so little, stayed on surfaces,
We calculate the outsides of all things,
Preoccupied with our own purposes
We miss the shimmer of the angels' wings,
They coruscate around us in their joy
A swirl of wheels and eyes and wings unfurled,
They guard the good we purpose to destroy,
A hidden blaze of glory in God's world.
But on this day a young girl stopped to see
With open eyes and heart. She heard the voice;
The promise of His glory yet to be,
As time stood still for her to make a choice;
Gabriel knelt and not a feather stirred,
The Word himself was waiting on her word.

Peter Barham
24 March 2021

The Churches Conservation Trust lecture by Father Jeremy Haselock entitled
"Most highly favoured lady, the Annunciation in the art of our Medieval
churches" can be watched at
<https://www.facebook.com/ChurchesConservationTrust/videos/3772631726160670>

and I expect it will shortly be on their youtube pages – go onto youtube and
search for "Churches Conservation Trust"