

## Mute Mysteries of the Divine Logos: On the Pictorial Poetics of Incarnation

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In the following I will focus mostly on one painting, which seems to me especially relevant and illuminating in our context, namely the *Virgo Annunziata* or *Virgin Annunciate*, painted by Antonello da Messina in ca. 1475–1476 [Fig. 2.1]. As a preliminary remark, let me note however that this painting with its striking aesthetic structure and its impact on the beholder is only one example of a more general historical development of pictorial aesthetics, respectively pictorial poetics. The synthesis of heterogeneous, counterfactual realities in the medium of pictorial fiction, and the aesthetic creation of a visual paradox, namely an ‘eternal moment’, an ‘impalpable presence’, a ‘narrative icon’ etc., are generally characteristic of the special quality and novelty of the representational forms that had dominated northern Italian painting of Veneto and Lombardy, especially since the late Quattrocento.<sup>1</sup> What we find here is the fundamental desire to integrate the paradoxical character of the image, its ‘mode of being’ as both opaque medium and transparent membrane, into a comprehensive poetics of representation, a new pictorial articulation. The consequences are twofold. First, the pictorial reference to the viewer acquires a new character as he is actually ‘addressed’ and communicatively included by the painting in an increasingly direct way. Second, the image acquires a new capacity for poetic expression. There is a growing ability to articulate

\* This article goes back to arguments and interpretations undertaken in my book *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren. Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien* (Munich 2001). A comprehensive and critical synopsis of the book, including a discussion of the notion of the term ‘mediality’, which is unusual in English, but central in the book, is to be found in the review by Falkenburg R. *The Art Bulletin* 89 (2007) 593–597.

1 See the fundamental study, Ringbom S., *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting*, Acta Academiae Aboensis 31 (1965). See also Huse N., *Studien zu Giovanni Bellini* (Munich: 1972), esp. 42f; Rosand D., “Giorgione e il concetto della creazione artistica”, in *Giorgione*, Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio, Castelfranco Veneto 1978 (Asolo: 1979) 135–139; Belting H., *Giovanni Bellini Pietà : Ikone und Bilderzählung in der venezianischen Malerei* (Frankfurt am Main: 1985); and Shearman J., *Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: 1992) 33f, 109f.



FIGURE 2.1 *Antonello da Messina, Virgin Annunciate (ca. 1475–76). Oil on wood, 45 × 34.5 cm. Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia.*

IMAGE © BPK | SCALA.

pictorial content by non-discursive, non-linguistic means and thereby to generate semantically condensed and intensified messages.

All this is on full display in Antonello da Messina's famous panel of the *Virgin Annunciate*, which he painted during his stay in Venice ca. 1475–1476.<sup>2</sup> The image presents the Virgin in a tranquil, clearly structured composition. The strict symmetry and frontality are reminiscent of an icon. Only the implied movement of the right hand, which reaches forward into the pictorial

<sup>2</sup> 45 × 34.5 cm. Mandel G., *L'opera completa di Antonello da Messina*, Classici dell'arte, 10 (Milan: 1967) 99, no. 65; Morabattini A. – Sricchia Santoro F. (eds.), *Antonello da Messina*, exh. cat. (Rome: 1981) 184f, no. 41; and Sricchia Santoro F., *Antonello e l'Europa* (Milan: 1986) 168, no. 39; and Savettieri C., *Antonello da Messina* (Palermo: 1998) 70f, no. 5.

space, and the direction of the Virgin's gaze, which almost imperceptibly follows the turning of her body, subtly indicate that a scenic incident, namely the Annunciation, is taking place. Antonello radically reduces the event of the Annunciation by depicting only the very moment in which the Virgin receives the Word of God, and with it the divine fruit of her womb. The actual descent of the divine Logos remains imperceptible to the eyes. It can only be inferred from Mary's reaction and from the reflection of the light that shines on her from above, and which appears to radiate all the more intensely against the dark background.<sup>3</sup> The actual subject of the image is thus the paradoxical manifestation of the invisible in the visible, of light amidst darkness, of the Word in the flesh, in sum: of the divine in the temporal. The synthesis of icon (*imago*) and history painting (*historia*) produces the visual impression of an eternal moment that allows contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation itself.

Antonello's image links 'the problem of visibility with a new conception of the image, which he defines in a radically new way', since the image's meaning is now completed only in its aesthetic perception and thus only in the viewer's productive imagination.<sup>4</sup> The latter is continually kept active by the mysterious indeterminacy that pervades the whole image. This indeterminacy stems not only from the basic design of an 'implied action', with its oscillation between descriptive and narrative image (*Zustandsbild* and *Ereignisbild*), but also, and especially, from the subtle elaboration of the painted figure and its expression. The Virgin appears reclusive and withdrawn, enclosed in the compact, tent-like cover of her cloak, which she holds in front of her chest with her left hand.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless her whole attention is focused on what is happening to her, which she acknowledges by extending her right hand. The harmonious proportions of her face stem from a traditional typological canon, but nonetheless betray a powerful psychological depth reminiscent of the individualized traits of a portrait. Her expression is calm yet deeply moved, youthful yet profoundly mature. The hint of a smile seems to play upon her lips while at

3 Regarding the symbolism of light in the context of the iconography of the Annunciation see Meiss M. "Light as Form and Symbol in Some Fifteenth-Century Paintings", *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945) 175–181.

4 Belting H., *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott (Chicago: 1994) 346.

5 This is a reference to the Immaculate Conception and the notion that Mary is the tabernacle of the Lord; for the metaphor of the closed tent as a topos that refers to Mary's imminent confinement, see Os H.W. van, *Marias Demut und Verherrlichung in der sienesischen Malerei 1300–1450* (The Hague: 1969) 141; and Salzer A., *Sinnbilder und Beiworte Mariens in der deutschen Literatur und lateinischen Hymnenpoesie des Mittelalters* (Linz: 1893) 18f.

the same time suggesting composed seriousness. In keeping with the Gospel's account, which relates her anxiety ('she was greatly troubled at the saying') as well as her compliance ('Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word'),<sup>6</sup> the gesture of her right hand indicates both her resistance and her fear, but also calm consent.<sup>7</sup> The thematically determined ambivalence just discussed is thus woven into the visible characteristics of the central figure, so much so that her appearance itself wears the signature of the indeterminate, the inexplicable and the ineffable.

The positioning of the lectern also contributes to the suspense-filled sense of ambiguity that characterizes the overall pictorial effect. Positioned at an angle, it creates a spatial effect that confronts the viewer with its emphatic presence, while keeping him at a distance like a barrier. The lectern thus reinforces both proximity and remoteness as the two poles between which the viewer's perception unfolds. In a word, the mysteriousness of the Virgin becomes the enigma of the image itself, in which the higher mystery of God's Incarnation is contracted into an aesthetic experience.

Antonello's *Annunciation* makes clear just what it means to speak of painting's new 'articulacy' and its repercussions. The subject of Antonello's painting is a spoken dialogue between the Virgin and the angel Gabriel, as narrated in *Luke* 1:28–38 and illustrated by an iconographic tradition spanning a great number of paintings, continued into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and beyond [Fig. 2.2]. The idea that the encounter between the Virgin and the angel took the form of a dialogue had a long tradition. This is suggested not only by the widespread practice of elaborating the exchange between the two in Marian sermons and in other forms of spiritual literature. It is also testified to by the daily prayer of lay persons, which from the thirteenth century on was the *Ave Maria* with its persistent repetition of the words in question.<sup>8</sup> This conception of the Annunciation was often portrayed in painting by staging the dialogue with the help of inscriptions that render the exact words spoken by the two protagonists according to the Bible. Seeming to emerge directly out of their opened mouths, the inscriptions lend visual form to their spoken

6 *Luke* 1:29: 'turbata est in sermone eius'; and *Luke* 1:38: 'ecce ancilla domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum'.

7 Lauts J., "Antonello da Messina", *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* N.F. 7 (1933) 15–88, esp. 43.

8 Gössmann E., *Die Verkündigung an Maria im dogmatischen Verständnis des Mittelalters* (Munich: 1957) 217f; and Büttner F.O., *Imitatio pietatis. Motive der christlichen Ikonographie als Modelle zur Verähnlichung* (Berlin: 1983) 70f.



FIGURE 2.2 *Matthias Stomer, Annunciation (ca. 1630–32). Oil on canvas, 117 × 171,5 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.*

IMAGE ©KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN MIT MVK UND OETM.

interaction [Fig. 2.3].<sup>9</sup> The notion of a visible verbal exchange, to which images of the Annunciation in particular bear witness, possessed a topical meaning from an early date. Already in the twelfth century, the Byzantine poet Theodoros Prodromos describes an Annunciation by the painter Eulalios which was executed with such skill that, as he puts it, one could almost hear Gabriel and Mary speak.<sup>10</sup> At a later date, Dante, in a much quoted passage from the *Purgatorio*, has his traveler praise the liveliness and the veritable eloquence of a marble relief depicting the Annunciation: “The angel who came to

9 Wenzel H., “Die Verkündigung an Maria: Zur Visualisierung des Wortes in der Szene, oder: Schriftgeschichte im Bild”, in Opitz C. et al. (eds.), *Maria in der Welt. Marienverehrung im Kontext der Sozialgeschichte 10.-18. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: 1993) 23–52; and Tarr R., “‘Visibile parlare’: The Spoken Word in Fourteenth-Century Central Italian Painting”, *Word and Image* 3 (1997) 223–244. See also Marin L., “Annonciations toscanes”, in idem, *Opacité de la peinture: Essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento* (Paris: 1989) 125–163, the author refers to the angel of the Annunciation as ‘énoncé figuré de l’énonciation’, 162.

10 Maguire H., *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton: 1981) 11f; and Belting, *Likeness and Presence* 273f.



FIGURE 2.3 *Simone Martini, Annunciation, detail with the Angel Gabriel saying 'Ave' (1333). Tempera and gold on wood, 184 × 210 cm. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.*

IMAGE © BPK | SCALA.

earth with the decree of peace [...] before us there appeared so vividly graven [...] that it seemed not a silent image: one would have sworn he was saying, "Ave" ("L'angel che venne in terra col decreto [...] dinanzi a noi pareva sí verace [...], che non sembiava imagine che tace. Giurato si saría ch'el dicesse "Ave!"'; *Purg.* x, 34–40).<sup>11</sup>

The special emphasis placed on the spoken word in the context of the Annunciation is of course theologically founded. This emphasis can be explained by the traditional doctrine that interpreted the process of Incarnation as a spiritually induced conception. How this took place (*modus incarnationis*) is represented in the extraordinary idea of the conception of Jesus through Mary's ear, described as follows by Bernard of Clairvaux:

<sup>11</sup> *Purgatorio* x, 34–40, in Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, trans. C.S. Singleton (Princeton: 1977) II, 101. Concerning this, see the very recent publication Kablitz A., "Jenseitige Kunst oder Gott als Bildhauer: Die Reliefs in Dantes Purgatorio (Purg. x–xii)", in Kablitz A. – Neumann G. (eds.), *Mimesis und Simulation* (Freiburg i.Br.: 1998) 309–356, esp. 325f.



'The Angel Gabriel was sent by God to convey the word of the father (*Verbum Patris*) through her ear (*per aurem*) into the spirit and the womb of the Virgin'.<sup>12</sup> The physiologically rather peculiar metaphor of God speaking through the angel and of his Logos entering through the ear of the Virgin has its roots in the basic but paradoxical notion 'that the divine word, when it is heard and accepted, has the power of life-giving seed'.<sup>13</sup>

This theological background explains the specific challenge faced by representations of the Annunciation. On the one hand, they aim to give visual form to the divine word and are therefore confronted with the fundamental problem of the difference between the medium of language and that of images. On the other hand, they must find an appropriate way of depicting the intrinsic paradox that is characteristic of the notion of the 'divine Word'. The heavenly Logos, as the all-powerful Word of the Creator, forms a unity with God: according to the opening of John's Gospel (*John* 1:1), 'Deus erat verbum', 'the Word was God'; the Logos remains forever beyond man's comprehension and categorically inaccessible to human language (*ineffabile*). In the Incarnation, however, mankind receives the Logos in its revealed form, as the miraculous gift of God's son.<sup>14</sup> As Bernardino da Siena argues in a sermon delivered in Florence around 1425, the mystery of the Incarnation (*mysterium incarnationis*) implies that what cannot be represented (*infigurabile*) infuses the image in the way that the ineffable (*ineffabile*) enters language; and that just as the invisible pervades what is visible, so too the inaudible reverberates in what is heard.<sup>15</sup> Attempts to provide visual representations of so complex a set of exegetical ideas occasionally produced curious solutions, especially during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Long, contorted mouthpieces that lead directly from the mouth of God the Father down to Mary's ear [Fig. 2.4], or tiny figures of the Christ

12 "Sermo", *Sanctus Bernardus, Opera*, eds. J. Leclercq – C.H. Talbot – H.M. Rochais, 6 vols. (Rome: 1957–1972) V 165–170, quotation 167. In general, see Martin J., "Exkurs: Die Empfängnis durch das Ohr", *Würzburger Jahrbücher für Altertumswissenschaft* 1 (1946) 390–399; Guldán E., "Et verbum caro factum est: Die Darstellung der Inkarnation Christi im Verkündigungsbild", *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 63 (1968) 145–169, esp. 155f.; Steinberg L., "How Shall This Be?" Reflections on Filippo Lippi's Annunciation in London, Part 1", *Artibus et historiae* 16 (1987) 25–44, esp. 26f; and Schreiner K., *Maria. Jungfrau, Mutter, Herrscherin* (Munich: 1994) 40f.

13 Ibidem 40.

14 See Schnackenburg R. – Huber C., "Logos. II (In der Schrift), III (Dogmengeschichte)", *LThK* 6 (1961), cols. 1122–1128; Bühner J.-A., "Logos im Alten und Neuen Testament", *HistWbPh* 5 (1980), cols. 499–502; and Gilson E., "L 'esse' du Verbe incarnée selon saint Thomas d'Aquin", in idem, *Autour de Saint Thomas* (Paris: 1986) 81–95.

15 See Marin, "Annonciations toscanes" 136.

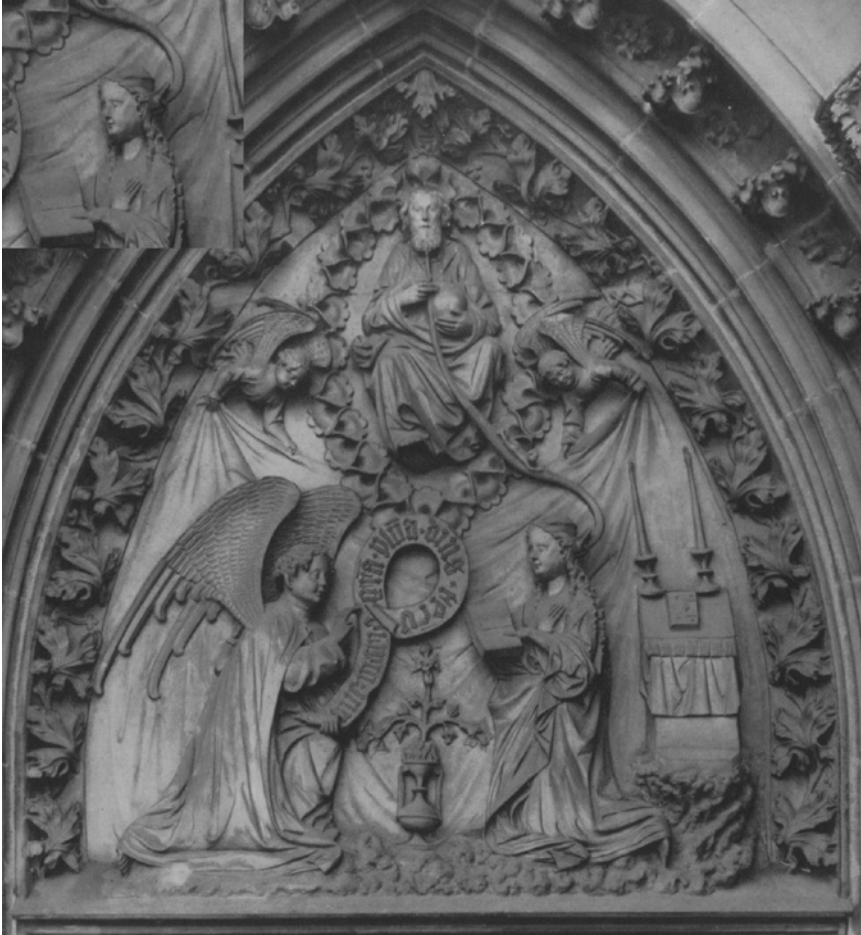


FIGURE 2.4 *Unknown master, Annunciation through the Ear (ca. 1400). Stone carving. Würzburg, Chapel of Mary, northern portal.*  
IMAGE © AUTHOR.

Child as a homunculus flying down from God's mouth into Virgin's ear, constitute pictorial ideas that were open to misunderstanding and as a result were quickly condemned theologically.<sup>16</sup>

16 See Guldán, "‘Et verbum caro factum est’: Die Darstellung der Inkarnation Christi" 155f; and Steinberg, "‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi's Annunciation". For an overview regarding representations of the Annunciation in the Quattrocento and the ways in which they engage with conceptual problems in theology see the most recent publication on the topic, see Arasse D., *L'Annonciation italienne: Une histoire de perspective* (Paris: 1999).



If we return to Antonello's *Virgin Annunciate* [Fig. 2.1], it becomes apparent how well this painter compressed the issues raised by the subject matter into one visual representation. Central to the painting is the strict reduction of the scene and its quasi reworking into a portrait of the Virgin at the very moment of the Annunciation. The angel, as the vehicle of the spoken Word of God, is no longer visible. His presence can only be inferred from the reaction and expression of the Virgin as she conceives her child. This is how the painting visually represents the Logos, which is spoken and yet cannot be heard; and this is how it represents the Word's Incarnation, which is material but nonetheless cannot be seen. The painting thus visualizes the paradoxical enigma known as the 'Incarnation of the Logos', of which human experience can only partake through the mystery of faith. But the compelling intensity that the painting achieves is due above all to the consistency with which it marks its subject as an aesthetically reflected illusion. The viewer becomes aware of the paradox inherent in the subject matter only through the experience of the paradox inherent in the medial character of the image—namely its capacity to elicit the invisible by means of a visual, deceptively real-looking presence and to evoke the ineffable through its mute but articulate expression as an image.

Antonello's painting develops what one might call a mute discourse by staging the angel's address without actually representing it. The angel's words are implicit in the dialogic exchange between the Virgin and, now, the viewer himself as her new interlocutor. This dialogue, however, cannot be realized as an actual conversation but only in and through an intense empathy sustained by the power of vision. The underlying idea that the believer should follow the exemplary role of the angel of the Annunciation is by no means uncommon. The thirteenth-century *Mariale aureum* states, 'Let us take as our example the angel who greeted her [Mary] with reverence', ('Habemus exemplum ab angelo, qui eam reverenter salutavit'), and devotional practice from the late Middle Ages onward supplies numerous examples of similar adaptations of religious roles.<sup>17</sup> The striving for this sort of intimate proximity to the Virgin at the moment of conception expresses a yearning for the salvation promised by the mystery of the Incarnation. Similar images portraying pious nuns and monks, priests and lay donors taking the angel's place or being encouraged to imitate him were common in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries [Fig. 2.5]. In Fra Angelico's famous fresco of the Annunciation in San Marco in Florence, which today greets the visitor at the landing of the stairs leading up to the monks' cells [Fig. 2.6], there is an inscription which admonishes everyone passing by

17 In this context see Büttner, *Imago pietatis* 70f, with numerous references.



FIGURE 2.5 *Sandro Botticelli (workshop), Annunciation (ca. 1495).  
Tempera on wood, 36,5 × 35 cm. Hannover,  
Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum.*  
IMAGE © LANDESMUSEUM HANNOVER.



FIGURE 2.6 *Fra Angelico, Annunciation (ca. 1442–43). Fresco, 230 × 321 cm.  
Florence, Convent of San Marco.*  
IMAGE © BPK | SCALA.

not to fail in joining the angel and greeting Mary with an *Ave*.<sup>18</sup> The fresco aspires to achieve by way of an explicit address what Antonello's painting achieves implicitly by way of visual evocation: namely, the incorporation of the viewer into the scene, as both addressee and participant.

The new, innovative conception of the 'nature of the image' manifested in Antonello's *Virgin Annunciate* could be further illuminated by conducting a comparative study of its immediate iconographic predecessors. These include a slightly earlier version by Antonello himself, which was painted in 1474 and which is now located in Munich [Fig. 2.7].<sup>19</sup> Despite its captivating *trompe l'oeil* effect of the parapet with two books, the earlier work does not achieve the same spatial depth, or the same acuteness in the capturing of a fleeting moment, or a similarly concise pictorial construction. Moreover, the motif of Mary crossing her hands before her chest in a gesture of *humiliatio* remains within the bounds of an established convention. A Florentine panel of the late Trecento (ca. 1385–1390), today attributed to Niccolò di Pietro Gerini [Fig. 2.8], proves that the version in Munich is much more traditional in character than the one in Palermo.<sup>20</sup> Both in its inclusion of the traditional gesture of humility and in its emphasis on the motif of the book, the Florentine panel represents the traditional type on which Antonello's pictorial invention is based. According to a well-documented complex of metaphorical imagery, the motif of the 'sealed book' (*liber signatus*) refers both to the unfathomable counsel of the Lord and to Mary's virginal conception. Finally, open or closed, it also refers to Jesus as the 'book of life' on which believers, just like the Virgin herself, can draw as a source of knowledge about their salvation.<sup>21</sup>

A comparison of Antonello's two Annunciations with Gerini's Florentine panel brings to light a tradition that can be traced back beyond Gerini's work and into the thirteenth century.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, however, such a comparison also brings out the extent to which Antonello departs from this

18 Pope-Hennessy J., *Fra Angelico*, 2nd edition (London: 1974) 206: 'Virginis intacte cum veneris ante figuram pretereundo cave ne sileatur ave [...]'.  
 19 42.5 × 32.8 cm. See Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative* 65; Mandel, *L'opera completa di Antonello da Messina* 94, no. 40; Kultzen R., *Italienische Malerei, Alte Pinakothek München, Katalog v* (Munich: 1975) 13f; *Antonello da Messina*, exh. cat. (1981) 148f, no. 31; Sricchia Santoro, *Antonello e l'Europa* 161f, no. 24; Belting, *Likeness and Presence* 346f; and Savettieri, *Antonello da Messina* 69f, no. 4.

20 Syre C., *Frühe italienische Gemälde aus dem Bestand der Alten Pinakothek*, exh. cat. (Munich: 1990) 52f, no. 4.

21 For this context with references see Schreiner, *Maria* 149f.

22 See Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative* 64f; Belting, *Likeness and Presence* 346f (on the icon of the 'Maria Annunciate' in the Cathedral of Fermo, late 13th cent.); and Syre, *Frühe italienische Gemälde* 54f.



FIGURE 2.7 *Antonello da Messina, Virgin Annunciate (ca. 1474). Oil on wood, 43 cm × 32 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.*

IMAGE © ALTE PINAKOTHEK / BAYERISCHE  
STAATSGEMÄLDESAMMLUNGEN.

tradition by charging the icon with narrative content and indeed fictionalizing it. Antonello's abandonment of a direct confrontation with the Virgin's gaze is especially remarkable. Apparently in deliberate contrast with Antonello's actual portraits, the scene shows Mary looking from the side at an unspecified point outside the painting. The figure thereby becomes animated with a certain tension that accords with the subject matter but seems equally to be motivated by Mary's inner state.<sup>23</sup> In this way, the figure acquires great credibility and immediacy. At the same time, through the intentness with which she

23 Regarding the interplay of gazes in other religious motifs by Antonello, see the most recent publication on the topic Thiébaud D., *Le Christ à la Colonne d'Antonello de Messine*, Les dossiers du musée du Louvre (Paris: 1993). On the portraits see *ibidem*, esp. 93f; Savettieri,

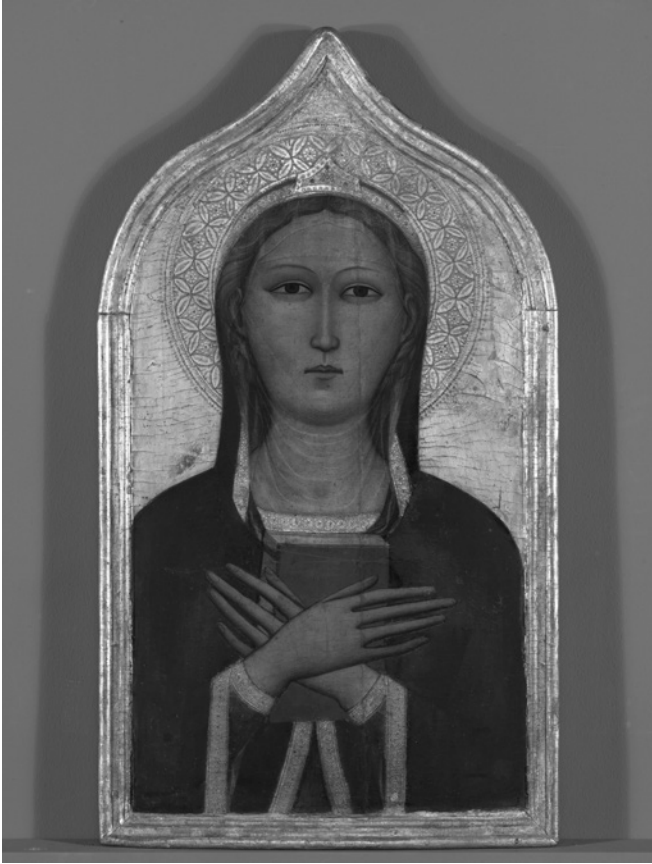


FIGURE 2.8 *Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, Virgin Annunciate (ca. 1385–1390).  
Tempera on wood, 80 × 45 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.  
IMAGE © ALTE PINAKOTHEK / BAYERISCHE  
STAATSGEMÄLDESAMMLUNGEN.*

concentrates on the event at hand, she remains remote from the beholder. In a word: what we look at is a subtle fictionalization of the icon, creating a specific combination of proximity and distance that may be regarded as a fundamental characteristic of aesthetic illusion.

Both Antonello's Annunciations probably originated during his stay in Venice, where they were most likely produced as devotional images for pri-

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*Antonello da Messina* 118f; and Boehm G., *Bildnis und Individuum: Über den Ursprung der Porträtmalerei in der italienischen Renaissance* (Munich: 1985) 147f.

vate patrons seeking support in matters such as pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>24</sup> The two paintings are original and path-setting inventions, whose popularity and success are documented by numerous and widespread copies and adaptations.<sup>25</sup> The creators of these copies did not always equal Antonello's compact form of representation or live up to the original's aesthetic ambition. This is most evident in copies that expand on the original by adding the Christ Child and thereby render visible and explicit what Antonello's depiction left subtly implicit.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from such direct emulation of Antonello's Annunciations, one could, in a wider context, trace the continuing impact and elaboration of this highly reflective approach to the image, with its resulting evocative involvement of the beholder. It is primarily Leonardo's various pictorial inventions that come to mind here. Among them, special consideration (in our context) is owed to his depiction of the angel of the Annunciation who confronts the viewer rather than Mary with the heavenly message [Fig. 2.9]. This painting, presumably created around 1510, is known only from Vasari's description and through extrapolation from various copies and a drawing from Leonardo's workshop.<sup>27</sup> The painting's unusual design inverts, so to speak, Antonello's arrangement and visual display of the Incarnation, and may derive from a different

24 For Mary as the special patron of pregnant women, see Schreiner, *Maria* 57f.

25 The early replicas are enumerated in Mandel (1967) 94 and 100, also in Zeri F., "Un riflesso di Antonello da Messina a Firenze", *Paragone* 99 (1958) 16–21. This pictorial concept was effective until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; for an example, see images of the "Vergine annunziata" by Flaminio Torre, c. 1650, in Rome, Galleria Pallavicini and in a private collection in Bologna, Ambrosini Massari A.M., in Negro E. – Pirondini M. (eds.), *La Scuola di Guido Reni* (Modena: 1992) 393; and Manni G. – Negro E. – Pirondini M. (eds.), *Arte emiliana dalle raccolte storiche al nuovo collezionismo* (Modena: 1989) 118.

26 Examples in Zeri (1958).

27 Vasari G., *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori, con nuove annotazioni e commenti di G. Milanesi*, 9 vols. (Florence: 1906), vol. 4, 26: '[...] nel palazzo del duca Cosimo [...] una testa d'uno angelo, che alza un braccio in aria, che scorta dalla spalla al gomito venendo innanzi, e l'altro ne va al petto con una mano [...]']. Among the replicas special mention deserve those in those in Basel (Kunstmuseum), Oxford (Ashmolean Museum) [Fig. 2.9] and St. Petersburg (Hermitage); and the drawing (ca. 1504/05) in Windsor, Royal Library, n. 12328r; on this topic see Clark K., *The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, 2nd edition (London: 1968–1969) 1 27f). In general see Möller E., "Leonardo da Vincis Brustbild eines Engels und seine Komposition des S. Johannes-Baptista", *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft* 3 (1911) 529–539; Pedretti C., *Leonardo. A Study in Chronology and Style* (New York-London: 1982) 167, 169f; Marani, *Leonardo. Catalogo completo dei dipinti* 58; Kemp M., *Leonardo e lo spazio dello scultore*, *Lettura vinciana*, 27 (Florence: 1988) 20f; Marani P.C., *Leonardo. Catalogo completo dei dipinti* (Florence: 1989) 145f, no. 12 A; and Shearman, *Only Connect* 33f.





FIGURE 2.9 *Unknown artist after Leonardo da Vinci, Angel of the Annunciation (ca. 1510–1520). Oil on wood, 75 × 53.4 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.*

IMAGE © ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD.

iconographic intention, namely that of Leonardo's portrayal of Saint John the Baptist in the Louvre [Fig. 2.10]. However this may be, the emphatic pointing gesture of Leonardo's angel, combined with the auspicious tenderness in his posture, may well be interpreted as a visualization of the divine appeal to understand the essentially invisible scenario and its promise of salvation. Significantly, in his description of Leonardo's image of the angelic messenger, Vasari particularly praised the striking effect of the figure's emerging with sculptural force (*maggiore rilievo*) from the unfathomable darkness into the light and into the space of the viewer.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the dynamic torsion makes the angel appear to step out from the impenetrable darkness and into the light that illuminates him from an external source. The figure appears right at the

<sup>28</sup> Vasari, *Le Vite*, vol. 4, 26.



FIGURE 2.10 *Leonardo da Vinci, St. John the Baptist (ca. 1513–1516). Oil on wood, 69 × 57 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.*

IMAGE © BPK | RMN—GRAND PALAIS |  
STÉPHANE MARÉCHALLE.

threshold between image and reality, a line of transition that serves at the same time as a line between mundane experience, temporally and spatially structured, and the complete absence of that structure in the dark, undefined background. The angel oscillates between both zones. Correspondingly, his appearance strikes the viewer as palpably real, yet at the same time seems atmospherically interlaced with the unfathomable darkness. This alone suffices to demonstrate that the image is designed to depict more than just the objective appearance of the motif of the angel (who, by the way, as a spiritual being has no objective reality at all). It seeks to express, in a visually compressed form, the cognitive difference between this world and the next, between the here and now and the beyond. The rotational movement of the whole figure, ending in the upward pointing gesture, is directed at transcending both itself and the

painting, toward a realm that the image can intimate but not represent. Through its staging of light and its shaping of the motif, the image as a painted medium adopts the difference between the visible and the invisible as its proper theme. It has the paradoxical aim of representing what cannot be represented.

In parenthesis, it should also be mentioned that a variation of Leonardo's invention is found in a depiction of the archangel Gabriel kept in Chantilly (Musée Condé) and attributed to Annibale Carracci, which contains a similar motif [Fig. 2.11].<sup>29</sup> Carracci's painting shows the winged messenger



FIGURE 2.11 *Annibale Carracci (attr.), Angel of the Annunciation (late 16th cent.). Oil on canvas, 249 × 212 cm. Chantilly, Musée Condé.*

IMAGE © BPK | RMN—GRAND PALAIS | RENÉ-GABRIEL  
OJÉDA | FRANCK RAUX.

29 *Der Glanz der Farnese: Kunst und Sammelleidenschaft in der Renaissance*, exh. cat. (Milan – Munich: 1995) 99.

gliding down from ethereal, angelic heights and looking straight at the viewer, even though the white lily in his hand is an unmistakable indication that his message is intended for the Virgin Mary. The painting, however, facing the observer so directly and so visibly with an invisible and unfathomable message, becomes a paradox, namely that of being faced directly with the message of salvation, even though this message is destined only indirectly for him. This paradox is subtly enhanced by the novel motif of angelic music, jubilantly intoned as a heavenly sound and *maestoso* resonance of the Incarnation. Heavenly music (*musica coelestis*), however, is defined in theological terms quite clearly as inaudible, voiced and played by spiritual beings. Nevertheless, this inaudible *musica coelestis* of salvation is visualized as a performance given by angels who sing and even play physically real musical instruments, and is hence visibly translated into the category of mundane audibility. At the same time, and in light of the categorical muteness of the medium of painting, it is precisely the visual and motivically implied audibility of this *musica coelestis* that is refused any audible, acoustic expression. Hence, the pictorial poetics of incarnation is amplified and widened here via an intermedial discourse connecting the unfathomable mystery with the aporia of an invisible audibility, and correspondingly, with the visualization of the inaudible.

The basic premises underlying such a painting's claim to convey religious content underwent far-reaching changes from the Renaissance onward. Given the steady increase in the elaboration of mimetic possibilities, novel conceptions of the image arose, founded on new claims about the hermeneutic openness of the representational relation. Depending on one's outlook and ideological propensity, this shift in representation can be understood either as the symptom of a crisis or as part of a process of emancipation. Especially since the Cinquecento, the question of the ontological status of images—alongside the question of who was competent to produce and to interpret them—generated a new diversity and differentiation of arguments as well as an unprecedented degree of polemical vehemence. Naturally, this discussion was not confined to theoretical discourse, but also affected the everyday production and reception of images, in such a way that the pictorial solutions that emerged are always, at least in part, to be understood as complex ways of reflecting on and adapting, productively applying or critically revising, already existing paintings and pictorial conceptions. This reflective dimension plays a crucial part in constituting the image's meaning and always contains a more or less explicit comment on the image's status qua image. This is true especially in those instances where a specific item within the painting is singled out to refer beyond the

painting, be it through the adaptation of particular models or codes, or in the literal form of a 'represented representation', i.e., of an image within the image. These are ways of 'framing' an image, of semantically situating or contextualizing it within the coordinates of its assigned function. In short, the 'framing' itself creates a new visual poetics to express the paradox of the Incarnation.

Let us take as an example some paintings that perform the discontinuity between different levels of reality in a literal sense, by way of an image within the image. One example is Sebastiano Carello's painting in Savigliano from about 1645, showing Catherine of Siena and John the Baptist devoutly attending to a painting of the Annunciation [Fig. 2.12].<sup>30</sup> Another example is a work in Parma painted by Giovanni Venanzi in 1667 [Fig. 2.13]. It employs a similar pictorial form, displaying Saints Nicholas and Barbara before a painting of the Annunciation.<sup>31</sup> In both cases, the saints function as active mediators between the believer's external reality and the internal reality of the image within the image.

In Carello's painting, the image within the image functions as an actual retable: a marble frame appears above the altar, and an altar cross is placed on the mensa. The two saints stand before it, awestruck at the sight, and regard the mystery of the Incarnation presented to them. The saints thus replicate and mirror, within the picture, the worshipper's situation in front of it, so that the viewing experience is intensified simultaneously through identification and reflective rupture. In Venanzi's painting, the reference to the viewer is even more pronounced. The location of the two saints lacks clear spatial definition; they inhabit an intermediary realm of indeterminate reality. Looking out from this space, the saints emphatically confront the viewer with their grave faces and gestures. Saint Barbara especially insistently the viewer's gaze by pointing to the image within the image, which appears to have been revealed exclusively for the latter's benefit by the angels raising the curtain before her eyes.

In both paintings, the subject matter of the image within the image is the unseeable and non-visualizable mystery of the Incarnation, the union of divine Logos and human nature. According to Thomas Aquinas, this event takes place beyond the *ratio* of the natural world, 'by ineffable, miraculous ascent' ('per ineffabilem assumptionem').<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the paintings of Antonello da Messina discussed above, the works by Carello and Venanzi represent the

30 Galante Garrone G., in Giovanni R. – Macco M. di, *Diana Trionfatrice: Arte di Corte nel Piemonte* (Turin: 1989) 242f, no. 264.

31 Mendogni P.P., in Emiliani A. (ed.), *La pittura in Emilia e in Romagna: Il Seicento*, 2 vols. (Milan: 1994) II 104.

32 Gilson, "L' 'esse' du Verbe incarnée".



FIGURE 2.12 *Sebastiano Carello, St. Catherine of Siena and St. John the Baptist before a Painting of the Annunciation (ca. 1645). Savigliano, Museo Civico.*

IMAGE © ARCHIVIO FOTOGRAFICO MUSEO CIVICO A.OLMO, SAVIGLIANO (CN), N.RO INV.232.

paradox of an implied non-visualizability through a visibly identified ‘as if’ structure, that of the image within the image. The image reveals to the viewer the various levels involved in the descent of divinely bestowed grace. It descends, via Mary’s mediation and the mediation of the two saints, to the worshipper as its ultimate recipient. What is thus conveyed to the latter is not only the Incarnation itself as a mystery of faith, but equally the mediated character of the viewer’s own access to the revelation of that mystery. The image presents itself as a medium for delivering the promise of salvation, and at the same





FIGURE 2.13 *Giovanni Venanzi, St. Nicholas and St. Barbara before a painting of the Annunciation (1667). Parma, Museo Diocesano.*

IMAGE © ROME ISTITUTO CENTRAL PER IL CATALOGO E LA DOCUMENTAZIONE.

time as an instrument for the guidance and, as it were, the religious education of the viewer's gaze.

The poetological discourse of the Cinquecento articulates what these paintings put into concrete form. Alessandro Piccolomini's commentary on Aristotle (1575) states, 'the actors are those persons who represent and not those who are represented. [...] the representation is not reality itself' ('l'imitazione non è lo stesso vero').<sup>33</sup> The irrevocable difference between what is presented to the viewer and the reality to which that presentation refers, between *cosa rappresentante* and *cosa rappresentata*, is the actual insight disclosed by the viewing of the paintings. Despite a certain implied correspondence, it is at once an insight into the gulf that separates the beholder's own situation of contemplating the picture from the situation of the saints within the picture. The appeal to the viewer acquires all the more force: he is urged to open himself to the experience of an inner revelation through visual contemplation.

To be sure, beyond contemporary poetological discourse, one can hardly overlook the ostentatious and also didactic character of these later works. In categorical contrast to Antonello, they allude to the mystery of the Incarnation, by staging what one might call a saintly annunciation, the presentation of an image of the Annunciation to the beholder. The works aim primarily to lend credence to the authority attributed to the saints as mediators between heaven and earth within the hierarchical doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. In their rhetoric and structure, these images establish what one might describe as an attempt to control religious viewing and the forms of inner experience that it activates. The strategic direction of the gaze corresponds to the spiritual guidance offered by the saints, to whom believers are asked to entrust themselves.

It is well known that these sorts of claims to authority on the part of images had been an issue at least since the Council of Trent and its decrees concerning the veneration of images. The role and function of images was repeatedly discussed and justified in the theoretical writings of the Counter-Reformation. As part of the efforts of the *Riforma Cattolica* to re-enforce charismatic concepts of the religious image in the face of Evangelical criticism, the hierarchical idea of the religious control of the faithful through the image played a decisive role. The Tridentine decree on sacred images instructed bishops and other religious authorities to convey the mysteries and teachings of Christian doctrine by way

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33 See Schröder G., *Logos und List. Zur Entwicklung der Ästhetik in der frühen Neuzeit* (Königstein/Ts. 1985) 71f. Cf. the fundamental study Schöne W., *Emblematik und Drama im Zeitalter des Barock*, 3rd edition (Munich: 1993) 185f, 208f, esp. 223f, on the pictorial character of contemporary theater and on the performative, self-referential quality of theatrical productions at the time.

of images, through which believers could be educated and purified, and their faith consolidated. The saints in particular were to be presented to the eyes of the believers (*oculis fidelium*) as divine intermediaries and as models of piety and devout practice.<sup>34</sup> One of the most prominent representatives of Counter-Reformation art theory, Gabriele Paleotti, declared in his *Discorso intorno alle imagini* (1582), that Christian images were 'instruments for joining man to God' and that their ultimate meaning resided in their power to 'persuade a person to be pious and to submit himself to God'.<sup>35</sup>

The rhetorical role played by the saints in the works of Venanzi and Carello, where their gazes and gestures mediate between the represented religious event and the outside viewer, corresponds unmistakably to Paleotti's premises. The pictorial representations rhetorically call on the viewer to participate in the miraculous event presented and to contemplate its intrinsic mystery. At the same time they uphold a distance between the viewer and the depicted

34 Mansi I.D. (coll.), *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* [...]. Vol. 33, eds. L. Petit – J.B. Martin J.B. (Paris: 1902; reprint ed., Graz: 1961) 171f: 'Illud vero diligenter doceant episcopi, per historias mysteriorum nostrae redemptionis, picturis, vel aliis similitudinis expressas, erudiri et confirmari populum in articulis fidei commemorandis, et assidue recolendis; tum vero ex omnibus sacris imaginibus magnum fructum percipi, non solum, quia admonetur populus beneficiorum et munerum, quae a Christo sibi collata sunt; sed etiam, quia Dei per sanctos miracula et salutaria exempla oculis fidelium subjiciuntur, ut pro iis Deo gratias agant, ad sanctorumque imitationem vitam moresque suos componant, excitenturque ad adorandum ac diligendum Deum, et pietatem colendam. Si quis autem his decretis contraria docuerit, aut senserit, anathema sit'. Also see Aschenbrenner T., *Die tridentinischen Bildervorschriften: Eine Untersuchung über ihren Sinn und ihre Bedeutung* (Freiburg i.Br.: 1930); JedinH., "Entstehung und Tragweite des Trienter Dekrets über die Bilderverehrung", *Theologische Quartalschrift* 116 (1935) 143–188, 404–429; idem, "Das Tridentinum und die Bildenden Künste", *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* (1963) 329–339; idem, *Der Abschluß des Trienter Konzils 1562/63: Ein Rückblick nach vier Jahrhunderten* (Munster: 1963); idem, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, IV, 2 (Freiburg i.Br.-Basel-Vienna: 1975) 183f; SeidelM., *Venezianische Malerei zur Zeit der Gegenreformation: Kirchliche Programmschriften und künstlerische Bildkonzepte bei Tizian, Tintoretto, Veronese und Palma il Giovane* (Munster: 1996) 21f, 309f; and Hecht C., *Katholische Bildertheologie im Zeitalter von Gegenreformation und Barock: Studien zu Traktaten von Johannes Molanus, Gabriele Paleotti und anderen Autoren* (Berlin: 1997) 17f and passim.

35 Paleotti G., *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* (Bologna: 1582), in Barocchi P. (ed.), *Trattati d'Arte del Cinquecento*, II (Bari: 1961) 117–509, esp. 215: 'strumenti per unire gli uomini con Dio' and 'persuadere le persone alla pietà et ordinarle a Dio'. For the significance of Paleotti's treatise see Prodi P., *Ricerche sulla teorica delle arti figurative nella riforma cattolica* (Bologna: 1984), esp. 25f, 55f; and Hecht, *Katholische Bildertheologie*, passim.

event. While testifying to the veracity and authenticity of what is depicted, they nevertheless ensure that the viewer remains aware of its specifically pictorial reality. The achievement of these images lies in demonstrating the non-visualizable dimension of the divine mystery (*assumptio ineffabilis*, in the words of Thomas Aquinas), precisely by displaying it as an image within the image. The mysterious event is represented in such a way that although true and actual, it does not belong to the temporal and spatial reality either of the saints or of the beholder. This is particularly so in Giovanni Venanzi's painting, where the image within the image is an unmistakable replica of the famous, much adored and miraculous Annunciation fresco in SS. Annunziata in Florence [Fig. 2.14], renewed for its widespread veneration far beyond Florence, which lends it (in Venanzi's painting) an aura of both authenticity and miraculous power, in a word: an aura of the real presence of divine grace, though mediated only through the reality of painting.<sup>36</sup>

Bernini's ensemble for the *Cappella Fonseca* in San Lorenzo in Lucina in Rome, dated ca. 1663–1675, can be placed at the end of this short series of examples [Fig. 2.15].<sup>37</sup> Once again, the relationship of the believer to the divine mystery is marked by both participation and separation. Above the altar appears an oval image of the Annunciation, held by two bronze sculptures of angels. The image they carry is a copy of a painting by Guido Reni in the Palazzo Quirinale [Fig. 2.16].<sup>38</sup> The donor, Gabriele Fonseca, emerges from a rectangular niche to the left of the altar to look at the painting [Fig. 2.17]. The gesture of his hand, piously placed on his chest, echoes the posture of the angel on the right, who looks down at him and who, in turn, only echoes Mary's gesture in the painting of the Annunciation [Fig. 2.18]. The Virgin, who receives the Lord's supreme grace with an expression of devotion and humility (*humiliatio*), thus figures as

36 On the miraculous image in Florence see Paatz W. and E., *Die Kirchen von Florenz* (Frankfurt a.M.: 1955), vol. 1, 97f; on the character of its renewed veneration in the Counter-Reformation, which is apparent in the widespread dissemination of copies and prints, see Casalini E., *La SS. Annunziata di Firenze: Studi e documenti sulla chiesa e il convento* (Florence: 1971) 51f; and Wazbinski Z., "L'Annunciazione della Vergine nelle Chiese della SS. Annunziata a Firenze: un contributo al moderno culto dei quadri", in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Craig Hugh Smyth* (Florence: 1985) vol. 2, 533–549.

37 Hibbard H., *Bernini* (Harmondsworth: 1965) 217f; Dobias J., "Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Fonseca Chapel in San Lorenzo in Lucina, Rome", *Burlington Magazine* 120 (1978) 65–71; Wittkower R., *Gian Lorenzo Bernini: The Sculpture of the Roman Baroque*, with a catalogue raisonné, 3rd edition, eds. H. Hibbard, T. Martin and M. Wittkower (Oxford: 1981) 256f, no. 75; Scribner III C., *Gianlorenzo Bernini* (New York: 1991) 43f, 114f; and Careri G., *Bernini: Flights of Love, The Art of Devotion* (Chicago: 1995) 11f.

38 Pepper D.S., *Guido Reni* (New York: 1984) 38.





FIGURE 2.14 Unknown artist, Miraculous image of the Annunciation (14th cent.). Fresco. Florence, ss. Annunziata.

IMAGE © AUTHOR.

a model for imitation (*imitatio*) and spiritual assimilation. She is an example not only to the donor, Gabriele Fonseca—whose first name, Gabriele, is that of the angel of the Annunciation, a fact that undoubtedly played a role for the overall design—but also to the pious viewer who kneels at the chapel's altar and gazes up at the painting of the Annunciation.<sup>39</sup> Implied are the Gospel words, 'And blessed is she who believed' ('beata, quae credidisti').<sup>40</sup> Mary's pure faith and her submission to the will of God supply a model of inner conformity and a warrant of spiritual salvation.

The descent of heavenly grace is implied by a sequence that unfolds as a progressive change in materials and modes of reality: from the suspended painted image via the bronze relief of the angels, who hold it aloft and seem to be emerging from the wall, down to the three-dimensional bust of Fonseca and, finally, to the concrete and lively presence of the believer himself; and

39 See the detailed remarks of Careri G., "Il busto di Gabriele Fonseca nel 'bel composto' di Bernini", in GentiliA. – Morel P. – Cieri Via C. (eds.), *Il ritratto e la memoria: Materiali 3*, (Rome: 1993) 195–204; also Careri, *Bernini: Flights of Love*, esp. 15, 25f, 30f.

40 Luke 1:45.



FIGURE 2.15 *Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cappella Fonseca (ca. 1663–1675). Rome, San Lorenzo in Lucina.*

IMAGE © AUTHOR.





FIGURE 2.16 *Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cappella Fonseca, detail with the altar painting of the Annunciation after Guido Reni (ca. 1663–1675). Rome, San Lorenzo in Lucina.*  
IMAGE © AUTHOR.

from the imaginary presence of the ‘Very Highest Potency’ of the Holy Spirit,<sup>41</sup> down to the physical, earthly existence of man. The worshiper accordingly comprehends the mystery of the Incarnation through a process of participation and internal assimilation.

Giovanni Careri has pointed out the correspondence between the conception of the chapel’s decoration and the devotional and meditative practice of

<sup>41</sup> *Luke 1:35: ‘virtus Altissimi’.*



FIGURE 2.17 *Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cappella Fonseca, detail with the portrait bust of the donor Gabriele Fonseca (ca. 1663–1675). Rome, San Lorenzo in Lucina.*  
IMAGE © AUTHOR.



FIGURE 2.18 *Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cappella Fonseca, detail with an angel holding the altarpiece of the Annunciation after Guido Reni (ca. 1663–1675). Rome, San Lorenzo in Lucina.*

IMAGE © AUTHOR.



‘inner imagination’, propagated above all by the Jesuits.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, of special significance here is the fact that the depiction of the Annunciation is explicitly presented as an image by means of a distinctly contoured and richly veined marble frame. For the representation embodies, like an external projection, the image that Fonseca produces in his inner imagination. Through the contemplation of an external image, Fonseca, by analogy to the event depicted in it, receives on his part what Ignatius of Loyola called an ‘inner knowledge of the Lord’ (‘conocimiento interno del Señor’).<sup>43</sup>

In conclusion, what finds expression in the two examples analysed here (Antonello da Messina and Bernini), notwithstanding their different contexts, materials, formats, etc., is essentially the notion that the image functions in a specific manner as a *medium* of visibility and visualization, and more precisely as a medium situated right in the intermediate zone between concrete sensual experience and the trans-material imaginary of the Incarnation. By taking this in-between position, that is to say, by performatively mediating between these polarities while also maintaining their dissociation, the image proves capable of generating a specific type of experience, one that oscillates in an intricate manner between perceptions of *similarity* and those of *difference*. It is this genuine potency of pictorial experience which could be called, in the end, the pictorial poetics of Incarnation.

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42 Careri, “Il busto di Gabriele Fonseca” 202f; and Careri, *Bernini: Flights of Love* (1995) 33f, esp. 38f.

43 S. Ignazio di Loyola, *Esercizi spirituali, con testo originale a fronte*, ed. P. Schiavone (Milan: 1995) 188f, quotation 190; also see Careri, *Bernini: Flights of Love* 33f. On the structuring of the relationship between the visible and the invisible in Ignatius’ process of the imagination, see Fabre P.-A., *Ignace de Loyola: le lieu de l’image* (Paris: 1992) 46f, 265f.

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