

The rebirth of the madonna essay

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The Rebirth of the Madonna Botticelli's The Annunciation is considered a magnum opus hailing from the Italian Renaissance Period. The painting, on the whole, shows Mary kneeling in homage to the winged herald, who himself is slightly stooping in subtle reverence to the Mother of Christ.

Portrayed as directly face to face along a straight line, the two subjects are practically mirror images of each other. Aside from the majesty of the depiction itself, the skilful use of linear perspective in its classical Roman architectural setting continues to enchant and inspire tourists of the Metropolitan Museum of Art where it is presently displayed. To further deepen our appreciation of this work of genius, an analysis of its form, content, and context is needed. As a final point, a comparison shall be made with another piece of art.

The Annunciation is tempera and gold on wood. To make it suitable as a canvass, the wood panel is first smoothed by sanding. Then tempera and gold come in to create color. Tempera was the principal painting medium during the Renaissance before it was superseded by oil painting. Produced by crushing pigments and combining them with traditional binding agents such as egg or honey, tempera allowed paintings of this era to endure with their colors as vibrant as they were more than five hundred years ago.

Their colors are still fresh and crisp to this day. By the water gliding technique, on the other hand, gold is applied to the wooden surface (Ward 234). Icon paintings such as The Annunciation are primarily testimonies to this technique. One of the most notable innovations during the Italian

Renaissance, of which this painting is a perfect example, is the use of “linear perspective” (Burn 105). The concepts of space and distance began to be developed and appreciated. The viewer recognizes the spatial illusion in the succession of pillars, which seem to be getting smaller as they stretched out toward a hall or vestibule.

The reddish floor of the hallway where the angel stands, divided at intervals by strips of white also exhibits linear precision. Even with a row of pillars at the center separating Mary and the angel, the viewer is aware that both are in one enclosed room. The very application of this technique makes this painting “one of the jewels of 15th century Italian art, embodying the achievements that made Florence so famous and influential” (Burn 105).

ContentA Christian commemoration, the Annunciation is when the Angel Gabriel visited the Blessed Virgin Mary to reveal to her God’s divine plan of making her the Mother of Jesus. The Holy Bible narrates the Annunciation beginning with the Angel Gabriel greeting Mary. “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke, 1: 29). “Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called son of the Most High...” (Luke 1: 31). Ever the pious servant of the Lord, Mary responds, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1: 38). The most famous subjects of Christian iconography, aside from Jesus, are angels and the Blessed Virgin Mary. And the most celebrated episode in Mary’s life is the Annunciation. In The Annunciation, Mary is in red and blue robes.

These colors are oftentimes associated with the concepts of royalty, purity, passion and suffering. “ Blue is also the color of heaven or divinity, red the color of earth or flesh, so we may say that the blue mantle of divine grace surrounds Mary’s body” (Schrauzer 36). Another iconographic symbol is the branch of lilies being offered by the Angel Gabriel to Mary.

The image of this flower is popularly found in Annunciation paintings. The lily, being sparkling and white, has evolved into a Marian symbol of chastity and purity - virtues that Mary epitomizes. “ The Lily of the Valley” and “ the Lily among the thorns,” phrases found in Song of Solomon (2: 2), are allusions to Mary.

Interestingly enough, contrary to typical illustrations of the Annunciation where the Angel Gabriel is depicted full of vigor, with wings gloriously spread open and standing or floating on clouds in an intimidating fashion, Botticelli’s interpretation is more tempered. In his painting, we see both the Angel Gabriel and Mary in submissive and meek postures. As the compliant bearing of Mary is expected, the uncommon version of a self-effacing Angel Gabriel may be a representation of the Christian veneration to the Mother of God. The veneration, as opposed to the worship of Mary, is a practice that in either case, seems to entitle her with a demigod status. ContextThe illustrations of the Madonna are innumerable in Christian Art.

During the Renaissance, artists like their predecessors of the Medieval Age, continued to create art for the Christian Church. Patronage was received mostly from the church, if not from leading citizens of the time, such as the Medici of Florence. Being both a highly authoritative religious institution and

a powerful business enterprise, the Church commissioned paintings of biblical scenes to further expand and strengthen its European influence.

The Renaissance was an era when the Church had a virtual monopoly of visual art. It was propaganda primarily intended for the illiterate followers who did not know how to read scripture, or who were considered too unsophisticated for sacred doctrines. Religious paintings were displayed on churches as murals, frescoes or triptychs (3-panelled paintings). Eventually though, devout Catholics who had money to spare began emulating the Church by contracting with renowned artists to create religious paintings for their own personal collection.

The prosperous citizens of the day carried the conviction that commissioning religious paintings was pleasing to God. Religious painting was therefore an alternative form of praise. The Church also fostered the belief that by sponsoring religious art, these people will be guaranteed a ticket to heaven. Some of these private patrons even succumbed to their vanity by immortalizing themselves in the said paintings. They are usually seen in the corner kneeling or praying. Botticelli's *The Annunciation* " was almost certainly commissioned as a private devotional image, not as part of a larger structure. While the identity of the patron is not known, the work was in the famed Barberini collection in Rome in the seventeenth century" (www.

metmuseum. org). A distinctive feature of the Renaissance was the resurrection of classic Roman architecture in paintings. " The renewed interest in all things ancient began in Italy where artistic remains of Roman grandeur were interpreted as archaeological testimony to a period of

national greatness and unity” (Renaissance Art and Architecture 386). The majestic pillars, graceful windows, and arched doorways found in Botticelli’s *The Annunciation* are of classical Roman Architecture.

Comparison Robert Campin’s *Merode Altarpiece*, created around 1427-1432, serves as the object of comparison to Botticelli’s *The Annunciation*. Renowned for its meticulous attention to detail, superb imagery, and brilliant colors, Campin’s triptych handiwork is regarded as one of the most highly acclaimed paintings of the Netherlands, earning him the moniker, “Master of Flemalle” (Master of Flemalle 387). Currently located at the Cloisters Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the central panel showcases the Annunciation in a conventional Flemish middleclass setting.

The left panel shows the kneeling patrons while St. Joseph, busy working in his carpentry shop, is on the right panel. The painstaking application of even the subtlest of details, as evident in the wood chips on St. Joseph’s table and the airborne miniature crucifix in Mary’s room, seals Campin’s reputation as a genius just like Botticelli. Both of the Italian Renaissance Period, Campin’s masterpiece is older by around 60 years. While both used wood as canvass, Campin’s medium for painting is oil, while that of Botticelli are tempera and gold.

Several symbols are also evident in both works – the lilies, the blue and red robe of Mary and the deferential disposition of the Angel Gabriel. Another similarity is the use of linear perspective. While we see this in the floor and pillars of Botticelli’s work, the town sentry standing far behind the patron-couple, the outlying panorama of a city square being framed by the window

of St. Joseph's carpentry shop, and the wooden beams of Mary's room, are the very features in Campin's painting that provide the illusion of space and distance. Beautiful by any standard, and a timeless Marian masterpiece, Botticelli's *The Annunciation* continues to stir artistic, intellectual and religious fervor.

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