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Investigating Claims of Eroticism in Images of the Annunciation

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In late-medieval Europe growing interests in 'man-centred' philosophies, known subsequently as humanism, had profound effects upon art and literature. In the visual arts, which were dominated by Christian themes, there was an increasing tendency to depict biblical stories and those from the lives of saints realistically. In contrast to the schematic symbolism of medieval times, the figures and objects pictured in the Renaissance closely resembled those from everyday life. This new naturalism was particularly evident in the expanding urban centres of Florentine Tuscany.

The usefulness of religious images to the Christian Church had long been appreciated, but their function was most clearly expressed from the time of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) onwards. Images were to instruct the illiterate and the ignorant, to remind devotees about the mysteries of the faith by reference to the exemplary lives of the saints, and to stimulate devotion (Welch 137). Naturalism, which began to emerge in the early fourteenth century, can be seen as a logical extension of these aims.

There were dangers involved in the encouragement of naturalism. One risk was that the importance of the images themselves could become wildly exaggerated to the extent that they were worshipped in an idolatrous fashion. Another danger was that, in breaking time-honoured conventions, artists became exposed to accusations of misinterpretation and even profanity. The systematic destruction of artworks and other objects during the Byzantine Iconoclastic period (principally the eighth and early ninth centuries) demonstrated the gravity of such issues for the Christian faith. As the mood for reform of the Church gathered pace in the second half of the fifteenth century, the use and propriety of imagery was once again coming into sharp focus. In the wrong hands and in a changing visual and philosophical environment the *sacred* could so easily become the *sacrilegious*.

Profanity at the Annunciation?

Without question, the scene in which the Angel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will bear the Messiah, Jesus Christ, is a defining moment in Christianity. It is reasonably well-documented in Scripture (Luke 1:26-38) and consequently its depiction has changed little over the centuries. However, in the age of naturalism this very traditional encounter could take on a particularly sensual or even erotic dimension in a number of Italian Renaissance images. An undoubtedly sensuous-looking Virgin appears, for example, in Alessandro Botticelli's *Annunciation* (c. 1489-90, fig.1).

This article employs Susan Rhor von Scaff's recent analysis (2002) as a vehicle to discuss the possibility of eroticism in Italian Renaissance images of the Annunciation. Scaff highlights changes to the image type brought about by the increasing use of naturalistic poses and gestures as well as the abandonment of the schematic devices common in medieval art. The new meanings suggested by these more earthly encounters are, however, extremely difficult to define. Scaff's reading of the contrast between Mary's purity and earthly sensuality appears well grounded, but her conclusion suggests that the images were ambiguous and inappropriate: "[although] Mary's heavenly perfection is defined by her chastity [...], her womanliness is completed by her human sexuality. In this regard she has been transformed [...] into an object of erotic desire" (118).

I acknowledge the enhancement of a number of gestural and symbolic references to sexuality and procreation in the images identified. Indeed, I will describe what I believe to be hitherto unrecognised characteristics of this type. However, my argument is that these images would not have been considered erotic, improper or ambiguous in any way. To the devout Renaissance viewer there was no paradox in the Virgin Mary's human sexuality and virginity. The distinction between the sacred and sacrilegious, which can appear blurred or ambiguous to the modern viewer of such images, was clearly delineated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Virgin's human sexuality and perpetual virginity are in accordance with her role as human

mother and Mother of God and the contrast between them, highlighted by the images, signifies further the miraculous nature of the Incarnation. This sense of an entirely orthodox and non-controversial tension is particularly persuasive when we consider the religious context in which the images would have been encountered and used.

By the late-medieval period, the Virgin Mary had been considered a paragon of virtue for over a thousand years. Following the teachings of the Latin theologian Helvidius in the fourth century, Mary's perpetual virginity was consistently proclaimed by both the Eastern and Western Church (Graef 10). Indeed, claims for Mary's purity developed to the extent that by the Renaissance, after centuries of theological debate and despite the fact that it is never mentioned in Scripture, the Immaculate Conception was widely established in the Church. The reasons for the Virgin's importance are, in fact, Christological and at the heart of the Faith. Mary had to be beyond reproach so that Christ's coming was both miraculous and free from the sins of Adam. This is why any concrete association between the Virgin and actual sexual intercourse would have been considered scandalous and beyond the pale.

It can be difficult to distinguish between physical and spiritual feelings during worship and at intense moments of religious contemplation or 'rapture'. Over the centuries theologians and mystics alike have noted that the body and soul (or intellect) are co-dependent and that their pathway through life is an identical one (Elliott 141). Scaff (quoting Marina Warner), links her conclusion to "the tendency [in Catholicism] to conflate [...] physical and spiritual expressions of love" - carnal desire and "the leap of the soul towards God" are expressed in similar ways (118). The ostensible contradiction of Roman Catholic teaching is that whilst chastity, abstinence and modesty are championed, devotees are at the same time encouraged to imagine a "physical embrace" with God as the soul 'leaps' toward him (118).

The Song of Songs and Saint Bernard

To ground this claim Scaff refers to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux's influential and overtly erotic visualisations of the 'Song of Songs' from the Vulgate Bible. Saint Bernard regarded the Song as a sublime allegory on the love of God that can be experienced through contemplation. He re-interprets the story of a beautiful virginal bride as referencing the Virgin Mary, the Church itself, and, at the same time, the soul of the individual devotee (Schäfer 157). Bernard's reading is highly complex and allegorical. It has, for example, been interpreted by many recent commentators as evidence of the medieval male assuming feminine characteristics - a renunciation of male 'worldly' values in a male-only environment (the monastery at Clairvaux) with the aim of spiritual enlightenment (Krahmer 304).

The complexity of Bernard's reading is demonstrated by Sermon 29, 'On discord in the church and in communities.' Bernard consistently employs physical and sensual language, often with unmistakably erotic overtones, but it is applied metaphorically to highlight both the enduring strength of spirituality and the very 'weakness' of the flesh. The Virgin Mary and the institution of the Church itself are often regarded as one and the same, implying a mutually supportive sense of sexual neutrality and propriety.

Time and again, Bernard emphasises the association between physical weakness and spiritual strength. His language is rich in penetrative sexual metaphors, but like images of the Annunciation, these are always tempered or neutralised in some manner, as indicated here by the phrase "full of grace," which is borrowed from Luke's Annunciation:

"A polished arrow" too is that special love of Christ, which not only pierced Mary's soul but penetrated through and through, so that even the tiniest space in her virginal breast was permeated by love. Thenceforth she would love with her whole heart, her whole soul and her whole strength, and be full of grace.

This is a mystical penetration not a physical one. Mary is "transpierced" by love, but

sexual neutrality is guaranteed by the lack of any actual bodily exchange or contact. Christ is “conceived invisibly, neither from the flesh nor by means of the flesh”.

However, the following excerpt might be considered proof that physical and spiritual love are, at times, considered one and the same by Bernard. My view is that Bernard thinks they are, but I am not sure that one would call this sexual love. A physical embrace, (here, with Christ) does not necessarily involve carnal desire and in Bernard's opinion the spirit always overcomes the flesh:

In the process she experienced through her whole being a wound of love that was mighty and sweet; and I would reckon myself happy if at rare moments I felt at least the prick of the point of that sword. Even if only bearing love's slightest wound, I could still say: "I am wounded with love." How I long not only to be wounded in this manner but to be assailed again and again till the colour and heat of that flesh that wars against the spirit is overcome.

Scaff argues that because, like Bernard's vision, images of the Virgin were conceived and produced by men, the Virgin was therefore a perfect expression of male desire. Mary has “virtue and beauty, submissiveness to authority, and readiness to absorb every circumstance and feeling that might be imputed to her from modesty and reluctance to receptiveness and sexuality ripe for the taking” (Scaff 119). Given the paternalistic nature of the Church and the visceral and penetrative quality of Bernard's metaphors, this argument is an inviting one. However, Bernard's thoughts are cited by Scaff without sufficient reference to the conditions and times in which they were expressed and received. Practices of worship could change just as radically as imagery. Recent work by Caroline Walker Bynum demonstrates that there existed a medieval corporeal sense of piety that is completely alien to modern sensibilities. It would be misleading, in these circumstances, to read Bernard's words too literally.

Other claims of eroticism

There are other grounds for the assertion that the Madonna's portrayal in the fifteenth century could be considered erotic, not least the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola's late fifteenth-century sermons in which he attacks the practice of dressing religious figures in the fashions then current to young women:

You painters do an ill thing [...] Do you believe the Virgin Mary went dressed this way, as you paint her? I tell you she went dressed as a poor woman, simply, and so covered that her face could hardly be seen [...]

You make the Virgin Mary seem dressed like a whore (quoted in Gilbert 157-158).

The issue of eroticism in images of the Virgin is not, therefore, straightforward. Savonarola might be regarded as a special case, a fanatic, who, even during his own ascendancy in the mid-1490s, was seen by many as someone who wished to turn Florence into a convent (Martines 102). However, we know that eroticism was becoming an issue for other church leaders, especially in the sixteenth century as testified by the infamous controversy surrounding the naked figures in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* (1536-41).

As argued convincingly by writers such as Margaret Miles and Megan Holmes, the bare-breasted lactating Madonna is an image-type that was considered inappropriately erotic in fifteenth-century Florence. By the late century, it was becoming rare to find images in which the lactating Virgin's bare breast was depicted in a graphic manner. As naturalism developed, such images could be confused with other discourses about women in Florentine society, namely, "the bare-breasted or erotic woman" and the wet-nurse (Holmes 178-80). Indeed, the conflation between ideal beauty in women and the Virgin Mary has a broader basis in literature. Medieval poetry honouring the Virgin Mary often has features identical to profane love poetry written around the same time (Wimsatt 29).

Nevertheless, a close analysis of Renaissance Annunciation images reveals the very limitations of erotic characteristics in this context. There may indeed be a

tendency to conflate expressions of spiritual and physical love in Catholic texts and associated devotional practices, but the extent to which such a conflation is echoed by the images in question is highly debatable. Even if we accept that there are erotic overtones in the fifteenth-century Annunciation, such views are tainted by modern-day secular perspectives. Leo Steinberg (1983) notes this difficulty with reference to latter day prudishness about the nudity and sexuality of Christ (17).

The Immaculate Conception

Although Christ alone was considered indisputably sinless, the Virgin Mary was, in the eyes of many, effectively equal to him in this regard. For although the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was disputed (principally by the Dominican order), even those who questioned it agreed that Mary was sanctified in her mother Anne's womb or, at the very latest, at the moment of the Incarnation (Graef 203). Thomas Aquinas, the doctrinaire inspiration of the Dominicans and one of the leading medieval theologians opposed to the Immaculate Conception, did not believe that Original Sin compromised Mary's purity (O'Faolain and Martines 118-20).

The argument against the Immaculate Conception had always been that if Mary was exempt from sin, she could not have participated fully in the Redemption of man. Christ dies on the Cross for man's sins, cancelling them out, but Mary needs to be fully human to guarantee the reality and fruition of his sacrifice. William of Ware (flourished 1290-1305) countered this concern by pointing out the essential difference between Mary and Christ. Whereas the former was pure, but from an impure background, Christ was 'pure from pure.' His pupil Duns Scotus (1270-1308) went a stage further. Turning the Redemption argument on its head, he claimed that because Mary's Immaculate Conception required the supreme intervention of Christ, she was, although free from normal sin, fully human. Indeed, Mary was even more dependent upon the Redemption than all others, who could be saved from Original Sin by the simple act of baptism. Christ's gift, as it were, had been bestowed upon Mary in advance of the Crucifixion (Graef 236-237). This subtle argument exerted a singularly

pervasive influence in the following centuries. But, even to the doubters, Mary's perpetual virginity was never in question.

It follows, therefore, that although a conception is central to Annunciation images, this does not present any difficulty or danger of misinterpretation. Accordingly, it is quite common to find that the Annunciation takes place in Mary's bedroom, the *Thalamus Virginis* (Scaff 111). She is after all, the bride of Christ. Indeed, in fourteenth-century Italian images of the Annunciation in particular, the exchange often takes place in a "womb-like space" (Scaff's term). This reference to an internal space follows the only indication we have in Scriptures about the location of the Annunciation: "And the angel *being come in*, said unto her: Hail, full of grace..." (Luke 1:28, my emphasis).

Importance of location, form, function and reception

The womb-like space, often a cut-away or schematically indicated structure, also reflects the need for an efficient method of representing a larger internal space within a limiting format. Individual episodes of religious narratives are frequently recorded in discrete areas of fresco cycles, within small side panels, or the narrow confines of an altarpiece predella. The reduction of architectural features in comparison to the figures in a scene was quite common in fourteenth-century art.

Images of the Annunciation were most commonly produced for church locations. They were, as such, integral to the teachings, ceremonies and acts of worship associated with the Eucharist and other religious feasts and rituals. One of the principal reasons why the Annunciation is a suitable subject for the central panels of high altarpieces is that it concerns the Incarnation of Christ and ultimately, like the crucifix, Christ's sacrifice and the Redemption. The Virgin's withdrawn or sad disposition at the Annunciation is often interpreted as a sign that she has foreseen the death of her son even at the moment of his conception (Lavin 195-196).

It is clear, therefore, that issues of function (devotional, didactic or liturgical), location and reception (whether private, public, or as part of regular or specific

ceremonies) need to be taken into account when assigning meaning. The issue of private patronage and the detailed circumstances and constraints of individual commissions is beyond the scope of this article. However, when it is considered that the austere Fra Angelico *Annunciation* (c. 1440-41, fig. 2) was made for the friary of San Marco, it becomes clear that the kneeling, obedient and submissive nature of the Virgin Mary was primarily an example for the friar who occupied the cell within which it is painted and did not necessarily constitute a model for women (Honour and Fleming 450).

The format of the Annunciation type and its iconography were also intimately associated with the design and development of altarpieces and church architecture, as well as the increasing popularity of the Virgin Mary. For example, because the Annunciation episode involves two figures, it was convenient to show them on separate parts of an altarpiece, on opposite wings or on either side of a structural architectonic divide or decorative division derived from a structural one (see fig. 3).

On the arch, high upon the choir wall in the Arena chapel, Giotto pictures God dispatching the Angel Gabriel on his mission. Then, following the narrative of the life of Christ and western sequencing conventions, the Annunciation takes place in the next two scenes below and upon either side of the choir opening, with the Virgin as recipient of the angel's message pictured to the right (fig. 4). With the rise in the popularity of the Virgin Mary, the two protagonists were often brought physically closer on the central panels of altarpieces.

Common Annunciation symbolism

Another common idea in the *Trecento*, but more pronounced a century later, was that the encounter took place near an enclosed garden, the *hortus conclusus*, symbolic of virginity and the womb (Scaff 111). In addition, the meeting is often pictured within view of a distant interior window, the *fenestrum crystallinam*, symbol of the intact hymen and Mary's perpetual virginity. Care is needed when interpreting the significance of such symbols. The enclosed garden was a symbol of fruitfulness but

more often, like the window - and especially in Annunciation imagery - it signified Mary's virginity (Schiller 53).

Arguably, there is a phallic quality to the way that this intimate space is breeched by the dove or by a ray of light from God, symbolising the Holy Spirit. Yet, unlike Saint Bernard's 'transpiercing' arrow, these rays never reach the Madonna's body (Steinberg, 1987, 34).¹ Their effect is perhaps most aptly summarised in a verse inscribed upon the frame (now lost) of an Annunciation by Jan van Eyck:

As the sunbeam through the glass

Passeth but not staineth

Thus, the Virgin, as she was,

Virgin still remaineth (quoted in Carrier 239)

Scaff's claim of a similarly phallic quality to the "tall spiked trees" in Leonardo's *Annunciation* (fig. 5), the "typically erect" lilies, and the "long straight alleys leading back to Mary's enclosed garden" in other fifteenth-century Annunciation images seems exaggerated (119). The latter is merely a reflection of fifteenth-century preferences for scenes that favoured the inclusion of prominent linear perspective devices such as the convergence of parallel lines towards a distant vanishing point.

If there is any sense of impiety or overt sensuality it is most often cancelled out by the sexually neutral Angel Gabriel, who is commonly depicted as a female with similar features to Mary herself (Scaff 111). The division of the enclosed space and the separation of the two figures by a wall or another architectural feature, which is particularly prevalent in Italian art, reinforces this sense of propriety and neutrality. The Virgin is shown frequently with head bowed and eyes closed, maintaining the psychological distance between the two figures. Scaff notes that in one unusual example, the eyes of the two protagonists appear to meet, suggesting an intimate exchange (Fra Angelico, c.1420-40, fig. 6). But on closer inspection, the Virgin, who is

¹ Early church fathers such as Zeno, Bishop of Verona (363-372) and Ephraem of Syria (ca. 306-373) believed that Christ entered Mary through the ear (Graef 44-46).

pictured on the other side of a central pillar from the angel, is typically lost in contemplation.

One can interpret Donatello's Santa Croce *Annunciation* sculpture (c.1435, fig. 7), as further evidence of the development of the 'conversation' between the angel and the Virgin (Schiller, 38-39). The two figures are brought into close proximity, are realistically portrayed (the angel's wings aside) and the exchange between them visualised as more of an intimate entreaty than an 'announcement.' The above characteristics are also prominent in Botticelli's Uffizi *Annunciation* (fig. 1), the Lippi/del Cervelliera version (fig. 8), and Ghirlandaio's fresco (1486-90, fig. 9).

However, any sense of impropriety is invariably mitigated or neutralised by other factors in the images. Even in Botticelli's unusually sensuous-looking Uffizi example, where the two figures are pictured at close quarters, the Virgin's eyes are downcast and, despite her suggested movement or agitation, there is a solemnity and distant character, a platonic remoteness, about her whole being. Although, by her body movements, it is evident she has been disturbed by the visitation of the angel, turning away in apparent confusion from the lectern, it is as though her contemplation of the mysteries of faith has not effectively been disturbed at all. She is performing the role prophesised for her in the Old Testament, from which, according to Saint Bernard, she had just been reading: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14). In any case, these intimate depictions are the exceptions. In other versions of the Annunciation the same artists (Fra Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli) retained the more traditional elements such as the physical separation of the two figures by architectural features.

The Virgin Mary as a portal

The extent to which these characteristics suggested tensions between eroticism and propriety is difficult to gauge. These are complex images, at least to the modern viewer. I would argue that Mary's opened cloak in a number of Italian fifteenth-century images acted as a portal or gateway. As noted above, Botticelli's standing

Madonna somehow maintains her balance and contemplative calm as she turns away from her lectern and gesticulates in disbelief and initial confusion towards the Angel Gabriel. Despite the considerable disturbance she manages to keep her cloak, which is fastened at the neck, but is forced wide open by her arms, closed around her legs (a detail that is also evident in Carlo Crivelli's *Annunciation*, fig. 10). Combined with the stark contrast between the colours of her cloak and gown (traditionally blue and red respectively) this forms a striking eye-shaped aperture towards the viewer - a symbolic container in front of the Madonna's enlarged abdomen. This opening echoes the mandorla in which Christ was commonly pictured in medieval and Byzantine imagery (signifying his divinity and holiness) and, in turn, may even be a reference to Christ's wound and to Mary's birth canal (see fig. 11).² Like the penetrative rays of light more common in medieval depictions, the aperture is also a reference to the sexual act, a deliberate yet subtle emphasis upon the contrast between the Madonna's physical sexuality and, because no actual penetration ever takes place, her unquestioned purity. The devout fifteenth-century viewer witnesses, without contradiction, a truly miraculous event - the opening of the gateway to mankind's redemption. As schematic symbolism became less fashionable, the subtlety with which poses and gestures had to convey meaning became ever more sophisticated.

Balancing the roles of the Virgin

Innovation and subtlety of meaning were not, however, confined to naturalism during the Renaissance. In the mosaic of the *Annunciation* at Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (432-40, fig. 12), which was commissioned by Pope Sixtus III as part of a Christological cycle to glorify the Incarnation after the First Council of Ephesus (431), Mary is shown seated formally as though enthroned, wearing rich clothing and many jewels. This portrayal is in accordance with Mary's declaration at Ephesus as

² As well as divinity, sacredness and holiness, the mandorla also represented virginity, the vulva, and an opening or pathway. Each side of the almond shape could represent opposite poles (Cooper, 103-104). On Christ's wound and the opening to Mary's gown see Lavin, 195-196. On the Virgin's womb as a temple with its own portal, see Jacobus, 170.

Mother of God. Nevertheless, reflecting her humble origins, she is shown carrying out the simple, ordinary task of spinning wool, which is an allusion to the apocryphal account of the Annunciation in the *Protoevangelium of James*. Yet another layer of subtlety is indicated by the colour of the wool, which is purple and represents Mary's regal and queenly status.

The sensitive balance between Mary's recently exalted position and humble origins is especially apparent if we consider this scene in the context of the rest of the programme. The scene immediately below the Annunciation upon the triumphal arch is the *Adoration of the Magi* (fig. 13) in which Christ is unmistakably elevated and separated from all the other figures. Shown as a young boy, he is robed in white and seated upon a large and elaborate throne and dais, an imperial *synthronon*. Mary, although richly clothed underneath, is covered modestly and sits simply to his left. Her plain outer cloak or *maphorion* indicates clearly that she is being portrayed as wife and mother (Rubery 160, 164). Reverence for Mary as Mother of God is thus carefully modulated between that of her glorification at the moment of the Incarnation and her humility, virtue and acceptance of God's will.

Another female figure is pictured beside Christ's throne in the *Adoration* scene. Eileen Rubery speculates that both women, who have not been identified definitively, are simultaneously the Virgin Mary. She notes that the figure to Christ's right is similarly adorned to that of Mary in the *Annunciation* scene above. Rubery also notes the striking similarity of this bejewelled woman to depictions of virgins from the same period in Rome and Ravenna. The figure to the Christ's right is, therefore, identified as the 'ever-Virgin' Mary and the other, the Mother of God, reflecting the contemporary emphasis, around the time of the Council of Ephesus, upon the unity of Christ, his simultaneous and complete humanity and divinity. If this reading is correct, the *Adoration* image represents one of the most sophisticated attempts to convey the mystery of Mary's motherhood and virginity.

Continuity of meaning

The same sense of a delicate balance between the contrasting roles and characteristics of the Virgin was carried forward in the centuries following the Council of Ephesus. An unambiguous sense of propriety and correctness between the angel and Mary is maintained and carefully modulated as changes resulting from naturalism and the Virgin's status were introduced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Despite the prominence of the symbolic opening to the Virgin's outer cloak discussed above, it is never discarded and usually covers the majority of her body maintaining the emphasis upon her motherhood, chastity and modesty. The idealised figure of Mary is undoubtedly more sensuous-looking in the Renaissance, but this does not necessarily infer sexual love. As naturalism progressed the penetrating 'phallic rays' of light are removed from Annunciation scenes. The Angel Gabriel may occasionally move closer to Mary in fifteenth-century images, suggesting a more intimate exchange between the figures, but this is defused in some manner by other devices. For example, by divisions such as the lectern in Leonardo's *Annunciation*, or by the increasing inclusion of references to the Fall, which contrasts Mary's purity with the sinful Adam and Eve (fig. 14, see Schiller 39-41). In addition, as we move outside, the Virgin's bedroom is visibly subordinated.

The kneeling Gabriel does indeed contrast sharply with the standing Madonna in the later *Annunciation* images, but in the light of the Virgin Mary's contemporary ascendancy in the church as well as in the popular domain, this, rather than the entreaties of a courtesan, can be understood more readily as devout or rapturous religious salutation. It is the earthly nature of the exchange that brings the lives of these saints and other religious figures, their very piety, chastity and devotion to God, closer to that of the devotee. It is highly questionable whether artists would seek to do this by stimulating or encouraging carnal desire.

As indicated by the Roman mosaics these adjustments can be seen as part of a much longer series of checks and balances, designed to maintain simultaneously

Mary's special status as Mother of God (confirming Christ's divinity), and her importance as human mother (guaranteeing man's ultimate redemption).

Conclusion

This article considered the possibility that, because of their naturalism, a number of images of the Annunciation in the Renaissance became eroticised. It seemed that in depicting the Virgin Mary as a beautiful, richly-attired and sensuous young woman, artists were treading a fine line between the sacred and the sacrilegious. However, a closer study of the images, combined with a consideration of their meaning and use, particularly in the context in which they would have been encountered, revealed a very different picture.

It has to be acknowledged that we are dealing with a visual language and related devotional habits that will never be entirely transparent. A brief review of Saint Bernard's reading of the 'Song of Songs' suggests propriety, but not in modern-day terms. It was also noted that in fifteenth-century Florence there was a risk of sexual ambiguity in other images of the Virgin Mary, most notably, perhaps, the bare-breasted lactating Madonna. In the 1490s Savonarola, although regarded by many as a moral extremist, signalled a new sensitivity about religious images, including those in which the Madonna was inappropriately dressed.

However, the Annunciation in art reveals a contrasting feature about naturalistic developments. As schematic devices were abandoned and as the Virgin's status and popularity increased, Renaissance artists adapted with, at times, what can only be described as an astonishing degree of resourcefulness and subtlety. New and sensitive methods of balancing the Virgin Mary's often sharply contrasting attributes had to be found whilst completing the traditional task of instructing devotees and stimulating devotion. These methods evolved in close harmony with the functions, the various forms and the locations of the images. Of course, as the Reformation approached in the sixteenth century, the artistic and critical climate was about to change. But from the evidence discussed, it is difficult to imagine any sense of impiety or sexual

ambiguity invading the encounter between the devotee and these fifteenth-century images. There was indeed a tension between the Virgin Mary's 'ever-virgin' perfection and her sensual, earthly reality in Renaissance Annunciation imagery, but this was entirely appropriate. It underscored powerfully the miraculous nature and the mystery of the Incarnation.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1, Sandro Botticelli, *Annunciation*, 1489-90, Tempera on panel, 150 x 156 cm, Uffizi, Florence



Fig. 2, Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, 1440-41, Fresco, Cell, Monastery of San Marco, Florence



Fig. 3, Giovanni da Milano, Prato Polyptych (detail), *Annunciation*, before 1363, Tempera on panel, Pinacoteca Comunale, Prato



Fig. 4, Giotto, *Annunciation*, c.1305-8, Fresco, Arena Chapel, East End, Padua



Fig. 5, Leonardo da Vinci, *Annunciation*, c.1472-75, Panel, Uffizi, Florence



Fig. 6, Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, c.1420-40, Fresco, Monastery of San Marco, North Corridor, Florence



Fig. 7, Donatello, *Annunciation*, c.1435, Gilded pietra serena, Santa Croce, Florence



Fig. 8, Filippo Lippi and Giovanni di Francesco del Cervelliera, *Annunciation*, mid-1440s, Panel, San Lorenzo, Florence



Fig. 9, Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Annunciation*, 1486-90, Fresco, Cappella Tournabuoni, Santa Maria Novella, Florence



Fig. 10, Carlo Crivelli, *Annunciation*, 1486, Panel, National Gallery, London



Fig. 11, Christ displaying his wound to a nun, Initial D, *Hours of the Passion*, S. France, 1275-1300, British Library, MS. Egerton 945 f.237v

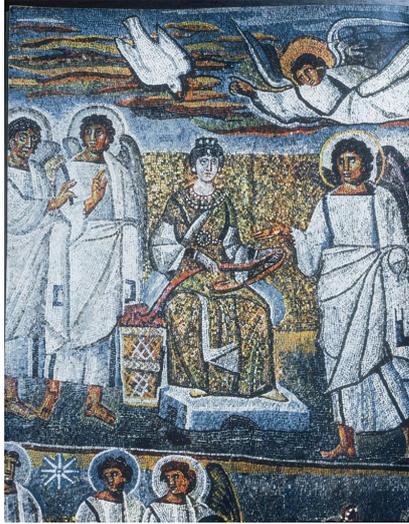


Fig. 12, *Annunciation*, 432-40, Triumphal Arch (detail), Mosaic, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome

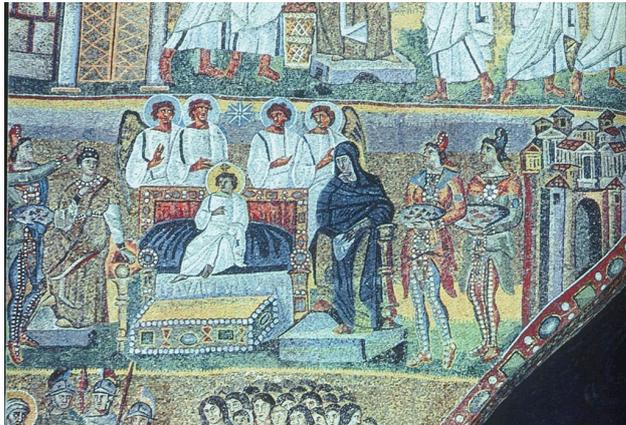


Fig. 13, *Adoration of the Magi*, 432-40, Triumphal Arch (detail), Mosaic, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome



Fig. 14, Lorenzo di Credi, *Annunciation*, 1480-85, Panel, Uffizi, Florence