

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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## NEWLY RESTORED VAN EYCK MASTERPIECE

### IS SHOWCASED IN NATIONAL GALLERY EXHIBITION

Washington, D.C. -- One of the jewels of the National Gallery of Art's permanent collection, the Annunciation by Jan van Eyck (c. 1434/1436) returns to public view in the focus exhibition Jan Van Eyck's "Annunciation" following a two-year restoration. This early Netherlandish masterpiece was among twenty-one paintings acquired by Andrew W. Mellon from Russia's Hermitage Museum in 1930. It was included in the core group of paintings given to the nation at the founding of the National Gallery over fifty years ago.

Included in the exhibition are two illuminated manuscripts that illustrate the influence of French manuscript illumination on Van Eyck's style as well as his enduring impact on Netherlandish art of the fifteenth century. The exhibition will be on view from May 22 to September 5 in the West Building, Gallery 40. The exhibition and accompanying booklet have been made possible by The Circle of the National Gallery of Art.

"The meticulous restoration of Van Eyck's Annunciation once again reveals its astonishing technical and artistic virtuosity," said Earl A. Powell III, National Gallery director. "It also reconfirms Van Eyck's place as one of the greatest painters in the history of art."

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Because of his mastery in manipulating the new medium of oil paint to render precise, realistic detail as well as subtle atmospheric effects, Van Eyck was traditionally credited with inventing oil painting. Modern research, however, reveals that several of his predecessors and contemporaries also used the medium.

Measuring about thirty-six inches high by fourteen inches wide, the Annunciation is a magnificently detailed tour de force of Christian symbolism. It depicts a central event in the New Testament: the angel Gabriel announcing to the Virgin Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus, the son of God, as told in Luke 1:26-38. The scene is set, perhaps for the first time by a panel painter, inside a church rather than under a portico or in a domestic interior.

In Van Eyck's Annunciation Mary is shown with an open prayer book, a symbol of her piety. Standing to her left, Gabriel is dressed in a cope, an elaborate liturgical garment sumptuously edged with gems and rows of pearls. Streaming through an arched window at the upper left, seven rays of light represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit to Jesus. The dove of the Holy Spirit descends along the longest of these rays. The composition is suffused with a mysterious blend of natural light from the right and "divine" light from the window at the upper left of the painting.

Among the myriad symbols woven into the composition, dual architectural styles of the church allude to the transition from

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the Old Testament to the New Testament. Rounded arches at the top of the building in the older Romanesque style give way to the slightly pointed arches of the newer Gothic style in the lower story. Zodiac signs inlaid in the floor indicate God's dominion over the entire physical universe, including movement of the planets.

The tall, narrow shape of the painting suggests it was originally the left wing of an altarpiece, probably a triptych. Although none of the other portions survive, the center panel might have represented a Nativity scene or the Adoration of the Magi, while the right wing may have continued the story with a depiction of the Presentation in the Temple.

"It is somewhat staggering to realize that the same visual and iconographic density found in the Annunciation may have extended through the other panels," wrote John Hand, the exhibition curator, in the accompanying brochure. "From this one surviving painting, it seems obvious that the altarpiece was a major work."

The early history of the painting is shrouded in mystery. Its documentation began in 1823, when art dealer C. J. Nieuwenhuys sold the Annunciation to Willem II, king of the Netherlands. According to Nieuwenhuys, the painting had been brought from Dijon to Paris in 1819. It remained in the collection of Willem II in Brussels and The Hague until the monarch's death in 1849. The painting entered the Imperial Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg when Czar Nicholas I of Russia acquired it at the sale of Willem II's collection in 1850.

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Similarly, little is known about the early years of the artist's life. It is believed that Van Eyck was born no later than 1390. The earliest records indicate that in 1422 he worked for John of Bavaria, count of Holland, and was appointed court painter and varlet de chambre to Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy, in 1425. Van Eyck lived at the court in Lille and was entrusted by Philip with several secret missions. From 1430 until his death in 1441, he lived in Bruges serving the duke of Burgundy. His elegant renderings of religious subjects were also in great demand among the merchants and bankers of Bruges.

Illuminations shown with the Annunciation include a Book of Hours produced by a French artist around 1420/1430, which demonstrates Van Eyck's iconographic and stylistic origins in courtly French manuscript illumination. The Annunciation depicted in this earlier version from the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, also takes place in a church with the Virgin kneeling, Gabriel entering from the left, and the dove of the Holy Spirit descending along golden rays.

Van Eyck's influence on later Netherlandish artists of the fifteenth century is illustrated in another splendid Book of Hours, the "Llangattock Hours," produced in the Bruges-Ghent region around 1450/1460. This fine miniature from the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, portrays both Gabriel and the Virgin in poses, gestures, and facial expressions similar to those in Van Eyck's Annunciation.

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