

The Annunciation to Mary, Mother of Jesus, in Medieval Christian and Islamic Art of the Book

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The *sura* of Maryam says: “Relate in the Book (the story of) Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent her our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects” (19: 16-17).

For his part, Al-Tabari quotes Wahb Bin Manbeh and explains that: “she found Gabriel at her side and God sent him in the form of a man” (Al-Tabari, 1978, p. 45).

There have been countless interpretations and versions of this annunciation, some of which were portrayed in miniature paintings depicting the events in lines and colors. The University of Edinburgh has an embellished copy of a book by Abi Rayhan al-Biruni titled *Al-Athar al-Baqiya ‘an al-Qurun al-Khaliyyah* (The Chronology of Nations).¹ The copy, which came from the city of Tabriz and goes back to 1307, includes 24 miniatures, mostly religious. At the back of page 166, there is a drawing of Mary’s annunciation, along with a chapter titled ‘A Comment on What Christian Melkites use in Syriac Months’. We conclude here that this Islamic drawing adorns a church calendar pertinent to the Greek Orthodox denomination, passed on by al-Bayruni in the city of Khawrizm in Khurassan. It is a depiction of Annunciation Day that falls on the 25th of March. According to the manuscript, this occasion is known as:

‘The Entry Holiday’, which marks Gabriel’s coming to Mary with the good news of the birth



The annunciation of Mary fil Mehrab, miniature from Al-Biruni’s *Al-Athar al-Baqiya ‘an al-Qurun al-Khaliyyah*, 1307, University of Edinburgh library.

of the Messiah in nine months, five days, and a little more, which is the natural period of the baby’s stay in the mother’s womb. And even though Jesus was without the fatherhood of a man but was supported by the Holy Spirit, he was to stay in the womb according to nature”.

The miniature has a predominantly Asian character with some influence by the Abbasid art of the book. It shows Gabriel raising his right arm towards Mary who is squatting beneath an arch that bears decorations similar to the Kufic writing. Mary is working on a spindle just like in Christian pictorial art, though we find no mention of this spindle in any of the four gospels. The story, however, is common and popular, its origin being an apocryphal gospel known as the *Protevangelium* or *The Book of*



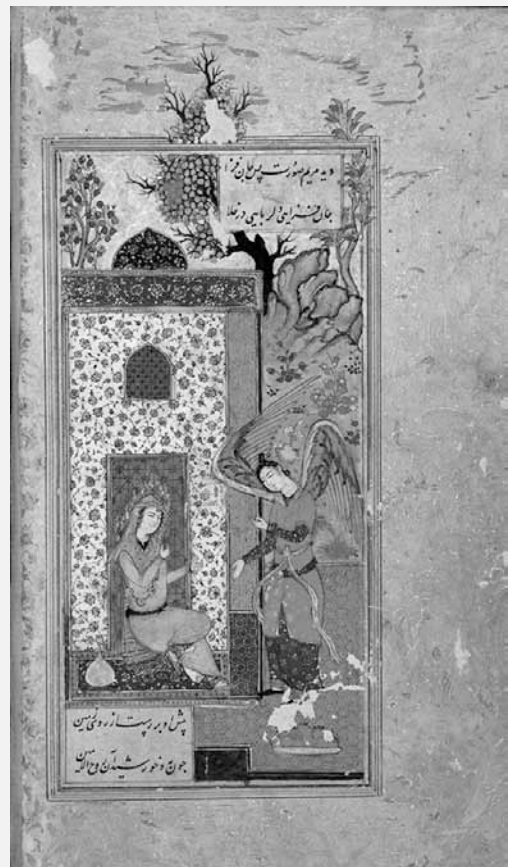
The annunciation of Mary in front of Gabriel, *Jami' al-Tawarikh*, 1314, University of Edinburgh library.

James. According to this version, Mary was brought to the temple as a child and stayed there until she was 12 years old. She was one of seven virgins commissioned by the priest to weave a curtain for the Temple. The story goes on to say that it was by lot-casting that Mary was given the true purple and the scarlet, "... but Mary took the scarlet and began to spin it" (The Apocryphal New Testament, 1924, p. 45). Artistically speaking, this miniature seems unique with its Chinese style, and we find nothing among Eastern Christian books similar to this style. The Syriacs reached China before Western missionaries and they brought the gospel to its remote areas in the medieval centuries. However, the art we received from this spiritual adventure was no more than a few miniatures. "Al-Athar al-Baqiya" miniature was most likely inspired by other extinct miniatures. The special attribute of this miniature stands out when compared to a Coptic miniature from the 13th century depicting Mary sitting on the floor holding a spindle. This ornament appears to have an Abbasid style, despite its overall Byzantine feature. By contrast, 'The Entry Holiday' miniature seems Asian in character, regardless of its Islamic identity which is linguistically Arabic and geographically Persian.

On the Fountain

We find an Arab miniature ornament of the Annunciation in an embellished copy of *Jami' al-Tawarikh* by Rashid al-Din Fadlallah al-Hamadani, in the archives of Edinburgh library. This copy also comes from Tabriz and is traced back to 1314. At the back of page 23, there is a picture of

a standing Mary carrying a big clay jar with her left hand and eyeing a bearded man. The man is blessing her with a gesture of his right hand from behind rocky mountains through which a fountain of water is flowing. The style here is completely different and the Chinese influence is nowhere to be seen except in some features of the outdoor scenery. "The Jami' al-Tawarikh" miniature is similar to Christian pictures of the 'Annunciation' scene next to the fountain, especially a Syriac drawing in a manuscript from the 13th century held in safe keeping at the Midyat Archbishopric in Turkey. According to the story told by Al-Tabari in his History, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (i.e. the history of apostles and kings), the Virgin was serving in the Beit al-Makdis (Jerusalem) offering water to visitors and worshippers, along with her cousin Yussuf Bin Ya'qub (Joseph son of Jacob) to whom she was betrothed. One hot day, she ran



The appearance of the Holy Spirit to Mary, Rumi's *Masnavi*, Golestan palace, Tehran.



The annunciation of Mary, a Coptic manuscript that dates back to mid 13th century, Library of the Catholic Institute, Paris.

out of water and rushed to a cavern where she was met by Gabriel, whom God sent “in the form of a man”. So he brought her the good news of a male offspring then “he blew in her pocket and his breath reached the womb and Jesus was conceived” (Al-Tabari, 1967, p. 593).

The story is known in Christianity, its origin being *The Book of James* with its numerous derivatives. According to this book, Gabriel called on Mary first when she was filling her jar, and said: “Hail thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” (1924, p. 43). Mary searched right and left for the source of the voice and returned home in fear. As she put the jar down and took the purple to spin, the angel of God appeared and said: “Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things” (1924, p. 43). The story is repeated in an apocryphal Latin gospel known as *The Alleged Gospel of Matthew*. Specialists say that it is a belated text based on an ancient Eastern manuscript. Chapter 9 says that the angel called on Mary while she was standing next to the fountain, and then came to her while she was spinning purple. He took the appearance of a young man with indescribable beauty. Mary reportedly quivered at his sight so the angel calmed her down and told her that she will give birth to a king whose kingdom will extend from earth to Heaven. This version is not far from the *Qur’anic sura* that says: “Relate in the Book

(the story of) Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent her our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects” (19: 16-17).

The True Morning

‘The Annunciation Scene’ takes on a pure Islamic character in a miniature ornament found in an embellished copy of *Masnavi* by Jalal al-Dinn al-Rumi in 1598 (unknown artist). It is preserved at the Golestan palace in Teheran. In his drawing, the artist faithfully follows the Safavid school which marks the peak of Persian art of the book in its last golden age. Again, the picture unifies the outdoor and indoor scenes balancing between the two, based on complete and equal structure. Inside, Mary is sitting on a rug, and there is a halo surrounding her head which represents the fire of prophecy according to the Islamic artistic tradition. Gabriel is speaking to Mary from the outside while raising his arms. Mary herself is in a decorated house with a



The annunciation of Mary in front of a spring, a Syriac manuscript that dates back to the 13th century, Midyat Archbishopric, Turkey.



The annunciation of Mary, a Syriac manuscript that dates back to the 13th century, Al-Zaafaran Monastery, Turkey.



The annunciation of Mary, a mosaic that dates back to the 13th century, the Syriac monastery, Al-Natrun valley, Egypt.

dark blue dome adorned with golden engravings. It is located inside an exceptionally beautiful garden where three leafy trees add to the “Eden” effect. Master Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (1997) relates the story of “the Holy Spirit appearing to Mary in a human form” and saying: “I am the messenger of truth to you. Don’t be afraid and do not hide from me for this is the command”. Al-Rumi (1997) continues the story in a most creative poetic manner:

The generous one told her: ‘Fear not for I am faithful. Do not resist those who take pride in honor, and do not conceal yourself from the righteous ones who were secretly informed.’ He spoke these words while a ray of pure light left his mouth towards Heaven. ‘Do you escape my presence to nothingness? Don’t you know I am king and master in the world of nothingness? All my counsel and acquisition are from nothingness, but only my image appears before the great lady.

Behold, Mary, I am in a confusing image. I am a crescent and a spirit in the heart. And as long as a spirit settles in the heart, it will accompany you wherever you run.

Except for this untrue and obstructive spirit which is like a false morning. But I am like a true morning from the light of the Lord, and no night can ever surround my daylight.

So go on, daughter of Imran, don’t escape my existence, for I have come here from the same place you take refuge in. ‘Taking refuge’ is one of my origins. It is nourishment to me and its light is within me before you uttered it. You escape me to truth and I am already created from that refuge. I am the refuge and sanctuary which safeguard you. You ask me for refuge, and I am the refuge. (Al-Rumi, 1997, pp. 323-324)

Translated by Nazih Khater

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