

The Annunciation
Southern Low Countries, Antwerp
c. 1525



27 cm diameter; clear glass with silver stain, vitreous enamel and pink sanguine pigment. Some abrasion to the paint surface and localised scratching, otherwise completely intact.

Provenance

Sotheby's London, Medieval Works of Art and European Sculpture, 6th July 1989, lot 5;
Andrew Rudebeck collection, inv. SG 42, acquired from the above

Published

Medieval Works of Art and European Sculpture, auction cat., Sotheby's London, 6th July 1989
(ill. p. 6).

William Cole, *A Catalogue of Netherlandish and North European Roundels in Britain*, Oxford, 1993, p. 223, no. 1786 (dated to c. 1525).

Description and Iconography

This magnificent roundel, measuring 27 cm in diameter and showing the Annunciation to the Virgin framed within an integrally composed border of scrolling vine tendrils, counts among the finest examples of sixteenth-century grisaille glass painting to have survived anywhere. The Virgin Mary appears in her bed chamber, kneeling in prayer behind a prie-dieu whose panelled sides are partially shrouded with the cloth of her mantle. Behind her is a bed with a decorative panelled headboard and a tasselled cloth tester extending into the room above it. A wooden bench with two cushions and a carved foliate crest running along its backrest sits under a window let into the far wall, through which the Holy Spirit has just entered the room in the form of a dove and hovers close to the Virgin's head. On the left, his alb and ornate brocaded chasuble still fluttering as if in arrested motion, the archangel Gabriel greets the Virgin with partially unfurled wings emanating from his shoulders. He carries a slender sceptre in his right hand and raises his left towards her in the sign of the Benediction. A heraldic shield is placed centrally at the lower edge of the composition, its field decorated with a six-pointed star between a pair of compasses, and the letters 'C' and 'M' appearing on either side. A pair of slender scrolling vine tendrils that emanate on either side of the escutcheon and come together together at the 12 o'clock position in a four-petalled flower head, frame the whole scene within a broad border of black pigment. The motif is picked out from the surrounding using the sticklighting technique, in which a stylus is scratched back through the paint layer to reveal the clear glass underneath (in this case the glass showing through has been embellished further using silver stain).



Tone is built up with both stippled shadows and washes of varying concentrations, a time-consuming two-stage approach associated only with the most accomplished roundel painters. A similarly meticulous level of thought was given to the evocation of different materials, with long, crisp highlights scratched back through the paint layers with the aid of a straight edge to evoke the appearance of polished, stony surfaces, alongside shorter, curvilinear hatchings that give softer shape to cushions, bed hangings, and drapery folds. The typical glazier's palette of dark brown vitreous paint and bright silver stain is also augmented by an extremely delicate and skillful use of what is today known as 'pink sanguine' pigment, a warm, reddish enamel paint the use of which

spread rapidly across northern Europe in the years after 1500. It is used selectively and with great care to imbue the faces and flesh tones of the figures with life and warmth, particularly in the cheeks of the Virgin. It is also used alongside its darker brown counterpart to suggest the marble column behind the archangel at the far left, where loose, painterly brushstrokes brilliantly evoke the figuring of the stone. All of these features tell us that we are looking at the work of an absolute master of the artform.

Compositional sources and context of production

The imagery used on our roundel was lifted from the Gospel of Luke, which explicitly describes the appearance of the archangel Gabriel to the Virgin at the moment of her Annunciation. Nevertheless, this is heavily embellished with supplementary details drawn from contemporary artistic conventions and modes of representation that had become fashionable in northern Europe at the turn of the sixteenth century. The detailed evocation of a fully furnished bedchamber recalls depictions of the same scene by artists such as Petrus Christus, Hans Memling, Rogier van der Weyden, and later also Joos van Cleve, who all humanised the story's protagonists by placing them in domestic settings littered with the paraphernalia of real life. The predominant source of visual inspiration for our painter must have been a stock of contemporary prints. As was correctly noted at their time of its sale in 1989, the figure of the Virgin appearing behind rather than beside her prie-dieu (as was more conventional during the period) and the dove hovering to the left of her head, seem to have been lifted in large part from Albrecht Dürer's (1471-1528) c. 1510 woodcut of the same subject from the *Small Passion* series (fig. 1), though they were individualised and embellished to a large degree by our painter; a large halo with radiating rays and a scalloped border was added to frame the Virgin's face, while her dress received a fur trim and flower-head clasp not present in the original woodcut. The figure of the archangel seems to paraphrase a woodcut of c. 1511-15 by Hans Schaufelein¹, although aspects of his anatomy and dress, as well as the furnishings of the bedchamber to his right, also suggest a more dominant influence from contemporary developments in early Netherlandish painting, as will be discussed further below.



Fig. 1
Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)
The Annunciation, from the *Small Passion*
c. 1510
12.7 x 9.7 cm; woodcut
Hollstein VII 116.128

¹ Campbell Dodgson, *Catalogue of Early German and Flemish Woodcuts in the BM*, 2 vols, 1903, 1911, II.30.77a.

The rare presence of a large heraldic shield near the base of the composition indicates that our roundel was made as a private commission, perhaps in celebration of a marriage or the founding of a private chapel. Its emblem of a pair of compasses would suggest that the family for which it was made included, or was closely connected with, an artisan such as a stonemason, sculptor or architect, although the significance of the star and two initials remains unclear. Sadly, nothing is known of its early history, although the localized pattern of damage affecting the coat of arms might suggest that a later owner attempted to remove its emblems, perhaps to overpaint them with their own, a process which has led to their partial fading.



Every aspect of this remarkable roundel signals its status as a luxury object and its execution at the hand of one of the greatest glass painters of the age; the precision of line, meticulously considered approach to highlights and shadows, and ambitious scale and level of detail makes it without doubt an absolute masterpiece of the artform. In a series of unpublished notes, Andrew Rudebeck perceptively noted its debt to early Netherlandish painting, citing in particular the Mechelen-based painter Jan Gossaert (c. 1478-1532). It is indeed tempting to seek the involvement of an accomplished painter such as Gossaert in its execution, since the handling of the brush and the careful ordering of the composition utilising a varied repertoire of up-to-date source material implicate an inventive, accomplished and well-connected artistic personality of exactly his stature and skill. Our glazier certainly seems to have come into direct contact with the work of Antwerp-based contemporaries such as Jan de Beer (c. 1475-1528) and Joos van Cleve (c. 1485-1540/1), since the conceit of the archangel's fluttering lower draperies and elongated figure type echo those artist's compositions forcefully (figs. 2-3). The large size of the glass sheet (measuring 27cm in diameter) might also support the localisation of



Fig. 2
 Joos van Cleve (c. 1485-1540/1)
The Annunciation
 c. 1525
 86.4 x 80 cm; oil on panel
 New York, Metropolitan Museum
 of Art, inv. 32.100.60



Fig. 3
 Jan de Beer (c. 1475-1528)
The Annunciation
 c. 1520
 111.5 x 131 cm; oil on panel
 Madrid, Museo Thyssen-
 Bornemisza, inv. 35 (1956.15)

our roundel to an Antwerp workshop; the city enjoyed a strategic position along the trade routes for French glass travelling north through the Low Countries, and its agents routinely claimed the best and largest panes of glass from shipments destined for onward travel to the north.² Yet precious few grisaille roundels of a similar type, and with integrally composed

borders like ours, have survived with which it can be compared, fewer still that rival its exquisite level of quality and refinement. A large roundel of the *Adoration* attributed in recent scholarship to an Antwerp workshop and exhibiting a partially integral border closely related in stylistic and technical approach, was recently acquired by the Rijksmuseum from the Tiedemann collection (fig. 4), though its central figures lack the slender grace of those on our panel.³ Alongside this example, a group of eight roundels now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York also exhibit similarly composed borders of a comparable weight and thickness, with a central black field banded on either side with yellow stain and inscribed with phrases interspersed by delicate scrolling foliage forms (fig. 5). As with ours, they incorporate escutcheons which sit on the lower perimeter but are allowed to extend partway into the scene above. They seem in this way to be the product of a shared aesthetic idiom, but their figurative scenes are far cruder than the panel under discussion, and unlike the Amsterdam *Adoration* they have traditionally been attributed to a German workshop on the basis of the patronal identity referred to in their inscriptions.⁴ German roundels of the early sixteenth century rarely attain a level of quality comparable to those produced in the more developed and refined workshops of the Low Countries in the same period, and since ours is among the finest of its type to have survived, it stands to reason that it is more likely to have been executed by a Flemish glass painter drawing on a workshop stock of patterns that included southern German print sources, than a German glazier looking to Brabant and Flanders for inspiration.

² M. Reeves, C. J. Berseik, and J. M. A. Caen, *Gilded Light: 16th-century stained glass roundels from the collection of Sir Thomas Neave and other private collections*, London, Sam Fogg, 2016, p. 24.

³ Klaus Tiedemann, *Gemalt auf Glas & Licht: Kabinettscheiben von Gotik bis Barock / Painted on glass & light: Stained glass panels from the Gothic to Baroque Period*, 'Ergänzungsheft', Nachtrage/Addendas, 2016, pp. 20-21.

⁴ Timothy Husband and Madeline Caviness eds, *Stained Glass Before 1700 in American Collections: Silver-Stained Roundels and Unipartite Panels* (Corpus Vitrearum Checklist IV). *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 39. Washington, D.C.: National Art Gallery, 1991, pp. 165-6.



Fig. 4
 The Adoration of the Magi
 Antwerp?
 c. 1530s
 25.5 cm (35.5 cm with border);
 clear glass with silver stain and
 vitreous paint
 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 5
 The Prodigal Bids Farewell
 Southern Germany
 1532
 25.4 cm diameter; clear glass with silver
 stain and vitreous paint
 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art,
 inv. 41.190.446