

= Annunciation (Memling) =

The Annunciation is an oil @-@ on @-@ oak panel painting attributed to the Early Netherlandish master Hans Memling . Completed c . 1482 , it was partially transferred to canvas in the 1920s and is today held in the Robert Lehman collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art , New York . It shows the Virgin in a domestic interior , two attendant angels , the archangel Gabriel dressed in rich ecclesiastical robes , and a hovering dove . The painting is based and expands upon the Annunciation wing of Rogier van der Weyden 's c . 1455 Saint Columba altarpiece . The Virgin simultaneously swoons and foreshadows the crucifixion . According to art historian Maryan Ainsworth , the work presents a " startlingly original image , rich in connotations for the viewer or worshiper . " The simple iconography centers on the Virgin 's purity ; the Incarnation , the Virgin as mother and her role as bride and Queen of Heaven .

The original frame survived until the 19th century and was inscribed with a date believed to be 1482 ; 20th @-@ century art historians suggested the number 's final digit was a nine , which would give a date of 1489 . In 1847 Gustav Friedrich Waagen described it as one of Memling 's " finest and most original works " . In 1902 it was exhibited in Bruges at the Exposition des primitifs flamands à Bruges , after which it underwent cleaning and restoration . Philip Lehman bought it in 1920 from the Radziwill family who may have had it in their family since the 16th century ; Antoni Radziwill discovered it on a family estate in the early 19th century . At that time it had been pierced through with an arrow and required restoration .

= = Description = =

= = = Annunciation = = =

The Annunciation was a popular theme in European art , although a difficult scene to paint , because it depicts Mary 's union with Christ as she becomes the tabernacle for the Word made flesh . Mary as Theotokos , the God @-@ bearer , was affirmed in 431 at the Council of Ephesus ; two decades later the Council of Chalcedon affirmed the doctrine of Incarnation ? that Christ was of two natures (God and Man) ? and her perpetual virginity was affirmed at the Lateran Council of 631 . In Byzantine art , Annunciation scenes depict the Virgin enthroned and dressed in royal regalia . In later centuries she was shown in enclosed spaces : the temple , the church , the garden .

The Annunciation is typically set in domestic interiors in Early Netherlandish art , a style Robert Campin established , and Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden followed . Neither Campin nor van Eyck went so far as to set the scene in a bedchamber , although the motif is found in van der Weyden 's c . 1435 Louvre Annunciation and c . 1455 Saint Columba altarpiece in which the Virgin kneels by the nuptial bed , rendered in red made from costly pigments . Memling 's depiction is nearly identical to van der Weyden 's Columba Altarpiece .

= = = Figures = = =

The archangel Gabriel appears to Mary to inform her that she shall bear the Son of God . He is shown standing in a three @-@ quarter view wearing a small jeweled diadem and dressed in vestments . He has a richly embroidered red @-@ and @-@ gold brocade cope , edged with a pattern of gray seraphim and wheels , over a white alb and amice . He holds his staff of office in one hand , and raises the other towards the Virgin . He bends his knees , honoring and acknowledging her as Mother of Christ and Queen of Heaven , and his feet are bare and positioned slightly behind hers .

The Virgin is in a frontal view ; directly behind her the red @-@ curtained bed acts as a framing device , similar to the traditional canopy @-@ of @-@ honor or baldachin . Unlike Memling 's predecessors whose Virgins are garbed in heavily jeweled and costly robes , the plain white shift she wears beneath a blue mantle is minimally jeweled at the hem and at the open neckline . A

purple underdress peeks out at her neck and wrists , indicating her royal status . Mary seems neither surprised nor fearful at the announcement ; according to Blum the scene is rendered with a great sense of naturalism and successfully depicts " the transformation of Mary from girl to God @-@ bearer . "

The Virgin holds an innovative and unusual position . She seems to be either rising or swooning as if having lost her balance , a divergence from her conventional seated or kneeling pose . Blum believes " one may search in vain in other Netherlandish Annunciation panels of the fifteenth century of a Virgin positioned as she is here " . Art historian Penny Jolly suggests the painting shows a birthing position , a motif van der Weyden experimented with in the Seven Sacraments Altarpiece , where the Virgin 's collapse results in a childbirth @-@ like posture , and with the Descent from the Cross , in which Mary Magdalen bends and crouches ? similar to the position Memling 's Magdalen assumes in his Lamentation . Flanking the Virgin , and holding her , are two attendant angels . The one to the left lifts the Virgin 's robe while the other gazes at the viewer , " soliciting our response " , according to Ainsworth . Both are small @-@ statured , solemn , and according to Blum , in mood " comparable to that of Gabriel . " Other than the presence of the angels , Memling shows a typical upper @-@ merchant @-@ class 15th @-@ century Flemish bedchamber .

= = = Objects = = =

The dove of the Holy Spirit hovers inside a rainbow @-@ hued circle of light directly above the Virgin 's head . Its placement and size is unusual for art of the period . It is unlike anything found in van der Weyden , and never repeated in Memling 's work , but reminiscent of van Eyck 's dove in the Ghent Altarpiece 's Annunciation panel . Its shape is found in medallions hung above beds at that time , and thus seems in keeping with the domestic interior .

Mary 's left hand is on an open prayer @-@ book , propped on a prie @-@ dieu ; the letter " D " visible on the page ? perhaps for Deus tecum (" the Lord be with you ") , according to Ainsworth . Blum speculates the passage is from Isaiah 7 : 14 , " Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a son . " A vase containing white lilies and a single blue iris is next to it on the floor .

A curtain sack , commonly found on beds of the period , hangs in the central axis between Gabriel and the attendant angel . A sideboard beside the bed contains two types of candles and a flask of water standing in bright light falling from the window to the left . The floor is multi @-@ colored tile @-@ work , similar to van der Weyden 's Columba altarpiece ; Memling truncates the ceiling rafters in the mid @-@ ground , at the end of the bed , with the floor extending into the foreground . Blum describes the effect as acting " like an open stage for the holy figures " .

= = Iconography = =

The iconography is not overly labored , and Memling avoids extraneous symbolism . Many elements emphasize Mary 's role as the Mother of God ; the chamber is furnished with simple everyday objects that indicate her purity . The vase of lilies and the items on the sideboard are objects 15th @-@ century viewers would have associated with her . White lilies were often used to signify her purity , while irises or sword lilies were used as metaphors for her suffering . Memling emphasizes symbols associated with her womb and virginity , and " introduces two additional angelic priests , and floods the room with natural light , thereby rearranging the anecdotal to emphasize the doctrinal meaning . " Charles Sterling describes the work as " one of the finest examples of Memling 's ability to take a pictorial convention inherited from his predecessors and infuse it with a heightened sense of emotion and narrative complexity . "

= = = Light = = =

Light was associated with Mary and the Incarnation from the 9th century . Millard Meiss notes that , from the 12th century a common way to convey the conception was to compare light passing through glass to the passage of the Holy Spirit through the body of the Virgin . St. Bernard likened it

to sunshine explaining in this passage : " Just as the brilliance of the sun fills and penetrates a glass window without damaging it , and pierces its solid form with imperceptible subtlety , neither hurting when entering nor destroying when emerging ; thus the word of God , the splendor of the Father , entered the virgin chamber and then came forth from the closed womb . "

The three objects on the bedside cabinet represent the Virgin 's purity : the water flask , the candleholder , and the ropewick light . The light passing through the glass of the womb @-@ shaped flask symbolizes her flesh , pierced by divine light , its clear and undisturbed water represents her purity at the moment of conception , a device also found in the earlier paintings as a metaphor of the Virgin 's sanctity . The flask shows a reflection of the window 's crossbar as a cross , a symbol of the Crucifixion , another small detail in which Memling " lays one translucent symbolic form upon another " .

Light represented by candles is a common symbol for the Virgin and Christ ; both Campin and van Eyck placed hearths or candles in their annunciation scenes . The candleholder without a candle and the ropewick without flame symbolize the world before Christ 's Nativity and the presence of his divine light , according to Ainsworth .

The challenge for painters of the Annunciation was how to visually represent the Incarnation , the Word made flesh , or Logos . They often showed rays of light emanating from Gabriel or a nearby window entering Mary 's body to depict the concept of Christ " who inhabited and passed through her body " . The light rays might sometimes include an inscription , and were sometimes shown entering her ear , in the belief that it was thus the Word became flesh .

Memling left out the rays of light , as did Dieric Bouts in his Getty Annunciation , yet the room is bright , filled with sunlight , a fenestra incarnationis , which would have been an adequate symbol for the contemporary viewer . By the mid @-@ 15th century the Virgin is found depicted in a room or chamber near an open window to permit the passage of light . Memling 's room , with its window through which light streams , is a most " decorous sign of Mary 's chastity " , according to Blum . There are no word scrolls or banderoles to indicate the Virgin 's acceptance , yet her consent is obvious through her pose , which seems , according to Sterling , both submissive and active .

= = = Mother of Christ = = =

The Virgin birth is indicated by the red bed and red womb @-@ shaped curtain @-@ sack . During the early @-@ 15th century hanging beds or curtain @-@ sacks became symbols of the Incarnation , and " served to affirm [Christ 's] humanity " . Blum notes that at a time " when artists did not hesitate to depict the breast of the Virgin , Memling did not shun her womb " . Christ 's humanity was a source of fascination , and it was only in Netherlandish art that a solution was found for visualizing his embryonic state with curtain @-@ sacks draped to suggest the shape of a womb .

Mary 's body becomes the tabernacle holding the Host made flesh . She becomes an object of devotion , a " monstrance containing the Host " . Her full belly and the presence of the dove indicate the moment of Incarnation has occurred . Viewers would have been reminded of the Crucifixion and Lamentation with the swoon , " thus anticipating Christ 's sacrifice for the salvation of mankind at the moment of his conception . " According to theologians , Mary stood with dignity at the Crucifixion of Jesus , but in 15th @-@ century art she is depicted swooning , according to Jolly , " in agony at the sight of her dying son ? assuming the pose of a mother in the throes of the pain of childbirth " . At the cross she felt the pain of his death ; pain which at his birth she had not experienced .

The painting 's domestic setting belies its liturgical meaning . The dove is a reminder of the Eucharist and Mass . Lotte Brand Philip observes how throughout the 15th century " eucharistic vessels made in the form of doves and suspended over altars ? were lowered at the moment of transubstantiation " ; here it suggests that in the same way the Holy Spirit gives life to the bread and wine , it gave life to the Virgin 's womb . She carries the Body and Blood of Christ , and is attended by three priestly angels . Mary 's function is to bear " the Savior of the World " ; the angels ' role is to " support , present and protect her sacred being " . With the birth of Christ her " miraculous womb passed its final test " to become an object of veneration .

= = = Bride of Christ = = =

Memling presents the Virgin as the Bride of Christ about to assume her role as Queen of Heaven . The attendant angels indicate her royal status . Such angels typically float above the Virgin , holding her crown , and some German painters showed them hovering close in Annunciation scenes , but angels rarely approach or touch the Virgin . Only a single previous version of such attendant angels has been found : in the Boucicaut Master 's early 15th @-@ century illuminated manuscript version of the " Visitation " , the pregnant Virgin 's long mantle is held by attendant angels , about which Blum says , " her queenly appearance surely commemorates the moment when Mary is first addressed as Theotokos , the Mother of the Lord . " Memling frequently featured a pair of angels dressed in vestments attending the Virgin in his work , but these two , dressed in simple amices and albs , were never repeated in his art . Their dual function is to " present the eucharistic offering and proclaim the Virgin bride and queen " .

= = Style and influence = =

The Annunciation draws heavily on van der Weyden 's 1430s Louvre Annunciation , his c . 1455 Saint Columba altarpiece , and the Clugny Annunciation (c . 1465 ? 75) , which is attributed to either van der Weyden or Memling . Memling almost certainly was apprenticed to van der Weyden in Brussels until setting up his own workshop in Bruges sometime after 1465 . Memling 's Annunciation is more innovative , with motifs such as the attendant angels that were absent in the earlier paintings . According to Till @-@ Holger Borchert , not only was Memling familiar with van der Weyden 's motifs and compositions , but he might have assisted with the underdrawing in van der Weyden 's workshop . The shutters on the right are copied from the Louvre panel , the knotted curtain appears in the Columba triptych 's " Annunciation " .

A sense of movement is conveyed throughout . The trailing edges of Gabriel 's garment fall outside the pictorial space , indicating his arrival . The Virgin 's " serpentine " pose , with attendant angels supporting her , adds to the sense of flow . Memling 's use of color achieves a startling effect . The traditional rays of light are replaced with light color indicators ; the white clothes rendered in " icy " blue , the angel to the right in yellow patches seems " bleached by light " , the left @-@ hand angel appears to be steeped in shadow , dressed in clothes of lavender and bearing deep green wings . The effect is iridescent , according to Blum , who writes , " this shimmering surface gives [the figures] an unearthly quality , separating them from the more believable world of the bedchamber . " The effect deviates from the pure naturalism and realism which typifies Early Netherlandish art , causing a " startling " juxtaposition , an effect that is " unsteady" and contradictory .

Scholars have not established if the panel was meant to be a single devotional work , or part of a larger , and now broken up , polyptych . According to Ainsworth , its size and " the sacramental nature of its subject would have been appropriate for a family chapel in a church or monastery for the chapel of a guild corporation . " An intact , inscribed frame is unusual for a wing panel , indicating that it was probably intended as a single piece , but scholars are unsure because the slight left @-@ to @-@ right axis of the tiles tend to suggest it could have been the left @-@ hand wing of a larger piece . There is no information about the panel 's reverse , which has not survived .

Technical analysis shows extensive underdrawing , typical for Memling . They were completed in a dry medium except for the dove and the flask and candles on the sideboard . Revisions during the final painting included the enlargement of the Virgin 's sleeves and the repositioning of Gabriel 's staff . Incisions were made to indicate the floor tiles and the dove 's position .

The only person to question Gustav Friedrich Waagen 's 1847 attribution to Memling is W. H. J. Weale , who in 1903 declared Memling " would never have dreamt of introducing into the representation of this mystery these two sentimental and affected angels . "

= = Provenance and condition = =

The painting 's known provenance begins in the 1830s when it was in the possession of the

Radziwill family . According to art historian Sulpiz Boisserée , who saw the painting in 1832 , Antoni Radziwill found the painting in an estate his father owned . Waagen speculated that may have belonged to Mikolai Radziwill (1549 ? 1616) who might have inherited it from his brother Jerzy Radziwill , (1556 ? 1600) , who was a cardinal . The family kept it until 1920 when Princess Radziwill sold it to the Duveen Brothers in Paris . Philip Lehman bought it in October 1920 ; it is now held in the Robert Lehman collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art , in New York .

Generally the condition is good . Memling painted the work on two panels of about 28 cm each . The dated and inscribed frame , probably the original , was discarded in 1830 . There have been three documented restorations . The painting had been pierced by an arrow when Anton Radziwill found it ; he had it restored and the damage repaired . At that time the Virgin 's mantle and the flesh tones sustained heavy overpainting . The original frame was discarded , but its inscription was inserted into the new frame . A description of the original frame suggests it carried a coat of arms , perhaps belonging to Jerzy Radziwill . The second restoration was after its exhibition in Bruges in 1902 ; and the third when Lehman had it restored and transferred to canvas sometime after 1928 . The painting survived the transfer without significant damage . A late 19th century photograph shows wood on all four sides of the painted surface , which suggests the edges may have been extended during the transfer . Areas that suffered paint loss and overpainting are Gabriel 's cope and the vase holding the flowers .

When Boisserée saw the painting he recorded the inscription 's date as 1480 . The last digit of the inscription was faded and difficult to read and had become illegible by 1899 . Waagen suggested the date could have been 1482 , and art historian Dirk de Vos suggested 1489 . Memling 's style does not lend itself well to assigning dates , making a determination difficult . According to Stirling , an earlier date is easily accepted , especially because of stylistic similarities to Memling 's 1479 St John Altarpiece , whereas Ainsworth leans toward the later date as more in keeping with the mature style of the late 1480s .