

The Smoking Candle of the Mérode Altarpiece

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One of the most intriguing puzzles of Netherlandish painting is the Mérode Altarpiece of 1425-30 by the Master of Flémalle, Robert Campin. As source for Panofsky's "hidden symbolism," the triptych has inspired a vast body of written investigation, research, and learned speculation.¹ It is not my intention to deal with the vast bibliography on the Mérode Altarpiece, or to discuss the symbols of all three panels. I have attempted to deal with the smoking candle in the very center of the central panel, a symbol that has stubbornly resisted analysis. In so doing, I have re-examined a few other details in the panel (Figures 1 and 2).

While attempts have been made to explain the smoking candle, these attempts have been made more difficult by the lack of reference in literary sources and by the fact that the symbol appears to be truly unique in early Netherlandish painting. It appears only in the two replicas by Campin; in a third copy of the center panel, most probably by his workshop, the smoking candle has disappeared.² Other objects painted by Campin are seen in the work of van Eyck and especially van der Weyden, but not the smoking candle.

Its position in the center of the composition has convinced me that the smoking candle, placed on the table between Gabriel and Mary, was essential to the intended impact of the iconography.

There have been various explanations for the smoking candle. Margaret Freeman speculated, in a basic iconographic study, that the extinguished flame meant "the Word made flesh" as the divine spirit entered a human body.³ Millard Meiss mentions the extinguished candle in his study of the iconography of light; he feels that it refers to the well-known vision of St. Brigit of Sweden, in which the light of the Child's presence overpowers the light of the candle at the scene.⁴ This is also the interpretation given by Erwin Panofsky in his study of the iconography of Flemish painting.⁵ A reading of St. Brigit's vision shows us, however, that the candle held by St. Joseph was not extinguished, but only overwhelmed by the larger radiance of divine light. In fact, this is the way the candle of the Nativity is shown by Campin himself in his Nativity of Dijon where the painted candle is lighted, expressing that very concept. The Candle of the Mérode Altarpiece is not overwhelmed, but extinguished, and not only extinguished, but smoking.

James Snyder has most recently compared the smoking candle to the lit candle of the Jan van Eyck Arnolfini wedding portrait, cautiously suggesting that the Mérode candle may also be the *Brautkerze*, or Bride-Candle.⁶ This is, he states, brought to the bridal chamber and extinguished at the moment the marriage is consummated, an admittedly "bold reference" to the impregnation of the Virgin by the Holy Spirit. This interpretation, which at first appears to hold much promise, is apparently based on Panofsky's discussion of the *Brautkerze* in the Arnolfini wedding portrait. In fact, Panofsky outlined no such scenario for the candle.

The Bride-Candle, as described by Panofsky, is typical of the large candles customarily held by participants in religious ceremonies such as weddings and baptisms. Such candles are lit for the sacrament and extinguished at the end of the service, whether, as Panofsky notes, this was conducted at church or at home, as in the Arnolfini painting. Nowhere is the discussion extended further; there is no reference to the actual bedding of the bride. Snyder's explanation, then, is based upon an elaboration which he does not satisfactorily support.

Charles Minott presents the most unusual theory. All of his literary searches persistently refer to burning, and to Christ's statement that "I am come to set fire on the earth" (Luke 12:49); Minott is therefore forced to conclude that the candle is not extinguished at all, but on the contrary about to burst into flame.⁷ David Robb in his major study of Annunciations of the period unaccountably refers to the candle as "lighted," stating that the candle then signifies the presence of the divinity of Christ.⁸ Shirley Blum, whose work centers on donor influence, briefly alludes to the candle, implying that it has been blown out by the wind of the archangel's arrival.⁹ However, a look at the settled folds of the archangel's robes and the long, drifting spiral of smoke tends to rule out turbulent air currents. All of the explanations, in fact, seem unsupported by what we see in the central panel.

The lack of literary evidence and the lack of any tradition of the symbol in Flemish painting has led to the conviction that we are dealing with an obscure example of disguised symbolism, in which the meaning has been lost. I propose that, on the contrary, the meaning of the smoking candle was never lost: until fairly recently it could still be seen in church liturgy forty days after Easter. It is my contention that the clue to the smoking candle—and other elements in the central panel—are to be found, not in the sermons and exegeses of the Middle Ages, but in the liturgical symbolism of the Church. Art and liturgy share an essential ability: the use of symbolism to convey intrinsic meaning, expressing in outward sign an inner complexity. Specifically, I hope to show that these elements in the central panel refer to events in the church calendar following the Feast of the Annunciation, the subject of the central panel. These events fall within an exact time frame: the forty days before Easter and the forty days after Easter, the seasons of the church known as Lent and Easter. The smoking candle itself marks the final moment of that sequence, an event as momentous in the eyes of the church as the Annunciation.

It is essential to remember at this point that life in the fifteenth century was regulated by a liturgical calendar that told the days as surely as the bells of the church told the offices, or hours, of the day. In losing the rhythmic round of the liturgical seasons, the twentieth-century historian may find mysterious what was once familiar.

The subject of the central panel, the Annunciation, is marked by the church on March 25 (exactly nine months before December 25). It comes as a joyful feast day in the long penance, denial, and fasting of Lent. The feast day was an extremely popular event, but even at such a happy time, neither the church nor the people forgot the ultimate meaning of God's gift. In the popular legends of the time, March 25 was reputed to be not only the day of the Annunciation, but also the exact day of Christ's crucifixion and death. It was therefore both the date of the beginning and the end of his life, in an example of the medieval belief in mystic numerical concurrence.¹⁰ When we remember this, the imagery of the tiny descending Christ-child with his cross assumes an essential meaning.¹¹

The Virgin of the Annunciation was known in religious symbolism as "the Candlestick" who in carrying the Christ-child literally held up "the light of the World." We may cite here Panofsky's and Freeman's summaries of medieval references which show that the candlestick represents the Virgin while the candle represents Christ.¹² Panofsky's quotation from *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* demonstrates how widely known was such an interpretation:

*Ipsa enim est candelabra et ipsa est lucerna—
Christus Mariae filius, est candela ascensa.*¹³
[She is the candlestick and she is the lamp—
Christ, Mary's son, is the lit candle.]

Freeman also points out the theme in Durandus, and shows that the candle represents the human, physical flesh of Christ, the wick the soul, and the flame represents the living, divine spirit.¹⁴ However, attempts to apply this imagery to the smoking candle meet with great difficulty. Here, plainly, the flame which should represent the spirit is extinguished.

For an explanation, we turn to the celebration of Holy Saturday which is observed after the Annunciation on the day before Easter. On the eve of this day, dedicated to the Virgin, the Church celebrated the Feast of New Fire and the great Paschal candle was lit in every church. This celebration was of great antiquity, dating from the fourth century when it was originally a day of mass baptism and a night of vigil, *Sabbatum Sanctum*, marking the last hours of Christ's entombment and of the Lenten season.¹⁵ In the celebration of New Fire, the lighting of the Paschal candle signified the beginning of the Resurrection and Christ's unquenchable light cast out upon the world. The blessing and lighting of the Paschal candle, the symbol of Christ's spirit, became a part of the rite sometime in the twelfth century, and appears in the second edition of the *Liber Pontificalis*.¹⁶

The lit Paschal candle is placed upon or very near the altar. The central candlestick of the Mérode Altarpiece is placed prominently on the tilted surface of the table below the vase of lilies and beside the open book and scroll of text.¹⁷ The comparison of this domestic table and still life to an altar table with candle, book, and flowers, should be made with reference to Robb's examples of miniatures in his study of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Annunciations where the Virgin kneels before an altar or lectionary.¹⁸ This does not alone suggest that the Mérode candle symbolizes the Paschal candle; the rolled scroll adds a certain weight to the symbolism of the Paschal candle. The roll of text is not a usual object in scenes of the Annunciation. Like the smoking candle, it may symbolize a closely associated object. During the lighting of the Paschal candle, a parchment scroll which bore the Easter Laud or Exultet was unrolled. This

was read or sung as the Paschal candle was lighted during the liturgy.¹⁹ On elaborate scrolls, in fact, illuminations were painted upside down so that the congregation could follow them as the scroll was unrolled. This demonstrates that this scroll, the Exultet roll, was a focus of attention during the liturgical lighting of the candle. Like the mystical numeric confluence of March 25 which was popularly believed the date of Christ's conception and death, this would take us from the Exultet of the Annunciation to the Exultet of Easter Eve.²⁰

A great deal of speculation has been written about the empty fireplace. Charles de Tolnay has given the simplest answer, that the empty fireplace refers to the spring date of the Annunciation.²¹ However, it was the custom in northern Europe to sweep the fireplace clean to be lit with New Fire on Holy Saturday, the day the Paschal candle was lighted.²² It may be that the empty fireplace, like the unlit candle of the candlestick on the chimney-breast, awaits the coming of New Fire, now descending on the rays of divine light.²³ If so, it is interesting to note the recent identification by Cynthia Hahn of the object St. Joseph is crafting in the right wing as a wooden firescreen, much like the one before the empty fireplace.²⁴ In such a context the firescreen would assume the same significance as the famous mousetraps in the right wing: just as the marriage of Mary and Joseph screened the birth of a Messiah from the devil, the firescreen shields and guards the New Fire.²⁵

However, assuming that the single candle represents the Paschal candle, how does this explain the fact that it is smoking? I believe it is the smoke trail itself that presents the final evidence that this is the symbolic reference to the Paschal candle. To accept this, we must continue with the liturgical cycle that begins with Christ's descent in the Annunciation as the church celebrates the beginning of his earthly existence among mankind. The forty days of Lent, in which occur the Feast of the Annunciation and Holy Saturday with the symbolism of baptism and New Fire, take us to Easter Sunday. We must remember at this point that Easter does not end on a single day but continues for forty days, like the Lenten season that precedes it. During all this time, the Paschal candle, mounted on a large single candlestick, remained continuously burning in a prominent position on or near the altar-table. This flame symbolized Christ's spiritual presence on earth after the crucifixion.

Forty days after Easter, the liturgical cycle ended on Ascension Day, a feast day equal in importance in the eyes of the church with the feasts of Easter and Pentecost.²⁶ This marked the end of Christ's earthly existence among men. On this day, then and until recently, the Paschal candle was ceremoniously and solemnly extinguished in church as part of the liturgy.²⁷ This flame had symbolized the "Risen Life" of Christ.²⁸ In the ceremony, the spiral of smoke mounting upward represented the Ascension: the spirit returned, as it came, to the Father in Heaven. We see in the Mérode Altarpiece the spirit of Christ descending on the left, before the Fire is kindled, and ascending in the center after it is extinguished. This Ascension Day ceremony marked the termination of Christ's earthly life just as the Annunciation marked the beginning. One is reminded again of the line from the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*: Christ, Mary's son, is the lit candle.

The smoking candle, then, would appear to be a reference to the end of the Christological cycle expressed in the familiar terms of liturgical devotions. On this evidence, it is my belief that the center panel of the Mérode Altarpiece

piece portrays the full circle of the earthly life of Christ, from the moment of his Incarnation to the moment of his

Ascension, in simple images easily recognizable to the Christian of the Middle Ages.

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- 1 See the bibliography in Marcia Laszlo and Ruth Nachtigall, *Literature on the Mérode Altarpiece* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art Library, 1974); checklist for an exhibition of the collective material on the altarpiece at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Library October 22, 1974-February 1975 and the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, December 1957, which focussed on the altarpiece.
- 2 Max J. Friedlander, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Vol. II: Rogier van der Weyden and the Master of Flemalle* (New York: Praeger, 1967) pl. 77, 54a, Add. 155. The third copy is attributed to Jacques Daret, Musée de l'Art Ancien, Brussels.
- 3 Margaret B. Freeman, "The Iconography of the Mérode Altarpiece," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, XVI, Dec., 1957, 130-139, see 134.
- 4 Millard Meiss, "Light as Form and Symbol in Some Fifteenth-Century Paintings," *Art Bulletin* XXVII, 1945, p. 176, note 2.
- 5 Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character: Vol. I* (New York: Harvard UP, 1971), p. 143.
- 6 James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture and the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ and New York: Prentice & Abrams, 1985), p. 121. For the discussion of the *Brautkerze* in the Arnolfini wedding portrait see Panofsky, p. 202.
- 7 Charles Isley Minott, "The Theme of the Mérode Altarpiece," *Art Bulletin*, LI, 1959, pp. 267-271. Minott has attempted to relate most of the elements of the altarpiece to the prophesies of Isaiah. In the attempt he also states that the scene is not an Annunciation.
- 8 David Robb, "Iconography of the Annunciation," *Art Bulletin*, XVIII, pp. 480-526; 504.
- 9 Shirley Neilsen Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of CA Press, 1969), p. 9.
- 10 This folk belief is cited in Howard V. Harper, *Days and Customs of All Faiths* (New York: Fleet Publishing Corp., 1957), p. 88; and George M. Gibson, *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville and New York: Cokesbury, 1945) p. 90. See Vol. III of Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, Caxton ed., reprint of 1900 ed. Temple Series (New York: AMS Press, 1973), "The Annunciation of Our Lady," p. 100, for the belief of concurrence of dates.
- 11 See Robb, Appendix, "The Motive of the Christ Child in the Annunciation," pp. 523-526, for other examples of the theme of the nude Christ-child bearing his cross, its development, popularity, and the opposition of the church.
- 12 Panofsky, p. 143, Freeman, p. 134. A good example of this concept can be found in S. Martin Legion, *Sermones de Sanctis*, "In Assumptione Sanctae Mariae," Migne, PL 209, p. 19, "Maria est illuminatrix" who bore the light of John ("In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not," John 1:4-5).
- 13 Panofsky, p. 143.
- 14 Freeman, p. 134.
- 15 Francis X. Weiser, *The Easter Book* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1954), pp. 131-139, 133.
- 16 E. O. James, *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961), p. 212. Also see Dom Benedict Steuart, *The Development of Christian Worship* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green & Co., 1953), a scholarly study of the historical development of various parts of the church canon and liturgical rites, p. 231. Although the Sarum rite was formulated in the eleventh century, the earliest surviving manuscript has been dated to the thirteenth century, a recension of the twelfth century rite. This addition is edited from three early manuscripts of the Sarum rite. See J. Wickham Legg, ed. *The Sarum Missal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916; Oxford University Press reprint, 1969), pp. 115-116, 20-40, "Sabbato in Vigilia Pasche." During the fourteenth century, the Holy Saturday vigil with the blessing and lighting of the Paschal candle gradually began to move from the dramatic night service to Holy Saturday morning. The Holy Saturday Vigil with the celebration of New Fire was restored to its ancient place on Easter Eve in 1951 by Pope Pius XII. See James L. Monks, S.J., *Great Catholic Festivals*, (New York: Henry Schulman, 1951), pp. 54-57. See also Gerhard Podhradsky, *New Dictionary of the Liturgy*, (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966), p. 155, on the contemporary lighting of the Paschal candle and the New Fire.
- 17 No other example of a scroll of sacred writing among the customary devotional books used by the Virgin Mary in scenes of the Annunciation is known to me at this time. Most devotional texts appear in manuscript form. (The large Exultet rolls of the liturgy were exceptions.)
- 18 See Robb, In Fol. 53v of the Book of Hours of the Marechal de Boucicault, the Virgin kneels with her book before an altar. This could be perhaps understood as a window-sill of the ecclesiastical building, if the Master of the Boucicault had not repeated the same scene in the Annunciation in the Book of Hours of the Order of the Holy Ghost, and in this second example made the altar surface far too wide to be a simple window-sill. Both may be compared to Figs. 25 and 26, Robb.
- 19 Monks, pp. 56-57.
- 20 Monks, pp. 54-55. "Let now in heaven the countless host of Angels hold high festival; with exceeding great joy let the hidden creations of God rejoice; and let the trumpet of salvation sound forth the triumph of the King of Kings. . ." (Monks' translation).
- 21 Charles de Tolnay, "L'Autel Mérode du Maistre de Flémalle," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 53, 1959, pp. 65-78, see pp. 69-70.
- 22 For the folk-customs of Northern Europe see Weiser, *Easter*, pp. 141-142 on the cleaning of stoves, lamps, candlesticks, etc., to be ready for the New Fire, and the Easter fires before the church; Edwin James, *Christian Myth and Ritual: A Historical Study*, (Cleveland and New York: Meridian/World Publishing Co., 1965), p. 108, on the kindling of New Fire with flint and steel; most extensive treatment of the customs connected with the New Fire are found in James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, part X, *Balder the Beautiful: The Fire-Festivals of Europe and the Doctrine of the External Soul*, Vol. 1 of two volumes of *Balder*, (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1919), "The Easter Fires," pp. 120-127.
- 23 For a related theory, see Carra Ferguson O'Meara, "'Fire in the Hearth of the Virginal Womb': The Iconography of the Holocaust in Late Medieval Art," *Art Bulletin* LXIII, 1981, pp. 75-88, where she discusses Campin's *Madonna and Child Before a Firescreen* where a small burst of flame appears behind the head of the madonna. In her paper on fireplaces in Campin's paintings, O'Meara argues that Christ is the burnt sacrifice and the bread baked in the hearth of the Virgin's womb (a combination represented by a single imagery—the fireplace—that seems awkward) and does not seem to have come across the liturgical references to the New Fire. Her illustrations are very useful in pointing out related examples in Netherlandish paintings of the swept-empty fireplace and the New Fire.
- 24 Cynthia Hahn, "'Joseph Will Perfect, Mary Enlighten and Jesus Save Thee': The Holy Family as Marriage Model in the Mérode Triptych," *Art Bulletin* LXVIII, 1968 (March, no. 1), pp. 54-66; see p. 60.
- 25 Meyer Shapiro, "'Muscipula Diaboli,' the Symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece," *Art Bulletin* XXVII, 1945, pp. 182-187, who cites St. Augustine: the marriage of Mary and Joseph tricked the Devil by hiding the birth of a Messiah who was the trap set for the Devil.
- 26 Gibson, p. 84.
- 27 Noted by Gibson, p. 84; James, *Feasts and Festivals*, p. 219; Podhradsky, p. 30; Weiser, *Easter*, pp. 206-207; Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs: The Year of the Lord in Liturgy and Folklore*, 4th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958), pp. 141-142.

28 Weiser, *Easter*. Extinguished is "the symbolic light of his visible presence on earth," p. 207. "It is actually Ascension Day that terminates the events of the Savior's life on earth." The symbolism of the rising smoke from the Paschal candle on Ascension Day both preceded and survived Ascension plays of the Renaissance, and it was a moving part of the present-day liturgy until fairly recently. Both Roman Catholic and Anglican/Episcopalian liturgy have been undergoing drastic and sometimes controversial revision in recent years. Part of the latest trend has been to repudiate symbolism that the church apparently felt to be negative; the ascension symbolism, with the extinguishing of the candle, was

felt to emphasize the withdrawal of Christ's presence. The Paschal candle is now extinguished on the occasion of the Pentecost, which is the celebration of the descent of the Holy Spirit, so that as Christ's symbolic presence is extinguished, the church celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit, "the Comforter," an eternal presence. Modern-day attendance and economies had long suspended the medieval custom of continuous burning of the great Paschal candle. The smaller version is today lit intermittently until the end of the Easter season, which is now marked by Pentecost rather than Ascension. The modern emphasis is no longer on Christ's sacrificial earthly existence, but stresses the continuation of a spiritual presence.



Figure 1, Robert Campin, Triptych of the *Annunciation*, central panel, ca. 1425. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cloisters Collection, 1956 (56.70). Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 2, Robert Campin, Triptych of the *Annunciation*, central panel, detail of smoking candle, ca. 1425. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cloisters Collection, 1956 (56.70). Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.