



**JAIME EGUIGUREN**

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**Trapani, Sicily**

17<sup>th</sup> century

**LARGE DEVOTIONAL  
PLAQUE  
ANNUNCIATION**



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Trapani, Sicily  
17<sup>th</sup> century

*Large devotional plaque*  
*Annunciation*

Wood, coral, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, gilt bronze, silver, lapis lazuli.

87.5 x 58 x 22 cm

Provenance: Lisa and Heinrich Arnhold; London, Private Collection

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The work we are examining here is a clear example of the refinement, exuberance and level of technical sophistication attained in the manufacture of coral in late Baroque Trapani, and forces us to reconsider its classification as a “*Minor Art*”, now recognising it as a compendium of various art forms, resulting from the skill and virtuosity of local artisans. The piece is a dual-framed devotional plaque with a sculptural group depicting the *Annunciation* in the middle.

Despite the multiplicity of forms and compositional elements, we can observe how the artist has successfully linked each of the work’s three levels without seeming unnatural or forced.

On the first level we observe a frame that is ornate with curvilinear movement, contrasting with the defined geometry of the internal frame, where the Annunciation scene is located. Using gilt bronze as both support and connecting element throughout the entire work, we can appreciate, on this first, external level, acanthus-shaped motifs made of mother-of-pearl and coral inlay (Fig. 1). In the lower corner, superimposed over a bronze frame made up of plant motifs, we find an encrusted circular-shaped lapis lazuli contrasting with the (irregular) octagonal geometry of the larger-scale encrusted lapis lazuli crowning the work at the top of the plaque.



Fig. 1 Trapani. 17<sup>th</sup> century. *Devotional plaque* (detail). Wood, coral, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, gilt bronze, silver, lapis lazuli. Arnhold Collection.

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Figs. 2 & 3 Trapani.  
17<sup>th</sup> century. *Devotional plaque (detail)*. Wood, coral, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, gilt bronze, silver, lapis lazuli. Arnhold Collection.



The middle section of the piece presents a rectangular frame made of tortoiseshell and jasper. The corners of the parallelogram are encrusted with round lapis lazuli, maintaining a balance with the compositional elements of the whole work. Lapis lazuli inlay is once again present in the middle of each of the four sides, mounted on little metal frames made up of plant motifs (Fig. 2).

On the third and final compositional level, in the middle of the devotional plaque, we see the sculptural group depicting the Annunciation scene at the precise moment at which the Virgin Mary is listening to the words of the Archangel Gabriel bringing her the news that she is going to be the Mother of God (Fig. 3).

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In accordance with the iconographic tradition of Medieval Western art, the episode is depicted in the middle of what appears to be a room in a palace, locating the Annunciation in increasingly opulent architectural surroundings. Elegant “embroidered” curtains over gilt bronze present the scene on which the event takes place, looking out through enormous windows onto a beautiful sky, heavily charged with meaningful decoration. Particularly symbolic is the vase of flowers separating the Virgin from the message-bearer, given that flowers are a reference to the Mary’s three-fold virginity (after, during and following the birth of Christ). The scene where the action is being played out includes the depiction of the Virgin, the Archangel Gabriel and God the Father, all carved in red coral. The Virgin Mary is presented in the lower left section of the composition, standing as a sign of respect for the divine emissary. Also in the tradition of Western depictions, we see her dressed in lavish red robes (tunic and cloak), holding a book open in her left hand with which, according to some exegetes, she is reading and meditating the words of the prophet Isaiah (7:14). Meanwhile, with her other hand resting on a table and turning her crowned face towards the Archangel, she receives the divine message with surprise and majesty.

The dynamism of the Archangel Gabriel stands in contrast to Mary’s mystical attitude, placed opposite and above the recipient of his message, on the right of the scene. He is depicted standing on a cloud with his wings unfurled and raising his right hand towards the heavens in a clearly oratorical gesture to communicate the divine message to Mary.

Standing at the top of the middle of the scene is the composition’s third and final element, God the Father, also on a cloud and surrounded by eight cherubs. Depicted as a bearded man, topped by a triangular crown that might well be the *Eye of Providence*, from which a halo of light is emanating, he holds the globe in his left hand and, raising his right hand in a gesture of blessing, confirms the angelic message.

The relationship between word and conception as a way of understanding the Annunciation has been addressed in a range of written sources throughout history, although the main textual reference on which we draw is the telling of this episode in the Gospel of Saint Luke, narrated from Mary’s point of view (1:26-38):

*“And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city in Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her and said: «Hail, thou that are highly favoured, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women». And when she saw him she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be, and the angel said to her: «Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God. And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest. And the Lord God shall give him the throne of his father David; and he shall rule over the House of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end»”.*

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Fig. 4. Anton Raphael Mengs, *The Dream of Saint Joseph*, 18<sup>th</sup> century. Museum of History of Art, Vienna.

There have also been many cases throughout the History of Art where the scene depicted is that of Mary's husband Saint Joseph's impression of this moment, as appears in the Gospel of Saint Mark (Fig. 4).

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Fig. 5. Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, 15<sup>th</sup> century, Prado Museum, Madrid.

From an iconographic point of view, the various apocryphal texts, far more exhaustive in their description of events, have proved a rich source, resulting in an immense panoply of representative possibilities that have varied over the centuries and through all points of the compass. We therefore observe behavioural variations on the part of the characters, which might see the Virgin kneeling, sitting or standing, drawing water from a well or spinning with a spindle in Byzantine depictions, or reading in the case of Western ones. Similarly, it is also common to see the Archangel starting to genuflect in a display of the Medieval chivalric ideal (Fig. 5), with his hands crossed over his chest or with an olive branch to symbolise peace. These are just a few examples from the extensive iconology surrounding this Biblical episode, and which clearly attest to the importance that this subject has had for the art world.

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Fig. 6 G. B. Tiepolo. *Neptune Offering Gifts to Venice*. Fresco from the Venice Ducal Palace.



Fig. 7 Lapidary testimony on the wall of the Fardelliana Library.

Having already addressed the iconographic aspect of the piece, I feel it is worth taking time now to examine its geographic-artistic context: Trapani. This Sicilian region's history is irremediably linked to coral, to its fishermen and the *corallai*.<sup>1</sup> It is known that as early as when the Phoenicians and Arabs inhabited the island, the local sailors knew about the rich coral banks on the seafloor around them and throughout much of the Mediterranean (Fig. 6). Sensing there was a direct relationship between the island inhabitants and their maritime surroundings, the first references we find are from the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, through the lapidary testimony currently on the wall of the Fardelliana Library, recounting the discovery of significant coral banks (Fig. 7).

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1 Coral workers and artisans



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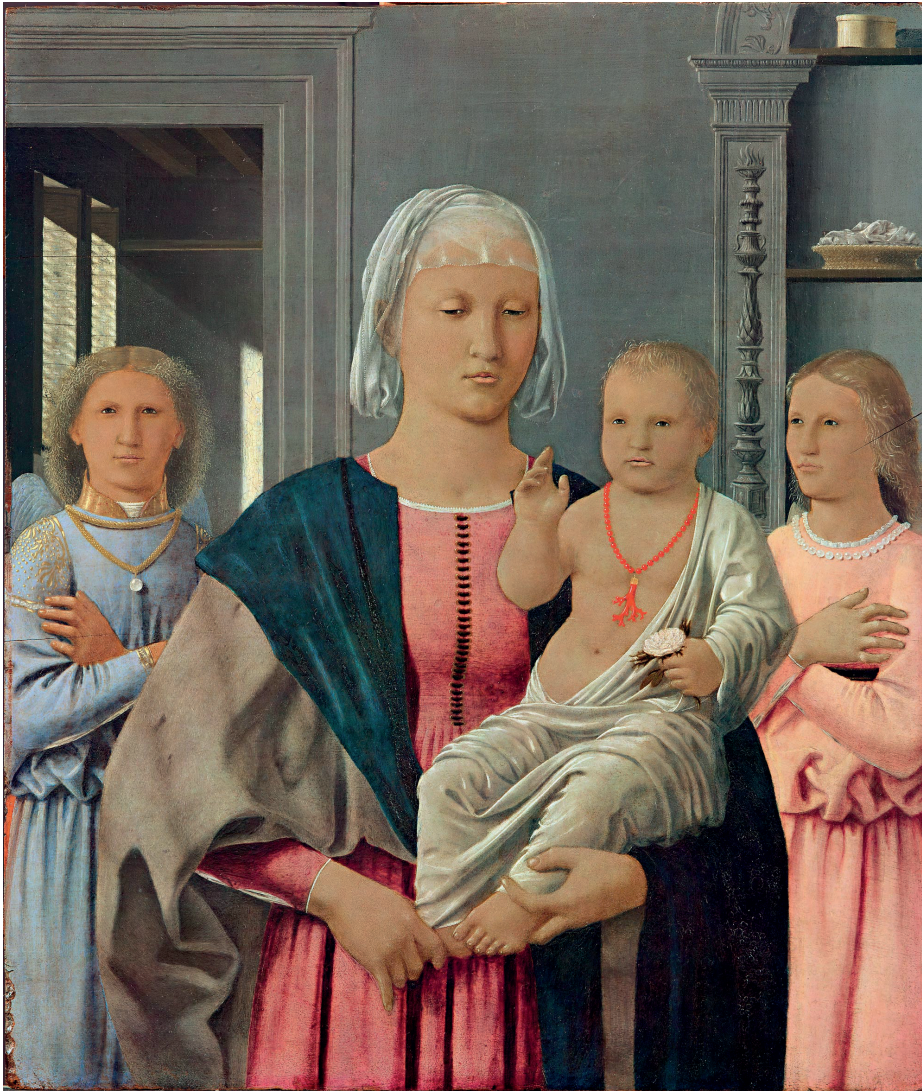


Fig. 8. Piero della Francesca. *Madonna with Child*. 15<sup>th</sup> century. Urbino Ducal Palace.

Fig. 9 Trapani, *Chalice*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, gilt bronze with coral inlay, Pepoli Regional Museum, Trapani.

Fig. 10. Trapani, *Reliquary*. 17<sup>th</sup> century. Gilt bronze, coral and enamel.



Despite its nature and formation still being shrouded in mystery, *Corallium rubrum* has always been used in artistic works, among its other functions. From jewellery for personal use (Fig. 8), to sacred works for local churches and beyond (Figs. 9 & 10), as well as decorative elements designed for important customers who, over the years and with the growing recognition of the artistic use of this colonial animal, helped to develop an increasingly refined and elaborate art form.

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Fig. 11 Trapani, *Frame*, 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Gilt bronze, coral and mother-of-pearl. Private Collection.



Fig. 12. Trapani. *Devotional plaque*. Late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Gilt bronze, coral, mother-of-pearl, lapis lazuli and tortoiseshell. Private Collection.

It was thus, and as a consequence of the demands of a clientele whose tastes were increasingly exquisite, that coral workers were forced to combine their creations with new decorative elements, such as mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell or precious stones, and to get to know and learn about new arts such as working with precious metals (Figs. 11 & 12). That explains the evolution culminating in the major decorative works adorning 17th-century churches and palaces, and which are currently housed in major museums in Italy and throughout the world, as well as in major private collections. From the royal collections of Philip IV and Charles II to that of Manolo March (Figs. 13 & 14), taking in the collections of Schoenborn, Pommersfelden, Whitaker, and, of course, the one we are dealing with here, the collection of Lisa and Heinrich Arnhold (Figs. 15 & 16).

SOFÍA FERNÁNDEZ LÁZARO



Fig. 13. Trapani, *Devotional plaque with crown of thorns*. First half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. wood, bronze and gold leaf, coral, mother-of-pearl, agate, and lapis lazuli. Manolo March Collection.



Fig. 14. Trapani, *Devotional plaque depicting Judith and Holofernes*. First half of the 18th century. Gilt leaf, bronze, coral, ivory, mother-of-pearl, agate, amber, tortoiseshell, *pietre dure*, lapis lazuli, silver filigree, polychrome stones. Private collection, Palermo.

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Fig. 15: The Arnhold family castle's front.

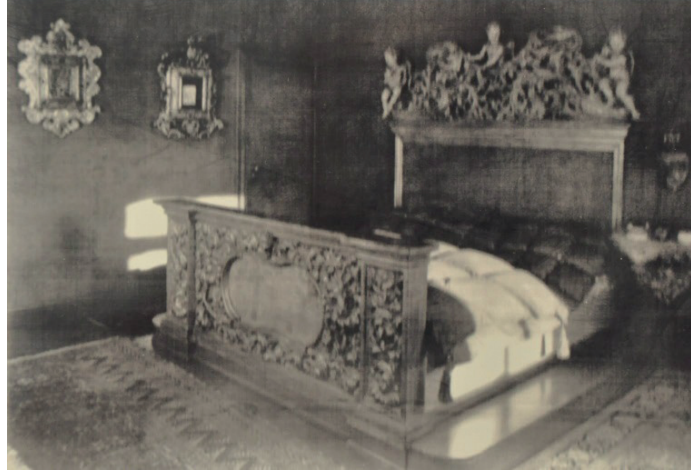


Fig. 16: Trapani. Arnhold family bedroom interior where the Trapani plaque can be appreciated.

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