

INTERSEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE “VISITATION”

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According to Jacobson (1971): “Inter-semiotic translation or transmutation is the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of the non verbal sign systems”. Here we present a brief analysis of some examples of iconic representations of the Visitation.

The biblical text (Lc 1, 39-56): (*The angel said to Mary*)³⁶....Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month,³⁷ for nothing is impossible to God.³⁸ I am the handmaid of the Lord, said Mary “let what you have said be done to me. And the angel left her.³⁹ Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah.⁴⁰ She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.⁴² She gave a loud cry and said, “Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.⁴³Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? ⁴⁴For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy.⁴⁵Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.....⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elisabeth about three months and then went back home.

Structural analysis of the text: scenes and roles

1° scene (39): the journey of Mary to her kinswoman Elizabeth

2° scene (40): Mary greets Elisabeth in her home

3° scene (41-45): Elisabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, greets and blesses Mary as “mother of the Lord”

4° scene (46-55): Mary magnifies the Lord

5° scene (56): Mary stayed with Elisabeth about three months and then went back home.

According to Lessing: “Painting can use only a moment of the action; therefore it must choose the most pregnant moment” in order to render the preceding and following moments in the best way” Which of the above scenes should be chosen as pregnant? Here we will analyse some examples.



Fra Angelico (1433-34, Museo diocesano di Cortona). The artist has chosen scenes 1 and 2. The composition has two subordinated centers: the main one is the reciprocal and symmetrical embrace between the two women; the second center is represented by the arriving servant. The viewer is thus reminded of Mary's initiative and of her fatiguing trip. Considering the proxemic of the encounter the painting presents a symmetric modality of meeting, where the two women act in a paritetic way.

El Greco (1610-13, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington). Here the artist chooses exclusively scene 2, illustrating a symmetrical and reciprocal embrace.



Luca Della Robbia (1445, Chiesa di San Giovanni Forcivitas, Pistoia). Here the artist represents reciprocity in gestures and in gazes, but asymmetry in the pantomimic: Elisabeth is kneeling in front of Mary, “the God's mother”.

Ghirlandaio (1491 Museo del Louvre Parigi). Here the asymmetry between the two women is accentuated by the lack of reciprocal gazes.

