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# THE CARTOGRAPHIC SYMBOLISM IN JAN van EYCK'S ANNUNCIATION IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY, WASHINGTON, D.C.

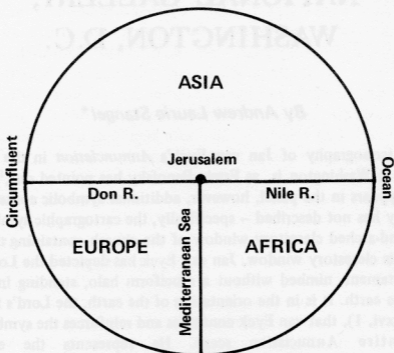
By Andrew Laurie Stangel\*

The iconography of Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation* in the National Gallery at Washington is, as Erwin Panofsky has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> intense. There appears in the panel, however, additional symbolic content which Panofsky has not described – specifically, the cartographic symbolism in the round-arched clerestory window of the church containing the scene.

In this clerestory window, Jan van Eyck has depicted the Lord of the Old Testament, nimbed without a cruciform halo, standing in majesty upon the earth. It is in the orientation of the earth, the Lord's footstool (*Isaiah* lxvi, 1), that van Eyck continues and reinforces the symbolism of the entire Annunciation scene. He represents the earth as West-oriented – i.e., West positioned at the top of the world map – in marked contrast to conventional cartographic representation which, since the great development of European map making in the later Middle Ages and until the later half of the fifteenth century, reckoned East as belonging at the top of a world map. As sure as the apse of a Gothic cathedral was regularly oriented towards the East, so too, were medieval world maps regularly East-oriented. The reason for the East-orientation of world maps before the later half of the fifteenth century will be discussed below; it is sufficient to indicate here that Jan van Eyck reversed a basic cartographic convention of his day. Certainly such an observant and erudite painter as van Eyck would not have erred in his observation of common cartographic conventions; his representation of the world appears to be, rather, a conscious adjustment of those conventions for symbolic purposes.

## I

The body of cartographic knowledge which existed in van Eyck's time was essentially medieval. The usual Western medieval conception of the world, or *oikoumene*, was that of a circular area or disc, divided into three continents – Asia, Europe, and Africa (Libya). Cartographically, this tripartite division of the world is known as a T-O (or T-in-O) representation. The T represents the boundaries of the three major areas of the world (see illustration): Asia was usually thought to be



approximately the size of Europe and Africa combined, and was regularly positioned at the top of the world map – above the top stroke of the T, which represented the rivers Don (Tanis) and Nile, separating Asia from Europe and Africa, respectively – since Paradise is located in the East (*Genesis* ii, 8) and it was assumed natural that Paradise should be cartographically represented “upwards,” towards heaven.<sup>2</sup> Europe and Africa shared the remaining half of the world, separated from each other by the Mediterranean Sea. Christian thought was further satisfied cartographically by placing Jerusalem in the center of the world in accordance with scripture (*Ezekiel* v, 5).<sup>3</sup> Finally, the entire known world was surrounded by a great circumfluent ocean – the O of T-O nomenclature.

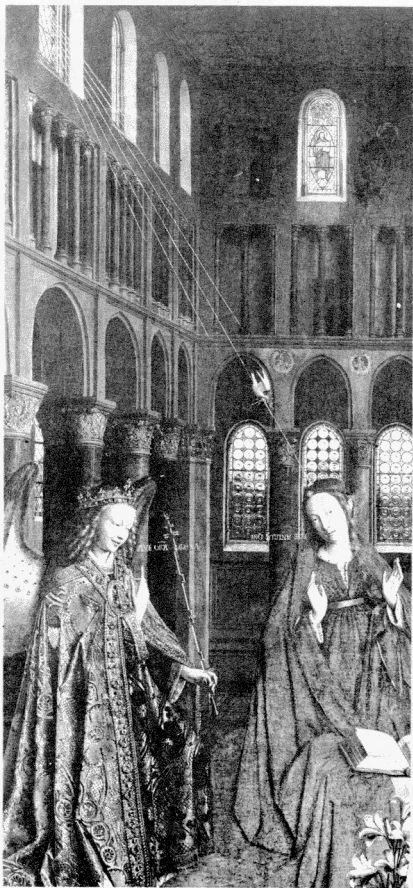
This medieval conception of the *oikoumene*, visually represented in the East-oriented T-O maps, remained the orthodox conception of the known world in Western Europe until well into the fifteenth century. It was only then, with the rediscovery of Ptolemaic geography, that cartography leaped suddenly forward towards the development of a body of accurate, scientific knowledge. In the time of Jan van Eyck, the world was still geographically reckoned in medieval conceptions.

## II

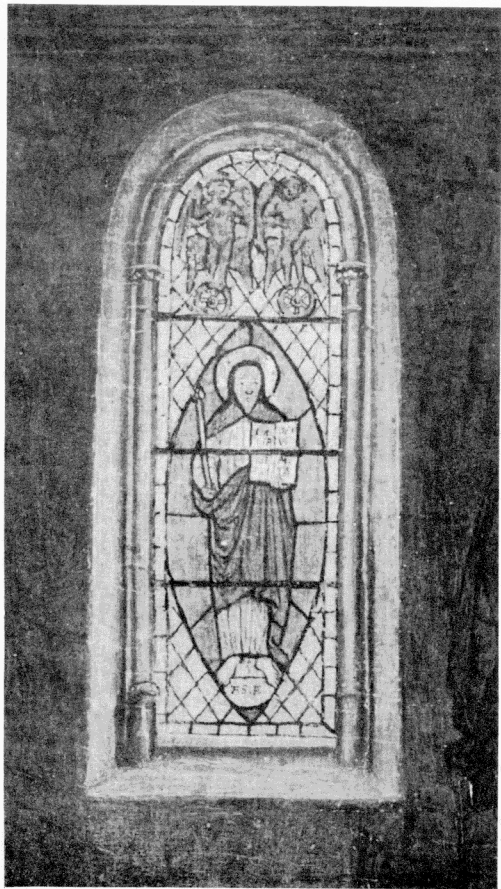
In Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation*, the representation of the world in the clerestory window may be seen as part of the artist's attempt to illustrate, as Panofsky has remarked, "the self-revelation and self-explication of the trinity which marks the transition from the Jewish to the Christian era."<sup>4</sup> Van Eyck's painting is a symbolic glorification of the Annunciation as the first and fundamental miracle of the New Dispensation — God's new covenant with Man. This new covenant was at once both a promise and more than a promise, for the Annunciation marked also the time when God became Man, when heaven and earth became one in Mary's womb. It is this miracle of the Annunciation and the Incarnation which is the subject of van Eyck's painting.<sup>5</sup>

The church in which van Eyck has placed the Annunciation is an imaginary architectural structure. It not only *contains* the scene of the miracle of the Annunciation and Incarnation; it is also a *visual affirmation* of the miracle in its relation to the Old Testament. At the top of the scene, the Lord of the Old Testament is depicted standing on the earth, within a single, round-arched clerestory window. Van Eyck here uses the Romanesque architectural form to symbolize the era of the Old Dispensation, the era *sub lege*. Below the round-arched window in the clerestory and just behind the Virgin are three Gothic windows, symbolizing by their architectural style the era of the New Dispensation, the era *sub gratia*. The manifestation of the Trinity through the Incarnation is also signified by the progression from a single window in the clerestory to three windows behind the Virgin, herself the sacred shrine of the Trinity.<sup>6</sup>

This downward transition, or progression, from the Lord of the Old Testament above to the Lord of the New Testament below, from Romanesque above to Gothic below, from one window in the clerestory to three windows below is continued and reinforced by van Eyck's inversion of the world on which the Lord stands.<sup>7</sup> As the miracle of the Annunciation and Incarnation is revealed from top to bottom, the world



Jan van Eyck's Annunciation



Detail of the Clerestory Window

in the clerestory window is oriented to suggest a sequence which parallels the direction of this revelation and which follows the descent of the Dove of the Holy Spirit to the Virgin.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, it is important to note that van Eyck's representation of the world, while *cartographically* West-oriented, remains *symbolically* East-oriented.<sup>9</sup>

While van Eyck has represented the Annunciation and Incarnation as a miracle unfolding from above, the scene has a downward progression whose symbolism is explained by the theme of the picture itself. It is the Incarnation, the essential subject of van Eyck's painting, which once again has given man, in spite of Adam's Fall, access to Paradise. Christ is frequently regarded as having been a second Adam; a second Adam would suggest a second Eden, and indeed Christ has given man a second chance to approach Paradise (*Apoc. ii, 7 et alibi*). It is to this theme of God becoming Man and bringing Paradise to those who would now share in the glory of salvation through His Incarnation that van Eyck has directed the symbolism of this scene. Van Eyck was perhaps the most observant and erudite painter in Northern Europe; to this fact his *Annunciation* in the National Gallery remains visual testimony.

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#### FOOTNOTES

\*I should like to express my thanks to Professor Karl Birkmeyer of the Art Department, University of California, Los Angeles, and Professor Lynn White, jr. of the History Department, University of California, Los Angeles, for the interest which they have taken in the preparation of this paper.

1. *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), I, pp. 137-39.
2. In spite of regard for the West as the ultimate inheritor of the greatness of the East, indicated by the Lord's favor of Japheth (*Genesis ix, 27*), the East remained, cartographically, of paramount importance as the location of earthly paradise.

3. So disturbed was Fra Mauro in the mid-fifteenth century by his own departure from orthodox cartographic convention in placing Jerusalem well to the west of the center of the world (perhaps under the new influence of Ptolemy or of recent travellers' reports on the great extent of the East) that he was forced to excuse himself by acknowledging that Jerusalem was indeed in the center of the world latitudinally, though longitudinally it was somewhat to the west. However, since the western portion of the world was more thickly populated, Jerusalem remained the center of the world longitudinally, in consideration not of empty space, but of population density.
4. Panofsky, I, p. 138.
5. The miracles of the Annunciation and Incarnation, intimately associated, are hereafter referred to as one since van Eyck's painting gives visual expression to the belief, common since at least the fourth century, that God became incarnate within Mary's womb at the moment of Gabriel's pronouncement.
6. Van Eyck's beautiful *Madonna in a Church*, now in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin-Dahlem, is the artist's earlier description of the Virgin as the Lord's shrine.
7. De Tolnay, "Flemish Paintings in the National Gallery of Art," *Magazine of Art*, xxxiv (1941), p. 176, mistakenly identifies the figure in the clerestory window as Christ rather than the Lord of the Old Testament (cf. Panofsky, I, p. 414, n. 1), and states that Christ is standing upon a "globe" on which is written the word ASIA, "signifying the home of Jewish-Christian monotheism." De Tolnay is correct in stating that the home of Jewish-Christian monotheism was the East, but he has not indicated the significance of Asia's orientation in van Eyck's *Annunciation*: The East, as the location of earthly Paradise in *Genesis*, was invariably given the position of priority at the top of medieval world maps, and van Eyck's reversal of this orientation, as indicated above, was a conscious adjustment of a cartographic convention for symbolic import.
8. The footstool before the Virgin is probably not for her but rather, as Panofsky (I, p. 139) suggests, for her son (*Isaiah* lxvi, 1.).
9. Since Europe is regularly positioned in the lower left quarter of the East-oriented T-O world maps, it would be reasonable to assume the location of Europe in van Eyck's representation to be under the Lord's left foot. But would van Eyck have positioned Europe to the Lord's left side? Might he not have represented a foreseen significance of the right side of Christ, and have ordered the position of Europe in the world with regard to that significance? Unfortunately, this question must remain unanswered; for with the Lord's feet fixed firmly upon each side of the earth, we can discern only the broken line indicating the Mediterranean Sea above Asia. It is nevertheless interesting to speculate that with the cartographic reversal of Asia's position, Europe and Africa would have been transposed to place Africa at the inferior position of the Lord's left side — a position quite in accord with its scriptural condemnation



(*Genesis ix, 27*) – and Europe, the Christian continent, on the Lord's right side. To be sure, such symbolism would have meant an arbitrary adjustment of geographical reality (*viz.*, the relation of the continents to each other within the world) which the reorientation of the entire world itself did not involve; but the possibility of van Eyck's transposal of Europe and Africa, which would have been no more arbitrary than his placement of the entire scene within an architecturally imaginary interior, cannot be discounted.