

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE MERODE ALTARPIECE

By MARGARET B. FREEMAN

Curator of The Cloisters

The iconography of the Merode altarpiece is something of a puzzle—a puzzle which has interested many people for a long time. As in almost all puzzles, some of the solutions are easy, some are more obscure, and, in this case, some remain undiscovered. The basic difficulty is that Robert Campin, rejoicing in the ability to reproduce the physical world in paint on a wooden panel, at the same time felt it important to endow his apparently natural world with as much spiritual meaning as possible. The question is, as Erwin Panofsky says, “how we are to decide where the general . . . transfiguration of nature ends and actual specific symbolism begins.” For instance, in the Annun-

ciation scene of our painting, are the lions on the Virgin’s bench meant to signify Christ, are they meant to suggest King Solomon’s throne, a favorite Old Testament prototype of the Virgin Mary—or are they merely the kind of carved finial that could be seen on many a piece of medieval furniture because people liked lions?

Campin is probably the first artist to present us with this particular sort of problem. He is certainly the first to paint a fully developed domestic setting for the Annunciation. Italian painters, and a few others, had suggested a bedroom—the “*thalamus virginis*” (the virgin’s chamber)—before, but no one previous to Campin so completely interpreted the Annunciation as taking place in a town-house sitting room such as

anyone of the time would know and recognize.

This attitude is entirely in accord with the mystics who wished to see not the Blessed Virgin Mary enthroned as Queen of Heaven, who had existed as an idea in the mind of God from the time that Eve ate the forbidden fruit, but the maiden Mary, who once lived on earth and who, because she was humble and “full of grace,” was chosen to be the Mother of God. “Take heed and have in mind,” says the thirteenth-century Pseudo-Bonaventura in his *Meditations*, “as if thou wert present in the private chamber of Our Lady where the Holy Trinity is present with his Angel Gabriel.” Voragine in his *Golden Legend* writes, “When that the

Angel Gabriel was sent for to show the incarnation of our Saviour Jesu Christ, he found her alone, enclosed in her chamber, like as Saint Bernard saith, in which the maidens and virgins ought to abide in their houses, without running abroad out openly.” In a fifteenth-century mystery play, Mary speaks: “Here is my little room, so pretty and so neat. To serve God, my Maker, and to deserve His grace, I would like to read my Psalter, one psalm after another until I have read them all.” The neat little room is in our painting, and contemporaries must have felt in viewing it that they could easily imagine themselves to be “present in the private chamber of Our Lady.”

Mary herself was a good housekeeper. The



The Virgin Mary seated on the floor in the attitude of humility. Behind her is a bench with carved dogs and lions. Detail from the Merode altarpiece

floor is spotless, the bronze vessels well polished and the andirons free from rust. The author of *Speculum humanae salvationis* writes that when she dwelt in the temple, before being affianced to Joseph, "she washed the things that were there to be washed and cleaned what needed cleaning."

In our little painting Mary, her housework done, is comfortably seated on a cushion on the floor, engrossed in the book that she is reading. The book is carefully protected even from Mary's clean hands by a white cloth. Another book and a scroll lie on the table, suggesting that she is in need of a few reference works. The author of *Speculum* says that she "understood very well the books of the prophets and the Holy Scriptures. . . . In reading them and realizing their meaning she profited."

Mary knew, of course, the prophecies that foretold the coming of the Savior. In a revelation made to Saint Elizabeth of Schonau she says: "I prayed that He should let me see the time when that most holy virgin would be born who was to give birth to the Son of God, and that he preserve my eyes that I might see her, my ears that I might hear her, my tongue that I might praise her, my hands that I might work for her, my feet that I might walk as her servant, and my knees that I might adore the Son of God in her lap."

Many medieval writers give similar accounts of this profound wish of Mary, and all of them emphasize the essential quality of her humility. Saint Bernard writes in his homily on the Annunciation: "The virtue of virginity is worthy of praise, but humility is more necessary. The first is recommended, but the second is prescribed. . . . I would dare to say that without humility, even the virginity of Mary would not have been pleasing to God."

In a Brussels tapestry at The Cloisters, the Angel Gabriel pronounces the glad tidings of the Annunciation to a figure personifying Humility, rather than to the Virgin Mary herself. In the same tapestry Humility and Chastity are present at the Nativity—and, interestingly enough, it is Humility who wears a crown. The painter of our altarpiece has expressed the same idea in a more natural way. He has placed the Virgin Mary on the floor, not so that she may reach her texts more easily or because she, being young, enjoys sitting on the floor, but because

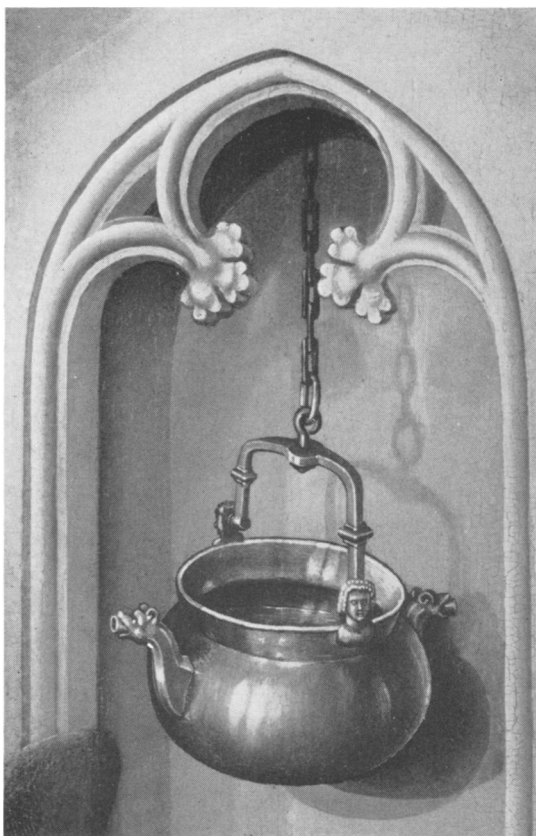


The Annunciation, detail from the Nativity tapestry at The Cloisters. Here Gabriel gives his message to Humilitas. Flemish (Brussels), about 1500

this is the accepted position for the Virgin of Humility. Millard Meiss has pointed out that the conception is derived from Italy, where many a Madonna in similar posture has been clearly labeled "Our Lady of Humility." Campin has made Mary's humble position even more apparent by painting an elegantly carved bench behind her, equipped with a brilliant blue covering cloth and a cushion.

This bench has been interpreted as signifying the throne of Solomon—

one of the Old Testament prototypes of the Virgin Mary. The author of *Speculum humanae salvationis* explains the analogy as follows: "The throne of [the wise] King Solomon is the Virgin Mary in whom stayed and lived Jesus Christ, the true wisdom. . . . This same throne had two large lions which signified that Mary retained in her heart . . . the two tablets of the ten commandments of the law." The bench in our painting has two small lions and two small dogs. As has been pointed out above, it is difficult to be sure whether Campin intended to suggest the throne of Solomon here or was merely furnishing his little room with a bench, somewhat like a fine bench at The Cloisters which also has as finials two small lions and two small dogs.



ABOVE: Details from the Merode altarpiece showing the highly polished bronze laver and candlestick, symbols of the Virgin Mary. BELOW: Bronze laver at The Cloisters, Flemish, xv century, and candlestick in the Museum collection, Flemish or German, xv century, which are similar in type to those in the altarpiece

In any case there is no doubt that other household objects introduced into the setting in a completely natural and disarming way are full of symbolism. The stalk of Madonna lilies, one of the most important accessories of Annunciation scenes from the fourteenth century on, is here rather casually arranged in a blue and white jug placed on the table as it would be in any home. The lily, of course, is first of all the symbol of Mary's purity. Saint Bernard writes: "Mary is the violet of humility, the lily of chastity, the rose of charity,



and the glory and splendor of the heavens." Bartholomaeus Anglicus adds to the symbolism: "The lily is an herb with a white flower, and though the petals of the flower be white, yet within shineth the likeness of gold." Thus the lily is the symbol of Mary herself,

the pure shrine for the "gold" that is Christ. The shining bronze laver with the clean blue-bordered towel is also more than a normal bit of household equipment. It, too, is a symbol of Mary's purity. In the fifteenth-century *Mirror of Our Lady*, the author, in explaining the service

of Thursday Matins, states: "Conveniently it accordeth to liken the blessed body of Mary unto a vessel most clean and her soul unto a lamp most clear. . . ." The "vessel most clean" in the painting recalls the liturgical cleansing of the hands by the priest before and during Mass. It can also be considered, as Erwin Panofsky suggests, as the indoors equivalent of the "fountain of gardens," and the "well of living waters"—poetic images from the Song of Songs which were applied to Mary. The clean vessel with its purifying water became an important element in many paintings of the Annunciation following ours, the most important of these being that on the outer wings of the Ghent altarpiece by the van Eycks (see p. 135).

In painting the rays of the sun streaming through a round glass window Campin gave reality to one of the most popular allegories of the perpetual virginity of Mary. Saint Bernard explains it as follows: "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 it when entering nor destroying it when emerging, thus the word of God, the splendor of the Father, entered the virgin chamber and then came forth from the closed womb." In one of Saint Bridget's visions, Christ himself told her: "I took a body without sin or lust, entering the maiden's womb as the sun shining through a clear stone. For as the sun entering the glass hurteth it not, so the virginity of the Virgin abode incorrupt . . . in taking on my human form."

Of course this light which is entering Mary's chamber is more than ordinary sunlight; it is the light divine emanating from God. In many Annunciation scenes God himself is shown dispatching the dove, symbol of the Holy Ghost, on beams of light to the presence of Mary. It is undoubtedly significant that in our painting the beams of light number exactly seven. Interpreted as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the beams of light become a substitute for the dove, the more familiar symbol of the Holy Ghost. Although God the Father is absent from our Annunciation and the Holy Ghost is suggested only by the seven rays of light, God the Son is very much in evidence as a tiny infant, gliding



Detail of the left wing showing a street scene with shop fronts, seen through the open gate behind the donors

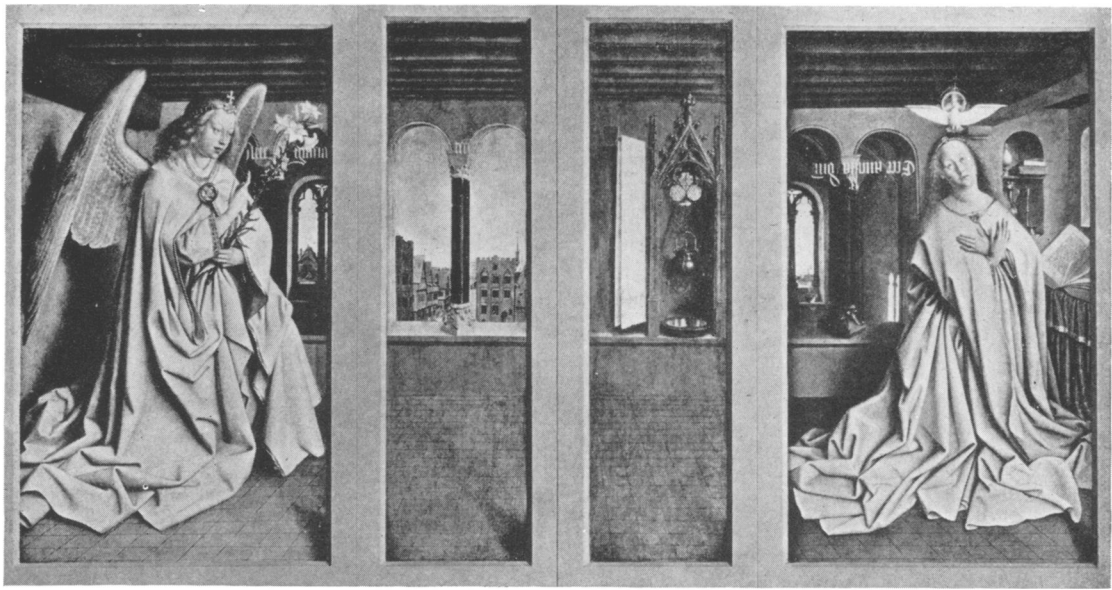


The Annunciation in a church, an early painting by Jan van Eyck (died 1441) contemporary with Campin's Annunciation, which is set in a town-house interior. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Mellon collection

in on the beams of light. This rather literal way of expressing the mystery of the Incarnation was frowned upon by the Church but had been popular in Italy and depicted elsewhere for over a century preceding our painting. The fact that the little Child carries a cross emphasizes the significance of the Annunciation: that God became Man to suffer and die in order to redeem mankind from the original sin of Adam.

So far the symbolism in our altarpiece, though sometimes hidden under the cloak of realism, seems comprehensible. There is a problem, however, with regard to the candle on the table which has just been blown out, leaving a minute spark and an exquisite spiral of smoke. When there is a lighted candle in Annunciation scenes the implication is clear enough. As Durandus and others explain, the wax of the candle, "which was produced by the virginal bees, represents the humanity or the flesh of Christ . . . the wick found in the wax represents his soul. . . . The light of the candle represents his divinity." The author of *Speculum humane salutis* writes: "Jesus, the son of Mary, is the true lit candle, offered to God the Father for the human race. . . ." And Mary is "the candlestick." Millard Meiss has suggested that the extinguished candle refers to a passage in Saint Bridget's *Revelations* which states that at the Nativity, "the divine radiance . . . totally annihilated the material light," even the light of the candle which Joseph had brought into the place where Christ was born. This is a reasonable theory. However, it must be said that in all Nativities influenced by Bridget's vision, including the Nativity in Dijon by Campin, the candle is shown still burning, even though the "divine radiance" obscures it.

There is another possibility. It may be that Campin deliberately extinguished the flame which denoted Christ's divinity in order to emphasize the fact that, at the Incarnation, "the Word was made flesh," and God became man. Saint Bernard in a sermon on the Annunciation gives a precedent for this point of view. "In you alone," he addresses Mary, "this King so rich is annihilated, this great sovereign is brought low, this infinite God is made tiny and is put below the angels: true God and Son of God, he is made



The Annunciation by Jan van Eyck from the Ghent altarpiece, painted later than the Annunciation opposite. It shows Campin's influence in the domestic interior, the laver and towel, and the view through the windows.

flesh.” It seems to be in keeping with Campin’s temperament, though it put him on dangerous ground theologically, that he thus emphasized the human side of Christ. And it does appear almost as if the little human figure of the Christ Child in our painting, by the velocity of his descent from Heaven, is responsible for the blowing out of the candle.

The open door, painted as a very important element in the left panel, is also something of a problem. Saint Bernard and others specifically describe the chamber of the Annunciation as completely shut off from men. “Where did he [Gabriel] find her [Mary]? It was, I believe, in the privacy of her room where, with the door closed, she had withdrawn to pray to her Father. . . . It was not difficult for this angel to penetrate the closed door into the retreat of Mary, the subtlety of his nature made it possible for him to enter where he pleased without even locks of iron putting obstacles in his way.” The shut gate of Ezekiel is one of the familiar Old Testament prototypes of Mary. Thomas à Kempis, in his *Meditation on the Incarnation of Christ*, explains the analogy. He first quotes Ezekiel. “‘This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened: and no man shall pass through it, be-

cause the God of Israel hath entered in by it: and it shall be shut for the prince.’ . . . Mary is the shut gate, who, in conceiving and bearing, remained ever a maiden untouched.” Did Campin then open the door because he wanted his patrons, the kneeling donors, to participate in the event (unlike the angel they could not penetrate a solid door), or did he perhaps have in mind the symbolism of Voragine, “The gate of paradise which by Eve was closed from all men, is now opened by the Blessed Virgin Mary.” ?

In painting so carefully the hinges and the lock and key on the door, was Campin thinking of Saint Bridget’s revelation concerning doors or was he merely fascinated with depicting familiar objects in a realistic way? God, speaking to Bridget, said: “But if we have houses, we may not keep what is gathered in them except they have doors, nor may the doors hang without hinges nor be shut without locks. . . . The door is hope . . . and this hope must have two hinges; one that man should never despair of attaining bliss, nor be presumptuous of escaping pain. . . . The lock of the door must be goodly charity . . . that the enemy come not in, for what availeth it to have a door without a lock, and what is it to have hope without charity. . . . The key to open



The Annunciation, miniature from the Boucicault Hours. French XV century artists usually showed the scene in an oratory. Here the candle on the altar is lit. About 1410. Jacquemart-André Museum, Paris

and close oweth to be the only desire of God.”

To be sure, very few representations of the Annunciation follow the descriptions of Saint Bernard and others of a completely closed chamber for the Annunciation; many of them are wide open to the world outside; but they rarely show so conspicuously in the design a very realistic opened door. Hence one is tempted to discover a hidden meaning here. It may well be, however, that the opened door is merely the artist’s device for integrating the left panel with the central one, while at the same time creating a slight barrier between the two, the holy scene and the secular one.

In any case, there is no doubt that there is symbolism in the garden. The red rosebush growing against the high wall signifies martyrdom and the suffering of Christ on the cross. But

more particularly it refers to Mary, her “charity” and her abiding love. Medieval literature is full of references to Mary as a rose. She was “the rose without thorns, the most sweet-smelling of all flowers,” she was “the fresh rose, the fully-opened flower in which reposed the Holy Spirit,” she was “the garden of roses, protected by God himself.” The donor kneeling in the garden of our painting has tucked a red rosebud in his hat, perhaps to show his devotion to Mary.

Among the blossoms in the flowery mead of the foreground are forget-me-nots, often called “the eyes of Mary,” violets, and daisies, symbols of her humility. The spring flowers, “flowers of the fields,” recall the time of year when the Annunciation took place. As Saint Bernard said, Christ wished to be conceived “of a flower in the time of flowers.”

The walled garden itself, with its battlemented gate, is also a symbol of the virginity of Mary. The imagery was derived from the Song of Songs: “A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.” To be perfectly consistent, Campin should have closed the gate, but then he could not have painted the little street scene beyond, where a gentleman in a vermillion cloak and large black hat rides a white horse and a woman sits gossiping on a bench beside a shop which displays bright articles of clothing resembling winter underwear. One can find no hidden meaning here.

A more complete view of the Flemish town—which may be Tournai—is depicted on the right-hand panel through the window of Joseph’s workshop. Here are a church, a belfry, and many narrow, steep-gabled houses, each with its shop, a counter for showing the wares fashioned inside, and a bench for the shopkeeper, who may want to get a breath of air. Bright-gowned men and women saunter through the market square, stopping occasionally to chat. It is a delectable glimpse of a fifteenth-century Flemish town.

The scene of the Annunciation gives a detailed picture of the interior of one of these narrow gabled houses, the scene of the donors presents a view of a small town-house garden, and the scene of Joseph takes us inside one of the workshops.

Joseph the Carpenter seems to specialize in



The Annunciation, by Giovanni di Paolo (died about 1482). Italian painters of the XV century generally depicted the event as taking place in a loggia. The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise emphasizes the need for a Redeemer. This is apparently the only XV century painting besides the Merode altarpiece that shows Saint Joseph in an Annunciation scene. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress collection

mousetraps. One is on display at the open window and another, of a different design, rests completed on his workbench along with sundry tools of his trade. These mousetraps, as Meyer Schapiro has brilliantly demonstrated, are placed in the picture not solely because Campin enjoyed painting such contraptions but because he intended to convey, once again, a theological concept under the guise of familiar, everyday things. The interpretation is to be found in sermons by Saint Augustine, and following him, by Peter Lombard. It was firmly believed by the people of the late Middle Ages that the knowl-

edge of the divinity of Christ must be kept from the devil, who was responsible for man's original sin, who made necessary the coming of God to earth in human form to suffer and die by way of atonement. The devil was never to know that Christ was more than man. Only thus could the archenemy be fooled and the original sin of Adam and Eve wiped out. Many writers give as the most important reason for the token marriage of Mary and Joseph that it was necessary to have it appear to the devil that Jesus was born as an ordinary human being. "The marvelous birth of God's Son should be hidden and kept



Christ Carrying the Cross, miniature from a Netherlandish Book of Hours dating from about 1470. The spike-block is illustrated here dragging on the ground between Christ's feet. Bodleian Library, Oxford (3083)

secret from the devil," says Pseudo-Bonaventura. The human flesh of Christ was the bait in the mousetrap which finally caught the devil. As Saint Augustine writes: "The devil exulted when Christ died, but by this very death of Christ the devil is vanquished, as if he had swallowed the bait in the mousetrap. He rejoiced in Christ's death like a bailiff of death. What he rejoiced in was then his own undoing. The cross of the Lord was the devil's mousetrap; the bait by which he was caught was the Lord's death."

Since Joseph's mousetrap seems full of significance, one is inclined to ask what Joseph is making now. Certain writers have said that he is at work on another mousetrap. If so, it bears no relationship to his previous creations or to any other mousetrap, medieval or modern, that seems capable of fooling or catching a mouse. Erwin Panofsky has suggested that he is fashion-

ing a foot warmer such as that in Vermeer's painting of a milkmaid. If this is true, there is no symbolic significance in Joseph's present occupation.

There is another possible interpretation. In many Flemish representations of the Carrying of the Cross, Christ is shown with blocks of wood on ropes hanging ankle length from his waist. These blocks are spiked with nails. An account of the Passion in the Archepiscopal Museum of Utrecht, quoted by A. E. Rientjes, describes these spike-boards. "And then they tied a strong cord around the waist of Our Lord so that by it they could drag him any way they wished. And they tied boards pierced with nails at the ends of the cord with which he was girdled, and they let these fall to his feet. . . . And the boards, with nails stuck through them, hit his heels from behind and his shins in front." The spike-block seems to have been a typically Netherlandish idea for intensifying the suffering of Christ.

Joseph is boring holes in a board strikingly similar in size and proportion to the spike-blocks in the representations of Christ Carrying the Cross. Present day carpenters have said that as a preliminary to driving heavy spikes into a board, smaller holes would undoubtedly be made first. Is it not possible that Joseph, having finished his mousetraps for catching the devil, is now, with the sad foreknowledge of tragic but necessary events to come, reluctantly at work on a spike-board? The tiny Child in the Annunciation scene is already bearing his Cross. The mature Christ wore the spike-blocks when he was carrying his Cross on the way to Calvary. Here, perhaps, is another symbol emphasizing the human nature of Christ and his mission on earth.

The mere presence of Joseph himself, who is almost never included in Annunciation scenes, serves to give importance to the human family of Christ. Jean Gerson, a great protagonist for the cult of Joseph, speaks of the "most divine Trinity, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." The mystics enjoyed imagining the daily life of the family. Pseudo-Bonaventura writes: "Our Lady wrought for her livelihood, that is to say, with needle, sewing, and spinning, as it is written of her, and also Joseph worked at his craft of carpentry, and . . . the child, blessed Jesus, after he came

to the age of five years or thereabout, went on his mother's errands. . . . And Joseph dwelled and stood joyfully with his blessed spouse Mary and with chaste and true love so fervently loved her that it may not be told."

Robert Campin, an innovator in many ways, seems to be at his best in giving new dignity and importance to Joseph the Carpenter, whose feast was not made universal until 1621 and who too often in the Middle Ages was represented as a menial, an exhausted old man, or a fool.

Besides the works of medieval writers quoted in the text, the following works by modern scholars were of special help: Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*; Millard Meiss, "The Madonna of Humility," in the *Art Bulletin*, vol. xviii (1936) and "Light as Form and Symbol" in the *Art Bulletin*, vol. xxvii (1945); Meyer Schapiro's "'Muscipula Diaboli,' the Symbolism of the Merode Altarpiece," in the *Art Bulletin*, vol. xxvii (1945); and A. E. Rientjes' "Het Spijkerblok in de Kruisdraging van Christus" in *Het Gildeboek v, afl. 2*, (August, 1922).



The House of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth, by Martin Torner (before 1480), one of the rare representations of Joseph with a mousetrap. Villalonga Mir Collection, Palma, Majorca