



The Van Eyck brothers and The Virgin Mother: A comparative discussion on the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38) and its portrayal in Flemish Renaissance Marian artwork by Hubert van Eyck and Jan van Eyck.

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NRSV: New Revised Standard Version

OT: Old Testament

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Introduction

The Lucian account of the life of Jesus is arguably alone ‘among the gospels’ in giving the reader a glance beneath ‘the veil that shrouds the thirty years of our Lord’s life between his Birth and his Baptism.’¹ The unique nature of this Gospel sets it apart and makes it a particularly important text to the 1.2 billion followers of Roman Catholicism, and Christianity more generally.² The character of Mary appears within Luke’s Gospel narrative, particularly during the infancy narrative of Jesus. Mary has been, and continues to be, an important person of devotion within the Roman Catholic tradition. Mary is referred to as a ‘powerful protectress’ and her intercession is held in high regard though the prolific use of the Rosary within Catholic prayer and devotion.³ Due to Mary’s status it is important to study the Gospel narratives in which she is a protagonist, and the ways in which people of different periods have interpreted these texts. As a Catholic myself, I have been particularly intrigued by Mary’s prominent role in Catholic theology and teaching, but also outside the remit of the Church. The figure of Mary features frequently in art galleries across Europe

¹ William Neil, *William Neil’s One Volume Bible Commentary* (London, England: Hodder And Stoughton, 1973), p.389

² ‘How many Roman Catholics are there in the world?’, BBC, 2013, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-21443313>> [Accessed 12/03/2019]

³ Sarah Jane Boss, ‘Guardians of the Way’ in *Say Yes to God: Mary and the Revealing of the Word Made Flesh* ed. Martin Warner (London: Tufon Books, 1999), p.95
The importance of the Rosary to Roman Catholicism see, Nathan Mitchell, *The Mystery of the Rosary: Marian Devotion and the Reinvention of Catholicism* (New York: University Press, 2009), p.1

and it is this area that I will investigate in this dissertation. The aim is to comparatively explore the Lucan account of Mary with particular artistic depictions of Mary from the Renaissance to draw out the significance and effect of translating text to image.

The period of the Renaissance holds particular importance when studying the medium of art alongside theology, and more particularly for the figure of Mary. The 'escalation of private prayer and devotion in the fourteenth and fifteenth century is one of the major developments of the period.'⁵ This movement sparked an interest in paintings allowing believers to 'personalise their religious experience' and 'created a visual environment for personal prayer and meditation.'⁶

'Every renaissance comes to the world with a cry, the cry of the human spirit to be free.'⁷

The phenomenon of the Renaissance derives from its title, it was a 'rebirth of classical antiquity.'⁸ This period of art, literature and culture is commonly split into three chapters: The Early Renaissance also known as the Quattrocento (1420-1500), High Renaissance (1490-1527) and the Late Renaissance also known as the Cinquecento (1520- 1600).⁹

⁵ Susan Frances Jones, *Van Eyck to Gossaert: Towards a Northern Renaissance* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011), p.14

⁶ Jones, p.14

⁷ <<https://www.afb.org/annesullivan/educationspeech.asp>> [Accessed 26/02/2019]

⁸ Erwin Panofsky, 'Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the study of Renaissance Art' in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.228

⁹ High Renaissance dates < <https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance> > [Accessed 26/02/2019]

The Renaissance permeated the artistic sphere of all the European hubs of culture including Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. This period (particularly the High Renaissance) saw the heyday of many well-known artists whose works continue to dominate the world of fine art. Artists include, Titian (Venice), Michelangelo (Rome), Leonardo da Vinci (Rome), Raphael (Rome).¹⁰ For the purposes of this study I focus specifically on Flemish Renaissance artwork. This was a Renaissance subsidiary that covered what was known as the Low Countries, this encompassed the coastal Rhine–Meuse–Scheldt delta region in Western Europe.¹¹ This renaissance took place alongside that of Italy, Germany and France. The large settlements of the north such as ‘Bruges, Ghent and then later Antwerp and Brussels, were rich industrial and banking centres during this period and this allowed a large merchant-class to flourish creating an ideal environment for artistic production.’¹²

The Northern Renaissance was also unique for its artist’s revolutionary use of paints. Although oil painting had existed from the middle ages, Northern Renaissance artists ‘fully exploited this medium’s unique characteristics... [creating] a depth of color that was entirely new.’¹³ The context of Northern Renaissance art pieces, as well as the spiritual foundations of the Renaissance’s religious art movement, emphasise the importance of these pieces to the contributions of religious thought and practice during this time. But I would also insist that these pieces have a greater role to play

¹⁰ High Renaissance art information <<https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance>> [Accessed: 26/02/2019]

¹¹ Definition of the ‘Low Countries’ <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Low-Countries>> [Accessed: 26/02/2019]

¹² Dr. Andrew Murray, *Introduction to Fifteenth- century Flanders* <<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/northern-renaissance1/beginners-guide-northern-renaissance/a/introduction-to-fifteenth-century-flanders>> [Accessed: 07/04/2019]

¹³ Murray

outside of their Renaissance context. As installations in galleries the works of the Van Eyck brothers are now taking on a new mode as religious art in a secular context, providing for a different experience of the work than previously intended. Moreover, alongside the importance of Mary in Roman Catholicism, the works of Hubert and Jan van Eyck provide a turning point in religious expression in terms of the relationship between art and religious devotion.

In order to analyse Flemish Renaissance artwork in relation to the Annunciation as described in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:26-38 NRSV), I have selected two paintings from this period and region: Hubert and Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* or *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (c.1432) and Jan van Eyck's *The Annunciation* (c.1434-36). Both of these pieces have an artistic portrayal of the Annunciation narrative. The works of Hubert and Jan van Eyck are arguably timeless in their ability to evoke emotion and awe in the viewer. I will argue that these pieces have power as artistic objects. The fact that both of the pieces are under the care of the art conservationist of galleries and religious institutions respectively is testament to the prized nature of these paintings. Very different in composition, but typical of the Flemish Renaissance style and period, with Mary as the protagonist, these paintings provide for an intriguing analysis into the contribution that Northern Renaissance artwork has made to religious understandings of biblical texts such as the Annunciation.

In chapter one, *The Annunciation: A Discussion of Virginity and the Character of Mary*, I will begin with a brief discussion of Luke's theology, particularly highlighting the prominence of Mary and how this fits into Luke's interest in women as spiritually equal to men. I will then turn to the debates surrounding the cult of Mary as identifying her as Virgin, Mother and 'New Eve' as developed by the early church Fathers and contemporary scholars Marina Warner and Vincent Cronin. I will then

follow in chapters two and three by conducting an analysis of Hubert and Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* or *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (c.1432) and Jan van Eyck's *The Annunciation* (c.1434-36). I will draw out their similarities to, and differences from, Luke's account. I will look specifically at the context of the piece, the use of Christian iconography, the Flemish Renaissance painting style and how these relate to the portrayal of Mary in Lucian story of the Annunciation. I will refer to Lucian theology and the biblical narrative of the Annunciation found in Luke in order to conduct a comparative analysis. In the final chapter, chapter 3, *The Motivation to Create: Theology and Art*, I will explore the relationship between art and religious devotion and experience through the work of Graeme Howes. This chapter considers the dialogue between "readers" of religious artwork, particularly the work of the Van Eyck brothers, and those of biblical texts. I will conclude that the works of the Van Eyck brothers provide a powerful medium for religious understanding that transcends their historical context, while also being indebted to this context. Northern Renaissance artwork can thus perform an important theological function in promoting an understanding of biblical texts such as the Lucian Annunciation narrative and more specifically of the theological significance of Mary.

Chapter 1: The Annunciation: A Discussion of Virginity and the Character of Mary

The Gospel According to Luke, with evidence drawn from the NT and 'unanimous early church tradition', was traditionally identified to have been composed by Luke.¹⁴ Known as the 'beloved physician' (Colossians 4:14) of Paul and companion to him

¹⁴ Henry Wansbrough, *The SPCK Bible Guide* (London, England: Quarto Publishing Plc, 2012), p.232

on numerous missionary journeys.¹⁵ Scholars attribute both The Gospel According to Luke and the book of The Acts of The Apostles to Lucian authorship.¹⁶

Although the Matthean account does contain some narrative surrounding the infancy of Jesus, Luke prefaces his Gospel with two chapters encompassing this period of Jesus life, 'pertaining to the events that surrounded Jesus' conception, birth, and youth.'¹⁷ The Lucian narrative is also much longer and 'gives a prominent place to John the Baptist, who is never mentioned in the Matthean infancy narrative.'¹⁸

Through this text the reader is able to assemble a theology of Luke through his authorship of the Gospel. One key element of Luke's theology is his theology on women. According to Michael D. Goulder, for Luke 'women were in many ways the spiritual equals of men'.¹⁹ This can be seen in the Annunciation narrative as Mary is able to form a coherent knowledge of 'lofty messianic ideas', enough for her to question the Angel by asking 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' (Luke 1:34)²⁰

Luke's Gospel also indicates his theology on women by sending the Angel Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38); while Matthew's account of the proclamation of the coming of Christ sends the angelic messenger to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25). Looking at the Gospels through a synoptic lens, it could be suggested that Luke included this narrative and rejected the Joseph visitation in order to further enforce his theology of spiritual equality for women.²¹

¹⁵ See 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24

¹⁶ Wansbrough, p.232

¹⁷ *Mary in the New Testament* ed. Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, John Reumann (London, England: Cassell Ltd, 1978), p.19

¹⁸ *Mary in the New Testament*, p.19

¹⁹ Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1989), p.227

²⁰ Edwin D. Freed, *The Stories of Jesus' Birth: A Critical Introduction* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2001), p.61-62

²¹ Freed, p.60

Another aspect of Luke's theology is that of honour and shame. According to Joel B. Green, Luke was 'a person of the honor/shame-oriented culture of the [first century] Mediterranean world.'²² Luke proclaimed through his Annunciation narrative that Mary 'derives her status from God' in her 'obedience to God and participation in his redemptive purpose.'²³ This was not through her status in society which Green claimed was 'in no way deserving of honor' during the period she lived or indeed during the life of Luke.²⁴ Moreover, it is clear through delving into Lucian theology that he was intent as an author on manifesting a theology; a Christology based upon spiritual equality for women and a theology in terms of honor and shame that I would argue was countercultural. Both of these theologies are present in the Annunciation narrative.

'With Mary, her spiritual qualities must suggest divine, yet always stop short of the divine. And so continually we shall find a tension between the human and the transcendent, between Mary the young Jewish girl of Nazareth and God's Mother, chosen from all ages to be Queen of Heaven.'²⁵

Arguably the most well recounted story of the Lucian Infancy narrative is that of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38). Here God announces the Saviour (Jesus') birth to Mary, 'a maiden unknown to all the world recognised, was betrothed to a poor carpenter.'²⁶ Through an angelic visitation, Mary is informed of her conception, but Mary questions this as she is a virgin (Luke 1:34). The angel goes on to explain the

²² Joel B. Green, *New Testament Theology: The Theology Of The Gospel Of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.142

²³ Green, p.142-143

²⁴ Green, p.142-143

²⁵ Vincent Cronin, *Mary Portrayed* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Limited, 1968), p.3

²⁶ John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis Of The Book Of The Bible Vol 3 Matthew- John* (Kingston-On-Thames, England: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, 1943), p.201

miraculous virginal conception which was to take place (Luke 1:35). Mary's virginity at this point in the narrative is something that has and continues to divide theological debate.

The Early Church Fathers were the main Christian thinkers whose work, arguably, culminated in the acceptance of the Christian faith by Emperor Constantine, which then made it possible to formulate official Church doctrine at The Council of Nicaea beginning an 'era of conciliar definitions.'²⁷ Among the Fathers, St Irenaeus Bishop of Lyon wrote upon the topic of Christ's conception.²⁸ Irenaeus spoke out on this subject suggesting that no living being angelic or human can truly understand how the 'Son who was begotten' came into being.²⁹ This arguably disregards the historical validity of the Annunciation. It suggests that even the divine beings of heaven such as the one who visited Mary would be unable to understand the process by which Jesus was begotten and the gift of life bestowed unto Mary.³⁰ Thus, how can it be that Mary became pregnant as scripture suggests if, as Irenaeus infers, the angels have no way of understanding or conveying events? But, what the theorising of Irenaeus does suggest is that the mysterious event of the conception of Jesus was indeed mystical, divine and therefore worthy of further discussion.

Another theological concept that was brought to life surrounding the notion of Jesus' conception was the idea that Mary was in essence the 'New Eve'.³¹ In the understanding of "the Fall" according to key Christian interpretations of Genesis, Eve

²⁷ *The Early Christian Fathers* ed and translated. Henry Bettenson (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.1

²⁸ St Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons, *The third book of St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, against heresies* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1874)

²⁹ Bettenson, p.74

³⁰ See Luke 1:3-4

³¹ Marina Warner, *Alone Of All Her Sex: The myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, England: Picador, Pan Books Ltd, 1985), p.52

was the catalyst for sin. Her actions resulted in the fall of man from living in cohabitation with God in the Garden of Eden to banishment and shame. By Eve's temptation the human race was separated from God and plagued with Sin, a Sin now 'as natural as breath or as sleep itself'.³² The most extensively postulated of these sins is arguably sex. The 'association of sex, sin, and death is ancient and still endures [today]...' and was discussed by St Augustine of Hippo.³³ Augustine stated that after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit they would have 'covered their genitals, not their hands and mouths, which had done the deed.'³⁴ This suggests that humanity's fall from grace was not solely due to the explicit act of eating the fruit from the tree, but was rooted in man's desire of the flesh. Through this same thinking the sexual union of man and woman became enshrined in sin and the ramifications of the actions of Adam and Eve. Augustine inferred that 'the hereditary taint' of sin is transmitted via the genitals during the 'sexual embrace' and the passion in which it is shrouded; thus, from that point on the conceived child is stained with Original Sin.³⁵

This Christian understanding of 'The Fall' can explain the need for Mary to remain chaste in her conception of the Messiah, Jesus. Mary's Virginity was no coincidence, it was that the 'Son of God chose to be born from a virgin mother because this was the only way a child could enter the world without sin.'³⁶ As Mary gave birth to God incarnate, she 'conquered the post-Eden natural law that man and woman couple in

³² See Genesis 3:6

Warner, p.51

³³ Warner, p.51

³⁴ Warner, p.54 referencing St Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*

³⁵ Warner, p.54 referencing Augustine, *Sermones de Tempore, Sermon 2*; quoted in Francisco Suarez, *The dignity and virginity of the Mother of God. Disputations I, V, VI from The mysteries of the life of Christ* (France: West Baden College, 1954), p.52

³⁶ Warner, p.54

lust to produce children' and she 'escaped the debt of Adam and Eve.'³⁷ By this Mary became the one that by her unique femininity regained paradise for humankind. This was through the birth of the saviour, who would reconcile God and man once and for all. Irenaeus summarised this concept when he wrote: 'Eve by her disobedience, brought death upon herself and on all the human race: Mary by her obedience, brought salvation.'³⁸

The charism of virginity held by Mary affected the essence of the being that was Jesus Christ. As Mary was referred to as the 'New Eve', this scriptural comparison from Genesis also encompasses the person of Jesus. Warner proposes that '... just as God moulded Adam from new clay, so he has fashioned his Son anew. Because Jesus did not descend to earth but was born of a woman, it was crucial that her clay too should be pristine and unspotted.'³⁹ Here Warner makes links to the Genesis creation story of man, suggesting that Jesus is in fact the New Adam.⁴⁰ This idea is mirrored by Paul in 1 Corinthians where he wrote: 'Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.' (1 Corinthians 15:45). Here an interesting image of Mary and her place in this comparison could be introduced. Just as Jesus was formed from the Earth, one could infer that Mary is the Earth in this scenario. A much-loved creation of God. But it could also suggest that Mary was purely a commodity for use by God in order to make his body as God incarnate. Either way, this suggestion by Warner also brings early Christian teachings on purity to the foreground.

³⁷ Warner, p.52

³⁸ Bettenson, p.74 referencing St Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book 3, p.22, 4

³⁹ Warner, p.59

⁴⁰ See Genesis 2:7

Ultimately, the works of the early Church Fathers and that of contemporary scholars echo the importance of Mary's Virginity to the narrative of the Annunciation and the role of her as Mother of Jesus Christ. Therefore, this is a hugely important charism and one that I will continue to explore through the lens of Flemish Renaissance artwork. I will postulate to what extent these pieces correspond to the narrative of the Annunciation found in the Lucian Infancy texts.

Chapter 2: Hubert and Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* or *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* c.1432

Completed in 1432, the *Ghent Altarpiece* was painted by brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck for the chantry in what is now known as St Bravo's Cathedral, Ghent.⁴¹ The altarpiece depicts a painted narrative when both open and closed; this chapter will focus specifically on the closed altarpiece.

On the closed altarpiece as Elizabeth Dhanens suggests, there is a theme of 'the Mystery of the Incarnation'.⁴² The central narrative of the piece depicts the Annunciation across four panels running horizontally across the closed wings. At first glance the painting seems dull and lucid as Van Eyck's use 'grey and muted tones'.⁴³ Dhanens supposes that this was done to emphasise and 'set off the brilliance and power of the paintings of the open polyptych by contrast'.⁴⁴ However, I would infer that although this may be the case aesthetically, this reading of the work suggests an insignificance to the Annunciation in contrast to the rest of the Christian theological

⁴¹ Elizabeth Dhanens, *Van Eyck The Ghent Altarpiece* (London, England: Allen Lane, 1973), p.13

See source for authorship debates on this piece, Kim W. Woods, *Making Renaissance Art* (London, England: Yale University Press, 2007), p.190

⁴² Dhanens, p.51

⁴³ Dhanens, p.55

⁴⁴ Dhanens, p.55

narrative depicted in the piece. Rather, I would suggest that the placement of the Annunciation was done in order to symbolise the very beginning of the redemptive story for humanity according to Christianity; this moment made the rest of the Christian faith possible. As previously mentioned, Luke included this narrative in his Gospel for a reason. That may have to emphasise the theological importance of Mary as part of his own theology, and/or to stress the importance of Jesus' conception to the overall salvific plan of God. This point is also espoused by Warner in her theology of Jesus' conception, further stressing the importance of Christ's origins from 'new clay'.⁴⁵ God 'fashioned his Son anew' in order to provide, I would suggest, a perfect sacrifice as Son of God and bringer of eternal redemption.⁴⁶ Moreover, the theme and general scheme of the piece does not infer that the Annunciation is less important than the rest of the altarpiece's narrative. Rather, that the Annunciation holds such importance that it must be seen as a miracle all of its own.

This Annunciation scene also seems to have been poorly composed with the scale of the figures out of harmony with the room. Dhanens writes, the figures would 'not have been able to stand upright.'⁴⁷ She observes that that Mary and the Angels garments, much like those of the figures painted in the niches above, are not three dimensional.⁴⁸ Although Dhanens points to the lack of harmony within the annunciation piece, one could suggest that this motif casts aside reality. By painting this narrative as overtly different from the arguably ultra-realistic style of the rest of the altarpiece, the Van Eyck brothers may have been attempting to save themselves

⁴⁵ Warner, p.59

⁴⁶ Warner, p.59

⁴⁷ Dhanens, p.117

⁴⁸ Dhanens, p.117

theological confrontation. As there is a lack of concrete details for the event (for example specific movements of the characters or characters physical descriptions), the painters may have withdrawn this narrative from reality in order to ensure that their work met the approval of critics and theologians. During the period of the early Renaissance there was 'an atmosphere of Christian humanism, of devout erudition, and concern for the Church's didactic task.'⁴⁹ This academic climate in which the altarpiece came to being may well shed light on the piece's 'dogmatic character.'⁵⁰ Therefore, this may well be the reason for the scenes lack of harmony and unusual use of colour.

Within the Annunciation panels there are some key motifs of Christian iconography. These objects or sometimes plants or animals are inserted within religious artwork to convey a deeper meaning; as George Ferguson explained, 'the language of sign and symbol, the outward and visible form through which is revealed the inward and visible reality...'⁵¹ One of the icons found in this piece is the lavabo. This small glass container filled with clean water is found on the window ledge of the middle right panel and is found nowhere in the Lucian account of the Annunciation. The lavabo is traditionally a symbol of Mary's 'virgin motherhood' and the purity of her body and soul free from sexual sin.⁵² This theme of virginity is key to Christian theology as seen in my previous chapter and it is prominent in the Annunciation text. The word

⁴⁹ Dhanens, p.22

⁵⁰ Dhanens, p.22

⁵¹ George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.7

⁵² Dhanens, p.54

As discussed in previous chapter.

'virgin' appears three times within the narrative. Mary herself is introduced to the reader first and foremost as a 'virgin'.⁵³

However, it is difficult to suggest that the inclusion of this object within the piece is not purely aesthetic. The way in which the light within the piece plays on the surface of the glass and water is truly a feat of artistic talent. Dhanens notes that the lighting painted into the room of the Annunciation seems to marry up to the entrance of light into the 'Vijd chapel its self'.⁵⁴ This again reinforces the minutiae of the Van Eyck brother's attention to detail when creating this work. Therefore, I suggest that the insertion of the lavabo as an element within the scene depicted may have been for iconographic purposes, as well as a mode by which the Van Eyck brothers displayed their artistic fare within this piece. Arguably the most prolific of Jan van Eyck's works is the *Arnolfini Portrait*. This piece contains a mirror in the background of the picture reflecting the backs of the characters and a glimpse of the painter. This extraordinary skill to portray the effects of a reflective item within the scene of a painting is applauded by art critics to this day.⁵⁵ Moreover, it is not surprising that having this skill, Jan van Eyck wanted to include an item such as the lavabo in this piece.

Artists of the Northern Renaissance are acclaimed to this day for their revolutionary use of oil paints. Carol M. Richardson wrote that Netherlandish painters regarded relationships between objects as a 'secondary concern to capturing their material qualities- texture, colour, translucence- all helped by the development of oil paint.'⁵⁶

Therefore, I would argue that the depiction of the lavabo may have been inserted

⁵³ See Luke 1:27,34 for Mary as a 'virgin'.

⁵⁴ Dhanens, p.117

⁵⁵ See Liz Rideal, *How To Read Paintings* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2014), p.23

⁵⁶ Carol M. Richardson, 'Constructing space in Renaissance painting' in *Making Renaissance Art* ed. Kim W. Woods (London, England: Yale University Press, 2007), p.91

into this piece in order to allow the painters to explore the use of oil paints rather than to portray an iconographic. However, as already argued, proclaiming Mary's virginity is a key element of the Annunciation narrative. By also transmitting this message by inanimate objects, I would suggest that the Van Eyck's were looking to show God's divinity in creation and his eternal salvific transcendental plan for humankind through the birth of Christ.

Another Christian icon found within this piece is the book. In the right-hand panel of the Annunciation story portrayed in the altarpiece Mary is depicted robed in white and poised next to an open book. Although on the edge of this frame and seemingly devoid of meaning or purpose, books appear eighteen times within the entirety of the altarpiece and are an important part of the work, particularly in this scene.⁵⁷ On close inspection the pages show a reading from 2 Chronicles 2:6 which reads: 'But who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him, except as a place to make offerings before him?' As suggested by Dhanens, 'this must relate to Christ's incarnation in the Virgin's womb.'⁵⁸ Or to the dwelling of the Eucharist within the tabernacle located close to the altarpiece's placement within the chapel.⁵⁹

However, bearing in mind climate that 15th Century Church lived within, this was most likely an attempt to reinforce the traditional teaching of Jesus' immaculate conception. Part of this being that his birth from Mary was a fulfilment of OT scripture and prophecy. This was (and remains) fundamental to much Christian teaching.

Many Christian interpreters understood passages in the Old Testament as

⁵⁷ Dhanens, p.21

⁵⁸ Dhanens, p.54

⁵⁹ Dhanens, p.54

foreshadowing the coming of Christ. In Genesis it is written that a child will be born who will conquer over Satan (Genesis 3:15), later, in the book of Isaiah it was prophesied that 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.' (Isaiah 7:14). According to some Christian readings, the event of the Annunciation or 'divine conception' is in fulfilment to the prophecy made in Isaiah 7:14.⁶⁰ Biblical scholars suggest that Luke's reference to the 'house of David' in Luke 1:27 is elucidating the connection of the birth of Christ to the fulfilment of OT prophecy.⁶¹ By referring to the 'house of David', Luke is referencing Nathans promise to David eluding to Jesus' future as 'Son of the Most High,[that he] will be given David's throne,[that he will be] a king over a house,[an] eternal kingdom' (2 Samuel 7).⁶² By stating this early in the Gospel narrative Luke is stressing the importance of the OT prophecy as proof of Jesus' sonship and rightful place as Messiah to the children of Israel. One can conclude that from the direct fulfilment of prophecy seen in the Annunciation narrative that the inclusion of OT scripture is important to the composition of the altarpiece. The importance lies within this painter's intention to explicitly convey to the viewer how the birth narrative of Jesus is a fulfilment of OT prophecy. To enforce the overall teaching of Christianity that Jesus is the Messiah or as it says in Isaiah 'Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14), 'God with us.'⁶³

Further passages of scripture can be found within this piece. Emanating from the mouth of the Angel and Mary are words found within the Annunciation text of Luke's Gospel. The Latin words " AVE GRACIA PLENA DOMINUS TECUM", "Hail, thou

⁶⁰ *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* ed. By William D. Mounce (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006), p.769

⁶¹ *Mary in the New Testament*, p.123

⁶² *Mary in the New Testament*, p.118

⁶³ 'Immanuel' ed. Mounce, p.296

that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee” come from the Angelic creature. And from Mary, “ ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI”, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord”.⁶⁴ These directly refer to translations of Luke 1:28 and Luke 1:38.⁶⁵ These lines of dialogue appear at the beginning and end of the scripture and are in no way the entirety of the discourse between the Angel and Mary. However, these carefully selected excerpts, encompass the overall message of the narrative. Dhanens also observes that the text painted into the scene coming from the mouth of the Virgin is ‘written upside down in order that the Holy Spirit, who appears above her in the form of a dove, may read it.’⁶⁶ This enables the viewer to see the direct communion between the earthly and the divine within the narrative of the Annunciation. The explicit representation of the communion with the divine reinforces the Gospel story as told by Luke. Moreover, the use of scripture within this piece adds to the alignment of it to the Gospel narrative.

Due to the altarpiece’s centrality in the everyday worship performed in St Bravo’s Cathedral, Dhanens argues that it was only fitting that ‘the Altarpiece’s symbolism should be related to the mysteries of the church’s year...’⁶⁷ Thus, it is logical that the main sources for the Altar’s iconography was the Bible alongside the ‘works of the Fathers of the Church and of classical antiquity.’⁶⁸

During her investigation of the Ghent Altarpiece, Dhanens discovered that the work of 12th century theologian Rupert of Deutz was likely a key influence in the creation of the altarpiece. The city of Ghent ‘had long-standing economic and other ties with

⁶⁴ Dhanens, p.53

⁶⁵ See Luke 1:38

⁶⁶ Dhanens, p.53

⁶⁷ Dhanens, p.88

⁶⁸ Dhanens, p.89

the Maas area and the Rhineland, where Rupert lived and worked.⁶⁹ Dhanens goes on to examine Deutz's work through the scholarship of Jacques Paul Migne.⁷⁰ From this, she highlights the Fall as the rationale for the Annunciation stating that: 'If the Redemption is necessitated by the Fall of man and prefigured by Caine and Abel, its starting-point is the conception of Christ in the Virgin Mary's womb, which was revealed to her at the Annunciation.'⁷¹ As previously discussed, Mary is argued to be the 'New Eve' to humankind with her conception and birthing of Christ being a new start for God's creation. Therefore, this continued reflection on the Annunciation as necessary for the salvation of humanity makes the narrative and depictions of it all the more central to Christian thinking and teaching.

Respect for the literary arts is something that is engrained within the culture of the city of Ghent. Ghent is renowned for its libraries and the 'founding of the scriptorium and library of the House of St Jerome by Johannes van Impe ... in the very years in which the Altarpiece was painted, shows the importance which was attached to literary works at this time.'⁷² Therefore, the influence of antiquity, scholarly sources and books was arguably the reason for the depiction of the Annunciation as part of the altarpiece; alongside the vivid use of Christian Iconography within the painting of the Annunciation.

As aforementioned, the altarpiece was conceived and born into a culture of 'dogmatic character' within the Church.⁷³ Therefore, I argue that Hubert and Jan van Eyck's style, design and motif choices were due to the culture and impressions

⁶⁹ Dhanens, p.99

⁷⁰ J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (Published on 31/12/1845) can be found as an online resource at: <<http://patristica.net/latina/>> [Accessed 10/03/2019]

⁷¹ Dhanens, p.94

⁷² Dhanens, p.99

⁷³ Dhanens, p.22

of the period, rather than on a fervent desire to represent the Annunciation as it appears in the Lucian narrative. However, books and antiquity played a role in the piece's conception in its goal to decorate and inspire the experience of the individuals using the Cathedral worship space in Ghent. The use of direct scripture and the overall style of this piece inspire reflection on the Lucian scripture at the foundations of this painting. Although the goals of the Church may have been that of narration and accuracy, the depictions of the divine and of details mentioned in the text are not explicit. Rather, they are shrouded in mystery and tradition through the use of Iconographic symbols and excerpts of scripture.

Chapter 3: Jan van Eyck' *The Annunciation* c.1434-36

Brother of Hubert van Eyck and second painter of *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, Jan van Eyck is one of the most well-known artists of the Northern Renaissance. Today Jan van Eyck's masterpieces line the walls of the National Gallery in London, drawing in visitors daily to marvel at the artistry used to create the famous, *The Arnolfini Portrait* c.1434.⁷⁴ Across the Atlantic in Washington DC's National Gallery of Art many of Jan van Eyck's pieces are on display including his *The Annunciation*.⁷⁵

Thought to have been painted between 1434 and 1436, Jan van Eyck's *The Annunciation* is a piece composed as an oil on canvas transferred from panel. 'The painting's narrow format and open composition suggests that it once served as the

⁷⁴ Source: Referring to the National Gallery Website regarding *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck <<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait>> [Accessed 18/03/19]

⁷⁵ Source: Referring to the National Gallery of Art USA regarding *The Annunciation* by Jan van Eyck <<https://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/van-eyck-the-annunciation.html>> [Accessed 18/03/19]

left wing of an altarpiece...'⁷⁶ Since the altarpiece's other wings are lost and thus, so is the 'larger work, deciphering the message and iconography within this piece is all the more challenging. The purpose and context of the piece is now lost, and today as contemporary scholars and art historians we are faced with the dilemma as to how we are to analyse this piece. Do we view it as a stand-alone painting as we have no real proof of the other wings to the altarpiece? Or do we continue on the probable conclusions made by those who have gone before us? Due to Jan van Eyck's history of painting altarpieces depicting the Annunciation (as seen in the Ghent Altarpiece), and the fact that I find the composition claim compelling I will continue my investigation classing this piece as an altarpiece panel. I would stress the importance of knowing the other components in order to definitively decipher this painting. This is explained by Susan Frances Jones who observes that Diptychs, much like altarpieces 'can only be understood fully by observing the relationship between their interior and exterior views.'⁷⁷

In comparison to the setting of the Annunciation scene found on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Jan van Eyck's *The Annunciation* is set in a church like building, a contrast to the domestic setting of the previous piece. Cronin comments that the settings of paintings from the Low Countries often seemed to take Mary into the 'Flemish bourgeois home.'⁷⁸ The tall arches and windows that line the background of this piece provide for a grand setting to the Jan van Eyck *Annunciation*. This contrast to the commonly used domestic scenes supports the view that the piece was

⁷⁶ E. Melanie Gifford, 'Assessing the Evolution of van Eyck's Iconography through Technical Study of the Washington *Annunciation*, I' in *The National Gallery: Investigating Jan van Eyck* ed. Susan Foister, Sue Jones and Delphine Cool (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2000), p.59

⁷⁷ Frances Jones, p.16

⁷⁸ Cronin p.46

designed as a flank of an altarpiece with the setting better suited to a church environment. E. Melanie Gifford suggested that Van Eyck 'used the fabric of the church its self to reiterate the theme of the transition from life under the Old Law to life under the New Dispensation.'⁷⁹ Gary Waller also comments upon the religious setting of this piece and states: 'Mary is destined to be the temple of the Holy Spirit, the personified House of God...'⁸⁰ By depicting the Annunciation as taking place in a church building, Van Eyck is reinforcing this idea and juxtaposing the tabernacle which would have been situated close to the altarpiece. The womb of Mary is thought by the Greek Orthodox church and many Roman Catholics to have been the very first tabernacle.⁸¹ This is also suggested by Raymond E. Brown who in his exegesis of Luke 1:35 compares Mary to The Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 23:34) or Tabernacle of divine glory.⁸² This is due to a parallel between 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you' (Luke 1:35).⁸³ As well as OT texts such as Exodus 25:20 and 1 Chronicles 28:18 where 'winged cherubim' overshadow the top of the Ark of the Covenant and Deuteronomy 33:12 and Psalm 91:4 where 'God [is] overshadowing His chosen ones.'⁸⁴

Gifford goes on to infer that Van Eyck presented the moment of the Annunciation 'with costumes, words and gestures that would clearly have recalled the viewer to

⁷⁹ Gifford, p.60

⁸⁰ Gary Waller, *A Cultural Study of Mary and the Annunciation* (London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers Limited, 2015), p.78

⁸¹ See source for comparison to Mary as the first tabernacle: Referring to Pemptousia, Mount Athos- Wisdom- Holiness, *The Mystery of the Virgin Womb as the Tabernacle of God in the Flesh*, by John G. Panagiotou, written 02/02/2018
<<https://pemptousia.com/2018/02/the-mystery-of-the-virgin-womb-as-the-tabernacle-of-god-in-the-flesh/>> [Accessed 27/03/19]

⁸² Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth Of The Messiah* (London: Cassell & Collier Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1977), p.327

⁸³ Brown, p.327

⁸⁴ Brown, p.327

the same scene enacted in the *Missa Aurea*, or Golden Mass.⁸⁵ By eluding to this tradition, Van Eyck was clearly attempting to establish a link between the traditions of the Church and scripture. By representing the elements of the Church's tradition and the Annunciation scripture on equal grounds, Van Eyck arguably holds both of these in equal reverence and worthy of depiction in his work. Therefore, with this in mind, Van Eyck's Annunciation scene is not of strictly Lucian origin.

The back wall of the building is also embellished with artwork. To the top left and right of the back wall can be seen drawings of Moses. To the left Moses being presented to the Pharaoh as an infant, and to the right Moses receiving the tablets of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Below these, are two 'wall-painting roundels of Jacob and Isaac.'⁸⁶ These, similar to the presence of the book in the Ghent Altarpiece, are symbolic of the OT forbearance of the Annunciation. According to Waller these OT scenes are representative of preparations 'for the future Messiah, emphasizing the Jews as the Chosen People.'⁸⁷

By including these details within his scene, Van Eyck showcases theological and biblical knowledge. One might suggest that he was, like during the creation of the Ghent Altarpiece, under the instruction of scholars who guided him to make such stylistic choices. This inclusion follows the Church's focus on scholarly knowledge during the Northern Renaissance. I would also suggest that it stresses the importance of framing the narrative of the Annunciation within its scriptural context. Moreover, the addition of OT references within this painting add to the painting's

⁸⁵ Gifford, p.60

See Gifford, p.77, note 5.

⁸⁶ Gifford, p.60-61

⁸⁷ Waller, p.78

congeniality with the Lucian Annunciation text whilst also placing the narrative in context for 15th century viewers.

Along with the OT references within this piece, Van Eyck's *The Annunciation* also includes the same dialogue motif as the Ghent Altarpiece. A painted salutation from the Angel to the Virgin saying "*AVE GRĀ. PLENA* or "Hail, full of grace" and her 'obedient reply' *ECCE ANCILLA DÑI* or "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord" 'rendered upside down to the viewer to show them directly to the figure of God above.'⁸⁸ This is a direct use of the Lucian scripture found at Luke 1:28 and Luke 1:38 retrospectively. By using direct quotes from the Lucian Gospel, Van Eyck is ensuring his piece is grounded in the scripture and leaves the viewer with no question as to what is taking place. This artistic method is also used to symbolise the communication and unification of human and divine within the moment of the Annunciation. This is seen in the text when the angel says: "' The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...'" (Luke 1:35). By including this symbol of divine interaction in this piece Van Eyck is explicitly showing the viewer this connection.

The divine presence of God in this painting is embodied in the Dove seen streaming with direct rays of light through a window toward the figure of Mary. Rays of sunlight shining through windows in this way are often depicted within Annunciation narratives and their presence is 'to stress the *fenestrum crystallanum*, Mary's intact hymen being penetrated by the Holy Ghost, as light penetrates a window without breaking it.'⁸⁹ This symbol follows the Lucian Annunciation narrative, specifically Luke 1:35. It also suggests that Van Eyck is attempting to keep his painting close to

⁸⁸ Waller, p.77

⁸⁹ Waller, p.78

the Lucian scripture and wider church teaching on the immaculate conception of Christ.

Another iconographic symbol used within this piece that is the lily. Found at the bottom right hand side of the panel, the white lilies painted onto the backdrop of Mary's vibrant blue garments create a stunning feature at the base of this painting. Lilies have various symbolic meanings within Christian artwork. It is used as a symbol of purity and has become 'the flower of the Virgin'.⁹⁰ Lilies are commonly found in Renaissance artwork depicting the Annunciation with the Angel either holding a lily stem or a vase between Mary and the angelic messenger.⁹¹ With the lilies in Van Eyck's *Annunciation* painting being placed nearest to Mary, they are more likely symbolic of Mary's purity within this piece. As previously discussed, sexual purity was important to the early church fathers and theologians. This includes Irenaeus and Augustine who saw this charism as vital in portraying Mary as a worthy recipient of God's only Son. The theology of Luke himself also reflects this point. Through her obedience to God, being a young virgin and betrothed to a man (Luke 1:27), Mary claimed her status as honourable in the sight of God despite her low status to many.⁹²

To conclude, my analysis of Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation* leads me to a similar conclusion to that of Jan and Hubert van Eyck's *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*: the context into which the piece was born is key to its interpretation. Although the use of this piece in a liturgical environment is not certain, it fits the profile created by the altarpiece at Ghent. This piece was to be displayed at the heart of a church

⁹⁰ Ferguson, p.33

⁹¹ Ferguson, p.33

⁹² Green, p.142-143

environment, present and correct during the day to day rituals and traditions of the space. By this thinking, the painting must also represent Christian values and ideals, such as the immaculate conception. Moreover, this rendering of the narrative of the Annunciation does represent elements of the Lucian text and portrays them to the viewer. But the piece is also used as a vehicle of religious teaching by those who commissioned its inauguration. The motivations of these individuals may or may not be in keeping with that of Luke when he recorded the infancy narrative of Jesus in written text.

Chapter 4: The Motivation to Create: Theology and Art

From my analysis, it is clear that the paintings of Hubert van Eyck and Jan van Eyck contain a wealth of contextual, cultural, theological, iconographic, and ecclesiological information. But to what extent is this collision of the faculties of art and theology a coincidence? Or does the relationship between the two serve a greater purpose such as understanding and devotion? This chapter will endeavour to address these questions and explore the intersecting relationship between the worlds of art and theology. This will be in context to the works of the Van Eyck brothers and also to purveyors of religious art in modern Christendom.

My argument throughout this study has been that the art of the Northern Renaissance, showcased by Hubert and Jan van Eyck, have value in regard to the interpretation and understanding of religious texts, particularly the Annunciation narrative. I argue that the artwork of this time period and region provide for an enrichment to Christian religious life. Although it was arguably true for the *Ghent Altarpiece* (and likely for Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation*) 'certain church authorities had a firm and measurable hold on what they wanted represented in their

churches.⁹³ According to Graeme Howes, pre-Reformation religious institutions served generally as 'relatively undemanding patrons of religious art, as they had not, until relatively recently felt it necessary to demand 'sincerity' from the artist.'⁹⁴ In the 15th Century, 'the Church seems to have found no difficulty in accepting sacred art that was overtly frivolous and worldly in treatment'.⁹⁵ Edgar Ward even observes that paganism formed a 'comfortable modus vivendi with Christianity..' This was later challenged during the Reformation.⁹⁶ Therefore, the motivation for the theology within the work of Hubert and Jan van Eyck is under debate. And although I respect the esteemed and in-depth work of Dhanens, the historical evidence for the art culture of the time provides a more convincing argument for the source of the theological basis of the work. This would lead to the work being more vivacious and artist led origin due to the relations between artwork and religious institution at the time of the Northern Renaissance.⁹⁷ This was a culture which valued the visual arts and their contribution to a society striving to reconnect with antiquity.

However, this is not to say that these motivations are not in and of each other. Dhanens' observations are compelling, and it may be that Hubert and Jan van Eyck sort the consultation of theologians and commissioning individuals in order to produce work pleasing to their audience. It is also possible that the Van Eyck brothers themselves were inspired by scholarly views and inserted dogmatic themes within their pieces. Howes suggests that 'the artist's own experience of the episode

⁹³ Graham Howes, *The Art of the Sacred: An introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007), p.20

⁹⁴ Howes, p.20

This is supported by the work of Dhanens as previously mentioned as she attributes much of the theological motifs within the *Ghent Altarpiece* to theological scholarly influence.

Howes, p.16

⁹⁵ Howes, p.20

⁹⁶ Howes, p.20

⁹⁷ As suggested by Ward and Howes.

shapes his depiction of it.⁹⁸ Therefore, one cannot deny that the Van Eyck's own personal familiarity with the narrative would have shaped their artistic depiction of this scene. However, the question of Hubert and Jan van Eyck's theological inspiration and sources for their work cannot be definitively answered without further concrete evidence from the painters coming to light. But I would argue that in relation to our current usage of these pieces, the original motivations shed light on the works as historical artefacts but have little bearing on them as objects of religious devotion.

In regard to modern Christendom, art continues to play a role in understanding and devotion: 'religion is integral to art and art to religion... all art, arguably, involves an encounter with the mysterious and the invisible'⁹⁹ According to a synod at Arras 1005, 'art teaches the unsettled what they cannot learn from books.'¹⁰⁰ This use of art as a vehicle for religious and theological understanding is what makes it relevant to Christians throughout time and today. According to Howes artwork can 'give theology the eyes to see ourselves in all our dimensions, and ears to hear the voice of our inner lives, and one of the instruments with which to communicate with one another.'¹⁰¹ This bridge that artwork creates between the ordinary and the divine is explained as a 'secular means [to] serve a sacred ends'.¹⁰² By using art work as a means of 'democratising of religious art' a change takes place and the work becomes a tool that can be used to 'widen public access to the transcendent.'¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Howes, p.105

⁹⁹ Howes, p. 92

¹⁰⁰ Howes, p.12

¹⁰¹ Howes, p.146-168

Howes, p.156

¹⁰² Howes, p.137

¹⁰³ Howes, p.135

However, some would argue that art does not play the same role as it did pre-Reformation. As Hans Belting wrote: 'the empty walls of the reformed churches were visible proof of the idolatrous images of the papists. They attested to a purified *desensualised* religion that now puts its trust in the Word.'¹⁰⁴ Modern manifestations of the Christian faith too could be said to follow this same rhetoric, with the Word being the central source of divine affirmation. This is more so true in Protestant traditions rather than Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions that still herald art such as Icons to holding particular religious importance and power.¹⁰⁵

Howes comments that 'most recent religious revivals of faith and devotion... have tended to be grounded in words rather than pictures.'¹⁰⁶ These include 'Liberation Theology' and 'Charismatic Renewal movements.'¹⁰⁷ Through this it appears that 'visual didacticism is rare' and that today more people are able to read scripture than 'read paintings or stained glass windows.'¹⁰⁸ Therefore, one may be tempted to claim that art has been made redundant to a clearer understanding of biblical literature due to the current cultural climate. However, artwork such as the pieces I have examined in my study, 'persist for centuries as media for formative memories which can act as fertile soil for new improvisations of the Christian faith.'¹⁰⁹ Therefore, I would argue that artistic impressions from the past provide for inspiration for the development of contemporary Christianity.

¹⁰⁴ Howes, p.9 referencing Michel and Gaby Vovelle, *Vision de la mort et de l'an delà en Provence* (Paris: 1970)

¹⁰⁵ For an introduction to the use of Icons in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. See Howes, p.7

¹⁰⁶ Howes, p.19

¹⁰⁷ Howes, p.19

¹⁰⁸ Howes, p.19

¹⁰⁹ Howes, p.152

Art can have, and arguably already had, a vital role to play in modern theology. David Morgan states that belief 'is an embodied practice no less than a cerebral one. Revelation is a constellation of seeing, speaking, and writing...'.¹¹⁰ This assemblage of senses to Morgan is the key to belief and religious understanding.¹¹¹ Giulio Carlo Argan described 'a sacred theatricality' whereby the interior and exterior of Baroque churches 'became a glorious forecourt to heaven.'¹¹² This emersion of the senses noted by Argan is testament to Morgan's claims and further proof to the importance of art to the religious experience. Therefore, the visual arts (according to Morgan) are equal and co-existing partners to text as a means of divine revelation within modern Christianity. This is seen clearly in elements of the Van Eyck pieces such as the direct use of scripture both OT and New within the works. I would suggest that by this motif Hubert and Jan van Eyck harmonise the mediums of text and image. This allows for an elucidation of the scriptural message to the viewer and participant in the religious experience.

By this same thinking, I would assert that the works of Hubert and Jan van Eyck provide material for such exploration. Andrée Hayum conducted an analysis of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* and in conclusion he stated that 'we as modern viewers still sense those charismatic resources and mythic roots of its visual expression.'¹¹³ This connection between viewer and artist may, as Hayum suggests, be something mystical, transcendent or even divine in nature.¹¹⁴ This is supported by Rudolph Otto who asserts that 'in great art a point is reached at which we may no

¹¹⁰ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Vulture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, Ltd, 2005), p.21

¹¹¹ Morgan, p.21

¹¹² Giulio Carlo Argan, *The Baroque Age* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 1989), p.81

¹¹³ Andrée Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.67

¹¹⁴ Hayum, p.67

longer speak of the magical but rather confronted by the numinous itself.¹¹⁵ What is suggested here is that a transcendent religious experience takes place when one views religious artwork. This power would be transcendent of time, giving pieces such as the works of Hubert and Jan van Eyck the ability to manifest such experiences with modern viewers.

In regard to the Annunciation scenes by Hubert and Jan van Eyck, I would argue that in relation to the text, these pieces provide for an important accompaniment to the Lucian narrative. John Tinsley once remarked that 'Christians have surrendered with amazing ease to the notion that the image is a lesser form of truth than the concept'.¹¹⁶ 'One can', he continues, detect 'a secret preference for language, words, speech, writing, as the appropriate and only satisfactory way of expressing theological truths and communicating the Gospel'.¹¹⁷ This preference, as I have already discussed, suggests a societal shift towards text over visual media in the pursuit of truth. But this does not mean that artwork is devoid of spiritual truths. In fact, I would suggest that artwork can aid in providing Christians with a connection with the scriptures they hold as central to their faith. By giving Christians a visual representation of the Annunciation, the shroud is lifted on this mysterious event to which scripture provides little detail. The Lucian narrative becomes ever more tangible to the contemporary Christian. Howes suggests that through altarpieces 'we can detect a fusion of visual and religious intensity'.¹¹⁸ By partaking and embracing in this fusion, including the utilisation of the works of Hubert and Jan van Eyck, I

¹¹⁵ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p.67

¹¹⁶ John Tinsley, 'Art and the Church: A Theologian's Viewpoint' in *Prophecy and Vision* ed. Peter Burman and Kenneth Nugent (Bristol: Committee for Prophecy and Vision, 1982) referenced by Howes, p.19

¹¹⁷ Tinsley reference, Howes, p.19

¹¹⁸ Howes, p.118

would without doubt, say that the individual would benefit in understanding of the scripture to which it pertains. Moreover, religious artwork should be seen as an extension to the process of religious understanding, particularly that of scripture. In my view, artwork should be an integral part of religious teaching and the Christian experience.

Conclusion

In chapter one of this work, *The Annunciation: A conversation on Virginity and the Character of Mary*, I unpicked the Lucian theology found in Luke 1:26-38 and explored the cult of Mary as identifying her as Virgin, Mother and 'New Eve'.

In Chapters two and three I conducted a comparative analysis of Hubert and Jan van Eyck's *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (c.1432) and Jan van Eyck's *The Annunciation* (c.1434-36) respectively, comparing them to the Lucian account of the Annunciation.

The final chapter, *The Motivation to Create: theology and art*, explored the relationship between art and religious text and its use in religious devotion and experience through the work of Graeme Howes.

Many individuals of our contemporary popular culture frequent galleries in order to view artwork which could be seen as both secular and religious. By removing pieces such as Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation* from an overtly religious environment, I would suggest that the painting takes on a new mode as a powerful example of religious experience. In its presence within a gallery, the piece is removed from its religious environment and placed within a secular space. Through this, it is free (or at least more free) from doctrinal, traditional and religious influences. For many, these influences are the reason they retreated from religion or continue to separate

themselves from it. This removal from the religious institution and its connotations allows the viewer his or her own opportunity to bring their own personal religious beliefs and struggles to the piece. This could be an understanding of the scripture on which the piece is based, or thoughts and feelings surrounding the theology and dogma deriving from the piece's implicit message.

In regards to the Annunciation such reflections may be personal doubts towards the feasibility of an immaculate conception or the existence of angelic beings. Cronin's understanding of Mary as both woman and mother, close but not quite divine provides a long-standing and ever-present fascination with the character of Mary.¹¹⁹ Her humanity seen in ability to bear a child and her almost divine strength to birth and raise the word made flesh (John 1:14), makes Mary a promising muse to artists and viewers of art. This is why I would argue that depictions of the Annunciation, particularly those produced by the Van Eyck brothers provide such powerful testimony. The secular and arguably free-thinking environment that religious art such as Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation* are now set, allows for an opportunity of personal exploration and even evangelisation through connection with the paintings. These pieces provide a portal to a scripture and a set of ideas in Roman Catholicism and Christianity more generally. By giving people the opportunity to explore these pieces they transfer their messages and 'numinous' nature to the viewer. A 'secular means [to] serve a sacred ends'.¹²⁰

Iconography is a key feature in Northern Renaissance artwork, including in the pieces upon which I have conducted this study. 'Wherever religion exists, its

¹¹⁹ Cronin, p.3

¹²⁰ Howes, p.137

symbols- visual, dramatic- are in constant use.¹²¹ By learning the language of these symbols and deciphering what theological idea they are representing, contemporary Christian viewers of these pieces will be able to 'reinhabit' such ideas into their understanding of the text.¹²² These icons, I would infer, enhance the religious experience that one can gain from viewing such artwork and they are often missing from modern art. Icons give the reader clear but also flexible signposts to the theology that the piece is attempting to disclose. This is part of what sets Northern Renaissance artwork apart from other pieces; but its inclusion is not vital to a dialogue with art. What is vital is a willingness to engage with the piece, to pursue a dialogue with it, drawing upon your own inferences and emotions to interpret the painting and its personal meaning to you.

As previously described, the Renaissance was a period that treasured books and academic texts. Yet in this era art also paved a way for a new means of religious devotion. Moreover, the works created by Hubert and Jan van Eyck manifest through contact with themselves a religious experience, a divine presence. They provide a dynamic opportunity for furthering spiritual and religious understanding of the fundamental aspects of the Christian faith, alongside the exegesis of religious texts such as the Lucian infancy narrative.

¹²¹ Howes, p.153

¹²² Howes, p.153

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