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Annunciate Virgin

RISD Museum

Evelyn Lincoln

Brown University, evelyn_lincoln@brown.edu

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I am Evie Lincoln and I teach the history of Renaissance Art and Architecture at Brown University, and I am looking at a painting of a young woman that was made, probably, in the early 17th century or late 16th century. And the Museum's job being to educate us, it has given this painting the title of the *Virgin Annunciate*, or the *Annunciate Virgin*, which helps us to understand why this person clasps her hand over her heart and looks up at a lily being brandished in front of her by an absent person...all we see is his hand. And she is looking at it raptly and with great attention, but we don't know exactly what's there. She looks like a woman of privilege, a young, studious, chaste, and obedient woman. She is reading a book that has a woodcut illustration in it, a small book with little ties around it, so we know that this is a book that's been printed with a lot of care. And next to her is a beautifully, stunningly painted basket filled with very neat work that's she's been doing—she's been darning, she's been working with very fine white fabrics that are trimmed with lace, and we see a tiny, tiny scissors and a little etoile red case filled with darning needles tucked into the side. An orderly person. Somebody who's engaged in the kind of work that patrician young women would be engaged in doing if they were left by themselves in a beautiful rich palazzo.

So this young woman, whose skin is given to us as very, very soft, without any harsh lines as is appropriate for a young woman, a virgin—because this woman is not only “a” virgin but, as we'll see in a minute, The Virgin—she lifts her head up high so we can see the straining of the muscles under her ear and at her neck. She looks up and you can see that there's been some quickness in this, even though all we see is her, because the pages of the book are ruffling in response to her pulling back. And not only that, but she is slightly off center—one foot is on the lectern where the book has been being read. And she pulls her hands, which are painted with great care and great attention, over her breast, which hides her heart, which in this period was the place where you knew things that were given to you through sight. And so what she's seeing is something that she knows very clearly and with great immediacy and attention, and it goes right to her heart and she covers it with her hand, which is not going to help her because what we're seeing at this moment is the impregnation of this virgin in a mystical, magical way, through the message of a missing angel.

The angel who is not there would have been hovering in mid-air, not as earlier paintings would have shown him kneeling in front of her, which allows her to look up, and increases the drama of the painting and the raptness of her attention, and would have made the fact that the angel is missing not that important to whoever wanted to keep looking at this painting and keep admiring this still-intact image of the still-intact virgin. The lily, the hand out in benediction, all of those would have stood in, in very understandable iconographic tension, with the look that she gives them, and we can still appreciate the Annunciation in the absence of the holy messenger.