The Annunciation:
Symbolic functions of space in Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation

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> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus' (Luke 1.26-31).

The Annunciation is, together with the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, the most commonly depicted Biblical event of the Renaissance. Of these three the Annunciation is particularly interesting in terms of the space it depicts. The fundamental message of Christianity is the meeting of the divine and the human in the figure of Christ, the God-man. This meeting is prefigured by the Annunciation, where the divine (Gabriel) and the human (Mary) come together in a shared space. The Annunciation contains the Christian message within it like a seed, as indeed it is. To be born of flesh entails that Christ must suffer and eventually die; therefore this moment contains within it all that Christ means in terms of man's redemption. The Annunciation provides the opportunity for the religious artist to investigate these ideas through the structural workings of the confinements of Mary's dwelling.

Generally speaking, the paintings of the Early Byzantine period were consciously constrained in their expression of space. As a mode of religious communication their effectiveness derives from a formal language of symbolic iconography and story telling. It was not until the

work of the Giovanni Cimabue (1240-circa 1303) and in turn Giotto Di Bondone (1266/7-1337) that Western artists began to adopt a certain "naturalism" as a mode of expressing the sacred. Vasari remarks of Giotto, 'In my opinion painters owe to Giotto ... exactly the same dept they owe to nature'[1]. The solidity of Giotto's figures creates a depth and space in which his embodied characters truly "live." In the sensitive hands of a master such as Giotto this space allows for a sense of movement that gives birth to a naturalism that allows the viewer to engage the picture on an immediate and intimate level.[2] While Giotto was changing the mode of consciousness in Florence, Duccio Di Buoninsegna (1255-1319) was also breathing life into the Byzantine style in the neighbouring city of Sienna. Duccio's Annunciation, painted for the *Maestá Alterpiece*, develops a distinct sense of architectural space. Mary is enclosed within a cubicle that depicts a definite depth. Nevertheless, Duccio's perspective can appear somewhat awkward.

Simone Martini (circa 1285-1344), a master from the school of Duccio, working with another such master, Lippo Memmi (died circa 1347), created a vision of the Annunciation for an alter in Sienna Cathedral, Uffizi, in 1333. The scene contains all the fundamental iconography of the early Byzantine work: Mary's "divine" blue cloak and inner "blood" red garment; the olive branch (symbol of peace and God's covenant with man); the vase of lilies (symbol of purity and Mary's virginity); and the throne, upon which the "Queen of Heaven" sits. Yet more, Martini brings a wonderful sense of depth, created by the positioning of the vase back from the wall. Still, like Duccio, Martini's perspective is awkward. To see this one need only consider the relation of the horizontal base of the throne to the angle the throne is set on.

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[1] Vasari, *Lives of the Artists Vol.1*, London: Penguin, 1987, p.57.

[2] This is not to advocate "naturalism" over the abstract and symbolic. As Ananda Coomaraswamy observes, '... we should have liked to have taught the primitive or savage artist ... to draw in "correct perspective." We take it for granted that an increasing naturalism ...represents a progress in art. ... It hardly occurs to us that prehistoric art was a more intellectual art than our own; that like the angels, prehistoric man had fewer (and more universal) ideas, and used fewer means to state them than we...' ('Mediaeval and Oriental Art' in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. R. Lipsey, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1989, p.53). See also Coomaraswamy's, *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought: The Traditional View of Art*, revised edition, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007.

Duccio Di Buoninsegna, *Maestá Alterpiece*, Sienna

Simone Martini & Lippo Memmi, Sienna Cathedral, Uffizi

Of the sense of space depicted in Martini's painting the most powerful, but maybe the most subtle, is the space into which the shocked Mary has placed her thumb, book-marking the page of the Scriptures she is reading at the moment of the Annunciation. In this one act Martini reveals the awe-inspiring suddenness of this visitation and, simultaneously, the immediate humanness of Mary. Light falls into the open book creating shadow and depth. Mary is interrupted in her reading by the presence of the divine and *still* she marks her page as if to go back to reading once the angel has left. In the veracity of his depiction of this single act Martini shows both the shockingly wondrous and the intimately human nature of this momentous event.

St. Luke writes, 'And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be' (Lk.1:28-30). This sense of "perplexity" and fear is magnificently captured by Martini and Memmi. The Virgin shrinks back, her right hand pulling her cloak protectively across her chest and up around her face. Demonstrating an understandable fear she turns to the left placing her heart as far from threat as possible. Gombrich admits to struggling to find emotion in the "slanting eyes and curved mouths"[3] of Martini's figures. Yet surely one cannot but feel the emotion of Mary's body language, which remains equally true today as for all time.

The curvature of Mary's body, in Martini's painting, works symmetrically with the wings of Gabriel. Together with the central arch of the wooden panel these flowing lines form an "egg," symbolic of the redemptive life of Mary's womb. These flowing lines further emphasise the lateral space of this picture, which moves from the angel to Mary with the flow of the impregnating Word that Martini depicts crossing his painting.

With Piero della Francesca (1416-1492) artistic expression of space achieved a new level. Vasari remarks that 'Piero made an intense study of painting and perspective. He acquired an intimate knowledge of

[3] Gombrich, *The Story of Art* 14th ed., Oxford: Phaidon, 1988, p.161.

Piero della Francesca, *Perugia Polyptych*

Euclid, understanding better than any other geometrician the nature of the perfect curves'.[4] It is this understanding of perspective and curve that is so striking in his Annunciation, painted as part of the *Perugia Polyptych*, c.1460. The similarities between Piero della Francesca's Annunciation and Martini's are immediate: Mary is shown marking her book with her finger; arches frame both Mary and the angel; and between them there is an established sense of the "centre." The differences however are vital and appear in many of the later Annunciation depictions. The most notable is that Mary is enclosed or separated from the angel. Behind her is the darkness of an internal room, suggestive of the mystery of the womb. Distinct from this, Gabriel comes to the Virgin from a sense of "openness," suggestive of the divine Infinite. The other element of this open space—common in later depictions of the Annunciation—is the inclusion of "nature" or at least a single tree, which suggests both the Garden of Eden and more particularly, the Tree of Life.

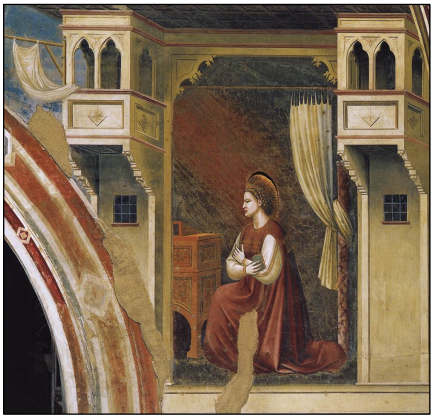
The most striking aspect of Piero's painting is the use of the arched walkway to create a centre and the powerful sense of depth herein achieved. This depth stretches away from the viewer into the back panel of marble; which, far from being cold and solid, appears like a mist wherein the viewer's vision continues to melt deeper and deeper. This archway "solidifies" the space within it and hence between the two figures. This space—not the air in it, nor the actual stone construction of the arches—but the space itself becomes charged with significance and meaning. This charged space becomes the Word of God spoken from the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary.

To expand on this theme of the Word as expressed through the arch one need go no further Padua, and the brilliance of Giotto's Arena Chapel. Upon entering the Arena Chapel one looks down the length of the building covered with depictions of Christ's life and death. Giotto places his Annunciation, the pre-culminative scene of all that is portrayed upon the wall, at the far end of the nave. The angel and Mary are positioned on opposite sides of the architectural arch surmounting the Sanctuary. In this way Giotto incorporates the physical space of the chapel within his vision. The golden arch expresses the glorious message of God as it travels from Gabriel to the Virgin. Symbolically it is the

[4] Vasari, Lives of the Artists Vol.1, 1987, p.196.

golden passage of the Sun that is re-born each morning and re-dies at the end of each day. More importantly, it is the Rainbow, the covenant between God and man, that was first sealed between God and Noah and then re-established with Moses, and now here through Jesus Christ.

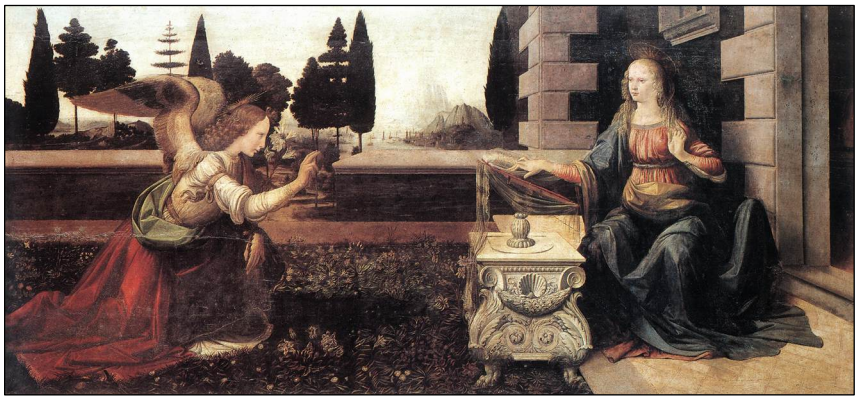
Giotto, Arena Chapel, Padua



Details, Arena Chapel

Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) bring their mastery of line, form, and flow to the Annunciation. The sensuality of the human form that they achieved contrasts with the sharp line and perspective of their architectural renderings bringing a further element to the depiction of space. The influence of Fra Filippo Lippi's (1448-50) vision of the Annunciation is obvious on the later painter. Nevertheless, it is Leonardo that we will first address.

Leonardo's Annunciation (1472-75), painted for the monastery of San Bartolomeo, is regarded as his first masterpiece.[5] It shows his mastering of aerial perspective, tonality, and light. The soft, muted colours of the sea and mountains create a distance and depth sweeping behind both the garden of trees and the building. Behind the kneeling Garbriel, a gap in the wall opens onto a garden that disappears into this depth intimating the infinite vastness of the divine. This is due in part to the daunting size of the actual painting (98 x 217 cm). Leonardo places Gabriel at a distance from the Virgin, kneeling upon a bed of flowers (once again symbols of Mary's virginity and fecundity). This relation of the divine, nature, and vast space is played off against Mary, the human element of the Annunciation. Her space is enclosed by the sharp right angles of the building behind her. The implication seems to be one of almost divine wilderness–intimating the chaos from which order is born–surrounding, and opposed to, the structured nature of man.



Leonardo da Vinci, San Bartolomeo

[5] Castelfranco, *Leonardo*, Collins Fontana Pocket Library of Great Art: Milano, 1960, p.18.

Between Gabriel and the Virgin is a marble lectern upon which Mary has rested her bible. This lectern partakes of both the divine/natural and the human realities; it is adorned with finely carved images from nature, yet its structured symmetry is obviously man-made. The diametrical halves of the lectern mirror each other creating a sense of a centre, even though this centre is geometrically well to the right of the actual centre of the painting. In this the lectern expresses the central meeting place between the divine and the human while still acknowledging the superiority of the divine in comparison with the human. At the same time, as the halves reflect each other, so too the human reflects the divine: 'As it is in Heaven, so on Earth.' This symmetrical centre is again shown by Fra Filippo Lippi in the form of a spherical vase, instantly reminiscent of Simone Martini's Annunciation.

Leonardo's depiction of the Annunciation unfolds along the horizontal plane. The flow moves unmistakable from left to right–from Gabriel in towards Mary. The divine vastness contracts into the right angles of the building and, then, into the Virgin Mother, who, like the eye of a divine storm, internalises the Holy Spirit and conceives the Son.

It is right and proper that the movement of the Annunciation should be from angel to Mary. As it is written, 'In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth.' Gabriel goes to Mary. To understand this movement from angel to Mary better it is interesting to consider a case where it appears to have been reversed. We find this in the Aix Annunciation (1442-1445) by the unidentified Master of the Aix Annunciation. The sense of space is reversed with the angel enclosed and Mary aligned to the depth of the painting. The unfortunate result of this is the feeling of Mary coming to the angel, as if in supplication. The gift of the Spirit is precisely that, a gift, given freely and often unexpectedly.

Aix Annunciation

Fra Filippo Lippi, Martelli Chapel, San Lorenzo, c.1445

As the Annunciation is the union of God and human it is again right and proper that it should portray the angel and Mary sharing space. The danger here is of "robbing" the angel of its divinity. Fra Filippo Lippi's Annunciation, for the Martelli Chapel in the Medici church of San Lorenzo (c.1445), however, is able to show the angel and Mary sharing a common room, while at the same time expressing the vast, unknowable, nature of the divine (a sense of "otherness") via the space viewed through the openings in the structure of the room itself. We see this with Gabriel crossing the centre–forcibly acknowledge by the pillar that divides the painting in half. In the background the room opens onto a tree-lined arcade, with one single tree prominent behind Gabriel. Fra Filippo Lippi uses light to emphasise the different halves of the painting, while at the same time creating a flow from left to right, from Gabriel to Mary. One notes the shadow and darkness to the left of the pillar in comparison to the light that runs along the face of buildings on the right. Behind Mary an arched doorway leads into a smaller room with barrel vault roofing, suggestive once again of her womb.

In another depiction of the Annunciation (c.1443), Fra Filippo Lippi uses the three arches that were so prominently used by Piero della Francesca and Simone Martini. Once again the fall of light flows with the feel of the painting from the Gabriel to Mary. Seen through the arches, God's divinely ordered space falls away in perfect symmetry. A single tree rises in the garden just outside the arch, the geometric centre of the painting. Inside the room, and yet outside of space and time, a single white dove–the Word of God, the conceptual Spirit–is portrayed in this corresponding centre. This dove is a common symbol in many Annunciation paintings; in this version its relation with the central tree heightens its significance.

Several elements of Fra Filippo Lippi's depictions of the Annunciation–the line and attitude of the Virgin's body, the central tree in the opening distance, the gridwork patterning beneath the kneeling Mary–come together in one of the most beautiful visions of the Virgin given to us. Here we turn to Fra Filippo Lippi's most famous pupil, Sandro Botticelli (1444-1510). Botticelli's Annunciation (1489), painted for the church of the Florentine convent of Cestello, shows exquisite use of line within the room, while outside the window the tonality of light fades into the distance reminiscent of Leonardo. The vision we are allowed into beyond the window creates the sense of divine otherness. It

Fra Filippo Lippi, c.1443

Sandro Botticelli, Convento di Cestello

is interesting to see the architectural works in the distance. Perhaps this is a recognition of the Renaissance belief that the divine is inherent in the noble works of man. Alternately, this may represent the New Jerusalem.

The falling line of Botticelli's Mary, which should be compared with Fra Filippo Lippi's Mary (Martelli Chapel), suggests the truly terrible and awesome nature of this visitation. Still, there is a grace and beauty in the manner that Mary pulls back, both in fear and with a sense of unworthiness (as surely any worthy person would have), and yet at the same time reaches out her hand. This hand gesture contains within it all that is important in the Annunciation. Mary and Gabriel's hands are coming together in a sacred centre created by Botticelli's use of the parallel lines in the floor pattern and the vertical line of the plaster work along the window. Mary's hand seems to both warily shun the angel and at the same time reach to bring this divine messenger up from its knees. There is a sense of acceptance in her reaching out to Gabriel. The space in which these hands meet–without touching–creates the same charged potential that exists in the archway of Piero della Francesca. In this meeting of hands, which prefigures the birth of the redeemer of man, the new Adam, one is reminded of another such momentous meeting of hands by the master Michelangelo.

Botticelli's keen sense of perspective creates a depth within the room in which the figures come to life: Gabriel rising from the floor, Mary collapsing *away from* and *in towards* the divine presence, all one smooth flowing motion. Botticelli's feel for line and movement brilliantly caresses the mind of the viewer, giving a
supreme sense of grace. In this capturing of Mary, Botticelli surely owes a dept to his master, Fra Filippo Lippi. So it is that in considering the grace of the Annunciation we turn back, but not to Fra Filippo Lippi, rather to his compatriot and occasional co-worker the Dominican painter-monk Fra Angelico (c.1387-1455).

The emphasis of this discussion has so far been upon space, but with Fra Angelico we come to what, in my mind, is the pinnacle of this consideration of the Annunciation. For this reason, and essential to our understanding of the beauty of his paintings, it is important to know just what sort of a man this Dominican monk was. The art historian, Helen Gardner, has this to say of Fra Angelico:

> [He] was conservative by both training and inclination. Although he was fully aware of what was being done by his more experimentally inclined contemporaries, he adopted only those innovations he could incorporate without friction into his essentially conservative style. While accepting realistic details in anatomy, drapery, perspective, and architecture, he rejected Masaccio's heavy modelling, which would have dulled his bright Gothic colouring. In the Annunciation, one of numerous frescoes with which Fra Angelico decorated the Dominican convent of San Marco in Florence between 1435 and 1445, the Brunelleschian loggia is neatly designed according to the rules of linear perspective; but the fact that the vault was too low to allow the figures to stand would have been unacceptable to a Piero della Francesca. However, such considerations were secondary to Fra Angelico; what he wanted above all was to stress the religious content of his paintings… [6]

Her sixteenth century colleague, Giorgio Vasari, expressed similar sentiment with a simplicity that reflects Fra Angelico's life:

> Fra Angelico led a simple and devout life ... was most gentle and temperate and he lived chastely, withdrawn from the snares of the world. [He] was so humble and modest in all he did and said and [his] pictures were painted with such facility and piety.[7]

The beauty of Fra Angelico's painting rests in the beauty of the man. As such, the forms through which space is "created" are secondary. This is not to suggest Fra Angelico was not adept at the formal skills of perspective, tonality, shading, and conceptual space; far from this. He spent most of his working life in his Florentine monastery of San Marco where he painted several versions of the Annunciation (1440-1445). A mature version is found on the southern corridor of the upper floor in front of the staircase in the Convento di San Marco, painted on Angelico's return from Rome in 1450. Gardner observes that the roof of the vault is "too low"; yet there is a brilliance of space in this painting that transcends mere form.

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[6] Gardner, *Gardner's Art Through The Ages* revised by del la Croix & Tansey, Harcourt Brace & World Inc.: USA, 1970, p.426-7.
[7] Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, Vol.1, 1987, p.205-6.

Fra Angelico's (1450) Annunciation contains many aspects that we have already seen. The two separate arches and the central pillar establish both Gabriel and Mary's respective space. Still they share in the same floor (room) space. Behind Mary a door opens into the "womb" of a small cell. We should recall this most prominently in Fra Filippo Lippi, and to a lesser degree in the door open behind the Virgin in Leonardo di Vinci. And where we saw in Leonardo the contracting movement into Mary, so again space is graduated by the L-shape of the porch floor as it meets the walls of this small cell. The other common feature is the reference to the garden area from whence the angel has come. The fence that we see in the background establishes an implied space–a sense of otherness, the unknown.

Fra Angelico, Conventio di San Marco, 1450

The "unknown" garden becomes explicit when we look at Fra Angelico's *Prado Altarpiece* (1430-32) and his Annunciation in Cortona (1433-34).

Fra Angelico, Cortona

These show depictions of the Garden of Eden, so far represented through gardens and/or a single tree. This then is the redemptive quality of the Annunciation; as Christ redeems Adam, so too the obedience of Mary redeems the "disobedience" of Eve. However, to my mind, the use of the fence in his 1450 masterpiece intimates a much greater expression of the divine. Firstly it acts in accordance with tradition as the fence erected to keep banished man out of Eden. Secondly, it acts to create an *implied* space and serves far better to express the inexpressibility of God.

The sense of space in Fra Angelico's 1450 Annunciation and importantly, the movement of space, is all respective to the central

stillness and grace of Mary. Space flows from all directions into and around the Holy Virgin. And there, at the very heart of all this, she sits–central and so vital, yet graceful and so still. As Gardner remarks, 'the simplicity of the subject recalls Giotto'[8]. In respect to simplicity, note the simple wooden stool upon which Mary sits. The part this stool plays is essential in that it allows space to flow under, and hence *surround* Mary. At the same time it acts to impart a sense of humbleness and the mundane to the scene. This feeling of the commonplace and immediacy is also created by the depiction, within the scene, of the building (San Marco) whose walls this painting adorns.

Conventio di San Marco

Now, as with space, Fra Angelico has also created a sense of different time in his picture. In the implied space of the garden there is the mythic time of Eden; in the act of the Annunciation and the figure of Mary there is a sense of historical time; and in the building there is the now–the present (in regards to when and where this image was painted). The immediacy of the two figures also means that this moment (from a particular historical time) is itself beyond time and in all time. Fra Angelico's message to his fellow monks is simple yet monumental: the

[8] Gardner, Gardner's Art Through The Ages,1970, p.426.

Annunciation, this most important moment in Christian belief, is occurring now and forever, on the porch of their own convent, in all places, and in the hearts of all men. With such a momentous flowing of time and space glowing around her, this plain, yet grace-full figure, sitting on this simple wooden stool, is one of the greatest depictions of the enthronement of the Madonna.

Let us conclude with another of Fra Angelico's Annunciations, painted with piety and humility within the cells of San Marco (cell 3, 1440-41). This painting shares in the same spirit of his 1450 depiction; by this I bring attention to the simplicity of both versions. Iconography is sacrificed to and superseded by beauty. Yet in this kernel of beauty resides all that iconography has to say. This is not to suggest that in this beauty there lie implied messages in the same way that the implied Eden exists in his 1450 Annunciation. The truth at the heart of this beauty is beyond discussion in such terms. It is better to say that the message of this painting is not implied by or expressed through the beauty, but is in fact the beauty itself.

Certainly we can acknowledge the formal, or technical, elements of this painting: the angel and Mary sharing space; the angel linked to (or coming from) an outside "other"; the interesting inclusion of Peter the Martyr as a "present time" onlooker; the door towards the back of Mary, implying the womb; the importance of the half open book Mary holds. I also concur with Sir Ernst Gombrich, who remarks, 'We see at once that the art of perspective presented no difficultly to him.' But these are secondary. As Gombrich says,

> ...it was clearly not Fra Angelico's main intention to "break a hole in the wall." Like Simone Martini in the fourteenth century, he only wanted to represent the sacred story in all its beauty and simplicity. There is hardly any movement in Fra Angelico's painting and hardly any suggestion of real solid bodies. But I think it is all the more moving because of its humility, which is that despite his profound understanding of the problems which Brunelleschi and Masaccio had introduced into art. [9]

Fra Angelico's Annunciation in cell 3 remains sparse. The vault roof works again to form the "egg" that is the womb. Yet there is no sense of

[9] Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, p.188.

the moment being bound within the womb; rather a feeling of personal inclusion, as the soft warm colours radiate from the painting. One thinks of the inner glow of a contented pregnant woman and this makes a great sense. In his capture of this momentous and yet tender moment, Fra Angelico has achieved something truly beautiful. Space melts into light, and this light glows with Grace.

Fra Angelico, Cell 3