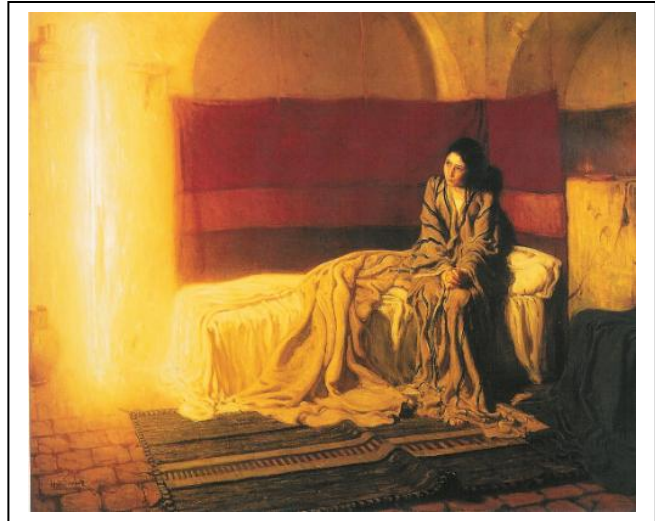


The Annunciation

By Henry O Tanner

The young woman sits quietly and attentively at the head of her bed. Her hands are folded and her head slightly bowed as she looks with shy reverence towards the bright yellow pillar of light near the foot of her bed. She is wrapped in a woolen blanket or robe. On her bed is draped another heavy bedspread. On the chair to the right is a dark woven cloth. Around her bed and against the stone walls of the room hangs a red blanket with an orange stripe. Over the cobble stone floor is a grey rug. One gets the sense that the room is dark and cold and the cloths are used in an attempt to shield the young woman from the drafty night air.



The bright yellow light bathes the entire room with a soft warm hue. It is intense but not overpowering. The young woman looks with questioned wonder. She seems to be listening.

From the title- The Annunciation- we know the woman is Mary and the yellow pillar is Gabriel announcing that she will give birth to a child who will be called the Son of God. The pillar with an intense band of white in the center is formless. It creates the sense of other worldly mystery. Our earthly dimension of cold, dark reality has been invaded by the kingdom of loving warmth and light. The Annunciation- from the word announcement will forever change life of the planet. This one act will be the defining act for our species for all of history.

The artist balances the bright light at one end of the bed by drawing all of the lines of the painting so that they converge upon Mary at the other end of the bed. She sits at the intersection of a cross that rests on her shoulders as it will on the shoulders of her son 33 years later. In her eyes and folded hands she says yes to what she hears in that moment. She accepts her call and allows her life and body to be used as the Lord of Heaven so pleases. She is the picture of submissive obedience and trusting faith.

The floor rug has two parallel bands with smaller slats connecting them. They look like the rungs of a ladder. Might it suggest Jacob's ladder- holy places in our world and hearts where the gateway to heaven opens for a moment and we catch a glimpse of glory?

The African American artist, Henry O Tanner 1859-1937 was born into a middle class family in Pittsburg, PA. His father was an African Methodist Episcopal preacher. From an early age he aspired to be a painter. He was sensitive, quiet and determined. As a black man with light skin, he endured taunting by other African Americans for having white friends and "white" ambitions. And yet, white students at the Pennsylvania Academy of Arts expressed their intolerance of a black artist in their midst by once throwing Tanner into the street, tied to his easel. He moved to France to escape racial intolerance and he spent most of his life there. His religious paintings reflect a deep devotion. O Tanner seems to identify with this poor, young girl living on the edge of society who is granted a wonderful, yet weighty, gift.

Steve Stuckey, 2004