Hans Memling’s *Annunciation* with Angelic Attendants

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Northern Renaissance painting found authority in repetition. More so than in the South, many artists confined their invention to intricate variations of a limited number of themes. Some of the great reputations in the history of art were built in the Netherlands on reworking similar paintings of well-known subjects. Like the great cathedral sculptors and the liturgy of the religion they celebrated, Netherlandish artists proved that reiteration might renew rather than reduce an article of faith. Surprisingly, the repetitive tendency of Flemish art did not become formulaic until the end of the fifteenth century.

Memling’s *Annunciation* (Figure 1), believed to have been done in 1482 at the height of his career, closely follows a well-established tradition. Memling drew upon a convention, fully formulated by the 142os, in which Gabriel, dressed in priestly robes, encountered Mary in a domestic Flemish interior. Within this utterly familiar setting, Memling diverges from the canonical kneeling, seated, or standing Virgin. One may search in vain in other Netherlandish Annunciation panels of the fifteenth century for a Virgin positioned as she is here, suspended between rising and kneeling and held forth by angels. As she gives her acceptance to an invisible God, Mary unselfconsciously turns fully forward, while the angel to her left raises his eyes to address the spectator directly. In spite of her meekness and unsure footing, the Virgin and her heavenly pages dominate the scene. The treatment of color, like that of the subject, mixes the conventional with the unexpected. The pristine luminous surfaces, admired since the time of van Eyck (d. 1441), combine with a rare iridescent wash, most noticeable on the garments of the angelic attendants. The painting reassures the viewer through its traditional forms and symbols, but intensifies the devotional content through the singular group of the Virgin and angels.

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the chamber and his exit from it were repeatedly used as analogies of the conception and birth of Christ and of Mary's virginity.8

Unlike the church setting for the Annunciation used by many artists in the first half of the century, the bedroom scene referred unabashedly to the sacred act of conception. Just as the bed in van Eyck's Arnolfini double portrait points to procreation as one of the purposes of the sacrament of marriage, the thalamus Virginis (identified by the bed) reminds the viewer that this is a nuptial chamber wherein the Virgin as bride and mother is joined to Christ, her Bridegroom and her Son. At the moment of the Annunciation, God espoused the Virgin as his bride. By this marriage, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God created a human form for his eternal Son. Although the act of conception was wholly spiritual, in the sense that the word of God miraculously entered the womb of the Virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the bed as a sign of consummation was not lost upon the fifteenth-century viewer. In the medieval marriage ritual the priest blessed the bed, and the ceremony itself was symbolic of Christ's union with his Church.9

The Church sanctioned intercourse only if intended for procreation. The Scholastics had reaffirmed the three ends of marriage first enumerated by Augustine: offspring (proles), fidelity (fides), and the sacrament (sacramentum).10 The Incarnation fulfilled the first requirement; the Virgin provided an ideal of the second condition; and the union of God and man in Christ was considered the true mystery of which human marriage was a type.

Aside from its pictorial sources in scenes of saintly birth in domestic settings, the major religious text for the nuptial imagery was again the Song of Songs. In this poetic dialogue the bride was identified by the early church fathers as Ecclesia, or the Church, and the bridegroom as Christ. By the twelfth century, with the steady growth of Marian devotion, these texts began to be applied as well to Mary, who had been considered, from patristic times, a figure of the Church. Her virginity was a sign of her fidelity to Christ, and by analogy the virginity of the Church was the purity of its faith. Mary had long been likened to Eve as “mother of all the living,” and like the Church, as the mother of all Christians. Greatly encouraged by the profuse devotions to the Virgin professed by Bernard of Clairvaux, exegetes used the erotic verses of the Song of Songs as Old Testament prefigurations, not only of the mystical union of the soul with God, but also far more literally as the heavenly nuptials of Christ and Mary: she the new Shulamite and Christ the new Solomon. Commentators went so far as to call Gabriel the best man.11

In Memling's painting the curtain of the nuptial bed has been knotted up into what Susan Koslow calls a curtain-sack.12 Because it is located along the central axis and because the top of the bed coincides with the top of the panel, the curtain-sack is exceptionally prominent. It seems much closer to the foreground than it actually is and, with the bending angel, occupies the charged interval between Gabriel and the Virgin usually filled by the pot of lilies. Koslow tells us that the hung bed, so called because the canopy was suspended by cords from the ceiling, became popular in the North about 1400 and appeared shortly thereafter in manuscript illustration.13

Like so many domestic artifacts, the curtain-sack, probably knotted up for ease of access during the day, became in the hands of the Netherlandish painters yet another symbol of the Incarnation. To fifteenth-century science the shape of the sack resembled the uterus of a woman as well as the fourth stomach of a goat or other ruminant.14 When the curtain-sack was likened to the womb of the Virgin, the biological analogy served to affirm Christ's humanity. It suggested that he, like any other mammal, was formed as an embryo within an impregnated womb.

A more unexpected visual and iconographic correspondence was seen in the art of cheese making. Aristotle, still the basic source for the study of embryology in the fifteenth century, compared the formation of a fetus in the womb to that of the curdling of milk in the making of cheese. He compared the use of rennet as the agent used in cheese making to that of semen in the formation of the embryo.15 Moreover, the sack that stored the curds looked like a womb and hung down from a rafter not unlike the knotted curtain on a tester bed.16 These two generative processes, each of which required “live” agents, lie behind the symbolic knotted curtain adopted by the Netherlandish artists. Rogier, Christus, and Bouts all repeatedly used the curtain-sack in their Annunciations.17

Near the curtain-sack, the three objects displayed on the cabinet next to the bed continue the Incarnation symbolism (Figure 4). The candleholder retained a long association with Mary's role as the God-Bearer. She, the candleholder, held Christ, the Light of the World.18 In the search for Old Testa-
Figure 1. Hans Memling (act. 1465–d. 1494). *The Annunciation*. Oil on panel, 78.8 × 55 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975, 1975.1.113
Since the ninth century the Virgin as the chaste bearer of the Divine Light had also been compared to glass, which, when pierced by light, remained unbroken. By Memling's time images of the window and the glass carafe, which alluded to the ability of light to go through solid objects, were common symbols of this miracle. In this Annunciation the crystal flask, already familiar from that seen in the Annunciation on the exterior of the Ghent Altarpiece and in the Frankfurt Madonna by Jan van Eyck, is another receptacle likened to the Virgin's womb. Because it is glass and holds a clear liquid, the light irradiates both the vessel and its contents. The clarity of the glass refers to the purity of the Virgin, and the light to Christ, who inhabited and passed through her body. Or as portrayed by Bishop Amadeus of Lausanne, a fervent follower of Bernard of Clairvaux: "Just as the sun's brightness penetrates glass without breaking it, and as a glance of the eyes plunges into calm clear water without parting or dividing it . . . so the Word of God drew near the Virgin's dwelling and went forth from it, her virgin womb still closed."

The left side of the carafe itself glows with the tiny reflection of a window with a crossbar. Carla Gottlieb traced the development of this "mystical window" of salvation to reflections found on the globe of Christ when he was depicted as the Salvator Mundi. Although the cross made by the frame of the window refers to the death of Christ, in paintings of the Annunciation such window reflections refer primarily to the Virgin Birth.

The use of the light-pierced window as symbolic of the Incarnation has a long history in Netherlandish painting. It appears in the works of both founders of the school, Robert Campin and Jan van Eyck. In Campin's Mérode Annunciation (Figure 5) and in van Eyck's Washington Annunciation (Figure 6) rays of light stream through the windows and carry the Christ Child in the Mérode and the dove of the Holy Spirit in the Washington painting directly toward the Virgin.

The frame that originally surrounded van Eyck's Virgin in a Church in Berlin displayed a text that confirmed the meaning of the painted sunbeam. It contained the words of the first verse of a Nativity hymn as a complement to the depicted sunlight that shines through the clerestory of the church. Fully explained by Millard Meiss, the fifth verse of this hymn likened the Virgin to a glass through which a sunbeam passes without breaking it, just as the Holy Spirit passed through the Virgin leaving her chastity intact. The hymn embodied the popular doctrine

Figure 2. Rogier van der Weyden (1399–1464), The Annunciation, from the Columba Altarpiece. Oil on panel, 138 x 70 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek (photo: Alte Pinakothek)
that Mary, a virgin, was pure before, during, and after the conception and birth of Christ. There is no more decorous sign of Mary's chastity than the window pierced by light, through which God passed from heaven to earth. Meiss interpreted both the light-filled flask and the window as symbols of the Incarnation.27

In Memling's painting, however, the rays of light are missing; only the material window remains. Even though the rays are absent, the symbolism is probably not lost. Meiss cites many paintings of the Annunciation done after the middle of the century, most notably those of Bouts, that eliminate the rays but by including large windows and brightly illuminated rooms continue the parallel symbolism of the Virgin as the fenestra incarnationis.28 Memling makes the meaning somewhat more concrete by depicting the window reflection on the carafe. He lays one translucent symbolic form upon another and fills the interior with sunlight. Within the new naturalistic style of the Renaissance practiced by Memling, light—the most pervasive symbol of the presence of
mind one of the domestic virtues practiced by the youthful Mary. According to the apocryphal tales, when she lived in the Temple Mary was privileged not only to weave the purple cloth but also to care for the ritual vessels and the linen. In Memling's painting the well-scrubbed room, the perfect condition of the few elements it holds, and its four-square cubic form convey a subliminal message of cleanliness as a sign of godliness. The immaculate living space itself becomes a metaphor for Mary's chastity.

Beside the Virgin's prie-dieu, the book that rests on it a reminder of her precocious understanding of the Scriptures also first manifest in the Temple, stands the traditional pot of lilies. This, too, had accumulated multiple meanings by the fifteenth century. The vase, like the candleholder and flask, may refer directly to Mary as the chosen vessel for Christ, as does the white lily, symbolic of her purity. The association of flowers with the Annunciation grew in part from the words of Bernard of Clairvaux. In an elaborate conceit he portrayed Christ as a flower conceived of a flower in the time of flowers in the city of flowers, which, prosaically speaking, meant that Christ was conceived by Mary (the lily of chastity), in springtime (March 25), in the town of Nazareth (a name Bernard mistakenly believed meant "flower").

Among the lilies in Memling's painting is one blue iris, a tragic reference within the joyful context of the Annunciation to the sorrow the Virgin would bear at Christ's death. This symbol has its origin in the prophecy of Simeon, when he told the Virgin at the time of Christ's Presentation: "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also" (Luke 2:35). Inspired by this biblical image, artists symbolized the Virgin's future suffering by the iris, whose old Latin name, gladiolus, meant sword lily.

A more overt reference to Christ's sacrifice is the fact that Gabriel is vested in a cope. The depiction of vested angels is as familiar in Northern art as the furnishings of the room; there are many precedents for Memling's Gabriel. By position and gesture he recalls three such richly robed angels. The scepter and the raised right hand are found in van Eyck's Gabriel in the Washington Annunciation; the suspended genuflection was introduced by Rogier in the Louvre Annunciation; and the gesture of the left hand, which reaches across and grasps the cope while holding the scepter, may be found in Bouts's Annunciation panel from the Mary Altarpiece in the Prado. Such vested angels were introduced in

Figure 4. Detail of Figure 1

God—became a palpable substance capable of many configurations.

The small vessel holds still more. The shape of the carafe itself may imply another image of conception and birth, drawn from the scientific world. Alchemists used such flasks to mix so-called male and female elements and called the flasks bridal chambers. When the elements joined to form a third substance, that new entity was called the child of the union. In the work of Bosch, a representation of a carafe is often explicitly intended to be considered such an alchemical "bridal chamber"; it is believed that a similar meaning is intended by depictions of carafes in paintings of the Virgin by Jan van Eyck and others. In this context, the flask may be seen as an even richer emblem of Mary, for it unites in one vessel the opposing traits of fecundity and virginity.

The sparkle of the three objects on the polished chest, the well-made bed, and the spotless floor re-
manuscript illustration toward the end of the fourteenth century and became popular in Northern panel painting by the 1420s. Although dressed in various combinations of alb, stole, and cope, these angels do not wear the chasuble of the celebrant, for, as Father McNamee recognized, they are to be viewed as subministers of the Mass. Christ alone is the high priest as well as the sacrificial victim, but all such angels evoke the eucharistic ritual.

The cope worn by Memling's Gabriel is secured by a large morse and worn over a long alb and an amice around the neck. It is heavily embroidered in red on gold and edged with gray and red seraphim interspersed with wheels. Gabriel wears a simple diadem and carries the staff of his office as God's envoy. The raised fingers of his right hand suggest that he has just uttered the words of greeting: "Hail Mary, full of Grace. The Lord is with thee."

Since the Annunciation is one of the oldest Marian feast days, Gabriel's dual role as messenger and as subminister joins the historical event to a major eucharistic celebration. As the material objects hide a divine mystery, so the domestic interior conceals its function as a setting for a solemn Mass served by not one but three priestly angels.

By the fifteenth century, it was believed that at the most sacred moment in the Mass, during the consecration, the bread and wine were transformed into the real Body and Blood of Christ. His presence on the altar was not spiritual or symbolic but real and substantial. The miracle is invoked by the words of consecration: "This is my body, which is given for you... This is my blood..." These words had originally been spoken at the Last Supper, which was considered the institution and first celebration of this ritual, and were signaled by the ringing of bells and followed by the elevation of the consecrated elements. The separate consecration of the Body and Blood recalled and was believed to make present the Crucifixion, but because the Christ made present was now in glory, the Mass was understood to be a representation of the Resurrection and Ascension as well.

Popular piety of the time stressed the sacrificial aspects of the Mass, concentrating attention on the crucified and resurrected Christ. But as early as the fourth century, the church fathers had compared the mystery of the transformation of the elements to the first, rather than last, appearance of God clothed in his human flesh, that is, to the shaping of the Body and Blood of Christ when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin's womb. They linked the moment of transubstantiation, when the divine power transformed the elements into the Body and Blood of Christ, to the moment of the Incarnation announced by Gabriel, when the divine power created that Body and Blood within the Virgin's womb. An obvious parallel was further drawn between the tabernacle that held the consecrated species and the Virgin's body, which held the living God. From that time on the Incarnation, wherein the Word was first made flesh, took on eucharistic meaning, as did the actual birth of Christ. In Netherlandish Annunciations the sacramental significance is made more compelling by the presence of angels in priestly habit. They remind the viewer that the earthly Mass is a replica of the eucharistic feast in heaven, served by angel deacons, to which it is mystically joined.

The reference to transubstantiation is strengthened in Memling's work by the singular dove that hovers over the head of the Virgin. By its stiff appearance and abrupt foreshortening it brings to mind a sculptural rather than a living form. In discussing the doves in the Ghent Altarpiece, Lotte Brand Philip saw a likeness between such doves and the eucharistic vessels made in the form of doves and suspended over altars. Representing the Holy Spirit and containing the Hosts, they were sometimes lowered at the moment of transubstantiation. As the Holy Spirit was the breath that gave life to Christ in the Virgin's womb, so too the Holy Ghost had a role in transforming the bread and wine into the living flesh. Although Gabriel delivered God's message, it was the Holy Spirit that made Mary fruitful. Memling's depiction of this dove, surrounded by a blazing aureole, is unusual enough in Netherlandish painting to give credence to its being not only a depiction of the Holy Spirit but also a eucharistic allusion. Its form, similar to that of the dove on the interior and the exterior of the Ghent Altarpiece, was not imitated by many Flemish artists. As far as we know, this frontal, foreshortened dove was rarely used by Rogier and not again by Memling in this particular form; it became common only at the end of the fifteenth century.

The mystery of the Incarnation lies at the heart of any representation of the Annunciation. Since the days of the early church, artists had enfolded this belief in the meeting between Gabriel and Mary. In order to make the moment of fertilization explicit, artists at times depicted rays of light streaming toward Mary's head to portray the popular belief that
Mary was fertilized through the ear.\(^{40}\) Memling, however, rejects such an obvious and antinaturalistic device. Neither does he dwell on the immediacy of the announcement or on Mary’s response to Gabriel’s sudden appearance. The Virgin does not convey by her position a sense of fear or surprise; nor does she question or merely humbly accept. Instead, in an invention worthy of Rogier van der Weyden’s most illustrious pupil, Memling reworks the familiar iconography and turns attention from the momentary encounter to the transformation of Mary from girl to God-Bearer. He eliminates extraneous symbols and concentrates on those objects closely associated with the womb and virginity. He repositions the Holy Spirit and the Virgin, introduces two additional angelic priests, and floods the room with natural light, thereby rearranging the anecdotal to emphasize the doctrinal meaning.

The barefooted Gabriel genuflects before a Virgin who seems to be on the point of rising or falling, her position much like that of the swooning Virgin portrayed by Rogier in the Prado Crucifixion and on the left wing of the Crucifixion diptych in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.\(^{41}\) Like those of the Philadelphia Virgin, her gestures imply a number of meanings simultaneously.\(^{42}\) Her left hand points to a sacred text, most probably that of Isaiah: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (7:14).\(^{43}\) Her downcast eyes and the hand over her breast signify her modesty. Her body, neither standing nor kneeling, portrays an outward obeisance to God and an inward state of being “overcome.” In Jacobus de
Voragine's commentary on the feast day of the Annunciation he discusses the Virgin's *Fiat*, or words of consent: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word!" (Luke 1:38). Calling on the authority of Bernard of Clairvaux, Voragine asserts that upon Mary's uttering these words the Son of God was conceived. Or as Amadeus wrote in one of his eight homilies on Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you . . . at his touch your womb may tremble, your belly swell, your spirit rejoice, your stomach expand." Such expositions were based on the spare sentence in the Gospel, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee" (Luke 1:35).

By using the Greek word *episkiazo* for "overshadow"—the same word that had been used in the Septuagint to describe the cloud's resting on the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35)—Luke drew a parallel with the sanctification of the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament. After Moses had finished setting up the tent and placed within it the tabernacle to hold the Ark and the altar for the burnt offering, he was prevented from entering the tent by a cloud that "covered" or "overshadowed" it (Exodus 40:35). The cloud was the Lord, who had entered the tent to fill the tabernacle with his glory.

To the Catholic apologist, the Old Testament scene of God's entering the Ark prefigured the Incarnation. Mary, the New Ark of the New Covenant, became the dwelling place for God in the era *sub gratia*. When God's spirit overshadowed her during the Incarnation, she became both Christ's bride and mother. The inherent contradiction between a shadow and the God of great light was not overlooked. In one of several interpretations, exegetes called the shadow the earthly aspect of Christ, that is, his human flesh, and the light his divine nature; thus could Mary be both overshadowed and filled with light. In this sense the cloudlike apparition, evoked by the word *overshadowed*, embodied the doctrine of the hypostatic union, the sum and substance of the Annunciation.

The moment of overshadowing pointed to a future as well as a past event in Christian history. Mary, as a figure of the temple, twice received the Holy Spirit, once at the Incarnation and again at Pentecost. At the Annunciation she became the mother of Christ, and at Pentecost the mother of the Church, the Holy Spirit descending into her, the apostles, and by extension all believers. The descent of the dove is evidence of her sanctification and her pri-
mary role in the work of redemption. In her consent to bear Christ she shared with him the burden of the work of salvation, reaffirmed in the founding of the universal Church at Pentecost. 49

Within the requirements of a naturalistic style, no subject was more delicate or difficult to represent than the fertilization of the Virgin. If one is willing to accept angels who look and behave like humans, as a part of the normal order of the Christian Renaissance world, Memling portrayed the moment of the Incarnation without resorting to elements that violated the rational expectations conveyed by the realistic Flemish room. Even the stiffened dove may be justified in mimetic terms, for as Julius Held pointed out, compositionally and by its circular shape the dove takes the place of a medallion hung at the head of a tester bed. 50 To reproduce the moment of divine conception naturally, Memling coordinated a number of devices: Mary’s left hand falls upon the text announcing a virginal conception; the haloed dove halts his flight just above her head; two angels, one on either side, hold forth the sacred shrine, and the light falls conspicuously upon the lower part of the Virgin’s body. All suggest that we are witnessing the moment when the Virgin became the God-Bearer. The sacred womb is visually recalled in the symbolic curtain-sack and actually represented by the very body of the Virgin herself. In a century when artists did not hesitate to depict the breast of the Virgin, Memling did not shun her womb. Luke’s famous verse “Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked” (11:27) serves as text for either emblem of motherhood. Both breast and womb embodied the sustenance and promise of redemption given by Mary to all Christians. With such an invention Memling joined that select group of Renaissance artists, from both the North and the South, who made the most profound and glorious mysteries of the Church as believably present in representation as they were in the imagination.

The doctrine of Mary as Theotokos, the God-Bearer, is of ancient origin. After much dispute, it was confirmed at the Council of Ephesus in 431. The doctrine of the Incarnation, which affirmed that Christ was at once one being with two natures, God and Man, was formulated twenty years later at the Council of Chalcedon, and the feast of the Annunciation was celebrated from the fifth century on. 51 The mosaics on the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore, built in 432 by Pope Sixtus III probably to commemorate the Council of Ephesus, are one of the first artistic formulations of the Virgin as the Theotokos. In the scene traditionally called the Annunciation the Virgin appears in full Byzantine regalia and receives the message of Gabriel as an enthroned queen attended by angels.

Memling’s Virgin, on the other hand, has been called from a lowly state to bear the Savior of the world. Her attendant angels have entered her simple home to support, present, and protect her sacred being. She attends the invisible Christ, who joins her as Son and Bridegroom before the nuptial bed. As any bride might, Mary gives her consent. As she does so, her outer garment seems to rise spontaneously like a regal cape behind her head and an angel lifts its hem from the floor. Mary has become Christ’s Bride, who will one day reign as Queen of Heaven. Her acceptance and submission have set in motion the redemption of the world.

Mary’s consent to bear the Son of God and act as the tabernacle wherein the Word was made flesh announced the beginning of atonement. God, no longer angry at humankind, forgave the sin of Adam through the sacrifice of his Son, and the transgression of Eve through the obedience of the Virgin. As Bonaventure wrote: “Through the Word made flesh the fall of both men and angels is repaired. . . . If the cure was to be universal, it was wholly becoming that angel, woman, and man should concur in the mystery of the incarnation: the angel as the herald, the Virgin as the conceiver and the Man as the conceived Offspring.” 52 With the coming of Christ man might again dream of Paradise. Commenting upon the joyful moment, a disciple of Bonaventure exalted: “Such happiness had not been heard since the beginning of time to the end. . . . Today is even more the festivity of human nature, for its salvation and redemption have begun, and the reconciliation of the whole world is taken up and sanctified.” 53

The greatest sign of the Virgin’s sanctity was her miraculous virginity, which linked her chastity with the mythic power to overcome evil. 54 From the third century on, Mary’s perpetual virginity—ante partum, in partu, and post partum—had been an accepted belief, although it was not formally defined until the Lateran Council of 649. 55 Her miraculous womb passed its final test with the birth of Christ. The angelic prediction was fulfilled, and Mary’s virginity was unblemished. Mary’s womb, the fabulous vessel that was able to carry “the One whom the heavens cannot contain,” had long been an object of veneration in song, exegesis, and prayer. Her body was lik-
en to all forms of enclosed architecture—a temple, a tent, a church, a castle, to name only a few—and prefigured in any number of images from the Old Testament. In the liturgy, the words of Elizabeth, which expand upon those of Gabriel: “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!” (Luke 1:42), repeatedly remember her motherhood. Ambrose called her womb “the pot which, by means of the fervent Spirit which hovered over her, filled the whole world when she brought forth the Savior.”56 There are almost as many verses dedicated to the Virgin’s womb during the season of Advent and on the feast of the Assumption as there are on the feast of the Annunciation.

The wedding between Christ and the Virgin, initiated at the Annunciation, culminated in Mary’s death and assumption.57 Believed to be higher than the angels and given the title of mediatrix of the salvation of the world, the Virgin began her ascent to sit at the right hand of God with the Incarnation. Because this event made her the mother of Christ the King and because she joined him in the mission of redemption, she was called a queen long before she received her heavenly crown. The conception and birth of Christ guaranteed her singular reward of bodily assumption. By the fifteenth century, her body was believed incorruptible in two senses: by her own birth free from sin (the Immaculate Conception, a doctrine championed by the Franciscans led by Duns Scotus in the thirteenth century) and by the chaste birth of Christ. As she gave mortal life to Christ, so did she gain immortality of body and of soul.58 For that reason paintings of the Coronation or the Assumption of Mary are often joined by scenes of the Annunciation, just as the liturgy joins references to the Incarnation with those of the king and queen ruling in heaven in the feast of the Assumption. An antiphon of this feast day returns to the image of the nuptial bedroom: “The Virgin Mary has been taken up into the heavenly bridal chamber where the King of Kings is sitting on his starry throne.”59 Alternatively, Annunciation scenes often contain specific references to the Assumption and the Coronation.

The inclusion of the two angels, one on either side of the Virgin, surely refers in part to her queenly state. Additional angels in Annunciations are not unusual, but they most frequently accompany Gabriel, and sometimes God the Father, as part of a heavenly host. When they are seen with the Virgin, they generally support a cloth of honor behind her or hover around her throne.60

Even Memling, who was predisposed toward angelic attendants, did not repeat these figures dressed in alb and amice in any of his other Annunciations. His vested angels appear almost always as devoted subjects flanking an enthroned Virgin and Child, sometimes alone, sometimes joined by saints and donors. Most frequently they make joyous music or present fruit to the Christ Child. They appear in largest number and scale as a chorus on either side of Christ the Salvator Mundi in the Antwerp triptych. Similarly, several Annunciations done by Memling’s followers, which repeat the scheme of this Annunciation, do not include angelic attendants. In the panel in the Vicente Collection in Madrid, in the fragment of the Annunciation from the Infancy Altarpiece in the Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow, and in a later panel from an altarpiece in the Philadelphia Museum attributed to the Master of Hooograetien, the Virgin receives Gabriel alone while kneeling in the usual three-quarter position beside a prie-dieu.61

The attendant angels in Memling’s Annunciation perform a dual purpose. They present the eucharistic offering and proclaim the Virgin bride and queen. Even in paintings of the enthroned Virgin and Child, Memling did not often portray the Virgin Queen as a richly crowned and ornamented woman in the tradition of van Eyck and, to a lesser extent, Rogier. This Virgin is no exception. Her white garment is sparingly bejeweled, and the regal purple tunic worn beneath peeps out only at the neck and wrists. But the lifting of her train identifies the Virgin as a royal bride. It is a motif most often associated with her Coronation. In an early Burgundian tocano of about 1400, now in Berlin, two vested angels stand behind the kneeling Queen. One holds her train, while a third angel draws back the curtain beside God’s throne (Figure 7). The Coronation page of the Triè Riches Heures of Jean, Duc de Berry, shows a similar action.62 In the Visitation from the Boucicaut Hours an obviously pregnant Virgin, wearing a long cloak held by an angel, meets Elizabeth; her queenly appearance surely commemorates the moment when Mary is first addressed as the Theotokos, the Mother of the Lord. In another Burgundian panel, attributed to Henri Bellechose, a vested angel holds Christ’s mantle while Christ administers the last sacrament to St. Denis (Figure 8). Such an action recognizes Christ’s kingship and the sacramental act, as it may well do in the Memling Annunciation.

The theme of the wedding of Christ and the Vir-
gin at the time of the Incarnation is also underscored by these angels. One picks up her gown, as noted, but they both appear to give her physical assistance. Her position seems to answer the Bridegroom's call in the Song of Songs, “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away” (2:10).63 Short of finding a text to explain their presence, it would seem that these angels were drawn from the courtly tradition upon which so much of Northern art depends. By the late medieval period in the West, angelic pages were common, and Gabriel himself knelt like any noble knight.64 The angels remind the viewer that the Virgin had often been served by angels and was most comfortable in their presence. As told in the Protoevangelium (8:2), angels continually ministered to her and fed her daily when she lived in the Temple. Many commentators hasten to explain that the Virgin did not fear Gabriel once she realized that he was an angel; it was only his message that momentarily “troubled” her.65 Moreover, attending angels are part of the standard iconography of Mary's Assumption and Coronation. She shares with them the state of virginity, and in her divine mission was often favorably compared to them and found second only to God.66 Like most attendant angels in Northern Renaissance painting they are small in scale. Lesser in station than Gabriel or Michael, the chosen champions of God the Father, such angels often hover around the sacred figures, performing worldly tasks or echoing the psychological state, whether triumphant or suffering, of the divinity they serve. These creatures sometimes seem more human than the anthropomorphic Savior or saints they attend; often the size of children, they appear to act innocent and spontaneous. In attitude, however, Memling’s small angels are solemn, their mood comparable to that of Gabriel. Only the hint of a smile touches the lips of the angel who bends to lift the Virgin’s garment. The other, whose visage closely resembles that of
the Virgin, looks directly at the spectator as he presents her sacred body. His gesture, like the Virgin's indication of the text, goes beyond the narrational to the liturgical. Both claim our attention and help isolate the Virgin and her mission. Even the brocaded Gabriel is a barefooted supplicant before the new mother, bride, and queen.

Because Memling did not extend the ceiling over the foreground space, terminating it with the top of the bed, the slightly tilted floor acts like an open stage for the holy figures. It stretches into our space as the ceiling does not, displaying all the main players as it rolls out to meet the viewer. On the measured Rogierian tilework one can see that Gabriel's foot has been placed slightly behind that of the Virgin, for her visible toe rests on a tile one row nearer to us. The three-quarter turn of Gabriel's body acts as another foil for the frontal Mary.

Although Memling eschews the use of obvious divine rays, he lets fall upon all the holy personages a most unusual light. The long garments of Gabriel, the Virgin, and the angels are white; yet both Gabriel and even more so Mary are cast in a light so blue as almost to obscure the local color of their robes. Gabriel's icy-blue alb and wings contrast with the warmth of his skin, his golden-red cope, and the sunlit room. The small angels seem to react to the light in opposing ways. The blue shadows and pink highlights give the alb of the angel to the Virgin's right a lavender cast. This, along with the dark green of his wings, suggests that he is somewhat in shadow, while the other angel seems bleached by light. An unseen spotlight searches out his face and breast, casting mauve shadows on his wings and garment and yellow highlights on his chest.

The final effect is one of iridescence. Limited to Mary and the angels, this shimmering surface gives them an unearthly quality, separating them from the more believable world of the bedchamber. It disconnects them from their surroundings just as their feather-light placement on the floor turns them into transient visitors. Memling imbues the reality of the drama with a touch of mystery, and invents yet another means to wed the sacred to the secular within the confines of a naturalistic style.

Although one finds flashes of such fluorescent color in the work of Rogier van der Weyden, in Memling's Annunciation this color falls consistently upon those two exceptional angel attendants, giving them a separate aura, like that created by the rain-

Figure 8. Henri Bellechose (ca. 1380–ca. 1440), The Martyrdom of St. Denis. Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: Réunion des musées nationaux)
bow of colors in the light rays surrounding the dove of the Holy Spirit. A harbinger of the sixteenth century, this Mannerist-like substitution of expressive color for local color has an unsteadying effect. One loses momentarily the rationality of the representation, the very underpinning of much of Flemish art. It cannot be accidental that the radiance also falls directly upon the Virgin’s body, displayed in all its fullness as if it were “a lantern that shone and shimmered with beauty from the moment God was enclosed in it.”

By its arrangement, Memling’s *Annunciation* plays with symmetry in much the way that Jan van Eyck’s does, equating asymmetrical elements without producing a restless imbalance. The three figures in the right half are balanced on the left by the single Gabriel. Unlike the Virgin, he is not centered within his half of the room, and his body turns diagonally in space almost parallel to the foreshortened window, further diminishing his pictorial weight. The articulation of the orthogonals on his side opposes the series of transversals on the other.

Memling tips the balance of the painting in favor of the Virgin. Centered beneath the bed and the dove and flanked by angels, one of whom overlaps Gabriel’s half of the panel, she forms a separate icon within the narrative. Their symmetrical arrangement and frontal position further remove this group from the immediacy of the encounter with Gabriel. Although placed in the right half of the panel, they are the devotional center. Looking back at Rogier’s Louvre *Annunciation* and the wing of the Columba Altarpiece, from which Memling took so much, we find no such dominance: in both, Mary kneels in humility as Gabriel’s tall figure descends upon her or stands above her. Not only has Memling given the Virgin greater importance; he has lifted her beyond the dramatic exchange. She is at once the girlish recipient of the Ave Maria and the New Eve, God’s chosen vessel, who serves as a human monstrance elevated by angels. As the bearer of God, a concept made explicit by the position and lighting of her body, she is worthy of devotion in her own right. We witness the moment in which the Virgin is overshadowed. The humble Mary of Nazareth rises in her middle-class Flemish home to become Our Lady, the mediatrix, who opened the gates of heaven with her *Fiat*.68

**NOTES**

1. This was a favorite painting of Guy Bauman, who devoted much of his scholarly life to Memling, an artist he knew to be much more than a “major minor master.”

2. The painting entered the Robert Lehman Collection from the collection of Prince Anton Radziwill of Berlin. Max J. Friedländer, *Early Dutch Painting: Hans Memlinc and Gerard David* (New York, 1971) VI A, cat. no. 26, follows Gustav Waagen in dating the work to 1482. The date may have been still apparent on the original frame (now lost) when the work was exhibited in Bruges in 1902 in the Exposition des Primitifs Flamands.

3. Memling is assumed to have been Rogier’s pupil in Brussels about 1460, as Vasari was the first to suggest in his life of Antonello da Messina in *Lives of the Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, A. B. Hinds, trans. (New York, 1980) I, p. 356. There are, however, no documents that connect Memling directly with Rogier’s workshop.

4. Anne Markham Schulz reviews the opinions that have led many to believe this painting is based upon a lost prototype and that it is not from the hand of Rogier van der Weyden. “The Columba Altarpiece and Rogier van der Weyden’s Stylistic Development,” *Münchner Jahrbuch der Bildenden Kunst* 22 (1971) pp. 69–70 n. 40.


8. For the development of this imagery particularly associated with the Nativity, see Carol Purtle, *The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck* (Princeton, 1982) pp. 31–32, 104ff.


Yrjo Hirn quotes other sources which called Gabriel the spokesman for God sent to woo the Virgin and arrange the marriage, in *The Sacred Shrine* (Boston, 1957) pp. 291–293.


13. Ibid., pp. 11, 32–33. Koslow notes that the canopy bed was replaced in the 16th century by the four-poster, a bed that enjoyed a much longer popularity.


15. Ibid., pp. 9–24.


17. See Koslow, “The Curtain-Sack,” *passim*, for a number of examples.


20. Charles Minnott, “The Theme of the Mérôde Altarpiece,” *The Art Bulletin* 51 (1969) p. 270. For the example closest to Memling, see the *Annunciation* by a follower of Rogier van der Weyden in the MMA (17.190.7). In this work the Virgin kneels before a prie-dieu and actually holds the ball of waxed flax, now lit, over the book. William S. Heckscher in “The Annunciation of the Mérôde Altarpiece: An Iconographic Study,” *Miscellanea Josef Duverger* (Ghent, 1968) 1, p. 64, takes this as a sign that the conception has not taken place, for the coming Divine Light has not yet overshadowed the physical light.


22. For a discussion of the glass carafe and its virginal and bridal associations, see Purtle, *Marian Paintings*, pp. 33–34, 115, 122–123. Ingvar Bergström in “Medicina, Fons et Scrinium: A Study in Van Eyckian Symbolism and Its Influence in Italian Art,” *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 26 (1957) pp. 12–14, also suggests that such carafes refer to the Virgin as the *fons vitae*, the fountain or well of living water, taken from the Song of Solomon. But he notes that when closed by a stopper, which often appears to be a piece of paper (as in the Memling *Annunciation*), the carafe refers primarily to the *fons signatus*, or sealed fountain (Song of Songs 4:12), a further reference to Mary’s virginity.


27. Ibid., p. 176.

28. Ibid., p. 178.


31. Panofsky, I, p. 141 and n. 3. The presence of the iris in the vase argues for the interpretation of all the flowers as virginal.


38. See Lotte Brand Philip, *The Ghent Altarpiece and the Art of Jan van Eyck* (Princeton, 1971) pp. 69–70, for this interpretation. Others have suggested that the position of the dove imitates that found in mystery plays of the Annunciation, when a dove was lowered over the head of the Virgin. For a summary of this view and sources, see Lane, *The Altar*, pp. 47–50, and Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine*, pp. 114–115.

39. Two appearances of such a dove in works associated with Rogier are found on the exterior Annunciation of the Beaune Last Judgment Altarpiece (these panels of Gabriel and the Virgin are often ascribed to a follower rather than to Rogier himself), and in a small painting in Antwerp whose attribution is also questioned. See Martin Davies, *Rogier van der Weyden* (London, 1972) pp. 197–199, for the Beaune Last Judgment Altarpiece and p. 195 for the Antwerp Annunciation. Petrus Christus, so often following in van Eyck’s footsteps, used such a dove in the Annunciation wing in Berlin, dated 1452, a composition that also depends upon Rogier’s Louvrev Annunciation.

40. Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine*, pp. 294–299, discusses the manner in which the Annunciation came to embody the idea of the Incarnation even though in the canonical Gospels the Virgin’s motherhood is merely a promise stated in the future tense. Nothing is mentioned as to how or when the conception will take place. In "L'Hymen et la couleur: Figures médiévales de la Vierge," *La Part
were gier Bonaventure (New York, I, p. 291.


45. Magnificat, pp. 84–85.


51. Warner, Alone of All Her Sex, p. 66. For a summary of the early Marian feasts, see Laurentin, Court traité, pp. 172–173.


54. Warner, Alone of All Her Sex, p. 67.


57. Purtle, Marian Paintings, pp. 8–9.


59. Ibid.

60. Such angels are fairly common in manuscript illumination. For one example, see the Annunciation in the Hours of the Virgin by the Rohan Master, illustrated in The Rohan Master: A Book of Hours, with an introduction by Millard Meiss and Marcel Thomas (New York, 1973) pl. 43; or the Annunciation by a master from Bruges or Ghent at the end of the 15th century illustrated in Janet Backhouse, Book of Hours (London, 1985) no. 15. For examples from painting, see the Annunciation by Johann Koerbecke from the Marian altarpiece of 1457 illustrated in A. Stange, Deutsche Malerei der Gotik (Kraus Reprint, 1969) VI, pl. 18, and another by Michel Wolgemut from 1479 illustrated in vol. IX, pl. 90. There is a rather unusual use of angelic attendants in the grisaille shutters of the Annunciation on the exterior of the Master of Moulins triptych in the Cathedral of Moulins. Gabriel on the right alights with several angels behind him, and the Virgin kneels on the left wing, introduced by two large angels who hover in the air above. Illustrated in Greta Ring, A Century of French Painting (Glasgow, 1949) cat. no. 293, pls. 159–163.

61. For illustrations, see Friedländer, Memline and David, VIA, pls. 131 and 125, and Max J. Friedländer, Early Netherlandish Painting: Quentin Massys (New York, 1971) VII, pl. 84.


63. For an interpretation of the Mérode Annunciation as a wedding picture, see Gottlieb, “Resticiens per fenestras,” pp. 76–83.

64. Vilette, L’Ange, pp. 17–18, 246.

65. Ibid., pp. 220–222. gives a number of reasons for her being “troubled.”

66. Two authors who try to explain the presence of the two angel attendants in Memling’s work are K. Smits, De Iconographie van de Nederlandse primitieven (Amsterdam, 1933) p. 49, who notes the equality of Mary and the angels because of their shared virginity; and Vilette, L’Ange, p. 247, who states that Mary is “already Queen of heaven.”


68. I would like to express my deep appreciation to Patricia Godfrey, who read and commented so carefully upon this text.