

A New Reading of the *Prado Annunciation* by Robert Campin

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The Annunciation panel in the Prado, executed by the Master of Flémalle and his workshop between 1430 and 1438, has been generally neglected in the literature dealing with early Flemish painting. It depicts the Annunciation in an ecclesiastical setting, which is unusual in the context of the Flémalle's work and led some scholars to doubt Flémalle's authorship.¹ It is the intention of this essay to address unanswered questions of the iconography and articulate the panel's relation to the *Merode Annunciation* of ca. 1425 to 1430. The *Prado Annunciation* is an announcement of Salvation to mankind through Christ's coming and through his death on the cross. The narrative of the Incarnation contains references to the offerings of the Mass (Figure 1).

The Annunciation is shown in the setting of a Gothic church,² which can be viewed simultaneously from the outside and the inside. The Virgin is seated inside a vaulted chapel,³ leaning against a bench and reading a book. The book the Virgin holds in scenes of Annunciation is, according to St. Bernard, interpreted as the Old Testament opened to Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14): "Behold a Virgin shall conceive. . . ." The Prado panel has been cut along the right side, which can easily be observed in the lower corner, where a majolica vase and the lilies are cut in half. Above the Virgin's head, a cupboard which has gone unnoticed so far is fitted between the piers. Its door is slightly opened and reveals several books and a round, wooden box. In the stained glass window, coats of arms, not yet identified,⁴ and the scene of Moses receiving the tablets with the Ten Commandments and the Sacrifice of Isaac can be recognized. The archangel Gabriel, dressed in liturgical vestments and carrying a staff, kneels at the steps that lead to a small side portal. The elaborate architecture is adorned with several sculptures: King David, a symbol for the Root of Jesse, stands between the windows above Gabriel; Moses with the tablets of the Ten Commandments and a statue of God the Father occupy the niches of the Romanesque tower in the background.

Two general types of Annunciation scenes developed during the fourteenth century and continued throughout the fifteenth century. The first type, derived from Italy, shows an exterior setting, as can be seen in the *Friedsam Annunciation* of the early fifteenth century by Hubert van Eyck (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art). The second type, developed in France, presents an ecclesiastical interior setting, such as the Annunciation in the *Petites Heures* by the Passion Master and Jacquemart de Hesdin (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. lat. 18014, fol. 22, ca. 1384-1390). In the fifteenth century, a third tradition came into being in Flanders; it depicts a bourgeois setting as in the *Merode Annunciation* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters).⁵ The bourgeois setting, although occasionally present in earlier panels, appears in an explicit form for the first time in the Master of Flémalle's

work and from then on dominated the Flemish iconography. Remarkably, the *Prado Annunciation* combines elements from all three types: it contains implications of an exterior, an ecclesiastical interior, and domestic objects such as the pillow and the majolica vase which recall bourgeois settings.⁶

The New Testament source for the Annunciation in the Gospel of Luke does not specify the setting of the Annunciation.⁷ Nevertheless, some scholars have interpreted the words "the angel came in unto her" to mean that the Annunciation occurred within an architectural setting, and during the Middle Ages the indefinite space of the Annunciation was transformed into the chamber of the Virgin in the teachings of the ecclesiastics and the Fathers of the Church.⁸ In the *History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, however, the Virgin "was sitting by herself in the great house of God" when the angel arrived.⁹ Furthermore, the church has been compared to the Virgin ever since the writings of the Church Fathers. Mary is the representative and the personification of the Church. The Latin liturgical drama of the Middle Ages was also an important source of inspiration for new iconographical elements in fifteenth century art.¹⁰ From the thirteenth century on, the *Missa Aurea* or Golden Mass, a liturgical drama commemorating the Annunciation,¹¹ was performed annually in Tournai, where the Master of Flémalle lived. The Latin liturgical plays were dramatizations of the Biblical text, performed by clerics in the church as part of the liturgy.¹² Although the ecclesiastical setting has a long tradition in manuscript illumination, it is rarely depicted in Netherlandish panel painting, the most prominent exception being Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation in the Church*, ca. 1433-1434 (Washington, National Gallery, Mellon Collection).

The church building of the Prado panel combines a Gothic nave with a Romanesque tower. The walled-up triumphal arch seems to indicate that the church is still being built and that the Romanesque part is being replaced by a new, Gothic structure. Panofsky compared the change from Romanesque to Gothic style in the architecture to the transition from Old Testament to New Testament and the replacement of the Old Jerusalem by the New Jerusalem.¹³ This transition is marked by the Incarnation. Mary becomes the transitional figure. Born in the era *sub lege*, in giving birth to Christ, she introduced the era *sub gratia*. A similar symbolism can be found in Jan van Eyck's *Mellon Annunciation*, where the upper parts of the cathedral are Romanesque, the lower parts Gothic, or in Hubert van Eyck's *Friedsam Annunciation* with Romanesque details on the right, Gothic on the left side. The transitional role of Mary in the Prado panel is further emphasized by the depiction of Moses receiving the tablets with the Ten Commandments, which marked the beginning of the era *sub lege*. A Moses statue also occurs in the Annunciation by the Limbourg Brothers in the *Belles Heures*, ca.

1408-1409 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, fol. 30).

The Romanesque tower is also symbolic in one other sense: Panofsky interpreted a similar architectural feature in Melchior Broederlam's *Annunciation* for the Chartreuse in Champmol, ca. 1394-1399 (Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts), as a symbol of Mary's chastity.¹⁴ As such the symbol originates in the Song of Solomon, where the Psalmist compares his bride to an ivory tower and the tower of David, both allegories of virtue and chastity. Another symbol of Mary's chastity, also present in both panels, is the walled-in garden, adjacent to the buildings on the left. It is also a reference to the Song of Solomon, where one reads, "a garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse . . ." ¹⁵ which, as a *hortus conclusus*, is a metaphor for the miraculous conception.

In contrast to Melchior Broederlam's Mary or to Jan van Eyck's panel, the Virgin in the *Prado Annunciation* is sitting on the floor as manifestation of her humility which entitles her to bear God's son. In this aspect she is like the Virgin in the *Merode Annunciation*. She is the *ancilla domini*, chosen for her "low estate." The depiction of Mary as Madonna of Humility here reminds us of the devotional character of this panel.

Gertrud Schiller points out that the "lowliness expressed by Mary's sitting position on the ground . . . is (further) an allusion to the sufferings of her son."¹⁷ That Mary's attitude of humility can be understood in this way is supported by the depiction of the Sacrifice of Isaac in the upper right panel of the stained glass window. This scene was frequently paralleled to the Sacrifice of Christ; as Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, so God was willing to sacrifice His, and, as Isaac collected the wood for his sacrifice, so Christ carried his own cross. Therefore, Christ's supreme sacrifice is recalled in the panel by Mary's humility, the representation of the Sacrifice of Isaac and, as we shall see, by other significant elements, each of which emphasizes a sacramental reference to the Holy Mass.¹⁸

The archangel Gabriel wears the cope customarily worn by the subminister of the Mass in the Middle Ages. Through the vestments, the angel's part as a minor minister at the great mystery of the Incarnation and simultaneously at Christ's ultimate sacrifice, which is repeated in the Mass, is indicated. McNamee suggested that the French ecclesiastical setting and the Latin liturgical plays influenced the use of correct liturgical vestments for the angel in Annunciation scenes.¹⁹ Liturgical vestments can also be seen in the *Annunciation of the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* from the early fifteenth century (Chantilly, Musée Condé, ms. 65, fol. 26r.), where the setting is a small Gothic oratory and the angel wears an amice, a dalmatic and an alb.

Above Mary a small cupboard is fitted between the piers. Its door is slightly ajar and reveals the objects in the cupboard. A key is shown in the keyhole. The cupboard contains several books, bound in leather, and a round, wooden box, which could be a pyx, a container for the Holy Sacrament. From the fifteenth century on, the pyx was no longer suspended over the altar, but kept in a niche near the altar. The niche then was furnished with a door and a lock, as can be seen in the *Prado Annunciation*.²⁰ The pyx itself can be seen as a symbol for Mary. In the *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* of the thirteenth century, William Durandus stated that "the box in which the consecrated Hosts are preserved, signifies the body of the glorious Virgin."²¹ The pyx containing the Hosts can also be

understood as a symbol for the Incarnation. Through the consecration the wafers are transformed into the flesh of Christ, just as the word was made flesh in the Incarnation. Maurice Vloberg noticed that in the thirteenth century, pyxes in the form of a seated Virgin could be found. The Hosts were contained in a small compartment in the Virgin's knee, the lid of which was adorned with a small dove.²² A similar pyx, fabricated in Limoges in the first half of the thirteenth century, is preserved in the Keir Collection.²³ Nevertheless, the pyx itself is an unusual requisite in the context of the Annunciation. The only other example known to this author is the *Annunciation* from Aix-en-Provence, ca. 1443, where in one of the side-panels depicting the Prophet Jeremiah (Figure 2), usually shown as a witness of Christ's passion, a pyx can be found (Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts).

The tabernacle containing the pyx with the wafers can be understood in a similar way. Mary is the living tabernacle of the incarnated Word. Prior to the fifteenth century, the comparison of Mary to a tabernacle was quite literally expressed in the so-called *Vierges Ouvrantes*, small statues of Mary that, when opened, revealed an image of Christ. Although the symbolism of Mary as tabernacle was still common in fifteenth century Flemish painting, it is mainly found in panels depicting the Madonna and Child and *Sacra Conversations* as in Rogier van der Weyden's *Medici Madonna*, ca. 1450 (Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut), where a tent enclosing the Virgin and the child symbolizes the tabernacle. Nowhere, though, is the comparison as obvious as in the *Prado Annunciation*, where the tabernacle is set next to the Madonna.

The ecclesiastical setting, the vestments of the archangel and the allusions to the Incarnation and Christ's sacrifice sum up the sacramental nature of the panel. Mary is the central symbol: she is the tabernacle, she is the pyx, and ultimately, she is the altar. The Mass is divided into two parts: the Liturgy of the Word with readings from the Scriptures, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, in which bread and wine are transformed into the body of Christ. Therefore, the book of Scriptures and the Eucharist are always found on the altar during the Mass. Both the book and the Hosts were placed on white linen cloth. An altar-like quality has been noted of the Madonna in Jan van Eyck's *Dresden Triptych*, ca. 1437 (Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlung) and in Campin's *Virgin and Child before a Fire Screen*, ca. 1428-1430 (London, National Gallery). In both examples, the Christ Child, who is the Eucharist and the embodiment of the Word, is presented on white linen cloth which recalls the liturgical ritual. The Virgin in the Prado panel is holding the protected Scriptures on her lap and the Christ Child in her womb.²⁴

Scholars have identified a similar sacramental meaning in the *Merode Annunciation* and identified the setting as a sanctuary through numerous symbolic details, such as the niche with the laver and the hanging towel, which stands for the liturgical niche, the table which became the altar and the liturgical vestments of the archangel.²⁵ In the *Prado Annunciation* the symbolism is more obvious. The setting reminds us that the Mother of Christ is also the mother of the Church and all Christians. Mary has become the altar. The archangel, identified as a minor minister through his garments, assists at the great mystery of the Incarnation. The Incarnation through Mary has become the central theme of the panel. Through the ecclesiastical setting, the tabernacle and the pyx, we are reminded that

the Incarnation is repeated in the Transubstantiation, the moment in the Mass when the wafers are transformed into Christ's flesh. Therefore, the *Prado Annunciation*

ultimately is a celebration of the mystery of the Mass and the coredemptive mission of Mary and the Church.

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1 The Annunciation panel is in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. It has been cut at the right side and measures 0.765m x 0.70m.

The question of authorship of this panel has not yet been satisfactorily resolved. M. J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, comments and notes by Nicole Veronée-Verhaegen. 14 vols. (New York: Praeger, 1967) 2:42. Friedländer accepts Campin as author. E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953) 1:175. Panofsky calls the *Prado Annunciation* a pastiche because of its archaic setting. D. M. Robb, "The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *Art Bulletin* XVIII (1936): 480-526 (517). Robb suggests that it is a later work by an Italo-French follower of the Flémalle master. After stylistic comparisons with paintings by the Master of Flémalle, Rogier van der Weyden, Jan van Eyck and Jaques Daret, I came to the conclusion that the panel originated in the Flémalle workshop. The overall composition and the two protagonists are by the master himself. Rogier van der Weyden's hand can be recognized in the execution of parts of the architecture.

There exist as many different suggestions for the dating of this panel as attributions. I suggest a dating between the *Merode Annunciation*, ca. 1425-1430, and the *Werl Altarpiece* of 1438 (Madrid, Museo del Prado). The protagonists of the *Prado Annunciation* recall those in the *Merode* panel. The position of the Virgin, who continues to read in her book when the angel enters, is almost identical. X-rays of the *Merode Annunciation* revealed that in an underlying composition the Virgin was looking up to the angel and that the change of her posture was developed at a later stage. The unique bearing of Mary, though, must have been developed in the *Merode Annunciation*, which clearly places the *Prado* panel somewhat later, after ca. 1430. The rendering of the perspective and the relation between the figures and the architecture of the *Prado Annunciation* points to a later date in the Flémalle oeuvre, close to the *Werl Altarpiece* of 1438. The *Prado Annunciation*, therefore, would have been executed between 1430 and 1438.

2 V. G. Martiny, "Architecture in Brussels in van der Weyden's Time," Exhibition of the City Museum of Brussels, ed. Centre Culturel du Crédit Communal de Belgique (Brussels: n.p., 1979) 94-101. Martiny argues that the "fretted" balustrade adorning the vestry in the *Prado* panel recalls the crenellated parapet of the Town Hall in Brussels (97). The parapets, though, differ in proportion and show different traceries. Furthermore, there exists no evidence that the Master of Flémalle had been to Brussels. Some architectural details appear in a different context again in the *Betrothal of the Virgin*, attributed to Campin and also in the Museo del Prado, which suggests the use of pattern books and freely assembled architectural details rather than the presentation of one particular building.

3 The chapel was interpreted as a vestibule, as a vestry, and by Martiny as a single nave church (97). The exact floorplan of the church and the part where Mary is seated is difficult to determine. I call it a chapel because of the tabernacle above Mary, which is not found in a vestry, a vestibule, or a nave.

4 The identification of these coats of arms could solve the dating problem and reveal valuable information about the function of the painting and possibly about the choice of the ecclesiastical setting.

5 For further elaboration on the development of these three types of Annunciation settings see: Robb 480-526. See also: M. Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951) 138. Meiss suggests that the domestic interior was pioneered by the Lorenzetti in the late fourteenth century.

6 The unusual setting leads Robb (517) to the conclusion that the *Prado Annunciation* was the work of an Italian working in France. A similar setting for the Annunciation can be found in the *Hours of Louis de Savoie* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. lat. 9473, fol. 17r.), executed between 1441 and 1445. The Virgin is seated under a portico of a Gothic structure. The angel, separated from her by a corner-pillar, is kneeling outside the building. The church is adorned with open gables and balustrades that recall the setting of the *Prado* panel. The position of the protagonists is the same as that in the Flémalle painting. The miniature, though, does not contain domestic objects.

C. Sterling, "Au temps du duc Amédée," *L'Oeil* October 1969: 2-12. Sterling reexamined documents of the archives of Tournai and stylistic peculiarities in paintings from Savoy of the first half of the fifteenth century which suggest Campin's influence. Sterling argues that Campin stayed in Savoy around 1430 after his pilgrimage to St. Gilles in Provence. Campin's presence in that area could explain the similarity in composition of the Annunciation of the *Hours of Louis de Savoie* and the *Prado Annunciation*. See also T. H. Feder, "A Reexamination through Documents of the First Fifty Years of Rogier van der Weyden's Life," *Art Bulletin* XLVIII (1966): 418-431.

7 Luke 1:26-35.

8 *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. ital. 115. trans. Isa Ragusa, ed. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960) 16. According to this fourteenth century, illustrated, Italian manuscript of the thirteenth-century text attributed to Pseudo-Bonaventura, the Virgin was in "a room of her little house."

9 Robb (485, n.23) quotes this text from the *History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*.

10 É. Mâle, "Le Renouveau de l'Art par les Mystères," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* XXXI (1904): 89-106, 215-230, 283-301, 379-394. M. B. McNamee, "The Origin of the Vested Angel as a Eucharistic Symbol in Flemish Painting," *Art Bulletin* LIV (1972): 263-278.

11 The *Missa Aurea* was performed on Ember Wednesday of Advent, the Wednesday after December 13, preceding the Christmas season and not on the Feast of the Annunciation on March 25. For a short history and medieval texts describing the *Missa Aurea* see K. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (1933; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 2:246, 480-483. See also B. Lane, *The Altar and the Altarpiece* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 47-50.

12 For further information on liturgical plays centered around the Virgin see T. Stemmler, *Liturgische Feiern und geistliche Spiele* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1970) 98-102. See also Young for the development of the medieval drama in general.

13 Panofsky 132-133.

14 Panofsky 132.

15 Song of Solomon 4:12.

16 Luke 1:48.

17 G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. Janet Seligman 2 vols. (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1971) 1:48.

18 The eucharistic mystery on the altar is primarily a *memoria passionis*, a repetition of Christ's Passion.

19 McNamee, Young. See also F. Bock, *Geschichte der liturgischen Gewänder des Mittelalters* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1866).

20 "Pyx," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 ed.

21 Lane 27.

22 M. Vloberg, *L'Eucharistie dans l'Art*, 2 vols. (Grenoble-Paris: B. Artaud, 1946) 2:285.

23 M. M. Gauthier, and G. François, *Medieval Enamels: Exhibitions-Catalogue* (London: British Museums Publications, 1981) 21 and Figure 19.

24 It was noted above that the Virgin here is presented as a Madonna of Humility. Besides meaning humble, the word *humilis* is related to *humus*, earth. This relation was seen as an explanation for the Madonna's sitting on the ground. See Schiller 48. But it could also be seen in relation to the earth symbolism of the altar, which is at the heart of all altar-symbolism. For a brief summary of the history of the altar and its earth symbolism, see "altar" *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 ed.

25 See for instance Lane (42ff.) who summarizes the sacramental meaning of the *Merode Annunciation*.



Figure 1. Master of Flémalle/Robert Campin, *The Annunciation*, ca. 1430-1438, oil on canvas (0.765m x 0.70m), Museo del Prado, Madrid.

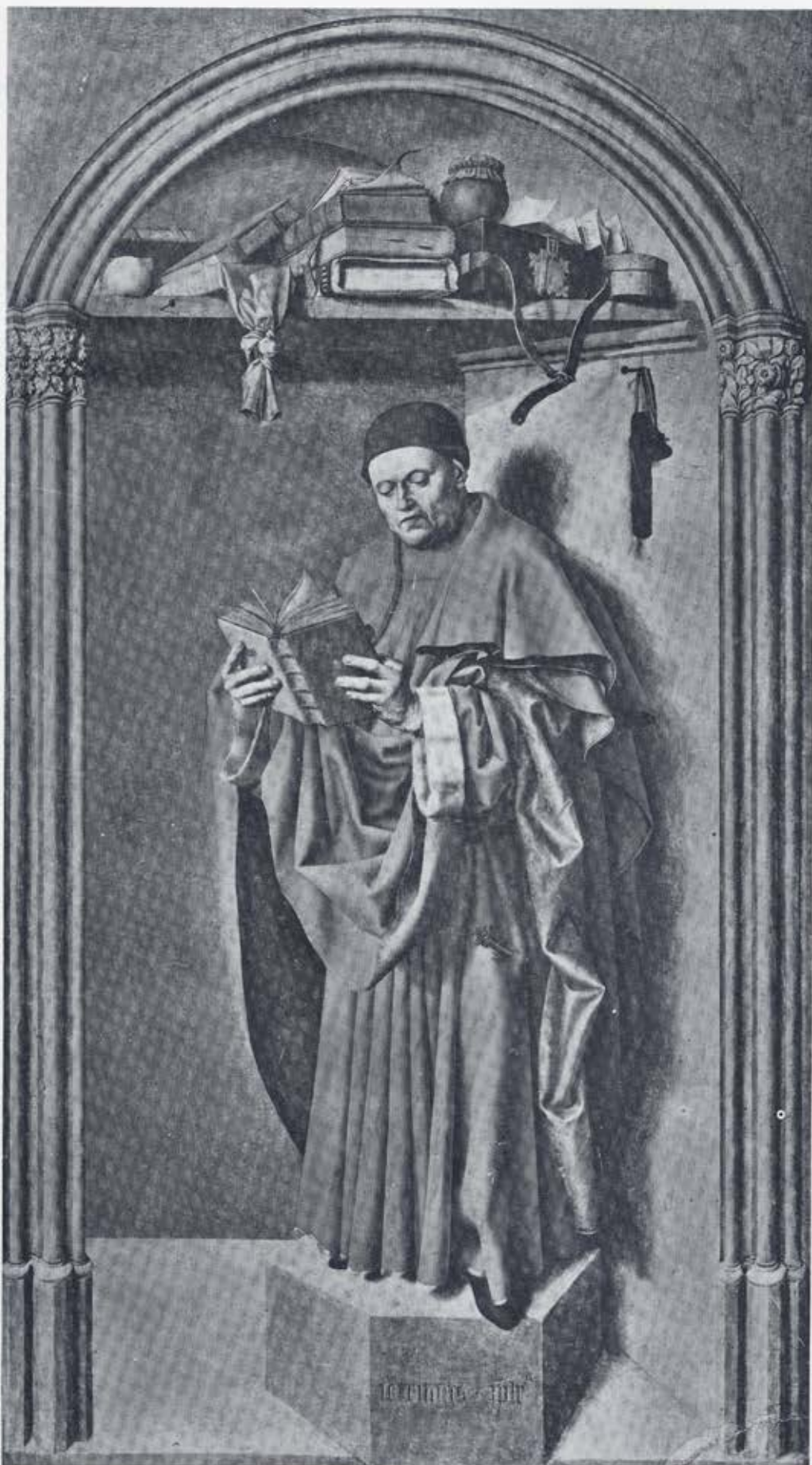


Figure 2. Master of the Aix Annunciation, *Prophet Jeremiah*, ca. 1443, oil on canvas (59 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ ") Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.