AN ANNUNCIATION BY
GERARD DAVID

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Saint Matthew in his gospel gives no account of
the angelic salutation, moving abruptly from
his listing of Jesus’ ancestors to a rapid descrip-
tion of the circumstances of his birth, with a
strong emphasis on the fulfillment of prophecy.
Saint Mark begins his gospel with the baptism
of Christ, and Saint John, after his splendid
mystical preamble, does the same. It is to the
gentle Luke, the physician and patron of paint-
ers, who cared little about ancestry, prophecy,
or theology, that we are indebted for the sim-
ple, tenderly sweet story of the nativity, as well
as for the very detailed account of the mysteries
that preceded it. It was Saint Luke who pro-
vided the Church with the words of the Ave
Maria and also with the text of the Magnificat,
the Benedicite, and the Gloria in Excelsis,
which are all to this day important parts of
Roman and Protestant ritual.

The apocryphal book of James, known also
as the Protevangelium, which is at least as old
as the second century, is, in the manner of
apocryphal writings, even more circumstantial.
It supplies the full story of Joachim and Anna,
the parents of the Virgin, and relates how
Mary was dedicated from her babyhood to the
service of the temple and after her betrothal to
Saint Joseph was one of the pure maidens
elected to spin “the gold and the undefiled . . . ,
the scarlet and the true purple” for the temple
veil. According to this book, the angel ap-
ppeared to her twice, delivering the first part of
his message while she was fetching water at the
fountain and the rest after she had returned to
her room and had again taken up the spinning
of the purple, one of the colors which had fallen
to her by lot. The author’s emphasis on her
taking the pitcher, to go to the well, and then
later, “filled with trembling,” returning to her
house and setting it down, suggests that this
text accounts for the ever present ever serving
as a vase in representations of the Annuncia-
tion.

The extremely popular Latin Meditations
on the Life of Christ, which were translated
into the vernacular of most European countries
during the fourteenth century, were known to
English readers through the Mirrour of the
Blessed Lyf, the version made by Nicholas Love
before 1410. They are a rich treasury of imagi-
native detail, filling out the often bare state-
ments of the gospels with homely incidents and
lively descriptions, providing in their vividness
an incomparable source for pictorial represen-
tations. Before embarking on the meditation
on passages from Saint Luke concerning the
Incarnation, the feast of the Annunciation, and
the greeting Ave Maria, the unknown author
devotes a chapter to the “manner of living of
the blessed virgin maiden Marie”; he quotes
Saint Jerome as having stated that she “or-
dained to herself this manner of rule in living”:
from morning until tierce giving herself all to
prayer, from tierce to nonees occupying herself
bodily with weaving work, and from nonees on
not ceasing prayer until the coming of the
angel of God, who daily brought her susten-
ance. God’s charge to the Archangel Gabriel as
given in the Mirrour is especially charming,
entrusting to him the message that God’s
“blessed son hath coveted her shape and her
beauty, and chosen her for his mother.” And
so Gabriel, rising up glad and gay, took his
flight from the high heaven to earth, and in a
moment was in man’s likeness before the Vir-
gin Mary, who was at that moment shut up in
her room in prayer or meditation, “peradven-
ture reading the prophecy of Isaiah concerning
the Incarnation.” How short a step from there
to the myriad Flemish paintings of the Virgin,
kneeling in her bedchamber before her prie-
dieu, on which lies open a book of devotion!
The Annunciation, by Gerard David (died 1523). Bequest of Mary Stillman Harkness, 1950
The intimate household setting for the Annunciation, the *thalamus virginis*, had become popular fairly early in the fifteenth century, replacing the older form previously favored in which the Virgin was shown in a porch and the angel approached from outside. The Museum has a beautiful example of the earlier form, the Annunciation of the Friedsam collection, variously attributed but probably by Jan van Eyck with the assistance of talented helpers in his shop. The dignified and monumental Virgin stands with her open hand at the portal of a chapel fraught with the symbolism of the Old and New Laws, and two steps below her, in a blossoming garden, stands the angel, resplendent in cope, scepter, tiara, and peacock-feathered wings.

To the Museum’s fine collection of pictures of the later type of Annunciation, which includes paintings by Rogier van der Weyden, Joos van Cleve, Isenbrant, and the Master of the Barbara Legend, the bequest of Mrs. Harkness has recently added another superb example, the Annunciation on two panels by Gerard David. These paintings belonged to Gabriel Johann Peter Weyer in Cologne until 1862, when they were sold to Prince Karl Anthonie von Hohenzollern, and they were in the collection that he formed at Sigmaringen until a short time before they entered the Harkness collection. They have often been referred to as wings from a triptych, but it is difficult to envision what sort of a work of art such a triptych might have been. Not that a broad horizontal picture is unknown among the works of Gerard David: the Marriage at Cana in the Louvre and the Virgin and Child attended by Saints in Rouen have proportions similar to those which the dimensions of our panels would require. But where in the history of art are two representations so essentially related as the Angel and Virgin of the Annunciation separated by another picture, forty-eight inches wide?

The possibility presents itself that they were the outsides of a pair of wings. The Annunciation was a favorite subject for the exterior panels of Flemish altarpieces, lending itself well to the exigencies of the narrow upright spaces of such panels. It was especially popular in grisaille—or stone-imitating gray—as on the closed shutters of Hugo van der Goes’s huge and wonderful Portinari altarpiece in the Uffizi or on the wings by Gerard David in the Robert Lehman collection in New York, which once flanked the Pietà in the Johnson Collection in Philadelphia. The angel of these beautiful Lehman panels is incidentally the same personage as the one who appears in the Harkness Annunciation, but the Virgin standing with somber gravity in her straight-falling cloak is altogether different. The Museum’s wings from a triptych by Hubert van Eyck are supposed to have had originally on their reverse a grisaille representation of the Annunciation. The great Ghent altarpiece by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck shows when closed an Annunciation in which the Virgin and angel are separated by a pair of slender panels representing nothing except part of the room in which the scene takes place, with windows opening to a city view. If it were not for the fact that the Ghent painting is in every respect *sui generis*, and in all probability pieced together from a number of independently existing elements, one might postulate such a pair of connecting panels as having originally been placed between our angel and Virgin of the Harkness paintings. Some lost connective must once have existed, for the pavements with their perspectives of tiles do not meet satisfactorily, and the window seat and casements, as well as the headboard of the Virgin’s bed, are cut short with an improbable abruptness. It is likely, and in keeping with an old tradition, that the angel stood on a lower level than the Virgin. The most probable assumption is that the two figures were originally part of the same panel and were cut from it either wantonly or when the painting had suffered some injury. A reduced copy in the Städel Institute in Frankfort offers no clues, for in it the two figures are adapted to a single picture.

The two panels as they have come down to us are in the purest state imaginable. Their most striking aesthetic feature is a pervasive and complete harmony of color, subtle, restricted, and quite consciously conceived. The
colored marbles of the paving show a pattern in rose, light blue, and green, and this chord of color repeats itself in the feathers of Gabriel’s wings and is broken up into the rose and green of the changeable silk with which his cope is lined and into the rose and blue of the concentric circles enclosing the gold at the heart of the nimbus of the dove. A somber bass is provided by the puce of the cushions on the window seat and the variegated dark blue and puce of the heavy hangings of the bed, while the single notes of blue green on the steps and
of rose color in the Virgin’s book bag sound with the poignancy of wood winds. The auburn gold of the angel’s light-kissed hair must have seemed to the painter radiant enough; so he was given no jeweled tiara, and his white alb, entirely without apparel, falls straight and breaks around his feet with the tinkle of ice which its bluish tones suggest. His cope is inscribed with the Alpha and Omega and on the other side with part of the Latin text from Saint Luke, “the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee.” In very fine ornament around the edge of the Virgin’s robe is another inscription with the first words visible at the left apparently Flemish, meaning Mother of our Lord. The rest of the inscription is taken from the Memento Salutis Auctor, a hymn sung at compline and included, like the verse from Saint Luke on the angel’s cope, in the office said on the feast of the Annunciation.

Gerard David was a native of Oudewater in Holland and before transferring to the southern Netherlands had been trained at home by some Dutch artist, possibly Aelbert van Ouwater of Haarlem. He is said to have been an illuminator, but we know nothing of his work before 1484, when he became a member of the painter’s guild in Bruges. He worked there until his death in 1523. In Flanders under the influence of the paintings of the Van Eycks, of Rogier van der Weyden, and of Memling, the somewhat naive and touching figures of his early style make way for noble and elegant creatures, aristocratic in cast of feature and in bearing, still solemn, but endowed with a lovely grace. The restrained and subtle color which is so wonderful a characteristic of our Annunciation paintings is typical of his later style and suggests that these works were painted in his full maturity.

In the painting of the Flemish primitives nobility and depth of emotion, like courtly manners and appearance, are usual and not peculiar to Gerard David. But he nevertheless made one very personal contribution to this school of painting, a consistently maintained, unmatched, exquisite refinement. It is manifest in every aspect of his work: in the fine gradations of his color, in his suppression of most of the usual elements of decoration, in his discriminating and abstemious selection of detail, as in the pearl borders of the angel’s cope and the rosary beads lying on the paving, and especially in the sweet, grave dignity of his holy people and in the quiet, infinitely significant gestures of their hands.