

Jan van Eyck's Annunciation

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National Gallery of Art

The Annunciation by Jan van Eyck is one of the treasures of the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Art, and its creator, a founder of the early Netherlandish school of painting, must be numbered among the greatest artists of all time. This exhibition celebrates the return of the Annunciation to public view after an absence of more than two years, during which time it was painstakingly cleaned and restored (fig. 1). As a result of this treatment, the brilliance of Van Eyck's accomplishment can now be more fully understood and admired.

"As Best I Can": The Artist's Career

Jan van Eyck's exact date and place of birth are unknown. It is generally thought that he and his brother Hubert came from Maaseik, a town north of Maastricht, and that Jan was probably born no later than about 1390. To judge from the surviving documents, Jan van Eyck's career was spent as a court artist. He is first recorded in 1422 working for John of Bavaria, count of Holland, in The Hague. After the count's death Van Eyck moved to Bruges, and he was appointed painter and varlet de chambre to Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy, on 19 May 1425. Until the end of 1429 the artist resided at the court in Lille, but he was entrusted by Philip with several secret missions. Van Eyck may have been sent to Spain in 1427 to negotiate a marriage between Philip and Isabella of Aragon, and he was in Lisbon in 1428 and 1429 where a marriage was successfully contracted between the duke of Burgundy and Isabella of Portugal. It is thought that he was among those who accompanied Isabella to the Netherlands in December 1429.

Beginning in 1430, Jan van Eyck lived in Bruges, where he served as court artist to Philip the Good and on occasion undertook work for private and civic authorities as well. No extant paintings can be documented as having been commissioned by Philip, but there is ample evidence that the duke held his court artist in high esteem. When his accountants balked at paying Van Eyck's salary, Philip expressed his great displeasure in a letter dated March 12, 1435, requesting that they pay the full sum, for he "would never find a man equally to his liking nor so outstanding in his art and science." Jan van Eyck remained in the employ of the duke of Burgundy until his death in late June 1441.

The exceptionally large altarpiece of The Adoration of the Lamb in the cathedral of Saint Bavo, Ghent, is probably Van Eyck's best-known work. Both Jan and Hubert van Eyck are mentioned in the inscription on the frame, which has engendered endless speculation as to the part each played in the creation of the altarpiece. Little is known of Hubert save that he died on 18 September 1426; as an artist he is a mystery. In contrast, it has been possible to establish a secure oeuvre for Jan. In addition to the Ghent Altarpiece, there are nine signed paintings dated between 1432 and 1439. Moreover, several paintings bear the artist's personal motto, "*Als ich chan*" (As best I can). This saying may derive from the Latin proverb used by medieval scribes and authors, "*ut potui, non sicut volui*" (As I was able, but not just as I wished). Jan van Eyck's best, however, was more than enough to ensure that his fame has continued without interruption from the fifteenth century to the present day. The meticulous technique and painterly skill, careful observation, and superior intellect that his genius comprises are fully apparent in his depiction of the *Annunciation*.



1. Jan van Eyck. *The Annunciation*. c. 1434/1436, oil on canvas transferred from panel. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

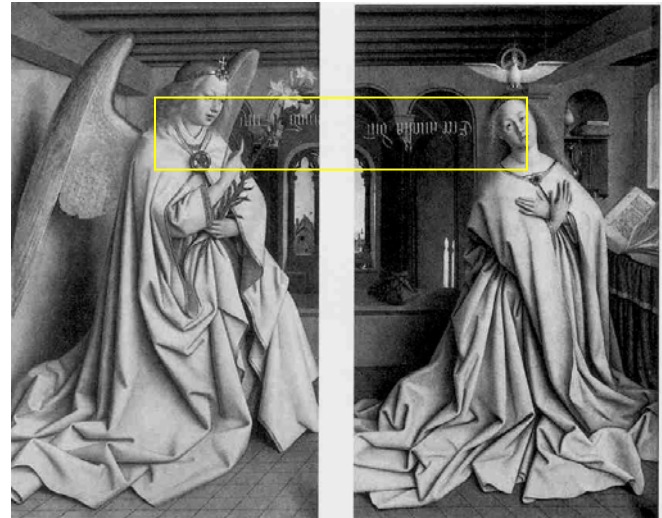
Subject Matter and Iconography

One of the fundamental events of Christianity is the Annunciation, recounted in Luke 1:26-38, in which the angel Gabriel announces to the Virgin that she will conceive and give birth to Jesus, the Son of God. The Incarnation marks the origin of the human life of Christ and is a necessary prelude to the redemption of mankind through his death and resurrection. The *Annunciation* is here shown taking place in a church interior. Gabriel holds a crystal and metal scepter and wears a crown and an elaborate cope, a type of ecclesiastical garment. Pointing upward, he pronounces the angelic salutation, "*Ave gratia plena*" (Hail, full of grace, Luke 1:28). Mary's reply, "*Ecce ancilla domini*" (Behold the handmaiden of the Lord, Luke 1:38), is written upside down so that it can be read from above by the Lord. The Virgin's words are also inverted in the Annunciation panels of the Ghent Altarpiece (fig. 2). Mary's pose is rather ambiguous; it is hard to tell if she is kneeling at her *prie-dieu* or in the act of standing up. Her hands are raised in a gesture of prayer and astonishment.



2. (right) Jan van Eyck, *The Annunciation*, 1432, oil on panel, exterior of The Adoration of the Lamb, Saint Bavo, Ghent

Around this event Van Eyck has centered an iconographic program of considerable complexity and erudition. It is possible to interpret virtually every object in the painting as pertaining to the Annunciation itself, or the prefiguration of Christ's life and works in the Old Testament, or Mary's own important role. When compared with the scale of the architecture, the figures are extremely large, but this disproportion is deliberate and may relate to the identification of Mary with the Church, a concept visually expressed by Van Eyck in the *Madonna in a Church* (fig. 3, below left). Moreover, the architecture of the church has been interpreted as symbolizing one of the main themes of the painting: the



transition and juxtaposition of Old Testament to New Testament. The round arches of the clerestory at the top of the structure belong to the older medieval style called Romanesque, which was followed by the Gothic style, seen in the slightly pointed arches of the lower story. The church is fictitious, but the seemingly inverted sequence of Romanesque arches placed over Gothic ones does occur in some medieval churches in Belgium; in being historically accurate, Van Eyck was also being symbolic. Similarly, in the windows of the back wall the single stained-glass window at the top contains a depiction of the Lord (right) and contrasts with the three lead-shot windows behind the Virgin, reinforcing the passage from the Jewish concept of One God to the Christian concept of a Triune God. That the figure of the Lord in the stained-glass window stands atop a world globe may refer to his words in Isaiah 66: 1, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool."



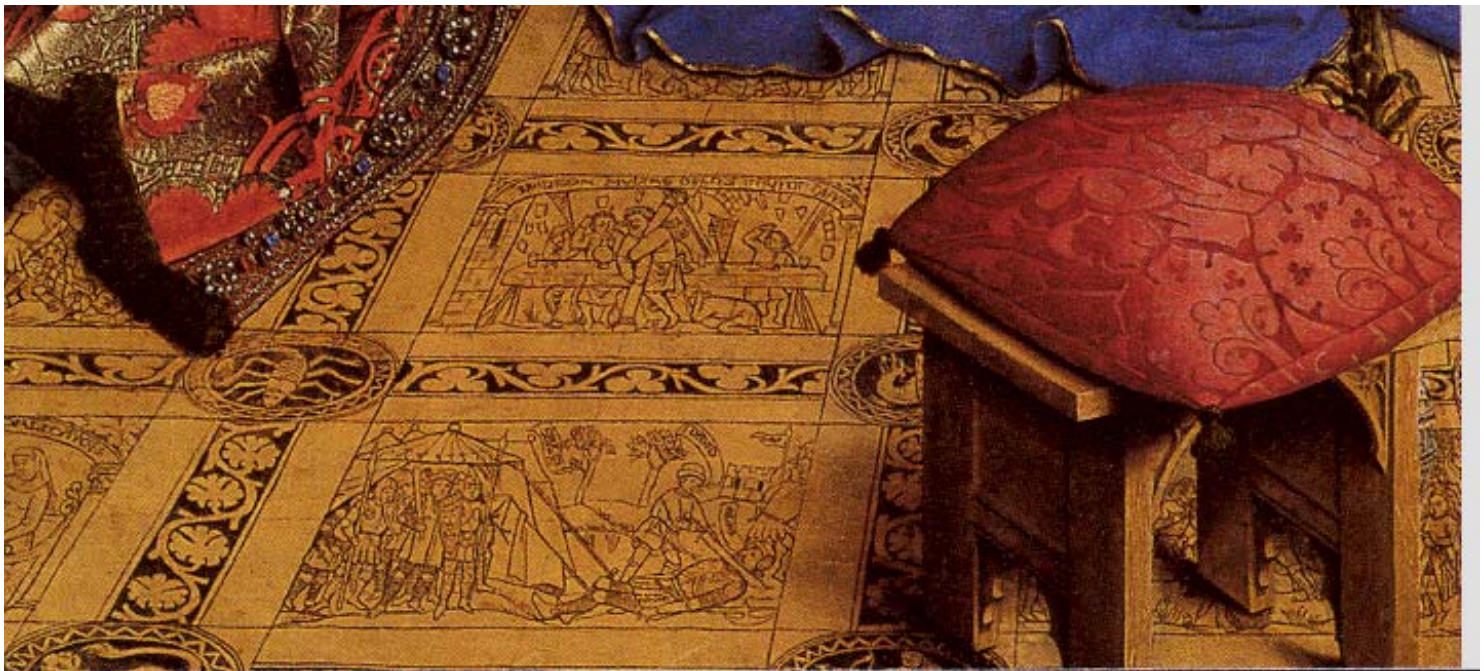
3. Jan van Eyck, *Madonna in a Church*, c. 1437, oil on panel, Staatliche Museen, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin



A critical component of the *Annunciation* is Van Eyck's masterful ability to use light both naturalistically and symbolically. The light that streams in from the window at the upper left takes the form of seven golden rays; the dove of the Holy Spirit descends along the longest of these. The seven rays allude to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that Christ will receive as a Branch of the Tree of Jesse (Isaiah II: 2-3): wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, purity, and fear. Seven is an important number in Christian symbolism, and it is significant that of the white lilies at the lower right, traditional emblems of the Virgin's purity, seven are open. In addition to the divine light that enters the building from above, a naturalistic light illuminates the scene from the right. Dual light sources—natural and supernatural—are also present in Van Eyck's *Madonna in a Church*.



Returning to the top of the back wall, wall paintings on either side of the window are done in a late medieval style found in some Belgian churches. Two scenes from the life of Moses are depicted, and these have been interpreted as prefigurations of the life of Christ. At the left the infant Moses is presented to Pharaoh's daughter, while at the right the Lord gives Moses a scroll bearing the words of the commandment "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7). Both Moses and Christ were raised by women of royal blood, and both transmitted God's covenant to mankind. The Ten Commandments given to Moses established the covenant of the Old Testament, which anticipated the covenant of the New Testament that began with the Incarnation of Christ.

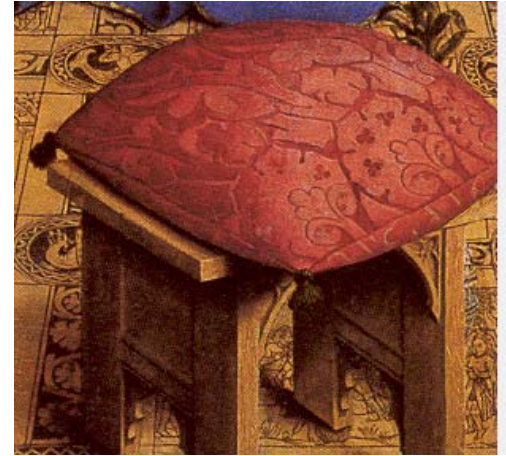


The floor of the church (above) displays two types of symbolic images, signs of the Zodiac and scenes from the Old Testament. Zodiac signs were sometimes incorporated into the pavements of medieval churches to demonstrate that God had dominion over the physical universe, including the movement of the planets. Here, not all of the signs are visible, but scholars have found meaning in the sequence of the roundels. The angel Gabriel stands over the signs of Aries, which corresponds to the month of March and more particularly to the date of the Annunciation, 25 March. Mary stands over Virgo the virgin (September), the sign traditionally associated with her. Barely visible at the far right is the sign of Capricorn the goat, indicating December and the birth of Christ on 25 December. One author has suggested that, with the exception of Leo the lion (August), the creatures that inhabit the roundels are impure hybrids that mirror the corruption and chaos of the cosmos before the advent of Christ. The lion is unaltered because Leo is the house of the sun and thus associated with Christ, who is both the "light of the world" and the "sun of justice" mentioned in the Old Testament (Malachi 4:2).

It is generally agreed that the second set of images inlaid in the floor was meant to be interpreted typologically, that is, as Old Testament prefigurations of New Testament events. Most of the scenes depict Samson (whose name means "little sun"), viewed by medieval theologians as a prefiguration of Christ. At the left below the hem of Gabriel's robe is a depiction of Samson slaying the Philistines (Judges 15), prefiguring Christ's triumph over sin. Below this Samson is betrayed by Delilah (Judges 16:4-5), which foretells Christ's betrayal by the Synagogue. In the center row Samson is shown destroying the temple (Judges 16:23-30), which presages the Crucifixion and the Last Judgment. Below this David cuts off the head of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:51), symbolizing Christ's victory over the Devil. Other fragmentary scenes have been identified as the death of Abimelech (Judges 9:8-20,54), who was associated with the Antichrist, and the death of Absalom (2 Samuel 18:9-15), whose rebellion against his father, King David, made him the antithesis of Christ. It is even possible to assign meaning to the stylized columbine and clover of the framing border. Columbine can refer both to the Holy Spirit and to the Passion of Christ, while clover is a symbol of the Trinity.

Multiple interpretations are possible for the footstool at the lower right. Because of its placement near the Virgin, it may symbolize her humility; at the same time, its polarity to the image of the Lord at the top of the painting may refer to Isaiah 66:1, "the earth is my footstool," mentioned earlier. The footstool could also allude to the throne prepared for the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time.

In general, the upper zone of the Annunciation is concerned with Christ's divine nature and his association with the Lord of the Old Testament, while the lower portion refers, through Old Testament prefigurations, to Christ's human existence and sacrificial death. Compositionally and theologically these two areas come together in the person of the Virgin, in whose body Christ was made incarnate and who acted as an intermediary between God and man. This calls to mind the identification of the Virgin with the Church cited earlier.



During the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries the Annunciation was usually situated in one of three settings: a portico, a domestic interior, or an ecclesiastical structure. Several authors have claimed that, with the Gallery's painting, Jan van Eyck was the first panel painter to set the Annunciation in a church interior. This may be true, but he was not the first artist ever to do so. Iconographically and stylistically Van Eyck's art grows out of the traditions of courtly French manuscript illumination of the time. This is evident in a precious Book of Hours produced by a French illuminator for use in Paris around 1420/1430. The *Annunciation* depicted here (fig. 4, left) takes place in a church. The Virgin kneels in front of the altar as Gabriel enters from the left; between them is a vase of white lilies. The Lord is at the upper left, and the dove of the Holy Spirit descends along golden rays that issue from his mouth. The artist manifests what might be called a late Gothic, "pre-Eyckian" realism in the detailed rendering of the angel's wings and colorful patterns of the floor tiles and fabrics as well as in his not-fully-successful attempt to create an interior space. The association of this manuscript with the French crown can be inferred from the heraldic shield of gold fleurs-de-lis on a blue ground at the top of the page held by an angel with peacock feather wings. The anonymous artist is named after a miniature illustrating the Coronation of Hannibal in a manuscript at Harvard University.

4. Master of the Harvard Hannibal, *The Annunciation*, c. 420/430, tempera, gold paint, and gold leaf on vellum, folio 24, Book of Hours, MS.W.287, The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore