



# THE ART OF MARY

A painting a day  
for Lent and Easter

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SISTER WENDY BECKETT



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## FOREWORD

Sister Wendy Beckett brings alive the words and actions of the mother of Jesus in this beautiful set of meditations. Drawing on the rich tradition of Christian art, she takes us on a journey through Lent and Easter and offers us a painting and a reflection for each day.

Through the interplay of Scripture and art we are invited to delve deeper into the life of faith by reflecting on the life and faith of Mary. In Scripture, we first encounter her as a teenager, but for many of us Mary has become fixed in our imaginations as a remote ‘other-worldly’ figure, displaying the faint glimmer of a smile as she talks to the angel or holds her baby. Held up by some as the unattainable ideal of purity or the exemplar of perfect motherhood, Mary can seem a distant figure to us in this busy technological age. But Mary was chosen by God to be the vessel of the Incarnation – the Word made flesh – and Sister Wendy has chosen images that help us to see Mary as one of us, and to wonder afresh at her part in the scriptural narrative. And in her commentary on these images Sister Wendy does not flinch from inviting us into Mary’s anguish and suffering, as well as her joy, obedience and humble faith.

Mary, an ordinary young woman living in a small insignificant country, languishing under the occupying power of Rome,



was chosen to play a significant and breakthrough role in the redemption of the world. Evil would be crushed and defeated through her offspring (Genesis 3:15), and her body would play a part in showing the world that Jesus really is ‘Emmanuel’ – God with us. Mary’s theological insights and reactions are recorded for us in the New Testament, and they are reflected here in the facial expressions and body language depicted in the pictures that Sister Wendy has chosen. It is no mistake that in Mary a woman gets to be a part of the redemption story, and that her voice, her questions, her fears, her actions and her obedience are of crucial and far-reaching importance.

As you begin this Lenten journey through *The Art of Mary* I pray that each day will draw you into closer communion with the one whom Mary carried and birthed. May Mary’s obedient faith be a model of the Christian life for us; let her response to the angel – ‘Let it be to me according to your word’ – characterise our own desires; and may each picture selected here help us to see the wonder of the Incarnation, atonement and resurrection of Christ afresh.

**Amy Orr-Ewing**, author of *Mary’s Voice*

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# The servant of the Lord



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## 1

*The Annunciation,*  
c.1120,  
Tretyakov Gallery,  
Moscow

No one saw the Annunciation, and yet perhaps no incident has been so repeatedly painted by artists and cherished by believers. This is a very large and ancient icon taken from the cathedral in Novgorod and it draws us into the holy silence of this wonderful encounter. The unknown icon painter portrays the archangel Gabriel as a figure of slow solemnity. He raises his arm gently, but emphatically, in blessing. Mary is not seated, as if to signify her constant state of attention to the messages of God.

It is impossible to overestimate what hung on the answer of this young woman. We know what the answer was – not merely a yes, but a trustful handing over of her future without conditions: ‘Let what you have said be done to me.’ We, who know the future, imagine she was well aware of the infinite importance of her ‘let it be done’, but we hear later that Mary ‘pondered these things in her heart’ and there are hints that the fullness of the incarnation disclosed its meaning to her over time, rather than immediately.

We are certain, though, that knowledge of the future would have made no difference to Mary’s immediate response. The Annunciation is essentially about trusting God and letting him do as he pleases with us, secure in his fatherhood.



## 2

*Annunciation*,  
c. 1434–36,  
Jan van Eyck

Whether or not Van Eyck was the first artist to use oil paint, he was certainly the first to exploit its special and luminous qualities. Here, in a great medieval church, he depicts Mary interrupted in her prayers by an angel who has come to announce that she is to be the Mother of God.

Mary's look of wonder and her elegant upturned hands are beautiful in themselves, but her beauty is heightened by the waterfall of blue material that envelopes her. The robe's only ornamentation is its gold-edged hems, and yet, in its simplicity, it emphasises the single-minded purity that is expressed in her face.

The angel is a complete contrast: where Mary's expression is one of submissive wonder, his face is alight with what one can only describe as heavenly amusement. From the tip of his rainbow-coloured wings and his jewelled crown, set over luscious curls that contrast with Mary's plain locks, the angel expresses completely the difference between heaven and earth. He is all splendour, colour and excitement, whereas she is earthly and quiet.



## 3

*The Annunciation*,  
c. 1425–26,  
Fra Angelico

At the Annunciation, the angel comes from heaven to ask a creature of earth if she will become the Mother of God. It is a very fraught moment, but there is nothing fraught in this painting by Fra Angelico. Here, Mary is almost a child. She sits on her stool without support, since life will not give this girl much support, her big apprehensive eyes fixed upon the angel, just waiting to hear what his message is so that she can obey.

The angel, so certain, so strong, so resplendent with his peacock-bright wings and pink and golden attire, is stooping humbly before this slender girl and addressing her with the greeting *Ave*. To some extent, the painting is about the word *Ave* and about silence. *Ave* literally means ‘Greetings’, but it is a solemn word, destined to be the beginning of the Ave Maria, the Hail Mary. Yet the picture is almost more about wordlessness, because we can see that both of them have their mouths closed. The *Ave* is being said from heart to heart.

The angel bows with beautiful humility before the meek and receptive Virgin. With a sophisticated subtlety that is often overlooked in Fra Angelico’s work, the angel has a single foot and the tips of both wings protruding out of the Virgin’s sanctuary into the wild world from which she has secluded herself. Nature and the supernatural are not, after all, as separate as they may appear.



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