The Annunciation

FROM A BOOK OF HOURS FOR CHARLES OF FRANCE

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“When the plenty of time and of grace was come in the which the high Trinity ordained to save mankind that was damned through the sin of Adam . . . the Father of heaven called to him the archangel Gabriel and said to him in this manner: Go to our dear daughter Mary, the spouse of Joseph, the which is most dear to us of all creatures on earth, and say to her that my blessed Son hath coveted her form and her beauty and [hath] chosen her for his mother.” Thus Nicholas Love in the beginning of the fifteenth century began his retelling of the story of the Annunciation first set down in the Gospel of Saint Luke.

From the earliest centuries of the Christian era, writers enjoyed adding details to the gospel story of the Annunciation, theologians interpreted every word of it, and mystics revealed the very thoughts of the chief actors in this momentous first act in the drama to save mankind. From the earliest centuries, too, artists depicted the scene, sometimes following the straight gospel account, sometimes adding the interpretations of subsequent writers, and quite often, it seems, putting in a few embellishments of their own. Probably there are more representations of the Annunciation in medieval art than of any other New Testament event except the Crucifixion, and it is a never-ending source of delight to the student of the Middle Ages to see the countless variations on a well-worn theme achieved by artists of skill and imagination. The Cloisters possesses a dozen or so Annunciations ranging from the thirteenth to the early sixteenth century: German, Spanish, French, Flemish; Annunciations in silver-gilt, stained glass, wood carving, marble sculpture, manuscript illumination, and panel painting. The tiny exquisite Annunciation in the Book of Hours of Queen Jeanne d’Évreux (Figure 5) and the brilliant Annunciation page from the Belles Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry (Figure 6) are important interpretations of the theme; and the magnificent altarpiece by Robert Campin (Master of Flémalle) is a milestone in the history of art, chiefly because it shows for the first time as a setting for the scene a complete fifteenth century bourgeois interior (Figure 3) furnished with ordinary everyday objects which in spite of their mundane appearance are highly symbolic of Christian belief.

This year at Christmas time we are showing in the same room with the Campin altarpiece another Annunciation recently acquired, one entirely different from all the others at The Cloisters, and perhaps anywhere in the world. This Annunciation (Figure 8) from a Book of Hours made for Prince Charles of France in 1465 interprets the event in a mood of fantasy and make-believe almost as if it were an illustration for a fairy tale. The little golden-haired Mary, a dainty figure garbed in blue and vermilion, sits on a brocaded cushion, turning the pages of her book with mannered grace. It is difficult to believe that she is reading the Bible and has just arrived at the prophecy of Isaiah foretelling the coming of Christ, as the commentators say; it seems more probable that she is perusing a less serious tome written in a much lighter vein. A comparison with the Virgin in the Campin altarpiece, also seated on the floor reading a book when the angel Gabriel appears, shows the wide difference in mood. The lowly position of the Virgin in both is intended to indicate her humility. In the manuscript page the humility seems to be that
by Jan van Eyck in Washington, the little chapel or oratory has achieved almost cathedral dimensions. This setting could be no part of a home, even conceding, as many commentators do, that Mary was residing temporarily in the house of her well-to-do parents in Nazareth. It may be that the artists magnified the churchlike surroundings in order to point up the significance of the event. It may also be that they were consciously following the account in one of the apocryphal stories of the Annunciation. The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary says: “Then Mary rose up and went to the house of the Lord. And . . . on the first day of the week, at the first hour of the day whilst Mary was sitting by herself in the great house of God, Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, appeared to her. . . .”

The illuminator of our manuscript pages has contrived an elaborate “house of God” which is not exactly a Gothic church nor is it even the medieval idea of a Jewish temple with its six-

**Fig. 2. The Annunciation, by Jean Fouquet. Page from the Hours of Étienne Chevalier**

Musée Condé, Chantilly

of the “youngest princess” rather than that of the Mother of God.

The churchlike setting, too, although undoubtedly planned to create a religious atmosphere, somehow only enhances the quality of delightful fantasy. French artists of the fifteenth century in depicting the Annunciation prefer to show it as taking place in a little chapel or oratory where the Virgin usually kneels at her prie-dieu. Since the oratory or chapel could well have been a part of Mary’s dwelling place, this setting is not at variance with the writings of the majority who insist that Mary was at home when the angel Gabriel came. However, in the Fouquet Annunciation from the Hours of Étienne Chevalier (Figure 2), and in the Aix Annunciation, both French, as well as in the Flemish Annuncia-

**Fig. 3. The Annunciation. Center panel from the Altarpiece by Robert Campin (Master of Flémalle). Flemish, about 1425**

The Cloisters Collection, Purchase
sided tower. It is rather something that a master builder might have dreamed up after too many flagons of wine, or that a sculptor might have tried to promote if he wanted a lifetime job carving statues, or a painter if he had lots of gold leaf on hand.

But it is futile to try to interpret the setting of this little Annunciation in terms of reality, because it is but make-believe. Perhaps the only concession to reality is in the minute and perfect scene of a private mass far in the background (see Figure 1), where a priest and his acolyte perform the solemn service while a lady in a hennin headdress kneels at the altar rail and two stylishly garbed gentlemen stand waiting on opposite sides of the steps. There is, of course, religious significance in many of the gilded statues. One can recognize the prophets with their scrolls who foretold the coming of the Savior, a sibyl who prophesied the Incarnation, and a nude Adam whose sin made necessary the advent of a Redeemer. It is possible that there is symbolism, too, in the jars symmetrically placed in the foreground, for Mary is frequently called a "faultless vase." It seems strange, however, that the usual white lilies, emblems of the Virgin’s purity, are omitted from this Annunciation.

The fantastic elaborateness of the page devoted to the Virgin Mary is fully equaled by the opposite page where a gentle curly-haired Gabriel kneels inside a gilded portico, bearing his scepter as herald of God. The words of his greeting are written in gold beside him: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee," and above him the dove of the Holy Spirit flies toward the Virgin, emanating rays of light. Never was the messenger of God accompanied by so many other angels; Gabriel is usually entirely alone. In the Annunciation of the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux at The Cloisters a few little angels look down from an upper story rather like children gazing at something the grownups are doing.

Fig. 4. Enlarged detail from the Annunciation shown in Figure 8
Then straightway great joy dwelt in Mary... And at that moment Mary saw the angelic hosts glorifying God... And the hosts came round about Mary like troops and horsemen of a king when he cometh and taketh up abode in his palace.

The French countryside over which the angels fly is dominated by a princely château which can be identified as Mehun sur Yèvre. This castle, now in ruins, was one of the favorite residences of Jean, Duke of Berry and is portrayed in the Duke's Très Riches Heures at Chantilly.

From this illustration, which shows the other side of the castle, from a published plan, and from a description of Mehun sur Yèvre, it was possible to make the identification. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the château is down below. In the Belles Heures many tiny angels playing musical instruments are integrated into the elaborate design of the border. In an Annunciation by the Boucicault Master in the Corsini Library, Florence, and in a few other manuscript illuminations, the angels come closer to participating in the scene itself. But in this illumination (see Figure 7) one has the impression that all the angels of heaven are coming to earth to rejoice in the good news of the Annunciation. And here indeed they come, in good order, two by two, in a great sweeping arc, making celestial music all the way.

The procession of angels is an enchanting variation on the Annunciation theme. It is difficult to tell whether the concept is due to the illuminator's desire for decorative elaboration, or whether he was consciously following the text of the apocryphal History of the Blessed Virgin Mary which describes the moments after Mary's assent as follows: "Then straightway great joy dwelt in Mary... And at that moment Mary saw the angelic hosts glorifying God... And the hosts came round about Mary like troops and horsemen of a king when he cometh and taketh up abode in his palace."

![Fig. 5. The Annunciation from the Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux, by Jean Pucelle. French (Paris), about 1325-1328. 3½ x 2¾ inches](image)

The Cloisters Collection, Purchase, 1954

![Fig. 6. The Annunciation from the Belles Heures, by the Limbourg brothers, made for Jean, Duke of Berry. Franco-Netherlandish, about 1410-1416. 9¾ x 6¾ inches](image)

The Cloisters Collection, Purchase, 1954
the bridge of three stone arches leading to the drawbridge and thence to the entrance. The Prince Charles for whom our manuscript was made spent a great part of his youth at Mehun sur Yèvre, since this castle was also a favorite residence of his beloved father, King Charles VII, and his mother, Marie of Anjou. It was at Mehun sur Yèvre that Charles VII died in 1461 believing that he had been poisoned by his eldest son, soon to become Louis XI, King of France.

Evidence for the ownership of our Annunciation diptych is to be found in the tiny coat of arms swinging like a jewel from the upper border of the angel page and a larger coat of arms on the reverse side (Figure 9) of the page of the Virgin Mary, which also bears an inscription on the border. The inscription translated reads: "Charles of France, son of Charles VII, ninth Duke of Normandy, in the year 1465. Long may he live." Two kneeling angels support the coat of arms of Charles as Duke of Normandy surmounted by a helmet with ducal crown crested with fleurs-de-lis. The arms display the golden fleurs-de-lis of France on an indented azure field, quartered with the two golden leopards on a red ground of the Duchy of Normandy. In 1465 Charles of France, then nineteen years of age, was titular head of a confederacy against his brother, King Louis XI, called the League of Public Welfare and backed by some of the most powerful barons of France. The league won an indecisive victory, but a victory nonetheless, and Charles was granted the Duchy of Normandy by a very reluctant King who took it back by force of arms in a few months' time. The manuscript was probably ordered to commemorate the induction of Charles of France as Duke of Normandy.

Two standing angels holding scarlet banners play an important part in the design of this page. On each banner is painted a Saint Michael conquering the devil in the form of a dragon. This device, adopted by French kings early in the fifteenth century, was a favorite with King Charles VII, father of our Duke Charles of Normandy. It was also a favorite of Louis XI, but that is probably not the reason why it is introduced here.

Playing a secondary role in the composition of this page is a scene of the Visitation and above, as an illumination of the letter D, a representation of the Virgin Mary busy at her loom, surrounded by countless angels. This charming little view of Mary at work is a reflection of many apocryphal accounts of the Annunciation that tell how the Virgin was engaged in making a veil for the temple when the angel Gabriel appeared. To quote from the same History of the Blessed Virgin Mary: "And it came to pass in those days that the chief priests wished to make a veil for the temple. And they sent and brought virgins to weave it, and they appointed Mary to help them weave it. . . . And she worked always at the curtain which the high priest had delivered unto her." Saint Jerome mentioned that "from the early morning until the third hour of the day she gave her all to prayers and from the third to the ninth she occupied herself with weaving work."

The letters AE tied together with cordeliers, which appear in the borders of this page and the preceding one, are more difficult to explain. Perhaps they are intended to represent "Ave," the first words in Gabriel's greeting, the V being incorporated in the A. It may be that they stand for Adam and Eve whose sin made necessary the Annunciation. Or it may even be that the letters are Alpha and Omega, that is, the Beginning and the End, symbols of Christ. It is possible that there is no religious significance in the letters at all. It has even been suggested that the A and E being the first and last letters of "Amboise" are a hidden reference to Charles's mistress, Colette de Chambes, who was married to Louis of Amboise. One might go further and imagine that they refer to Anne, daughter of Colette and Charles, who was born about the time this manuscript was ordered. The strange monogram made of spiked, thorny letters in the borders of the angel page presents even worse problems. If the undecipherable letters are XPC, the reference would be to Christ. On several of the gold coins issued by Charles there is the inscription: XPC. VINCIT. XPC. REGNAT. XPC. IMPERAT. The little Viola tricolor, the wild pansy, repeated several times in the borders may be pure deco-

Fig. 7. Enlarged detail from the Annunciation shown in Figure 8
Fig. 8. The Annunciation. Two pages from a Book of Hours made for Charles of France, Duke of Normandy. Each page about $6\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{8}$ inches

The Cloisters Collection, Purchase, 1958
Fig. 9. The back of the right-hand page shown in Figure 8
ration, or it may have been Charles's favorite flower, or, since it was known in the Middle Ages as the *herba trinitas*, it may refer to the Trinity. However, since the late Middle Ages delighted in strange devices, cryptic ciphers, and secret monograms, it is perhaps fruitless to "guess" any further here.

The very readable text of the page where the Virgin is weaving, for some strange reason written on a kind of framed poster hanging by a chain from the ceiling, is the text for the beginning of matins from a Book of Hours. Baroness Edith Greindl in the *Burlington Magazine* for October 1936 has proved without a doubt that these pages, at that time in the collection of Baron de Decker in Brussels, once belonged to the Book of Hours in the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris (Ms. 473), made for Charles of France, from which the initial page of matins and the usual accompanying scene of the Annunciation were already missing in 1885. The manuscript is unfinished, but several of the pages bear the arms of Charles as Duke of Normandy, and all show a high decorative quality and the stamp of individuality so evident in our Annunciation pages. The little Nativity (Figure 11) is completely surrounded by peacocks in all their pride and glory. Another page (Figure 12) is devoted to the unusual scene of the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. In the borders of this page the coat of arms of Charles as Duke of Normandy is repeated fourteen times on shields and on banners held by armored knights. Here again are what seem to be the familiar letters A and E, but on close examination the E could be read as two interlocked C's. Colette and Charles and Anne? This page at one time was also detached...
from the manuscript, was “discovered” by Delisle, and turned over to the Bibliothèque Mazarine in 1909.

One illustration, the Betrayal of Christ (Figure 13), is different in style from all the others. This page has justly been attributed to the renowned painter and *enlumineur*, Jean Fouquet of Tours. Since Fouquet executed many commissions for King Charles VII and his court, and later for Louis XI, he must have been well known to our Prince Charles of France. In the magnificent manuscript page of the trial of the Duke of Alençon in 1458, Fouquet painted a little portrait of the twelve-year-old Charles seated at the right of his father, “richly clad in silk . . . and velvet, furred with martin to the floor, and on his head a black hat . . . with a jewel.” It has been suggested that Fouquet also painted Charles as the youngest King in the Adoration of the Magi from the Hours of Étienne Chevalier at Chantilly, dated about 1450. At a later date than our manuscript, about 1470, Charles was again portrayed by Fouquet in the page commemorating the foundation of the Order of Saint Michael by Louis XI, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Fouquet’s Betrayal page in Charles’s Book of Hours in the Mazarine Library shows a different coat of arms from the one on our Annunciation pages. Here are the golden fleurs-de-lis on an indented azure field which Charles bore as Prince of France, Duke of Berry. Since Charles was Duke of Berry from 1461 until 1465 when he became Duke of Normandy, this page is earlier than the others. It is probable that Fouquet was commissioned to illustrate a Book of Hours for Charles while he was still Duke of Berry but never finished the work. The Betrayal being a handsome illustration, however, it was incorporated into the later book.

Baroness Greindl and others would attribute to Fouquet the Annunciation diptych at The Cloisters and many if not all of the illustrations in the Mazarine manuscript. Several connoisseurs, however, believe that only the Betrayal scene is by Jean Fouquet and the rest are by another artist. With this latter opinion we are in complete agreement. A comparison of the Annunciation page from the Chevalier Hours by Fouquet with the Museum’s Annunciation pages is sufficient to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the two, in style and in point of view. Fouquet chose an elaborate ecclesiastical setting with many gilded statues as did the painter of our pages, but Fouquet depicted a convincingly “real” structure, whereas our artist dreamed up a delightful fantasy. Moreover, Fouquet, having studied “true perspective” in Italy, was interested in creating an illusion of depth and of space. The painter of our miniature was more interested in embellishing a page,
treated the gilded architecture almost as if it were a very rich border, an imaginative frame for the little Virgin Mary and the angels. The difference is fundamental.

Although there are similarities in the drawing of the faces, with plump cheeks and heavy-lidded eyes, the heads in the Fouquet miniature have higher, wider foreheads that impart to the personalities of the Virgin and the angel Gabriel a more solemn, intellectual character. Although both artists liked to highlight the costumes of their figures with strokes of gold or silver, they treated the arrangement of drapery folds in an entirely different manner. Especially characteristic of our artist is the rather crumpled calligraphic patterning of materials spread on the ground.

More could be written by way of comparison between the universally acknowledged works by Fouquet and the Annunciation pages at The Cloisters. Perhaps enough has been said, however, to indicate that though similarities in style are evident, suggesting perhaps a common workshop tradition or similar regional background, the intrinsic differences prove that another artist than Fouquet painted our Annunciation.

Charles's expense accounts mention one Jean de Laval as being the "enlumineur" and "pantre" of "Monseigneur le duc." There are entries of payments made to him in 1463, 1467, and 1468. In May 1464 it is recorded that Jean de Laval, painter to Charles, made for King Louis two scarlet pennants, each "with a sun and its rays." (At that time Louis and Charles were not at swords' points.) It may be that this Jean de Laval was the illuminator of our manuscript pages. And it may be that the two scarlet pennants held by angels on the page with the inscription are the very ones that he painted for the King. Besides the figures of Saint Michael on the pennants one can faintly discern the "sun and its rays" with several stars.

Another "painter and illuminator" appearing in Charles's accounts is Henri de Villecocq. Nothing but his name and the amount paid him is recorded. A great deal is known, however, about Jean Gillemer, an enlumineur also associated with the Duke. This poor man was traveling from the court of Charles where he had sold a Book of Hours to Charles's mistress, Colette de Chambes, and had received an order from Charles himself for a breviary and a commission from Charles's sister, Princess Madeleine, for a Book of Hours, when he was arrested by King Louis's police as a suspected spy in the service of the League of Public Welfare. Gillemer insisted that he was on his way to join the court of the Count of Maine, "in gaiety of heart" and to collect a debt; that he was not carrying secret messages for Charles; that certain cryptic scraps

Fig. 13. The Betrayal. A page probably illuminated by Jean Fouquet for a Book of Hours made for Charles of France

Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris. Ms. 473 fol. 13
of writing found on him were love talismans and
charms against toothache and other maladies;
that he was merely an enlumineur going about his
legitimate business. All this occurred in January
1471 when Charles was Duke of Guyenne, hav-
ing relinquished his title of Duke of Normandy
in 1469. It is not known whether or not Jean
Gillemer was working for Charles when the
latter was still Duke of Normandy. Nor can it
be ascertained whether his imagination and
skill were of high enough order to have planned
and executed our serene and lovely manuscript
pages of the Annunciation.
Although the inscription on the border of one
of our pages concludes with the formal VIVAT
wishing long life to Charles of France, this was
not to be granted him. He died in 1472 at the
age of twenty-six, Colette de Chambes having
predeceased him by a few months. There were
many contemporaries who accused Louis of
having poisoned them both. It was an era of
violence and intrigue, but it produced many
tranquil and beautiful works of art, like our
little Annunciation.

In addition to the sources of information mentioned in
the text, the following books and articles were of special
assistance: Henri Stein, Charles de France, Frère de Louis XI,
Paris, 1919; Léopold Delisle, “Un Feuillet des Heures de
Charles, Frère de Louis XI,” Bibliothèque de l’École des
Chartes, LV (1894); A. Lecoy de la Marche, “Interroga-
toire d’un Enlumineur par Tristan l’Ermité,” Revue de
l’Art Chrétien, XXXV (1892), 369; David M. Robb, “The
Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and
Fifteenth Centuries,” The Art Bulletin, XVIII (March
1936); and André Blum and Philippe Lauer, La Miniature
française aux XV° et XVI° siècles, Paris and Brussels,
1930.