



## VIDEO TRANSCRIPTION

### 2 | Annunciation and Incarnation



ENCOUNTER  
**BEAUTY**

Commentary on Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Annunciation* by  
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Can you imagine how challenging it must have been to paint the two-thousand-year-old mystery of the Annunciation after it had been depicted by endless talented artists? It would be a daunting task for anyone. But Henry Ossawa Tanner was used to challenges.

As one of the earliest African-American painters, Tanner faced discrimination and moved to Europe where, through hard work and a lot of talent, he found fame and fortune. Despite his successes, he remained close to his religious roots. The son of a minister in the African Methodist Church, Tanner specialized in religious subject matters. And one of his greatest paintings is this 1897 Annunciation. One of the things Tanner did to make his Annunciation special was to travel to the holy land where he studied the setting, the light, the lands, the costumes, and the people in order to give a note of authenticity to His Image, which was often lacking in the Renaissance versions. You can see the result of his study.



The Annunciation, Tanner, Henry Ossawa / Philadelphia Museum of Art / Bridgeman Images

Mary is in a simple austere room, not a fancy silk-lined chamber, like in Renaissance paintings. The scratched plaster walls are decorated with a bright blanket and clay tiles cover the floor. Most artists like to show the Virgin reading or working. But look at Mary sitting up in bed with crumpled bedsheets around her. She looks like she has been awakened. She doesn't look like the fined veiled ladies we see in earlier painters; Tanner doesn't paint halos or flowers or fancy clothes. He tries to show her as a young girl, the way she would have been at the time the angel came to visit her. But then look at how he portrays Gabriel.

We are so used to angels with fluttering robes and wings, yet Tanner shows the angel as a beam of light. The more you look into that light the more it seems to pulsate as if it were alive. That light, that supernatural light, was influenced by Tanner's experience of the newly invented electric light. Imagine how exciting it was to see a light that could be summoned forth in the darkness. It fired the imagination of the young painter as he portrayed that incandescence in his version of the Annunciation.

When you look at Mary, what expression do you see on her face? We know Mary has different reactions during the Annunciation. When the angel first arrives she is surprised and troubled; then she stops and questions, and finally, she submits to the will of the Lord saying, "I am the handmaiden of the Lord, let it be done to me according to Thy word." Which one is it? Mary sitting there so calmly yet gazing into the light with a curious expression. Does it perhaps seem we're looking at the thoughtful, intelligent Mary? Not doubting the Lord, not afraid of the Lord, but simply wondering how these things will come to pass.

Older paintings love to use special symbols: lily, roses, books of Psalms, but Tanner, trying to maintain the authenticity of his seen, chose to leave these things aside. Mary isn't even wearing her usual red and blue robes, although a little stripe of silky blue, the color of Grace, in her robe alludes to her special status. However, Tanner placed several earthenware jars around the room on the shelf, on the floor, on the night table. These jars evoke the image of Mary as the vessel in whom the Lord will be incarnate. So Tanner takes history, mystery, and the magic of new technology and he fuses them together in a new image of the Annunciation which is just as unforgettable and moving as those of the great masters before him.



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