

## Annunciation 25<sup>th</sup> March

Luke 1

*26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

Representations of the Annunciation are second only to the Crucifixion in Western art. The world shaking significance of the event, the drama of the announcement, and the record of the complexity of the interchanges between Mary and the angel Gabriel have offered numerous possibilities for evocation of the scene.

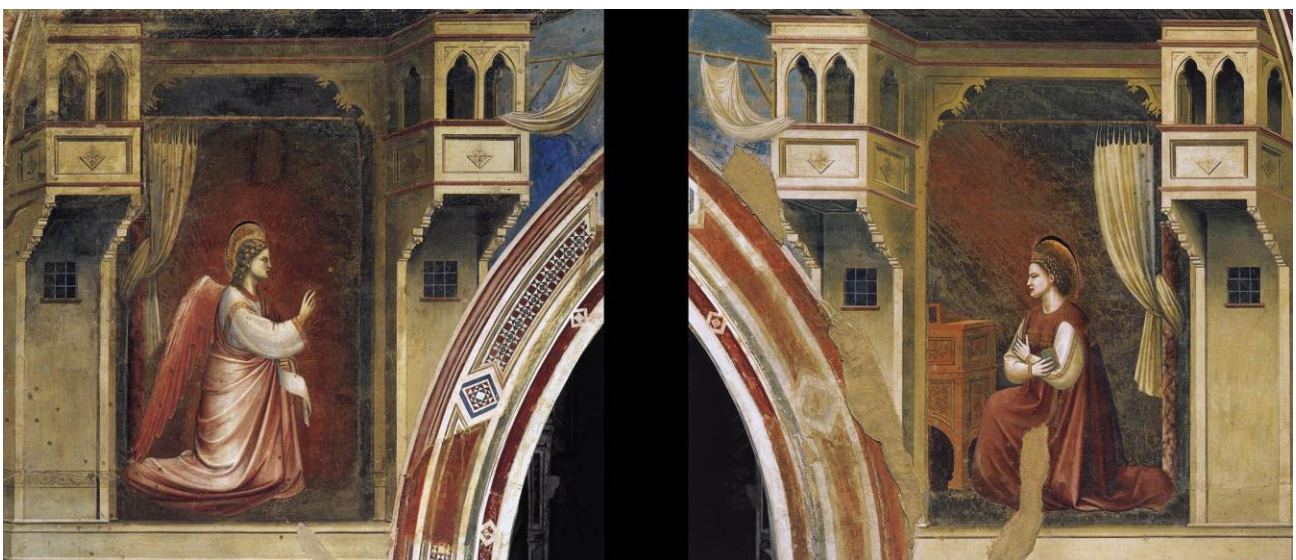
The very earliest are among the first images in Christian art and are typically minimalist – here (left) from the 5<sup>th</sup> c Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. The sculptural pair from Rheims Cathedral (c 1250) also reducing the text to the bare essentials are distinguished by Mary's gentle dignity, and the wonderful smile of the angel. (They would originally have been brightly painted)



By the 14<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> c with the dominance of panel painting a great variety of formats had evolved, with a repertoire of gestures miming the conversation. Quite often the words were also painted on the panel. However conventions were still strong. At San Galgano Abbey Ambrogio Lorenzetti was commissioned to paint a fresco of the Annunciation in the circular Montesiepi chapel. As was usual, he did a preliminary drawing on the wall in red chalk (known as a sinopie, from Sinope, the source of the chalk). This underdrawing would then be covered by a layer of plaster on which the artist would paint. Restoration techniques developed in the 1960s made it possible to lift off the surface plaster layer so that the drawing could be viewed. What a surprise in this case! Originally Lorenzetti had conceived an overwhelmed Mary crouching on the ground and clinging for support to a pillar. Clearly this was unacceptable to the patrons, for the final painting shows her upright with meekly folded arms – the gesture of acceptance of the angel's message.



Placing the angel and Mary in a spatially separated setting, as in the Lorenzetti, is an effective convention for visually implying that one is heavenly, the other earthly. In some cases the separation is a physical architectural element – which most reproductions in fact eliminate.



Giotto – Arena Chapel, Padua c 1305



Pontorno – Santa Felicità, Florence c 1527

In other cases the separation is suggested by painted architecture



Fra Angelico San Marco Florence c 1440



Piero della Francesca  
San Francesco, Arezzo c 1455

Some Annunciations may include God the Father, as in Piero della Francesca, others may show the Spirit as a dove speeding toward Mary, usually on rays of light. This is how Carlo Crivelli represents the event, in his wonderfully detailed 1486 version, now in the National Gallery in London.



As Dr Sally Hickson puts it, Crivelli is literally "bringing the miracle home"; the painting was done for the Church of the Holy Annunciation in Ascoli Piceno, and Gabriel is met by the patron saint of the town, St Emidius, bearing a little model of his town., while within her own home Mary humbly accepts the gift. Within the painting itself there are witnesses, just as we, looking at it, are witnesses also.