
Art Exhibitions

Restored paintings by two Renaissance geniuses: van Eyck and van der Weyden

by Warren A.J. Hamerman

One of the jewels of the National Gallery of Art's collection, and a treasure of early Renaissance painting, Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation*, is back on public display in Washington, D.C. after more than two years of cleaning and restoration.

The painting was done in oil on oak panel around 1434 in what is today Belgium. It was transferred to fabric at the Imperial Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg in the last century (this happened to many panel paintings in Russia, because the wood deteriorated with the damp climate conditions there). In 1931, along with Raphael's *Alba Madonna*, now also in the National Gallery, it was one of the Czarist art treasures sold by Stalin to American millionaires, in order to buy food during the terrible famine caused by the forced collectivization of farms.

It was finally cleaned of its accumulated grime at the National Gallery last year, and old in-paint was removed. Then the holes were painstakingly in-painted anew by an expert restorer. Visitors to the National Gallery before Sept. 5 will be able to enjoy the van Eyck in a special room of its own, as part of mini-exhibit on the artist, the painting, and the restoration. As a special treat, the Gallery is offering a free booklet by curator John Oliver Hand with full-color illustrations.

Meanwhile, in Malibu, California, the J. Paul Getty Museum has also put on display through Oct. 23 a rare 15th-century masterpiece of the Northern Renaissance, the *Madonna and Child* of Rogier van der Weyden. This exhibit also celebrates the completion of a year-long conservation process by the museum's Department of Paintings Conservation. This work belongs to the Huntington Art Collections in San Marino. The conservation was undertaken as part of an ongoing program by the Getty Museum of offering assistance to other museums around the world to restore important paintings.

The Annunciation theme

I recently had the experience of touring a large group of schoolchildren through the National Gallery who were awestruck by the brilliance and color of van Eyck's painting. From two galleries away, a first-grader pointed through two open doorways to ask what the "glowing little lit up painting was way over there." This is all the more remarkable because

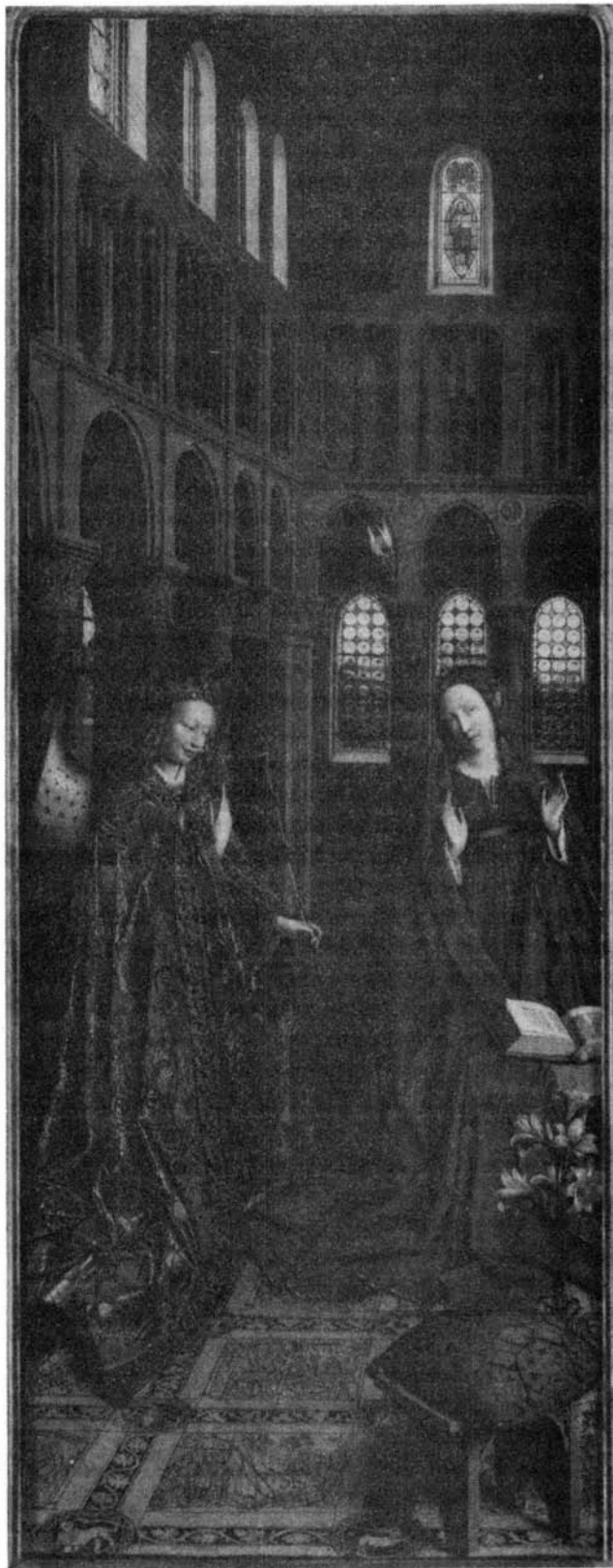
van Eyck's painting is a relatively small work, most likely the left panel of a triptych with a matching right wing and larger central panel, which are now both lost. Like so much of van Eyck's oeuvre, the other parts may well have perished in the violent iconoclastic outbreaks which occurred in northern Europe in the course of the 16th-century religious wars.

Extant altarpieces such as those by van Eyck's contemporary van der Weyden, suggest that the original triptych might have had the Adoration of the Magi as its missing center, and the Visitation in the right wing, thus complementing the story of the birth of Christ with the two major events that precede it in Luke's Gospel.

Van Eyck, long described as the "inventor" of modern oil painting because of his unique mastery of oil-based paints and glazing techniques, was born around 1390 in the town of Maaseik, north of Maastricht. He began his career as a court painter for John of Bavaria in The Hague. From 1425 until his death in 1444, he was the Flemish court artist of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, first in Lille and then in Bruges. Philip said of him that he "would never find a man equally to his liking nor so outstanding in his art and science."

During the Renaissance, the Annunciation theme was among the most preferred by the masters from van Eyck through Fra Angelico to Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, because of its fundamental importance to Christianity and all artistic creation and scientific discovery. Mary's willful assent to God is the model for how man can act in the image of God the Creator. As told in Luke 1:26-38, the Angel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will conceive and give birth to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mary, most often depicted as being interrupted while reading, to emphasize her literate intellectual powers, says "yes" to God, thereby cooperating with God in making the Incarnation possible.

Van Eyck depicted Mary as large compared to the scale of the architecture which alludes to her identification with the church. The artist paints the letters spelling out the angel's salutation in Latin next to Gabriel's mouth—"Ave gratia plena" (Hail, full of grace, Luke 1:28). Mary's assent—"Ecce ancilla domini" (Behold the handmaiden of the Lord, Luke 1:38)—is written upside down so it can be read from above by the Lord.



The Annunciation by Jan van Eyck, ca. 1434-36 (oil on canvas transferred from panel, 36½×14⅞ in., National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection).

Visible and invisible light

The Renaissance masters conveyed the interplay between what the Nicene Creed calls “all that is seen and not seen” through the metaphor of different types of light, divine and naturalistic. Van Eyck shows divine light streaming in from the window at the upper left in the form of seven symbolic golden rays. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove rides the middle golden ray to the head of Mary. The seven rays represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that Christ will receive as a Branch of the Tree of Jesse (Isaiah 11:2-3): wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, purity, and fear. A naturalistic light illuminates the scene from the right, lighting up the right sides of Mary, Gabriel, the open book and pillow, and casting shadows off the left as seen by the viewer.

On the top of the back far wall of the church there is a bright stained glass window showing God the Father standing atop a world globe. Below the stained glass window are the dark recesses of the far wall until one reaches perhaps the most technically spectacular of all light sources in the painting—the silvery-white light realistically radiating in through three lead-shot windows, which represent the One God in the Trinity. The interaction of these different levels of light presaged the frontiers Leonardo and Raphael explored more than a half-century later, and which, in a different way, Velázquez and Rembrandt explored considerably later.

Master detailists

Northern Renaissance art grew out of a long tradition of manuscript illumination. Painters like Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and Petrus Christus are rightly famed for the astonishing amount of detail in their paintings, often achieved with a magnifying glass and single-bristle brush.

In the van Eyck painting, the church architecture is a composite of older medieval Romanesque round arches, and the slightly pointed Gothic arches on the lower story. On either side of the stained glass window on the back wall of the church there are wall paintings of two scenes from the life of Moses which prefigure Christ. The floor of the church shows scenes of the Old Testament (mostly from Samson’s life) side by side with signs of the Zodiac.

Next to the Virgin is an open Bible, a pillow footstool and her characteristic vase of lilies, representing her intellect, humility, and purity.

Perhaps no Angel Gabriel in the history of painting has a more richly elaborate robe and crown, befitting a painting done in Bruges, the center of the most luxurious fabrics and metalworks north of the Alps at the time. Gabriel is wearing an elaborate liturgical vestment consisting of a sumptuous red velvet and gold decorated cope edged in red and blue gems and rows of pearls. Under the angel’s cope is a dark green velvet liturgical garment known as a dalmatic with flowers and foliage on a cloth-of-gold ground. The angel’s elaborate dress contrasts with Mary’s simple blue robe and



Madonna and Child by Rogier van der Weyden, ca. 1460 (oil on panel transferred to masonite, 19×12½ in., from the Huntington Art Collections, now on display at the Getty Museum in Malibu.)

headband. In the freshly restored painting, the viewer can even see the glistening brown marble in the perfectly painted columns along the side of the church behind the angel.

Restoration leads to discoveries

The National Gallery exhibition includes an infrared reflectography composite photograph of the underdrawing of van Eyck's paintings, which reveals a more tender expression on the face of the Virgin than the final panel. This is one of many discoveries which modern conservation techniques can afford to students of the old masters.

Similarly, according to Mark Leonard, Getty Museum Conservator of Paintings, "In the process of restoring the *Madonna and Child*, we learned valuable information about Rogier's inventive working methods. For instance, cross-sections of the painting's surface revealed that the artist experimented with an unusual combination of gilding techniques to create the ethereal gold background and distinctive haloes. While cleaning the work, we were delighted to find

that despite several past restorations, much of Rogier's original painting remains intact."

Rogier van der Weyden, considered the greatest Flemish master of the Renaissance together with van Eyck, lived from 1400 to 1464, and his patrons tended to come from municipal governments and middle-class burghers rather than the princes whom van Eyck served. He traveled to Italy and made paintings, which have survived, for the Este family of Ferrara and the Medici of Florence. Although like van Eyck he paid extraordinary attention to detail, he is known more for his expressive composition and the poignancy and religious feeling of his figures, than for the astonishing optical effects associated with the elder painter. The greater drama may partly be due to the strong influence of Italian narrative painting, for in Italy, ever since Alberti's work *On Painting*, written in 1435, the explicit ideal of painting was to express the "motions of the soul through the motions of the body."

In the picture displayed at the Getty Museum, the Christ Child is shown standing on a richly embroidered cushion, turning away from the Virgin while trying to unfasten the gold clasps of a book of hours, a popular prayer book used for the private devotions of wealthy laypeople of the day. The inclusion of the book of hours links the picture, probably destined also for private devotion, to the "Devotio Moderna" movement which played such an important role in the Renaissance in northern Europe, through its educational activities and the pervasive influence of *The Imitation of Christ*, the book written by the Devotio Moderna's most famous member, Thomas à Kempis.

Both exhibitions accompany the panel paintings with miniatures (book illustrations) of related themes or styles, as well as photographic enlargements of x-radiographs, cross-sections, and micro-details of paint samples to show some of the analytical techniques used.

Museum information

For those who wish to see the van Eyck or van der Weyden restorations or other exhibitions:

The **National Gallery of Art** in Washington, D.C. is on Fourth and Constitution. Hours are Monday-Saturday 10-5; Sunday 11-6. Admission is free. Parking is on the street; Archives stop on the Metro. Phone: (202) 737-4215.

The **J. Paul Getty Museum** in Malibu, California is at 17985 Pacific Coast Highway. Hours are Tuesday-Sunday 10-5. Admission is free, but advance parking reservations or Front Gate passes are required; MTA bus 434 (request museum pass from driver). Phone (310) 458-2003 (English) or (310) 458-1104 (Spanish).