

# *St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow* open, inclusive, welcoming

*The Feast of the Annunciation*  
25 March 2020

## TRANSCRIPT

Dr Deborah Lewer on Sandro Botticelli's *Annunciation*, ca 1485  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

1

Welcome to this podcast from St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow.

Before we start, if you can't see an image of the artwork, try going to the website of the Met Museum in New York and searching for Botticelli's *Annunciation*.

My name is Debbie Lewer. I am an art historian at the University of Glasgow, and a member of the congregation at St Mary's. We celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation, today, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, many of us, unexpectedly this year, in our own rooms. That's because it's 2020 and we're living through extraordinary and unsettling times. So today, I wanted to take a closer look at a small, old, but very remarkable painting. It's on the subject of this most decisive encounter between God and humanity.

2

The panel is tiny. It's no more than about the size of an A4 piece of paper. So in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, it was probably used for private devotion. What do we see? The setting is an interior of great order, and clarity. It's prosperous and tasteful. Everything is regular, and harmonious. But something extraordinary is happening. An angel, the angel Gabriel has arrived. On bended knee, bearing pure white lilies, he bows deeply in respect. The young woman he has been sent to bows too, to honour the messenger. Their greeting is mutual, symmetrical. As art's tradition has it, she, a virgin, has been reading in her chambers. It is an intimate space. The angel doesn't quite cross its threshold. But for

us, a white curtain has been drawn aside, allowing us to see. Far back in the shadows, we can glimpse her bedchamber, it's decked in red through a doorway. There is a lectern before her with a book of devotions. It tells us something about her own life of faith. But it also reminds us that what is happening here, has to do with the word. The word made flesh.

3

Let's look more closely. Let's look especially at what the painter makes light do. What are the sources of light in this scene? Well, from the left, a narrow vertical sliver of daylight tells us that there is a slender opening in the architecture. It lets light slip in, cool daylight from outside, falling across the pink floor. Through two arched windows, in the background, we can see out into the world, a distant green landscape, and bright skies. But there is another, wholly other order of light here. It is golden, it is precious, it is active and it is holy. Through the space in the walls of this home comes a gilded shaft of light. It makes the low ceiling above Gabriel glow. Botticelli uses the most precious substance, gold, for it. Its beam reaches farther than the angel will step, across the threshold that separates the figures, to meet Mary. It is God's light and it falls on this woman, as she consents to what will be with her. To what will be with us.

4

Looking at this painting now, in March 2020, the distance between the figures, the barrier demarcating their spaces is a keen reminder of our own separations. A row of hard, square columns that we see end on divides the composition, just off centre. We don't quite see the spaces between them. But they are there. Actually, everything about this painting is about ways in, ways through. This architecture does not seal, or confine. Even cloth is like gossamer, transparent, breathable.

Look at the structure of this painting. You can see how the artist is using a very careful system of single-point perspective. All lines converge on one point, known as the vanishing point. In Botticelli's *Annunciation*, this point is at the very centre of the painting – just about at Gabriel's forelock. This is what makes it feel so balanced. And the vanishing point is always decided by our eye level. Here, it is exactly at the angel's and at Mary's eye level. We too, are in symmetry, in mutuality with them. Botticelli has us viewing this scene from a bowed, kneeling posture too. We are fully implicated. Our sight, our vision is

central. And if you were to draw a line down the dead centre of the composition, it is not the line of the obvious barrier. Instead, it bisects, exactly, the one clear, open, unobstructed view of the world, through the arched window.

Looking at it now, in March 2020, in a time of many isolations, yes, this painting, like all Annunciations, speaks of incarnation, of God with us. For me today, it also speaks of how what matters most, what is most central, is not the barrier, but what is open, what is light, what is real, what is holy, what is mutual, what is accepting, and what is humble.

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