



***The Annunciation* in Fra Filippo Lippi: interpreting some symbolic variants**  
***A Anunciação* em Fra Filippo Lippi: interpretando algumas variantes simbólicas**  
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José María SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article<sup>2</sup> aims to highlight the extraordinary wealth of doctrinal meanings that Fra Filippo Lippi introduced under different symbols in eight versions that he painted of *The Annunciation to Mary*. Although most painters of the Late Middle Ages usually use one or the other of these symbols, the exciting thing is that Filippo Lippi combined them in almost all of his eight interpretations of this Marian event. To carry out our research more efficiently, we adopted two complementary methodological resources: first, the iconographic analysis of the eight paintings, in each of which we highlight some of the reference symbols; second, we expose some explanatory texts of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians referring to the specific symbol analyzed in each case. The main objective is to try to justify with these primary sources of Christian doctrine our iconographic interpretations of the symbols included by Lippi in his eight variants of *The Annunciation*.

**Resumen:** Este artículo trata de destacar la extraordinaria riqueza de significados doctrinales que Fra Filippo Lippi introdujo bajo diferentes símbolos en ocho versiones que pintó de *La Anunciación a María*. Aunque la mayoría de los pintores de finales de la Edad Media suele utilizar uno u otro de esos símbolos, lo interesante del caso es que Filippo Lippi los conjuntó en casi todas sus ocho interpretaciones de este evento mariano. Para llevar a cabo con mayor eficiencia nuestra investigación adoptamos dos recursos metodológicos complementario: en primer lugar, el análisis iconográfico de las ocho pinturas, en cada una de las cuales destacamos alguno de los símbolos de referencia; en segundo lugar, presentamos algunos textos exegéticos de Padres de la Iglesia y teólogos medievales referidos al específico símbolo analizado en cada caso. El objetivo fundamental es intentar justificar con esas fuentes primarias de la doctrina cristiana nuestras interpretaciones iconográficas de los símbolos incluidos por Lippi en sus ocho variantes de *La Anunciación*.

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## Introduction

Fra Filippo Lippi, born in Florence in 1406 and dead in Spoleto in 1469, was a Renaissance painter of considerable artistic skills. He complemented his resounding and precise drawing with an exquisite taste for vibrant and bright colors, both resources, drawing, and color, with which he managed to shape very original compositions, of great clarity, order, and narrative efficiency.

Friar of the Carmelite order, in one of whose convents (that of Carmine, in Florence) he entered when he was only eight years old, he led, despite his religious vows, a somewhat chaotic life, in which there was no shortage of disputes, scandals, judicial processes, and imprisonment. With his convulsive emotion and irrepressible erotic propensities, he will seduce the Carmelite novice Lucrezia Buti, a model in several of his paintings, with whom will end up living maritally (without formally marrying her), and who will give him two children, the future painter Filippino Lippi and Alessandra, eight years younger than her brother.

Despite his eventful, emotional and social life, Fra Filippo Lippi developed an extensive and exquisite artistic production, exclusively dedicated to religious themes,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a panoramic vision of Fra Filippo Lippi's life and work, see, among others, the following studies: MARCHINI, Giuseppe. *Filippo Lippi*. Milano: Electa, 1979; RUDA, Jeffrey. *Fra Filippo Lippi. Life and work with a complete catalogue*. London: Phaidon, 1993; HOLMES, Megan. *Fra Filippo Lippi. The Carmelite painter*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999; CHRISTIANSEN, Keith (ed.). *From Filippo Lippi to Piero della Francesca. Fra Carnevale and the making of a Renaissance master* (cat. exp. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Oct. 13, 2004 - Jan. 9, 2005 and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Feb. 1-May 1, 2005, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Milan: Edizioni Olivares / New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005; ZUFFI, Stefano. *El siglo XV*. Barcelona: Electa, 2005; FOSSI, Gloria & PRINCI, Eliana. *Filippo e Filippino Lippi*. Firenze: Scala, 2011.



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in which he showed off his extraordinary theological and humanistic culture, the fruit of his careful training in Carmelite convents and his later performance as a friar, chaplain, abbot, and rector of a church near Florence. Within this religious, artistic production, he dedicated himself with a special emphasis to the figure of the Virgin Mary, a subject in which numerous Madonnas with Child, various Coronations of the Virgin, and the eight Annunciations that we will analyze below stand out for their density and coherence.

From the outset, it is good to underline a piece of preliminary advice: although in all these Annunciations, Lippi – in line with most of the Annunciations painted by other artists of the 14th and 15th centuries<sup>4</sup> – incorporates practically the same symbolic elements, which therefore contain identical doctrinal meanings, we will assume the methodological decision – seeking a greater clarity and simplicity- to analyze each one of these eight Annunciations based on one of the doctrinal symbols we are interested in bringing to light here, namely: the stem of lilies, the *porta clausa*, the *Hortus conclusus*, the palace, the temple, the *ancilla Domini*, the bed, and the ray of light passing through a window.

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<sup>4</sup> For an approach to the artistic images of the Annunciation, see, among others, LECLERCQ, Henri. “II. L’Annonciation dans l’art”. In: CABROL, Fernand & LECLERCQ, Henri (eds.), *Dictionnaire d’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*. Tome I, 2<sup>e</sup> partie. Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1924, p. 2255-2267; PRANDI, Adriano. “4. L’Annunciazione, Nell’Arte”. In: *Enciclopedia Cattolica*. Città del Vaticano: Ente per l’Enciclopedia Cattolica e per il Libro Cattolico, 1948, v. I, p. 1386-1396; ROBB, David M.. “The iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries”. In: *The Art Bulletin* 18, n. 4, 1936, p. 480-526; TRENS, Manuel, *María. Iconografía de la Virgen en el arte español*. Madrid: Plus Ultra, 1947; RÉAU, Louis. *Iconographie de l’art chrétien. Tome 2, Iconographie de la Bible. Part II, Nouveau Testament*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957, p. 174-194; TOSCANO, Giuseppe M. *Il pensiero cristiano nell’arte*. Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d’Arti Grafiche, 1960, 3 v.; SCHILLER, Gertrud. *Iconography of Christian Art, Volume I* (Translated by Janet Seligman). London: Lund Humphries, 1971, p. 33-52; ARASSE, Daniel. *L’Annonciation italienne. Une histoire de perspective*. Paris: Hazan, 1999.

**I. *The Annunciation* (c. 1435-1440) of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.: the symbol of the stem of lilies**

**Image 1**



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *The Annunciation* (c. 1435-1440). The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Fra Filippo Lippi composes *The Annunciation* (c. 1435-1440) of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (**image 1**) in a lowered *lunetta* according to an almost perfect symmetry: both Gabriel and Mary, kneeling face to face, as well as the architectural and scenographic elements, balance each other on both sides of the picture around the robust axis constituted by the pillar in the foreground. Only a small, almost indiscernible movement of the anteroom with the angel to the right slightly breaks the symmetry. Kneeling and bowing reverently with a high stem of lilies in his left hand, Gabriel communicates his message to the Virgin through a suggested open door. In the dim semi-darkness that surrounds the environment – more pronounced in the room where the Virgin stands – the divine beam of light (a symbol of God the Son) is perceived slightly, which, descending from the invisible heaven and carrying in its wake the dove of the Holy Spirit reaches the body of Mary. With this narrative resource Fra Filippo Lippi, as almost all painters of the period do, wants to signify the immediate fertilization of the Virgin by the work of the Holy Spirit, without



intercourse, that is, the supernatural conception of God the Son incarnate, and, as a consequence, Mary's virginal divine motherhood.

Both necessarily correlative dogmatic theses – the supernatural conception/incarnation of God the Son and the virginal divine motherhood of Mary – are symbolized above all by the enormous stem of lilies that the angel carries in his right hand. Such deduction derives from the millennial, unanimous doctrinal tradition of countless Eastern and Western Church Fathers and theologians. By interpreting, for example, the prophecy of Isaiah announcing the blossoming of a stem sprouting from the root of Jesse,<sup>5</sup> as well as the episode of the flowering of the dry rod of Aaron,<sup>6</sup> all these Christian thinkers interpret both prodigious events as symbols of the miraculous conception of Christ in Mary's virginal womb. These masters of the Christian doctrine assume that the stem sprouted at the root of Jesse and the dry rod of Aaron symbolize the Virgin Mary, while the flower that appears on the stem of the root of Jesse and the dry rod of Aaron symbolize Christ. We have studied in depth in other papers the Mariological and Christological meanings that this stem of lilies contains, basing our interpretations on innumerable exegesis of prestigious Fathers and theologians of the Latin and Greek-Eastern Churches.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, here we will only bring now, as mere representative examples in this regard, a couple of testimonies of St. Chromatius of Aquileia († c. 407) and St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1218-1274). Chromatius of Aquileia assures that in Aaron's staff, which germinated and produced fruits without any fertilizer, symbolizes the Virgin Mary, who, without intercourse, fathered a son, turned in the pure fruit of

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<sup>5</sup> *Egredietur virga de radice Jesse, et flos de radice ejus ascendet.* (Is. 11, 1-2). In: *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam. Nova editio* (logicis partitionibus aliisque subsidiis ornata a Alberto Colunga et Laurentio Turrado). Madrid: La Editorial Católica, Col. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2005, p. 688.

<sup>6</sup> Nm 17, 1-11. In: *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam, op. cit.*, p. 122-123.

<sup>7</sup> For further information on this iconographic subject, see SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. "Sanctitate vernans virga Aaronis. Interpretation of the stem of lilies in the medieval iconography of the Annunciation according to theological sources". In: *Art Studies and Architectural Journal, Oxford Academic Studies Papers*, v. 10, n. 9, 2015, p. 2-32; SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. "Flos campi et lilium convallium. Third interpretation of the lily in the iconography of *The Annunciation* in Italian Trecento art from patristic and theological sources". In: *Eikón Imago* 5 (2014/1), p. 75-96; SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. "In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur. A new interpretation of the stem of lilies in the Spanish Gothic Annunciation from patristic and theological sources". In: *De Medio Aevo* 10 (2016/2), p. 117-144; SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. "Flos de radice Jesse. A hermeneutic approach to the theme of the lily in Spanish Gothic painting of *The Annunciation* from patristic and theological sources". In: *Eikón Imago*, 4 (2013/2), p. 184-222.



human salvation.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, St. Bonaventure, commenting on Isaiah's prophecy about the flowering of the stem in Jesse's root, asserts that this stem means the Virgin Mother of God, the flower means her divine Son, and the sprouting of the stem metaphorizes the birth of the Savior.<sup>9</sup>

## II. *The Annunciation* (c. 1440) of the Frick Collection, New York: the symbol of the *porta clausa*

Filippo Lippi organizes *The Annunciation* (c. 1440) of the Frick Collection in New York (**image 2**) through a straightforward, precise composition. The serene expressiveness of both protagonists contributes to that, as does the geometric, bare scenery. Here the common elements in the late medieval representations of this Marian episode are absent, such as the prayer book, the kneeler, the lectern, the bench, the vase with lilies, the beam of rays of light, and even the figure of God the Father. In the limpid porch that serves as a scenographic context for the episode depicted, the angel, holding a long stem of lilies on his shoulder, bows respectfully to the Virgin to convey the message of the Most High.

Mary expresses her full compliance with the divine plan, humbly bowing her head, putting the right hand on her chest, and opening the left arm. With these expressive gestures, Lippi illustrates, in the first instance the unconditional acceptance of the Nazarene maiden before the plan of God the Father to make her the virginal mother of his divine Son by the work of the Holy Spirit, who in the form of a dove flies towards her head.

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<sup>8</sup> “Et illic ergo in virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur, quae vere sine humore terrae fructumsuavissimum germinavit; quia sine semine viri filium edidit, qui verus fructus humanae salutis effectus est [...]. In virga autem singulari idcirco Maria cognoscitur, quia consortium viri nescivit.” – CHROMATIUS AQUILEIENSIS. *Homilia in Mattheum 1*, 6. In: ÁLVAREZ CAMPOS, Sergio (comp.). *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*. Burgos: Aldecoa, 1974, v. III, p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> “Ideo comparatur eius nativitas egressui floris; Isaiae undecimo: Egredietur virga de radice Jesse, et flos de radice eius ascendet, et requiescet super eum Spiritus Domini. Virgo Dei Genitrix virga est; flos, Filius eius; egressus virgae, nativitas Virginis; ascensus floris, nativitas Salvatoris; et hoc omnino de radice Jesse. Nam stirps Jesse virgam produxit virgaque florem, et super hunc florem requiescit Spiritus almus.” – BONAVENTURA DE BALNEOREGIO. *In Nativitate Domini, Sermo I*, 1. In: *Obras de San Buenaventura. Edición bilingüe. Tomo II. Jesucristo* (Ed. dirigida, anotada y con introducciones por los padres León Amorós, Bernardo Aperribay y Miguel Oromí). Madrid: La Editorial Católica, Col. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1967, p. 345.

**Image 2**



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *The Annunciation* (c. 1440). The Frick Collection, New York.

Now, together with these habitual resources in most Annunciations depicted by other artists, Fra Filippo Lippi adds here a new symbol to signify those same dogmatic contents: the dark door – accessing to the bedroom – that, behind Mary, physically prolongs her upright figure, as if the painter wanted to suggest a perfect continuity/identification between the two, the door and Mary. In all probability, this cult Carmelite friar painter wants to illustrate here, through this *visual metaphor* of a painted door, the *textual metaphor* of the eastern *porta clausa* of the temple,



preannounced by the prophet Ezekiel.<sup>10</sup> Countless Eastern and Western Fathers and theologians interpreted this passage from Ezekiel according to a double and complementary Mariological and Christological projection. For all of them, this Ezekiel's *porta clausa* symbolizes both the supernatural conception/incarnation of God the Son in the womb of the Virgin, as well as the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and her perpetual virginity.

As we have explained this issues in several previous papers,<sup>11</sup> we now bring, by way of example in this regard, some testimonies of Church Fathers, such as those of St. Andrew of Crete (650-740) and St. Ildephonsus of Toledo (607-667). St. Andrew of Crete exalts the Virgin Mary, saying that Ezekiel prophesied in her the Eastern Sun, Christ, and that she is the closed door through which only God passes, and that must remain closed again after the Lord's passage.<sup>12</sup> St. Ildephonsus, for his part, affirms that Mary is the house or the temple of God foretold by Ezekiel, a temple whose closings of modesty (the virginity) are entirely intact, and whose door facing East is always closed. Ildephonsus adds that no human entered or passed through that door (Mary's virginal womb) before or after the birth of Jesus since only the Lord God the Son passed through it at birth. Therefore Mary is always closed because she is perpetually a virgin.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ez. 44,1-3. In: *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, op. cit., p. 847.

<sup>11</sup> See SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. "Porta clausa es, Virgo. Exegeses on Ezekiel's *porta clausa* by some Latin Fathers and theologians between the 6th and 13th centuries". Article under evaluation in an academic journal, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> "Vere benedicta tu, quam Ezechiel Orientem praenuntiavit, 'et portam clausam, per quam Deus solus transeat, et quae iterum clausa maneat.'" – ANDREAS CRETENSIS, *Oratio V. In sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae nostrae Annuntiationem*. PG, 97, 899.

<sup>13</sup> "Haec in Ezechiele domus Dei est, cuius pudoris integerrima claustra, ad orientem consistens porta semper est clausa. Quae neque ante natum, neque post natum hunc filium alterius accessum uel transitum nouit, quia solus ipse Dominus per eam nascendo transiuit. Vnde et semper est clausa, quia semper est uirgo." – HILDEFONSUS TOLETANUS. *De uirginitate Sanctae. Mariae contra tres infideles*, III. *Contra Iudaeos*. In: *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina*, CXIV A, Turnout, 2007, p. 170-171.



**III. *The Annunciation with two kneeling donors* (c. 1440-1445) of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Roma: the symbol of the *hortus conclusus***

Image 3



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *The Annunciation with two kneeling donors* (c. 1440-1445).  
 Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Roma.

Filippo Lippi stages his *Annunciation with two kneeling donors* (c. 1440-1445) of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini in Rome (**image 3**) inside a sumptuous Renaissance palace, full of polychrome marbles and luxurious decoration. In such a beautiful palatial space, the angel offers on his knees a stem of lilies to Mary, as a symbol of the virginal divine maternity that the Most High proposes to her through the heavenly messenger, a virginal motherhood also symbolized by the dove of the Holy Spirit, who produces the miraculous conception of the incarnate Son of God. Almost entirely framed by the vaulted gallery that in the center of the composition communicates with a lush garden, the standing Virgin receives the



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angel's lily (the heavenly message), thus testifying her full acceptance of the divine design.

Apart from the unusual presence of the two donors kneeling in the foreground, and the surprising detail of the two women who go up or down the stairs at the end of the right wall of the room, it is essential to highlight here the garden surrounded by a white wall that one can glimpse through the vaulted gallery. Evidently, Lippi has depicted this closed garden here as a *visual metaphor* by which to illustrate the *textual metaphor* of the *Hortus conclusus* mentioned in the *Song of Songs*,<sup>14</sup> that innumerable Fathers and theologians of the Latin and Greek-Eastern Churches unanimously interpreted as a symbol of the perpetual virginity of Mary.

Just to mention some examples of patristic comments in this sense, we could underline those of Hesychius of Jerusalem († *post* 450) and St. Justus of Urgell (mid-6th century). Hesychius of Jerusalem, addressing the Virgin Mary, assures that, while some exegete called you a closed door facing East, this Husband who was born of you, predicted in the *Song of Songs*, called you a closed garden and a sealed fountain (*Hortus conclusus et fons signatus*): a closed garden because the sickle of corruption or the vintage did not touch you (in a sense, of having preserved your perpetual virginity), while you show to humankind the flower sprouted from the root of Jesse, cultivated for you by the spotless Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

In turn, St. Justus of Urgell, interpreting the expression *Hortus conclusus soror mea sponsa*, which the Husband dedicates to the Wife in the *Song of Songs*, affirms that this Wife (Mary) is, like the closed garden, surrounded by the grace of Christ, for which the expressions *Hortus conclusus et fons signatus* symbolize Mary, mother of the Lord, since she was a virgin when conceiving, and a virgin when giving birth, with which she

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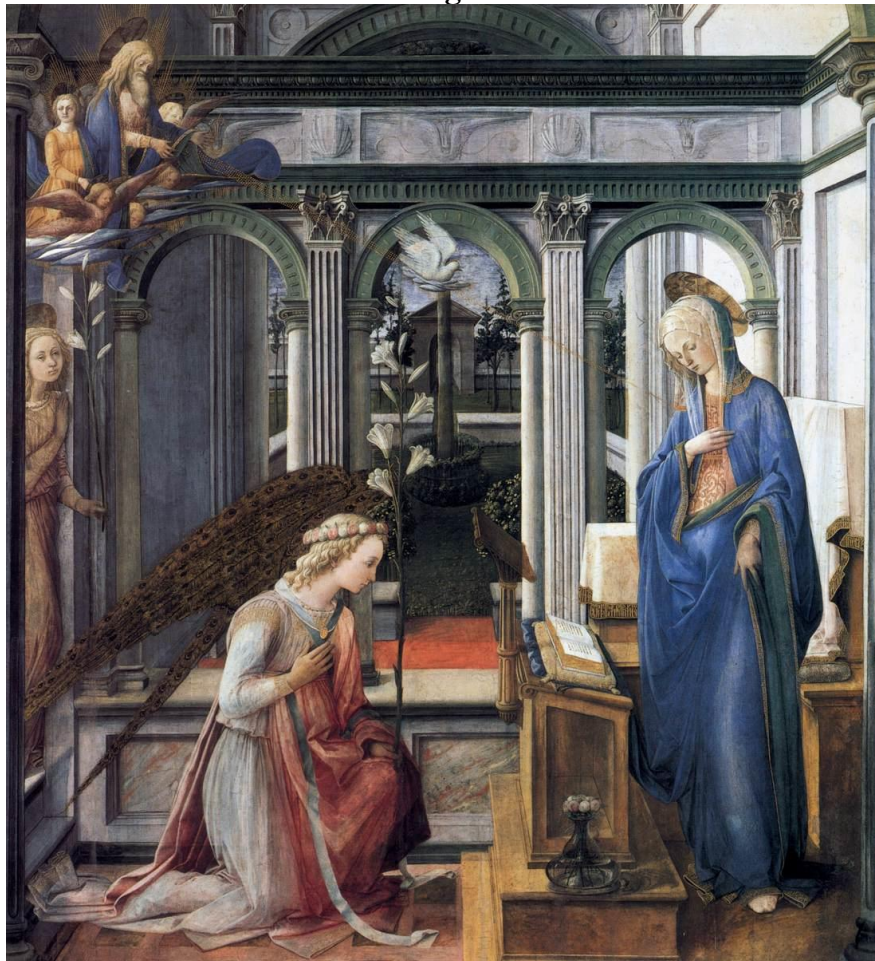
<sup>14</sup> The sentence of the *Song of Songs* (4, 12) *Hortus conclusus soror mea sponsa hortus conclusus fons signatus* is, in the patristic and theological tradition, an eloquent metaphor of Mary's perpetual virginity.

<sup>15</sup> "Alius te appellavit portam clausam in oriente sitam [...]. Vocavit te hortum conclusum; et fontem signatum is qui ex te ortus est sponsus praedixit in Canticis. Hortum conclusum, ob id quod falx corruptionis aut vindemia te non attingit; florem autem qui ex radici Iesse hominum generi pure exhibetur, excultus tibi a puro et intemerato Spiritu. Fontem conclusum, quia flumen vitae ex te prodiens replevit terram; alioqui ramus nuptialis fontem tuum nequaquam exhausit." – HESYCHIUS HIEROSOLIMYTANUS. *Sermo in Annuntiationem*. PG 93, 1460 D-1468 A. In: ÁLVAREZ CAMPOS, Sergio (comp.). *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*. Burgos: Aldecoa, 1976, v. IV/1, p. 566.

always showed in herself the immaculate beauty of the “closed garden ”and the “sealed fountain.”<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. *L’Annunciazione delle Murate* (c. 1443-1450) in the Alte Pinakothek de Munich: the symbol of the God’s palace

Image 4



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *L’Annunciazione delle Murate* (c. 1443). Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

<sup>16</sup> “*Hortus conclusus soror mea sponsa*. Huic sponsae, quae velut hortus concluditur, id est Christi gratia, tam indissolubili materia circumdatur, ut de ea Isaias propheta dixerit: *Non adiicies ut pertranseat per te omnis incircumcisis et immundus* (Isa. LII)”. Potest etiam hortus conclusus et fons signatus, ipsa mater Domini S. Maria intelligi; quae virgo concipiens virgoque generans, conclusi horti et signati fontis intemeratum in se decus exhibuit.” – JUSTUS URGELLENSIS. *In Cantica Canticorum Salomonis. Explicatio Mystica*, 91. PL 67, 978.



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In the *L'Annunciazione delle Murate*, c. 1443 (**image 4**) – originally painted for the Suore Murate convent in Florence, and today at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich – Fra Filippo Lippi represents the house of Mary as if it were an elegant royal palace in the Renaissance style, as its semicircular arches, its ionic columns, its compound order pilasters, and its richly ornamented entablature reveal. Through the triple archway, one can perceive in the background a large garden surrounded by walls, in an apparent reference to the biblical prefiguration of the Virgin Mary as the *Hortus conclusus* mentioned in the *Song of Songs*.

In that sumptuous palace, Gabriel kneels reverently before the Virgin, carrying a large stem of lilies, while behind him, a second angel peeks out the door with another stem of lilies in his left hand. Downcast and humble and shy, Mary appears standing, as if she had risen suddenly, interrupting her prayers, frightened by the unexpected appearance of the heavenly messenger, and surprised by the message of the Most High that she is hearing.

In the upper left corner of the painting, God the Father opens his hands in the gesture of sending towards the Virgin the fertile ray of light (God the Son), in whose wake the dove of the Holy Spirit flies. With this narrative resource, Fra Filippo Lippi symbolically illustrates here the instantaneous conception/incarnation of God the Son in Mary's virginal womb, an incarnation which comes real at the very moment that she unconditionally accepts the divine plan. The painter visualizes this full acceptance through the submissive gesture of the Virgin, bowing her head, squinting, and putting her right hand on her chest.

Apart from those compositional-narrative elements common in the Annunciations of this period, it is worth highlighting here the evident leading presence of this sumptuous palace in which the painter staged the Annunciation. It seems clear that by representing the humble abode of the modest maiden of Nazareth in the form of a luxurious royal palace, this scholar Carmelite friar wants to illustrate, through the *visual metaphor* of a painted palace, the *textual metaphors* of the “palace of God”, “royal hall”, “House of Wisdom”, and other similar metaphors, interpreted by numerous Latin and Greek-Eastern Fathers and theologians, with a doublé, complementing Christological and Mariological projection, as simultaneous symbols of Mary's virginal womb and the human body that God the Son incarnate took from the Virgin's bowels.



As we have studied this topic in-depth in other paper,<sup>17</sup> it is enough for us now to present some brief patristic testimony on the matter. In a sermon on the Conception of Mary St. John of Euboea (8th century), after referring to Ezekiel's *porta clausa*, asserts that the palace of the celestial King was built without human hands, and also this heavenly palace has a door facing East, and no one will enter through it, but only God, and it will be a closed door forever.<sup>18</sup> In turn, Peter of Celle (c. 1115-1183) describes the Virgin as a palace built with wonderful efforts but enriched with incomparable treasures: enriched by God the Father and God the Son.<sup>19</sup>

### **V. *The Martelli Annunciation* (c. 1445) in the Cappella Martelli of the Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Florence: the symbol of the *templum Dei***

Lippi designs the *Annunciation Martelli* (c. 1445) in the homonymous chapel of the church of San Lorenzo in Florence (**image 5**), in the context of a splendid Renaissance building, on whose porch, framed in front and behind by a double arcade, the Marian event takes place. In this porch, whose pavement is articulated surprisingly in various planes or platforms, the artist places the two usual protagonists, Mary and the archangel Gabriel, whom, on this occasion, two other angels accompany. In narrative function, Lippi structures the composition in two groups, each one framed by one or the other of the two arches in the foreground. In the space focused by the left arch, he places on the second platform the two additional angels who accompany the heavenly messenger. Instead, he frames with the right arch Gabriel and the Virgin, both situated on the lower platform of the porch. The archangel appears on his knees, carrying a large stem of lilies in his right hand. At the same time, Mary, standing before a lectern, turns her face downcast and extends her right hand towards Gabriel, while giving her body a shaking movement, as if showing surprise and fear at the appearance of the unexpected visitor. In the foreground, on the edge of the first platform and between the figures of the archangel and the Virgin,

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<sup>17</sup> See SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. “The house/palace in Annunciations of the 14th and 15th centuries. Iconographic interpretation in light of the patristic and theological tradition”. Article under evaluation in an academic journal, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> “Ecce sine manibus hominum construitur palatium coelestis regis, et hoc palatium in Eden ad orientem portam habet, et nemo per eam portam ingrediatur, nisi solus Dominus Deus; et erit porta clausa.” – JOANNIS EUBOEENSIS. *Sermo in Conceptionem Sanctae Deiparae*. PG 96, 1487.

<sup>19</sup> “Ecce palatium mirificis impensis constructum, sed et gazis incomparabilibus locupletatum; solique Deo Dei Filio locupletatum.” – PETRUS CELLENSIS. *Sermo VI. In Adventu Domini. In eodem tempore VI Adventu*. PL 202, 649-654.

there is a broad, transparent vase with water, the deep symbolic meanings of which we will explain in a future paper.

**Image 5**



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *The Martelli Annunciation* (c. 1445). Cappella Martelli, chiesa di San Lorenzo, Florence.

More than all the elements just described, we are interested in highlighting in this panel the relative form of a temple with which Lippi represents the house of Mary. Although this form of temple is not as evident in this *Martelli Annunciation* as it is in other Annunciations by other painters, such as *The Annunciation in a church*, by Jan van Eyck, *The Annunciation* by Robert Campin in the Prado Museum, or *The Aix Annunciation*, of Barthélemy d'Aix, however, Fra Filippo Lippi seems to have deliberately intended to give the Virgin's house a temple appearance. That is implied by the long nave which extends the enclosures of the first and second planes, a nave whose exterior walls can be seen to shine with high luminosity through the right arch.



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For the rest, this temple, thus suggested in the house of Mary represented in the intermediate planes, is reinforced and complemented by the churches whose towers are perceived in the background in the center of the composition. It seems clear that this wise Carmelite painter wants to depict here the house of Mary in the form of a temple as a *visual metaphor* to illustrate the *textual metaphor* of the *templum Dei* and other similar analogies, which many Fathers and medieval theologians interpreted with a double, complementary dogmatic projection, Christological and Mariological.

As we have explained this topic in other papers,<sup>20</sup> it will suffice to present here, as an example, a few exegetical comments from some Church Fathers and Doctors on the matter. Thus St. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-390) asserts that from Virgin's womb, God incarnated as a man, to whom the Holy Spirit joined when building the holy temple (the human body) in Christ's temple, scilicet Mary.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) praises Mary calling her "the Mother of God, the living God's temple, the eternal King's royal hall, the Holy Spirit's tabernacle", as by a unique privilege she made possible for the Word of God, the only-begotten of God the Father since the eternity, to become also her child, being God and man at the same time.<sup>22</sup>

## **VI. *The Annunciation* (c. 1445-1450) of the Galleria Doria-Pamphilj, Roma: the symbol of the bed (*thalamus Dei*)**

In *The Annunciation* (c. 1445-1450) of the Galleria Doria-Pamphilj in Rome (**image 6**) Fra Filippo Lippi incorporates two unusual details: first, reversing the position of the two protagonists, placing the angel on the right side and the Virgin on the left; second, duplicating the stem of lilies, one in Gabriel's hand, and the second in a huge vase on the floor between the two characters. Initiating the gesture of kneeling before the Virgin, Gabriel greets her with reverence through the gesture of putting his hand

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<sup>20</sup> See SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María, "Iconographic interpretation of the temple as a theological symbol in images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries". In: *Fenestella. Inside Medieval Art 1*, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> GREGORIUS NAZIANZENSIS. *Poemata quae spectant ad alios*, 7. PG 37, 1.565-1.566.

<sup>22</sup> "O beata Dei genitrix, virgo Maria, templum Dei vivi, aula Regis aeterni, sacrarium Spiritus sancti. Tu virga de radice Jesse, tu cedrus de Libano, tu rosa purpurea in Jericho, tu cypressus in monte Sion ; quae singulari privilegio sicut nescis in omnibus comparationem, ita nihilominus et angelicam superas dignitatem, cui novo et inaudito miraculo datum est ut Verbum quod ante saecula Deus genuit, fieret filius tuus, Deus et homo." – ANSELMU CANTAURIENSIS, *Oratio LV, Ad eandem sanctam Virginem Mariam*, PL 158, 961.

on his chest and bowing before her. Sitting on a bench with a closed book in her left hand, Mary turns her head towards the heavenly herald and raises her open right hand to show her unconditional obedience to the Almighty's will.

Image 6



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *The Annunciation* (c. 1445-1450). Galleria Doria-Pamphilj, Roma.

Apart from these narrative details, it is worth noting here the large red bed, protected by an open curtain, which one can see in the left part of the painting. Evidently, by giving such compositional importance to this bed, Filippo Lippi wants to present it as a *visual metaphor* able to illustrate the *textual metaphor* of the *thalamus Dei*, which many Church Fathers and theologians from the East and the West interpreted – with a double, complementary projection Christological and Mariological – as a simultaneous symbol of Mary's virginal womb and the human body of God the Son incarnate in Virgin's womb.

We have studied in-depth in other articles this topic of the bed in the Annunciations of the 14th and 15th centuries, so it is only worth mentioning in passing some



exegetical comments of a couple of prestigious Church Fathers on the matter.<sup>23</sup> Thus St. Proclus of Constantinople († 446) states that we venerate the Virgin Mary for having been converted into the bridal room (*thalamus*) and the ark of the Lord: the Virgin is a bridal-room because the Word of God inhabited in her as in his nuptial room; she is also an ark, but not the one that contained the tablets of the law, but the one that gave birth to the Legislator himself (God the Son).<sup>24</sup>

St. Peter Damian (1007-1072) asserts that being impossible for Humanity's redemption to take place unless God the Son was born of a Virgin, so the existence of this Virgin was needed from whom the divine Word could incarnate. Therefore, it was convenient to build a house where God, when descending to earth, deigned to lodge.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, it was necessary to erect a bridal room that would receive the Husband (Christ) whose epithalamic David sang when saying in Psalm 18: "The Lord coming from his bridal room like a husband."<sup>26</sup>

## VII. *The Annunciation* (c. 1449-53) of the National Gallery in London: the symbol of Mary's humble obedience as *ancilla Domini*

In the hard space of the lowered *lunetta* where *The Annunciation*, c. 1450-1453, of the National Gallery in London (**image 7**) stands, Fra Filippo Lippi balances the volumes of the angel and Mary, both in almost symmetrical genuflect positions, around the virtual axis suggested by the hand of God the Father blessing the Virgin

<sup>23</sup> See SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. "The Symbol of Bed (*Thalamus*) in Images of the Annunciation of the 14th-15th Centuries in the Light of Latin Patristics". In: *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies*, v. 5, n. 4, 2019, p. 49-70.

<sup>24</sup> "Adoratur et Maria, tamquam quae mater ancillaque, et nubes thalamusque, ac arca Domini effecta sit; mater, eum namque peperit, qui voluit nasci; ancilla, quippe naturam confiteor, et praedico gratiam; nubes, concepit enim de Spiritu sancto, quem illaesa integritate pepererit; thalamus, in ea etenim ut nuptiali thalamo Deus Verbum habitavit; arca, non quae legem portaverit, sed quae legislatorem pepererit." – PROCLUS HIEROSOLYMITANUS. *Oratio V. Laudatio Virginis Mariae*. PG 65, 719.

<sup>25</sup> "Sicut ergo impossibile erat ut humani generis redemptio fieret, nisi Dei Filius de Virgine nasceretur; ita etiam necessarium fuerat ut Virgo, ex qua Verbum caro fieret, nasceretur. Oportebat quippe prius aedificari domum, in quam descendens coelestis Rex habere dignaretur hospitium". – PETRUS DAMIANUS. *Sermo XLV. II. In Nativitate Beatissimae Virginis Mariae (VIII Sept.)*. PL 144, 741-742.

<sup>26</sup> "Necesse erat prius erigi thalamum, qui venientem ad nuptias sanctae Ecclesiae susciperet Sponsum, cui David, exultans in spiritu, epithalamium canit, dicens: 'Tanquam sponsus Dominus procedens de thalamo suo (Psal. XVIII)'." *ibid.*

from the top of the *lunetta*. In a garden full of flowers, Gabriel appears on his knees, and his head bowed respectfully before Mary, holding a stem of lilies whose theological symbolism is complemented by that of the other lilies which emerge from a vase placed on a plinth almost in the center of the scene.

Image 7



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *The Annunciation* (c. 1450-1453). The National Gallery, London.

Sitting inside the house, the demure Virgin tries with her right hand to cover her chest with the cloak as a sign of modesty, while holding open on her legs a prayer book before which she meditated. With an exceptional narrative decision, Lippi shapes here the dove of the Holy Spirit not with the usual formula of descending from above in the (here nonexistent) beam of rays of light emitted by the Most High but making it flutter in circles in low flight towards – and at the same height of – the Virgin’s womb.<sup>27</sup> Apart from these suggestive and innovative details, it is interesting to underline here the attitude of obedience and submission of Mary, who, bowing her head and torso with reverence, clearly manifests her unconditional obedience to the divine design that Gabriel announces to her, after proclaiming herself humble slave of the Lord (*ancilla Domini*).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> This Annunciation of Filippo Lippi in London has been analyzed, with somewhat particular interpretations, by STEINBERG, Leo. “How shall this be? Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s “Annunciation” in London, Part I”. In: *Artibus et Historiae. An art anthology* 16, 1987, p. 25-44; and EDGERTON, Samuel Y. “How shall this be? Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s “Annunciation” in London, Part II”. In: *Artibus et Historiae. An art anthology* 16, 1987, p. 45-53.

<sup>28</sup> We have dealt with this Marian virtue in the paper SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. “The Virgin Mary as a model of obedience in the patristic tradition and her representation in the late



Among the many testimonies of Church Fathers and theologians who have highlighted that extreme humility of the Annunciate by proclaiming herself “the slave of the Lord” when accepting the divine plan of being the mother of God the Son incarnate, we can focus, for example, those of St. Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-c. 202) and St. Bede the Venerable (c. 672-735). St. Irenaeus declares that, while the Virgin Mary shows her obedience in proclaiming *Ecce Ancilla tua Domine; Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*, Eve reveals her disobedience when failing to obey the Creator’s instructions; and so Eve became the death’s cause for herself and the entire humanity, while Mary became by her obedience the cause of salvation for herself and all humankind.<sup>29</sup>

Saint Bede, the Venerable, commenting the passage from the Gospel of Luke, features the great humility of Mary when declaring herself the Lord’s obedient slave (*ancilla Domini*) just when being chosen his mother.<sup>30</sup> Emphasizing the outstanding humility and obedience of the Virgin in considering herself a simple slave, despite being chosen by God as the most blessed woman,<sup>31</sup> Bede expresses that, fully aware of her status and the divine esteem, Mary humbly incorporated herself to the class of the servants of Christ, to whom she consecrated herself as his most devout maid.<sup>32</sup>

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medieval iconography of the Annunciation”. In: *Social Sciences and Humanities Journal*, v. 10, n. 8, 2015, p. 2-23.

<sup>29</sup> “Consequenter autem et Maria virgo obediens invenitur, dicens: ‘Ecce ancilla tua, Domine; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.’ Eva vero inobediens; non obedivit enim, adhuc cum esset virgo. Quemadmodum illa virum quidem habens Adam, virgo tamen adhuc existens (...) inobediens facta, et sibi, et universo generi humano causa facta est mortis : sic et Maria habens praedestinatum virum, tamen virgo, obediens, et sibi, et universo generi humano causa facta est salutis.” – IRENAEUS LUGDUNENSIS. *Contra Haereses Liber Tertius*, XXII, 4. PG 7, 958-960.

<sup>30</sup> “Ecce, inquit, ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum. Magnam quippe humilitatis constantiam tenet, quae se ancillam sui conditoris dum mater eligitur, appellat.” – BEDA VENERABILIS. *Homilia prima. In festo Annuntiationis Beatae Mariae*. PL 94, 14.

<sup>31</sup> “Beata in mulieribus angelico oraculo praedicatur, incognita adhuc caeteris mortalibus arcana nostrae redemptionis edocentur.” – *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> “nec se tamen de singularitate meriti excellentioris singulariter extollit, sed potius suae conditionis ac divinae dignationis in omnibus memor, famularum se Christi consortio humiliter adjungit, famularum Christo devota quod jubetur, impendit.” – *Ibid.*

**VIII. *The Annunciation* (c. 1467-1469) in the Cathedral of Spoleto: the symbol of the ray of light passing through a window**

**Image 8**



FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *The Annunciation* (c. 1467-1469). The Spoleto Cathedral.

Fra Filippo Lippi raises *The Annunciation* (c. 1467-1469) frescoed in the apse of the Spoleto Cathedral (**image 8**), with an impressive design. He accentuates the Marian event in a sumptuous two-story Renaissance palace, through which – with the explicit intention of symbolically investing it with the dogmatic meanings already explained – the painter represents the modest abode of the Virgin in Nazareth. Without having entered that palace, the angel appears with his stem of lilies kneeling in the adjacent



courtyard, at the end of which you can see a walled garden. In a room of the palace, the Virgin, seated before a piece of furniture that serves as lectern, turns demurely (with her eyes down) to Gabriel for listening to his message. At the same time, covering her chest with her left arm, she raises her right hand to manifest her full compliance with the divine plan.

In the upper left corner of the painting, God the Father, escorted by angels, blesses Mary, while sending towards her the fertile beam of rays of light, in whose wake the Holy Spirit flies. A very significant circumstance in this regard is that this beam of light reaches Mary after passing through a window. Now, that ray of light passing through the glasses of a window “without breaking or staining them”, far from being an insignificant, decorative or anecdotal detail, symbolically contains several dogmatic meanings, complementary Christological and Mariological, which we analyze in-depth in another paper.<sup>33</sup>

Such doctrinal symbolisms can be perceived in part through some brief comments by Fathers and theologians, such as St. Augustine (354-430) and Honorius of Autun (1080-1151). St. Augustine proclaims that the Virgin Mary was converted into a “window of heaven”, as by her God spread to humankind the true light (that is Christ and the Christian religion).<sup>34</sup> And Honorius of Autun repeats the extended sentence that the Virgin Mary was the window of heaven through which the Sun of Justice, Jesus Christ, shone in this earthly world.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusions

From this double analysis of images and texts, it seems logical to be able to deduce the following conclusions:

1. In his eight Annunciations analyzed here, Fra Filippo Lippi shows an outstanding narrative skill, which makes him able to represent the same episode with quite

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<sup>33</sup> See SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ, José María. “*Facta est Maria fenestra coeli*. The ray of light passing through a window in images of the Annunciation from the patristic and theological perspective”. Article under evaluation in an academic journal, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> “*Facta est Maria fenestra coeli, quia per ipsam Deus verum fudit saeculis lumen.*” – AUGUSTINUS, *Sermo CXXII (a)*. In *Natali Domini, VI (b)*. PL 39, 1991.

<sup>35</sup> “*Ipsa quoque beata Virgo coeli fenestra fuit, per quam Sol justitiae in domum mundi splenduit.*” – HONORIUS AUGUSTODINENSIS. *Sigillum Beatae Mariae ubi exponuntur Cantica Canticorum*. PL 172, 503.



different, although concordant, compositional structures and doctrinal symbols.

2. Beyond the compositional differences with which he designs his eight different Annunciations, Filippo Lippi manages to give all of them a relative conceptual unity. He achieves this goal by including in most of them the set of doctrinal symbols (the stem of lilies, the ray of light, the dove of the Holy Spirit, the prayer book, etc.) commonly used by almost all the artists who depicted the scene of the Annunciation during the 14th and 15th centuries.

3. Despite maintaining in most of his eight Annunciations the essential plexus of the symbols mentioned above familiar to other artists, Fra Filippo Lippi emphasizes in each of them a special symbol, including some very new ones, little or nothing exhibited by others painters of the period. Thus we can discern in each of the eight variants of the Annunciation by Lippi one or another of the symbols that we have brought to light: the stem of lilies, the temple, the palace, the bed, the *porta clausa*, the *hortus conclusus*, the humility of the *ancilla Domini*, and the ray of light passing through a window.

4. We have dared to give some personal iconographic interpretations of each of those eight symbols exposed by Lippi, on the ground of the testimonies of several Greek-Eastern and Latin Fathers and theologians.

5. Since the scarce patristic and theological evidence presented in this short article to justify our interpretations of these eight symbols may seem unconvincing to the reader wanting to know more, we recommend to him the reading of the other texts of our authorship cited here, in which we examine in-depth each of the symbols above.

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