

What Approach to Flemish Annunciations?

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Abstract: Through a series of case studies, this paper examines Flemish fifteenth and early sixteenth century paintings of the Annunciation in a domestic setting as an example of how the materiality and the spiritual dimension form two inseparable aspects of devotional practice. After questioning whether these paintings reflect contemporary interiors and practices of domestic devotion, the paper discusses their use as historical sources by addressing the domestic iconography of the Annunciation as a Flemish artistic tradition. It argues that it is necessary to consider these paintings as artworks to understand their primary role as devotional objects.

Keywords: Flemish art; Annunciation; devotion; fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; panel painting; domestic space; Virgin Mary

1. Introduction

In the famous *Merode Altarpiece* (Figure 1), created between 1425 and 1428 in the Tournaisian workshop of Robert Campin (ca. 1378–1444),¹ the encounter of Gabriel and Mary is depicted in a comfortably furnished Flemish interior, which underscores the traditional iconography associated with the scene.² Beyond the Annunciation, what this painting shows us literally is the interior of a late-medieval house; what it makes visible with the figure of the Virgin is the ability to accomplish one's devotions at home. A contemporary viewer of the painting would have perceived both the religious subject and a familiar reality. In fact, this representation finds real correspondences in the architectural transformations of the house and in the material transformations of religious practices at the end of the Middle Ages. Houses became spaces where people could retreat to read, meditate and pray, and the laity increasingly appropriated the images and sacred objects that were traditionally located in the church (Logna-Prat 2016, pp. 81–138). Thus, Annunciation paintings such as that of the *Merode Altarpiece* seem to mirror the materiality and actual practices of devotion. Part one of this essay will, therefore, question the use of Flemish fifteenth and early sixteenth century paintings of the Annunciation in a domestic setting as sources for the history of late-medieval devotion.

A few years after the *Merode Altarpiece* was painted, Rogier van der Weyden (ca. 1400–1464), Campin's former colleague in Tournai, depicted the Annunciation in the most intimate space of the house, the bedroom (Figure 2). According to Erwin Panofsky, Rogier was "the first to throw full light upon the idea of the *thalamus Virginis*" (Panofsky [1953] 1966, p. 254).³ The room is "conspicuously and unequivocally" characterized as a nuptial chamber, for the bed is a symbol of the union of the Bride and the Bridegroom, respectively identified with Mary and Christ following the medieval interpretation of *Song of Songs* 3:4. Rogier's invention, the iconography of the Annunciation in Mary's bedroom, became standard in Flemish painting for more than a century.⁴ The existence of symbolic meanings, along with artistic models and pictorial conventions adds an important argument to the critique of these paintings' status as accurate representations of fifteenth-century domestic devotion. Part two will, thus, address the domestic iconography of the Annunciation as an artistic tradition.



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Figure 1. Master of Flémalle (Robert Campin?) and workshop, *Merode Altarpiece*, ca. 1425–1428. Oil on wood, 64.1 × 117.8 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. © Steven Zucker, Smarthistory, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/profzucker/24521557023> (accessed on 29 October 2021). Image in the public domain.



Figure 2. Rogier van der Weyden and workshop, *Annunciation*, ca. 1435–1440. Oil on oak, 86 × 93 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Wikipedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/35/Rogier_van_der_Weyden_-_The_Annunciation_-_WGA25591.jpg (accessed on 29 October 2021).

Moreover, it is in considering the paintings as artworks that we are able to understand how they functioned as devotional objects, as will be argued in part three. The small dimensions of the *Merode Altarpiece* suggest that it was intended for the home of its owners. This work is one of the few for which their historical circumstances are known,⁵ but in most cases, it is impossible to document the paintings that could have been located both in churches and in secular homes so that there is no correlation between the depicted space and the actual space where the paintings were displayed. This is not to say that it is impossible to grasp the devotional role of these paintings. In 2001, Reindert Falkenburg shed new light on the *Merode Altarpiece* by referring it to the theme of the house of the soul, as found in a fifteenth-century devotional manual written in Middle-Dutch (Falkenburg 2001).⁶ The theme of the house of the soul, in which domestic elements are metaphors of virtues, allows a deeper understanding of the devotional meaning of the Annunciation depicted on the centre panel of the altarpiece. Taking into consideration how fifteenth-century Flemish viewers were familiar with both devotional literature and iconography, as there was a common devotional culture shared between texts and images, enriches our understanding of the painting.⁷ Domestic imagery thus appeared as a visual intermediary to invite the faithful to ‘conform’ their souls to the virtuous interior of Mary’s home, itself a metaphorical expression of Mary’s soul.⁸ Building on Falkenburg’s interpretation, I propose to extend to the corpus of Flemish Annunciations the question of how painting visually guided meditation.

2. What Approach to Flemish Annunciations?

2.1. *Mirroring Devotion: Flemish Annunciations as Historical Sources*

Flemish Annunciations make visible a phenomenon characteristic of the late Middle Ages: the process of ‘domestication’ of devotional practices and objects. However, no systematic study has addressed the corpus of Flemish Annunciations from the perspective of devotional practices.⁹ Annette LeZotte has conducted a statistical study of the domestic setting in the corpus of Early Netherlandish paintings gathered by Max Friedländer, but her approach misses the potential value of these paintings as sources for religious history (LeZotte 2008). Yet, Annunciations differ from other subjects depicted in a domestic setting in that they show Mary deeply immersed in meditation upon the arrival of the angel: the very theme of these scenes is the devotion of Mary. In their study dedicated to an extensive corpus of Annunciations painted in the German-speaking area in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Sven Lücken has considered seriously, although briefly, how these paintings can help document late-medieval interiors and serve as sources for the cultural history of devotion (Lücken 2000, p. 291). Building on this suggestion, I propose to consider Flemish Annunciations as sources for the history of late-medieval devotion.

2.1.1. The Space(s), the Objects and the Bodily Attitudes of Devotion

Flemish Annunciations can contribute to documenting the materiality of domestic devotion from a triple perspective: the space(s), the objects and the bodily attitudes. Most of the time, Flemish painters depict the Annunciation in a domestic interior. Three types of domestic spaces can be distinguished: the bedroom, which is the privileged setting for the scene, a space specifically reserved for devotion and a general room with no specific function.

Secluded from domestic affairs, Mary’s bedroom is most of the time the site for her devotional practice. In Rogier’s painting (Figure 2), despite the presence of a bench, the Virgin is kneeling on the ground at her prie-dieu, which is covered with a precious fabric so that she can place her book on it without damaging it. The room is heated and lit as indicated by the fireplace and the candlestick; the Virgin could, thus, perform her devotions in her bedroom day and night at any season of the year.

Less frequently, the scene is depicted in a space that seems to be specifically dedicated to prayer. The *Annunciation* by Albrecht Bouts (Figure 3) represents a room that recalls a chapel. Indeed, the inclusion of an altar in a niche with an ogival vault mimics the

architecture of a gothic chapel. The in-built altar suggests that this room is reserved for prayer on a permanent basis. The altar is topped with an altarpiece and the Virgin has put her book on a small pulpit in front of it, so as to better focus her meditation. The room includes a bench covered with fabric and pillows, but it can also be used as a prie-dieu, and Mary, now standing in front of her altar, has left a closed book on it. This room seems to be a domestic oratory, as suggested by the relatively small size of the room and windows and by the presence of shutters similar to those in Rogier's *Annunciation* (Figure 2). While we can glimpse at the landscape through the opening in the other room visible in the doorway, the windows of the oratory do not let us see anything from the outside, suggesting that the Virgin's intimacy is sheltered from prying eyes.



Figure 3. Albrecht Bouts, *Annunciation*, ca. 1500. Oil on oak, 116.8 × 109 cm. München, Alte Pinakothek. © München, Alte Pinakothek, https://res.cloudinary.com/tne/image/authenticated/s-pNagos0D--/q_80/artworks/ALBERT-BOUS_VERKUENDIGUNG-AN-MARIA_CC-BY-SA_BSTGS_WAF79.jpg (accessed on 29 October 2021). Image in the public domain.

General rooms with no assigned function frequently house the episode of the Annunciation and indicate how virtually any space of the house could function as a domestic oratory. The panel by the Master of Flémalle kept in Brussels (Figure 4)¹⁰ shows an interior, which resembles a sort of living room. Like in the Louvre panel (Figure 2), the presence of a fireplace and of sources of light such as the candlesticks on the table and on the chimney indicates that this room was suitable for devotional practice at any time of the day and year and connotes material comfort. Mary is sitting in front of a bench, turning her back on the chimney where traces of an old fire remain. She is absorbed in the meditative reading her book of hours, the purse of which has fallen to the ground, while there is another open book on the table, placed on its fabric cover.



Figure 4. Master of Flémalle (Robert Campin?), *Annunciation*, ca. 1425. Tempera on oak, 61 × 63.7 cm. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique. © author.

Sometimes the space is difficult to characterize with precision because it is not depicted in its entirety. For example, this painting attributed to the workshop of Dirk Bouts (Figure 5) shows Mary kneeling on the ground in front of a lectern where she has placed her book, while there are shelves containing several books and rolls with inscriptions behind her. The latter detail corresponds to medieval practices, for it was common to enrich one's book with selected prayers, copied on separate sheets and inserted into the book according to one's personal devotional interests. The room features neither a bed nor a chimney nor an altar, but the plain architecture evokes a domestic space and the presence of a lectern and of a stock of books indicates how a general room of the house could be used for prayer.



Figure 5. Workshop of Dirk Bouts, *Annunciation*, ca. 1480–1490. Oil on wood, 58.1 × 48.58 cm. Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, <https://www.vmfamuseum/piction/6027262-8053766/> (accessed on 29 October 2021). Image in the public domain.

2.1.2. A Reflection of the Materiality of Domestic Devotion?

Comparison with other sources yields valuable information when it comes to the potential of the paintings to serve as documents about late-medieval devotion. The results of my analysis of a corpus of fifteenth-century testaments from the city of Tournai show similarities with the paintings regarding the space and material culture of devotion.¹¹ The bedroom was, it seems, the usual place for the practice of devotion.¹² The difficulty of obtaining the right to have a consecrated altar and a domestic chapel or a private oratory explains their rarity in the wills: it was an expensive privilege, reserved for an elite (Morse 2007, p. 175). However, the faithful used sets of objects in order to organize their daily devotion and to delimitate a space for prayer inside the home.¹³ I propose to distinguish a ‘minimum’ and a ‘maximum’ configuration of devotional objects as evidenced by the Tournaisian wills. The first configuration, more minimalist and more widespread, involved at least the book of hours and the rosary or prayer beads, sometimes statuettes, crosses or an agnus dei, a wax medallion that was blessed by the Pope. The second configuration included more or less complete sets of objects allowing the reproduction at home of the liturgy of the church. These arrangements consisted of an altar covered with a cloth on which there were statues, crosses or crucifixes, altarpieces, liturgical objects such as chalices, relics and, sometimes, prayer books. Despite the absence of prayer beads, Annunciation paintings reflect contemporary devotional practices. Indeed, they represent most of the time the ‘minimum’ configuration of devotional objects: while the book is almost always present, altars, statues and altarpieces are rare. Overall, the Tournaisian wills provide us with an insight into the devotional practices of the urban elite at home that can serve as a basis for comparative analysis.

It is interesting to investigate domestic devotion further with a well-documented example, that of the “Court of Savoy” of Archduchess Margaret of Austria (1480–1530) in Mechelen. Using civic records and the inventory of 1523–1524 (Michelant 1871), Dagmar Eichberger proposed a reconstruction of Margaret’s apartments on the first floor of the palace and tried to specify the function of each room (Eichberger 1998, 2003). It appears that the majority of the religious artworks were kept in two rooms: the bedroom or “seconde chambre a chemynee” and the adjoining study or “petit cabinet” (Eichberger 1998, pp. 300, 306). The bedroom alone housed thirty-three artworks with religious subject matter, which were either displayed on the walls and sometimes covered by taffeta curtains or preciously stored in a cupboard (Eichberger 1998, p. 305). Three books of hours were listed in the study, but Margaret might have used them in her bedroom, where she would kneel on a prie-dieu to pray in front of an altar (Eichberger 1998, p. 306–7). Compared to the evidence provided by the testaments, the case of the Mechelen palace is exceptional given the high number and quality of Margaret’s devotionalia as well as the prominence of panel paintings. Moreover, the Archduchess was able to perform her devotions in various places including her private chapel, her bedroom and her private oratory in the church of St. Peter, which was connected to her bedroom thanks to a private walkway (Eichberger 2003, p. 28). Just as in the Savoy palace, the general room with no specific function in Annunciation paintings can perhaps be called a study room, especially when it contains a small cabinet with books (Figure 5). Recalling the in-built altar in the painting by Albrecht Bouts (Figure 3), Margaret’s bedroom at her monastery in Brou included a small niche with a groin vault for her private worship (Eichberger 2003, p. 35). Comparison with archival sources, therefore, reveals that Annunciation paintings, to some extent, provide us with a reliable picture of domestic devotion.

However, it is necessary to adopt a critical distance to these paintings. Flemish painters were indeed reputed for their illusionistic technique and mastery in reproducing the textures, lights and colours of the real world. Moreover, several elements in the paintings that apparently mirror actual objects or places might in reality have a spiritual meaning. The complex blend of realism and symbolism is indeed a defining feature of Early Flemish painting (Harbison 1984). The *Annunciation* by Albrecht Bouts (Figure 3) features two sculpted medallions above the figures of the Angel and Mary. They depict, on

the left, the Temptation of Eve (Genesis 3:14–15) and, on the right, the miracle of the dew on the fleece of Gedeon (Judges 6:37). The *Biblia pauperum* (Figure 6), a widespread collection of images, commonly associated an episode of the New Testament with two episodes of the Old Testament as a means to put the former in the broader perspective of the history of salvation.¹⁴ In this respect, the Virgin reversed humanity's subjection to evil by her consent to the divine will, so that the name of the first sinner, Eva, became that of the first human greeted by an angel since the Fall, Ave. Echoing the miracle of the fleece of Gedeon, the glorious Virgin became pregnant without sin, by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the medallions assume a theological meaning that is further underlined by their symmetrical and prominent front positioning (Figure 3). The sophisticated ornamental framing also contributes to debunking the character of instant vision of Mary's intimate devotion and to adding a new level of reality to the picture.



Figure 6. Master of Rambures, *Biblia pauperum* (Hesdin or Amiens), ca. 1450–1455. Parchment, 10.5 × 6.5 cm (left and right miniatures); 11 × 6 cm (centre miniature). Den Haag, Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum, ms 10 A 15, fol. 21r. © National Library of the Netherlands, https://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/BYVANCKB%3Amimi_mmw_10a15%3A021r (accessed on 30 October 2021). Image in the public domain.

Likewise, Annunciation paintings generally depict aristocratic interiors, as suggested by the fact that the house is made of stone, sometimes endowed with an urban garden and separated from the city by high walls (Figure 1). However, these elements also stand for Mary's virtues: one of the most common metaphorical designations of Mary in the Christian tradition is that of *hortus conclusus* or enclosed garden, which emphasizes her intact virginity. An image within the image, a woodcut featuring Saint Christopher holding the Christ Child on his shoulder is attached to the mantle of the fireplace in the *Annunciation* by the Master of Flémalle (Figure 4).¹⁵ Saint Christopher was believed to protect the faithful against sudden death without confession. The woodcut, therefore, acted as an apotropaic object able to sanctify and protect the interior of the home. In this respect, the detail of the woodcut refers to actual practices. However, Saint Christopher is also etymologically the Bearer of Christ, and the reference to this Saint in a painting of the Annunciation is not entirely coincidental. Just like Saint Christopher carried Christ on his shoulders, the Virgin carried Christ in her womb at the Annunciation. Similarly, in the Louvre panel (Figure 2), a metal tondo hangs at the back of the canopy bed. Featuring Christ as *Salvator Mundi* sitting on a throne and blessing the bed, so to speak, it highlights the symbolic meaning of the bed (Panofsky [1953] 1966, p. 254; De Vos 1999, p. 196). Furthermore, the desire to idealize the scene might also have motivated the representation of the Virgin praying inside her house. Flemish Annunciations display only the best existing objects. Sven Lüken pointed out that Annunciation scenes generally include no gardening tools, kitchen utensils or objects related to manual work, but only valuable and quality objects, as befits the Virgin's home (Lüken 2000).¹⁶ Thus, the detail of the broom attached to the wall in the Brussels panel (Figure 4), extremely rare in Flemish Annunciations, requires an explanation. Alone, it refers to the domestic, manual task of cleaning. Understood in the context of the whole composition, the detail of the broom acts as an emblem of *vita activa*, both distinguished from and complementary to *vita contemplativa*, symbolized by the book that the Virgin is reading. The combination of the two objects in the same image implies either that Mary accomplishes the perfect harmony of both *vitae* or that she "has chosen what is better" (Luke 10:42): contemplative life. Indeed, Annunciation paintings depict Mary as a literate woman who dedicates her time to the study of religious texts. As Laura Saetveit Miles showed, the detail of the book first appeared in the iconography of the Annunciation in the ninth century and became systematic from the twelfth century (Saetveit Miles 2014). She argues in favour of a double level of interpretation of this motif, as Mary's book "was never simply a symbol of the Word made flesh" but "also represented actual reading, actual devotion, by the Virgin—activities worthy of imitation as medieval authors made clear" (Saetveit Miles 2014, p. 668). Therefore, while the ubiquity of the book in the paintings examined in this essay certainly reflects contemporary devotional practice, one should not lose sight of its status as an emblem of Mary's literate devotion, a model that viewers were encouraged to imitate (Saetveit Miles 2014, p. 669). In what follows, I propose to complement this critique of the use of paintings as historical sources with the consideration of another aspect of Flemish Annunciations.

2.2. An Artistic Tradition: Flemish Annunciations as Artworks

The domestic iconography of the Annunciation pertains to a century-long Flemish artistic tradition. As a consequence, some motifs and iconographical options appear as pictorial conventions rather than as reflections of actual objects and practices. Such is the case of the book in Annunciation scenes in general or of the red-canopy bed in Flemish Annunciations depicting the Virgin's bedroom. I will, therefore, examine some examples from the corpus of Flemish Annunciations in order to understand the paintings in relation to each other. Jérôme Baschet defined serial analysis as an approach to medieval images that relates iconographical and formal elements and allows us to evaluate visual inventiveness in contrast to patterns of standardization (Baschet 1996, 2008). When applied to our corpus of paintings, this approach initially elaborated for Romanesque art helps understand

better the role of artistic models and historicize artistic evolutions such as that of domestic iconography.

2.2.1. The Annunciation in the Bedroom by Rogier van der Weyden: Its Artistic Sources and Influence

Rogier's *Annunciation* at the Louvre (Figure 2) includes several elements that seem to be taken from the *Merode Altarpiece*, such as the sculpted bench with cushions and its back to the fireplace or the candlestick attached to the mantle of the chimney. However, they are integrated into a new composition: the ewer is no longer in a niche but on a wooden cabinet;¹⁷ the majolica vase containing lilies is now on the floor, since the room does not feature a table. The bed behind the Virgin is prominent and the red canopy is suspended by means of a complex system of wires and pulleys. The candlestick on the table has been changed for a chandelier. The beam of light coming down through the window has disappeared and there are neither the dove of the Holy Spirit nor Christ in the figure of a homunculus plunging towards Mary, so that, if it were not for the Angel, one would not guess that the miracle is about to happen.¹⁸ A notable change compared to earlier Annunciations is the rural landscape behind the open window at the back of the room.

Art historians have not failed to note the influence of Jan van Eyck on Rogier's *Annunciation* (Panofsky [1953] 1966, p. 252). Indeed, several elements recall the *Arnolfini Portrait* painted by van Eyck in 1434, such as the chandelier with a single candle, the canopy bed, the open window on the side and the fruits (Figure 7). Even the gesture of the Virgin echoes that of Giovanni Arnolfini. Rogier has transformed a wedding portrait into an Annunciation scene, it seems, a transposition so ingenious that Dirk De Vos interprets it as the painter's artistic tribute to their famous contemporary. The Louvre panel contains references to other works by the court painter, such as the glass carafe on the chimney's mantle, which symbolizes Mary's purity, and the canopy bed, which is reminiscent of the solemnity of the royal canopies of Jan van Eyck's Virgins in an interior (Figure 8). The play of light defining the space makes the painting "one of Van der Weyden's most strongly Eyckian works" (De Vos 1999, p. 198).

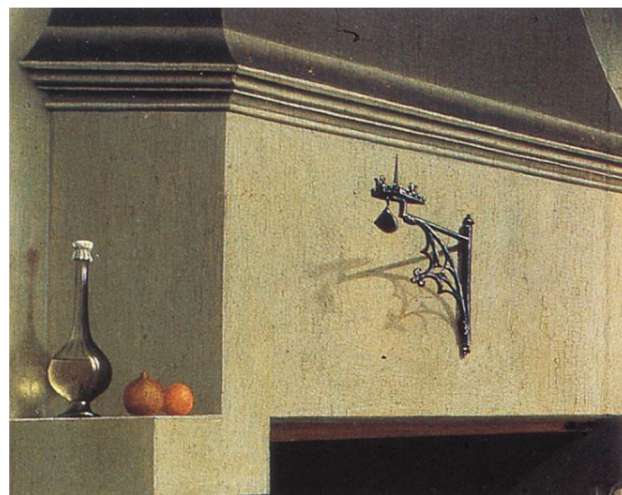


Figure 7. Rogier van der Weyden and workshop, *Annunciation* (detail). © Wikipedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Annunciation_-_Rogier_van_der_Weyden_-_Louvre_INV_1982#/media/File:Rogier_van_der_Weyden_-_The_Annunciation_\(detail\)_-_WGA25594.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Annunciation_-_Rogier_van_der_Weyden_-_Louvre_INV_1982#/media/File:Rogier_van_der_Weyden_-_The_Annunciation_(detail)_-_WGA25594.jpg) (accessed on 30 October 2021). Image in the public domain.



Figure 8. Jan van Eyck, *Lucca Madonna*, ca. 1437. Mixed technique on oak, 65.7 × 49.6 cm. Frankfurt-am-Main, Städel Museum. © CC BY-SA 4.0 Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en> (accessed on 30 October 2021). Image in the public domain.

2.2.2. The Annunciation in the Bedroom by Joos van Cleve: Artistic Citation and Archaism

When Joos van Cleve represents the Virgin in her bedroom (Figure 9), kneeling at her prie-dieu with a red-canopy bed behind her where a gold-framed mirror hangs, it appears that the Antwerp painter is citing Rogier (Figure 2). The presence of a basin and ewer, along with the opening of the room on a rural landscape, recalls Rogier's painting. Except for the chimney and the bench, the arrangement of the room closely follows that of the Louvre panel. However, the richness of devotional tools and the emphasis on images within images are striking in van Cleve's painting. Indeed, the room includes a complete devotional arrangement close to the 'maximum' configuration mentioned above. It consists of a wooden cabinet covered with a liturgical cloth, on which there is a triptych featuring the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek on the centre panel and figures of prophets painted in grisaille on the outer wings. On the wall next to the bed, we find a single-leaf woodcut representing Moses holding the Ten Commandments. The windows bear stained-glass roundels, and the Virgin is reading an illustrated book of hours.



Figure 9. Joos van Cleve, *Annunciation*, ca. 1525. Oil on wood, 86.4 × 80 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. © Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/ep/original/DP-19433-001.jpg> (accessed on 30 October 2021). Image in the public domain.

How to interpret this devotional overload? Does the painting register the state of domestic devotion one century after the *Merode Altarpiece*?¹⁹ In order to understand the iconography of this painting, it is essential to situate it within its artistic context. Let us cite just one example: attributed to Goswyn van der Weyden, the *Colibrant Triptych* (Figure 10), dated from 1516, depicts the Annunciation on its inner-left wing. The panel shows the Virgin in front of her pulpit, a book in her hand, while there are a desk and shelves with several books, a candlestick and a devotional woodcut attached to the wall at the back of the room. This *Annunciation* differs greatly from that of van Cleve, in that it demonstrates the influence of the Italian Renaissance. For instance, the decorative frieze helps connect the space where Mary meditates with the space of the centre panel, which corresponds to the interior of a temple. The room is no longer a bedroom but a sort of loggia with its majestic dimensions, its columns and its sculpted arch with carved grotesques as well as its large opening on a rural landscape.



Figure 10. Goswyn van der Weyden, *Annunciation* (left wing of the *Colibrant Triptych*), 1516. Oil on panel, 212 × 176 cm (open). Lier, church of St. Gummarus. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.

In other words, depicting the Annunciation in Mary's bedroom following Rogier's model in the 1520s appears as an intentionally anachronistic choice on the part of van Cleve (Figure 9). I refer to it as what Erwin Panofsky termed the 'Archaism of around 1500', that is to say the return to fashion, around 1500, of the style and motifs of the early painters of the Flemish school, in particular that of Jan van Eyck and of the Master of Flémalle.²⁰ By the first quarter of the sixteenth-century, the iconography of the Annunciation in the bedroom was the standard representation of the scene associated with the great tradition of the Early Flemish school of painting. I argue that it is necessary to consider the paintings as artworks to understand their primary role as devotional objects, which I will now address.

2.3. Supporting Devotion: Flemish Annunciations as Devotional Objects

Hans Belting proposed to do "a history of the image before the era of art" (Belting 1990). He claimed that images should not be decontextualized as in modern museums

but understood in their interactions with social and religious practices. Paralleling this anthropological approach to medieval images, art historians have shown interest as to how images themselves guided meditation and played an active role in devotional practices (Ringbom 1969; Harbison 1985; Rothstein 1999, 2005). Recently, this approach has tended to go beyond the descriptive level to underline the performative character of the relationship to the image: the viewer was actively involved in meditating on the image in the same way that the reader of devotional manuals was invited to internalize spiritual themes. Here, I will examine how the devotional meaning and function of the paintings were determined by their material and visual characteristics (Falque 2019, p. 106).

2.3.1. Staging Devotion: Devotional Portraits and Models of Devotion

Painters resorted to several visual strategies to invite the viewers to meditation. The most obvious strategy is undoubtedly the inclusion of devotional portraits in the painting.²¹ Indeed, it helped the viewer to get involved in a process of conformity with the devout figures. James Marrow showed that the representation of emotions through the gestures and expressions of painted figures was a way to provide the viewer with models to imitate (Marrow 1986). In this perspective, Reindert Falkenburg interpreted the figure of Mary as a model of meditation. The Annunciation of the *Merode Altarpiece* (Figure 1) deviates from traditional iconography, since the Virgin has not yet noticed the arrival of the Angel. Instead, she is absorbed in her reading and her lack of reaction expresses her inner recollection (Falkenburg 2001, p. 7). However, almost systematically in Annunciation scenes, Mary's downcast eyes indicate her internalization of the divine message, since she has read the prophecy of Isaiah and made the Word of God her own even before the Angel has started to speak.²² In numerous Annunciations, she is still holding the page of her book, while her other hand is raised in a gesture that seems to express the suspension of time tinged with both a slight expression of surprise and an attitude of inward devotion expressed by her lowered gaze, as she is on the point to place her hand on her chest in sign of acceptance of the divine message. Therefore, I contend that Mary's devotional attitude could represent a model for the viewers. Let us compare the *Merode Altarpiece* with another triptych from the perspective of the portrayed figures. In the *Du Quesnoy-Van der Tommen Triptych* (Figure 11), one can note the similar attitudes of the Virgin shown as a devout kneeling at her prie-dieu on which she has put her book, and of the 'historical' devout figures, namely the patrons and first intended viewers of the painting: Simon Du Quesnoy, his wife Maria van der Tommen and their seven children.

Furthermore, paying attention to devotional portraits allows us to understand the motivations behind the commissioning and use of the paintings. Jozef De Coo pointed out that Annunciation scenes with donors are very rare. In the *Merode Altarpiece*, the absence of saints recommending the donors to the Virgin in the centre panel led De Coo to consider the altarpiece as a votive painting (De Coo 1981, p. 128). The couple are thus directly expressing a common wish for offspring to the Virgin.²³ This wish would have motivated the choice of the Annunciation, namely the moment of Mary's miraculous insemination, as the central theme of the triptych.²⁴ Several elements seem to support De Coo's hypothesis that the *Merode Annunciation* had a votive function. The only visible devotional object is the rosary that the woman is holding in her hands, precisely at the level of her lap, and from which hangs a small metal figurine representing Saint Christopher, which can be interpreted as a desire for pregnancy. With the figures of Saint Christopher and of the Virgin, each carrying Christ in their way as we have seen earlier, the woman expresses her desire to bear a child. Yet, as noted by Falkenburg, the woman's meditative attitude resembles that of the Virgin and expresses not only her wish for offspring, but also her desire to receive Christ in her heart spiritually following the example of Mary, whose devotion led her, while still a virgin, to bear Christ in her womb (Falkenburg 2001, p. 14). The idea of a votive destination of the painting, therefore, appears to be complementary to a consideration of its devotional dimension.



Figure 11. Master of the Legend of the Magdalen, *Du Quesnoy-Van der Tommen Triptych*, ca. 1515–1520. Oil on panel, 80 × 67.5 cm (centre panel); 81.5 × 28.5 cm (wings). Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels (adapted by author).

Compared to the rather unusual inclusion of the donors in the *Merode Altarpiece*, the sitters of the *Du Quesnoy Triptych* are presented by their patron saints, respectively Saint Simon and Saint Mary the Egyptian, which is consonant with the traditional expression of a request for intercession. Let us scrutinize the attitude of the sitters: symmetrically placed on either side of Mary's room, the devotees are depicted kneeling at their prie-dieu, with a book of hours placed before them and with hands clasped in prayer. The daughters of the couple have a rosary attached to their belt and all the members of the Brussels family are staring into space, as if they were witnessing the Annunciation with the eyes of the mind. The emphasis on their active devotional attitude suggests that the donors wished to manifest their devotion as much out of a concern for respectability, insofar as the painting is likely to have been displayed in a church and, therefore, visible to the public, as to ensure their salvation and to request the intercession of the Virgin. Small red crosses painted above the hands of Simon Du Quesnoy and three of his children indicate that they were already dead when the triptych was completed. This detail suggests that the painting was commissioned by Maria van der Tommen, who is recorded as a widow in 1522 (Stroo et al. 2006, p. 120). The triptych was therefore probably intended as an epitaph for the grave of the family and fulfilled a commemorative function.²⁵ Resorting to the device of the devotional portrait as a surrogate figure thus allowed the devout to ask the Virgin to intercede in their favour and to petition the prayers of other viewers in the church. Nevertheless, identification with the figures was not the only strategy used by painters to involve the viewer in the meditation of the paintings.

2.3.2. Guiding Devotion: The Structuring of Pictorial Space

Relating the material structure of the object in the case of altarpieces and the visual structuring of pictorial space is key to understanding the devotional meaning and use of the paintings. Indeed, the material and visual approaches to the paintings as devotional objects are complementary, insofar as they related to devotion as much as images to contemplate than as objects to manipulate. In this respect, I distinguish the paintings where the Annunciation occupies the centre panel and those where it features on the wings. Indeed, while the Annunciation on the wings appears to be just one episode in a set of narrative scenes such as in the polyptychs of the Life of the Virgin, for instance, when

the Annunciation is on the centre panel, it is the centre, both formal and thematic, of the altarpiece, most of the time a triptych, and, therefore, the focus of devotion. Several above-mentioned paintings resort to the latter category, starting with the *Merode Altarpiece* (Figure 1). The Louvre *Annunciation* by Rogier van der Weyden also belonged to a now-dismantled triptych (Figure 12). The wings were painted by workshop assistants (De Vos 1999, pp. 195–196), showing on the right-hand side the Visitation in a landscape and on the left-hand side an ecclesiastical figure kneeling with their hands clasped in prayer in a sort of courtyard. Behind him, a path and a wall reminiscent of the left wing of the *Merode Altarpiece* lead the gaze to a mountain landscape with a lake. This portrait is not that of the commissioner of the painting and was added later, probably by the then owner of the painting (De Vos 1999, pp. 196–197). This example, therefore, serves as a caveat against hasty interpretations based on the portrayed figures. The panel by Joos van Cleve (Figure 9) was likely a commissioned work and may also have formed the centre piece of a triptych with wings depicting donors, but no evidence remains to support this hypothesis (Ainsworth 2018).

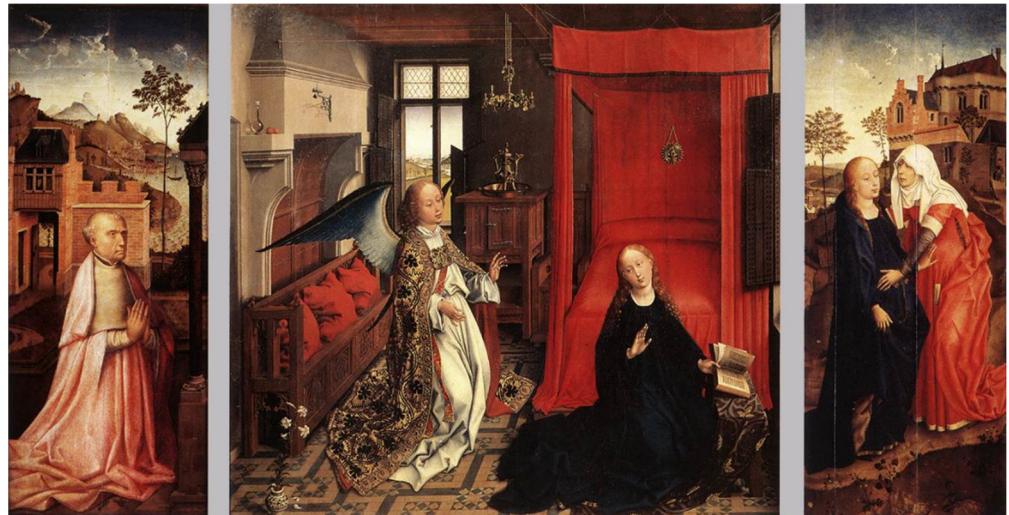


Figure 12. Rogier van der Weyden and workshop, *Annunciation Triptych*, ca. 1435–1440. Oil on oak; 89 × 36 cm (wings). Paris, Musée du Louvre (centre panel) and Torino, Galleria Sabauda (wings). © Wikipedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rogier_van_der_Weyden_-_Annunciation_Triptych_-_WGA25590.jpg (accessed on 30 October 2021). Image in the public domain.

Moreover, the composition helped guide the viewer’s meditation. According to Falkenburg, thinking in terms of visual strategies contributes to explaining the supposed anomalies of the *Merode Altarpiece* (Falkenburg 2001, p. 11). For instance, while the Annunciation seems to take place in the donors’ home, as suggested by the presence of their coats of arms on the window, they remain outside. What the painting represents, Falkenburg suggests, is the aspiration of the donors’ souls to enter Mary’s house spiritually. This aspiration has not yet been realized, as indicated by the steps leading up to the house, which stand for an image of spiritual progression: meditation and prayer are the steps leading the soul into Mary’s house. Ingrid Falque has explored the complex spatial construction of the *Merode Altarpiece* in the frame of her analysis of a corpus of Flemish paintings including devotional portraits.²⁶ The painter juxtaposed distinct physical and pictorial spaces to emphasize the gap between the saintly figures and the devotees (Falque 2019, p. 109). Indeed, the view of the sky from the window of Mary’s room is not consistent with the setting of the left wing. Similarly, in the *Du Quesnoy-Van der Tommen Triptych* (Figure 11), the family of donors are depicted in a landscape on the wings, which seems disconnected from the interior shown on the centre panel. However, the window at the back of Mary’s bedroom shows the same rural landscape through a half-open shutter, so that the whole composition retains a sense of unity. As remarked by Ingrid Falque, “By

situating the devotees *outside* the house of the Virgin, the painter seems to imply that the sacred place in which the Annunciation takes place is not (yet) accessible to them" (Falque 2019, pp. 77–78).

However, in the *Merode Altarpiece*, the composition has a dynamic dimension insofar as the open door suggests the possibility of the devotees entering Mary's house (Falque 2019, pp. 109–10). They are well advanced in the process of spiritual progression, as suggested by the path behind them. The view of the city in the background represents the world they left behind when they entered the garden. They are now on the threshold of the house, waiting to enter and unite their souls with God (Falque 2019, p. 110). The temporality of spiritual progression is, thus, suggested spatially and visually by the crossing of successive thresholds. Stephan Kemperdick had already emphasized this journey from the first to the second door (Kemperdick 1997, p. 88), but according to him the vision depicted on the centre panel is only symbolic: the devotees have access to it only with their mind's eyes (Hahn 1986, p. 54). Ingrid Falque draws another conclusion from the analysis of the spatial composition of the painting, seeing in it not the fixed representation of an achieved vision, but a process, an invitation to the viewer to visualize both the divine mystery and that of their own inner transformation.

Building on these approaches, I propose to extend the visual analysis of the composition and structuring of pictorial space to the corpus of Flemish Annunciations including single panels, for they can tell us about the dynamics of meditative viewing of the paintings beyond the few examples of Annunciation triptychs with devotional portraits.²⁷ For instance, in Joos van Cleve's *Annunciation* (Figure 9), the elements of the room serve as supports for Mary's devotion as much as they guide the viewer's devotion by drawing visually, so to speak, the daily path of their own devotional practice. Attention to the visual interplay between closure and opening, in the form of doors, arches, windows and shutters articulating the interior space and the landscape, would help to better understand the relationship between interiority and exteriority. Flemish Annunciations conflate the transparent representation of the real and the invitation to the viewers to look inside themselves; they are both windows on the outside world and mirrors of interiority.

3. Conclusions

What approach to Flemish Annunciations? I have first considered Flemish Annunciations as historical sources that can help document late-medieval domestic devotion, since they make visible the materiality of devotional practices. However, I have also questioned their status as accurate representations of domestic devotion on the basis of the symbolism and idealization that characterize these paintings. I have expanded this critique by addressing the domestic iconography of the Annunciation as a Flemish artistic tradition. I argue that considering these paintings as artworks is necessary if we are to understand how they functioned as devotional objects. Indeed, different visual strategies were used by the painters to involve the viewer in the meditation of the paintings. These include devotional portraits and the depiction of Mary as a model for that devotion, along with the structuring of the pictorial space and the arrangement of the composition.

The complementary approaches to the paintings that I have outlined in this essay can serve as a basis for a reflection that seeks to go beyond the debate, traditional in the historiography, on the materiality of faith, which can be summarized with the following question: how to explain the material profusion of devotion at the end of the Middle Ages, and is it not contradictory to the ideal of spiritual poverty and inward devotion? Flemish Annunciations demonstrate how materiality and the spiritual dimension form two inseparable aspects of devotion. To some extent, these paintings reflect the materiality of devotion, but above all they held a devotional function thanks to their material and visual qualities: it was in the repeated handling and daily viewing of the paintings that devotion was deepened day by day.

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Notes

- ¹ The correspondence between what the Tournaisian archives tell us of the life and work of Robert Campin and his workshop, and the consideration of the works attributed to the Master of Flémalle in their chronology and quality, seems close enough to suggest the identification of the two figures. However, the debate is still on-going (Campbell 1974, p. 646).
- ² However, against David Robb's assertion, the *Merode Altarpiece* is not the first example of a 'unified' interior (Robb 1936, pp. 503–4). The *Merode Altarpiece* depends in fact on an existing model and achieves this unification of space only in a very imperfect manner. For the sake of convenience, I take the *Merode Altarpiece* as the starting point for my reflection, given the fortune of this work in the historiography of fifteenth-century Flemish painting. Furthermore, it is important to specify that, even if the domestic setting was predominant, other iconographical types of the Annunciation (for example in the church) existed in Flemish painting.
- ³ (Panofsky [1953] 1966, p. 254): "Where a bed appears in such contemporary or slightly earlier renderings as the Brenken altarpiece or the 'Annunciations' by Masolino, Fra Angelico and Bicci di Lorenzo it is removed into an alcove in the rear or nearly hidden in an adjacent room, a modest footnote to the main text".
- ⁴ In this respect, it is the composition on the left-hand panel of the *Saint Columba Altarpiece*, also by Rogier van der Weyden, rather than that of the Louvre, that seems to have had the greater impact at least in the second half of the fifteenth century, as the numerous existing copies and variations demonstrate. However, this is beyond the scope of this essay.
- ⁵ Technical and stylistic analyses of the *Merode Altarpiece* have demonstrated that the triptych was created in several stages following the wishes of the man portrayed on the left wing. After he had commissioned or chosen the Annunciation panel among the available products of the workshop, the man had himself portrayed on the left wing while he was still single, asking the Virgin to intercede in favour of his marriage. Then, once married, he had his wife added to the left-hand panel (Kemperdick 1997, p. 85). Scholars have proposed several hypotheses about the identity of the figures portrayed on the left wing, based on the coats of arms painted on the centre panel although they cannot be identified with certainty. However, the male sitter is probably Peter Engelbrecht, a merchant from Cologne who had relatives in Mechelen, and the female sitter might be Peter's first wife, Gretgin Schrinmecher, whom he married between 1425 and 1428 (Installé 1992, p. 80; Kemperdick 1997, p. 87).
- ⁶ In *Here Begins a Devout Book on the Preparation and Decoration of the Dwelling of Our Heart*, Hendrik Mande (1350/60–1431) invites the reader to take a tour of his own house and describes in great detail a series of ordinary domestic objects, which are allegories of the virtues of the soul and are related to each other according to the technique of the arts of memory (Mande 1854).
- ⁷ (Falkenburg 2001, p. 4): "Images were integral parts of this culture, as much as texts were; each medium sustained and affected the other in its capacity to support prayer, meditation, and other devotional practices".
- ⁸ (Falkenburg 2001, p. 7): "These symbols are not (disguised) abstract notions, but the 'embodiments' of the properties of Mary's soul that—similar to the effect of Mande's text—serve as prototypes for the viewer to shape his inner self while meditating on the image. If the spectator scrutinizes the interior of the house of Mary's soul, halting at each object and article of furniture—the candle, flowers, pitcher and towel, and the bench against which Mary reclines—and ponders their symbolic meanings (for example, Mary's purity and humility, or the references to redemption), he appropriates these connotations and decorates the house of his own soul with the same virtues that adorn Mary's". Falkenburg speaks of a pattern of 'conformity' (conformitas, mede-vormigheid) to interpret the visual strategies by which the patrons are invited to 'conform' their souls to that of Mary (Falkenburg 2001, p. 10).
- ⁹ In general, when scholarship has made use of paintings, it has been mostly content with documenting domestic interiors either from the perspective of material culture (Praz 1964; Thornton 1991; Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis 2006; Ajmar-Wollheim et al. 2007) or from that of cultural history with the aim of uncovering the ideal of domestic sphere conveyed by these imaginary visions (Aynsley and Grant 2006, p. 12). Moreover, it has focused mainly respectively on the Italian Renaissance and the Dutch Golden Age. Strikingly, scholarship on domestic devotion has either left aside panel paintings or not made systematic use of them (Brundin et al. 2018; Corry et al. 2018).
- ¹⁰ The Brussels panel was long believed to be a copy after the *Merode Altarpiece* (Von Tschudi 1898, pp. 8–34, 89–116; Winkler 1913, p. 11; Gottlieb 1957). On the basis of infrared reflectography and stylistic criteria, Carla Gottlieb attributed the work to the painter Jacques Daret, who was an apprentice in the workshop of Robert Campin. The first art historian to propose an alternative thesis was Musper, who considered the Brussels version as the model for the *Merode Altarpiece*, which it surpassed in terms of artistic quality (Musper 1968, p. 62). Since then, the comparative technical analysis of the two paintings has confirmed the theory of the primacy of the Brussels version over that of New York. Jeltje Dijkstra's study of the underdrawing indeed showed that the *Merode Altarpiece* follows the painted surface of the Brussels panel, thus making the latter the direct model for the former (Dijkstra 1996, pp. 96–99).

- 11 The Tournaisian wills are a very rich source concerning the possession of devotional objects. These documents, previously kept in the collection of chirographs of the municipal archives of Tournai, disappeared in May 1940 when the archive building burned down. But fortunately for us a local scholar, Amaury de La Grange, published in 1897 more than 1200 wills dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century (La Grange 1897). However, this is a selection and not the totality of the available documents. A chapter of my dissertation currently in preparation is devoted to the analysis of these wills from the point of view of the material culture of devotion.
- 12 The spatial indications given by the testators always concern the ‘room’ (chambre, cambre)—I have found eight mentions for the first half of the fifteenth century—that is a room in the house without any assigned function and which does not specifically designate the place where one sleeps, but which is neither the kitchen nor the hall or a semi-public space (salle) of the house. The place of devotion is, therefore, always a more or less intimate space. For instance, Maigne Crespelaines bequeaths a statue of the Virgin “qui est en la cambre par terre de [m]a maison” (n°744), Marguerite le Ruddre donates an altar with statues “qui est en le chambre après le salle” (n°761) and Jacques Croquevillain and Catherine de Saint Marcel give an altar “à tout ung Repos de Jhésus, qui est en [nostre] première cambre hault, dessus ung escring” (n°707).
- 13 (Morse 2007, p. 170): “In most cases, altars were not located in discrete rooms that we could call a chapel, but were situated in the normal spaces of the *casa* (. . .)”.
- 14 Erwin Panofsky’s iconological analysis of Jan van Eyck’s paintings is based on the typological associations specific to medieval hermeneutics. The use of Romanesque and Gothic architectural elements and the imaginary combination of brilliantly imitated styles imply that every detail potentially had a symbolic meaning (Panofsky [1953] 1966, pp. 131–48).
- 15 Stephan Kemperdick bases himself on the engraving of Saint Christopher to propose a date for the panel. Similar examples are dated between 1420 and 1430 (one in Manchester even bears an exact date: 1423), which indicates that the work cannot have been created before the 1420s (Kemperdick 1997, p. 88).
- 16 (Lüken 2000, p. 296): “Das Gemach der Maria ist so eingerichtet oder ausgestattet, wie es sich für eine zukünftige Gottesmutter und Himmelskönigin gehörte: mit dem Besten und Neuesten. Die dargestellten Gegenstände waren den Betrachtern in der Regel bekannt, wenn auch in einer anderen Qualitätsstufe. Die Situation entsprach damit einem Ideal, mit dem sich die meisten Betrachter identifizieren konnten”.
- 17 The study of the underdrawing shows some changes in the composition indicating a creative process. Notably, Rogier added the cabinet and consequently shifted the window to the left (De Vos 1999, p. 195).
- 18 This ‘realistic’ aspect contrasts with the *Annunciation of the Saint Columba Altarpiece*, where the angel is given back his staff and Mary her halo, and the words of the Angelic Salutation are painted in golden letters (De Vos 1999, p. 195).
- 19 Or is it, as Maryan Ainsworth argues, because the painting aims at promoting “Catholic devotional practice at a time when Protestant Reformers were questioning the validity of imagery for religious worship?” (Ainsworth 2018). The specific problems entailed by the context of the Reformation exceed the scope of this article.
- 20 Panofsky sees the ‘Archaism of around 1500’ as a phenomenon limited to the Southern Netherlands and not affecting painters from Holland such as Lucas van Leyden and Jan van Scorel “because they did not need to free themselves from Rogier van der Weyden”. According to him, this marks the divide between Dutch and Flemish painting (Panofsky [1953] 1966, p. 356).
- 21 Ingrid Falque adopts this terminology for its broader scope than that of ‘donor portraits’ or ‘patrons’ (Falque 2019, pp. 4–6).
- 22 According to a tradition dating back to Saint Ambrose of Milan in his *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* (ca. 387), Mary was reading the prophecy of Isaiah foretelling the Incarnation (7:14: *Ecce virgo concipiet, et pariet filium*) upon the arrival of the Angel (Saetveit Miles 2014, p. 640).
- 23 According to De Coo, the motivations behind the acquisition of the painting exclude that it may have been intended for a church, even in the case of a family chapel in the aisle. (De Coo 1981, p. 131): “No couple was willing to acknowledge its own infertility and the publicity of portraits on an altarpiece set up in public will certainly have been avoided”.
- 24 (Drummond 2018, pp. 98–100): “Images of the Annunciation, announcing the actual moment of conception, were sometimes used as votive panels for couples who wished to have children, and Annunciation scenes were commonly hung in ‘lying-in’ hospitals throughout the Middle Ages”.
- 25 Although the original location of the triptych is not known with certainty, we know that Maria’s parents and her son Jan were buried close to St. Barbara’s altar in the Brussels Cathedral of Sts. Michael and Gudula. It is therefore likely that the graves of Maria and Simon, along with the triptych, were also located there (Stroo et al. 2006, p. 123).
- 26 (Falque 2019): The author combines a comparative analysis between spiritual texts and images as well as a visual analysis of the pictorial strategies used to guide meditation. She brings out several themes that are transversal between devotional literature and paintings, such as that of the spiritual journey.
- 27 The analysis of this corpus of paintings is the object of a chapter of my dissertation, which is currently in preparation.

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