

## THE MERODE ALTARPIECE (1425-1428)

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ef/Robert\\_Campin\\_-\\_Triptych\\_with\\_the\\_Annunciation%2C\\_known\\_as\\_the\\_%22Merode\\_Altarpiece%22\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ef/Robert_Campin_-_Triptych_with_the_Annunciation%2C_known_as_the_%22Merode_Altarpiece%22_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

Robert Campin was not definitely identified as the artist until the 1970's. Before that he was referred to as the Master of Flamalle. He was not a court painter but a townsman catering to the tastes of well-to-do fellow citizens. The altarpiece was commissioned for the private use of the 2 donors piously kneeling outside the Virgin's chamber. The man is a member of the Imbrecht family of the town of Mechelen in Belgium. The family coat of arms is in the stained-glass window in the center panel. The woman appears to have been added to the painting by another artist after the painting was completed, perhaps because the donor married.

This is the earliest Annunciation in panel painting to occur in a fully equipped domestic interior. To transfer a supernatural event from a symbolic setting to an everyday environment, without making it look trivial or incongruous, Campin used the method known as "disguised symbolism," which means that almost any detail within the picture, however casual, may carry a symbolic message. Because of that, the smallest and least conspicuous details are rendered with the same concentrated attention as the sacred figures.

A scroll and a book are in front of Mary, symbolizing the Old and New Testaments, and the part that Mary and the Christ child played in the fulfillment of prophecy. The cloth between her hands and the book is a practical way of keeping the leather binding clean.

The table is sixteen-sided, referring to the 16 main Hebrew prophets. The lion finials on the bench may refer to the throne of Solomon. The water basin and the towel on its rack are tributes to Mary as the "vessel

most clean” and the “well of living waters.” They may also refer to the vessels used by a priest to wash his hands during Mass. The table is usually seen as an altar, and the archangel Gabriel wears the vestments of a deacon. A tiny figure of Jesus, holding a cross, flies down towards Mary, representing her impregnation by God. The candle has just been extinguished because there is no longer need for it, the light of the world having entered the room. Mary sits on the floor to show her humility. The folds of her dress, and the way the light plays on it, create a star, probably alluding to comparisons of Mary to a star. By placing Mary in a comfortable, domestic interior, complete with furniture and knickknacks, the painter has made a *bourgeoisie* of the Virgin. One critic commented that the luxuriance of Mary’s robes makes it clear that she hasn’t been doing any housework lately.

The donors are kneeling in a guarded, walled garden, gaping open-eyed through the door at the miracle of the Annunciation. The walled garden is a symbol of Mary’s virginity. The guard represents the Prophet Isaiah. The rosebush, violets and daisies in the left wing, and the lilies in the center panel, are flowers associated with the Virgin. Roses denote her charity, violets her humility, daisies her innocence and purity, and lilies her purity. The presence of flowers in the garden indicates that it is springtime.

The Merode Altarpiece is the first painting to honor Joseph, the humble craftsman, by showing him at work next door. He is constructing a mouse trap, symbolizing Christ’s trapping and defeat of the devil, a metaphor used 3 times by St. Augustine. In an alternative view, Joseph is constructing wine-making equipment, which would symbolize the Eucharistic wine and Christ’s passion. However, there is definitely a mouse trap on the ledge outside the window. The tools in his workshop are chosen to symbolically prefigure the passion: the sword-shaped saw in the foreground alludes to the weapon that Peter would use to cut off

the ear of the high priest's servant; the log recalls the wood of the cross; the stick propped against it, the crown of thorns; nails, hammers, pliers, and screwdrivers all prefigure the instruments of crucifixion. A busy street is visible outside of Joseph's window, but he turns his back on the earthly temptations out there. One of the figures in the street is a tiny child being led by the hand, a reminder of a world in which people grow old and die. Some critics have commented on the appearance that Mary and Joseph are living together, even though they do not marry until after the Annunciation. But if you look closely outside Joseph's window, you can see snowflakes falling, suggesting that it is winter. If it is spring in the garden and winter in the town, then the triptych may well be intended to symbolize the time that passed between March 25 and December 25, between Christ's conception and his birth.

For more information on the symbolism of the Merode altarpiece see <https://artincontext.org/merode-altarpiece/>