FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS AND THEORIES OF ART

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Author
JULIA VARELA

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PICTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ANUNCIATION AND CHANGING POWER RELATIONS BETWEN THE SEXES (*)

Introduction

In *Nacimiento de la mujer burguesa* [The birth of the bourgeois woman], I described how a series of interwoven processes in the late Middle Ages were reinforced and articulated by what we call the *feminization device*, which fostered a negative definition of the *nature* of women (Varela, 1997). This gradually defined the ideal of the *bourgeois woman*, for whom, as Vives explicitly stated, 'the home would be her entire republic'. This cloistering of women in the home was extensive in the nineteenth century when the bourgeois class became dominant and effected a new "turn of the screw" for male domination.

During the late Middle Ages, women of elevated and especially of noble rank, and even women of popular classes or female professionals in medicine, translation and other fields were not yet subject to the new codes that the Church and municipal governments would seek to impose. Thus they maintained a relative balance of power with men. However, after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, with the advent of the modern administrative state, urban women of the emerging middle classes began to bend to pressures requiring them to embrace a *voluntary* domestication: seclusion within the space and time of the home.

As I studied how this strong imbalance of power between the sexes in the Western world gestated and was institutionalized, I became interested in paintings of the Annunciation as encounters between the female image of Mary and the male image of Gabriel the archangel. My interest grew during a visit to the Wallace Collection in London, where I saw an impressive *Annunciation* by Philippe de Champagne. The composition lacked the characteristic architectural frame of Annunciation paintings in prior periods and Gabriel was to the right of Mary, in striking contrast with most others I had seen. I asked myself why Philippe de Champagne had conferred this privilege of place on Gabriel when it was almost always reserved for Mary. It occurred to me that a study of the pictorial representations of the Annunciation might test the hypotheses I had explored in *Nacimiento de la mujer burguesa*.

Genealogy as a sociological approach

For this research, I used the genealogical method developed by classical sociologists and more recently enhanced by Robert Castel, Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias. Such an approach begins with a social problem and seeks to reconstruct its genesis, follow its transformation, objectify its social functions, and disentangle its meaning (Castel, 2001: 67-75). I have based my work on gender studies, the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of social encounters and the history of art.

Art sociologists hold that artistic representations, and here we will speak specifically of pictorial expressions, are not the result of the painter's genius; a painting is primarily a condensation of social relations. Michael Baxandall states that 'a painting is the repository of a social relationship' in the sense that it reflects both the painter's training and what it means to be a painter at different times in history. It also includes a series of transactions between the painter, patrons, theological counsellors, observers, clients, etc. Erwin Panofsky emphasized in *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* that such representations remit one to a complex, variable culture and result from close collaboration between patrons, artists, poets and the *literati*.

Other unavoidable references include the works of Émile Durkheim, Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias on categories of knowledge, on how our understanding of space, time, causality, hierarchy and identity change with time and history. These three social scientists highlighted the social nature of these categories and Michel Foucault in *Words and Things* analysed the various *epistemes* or systems of classifying, representing, interpreting and understanding the world since the Renaissance. Some works by Erving Goffman, especially those on the sociology of encounters, also guided my enquiry. Particularly valuable was a 1976 article titled 'Gender Advertisements' in *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*. Goffman analysed the logic of interaction rituals but kept his analysis separate from history, so that the norms appeared as *given*. Goffman was not the only one to leave history aside; Peter Burke pointed out in the 1920s how anthropologists and sociologists broke with the past and limited themselves to the present. His book entitled *The Italian Renaissance:*

Culture and Society in Italy (Burke, 1987) provided me with valuable information. To counter-balance this de-contextualisation of art, I recurred to some of the great sociologists and art historians, among whom are Michael Baxandall and Erwin Panofsky.

Institutionalisation and codification of the image of the Annunciation

How did we get from the *Maestà*, the representation of the Virgin enthroned as the mother of God, or the *Teotokos* derived from the Byzantine tradition, to the image of the Annunciation at the end of the Middle Ages? Why did representations of the Annunciation become frequent in chapels, churches and city cathedrals, especially from the fourteenth century on? One could hypothesize that the Annunciation was the image used by the *popolo grasso*, who governed the main Italian cities from the end of the thirteenth century, to oppose that of the *Maestà*: a protector of the cities but also a political image directly linked to the Papacy and the Empire.

Such images acquired new value and became more democratic in tandem with secularization processes related to the *coniurationes*: the struggles of emergent social groups to access city government and replace the feudal aristocracy. The Church of Rome put up with this change, which was fostered by the mendicant Franciscan and Dominican orders. The increasing centralization and hierarchy of the Church was curiously combined with a search for a more amenable image of Mary, which at that time affected a re-definition of female nature, primarily driven by ecclesiastics.

The Annunciation cult rapidly spread throughout Western Europe, especially Italy, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. According to some art historians, Franciscans in Venice and Dominicans in Siena were somehow involved in promoting these new pious practices (Maginnis, 2001). The very same orders had denied women access to Christian-scholastic universities, and the Dominicans played an important role in controlling orthodoxy through Inquisition tribunals (Varela, 1997). Paola Tinagli affirms that through these practices and the innovative portrayal of Mary, women were inculcated with the virtues of chastity, humility, modesty and industry, leading to heightened concern for family: the new value system of the 'ascendant bourgeoisie' (Tinagli, 1997).

Art scholars have shown that representation of the Annunciation was strictly controlled, not only by the dominant aesthetic canons in each time period, but also by ecclesiastical consultants who based their censorship on written sources such as the Holy Scriptures. Changes coincided with developments in court literature, courtly love and the creation of the figure of the Lady. An important innovation occurred in the form of a new cycle of sculptures dedicated to the life of Mary. She acquired a special relevance (Schine, 1985) and was no longer a subsidiary image dependent on that of Christ, who had been the central figure in Romanesque art. Works dedicated to the life cycle of the Virgin originated in the thirteenth century and the Annunciation became a main theme represented in codices, mosaics, stained glass, sculpture and frescoes (Van Dijk, 1999). Studies of iconographic traditions of the Annunciation show that this representation became independent in the fourteenth century (Robb, 1936). Lucien Rudrauf adds that the Byzantine tradition was broken by the discovery of perspective, which was combined with *chiaroscuro* techniques to organize the representation of three-dimensional space (Rudrauf, 1943). John R. Spencer credits especially the contemporaries of Fra Angelico, such as Masaccio, Donatello and Brunelleschi, for breaking with tradition and attempting new directions that emphasized the organization of space and plasticity of figures (Spencer, 1955). Erwin Panofsky observed that perspective meant the symbolic representation of a world in which God tended to be absent (Panofsky, 1999). Daniel Arasse established a sort of 'elective affinity' between the Annunciation and the search for new forms of representation (Arasse, 1999: 17). Michael Baxandall underscored the kinship of painters and preachers: 'the painter was a professional visualizer of holy stories'. He distinguished three phases in the Annunciation: the angel's arrival, the angelic salutation and the dialogue between the angel and Mary. Likewise, Baxandall described the different attitudes of Mary in each phase: *Conturbatio* (disquiet), *Cogitatio* (reflection), *Interrogatio* (inquiry), and *Humiliatio* (submission) (Baxandall, 2000: 77-78).

Sociological categories should thus be applied to the sociological reading of a painting; by seeking to objectify historical and social processes one can observe regularities and innovations. In this way, we see the painting as a space for inscribing social relations within systems of representation.

Four ideal types

From an iconological analysis of more than 100 representations of the Annunciation, I have been able to establish four *ideal types* that dominated the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries: the *courtly* Annunciation, the *ecclesiastical* Annunciation with Italian and Flemish variants, the *Annunciation of the humanists* and finally the *Counter-Reformation Annunciation*. I would like to emphasize here the instruction of Max Weber, namely that *ideal types* should not be convenient heuristic constructions elaborated by the researcher, but must be based in historical reality.

1) The courtly Annunciation

To illustrate this ideal type I have chosen the *Annunciation* painted by Simone Martini in 1333 for an altar of the Duomo of Siena. This important painter enjoyed connections with certain European courts, such as that of Robert d'Anjou and the papal courts of Benedict XII and Clement VI, who commissioned several of his works. He was a friend of Petrarch and other representatives of civic humanism. Martini was effectively the official painter for the city of Siena until the papal court moved to Avignon in 1335.

This Annunciation is considered a masterpiece of gothic painting and seems to take inspiration from the *Golden Legend*. Indeed, this resplendent painting is made entirely of gold panels, the material base serving as a symbolic reference to divinity. Martini is thought to have been aided in the execution of this painting by his brother-in-law Lippo Memmi and a brother. Both painters were well acquainted with sophisticated goldsmithing techniques. Mary, as queen, sits on a throne wearing a red tunic to remind us of the Passion, covered with a blue mantle, the colour of the celestial world. Her left hand is resting on the book of the Holy Scriptures and she occupies the centre right portion of the painting, which is understood in Western culture as the most significant space. Gabriel is kneeling before her with an olive branch in his right hand, the symbol of peace. As a divine messenger, he is wearing golden clothes and communicates to Mary that she will be the mother of God. From his mouth come the words *Ave María, gratia plena. Dominus tecum*. Between the two is a vase of lilies that symbolizes Mary's purity. This representation breaks with the hieratism of Byzantine imagery but remains fairly flat, though the vase and the throne provide some sense of depth. At this point in time, the rules of perspective were not yet extensively used in painting and the Annunciation had not reached full autonomy.

The significance of Simone Martini's *Annunciation* resides in the influence it later exercised on "international Gothic" and especially in how it intertwines the courtly refinement characteristic of the nobility in the late Middle Ages with the sensibilities of the "rich bourgeoisie" who then governed the city of Siena. Martini's Annunciation was the first of its genre to be designed for the main altarpiece of a cathedral, which increased the creative challenge and defined its enormous dimensions of 2.65 m x 3.05 m.

By giving it insufficient context of production and meaning, some art historians contradict each other when interpreting this Annunciation. Martindale emphasizes the technical mastery achieved by Martini: his control of visual splendour and his decorum in expressing human emotion (Martindale, 1988). Meiss reminds us of the weight of commercial and financial oligarchies in the governments of Siena and Florence during the late thirteenth century. This cosmopolitan merchant bourgeoisie evolved towards a less rigid and hierarchical social order than that of feudalism. The new elites created a value system that emphasized civic responsibility, the family as an institution, moderation, and above all industriousness and piety (Meiss, 1988: 80 and ff.). Rosemberg links Martini's *Annunciation* with the importance of Aristotelian philosophy in empirical and inductive thinking and exploration of the world. Other contextual features included ambitious public projects, the refined culture of European courts and the internationalisation of politics and art (Rosemberg, 1990). All these influences assisted in the development of emotive new scenes in painting. Indeed, the expression of emotions constitutes one of the most

innovative features of Martini's *Annunciation*, which, along with the works of Duccio and Giotto in the *maniera greca*, was entirely novel at that time.

Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress describe how decoding pictorial space involves giving attention to dimensions of proximity and distance between figures in relation to categories of solidarity and power, which vary according to historical periods, cultures and the rank of the people involved. These authors suggest an ambivalent interaction between figures in this Annunciation: the gesture of the Virgin seems to raise barriers to communication (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 52-63).

We might also hypothesize that Martini's *Annunciation* reflects a certain balance of power between the two figures. Mary occupies the space of privilege on the right and is not represented in a submissive attitude; rather, she sits on a throne as a queen receiving an unexpected messenger. Any imbalance in power in this painting would favour Mary. Is she apathetic, or does her attitude reflect a certain reluctance towards Gabriel's invasion of her space? Martini's painting seems to support the thesis I developed in *Nacimiento de la mujer burguesa*: namely that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a fairly egalitarian relationship existed between men and women of certain social strata, particularly the nobility.

2) The ecclesiastic Annunciation

a)   Latin version: Fra Angelico (1440)

The Annunciation acquired its brand image almost a century later, in Florence especially, thanks to the Dominican cleric Fra Angelico and the Carmelite Fra Filippo Lippi. The codification of this religious theme acquired a life of its own, along with new aesthetic properties. Fra Angelico trained as a painter in the convent under another Dominican, Giovanni Dominici. The convent of St. Mark in Florence houses the main museum of Fra Angelico's paintings, though his works are spread among the convents and monasteries of that preaching order and others. In 1446 he began to spend long periods in Rome, painting for Pope Eugene IV.

The Annunciation that best represents this ideal type is attributed to Fra Angelico, who painted it around 1440 for the Dominican convent of Fiesole. It has been in the *Museo del Prado* since 1861. Fra Angelico was one of the first painters to apply the rules of perspective established by Leon Bautista Alberti, which were fairly well-known by 1440. He applies techniques that employ both the vanishing point and the framing of the image, to which he assigns special value. The surface design is rectangular but the encounter takes place in a square open portico with celestial blue vaults filled with golden stars. Three columns in the foreground and three receding on the left remind us of the mystery of the Trinity. Mary is seated on a throne to the right of the portico, with her hands crossed over her chest and a book open in her lap. Gabriel crosses the portico and remains in the first arch on the left, in this case bowing with hands crossed over his chest but not kneeling. In the background between both is an open door that shows Mary's room as a sort of monastic cell. In the rectangle composing the far left we see a garden full of flowers —an allusion to the feast of the Annunciation— with the representation of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. From the upper left, a shaft of golden light stretches from the hand of God the Father to Mary, and the Holy Spirit is seen approaching her in the form of a dove. Both space and time are symbolically composed here to synthesize the mystery of redemption: the Expulsion from Paradise reminds us of sin and Mary's life cycle, represented on the predella along the base of the painting remits us to the Incarnation.

In his work entitled *Flemish Primitives*, Panofsky writes that a style known as *international gothic* emerged around 1400, resulting from the inter-penetration and fusion of different artistic currents. The works of Fra Angelico and Robert de Campin are generally considered to be representative of international gothic. The bourgeois organisation of Italian city-states, by now entrenched in strong competition and rivalry for prestige and power, had facilitated the development of this rich, sophisticated style.

'The aristocracy, inhibited by a permanent threat of intrusion, developed a sort of defence mechanism that involved over-stylising in a manner foreign to the dominant feudalism of the past and the self-assured emerging bourgeoisie. It was natural for the new mannerisms and luxuries of the nobility to be imitated by those they sought to exclude, the *nouveaux-riches*'

(Panofsky, 1998: 73)

Jean Paris points out that it was not until 'the arrival of international gothic and the courts of love that the sacred incorporated a bit of amiability. Mary now became a young noble in her oratory, gracious, enchanting, before whom the Angel deploys the delightful manners of a courtier' (1997: 57-58).

What were the production conditions of this Annunciation? Anthony Blunt argues that the Florentine generation of 1420 inaugurated a new artistic ideal that expressed the aspirations of the most enlightened members of the middle classes. This occurred at a historical moment in which the Medici governed the Republic of Venice and the city was embellished with the works of Brunelleschi, Donatello and others. The new style of painting, which some labelled "naturalist", expressed a fresh understanding of art partially linked to the aesthetic theories of the humanists: trust in human reason, and a "scientific" study of the world (Blunt, 1972: 23 and ff.). Baxandall analysed the categories and concepts that guided pictorial theory at that time, based on a text by Cristóforo Landino. This Florentine humanist and friend of Alberti translated Pliny's *Natural History* and used metaphors to describe the works of artists. He applied three terms to Fra Angelico's painting: *ornato*, *vezzoso* and *devoto* [ornate, blithe and pious], indicating that the artist's works were pleasant, skilfully executed, easily understandable and adequate for the moral edification and instruction of the observer (Baxandall, 2000: 163-164).

How did the ecclesiastical Annunciation supplant the courtly Annunciation, and why? Multiple forces undoubtedly intervened in this change: the aesthetic theories pioneered by Alberti, Dante, and the humanists; new religious, social and commercial practices; and the influence of the mendicant orders, who were promoting a new pedagogy of the image. Somewhere in the process, Mary transitioned from *Theotokos* to *ancilla Domini*, 'the handmaid of the Lord'.

Mary is in a submissive attitude in all known Annunciations by Fra Angelico. One could argue that he was a "modern" painter who partially assumed Alberti's principles of perspective, composition and colour. However, he used them to faithfully and clearly transmit the main theological message that had been developed the thirteenth century and extended into the Golden Age, which paradoxically coincides with the climax of a negative Church perspective regarding women (Ranke-Heinemann, 1994). At the time of Fra Angelico's paintings, the institutional church had already begun to redefine the relationship between the sexes, assigning women an inferior nature in homilies and theological treatises alike, while preaching an indissoluble, monogamous marriage within which women were subordinate. The Dominicans had been promoting this since the thirteenth century, and Fra Angelico became one of the leading propagandists. In this Annunciation, Fra Angelico re-interprets Simone Martini's codification process and uses splendour to more effectively appropriate the theme for the greater glory of the Church. It gave efficacy and force to the message: as agreeable, colourful, clear and diaphanous a message as any well-constructed and polished sermon. For Catholics, Fra Angelico's painting in the Prado is the quintessential representation of the Annunciation.

b)   The Netherlands version: Robert de Campin (1425).

In the early fifteenth century in the Netherlands, a pictorial tradition was developing separately from the southern countries. According to Paris, the commercial bourgeoisie had triumphed, forming free and prosperous communes.

'The art reflects the tastes of these merchants, bankers, ship owners, city planners, city councillors and patrons, who were more acquainted with managing their goods and cities than with poetic or theological subtleties; the virtues thus reflected were those of vigour, rigour and serenity. Gabriel the Archangel now reflected the discreet security of an ambassador and the Virgin Mary the robust bearing of a burgomaster's daughter.'

(Paris, 1997: 61)

The reference work I have chosen for this ideal type is the *Annunciation* painted by Robert de Campin for the Merode altarpiece around 1425, now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of New York. In the centre of this triptych we find the Annunciation, on the left the donors and on the right St. Joseph in his workshop. Panofsky notes how the abundant objects in the painting, along with the folds of the clothing, almost asphyxiate the figures. Campin creates a sensation of depth using linear perspective, but incorporating his own stylistic elements (Panofsky, 1998: 67-68).

In this case, the Annunciation shares similarities with paintings by van Eyck, Bouts or van der Weyden. The scene takes place inside a house but the first glance can be deceptive; the painting is replete with religious symbolism. We find an affinity for detail and note how everyday objects shine, expressing both divine splendour and the weighty ethos of the wealthy Dutch bourgeoisie (Eisler, 1988).

Flemish Annunciations are particular for their absence of actual encounter, according to Goffman's strict, face-to-face definition of encounters. Here also, the "encounter" between the angel and Mary lacks any depiction of real interaction. To explain this paradox we must revisit the Dutch social and cultural context. The *devotio moderna* emerged in the final third of the fourteenth century and reached its maximum expression in the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, who sought spiritual reformation of the Church. In *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis explains that the movement was mainly characterised by mental prayer. It could be argued that Campin's *Annunciation* reflects this reformation. The "encounter" between the Virgin and the Angel might symbolically represent an internal encounter suggestive of meditation: an imaginary space more than a social interaction. It is also quite probable that Flemish painters close to the Church were the first to feel uncomfortable with a tête-à-tête between a male and female figure in an intimate setting.

Although the composition does not manifest a strong imbalance of power between the figures, in Robert de Campin's *Annunciation* the scene takes place inside a house, in contrast with most Italian and French versions. Despite the wealth of objects, the room in which Mary appears to be meditating bears resemblance to a monastic cell. This Flemish variant of the ecclesiastical Annunciation seems to indicate that in Dutch painting the portrayal of female domestication and enclosure within the walls of a house began earlier than in the Italian Renaissance.

3) The Annunciation of the humanists

The choice of the *Annunciation* by Leonardo da Vinci (1472), which is currently housed at the Uffizi Museum, as an example of this ideal type is well justified. Da Vinci is considered one of the greatest painters of all time and the prototype of a Renaissance man, along with Rafael and Michelangelo. His studies spanned zoology, anatomy, botany, geology, optics, hydraulics and mathematics. Da Vinci was born near Florence in 1452 and trained in the Verrocchio studio. In 1472, he was accepted into the Florentine guild corresponding to painters, which authorised him to open a studio; in 1478 he became an independent master. He painted this Annunciation while still under Verrocchio, who competed with the Polloiaolo brothers in adopting new techniques such as oil medium. Da Vinci worked for many religious institutions and patrons such as Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan and Caesar Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI. Louis II of France named him Court Painter and he worked for the Vatican as a protégée of Pope Leo X. Leonardo da Vinci died while working in France under Francis I.

Cheney identifies diverse geometrical formats in the organization of da Vinci's *Annunciation*. The rectangular background of the painting presents a combined landscape and seascape. A parapet separates it from a rectangle nearer the observer, consisting of a *hortus conclusus*, with Gabriel and an elegant architectonic lectern. A square defines the space in which Mary sits reading in the vestibule, which is delimited behind her by the external wall of a Renaissance palace, with an open door revealing a bed. The rectangles and squares of the lectern reinforce the geometrical composition of the entire scene (Cheney, 2010). Cheney also notes the symbolism of the Annunciation, distinguishing between what might be called the natural level —represented by the spring landscape and particularly expressed by the atmospheric perspective— and the divine level manifest in the *hortus conclusus* with its carpet of flowers. The latter is associated with the annunciation feast but also alludes to the renaissance of the Church through the incarnation of Christ: linking the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. Elsewhere, Cheney describes the context in which the painting was produced: in the Florence of Lorenzo de Medici, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola were translating Greek manuscripts and the Platonic Academy was created, all of which gave rise to a new

artistic and intellectual environment. The *studia humanitatis* —linked at first to an educational, philosophical and literary movement manifest in the works of Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Valla, Bruni and many other humanists— had achieved strong social and political recognition by the mid-fifteenth century (Cheney, 1985).

Peter Burke emphasizes Italy's earlier development of political language and thought in connection with *good government*. Political institutions were perceived as human affairs and therefore modifiable, which helped facilitate the search for creative solutions even outside political spheres. The Renaissance world gradually embraced an understanding of space and time which departed from that of Alberti's era. In da Vinci's day, the priority of discovering the divine presence or fixed laws in nature had given way to a new search in which "artists" enjoyed increased autonomy.

Da Vinci studied light, shadow, and colour; he was a true innovator in aerial perspective and the atmospheric view. Opposed to any sort of idealism, he departed from Alberti's notion that a painter achieves ideal beauty by selecting the most beautiful things in nature (Blunt, 1972: 21). According to da Vinci's theory of expression, painting should reveal emotions and ideas through facial expressions, physical gestures, dress and ways of speaking that fit the age, rank, social position and gender of those represented in the picture.

Brown considers this Annunciation to coincide with Alberti's principles of a simple scene that incorporates a staggered effect leading towards the figures. Accordingly, Gabriel would be the true protagonist of the picture. Mary's home reflects knowledge of Florentine villa gardens of that period, incorporating a certain conception of air, atmosphere, and nature, enhanced by the oil technique that had emerged around 1470. Da Vinci achieved greater tonality than most painters and opened the door to an understanding of painting that transcended its aesthetic and formal features. The result here is a romantic and evocative picture that also tells of the artist's interest in "scientific" research (Brown, 1998). Contrary to Brown's analysis, however, we observe a very symmetrical, balanced composition in this Annunciation. If anyone dominates, it is Mary: seated on the right and higher than Gabriel, who kneels in homage on the left. In contrast with the ecclesiastical Annunciations, here Mary is not in a submissive attitude but instead expresses some authority. Does this greater balance between the figures reflect humanist theories on the relationship between the sexes? The various programmes developed by humanists in the *studia humanitatis* clearly diverged from the sexist approach of the Dominicans and Franciscans. The humanists held a significantly less negative view of female nature and women were known participants in some of their studies. Da Vinci's pictorial arrangement seems to express a certain appreciation for the world of women that can also be found in the works of Michelangelo and Rafael, who moved in circles close to the humanists.

Kelly-Gadol states that the relationship between sexes in the Renaissance became "modern" through the re-interpretation of courtly love in which '*the woman stopped being an object of real love to become the object of idealised love*' (Kelly-Gadol, 1977: 152). Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Castiglione contributed to this re-formulation. Is this re-interpretation reflected in the evocative, romantic atmosphere some ascribe to this da Vinci painting?

4) The Counter-Reformation Annunciation

Let us now go to the France of the 1640s, when the Renaissance atmosphere had been partially swept aside by the rigours of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The Annunciation I have chosen for this category was painted in 1645 by Philippe de Champaigne and is currently located in the Wallace Collection in London. André Felibien informs us of the life and work of this great painter in *Entretiens sur les vies et les ouvrages desplus excellents peintres anciens et modernes*. Philippe de Champaigne trained in Brussels in the *atelier* of Jean Bouillon and travelled to Italy when he was nineteen. Upon his return to France, he came into contact with Poussin and collaborated with him for a time. In 1628 Champaigne became the court painter for Marie de Medici, the wife of Henri IV. He frequented aristocratic circles and was part of the *Partie Devoté* [Devoted Party] that opposed the policies of Cardinal Richelieu. Nonetheless, in 1631 Richelieu named him as his personal painter and sat for numerous portraits. Known as a "wise and pious" man in his time, Philippe de Champaigne was often commissioned to paint religious works and is considered the main representative of Jansenism (Pericolo, 2002: 109).

The absence of narrative elements and the sobriety of the scene are intensified by the size of this Annunciation: 3.34 m x 2.14 m. Though of unknown provenance, most specialists date it between 1644 and 1648, which coincides chronologically with Philippe de Champaigne's involvement in Jansenist circles (Marin, 1995). Art critics marvel at the force, sobriety and modernity of this Annunciation. Light coming from the right side of this large work projects Gabriel's shadow on the ground, endowing him with a sort of heightened reality. Mary is also standing up, located now to the left of the painting, wearing a red tunic and blue mantle as usual. There is no longer a Bible in her hands or lap, but there are books on a low lectern shelf. In the lower left foreground, a cloth on the ground represents tasks that according to new ecclesiastical doctrine pertained to the realm of women. In the upper part, the heavens open on a luminous representation of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, surrounded by angels.

May we properly speak of a Jansenist aesthetic? The concept was not coined until 1908, in an article by André Fontaine. Louis Marin, one of the main scholars on Philippe de Champaigne, notes the specificity with which Port-Royal members regarded the Bible as containing the truth given to men by God. Champaigne's paintings sought to transcribe divine truth without ambivalence, giving rise to the ascetic aesthetic: unadorned, free of rhetoric, aligned with the Counter-Reformation but distant from Jesuit Baroque and therefore close to the Protestant Reformation. The force of this painting seems to come from the fact that the artist acknowledges it as mere representation but hopes to transcend it in order to simply state divine truth through humanity. In this eminently spiritual painting, technique is pushed to the limit to serve a higher religious aim. Thus, the reflectiveness of Champaigne can be likened to that of Velazquez, Rembrandt and Zurbaran.

During Champaigne's youth, the struggle between Protestants and Catholics had produced horrifying massacres in France. The Catholic reaction included acts of reparation, processions, ceremonies of expiation and other collective rituals, along with the killing of Huguenots. The image and cult of Mary swiftly divided Catholics and Protestants (Marin, 1995: 248); to paint an Annunciation in seventeenth-century France was tantamount to a Catholic declaration of faith. Given his affinity with the spirituality and aesthetics of Port-Royal, Philippe de Champaigne took this to a new level. Bernard Dorival, a leading specialist in Port-Royal art, suggests that in this current all profane painting and art understood to give pleasure to the senses was considered anathema (Dorival, 1976). Philippe de Champaigne has de-iconized the painting and removed all decorative elements. In doing so, the Annunciation becomes a stark encounter between a man and a woman, governed by the doctrine of the Church and entirely submitted to the omnipresent eye of God (Gandelman, 1977).

Champaigne also painted an *Annunciation of St. Joseph*. Reading between the lines, we find that the *feminization mechanism* fostered by the Catholic Church and closely linked to *patria potestas* [paternal authority] was unsustainable unless the husband had already been informed of the mystery. This social re-definition of the sexes took place at the dawn of modernity, marked by the advent of Cartesian rationality, in which men acquired greater dominion over a female sphere increasingly given to emotion and sentiment. At this point in history, we find Mary displaced to the left in most paintings, while Gabriel occupies the noble space to the right and becomes the clearly dominant figure. This trend was soon evident in Annunciations by Titian, Caravaggio, El Greco, Murillo, Zurbarán, Barocci, Rubens, Poussin, Stomer, Strozzi and others. We note an exception in the *Annunciation* by Artemisia Gentileschi, now housed in the *Museo de Capodimonte*.

5) "Deviant" Annunciations

Most pictorial representations of the Annunciation can fit within the typologies proposed, but some break with the dominant representational canons of each historical moment. I will only refer here to one painted by Lorenzo Lotto in 1534, which is now in the *Museo Civico di Recanati*. This Annunciation caused great scandal in its day, eliciting the following reaction from Leonardo da Vinci, who cautioned other painters not to follow such a bad example:

> '(...) some days ago I saw the painting of an angel who, in delivering the Annunciation seemed to be driving Mary from her room with movements that would indicate the sort of attack one would make on a despised enemy; and Mary seemed inclined to throw herself out of the window in desperation'
>
> (Baxandall, 2000: 78)

Lotto's *Annunciation* clearly expresses surprise at the unexpected arrival of a stranger, so that even the cat that appears between the Angel and Mary —a symbol of night and the diabolic— reinforces with raised hair and arched back this sensation of flight and defence in the face of an imminent threat. This rendering is the free creation of a painter who travelled from city to city without sufficient official recognition for his work. It clearly contains representations that strayed from the usual norms established by the church.

Final reflections

Variants of the Annunciation from the fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries express the changing world views and political positions of the Church, which heavily impacted the social re-definition of the sexes. If we were to chronologically transcribe the various static representations of the Annunciation into a sort of animated film, we would observe that Mary begins by receiving Gabriel from her throne, seated as a queen on the right side of the painting, while later submissively accepting the divine will expressed in the ecclesiastical Annunciation, almost kneeling. The humanists restored a certain balance of power between the figures, while the Counter-Reformation depicts the angel in flight: the super-natural dominates over the natural. Mary assumes an attitude of inferiority and dependence; from that point on she was systematically relegated to the left of the painting, often kneeling and submissive. In the seventeenth century, the Annunciation was replaced by the image of the Immaculate Conception, encouraged by Franciscans and Jesuits. As biology and medicine began to move from the social realm to enlighten theology and procreation, the incarnation gradually lost its mystery. Through their microscopes, modern scientists had discovered the egg and the sperm; this unveiling of the enigma of maternity helped to transform religious codes (Darmon, 1981).

In 1676, Pope Clement X established the feast of the Rosary and the Virgin became an archetype of purity and femininity. The cult to St. Joseph also flourished.

'Devotion to St. Joseph hardly existed in the Middle Ages but was particularly emphasized by Gerson and later by St. Theresa of Jesus, St. Francis of Sales, Jean-Jacques Olier and Cardinal De Berulio, deeply penetrating the Christian world. The Holy See finally established this feast on 19 March.'

(Llorca et al., 1967: 1081-1082)

For believers, Mary was the woman to emulate. Many religious and lay women have since lived in their own flesh the impossibility of being both virgins and mothers, which paradoxically augmented their religiosity, subordination and dependence.

In the seventeenth century, leading figures of the rising bourgeoisie further tightened the screws of the feminization mechanism by making the home and maternity the domain of women as men monopolized new Cartesian rationality, words, the public sphere, business, professions, and the management of symbolic values, including those sacralised by male ecclesiastics.

The representation of the Annunciation disappeared during the seventeenth century. The theme was revived in the mid-nineteenth century by the English pre-Raphaelites, who were grounded in the neo-gothic, in restoring value to the medieval and Renaissance worlds, and social romanticism that argued for the equality of sexes. A new era dawned in an industrialised world, as women began to speak with their own voices and break the silence of centuries.

(*) A different version of this text can be found under the title "El poder de las imágenes. Las representaciones pictóricas de la Anunciación y el dispositivo de feminización," in Julia VARELA and Fernando ÁLVAREZ-URÍA, *Materiales de sociología del arte*, Siglo XXI, Madrid, 2008.

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