

The Annunciation
Blessed Fra Angelico
1432
Museo Diocesano in Cortona, Italy

This work is the main panel of a polyptych work, which includes a multi predella panels with scenes from the Life of the Virgin.



We can learn many things about Jesus and Mary just by looking closely at pieces of art. They can reveal many things about an important event in life. One such piece of art is called the *Annunciation* by Bl. Fra Angelico, painted in 1432 in Florence, Italy. Fra Angelico was a Dominican priest, who was also a great artist. This painting was commissioned by a wealthy family in Cortona, Italy to hang above the altar in their local church. Fra Angelico also painted many scenes from the life of Christ on the walls in each of the rooms of his fellow friars. Fra Angelico was beatified by Pope John Paul II.

The angel Gabriel comes to greet Mary with words coming out of his mouth found in scripture, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee”.(Lk1:35) Look at the position of the angel, what are his hands doing? The position of his body and of his hands is to show the importance of the message.

There are also words coming out of Mary’s mouth... “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy Word.” (Lk 1:38) Mary’s great Fiat. Notice how she leans in toward the angel, a sign of acceptance. Notice her hands crossed on her chest; a sign of submission to the Lords will.

We see two people, a man and a woman in the upper left hand corner being forced to leave. A person of some sort, with a sword, appears to be making them leave. The man and woman are Adam and Eve being thrown out of the garden by a heavenly being. Remember they were thrown out because of their disobedience to God. Mary is the new Eve, she says “Yes” to God. It is through Mary’s fiat that God’s plan of salvation comes about. Notice, Adam and Eve are depicted small and up in the corner. This represents time, Adam and Eve are far removed from the Virgin, showing the chronological and spiritual distance from the Annunciation that would redeem their transgression.

We also see an image of Isaiah the Prophet with a scroll depicted in the circle directly above their heads, He is looking down at Mary. Isaiah foretold of this event, which fulfills Old Testament prophecies.

The position of the angel. Before the 1400’s i.e. the Renaissance, when St. Gabriel was pictured giving the message to Mary, he was always above her and more glorious than her because he was a heavenly being. However, during this time the artists started to make the angel at the same level or even lower by making them in the action of kneeling. This was to show that Mary is actually their queen, so they would kneel before her.

The colors of Mary. Mary is often seen in art wearing a red inner garment and a blue outer garment. Red garments in religious art symbolize martyrdom. Mary suffered an internal martyrdom as she witnessed the cruel death of her Son. Blue symbolizes royalty. Mary is the queen of heaven so she is wrapped in a blue cloak/robe to show this. Red also symbolizes humanity and blue divinity. Although Mary is not divine, she is the tabernacle for her divine Son.

Notice the chair she is sitting on. There is carpet only in a small area around her feet. This also shows royalty as a throne. The Queen sits on the throne of heaven.

Mary has a book on her lap. We are led to believe she was reading it before the angel came upon her. But what does this book symbolize? The book is the OT scriptures. Mary was versed in the scriptures as tradition has it she was raised in the temple. The OT scriptures, specifically Isaiah foretells of a Virgin who shall bear a Son. (Is 7:14) Therefore Mary knew what the angel’s greeting meant.

The curtain in the background seems like an odd addition to this artwork. The curtain symbolizes that something is being revealed. As if a curtain is being pulled away to reveal something magnificent. In other words, God's plan is finally being revealed through Mary.

The Palm tree is situated between the building and the Garden of Eden gate. The Palm tree symbolizes victory and the cross. It was through the cross/crucifixion that brought man back into relationship with God as His children.

The building structure Mary and the angel appear in; is it a house? There is no ceiling? This represents the temple; the same sort of structure you would see in Roman or Greek temples. Mary is the new temple.

Stars. There are only stars above the temple not above Adam and Eve. The stars represent heaven being opened. The heavens were closed after the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Mary's "Yes" means the relationship will be restored and the heavens will be opened through Jesus Christ. Hence the stars above her.