

VAN EYCK'S  
**Annunciation**

THE MEETING OF HEAVEN AND EARTH



THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO  
July 10–September 21, 1997





hen viewed as an individual picture on a museum wall, Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation* is a splendid example of the painter's art, a landmark in the progressive exploration of the possibilities of pictorial illusion. We are entranced by the archangel Gabriel's glittering vestments, his spun gold hair, the glowing royal blue of the Virgin Mary's robe, and the myriad decorative details of the church setting surrounding these figures. If we look beyond such sumptuous details, we see that the picture is, in fact, a precious remainder, a fragment of an even more complex object once placed on an altar for use during the celebration of the mass. It was made to offer praise to God and the Virgin Mary, to commemorate Christ's Incarnation in human form, and to bring earthly prestige and heavenly life to the patron who commissioned it from van Eyck. We can only guess at the specifics of the painting's intended destination and associations, but in the process we gain a glimpse of van Eyck's world, simultaneously bound by tradition and boldly exploring new realities.

Jan van Eyck was born on the border of present-day Belgium and Holland into a family of painters. His early training is unknown, but by 1422 he had entered the service of Count John

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III of Holland (1374–1425), and after the count's death, worked for the wealthier and even more powerful Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy (1396–1467). Van Eyck's princely patrons valued his skill and inventiveness in producing manuscript illuminations, portraits, religious works, and palace decorations. In a time when artists in northern Europe rarely signed their work, Jan van Eyck often proudly inscribed the frames of his paintings with his name, the date, and sometimes his personal motto, *als ich can* (as best I can), a phrase that appears self-consciously modest when we consider his extraordinary ability to capture the semblance of things.

*The Annunciation*, having lost its original frame, is not signed and dated, but its style clearly places it in the small body of Jan van Eyck's surviving paintings. Whereas those paintings are mostly portraits or devotional works focusing on the enthroned Virgin and Child, *The Annunciation* tells the story of a key event of Christian history. From its tall, slender format we deduce that it was originally part of a larger altarpiece, probably the left wing of a triptych. The center and the corresponding right wing probably illustrated other scenes from the childhood of Christ; alternatively, the center may have depicted the enthroned Virgin and Child.

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## THE MYSTICAL MADE REAL

**I**n van Eyck's painting, Gabriel's announcement to the Virgin that she will conceive and bear Jesus takes place not in the privacy of a house, but in a church. The setting may be related to the tradition, recounted in apocryphal texts, that the Virgin grew up within the Temple in Jerusalem. Earlier Parisian manuscript illuminators, like the Boucicaut Master and the Bedford Master, had also placed the event in a church, using its furnishings to give the Virgin a special, even regal quality: in the Bedford Master's illumination in the De Lévis Hours (fig. 1), another angel attendant draws a curtain to reveal Mary, and the altar steps are decorated with the



FIG. 1

Bedford Master, *The Annunciation*, c. 1417, tempera, gold and silver paint, and gold leaf on vellum, from the De Lévis Hours, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.





FIG. 2

Jan van Eyck, *The Annunciation* (detail).

stylized blue and gold fleur-de-lis of the French royal family. While van Eyck placed his figures more convincingly within the church, he made them slightly too large for the building, suggesting an additional, metaphorical reading comparing the Virgin to the institution of the Church, an association widely used in theological writing.

The building itself is an elaborately decorated piece of imaginary architecture in which we can find multiple allusions to the special relationship of God and man that was fulfilled in the Incarnation. Above the Virgin are wall paintings depicting the finding of the infant Moses by Pharaoh's daughter and the adult Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, the covenant that would be transformed by the Incarnation. The roundels above the Virgin's head show the Old Testament patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, while the scenes on the floor are stories of the heroes Samson and David, all of whom were interpreted in the Middle Ages as prefigurations of Christ. Van Eyck also elaborated the geometry of the church structure in ways that encourage the viewer to expand imaginatively on the mysteries of faith. Thus the Virgin's head—toward which the Holy Ghost descends—is framed by three lancet windows, suggesting the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

CONTINUE ON THE OTHER SIDE



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THE MEETING OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO  
THE DANIEL F. AND ADA L. RICE BUILDING

July 10–September 21, 1997

FREE PROGRAMS

LECTURE

*Thursday, July 10, 12:15*  
Van Eyck's *Annunciation*:  
The Meeting of Heaven  
and Earth  
Carol Purtle, *Professor of*  
*Art History, The University*  
*of Memphis*

FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

LECTURE

*Tuesday, July 15, 6:00*  
Van Eyck's Visual  
Intelligence: Symbol and  
Reality in *The Annunciation*  
John Hand, *Curator of*  
*Northern Renaissance Paintings,*  
*National Gallery of Art,*  
*Washington, D.C.*

FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

PERFORMANCE

*Sundays, July 20 and*  
*August 10, 1:30 and 2:30*  
A Well of Living  
Waters: Songs of the  
Burgundian Court  
AVE Quartet,  
Denver, Colorado  
REGENSTEIN HALL  
RICE BUILDING

GALLERY TALK

*Thursday, July 24, 12:15*  
Van Eyck's *Annunciation*:  
A Flemish Masterpiece  
Mickie Silverstein, *Assistant*  
*Director, Senior Programs,*  
*Museum Education*  
GALLERY 150

LECTURE

*Tuesday, August 5, 6:00*  
Lifting the Veil from  
Van Eyck: The Conservation  
of *The Annunciation*  
David Bull, *Chairman,*  
*Paintings Conservation*  
*Department, National Gallery*  
*of Art, Washington, D.C.*

FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

GALLERY TALK

*Monday and Tuesday,*  
*August 11, and 26, 12:15*  
Introduction to the Exhibition  
Jeffrey Nigro, *Lecturer,*  
*Museum Education*  
GALLERY 150

LECTURE

*Tuesday, September 9, 6:00*  
The Spell of Van Eyck  
Martha Wolff, *Curator of*  
*European Painting before 1750*  
FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

GALLERY TALK

*Friday, September 19, 12:15*  
Van Eyck's *Annunciation*:  
A Flemish Masterpiece  
David Stark, *Senior Associate*  
*Director, Museum Education*  
GALLERY 150

FREE FAMILY  
PROGRAM

GALLERY WALK

*Saturday, September 20, 1:00–2:00*  
Van Eyck's *Annunciation*:  
The Mystical Made Real  
Ages 9 & up and adults  
GALLERY 100

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THIS EXHIBITION IS SUPPORTED BY  
THE WILLIAM G. AND MARILYN M. SIMPSON  
FOUNDATION IN MEMORY OF  
THE LATE JOSEPH CARDINAL BERNARDIN.

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Above these windows is another row of openings created by an arcaded passageway, called a triforium, arranged with a further play of threes. It hardly seems an accident that van Eyck placed three columns in the arcade just above the Virgin's head, with access provided by one central door. At the very top of this wall, in the stained-glass window, the figure of the Lord presiding over the holy event is actually part of the fabric of the building.

If the mystery of the Incarnation is implied in a setting at once realistic and imagined, it becomes dramatic in the treatment of Gabriel and Mary (fig. 2). The bulk and



FIG. 3

Attributed to Jean le Tavernier, *Philip the Good Attending Mass*, c. 1460, tempera and gold paint on vellum, in *Traité sur l'oraison dominicale*, © Bibliothèque royale Albert Ier, Brussels.

richness of their robes contribute to a sense of physical presence. The reactions of the pair, conveyed by facial expression, are remarkably instantaneous in the context of fifteenth-century painting: Gabriel a smiling, dimpled courtier, confident that he will please; the Virgin turning inward in absorbed response to his message, her eyes





FIG. 4A

Netherlandish, *The Annunciation* (fig. 4a) and *The Crucifixion* (fig. 4b), from a portable altarpiece, c. 1400, oil on panel, The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

raised and unfocused, her lips parted, and her hair falling forward in disarray to reveal a prominent ear. The spoken words of Gabriel's announcement and Mary's response are made physical, floating from their lips into the space of the church.

## THE ANCIENT CAPITAL OF THE DUKES OF BURGUNDY

According to the picture's first modern owner, the Belgian dealer C. J. Nieuwenhuys, *The Annunciation* was made for van Eyck's patron Duke Philip the Good and came from a religious monument in Dijon, the ancient capital of the duchy of Burgundy. The painting has usually been linked to the Charterhouse



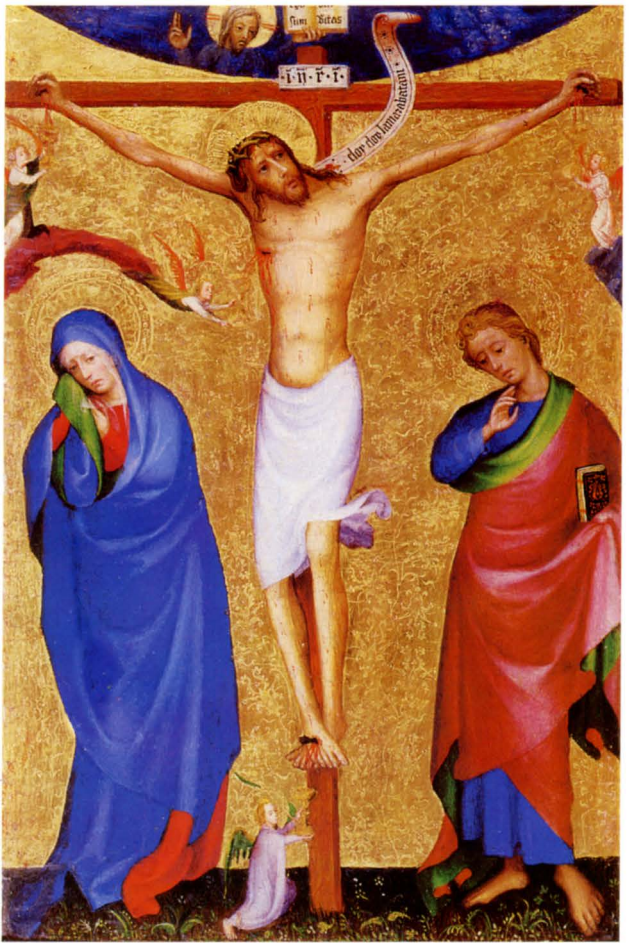


FIG. 4B

of Champmol, a monastery just outside Dijon established by Philip the Good's grandfather as the family burial place. Splendidly decorated by its founder, the Charterhouse also received gifts from Philip the Good, who was proud of being first among all the nobles of France. However, the painting could also have been made for the chapel of the dukes attached to their palace in Dijon. Philip made this chapel the permanent seat of the semi-religious chivalric order of the Golden Fleece, which he established in 1430 at the time of his marriage to Isabel, daughter of the king of Portugal. When she gave birth to a much desired heir in Dijon, the baby was almost immediately made a knight of the Golden Fleece in a chapter meeting held in this ducal chapel.

In the Charterhouse of Champmol, strictly cloistered monks lived a hermit's life, praying for the souls of the ducal family in a richly decorated church that also housed the family tombs, while the dukes and their wives



watched the services from two comfortable oratories, or private chapels, overlooking the church. The altarpiece that included *The Annunciation* may have been placed in one of these spaces. Or perhaps the painting was part of the decoration of the palace chapel in the center of Dijon. In any case, *The Annunciation* was probably not readily accessible to the public. Framed by curtains or even half-hidden by the carved rood screen that separated the priest and choir from the ordinary worshipper, its sumptuous detail may only have been legible to the priest as he said mass or to the patron watching from his or her oratory. A manuscript illumination showing Philip the Good attending mass (fig. 3) gives an excellent idea of how such an altarpiece would be approached: the duke kneels in a temporary enclosure made by hangings decorated with his personal insignia, while choristers sing and his courtiers loiter in the background; to aid his devotions, the duke contemplates a smaller, portable devotional painting similar in type to the precious, multipaneled altarpiece (figs. 4a and 4b) possibly commissioned by his grandfather, Philip the Bold, and now divided between museums in Baltimore and Antwerp. Certainly the surrounding altar hangings, gilded utensils for the mass, the intricate filigree surrounding sculpted figures, and other decorations created a highly charged environment of which the painting on the altar table was the center.

Viewed in this context, we realize how fortunate we are to be able to study this exquisite monument of early modern European civilization. The privilege of seeking to unravel the infinite changes that van Eyck rang on the mystery of the Incarnation may have been originally granted chiefly to the patron, his immediate circle, the priests who celebrated mass at the altar, and their heavenly maker, believed to be present in the elements of that mass.

MARTHA WOLFF

*Curator of European Painting before 1750*

COVER

Jan van Eyck, *The Annunciation*, c. 1430–35, oil on canvas, transferred from panel, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.