On Sightlines

Seeing (and) Devotion in Medieval Illuminations

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Introduction

For those living in the medieval period, seeing really functioned as a kind of believing. People considered vision to be the primary sense, especially in matters of religion, as demonstrated by the famous iconophilic (pro-image) quote by Pope Gregory I: "[A] picture is displayed in churches on this account, in order that those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books." (Chazelle, 139) Gregory and his contemporaries held a complicated understanding of how images, such as those painted in the pages of manuscripts, interacted with the human eye, mind, and even soul. Ancient and medieval concepts of vision were advanced, even without modern technology, and learned individuals argued over the two dominant theories of intro- and extramission. Intromission, the preferred theory of Aristotle and the Islamic physician Avicenna, proposes that little sight-rays extend from objects into our eyes, bringing with them an understanding of what the viewed thing is and how it works. Extramission, lauded by Plato, says that the eye sends out its own rays, traveling through air until they hit an item to carry the same information back to the mind. (Spencer-Hall, 107-108)

Illustration from *System der visuellen Wahrnehmung beim Menschen* (1687) depicting emission theory.

Both theories held substantial theological problems. Since every item projected its essence directly into the viewer's mind and soul, this meant that looking at an image of Jesus Christ was practically the same as communicating with Christ himself – forget speaking face to face, what about mind to mind! – but it also meant a harmful image had the same incredible and invasive power, and doctrinal questions about idolatry were always present. (Biernoff, 133-134) While these issues led to some iconoclastic (anti-image) phases, eventually the Church prioritized the image's utility as a vehicle for redemption through personal interaction with Christ. Images remained not just popular, but crucial.

Seeing internally, or visualizing, became just as important for private devotion as seeing externally; meditating on images such as those found in personal Books of Hours could stimulate the mind's eye as well as the physical one. The church's understanding of the interplay of vision and doctrine meant they kept a tight leash on how artists could orthodoxically portray holy figures, which resulted in works that at times could appear formulaic. (Dijk, 421-422) However, artists often played within the boundaries of established theological formulae to put their own personal stamp on exquisite scenes. (Bohde, 3-44)

Detail of Jan van Eyck, *Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele* (c. 1434/1436)

How, then, if vision is supreme – if seeing is not just believing, but knowing – did medieval viewers square the dynamics between doctrine and artistic representation with their own understanding of vision? If Mary and the archangel Gabriel stare directly into each other's eyes in a depiction of the Annunciation, such as that of the Hours of Jean Antoine de Mahieu and Jacqueline de Sivry, does this exchange of gaze mean something different to someone who believes in extramission versus if Mary casts down her eyes? What about when a painting of the Trinity makes direct eye contact with this external viewer, like in the Missal of Jan de Broedere – do any

Detail of Francesco del Cossa, *Saint Lucy* (c. 1473/1474)

doctrinal and devotional tangles arise? *On Sightlines: Seeing (and) Devotion in Medieval Illuminations* uncovers the tapestry of medieval vision, doctrine, and illustration through careful inspection of a variety of texts from the late medieval period, straight from the source. Come take a look to see (and believe) for yourself!

1.
The Visitation, Master of the Boethius of Montpellier
Thourotte Hours (use of Metz)
France, Metz, c. 1340
In Latin and French, illuminated manuscript on parchment. 40 miniatures (2 full-page, 7 miniatures, 7 large historiated initials, and 24 calendar miniatures) by the Master of the Boethius of Montpellier. 130 x 90 mm. (BOH 215) [32v.-33r]

Recognizing Twin Fates

This stunning miniature shows two women, Saint Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary, enclosed within a capital letter D while the dove of the Holy Spirit descends from a frame of clouds above. While in the Gospel of Luke the excitement of the Visitation is almost entirely spoken, here the artist turns the action visual. Elizabeth, almost frantic with excitement, reaches out towards a shy Mary to salute "the mother of [her] Lord" (Luke 1:43) and the two women lock eyes knowingly. The dove, hovering above Mary, flies almost directly into Elizabeth, indicating her miraculous knowledge of Christ's position within Mary's womb. The women's exchange of gaze thus demonstrates an interesting reinterpretation of Luke; instead of recognizing each other's pregnancies instantly through Mary's verbal salutation, the mother of Christ and the mother of John the Baptist realize the other's role through an uncanny clarity of sight divinely assisted by the Holy Spirit presiding over their greeting. The viewer, too, is privy to this clarity, for simply by looking at this combination of figures one feels the women's excitement through the paint – but anyone familiar with the story of Christ's birth, as the medieval owners of this book certainly were, knows that the carefully positioned dove is really the one in charge.

2.

The Annunciation, Hours of Jean Antoine de Mahieu and Jacqueline de Sivry (use of Mons)
Southern Netherlands, Mons, c. 1460 (original portion), c. 1480-1490 (updated)
In Latin and some French, illuminated manuscript on parchment. 22 full-page miniatures by the Mildmay Master
(13), the Master of Philippe de Croÿ (7), and a third Mons illuminator, follower of Simon Marmion (2) and 4 small
miniatures by the Mildmay Master 167 x 116 mm (BOH-0217) [103v-104r]

Exchanging a Gaze between Equals

This electric rendition of the Annunciation depicts Gabriel and Mary looking at each other so directly that one can practically see horizontal lines radiating from their pupils. Gabriel, leaning forward slightly, enters from a door on the left; Mary, on the right, turns over her shoulder. Although her posture expresses surprise, her face as she listens to the archangel is stoic and queenly. The sightlines here – a direct exchange – give the two figures equal footing in the scene. By the mid-15th century when this was painted, theologians had long recognized her role as the Mother of God and of the Church, which explains Mary's aloofness and Gabriel's slight stoop in deference. Interestingly, both Gabriel himself and the streamer of speech issuing from his hands interrupt Mary's gaze; medieval theories of vision guide the viewer to understand that through direct observation, Mary absorbs the *species* (essence) of Gabriel and his message into her mind to become part of her own consciousness. Gabriel in return looks directly at Mary, serving his role as God's faithful and efficient messenger as he communicates with a glance her role in a much larger series of events. Although not painted on the page themselves, viewers also participated in this exchange; the medieval book owner might meditate on the scene and visualize incorporating into their own lives the understanding and acceptance displayed by Mary.

3.

Throne of Mercy (Trinity), Missal of Jan de Broedere (Summer Part)
Belgium, Abbey Church of St.-Adrian of Geraardsbergen or Grammont, c. 1510-1520?
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment. 5 large miniatures, 1 full page, with 4 historiated initials and
illuminated borders by the Masters of Raphael de Mercatellis 335 x 230 mm. (IIM-5892) [53v.54r]

Encountering All of God Face to Face

It is unusual to see such explicit depictions of the Trinity in manuscripts; many branches of Christianity hesitate to paint God the Father, as questions of idolatry and ability to properly represent something sacred with profane materials arose between the 6th and 8th centuries. Another wave of iconoclastic fervor swept across 16th century Europe in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, attacking physical images in favor of simply visualizing Christ in one's own mind, which makes this miniature all the more interesting.

This scene follows an accepted archetypal model most popular in the Low Countries called the "Throne of Mercy" or "Throne of Grace," where God holds a crucified Christ and the dove of the Holy Spirit hovers between them. Usually, as seen here, the figures are surrounded by angels. Keeping with the doctrine of coinherence, or the affirmation of both one- and three-ness, the folds of God the Father's robe billow around the cross while the line of the dove's wings align with his chin and shoulders to create an illusion of one solid figure. Although Christ's head slumps, the other two parts of the Trinity stare straight out of the page to meet the viewer's eyes. Since a missal is used to guide daily Mass, a regular encounter with such a stern gaze must have sparked the priest's piety. The name "Throne of Mercy" does strike a bit of a different tone, though; seeing God the Father thrust Christ's broken body out of the page cues a meditation on sacrifice and, well, mercy rather than orthopraxy (correct practice.) If an image of Christ is for all intents and purposes the same as Christ being there in the flesh, then the artist likely intended this depiction of mercy & the encounter between viewer and God to be as piercing as the figures' sharp stare.
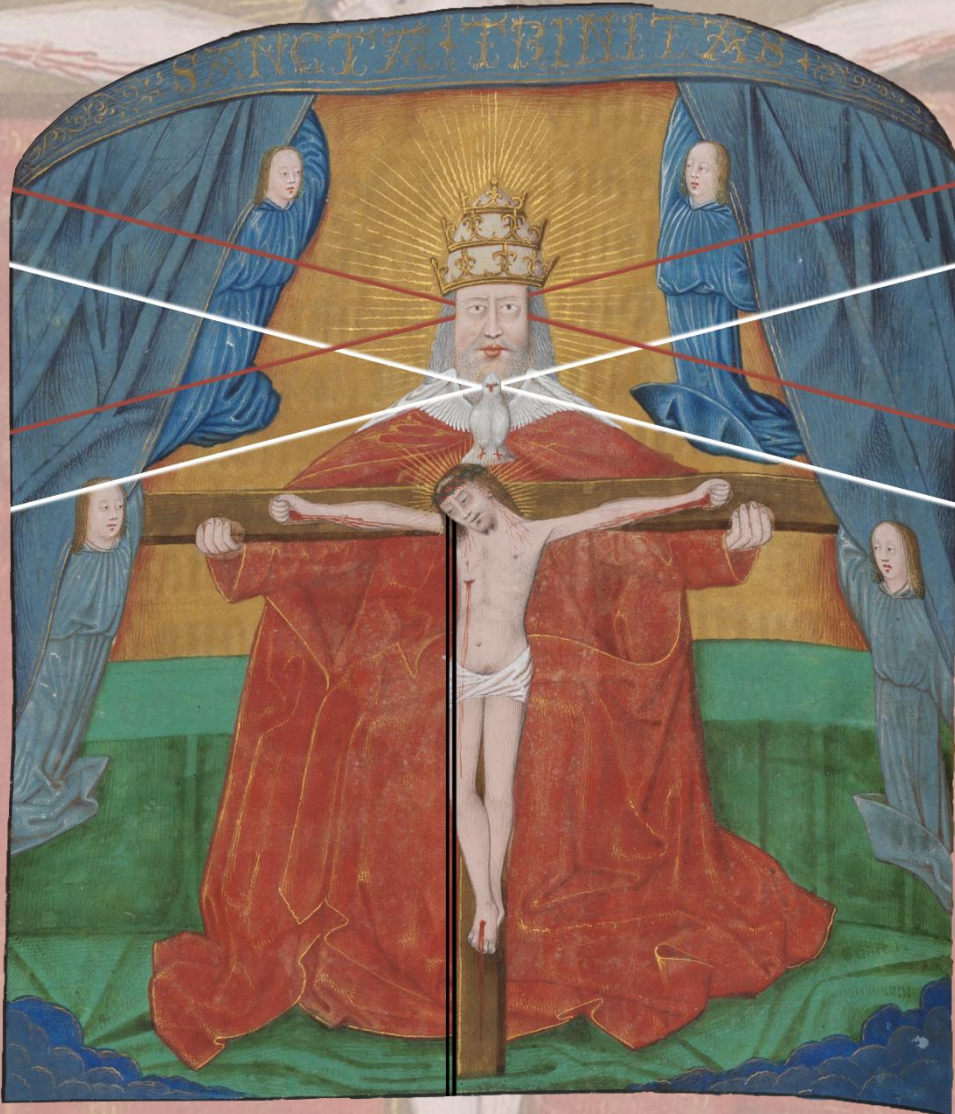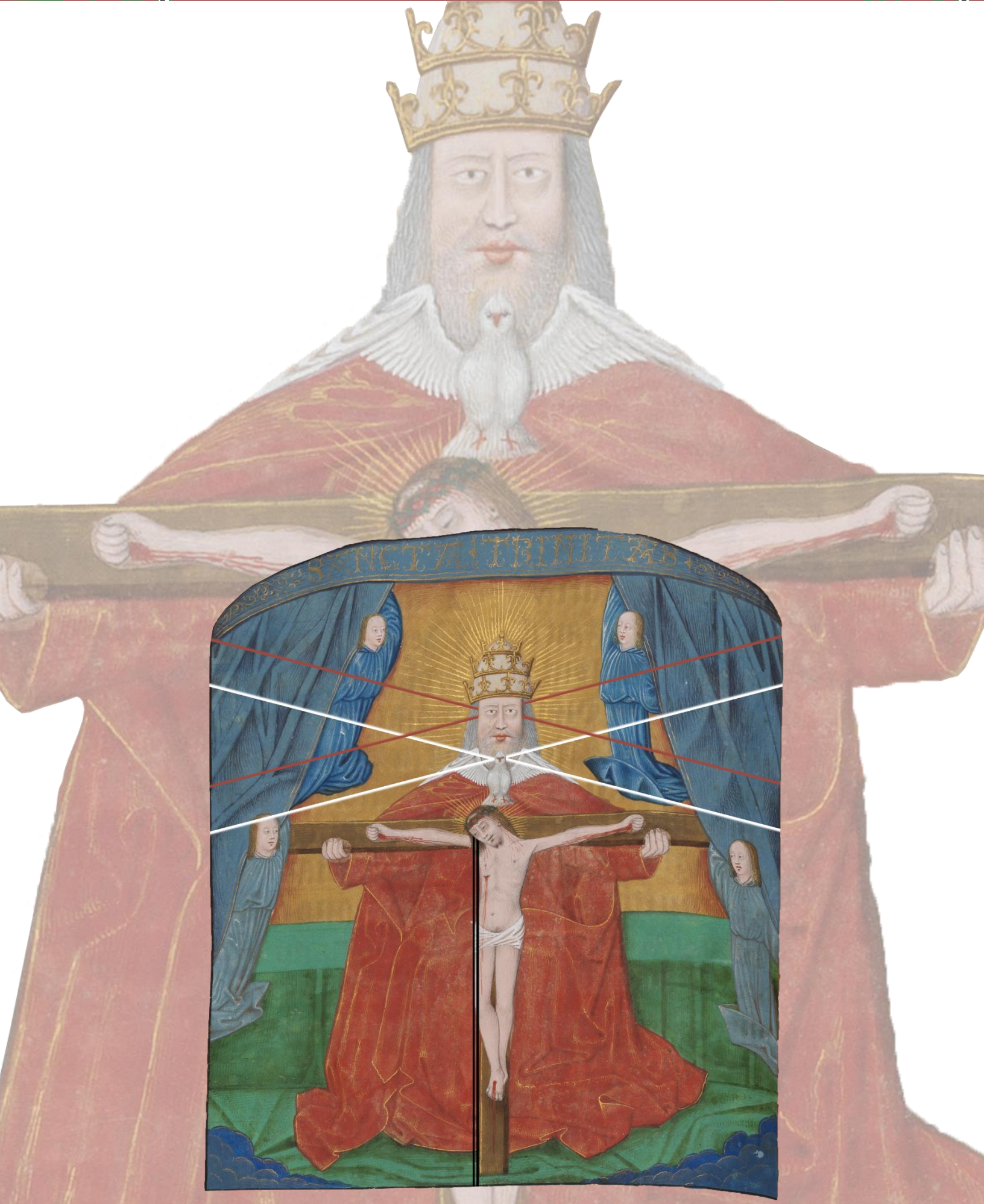
4.

The Crucifixion, Bamberg Painter (?)
Germany, Bamberg (?), c. 1440-1450
Tempera and gold leaf on parchment
300 x 220 mm., illumination 270 x 195 mm.
(MIN-8079)

Demonstrating Proper Lamentation for Christ

The pyramidal composition of this Crucifixion highlights a similarly triangular rotation of gazes. The Virgin Mary, on the bottom left, clasps her hands and looks sadly at John the Baptist, who stares up at the crucified Christ. Stigmata on prominent display, Christ's closed eyes would look directly down at his mother if they only opened just a crack. John's hand reaches to his chest in mourning and Mary averts her eyes, cueing a medieval viewer to react in a similar way as the intro- or extramission rays process the sad *species* of the scene. Outside of the central frame, the diminutive figure of the original book's commissioner lifts his hands in prayer as he takes the trio before him. Although certainly the insertion of donors into Biblical scenes was a regular practice in Christian art by the 1400s, perhaps viewers understood these insertions as a type of instruction, too. The commissioner physically was not at Christ's crucifixion, although here he is at the painted version; since we know medieval practitioners understood images to hold something of the essence of whatever they depict, visualizing oneself in the bishop's shoes means that the viewer, too, might incorporate something of the scene into themself as they picture crouching in front of the cross.
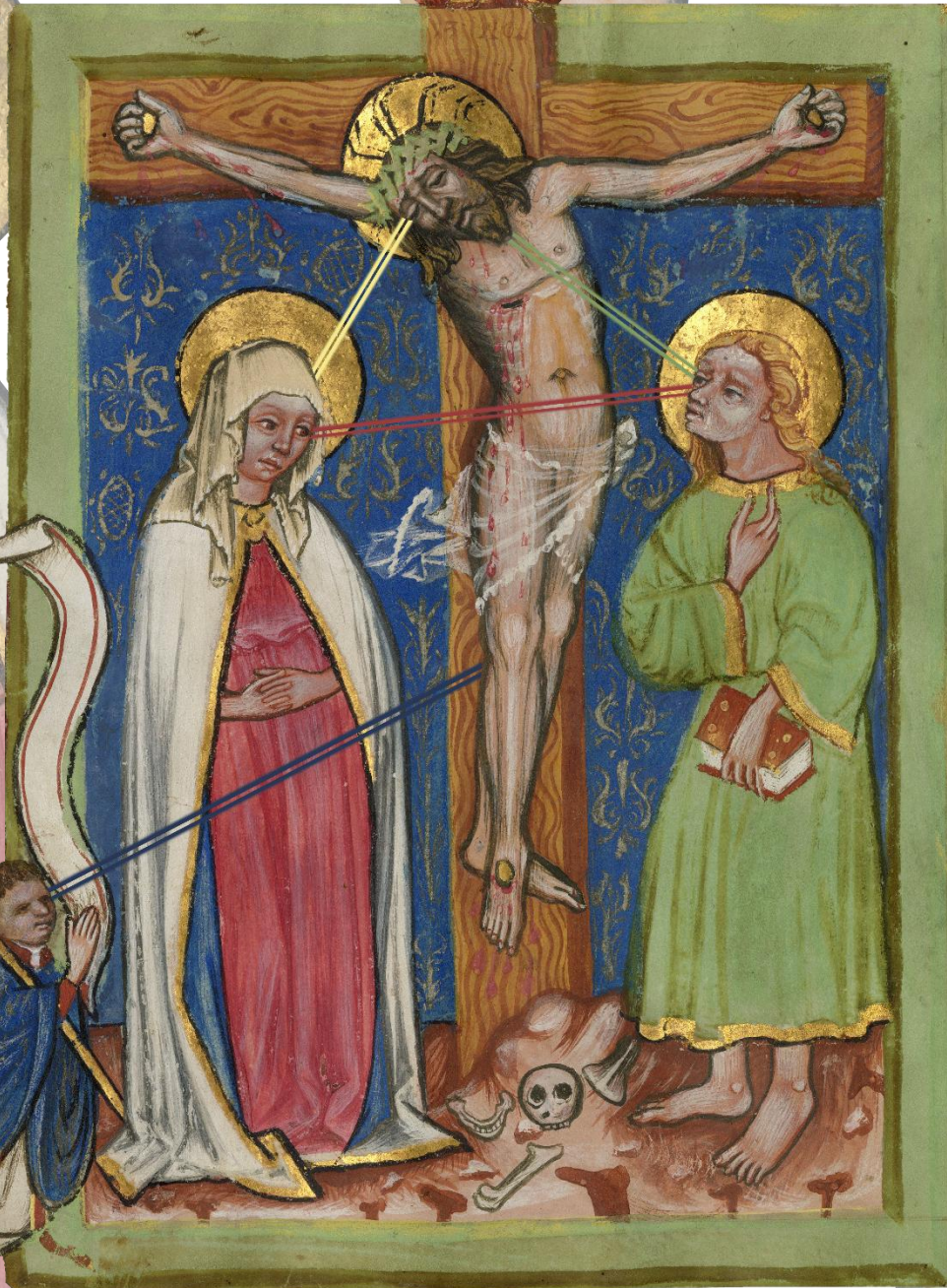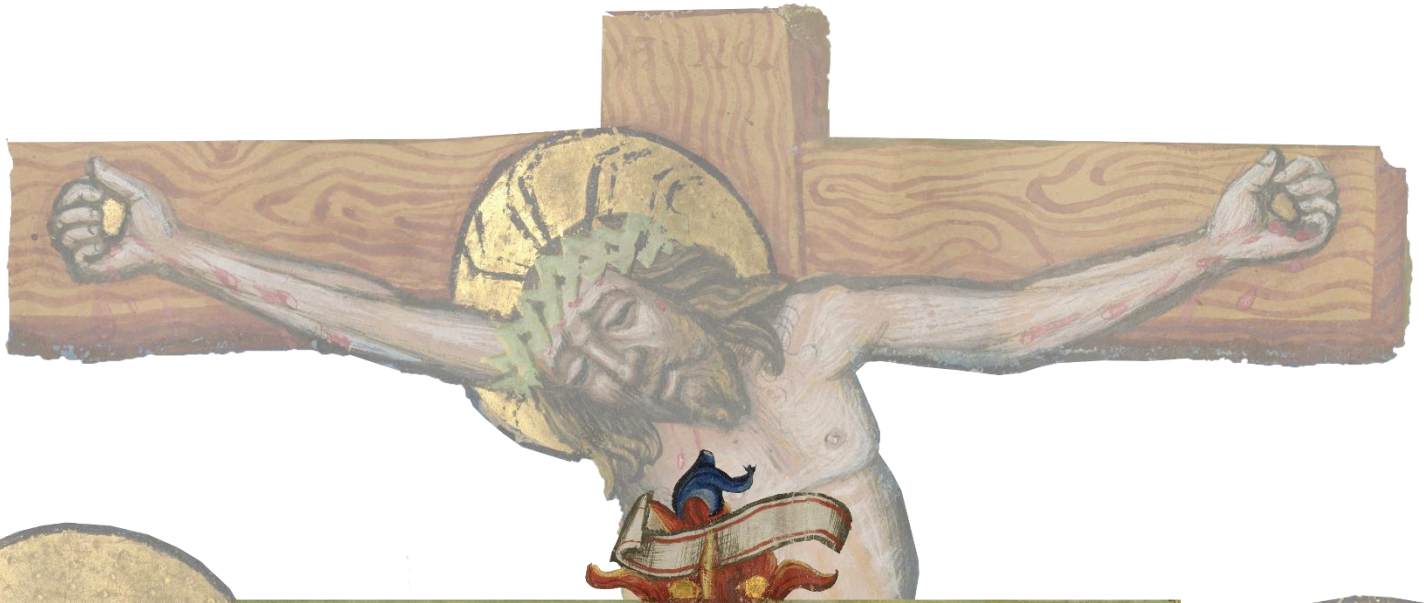
5.

The Annunciation, Choir Gradual with feasts for the Temporal (Franciscan Use)
Northern Italy, c. 1450-1460
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment with musical notation. One miniature with full border, eleven
historiated initials, and numerous painted initials by a provincial follower of the Master of the Budapest Antiphoner
480 x 355 mm. (TM-1164) [front flyleaf-f1r]

Modeling Duty and Virtuosity

Mary, bent over a book, looks demurely at the floor in acceptance while Gabriel, wings streaming behind him, charges in from the left to deliver earth-shattering news. The viewer, following the sightlines, receives the message loud and clear – she is to be the mother of Christ! This depiction of the Annunciation changes the dynamics from one of equals greeting each other to one of command. Here Mary plays the dutiful Virgin, purposefully not meeting the gaze of the angel either out of fear or reverence. Gabriel points directly at her, following the line created by the Holy Spirit in haloed bird form as it rockets to the right, and issues a streamer of text that wraps around his body. The effect of Mary's refusal to return the archangel's gaze is rather startling; combined with the harsh line where her interior setting changes from the landscape outside, the composition obviously guides viewers' eyes straight down to the text in addition to its example of exceptional faith on which parishioners might dwell.
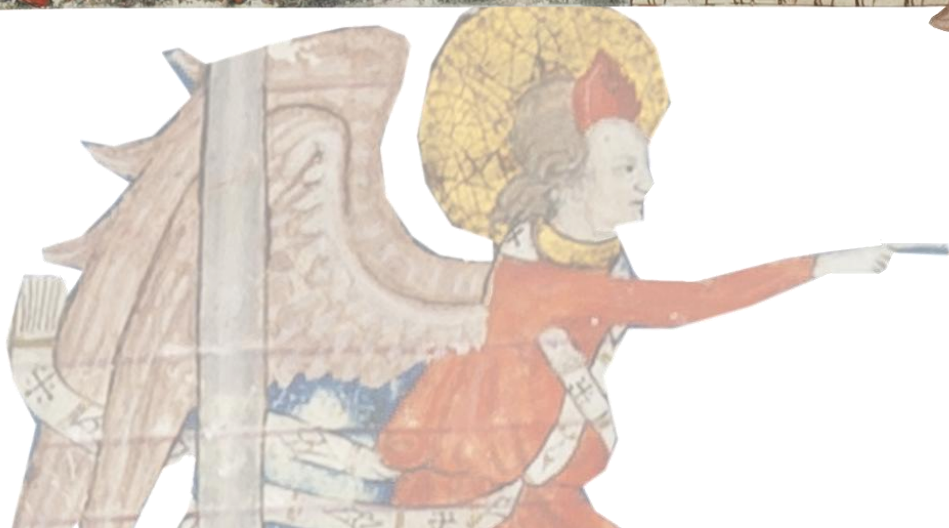
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