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Simone Martini's *The Annunciation*: A Look Into Communication Devices

Simone Martini's *Annunciation*, painted in 1333 for the altar of St. Ansanus in the Cathedral of Siena is one of his

most treasured works. This brilliantly decorated altarpiece can now be found at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. It represents a standard in Sienese Annunciation scenes by initiating a series of paintings that follow a similar approach.¹ The scene depicts the angel Gabriel kneeling in front of the Virgin Mary. There are



Simone Martini. *The Annunciation*. 1333. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

winged seraphims surrounding a dove flying above the space in between Gabriel and Mary. Gabriel extends an olive branch as an offering of peace to Mary.² A vase full of lilies, Mary's iconic symbol of

¹ Henk Van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces, 1215-1460* (Groningen, Egbert Forseten Publishing, 1990), 99.

² Dr. Steven Zucker, Dr. Beth Harris, "Simone Martini, *Annunciation*," 4:34, Nov. 20, 2011, Khan Academy.

purity rests on the marble floor in the middle of the angel and the Madonna.³ One of the most impressive aspects of this piece is the punched gold inscription which flows from the mouth of the angel Gabriel directly towards Mary, who cowers away from the angel bringing this message to her.

This altarpiece was commissioned as a set of four altarpieces for the Duomo di Siena dedicated to the city's patron saints; Savinus, Ansanus, Victor and Crescentius.⁴ Martini's *Annunciation* was originally placed as the altarpiece for the altar of Saint Ansanus. These four pieces each depicted a different moment in the life of the Virgin. This is especially significant because Siena dedicated itself to Mary and felt a very strong connection with her. The altar of St. Ansanus, directly to the left of the high altar, would have been screened off from the rest of the church, cementing Martini's beautiful altarpiece as one of the more important works in the Cathedral.⁵ This constricts the audience of this piece solely to the clergy and Sieneese elite who would have been allowed access to these parts of the church. This elevates the viewership to the highly educated few that could read the Latin inscription and fully comprehend these striking words. This scene would have also been placed but a few feet from Duccio's magnificent *Maesta*, created twenty years earlier, in 1311. As a follower and contemporary of Duccio, Martini was highly aware of his masterpiece. The influence is apparent in Mary's signature blue robe contrasted with the bright gold background. Although not a unique feature, this aspect in both pieces has the effect of enlivening the motionless figure and placing her

³ Emilio Cecchi, "The 'Annunciation'," in *Sieneese Painters of the Trecento*. (London & New York, 1931), 85.

⁴ Diana Norman, *Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval City State* (New Haven, 1999), 68.

⁵ Diana Norman, *Siena and the Virgin*, 68.

into action within this divine world the artists have created.⁶ The strong Gothic influence apparent in the sinuous lines, elaborately designed textiles and elongated figures of the *Annunciation* also recall Duccio.⁷

Both the inscription and the position of Mary in the painting reveal a new approach to depicting this classic scene. Mary is represented as pious and pure, fearful of what this visit could mean for her.⁸ The inscription floating through the gold background to Mary states the first lines of the Ave Maria prayer, ‘Ave gratia plena Dominus tecum’.⁹ This method of displaying direct communication has evolved throughout the decades, and yet is particularly significant in this work. Martini has effectively evoked the viewer to pronounce these words aloud with Gabriel using this technique.

The words of Gabriel hold great significance, they reveal to Mary the word of God, her intended destiny. This crucial moment, especially the way Martini has portrayed the urgency of this message, reveals that it is not to be ignored. It also appears as if the dove representing the Holy Spirit, flying above the Virgin, is speaking to her. All of these signals of communication serve to highlight the importance of the scene. The way Mary reacts in this depiction emphasizes her modesty and reluctance as a pure woman to accept this heavenly visit. She turns away, grabbing her distinct deep blue robe in a frightened gesture. Time is implied during this scene, it is clear that Mary has been interrupted, from the placement of her finger in her book, while piously reading her scripture. This manner

⁶ Timothy Hyman, “Simone Martini: ‘The New Sweet Style’” in *Sieneese Painting*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 60-61.

⁷ Bruce Cole, *Sieneese Painting: From Its Origins to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 82-83.

⁸ Timothy Hyman, “Simone Martini” in *Sieneese Painting*, 61.

⁹ Ann van Dijk, “The Angelic Salutation in Early Byzantine and Medieval Annunciation Imagery,” *The Art Bulletin* 81.3 (1999): 420.

of depicting the Annunciation becomes widely popular in Siena during this time. Taddeo di Bartolo and Giovanni di Pietro produce Annunciation scenes in the very same vein as Martini's, with a kneeling Gabriel offering an olive branch, and a modest Mary turning away.¹⁰

The paintings by Bartolo and Pietro also contain a key element of Simone's piece, the Latin inscription flowing into Mary's mouth. This method of communication cannot be denied as a formative way to evoke a response from the viewer. The devout would have been familiar with these words and would have been inspired to imitate the angel's action, to kneel before the Virgin and utter this same phrase.¹¹ However, Martini is not necessarily adding a new aspect to this classic scene. His version may be the most exquisite, but it is by no means the oldest. This tradition of the Annunciation scene with an inscription included is known from the eighth century, from mosaic panels by Giacomo Grimaldi that were in the oratory of Pope John VII.¹² This depiction of the Annunciation includes the oldest representation of the very same Latin phrase Simone uses. There are earlier depictions of this phrase, written in Greek, found on gold medallions as early as the mid fifth century in Istanbul.¹³ The frequent use of this prayer in artwork makes it a natural choice for Simone, yet his approach to this scene remains unique.

¹⁰ Henk Van Os, *Sieneese Altarpieces*, 103.

¹¹ Van Dijk, "The Angelic Salutation," 420-423.

¹² Van Dijk goes in depth regarding the oratory of Pope John VII. She also gives more connections to the precise placement of the inscription within the mosaic. Van Dijk, "The Angelic Salutation," 424.

¹³ There are more examples of works produced a little later than this time. Van Dijk also explores the patristic commentary on the Book of Luke, which is not pertinent to my argument. Van Dijk, "The Angelic Salutation," 426.

The Siennese tradition of the Annunciation, that Martini creates also extends to other cities. Florence accepts and adopts this tendency to show Mary in this reluctant posture, although it does decrease entering the fifteenth century.¹⁴ Mary's position may be one of the only features that infiltrated into Florentine culture, as opposed to the Gothic flowing lines. Nonetheless it shows the prominence of Siennese painters and their style in the Trecento.

There are definite symbolic boundaries formed within the space. As the angel conveys his message, the words combined with Mary's positioning and the dove of the Holy Spirit create a triangle. This intentional placement by Martini of the three-sided figure in the middle of the composition would have registered with the faithful clergy viewing the work. The three inherent parts of the Trinity are right there facing the viewer, the words of God (the father) are told through the angel, the dove represents the holy ghost, and Mary herself is the vessel for her son, Christ.¹⁵ Even the beak of the dove is open, as if he is speaking to Mary as well, notifying her of this life-changing event. All of these elements correspond to the aspect of communication within altarpieces of the fourteenth century. This intentional placement by Martini of the three-sided figure in the middle of the composition would have registered with the faithful clergy viewing the work. He uses the gold background and creates a very shallow space for the two figures

¹⁴ Spencer only references Siena briefly, as his article focuses on Florence at a later date than Martini's piece is created. However, it is important since it reveals more about the history of the Annunciation scene in Medieval Italy. John R. Spencer, "Spatial Imagery of the Annunciation in Fifteenth Century Florence," *The Art Bulletin* 37.4 (1955): 274.

¹⁵ Dr. Steven Zucker, Dr. Beth Harris, "Simone Martini, *Annunciation*," 4:34, Khan Academy, Nov. 20, 2011. <http://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-history/art-history-1300-1400-proto-renaissance/siena/v/martini--annunciation--1333>.

to interact to transport the faithful into the celestial realm.¹⁶ Harkening back to several decades prior, when the Byzantine style was preferred by patrons, Martini revisits this style, although it was quite unlike some of his other more progressive paintings, such as the *Guidoriccio da Fogliano* in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. Although the *Guidoriccio* is a secular subject matter, it shows that Martini was not incapable of creating naturalistic pieces of work.¹⁷

Simone Martini's *Annunciation* can be viewed as an experiment of communicative features within one of the oldest subject matters. Martini uses the punched gold technique in the altarpiece as emphasis on the words of Gabriel. They are meant to literally stand out from the piece and enter the worshippers mouth, evoking prayer.¹⁸ He understands what is necessary to create a feeling from an image, the rippling of the angel's drapery behind him suggests that he has just landed, almost as if you can feel the breeze created from his arrival. As he offers the olive branch to Mary, her usual iconography is present, the lilies in the background, a symbol of her purity. Martini keeps the traditional elements in tact while using the dove and seraphim to virtually speak to Mary. These subtle details elevate this masterpiece and create a model for annunciation scenes to come.

¹⁶ Cole, *Sienese Painting*, 83.

¹⁷ Cole, *Sienese Painting*, 80.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis on the Punched gold decoration see, Mojmír Frinta, "An Investigation of the Punched Decoration of Mediaeval Italian and Non-Italian Panel Paintings," *The Art Bulletin* 47.2 (1965):261-265

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