

The Incarnation of Christ as Presented in the Annunciation by Dieric Bouts

By Mary-Margaret McLeod

The Annunciation, also known as the Getty Annunciation, by Dieric Bouts is a piece shrouded in mystery (Fig. 1). The piece was purchased by the J. Paul Getty Museum after a private buyer removed his bid for the painting on the basis of advice from the art dealer and advisor Alain Tarica that the painting was not an original. The suspicion that the painting was a fraud continued after the Getty had it in its possession. Tarica felt that once the Getty purchased his painting his reputation in the art world was tainted. He published numerous articles about the Getty buying a fraud in an attempt to expose the Getty and repair his image. The basis for Tarica's belief that the painting is a fraud stems from stylistic elements in the painting that are uncharacteristic of annunciation scenes produced in the fifteenth century. Annunciation scenes from this Renaissance period are typically overflowing with symbols alluding to various elements from the life of Mary and Christ. Consider the *Mérode Altarpiece*, by Robert Campin; the annunciation scene contains symbols such as lilies for purity, light passing through a window unbroken as Mary could remain a virgin and conceiving Christ, a candle extinguished as a symbol for Christ leaving his godly life and becoming a mortal, and even a little Christ figure coming in on those rays of light (Fig. 2). In contrast, *The Annunciation* by Bouts features a simple plain room with few windows dimly lit, the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, and a red bed or couch. Although it appears that *the Annunciation* is missing many of the fundamental symbolic elements of a Renaissance annunciation scene, further study of the curtain-sack, the Angel Gabriel's covered hand, colour choice, the emptiness of the room, and the material it was painted on reveal that there is in fact deep symbolic meaning. Once those symbols are understood, this annunciation scene reveals that the focus of *The Annunciation* lies not on the visitation of Gabriel to Mary, but on the miracle of the Incarnation of Christ.

One of the few scholars to study the symbolism contained in *The Annunciation* is Susan Koslow. Her research focuses on the symbolic meaning of the curtain-sack. Curtain-sack is the name Koslow gave to the red sack suspended from the corner canopy of the bed featured in *The Annunciation*, as well as countless other interior paintings. The frequency of this sack in

northern Renaissance painting seems to draw the conclusion that this was a common element of bed linens and making.¹ Koslow's original research was on the significance of the curtain-sack in Rogier van der Weyden's *Columba Annunciation*; in a later version of her publication, Koslow expands on her theories and discusses the curtain-sack in *The Annunciation* by Dieric Bouts. Through a thorough analysis of the tradition of the curtain-sack and its shape Koslow concludes "The curtain sack symbolizes no less than the most fundamental of Christian beliefs, the Incarnation, by alluding to the embryogenic process whereby the World became flesh".² By including a curtain-sack in *The Annunciation*, Bouts has emphasized the Incarnation of Christ in a symbolic, but very literal manner. Further research on *The Annunciation* led Koslow to believe that the Angel Gabriel's odd hand gesture is part of the process to knot the curtain-sack.³ The Angel Gabriel's hands actively forming the curtain-sack bring an even greater focus on the Incarnation, and make it even more prominent in the painting.

The hand gesture of the Angel Gabriel is perhaps the most curious element of the composition. The cloth from the bed hanging over and veiling Gabriel's hand is what initially led Tarica to doubt the authenticity of this work. An article published in ARTnews shortly after the Getty acquired the painting details that Tarica calls the curtain over Angel Gabriel's arm "an oddity".⁴ In reaction to this claim the Getty responded "The gesture probably had some symbolic meaning that further research will reveal".⁵ It is a common religious tradition and custom to cover one's hands in the presence of a holy figure. In *The Annunciation*, that "odd" detail possesses a very sacred purpose. The Angel Gabriel shielding his hand from Mary is an indicator that, as the mother of the Saviour, she is even more holy than the angel himself and he is unworthy of being in her presence. Gabriel's respect for Mary may be an indicator that the Incarnation has already begun, and the Christ Child is already growing into his robe of flesh inside the womb of Mary. The respect that Gabriel has for Mary then demands even greater respect from the viewer, as the viewer interacting with this piece is stationed below both Mary and the Angel Gabriel symbolizing that they are above, and holier than, the viewer.

¹ Susan Koslow, "The Curtain-Sack: A Newly Discovered Incarnation Motif in Rogier van der Weyden's *Columba Annunciation*," *Artibus et Historiae* 7 (1986): 9.

² Ibid: 10.

³ *J. Paul Getty Museum Journal*, 14: 2.

⁴ Valerie F. Brooks, "The Thrill of a lifetime," *ARTnews*, (May 1985) 84: 19.

⁵ Ibid: 20.

The covered hand of the Angel may also be related to the sacristy of a church. The sacristy is a small room inside the church in which the priestly vestments are kept, and the priest dresses before each mass. The priest in the sacristy was a well-known and understood metaphor for the Incarnation of Christ during the fifteenth-century. The priest entering the sacristy, dressing in sacred robes while inside, and then exiting the room to perform the mass is a very symbolic representation of Christ. As Christ came down to earth and entered the womb of his mother, the Virgin Mary, he put on robes of flesh that were woven for him inside of her, and then was born as a mortal man to perform the great and everlasting sacrifice dressed in that cloak of humanity. Christ is the ultimate priest, whom all priests are emulating. Dressing in robes while in the sacristy is symbolic of Christ dressing in flesh while in the womb. The sacristy has long been associated as symbol of the womb of Mary, in which Christ puts on his robes of humanity.⁶

Applying the symbolism of the sacristy to *the Annunciation*, more specifically to the covering of Angel Gabriel's arm. The Angel Gabriel is dressed in a tunic which resembles the alb, which is one of the priestly vestments. As the Angel Gabriel is wearing a vestment of the priests he steps into the role of a priest as a representation of Christ. The action of covering the hands, then becomes a symbol for the sacristy; just as the hand is cloaked behind the cloth, a priest clothes himself in holy robes, and Christ is cloaked in flesh as His robe of humanity. Each level of this metaphor relates back to the Incarnation, concluding with Gabriel as a representation, in the painting *The Annunciation*, for the miracle that has occurred inside the Virgin Mary as Christ becomes mortal.

This deep symbolism of the Incarnation is made the focal point of *The Annunciation* through the composition of the room. This room in which the Angel Gabriel is visiting Mary is especially barren, holding only the two figures, a small bench and a large bed. The emptiness of this room serves to bring the focus to the bed and the cloth. Much of the meaning of this piece is related to the bed, more specifically to cloth. The choice to make this bed cover such a large portion of the composition further emphasizes that the focus of this annunciation scene is on the Incarnation.

⁶ William Durandus, "The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments," Cambridge (1843): 60.

The focus of the Incarnation, and the importance of the bed is also understood through Bout's use of colour. The room depicted in this painting is characterized with grey and brown walls and little light coming through the windows. The Angel Gabriel's white robe does not glow or stand out, and Mary herself is dressed in rather drab brown, a dark blue, and a very underwhelming green. Of all the holy people involved in the annunciation, the bed takes center stage. The vibrant red colour of the bed is juxtaposed against the duller colours of this composition, which brings it immediately to the viewer's attention. As the eye-catching red is noticed and the viewer contemplates the uniqueness of the red cloth over the angel's hand, they are drawn to notice the cuffs of Mary's sleeves. These cuffs are the only other place where Bouts featured that red colour. The gesture that Mary is making with her hands, places her sleeve cuffs in the centre of her abdomen, right where her womb is. The connection of the colour from the bed to Mary's womb aids the viewer in their understanding of the piece. Once the significance of the Angel Gabriel covering his hand as a symbol is understood and the connection to Mary's womb through the red colour is made, the viewer understands that the focus of this piece is the Incarnation.

Beyond drawing the focus to the cloth of the painting, the dark colour is more evidence that Christ has already come down and has been conceived in Mary's womb. In the Apostle Luke's account of the annunciation, it is recorded that the Angel Gabriel told Mary that "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee..." when she asked how it could be that she, a virgin, could conceive a the Christ child (Luke 1:35). The dimly lit shadowy room may be signifying that the Virgin Mary is being "overshadowed" and that Christ is conceived in her womb at this time in the narrative. This added layer to the analysis of *The Annunciation* works alongside the angel veiling his hand out of respect, because he is in the presence of both Mary and Christ who are engaged in a miracle. Together, with Christ in the womb of his mother, Mary, the Incarnation can be brought to pass. The dark colour of this room, once again commands a focus on the Incarnation by bringing the viewer to an awareness of Mary and Christ, mother and child.

The final element of *The Annunciation* that illuminates it's meaning is the material of linen. Bouts painted this scene in distemper on linen.⁷ It is thought that the purpose for the

⁷ "The Annunciation," <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection>, last modified March 2016.

cloth material may have been to enable the painting to be easily transported.⁸ However, the linen material has more significance and adds to the deep meaning of this painting. The symbolism of the bed cloth has been explored as relating to different elements of the Incarnation. It seems unlikely that all of this symbolism of the cloth would be included on a painting on linen only for the linen to simply be for easy transport. Cloth is an important symbol for the Incarnation, as it references the cloak of flesh Christ puts on in order to become mortal. However, the choice of linen has even more specific significance. The alb, which the Angel Gabriel has been identified as wearing, was made out of linen.⁹ In addition, the corporal, which the Eucharist is laid on, was also sewn from linen.¹⁰ This imagery of linen, when paired with the colours of *The Annunciation*, becomes a final symbol for the Incarnation. The colours of the Incarnation are white and red, as those are the colours of flesh and blood, which together create the robe of mortality that Mary weaves for Christ. In a very symbolic way these are the colours of the bread and wine of the Eucharist, which become the flesh and blood. What is especially interesting about these colours and their relation to the Incarnation is that white and red are the bed and the alb of Gabriel in this painting. With Gabriel acting as the symbol for a priest his linen tunic and the bed cloth are an image for the viewer of the body of flesh and blood that Christ so miraculously comes into. With this interpretation of the colours of Christ and the Eucharist being on the linen canvas, the canvas itself becomes like the corporal. The corporal, made from linen, has the bread and wine resting on it in the church, and the linen canvas for this work has the colours of the Eucharist, as well as the symbols of the Incarnation painted upon it.

Although *The Annunciation* by Dieric Bouts does not feature the usual symbols for the Incarnation – an extinguished candle, light passing through an unbroken window, and a visible Christ figure – the miracle of the Incarnation is still depicted in this annunciation scene. Once all of the symbols are understood, the Incarnation becomes more significant than the actual annunciation, and is the dominant meaning of this painting. The curtain-sack on the bed is a reference to Mary's womb, which is the site of the Incarnation; the possibility that the Angel Gabriel could be engaging in tying that sack, brings even more emphasis to it. The covering of Gabriel's arm, although unique and at first odd seeming is a vital symbol for the Incarnation.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ George Ferguson, "Signs & Symbols In Christian Art," Oxford University Press: 208.

¹⁰ Ibid: 160.

The covering of hands indicates that Gabriel is unworthy to be in the presence of Mary, possibly because she already has conceived, which places Gabriel in the presence of Christ through her. The veiling of hands is also a symbol of the sacristy, which is a metaphor for the Incarnation. With this gesture, Gabriel seems to be acting as a type to demonstrate the miracle taking place. In order to ensure that this profound meaning would be gleaned from the painting, Bouts utilized both composition and a very selective dulled colour palate; the bed covers a lot of space in the otherwise barren room, and is painted in red, juxtaposing it against the rather dull colour used throughout the remainder of the canvas. The final element that emphasizes just how significant the cloth motifs are is the linen which *The Annunciation* is painted on. The choice of a less common canvas and its relationship to the symbols painted on it cannot be just a coincidence. Although these are symbols which, are less common, or even perhaps unseen, in fifteenth-century religious painting they hold deep symbolic and religious meaning. These symbols are essential to an understanding of the meaning intended for *The Annunciation*, and reveal that although it is unmistakably an annunciation scene, the real focus of the painting lies in the miracle of the Incarnation of Christ.



Fig. 1 - Dieric Bouts, *The Annunciation*, 1450 - 1455



Fig. 2 Robert Campin, *The Mérode Altarpiece* – centre panel, 1428

Bibliography

Brooks, Valerie F. "The Thrill of a lifetime," *ARTnews*, (May 1985) 84: 19-20

Campin, Robert, *Merode Altarpiece*, 1427-32, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Durandus, William "The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments," Cambridge (1843): 60.

Ferguson, George. "*Signs & Symbols In Christian Art.*" Oxford: Oxford University Press: 208.

The J. Paul Getty Museum. "The Annunciation." <<http://www.getty.edu/art/collecti on>>. December 2016.

J. Paul Getty Museum Journal 14: 2.

Koslow, Susan. "The Curtain-Sack: A Newly Discovered Incarnation Motif in Rogier van der Weyden's *Columba Annunciation.*" *Artibus et Historiae* 7 (1986): 9-10.