



**3018. Annunciation,
Russian, ca. 1500, Dionisius and his Circle**

Egg tempera and gesso on wood

Panel: 31.3 x 27.5cm

Condition: paint film in good condition. The gesso ground, once covered with silver sheeting, (*basma*) is exposed.

Provenance: German art market

Date: 25th March

The iconography of Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary is very ancient, dating from the third century. (One fresco of the subject, in the Roman catacomb of Priscilla, is thought to be

second century.) The imagery is based on Luke (1:26-38) and partly on the apocryphal *Protoevangelium Jacobi* or *Book of James* (11:1-3), which dates from the second century. The latter was the source throughout the Middle Ages for much of the imagery associated with Mary, both in the East and the West. According to this apocryphal tradition, Mary was one of seven virgins set to spin wool. For each, a different colour was chosen by lot and that of royal purple fell to Mary. It is said that this was used to weave the curtain of wool that would cover the Holy of Holies in the Temple and which would be 'rent in twain' at the Crucifixion, symbolizing the revelation of mystery that had hitherto been secret. We see this in the red curtain suspended between the fantastic roofscape at the top of the icon.¹

Entering from the left is Gabriel with small head and elongated body, the raised right arm greeting Mary, the right leg extended behind, balancing the forward inclination. One wing is folding down, the other still aloft. The great drama in the history of humanity is enacted in an atmosphere of restraint and silence. The same restraint is true for the Virgin who sits on a carved and gilded cushioned stool, her feet not touching the ground but resting on a footstool. We see her perplexity, 'How can this be, seeing I know not a man?'; her right leg slightly raised in perturbation. We see her restraint and prudence modifying the emotional drama, and finally her consent and acceptance: 'So be it'.

The architectural background of Mary's house symbolises the enclosed inner space whose forms accord with proportions of the golden ratio. Studies have shown how early 20th century artists: cubists, futurists, constructivists, etc., were influenced by the new discoveries of medieval Russian art.² Such abstract symbolism, always mystical, originated from Hellenistic times and reached its highest development in Constantinople in the 14th century. It is the true language of icons. This passed to Russia and in particular to Moscow whose painters, among them Andrei Rublyov, could combine the insights of intense prayer and the methods known as Hesychasm, with the expression of mystical ideas in art. One of the greatest exponents was the Russian painter Dionisius.

Dionisius is regarded as the one who drew the most radical lessons from Rublyov's style. The outlines of his figures are even clearer and closer to pure geometric forms, the facial features more abstract, the forms completely ethereal, the composition exceptionally balanced, and the colours remarkably light. This extreme abstraction seems to throw wide open the mystical depth of the icon.³

Dionisius the Wise (also spelt Dionisy, Dionisii; Dionissi) was born *ca.* 1440, Opinion varies regarding his death; some historians give it as 1502, some 1508, and some suggest 1520. He is one of a handful of painters of the 15th century whose names together with some biographical details have come to us through contemporary chroniclers and hagiographies. It is known, for example, that he was a layman and that the icons produced in his large professionally organised workshop were the most outstanding of the later fifteenth century in

¹ See also: Kazhdan, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, OUP 1991, vol. I, p. 106. Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, Olten 1952 (reprinted SVSP, 1982) p. 172.

² See A. Spira, *The Avant Garde icon*, Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 2008

³ Adapted from <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/old-masters/dionysius-icon-painter.htm> and Andrei D. Sarabianov The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dionisy>

Russia. His patron, the influential theologian Joseph of Volotsk (1440–1515), called him ‘the best and most creative artist of all Russian lands.’



In Moscow he was exposed to the work of Italian Renaissance masters, namely Aristotle Fiorovanti and his associates, brought by Ivan III to rebuild the Ouspensky (Dormition) Cathedral situated within the Kremlin. Paintings attributed to Dionisius represent the apogee of the classicising style in Russian religious art. (Fig. 1.). Dionisius, with his assistants, Timofey, Yarets and Konya painted a Deesis with festivals and prophets for the cathedral of the Dormition and decorated two of the cathedral's chapels. In 1482 Dionisius restored the Byzantine icon of the Virgin Hodegetria in the monastery of the Ascension (destroyed in 1929) in the Moscow Kremlin.

0Fig. 1. Dionisius, hagiographical icon of Metropolitan Peter of Moscow. ca. 1500. Assumption Cathedral, Moscow Kremlin

Today he is famous for the frescoes of the Ferapontov Monastery near Vologda, a UNESCO World Heritage site. An inventory made in 1545 records 87 icons by Dionisius, 37 by his sons Vladimir and Feodosy and 20 by their colleague Paisy.⁴

Dionisius's style, derived from his Novgorod origins and beyond that, the traditions of Byzantium, is sometimes referred to as ‘Muscovite Mannerism’ and was characterised by his mastery of colour, confident and elegant drawing, light transparent colours, unique compositional harmony, and flowing lines. His images are imbued with spiritual serenity. While his figures are even more elongated than was customary in Novgorod, he escaped both artificiality and effeminacy. His drapery is moulded with a classic touch, which adds forcefulness to the curiously coloured hills and architectural features in his backgrounds, giving his work freshness and vitality. Dionisius arguably had an even greater impact upon contemporary Russian artists than his predecessor Rublyov: indeed, the lyrical effect of his colour schemes permeated much of Russian art of the early 16th century. His style was

⁴ Web Gallery of Art

continued by numerous followers including his sons Feodosy and Vladimir, who decorated the Annunciation Cathedral in the Kremlin in 1508.

At the end of the 15th century, Dionisius, by then at the height of his fame, moved to Moscow. His style had abandoned all allusions to the physical reality of the earthly world. The dramatically vertical dimension of his figures and the ornamental abstraction of his ecclesiastical garments combine to dematerialise the human figure entirely, allowing the saint—in the eyes of Russian Orthodox viewers of the era—to reach the height of spirituality.

Dionisius' work, with its abstract treatment of architecture, has affinities with our Annunciation. We see, in one of the border scenes of the icon of Metropolitan Peter (Fig. 1, and Fig. 1. detail) his rendering of the building of the foundations of the Assumption Cathedral in Moscow. The zig-zag top of the wall, viewed from above, is unique to the vision of Dionisius and its appearance in our icon significantly links the two works.

We note the artist's simultaneous use of multiple perspective systems both in our icon and in the works of Dionisius. In the Annunciation the two protagonists are clearly in front of the buildings situated behind them, but the form of the Virgin's footstool and of the stool on which she sits suggest perspective lines that will meet in front of the picture: a reverse perspective implying a space occupied by the onlooker. The top of the zig-zag walls are viewed from an aerial perspective whereas the fantastic curved roof of the structure on the right is seen from below.



Fig. 1. Detail



Annunciation detail. Note the view looking down on top of the zig-zag wall

Comparison with an icon of Saint Athanasius in the Menil Collection Museum in Houston, Texas (Fig. 3.) and the icon of the Virgin by Dionisius (Fig. 2) demonstrates that the painter of our icon belongs to the milieu. The Athanasius icon is attributed to Dionisius by Bertrand Davrezac⁵ 'we note the icon's flatness, elongation, unbroken contour lines, and the ornamentation, all have numerous counterparts in Dionisius' work.

⁵ In Annemarie Weyl Carr, *Imprinting the Divine*, Yale University Press, 2012, pp 109-111.



Annunciation detail



Fig. 2. Standing Virgin
Dionisius Museum
Ferapontov⁶



Fig 3. Menil Collection Museum
Houston TX

Dionisius is primarily known as the artist who, with his associates, conceived and decorated the Virgin Nativity Cathedral in the Ferapontov Monastery near Vologda in the Russian north. Almost perfectly preserved, the Virgin Nativity Cathedral and its frescoes is comparable, both for its importance to art history and as a pilgrimage destination for the faithful, to Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. At Ferapontov we see three images of the Annunciation (Figs, 4, 5, 6.)



Fig; 4. Dionisius, Annunciation, central crosswise nave.
East view. 'The power of the Most High then over-
shadowed...' (Akathist, Kontakion 3)



Annunciation, detail

⁶ <http://www.dionisy.com/eng/dionisy/>

Taking into account the difference in scale between the large frescoes decorating the huge cathedral-like space and our diminutive icon done with saturated colours on gesso and panel, we see the affinities between the two works. We note the small heads and tiny hands and feet, the self-possession and restraint of the figures and their gestures, the dynamically charged space between them, the ‘curious’ architecture behind them with similarly geometricised proportions.

Bernard Davrezac, regarding the Saint Athanasius icon in Houston (Fig. 3) states ‘Because only a handful of works are securely attributed to Dionisius, it is not possible to identify the painter more precisely than as coming from his workshop’.⁷ Davrezac, a distinguished art historian, follows the conventions of art historical methodology. And, while what he says is true, it does not take into account the tradition of the artist’s anonymity which was intentional and in perfect conformity with the spiritual tradition of Hesychast painters in the ‘Golden Age’ of icon to which our Annunciation belongs.

⁷ In Annemarie Weyl Carr, *Imprinting the Divine*, Yale University Press, 2012, pp 109-111.