

Appreciating the Paintings of Mary Holmes

To appreciate the paintings of Mary Holmes one must look at them with the whole self. The eyes and the senses alone will not do. Nor just the feelings, nor just the intellect. Only the whole self, including the intuition, the capacity for insight, the receptivity to gradual or sudden illuminations, will discern what she is really painting. Hence, to see her work as it is requires abandoning the distorting lenses imposed upon our vision by modernist and post-modernist principles of art. Her paintings do not exist merely to illustrate concepts, to express a self, to evoke emotions, or to reveal underlying psychological structures or underlying physical structures. A different principle is at work here.

As Mary taught, because we are incarnate beings, for whom only seeing is believing, we need art, and we make art, in order to make the invisible visible. She also said that whatever the style, age, or degree of seriousness, every work of art is made by a realist. That is, every artist strives to give visible form to what he or she knows or believes is real but otherwise invisible.

The realities Mary strives to make visible in her work are the realities of spirit. To appreciate a painting by her, therefore, is to experience a reality of the spirit revealed in visible form. Under her brush, the iconic figure, the formal gesture, the symbolic object, the illustrated myth, the richness of nature, above all what Milton calls “the human face divine” becomes a window into the invisible. In her paintings we are able to see, fixed in form for our contemplation, essences to which we would otherwise have no access in concept, word, or image and which we therefore cannot believe in, not having seen them. And yet they are essences which, whether we know it or not, we yearn to see so that we *can* believe in them.

An example: It has been several centuries since serious painters have taken a subject like the Annunciation seriously. We live, we are told, in a post-Christian age. Many feet have developed blisters walking through numberless museum galleries on whose walls are hung paintings of the Annunciation (or the Madonna and Child or the Crucifixion or the Deposition or the Flight into Egypt), and we are, as an age, fed up. Hence Cezanne, Picasso, Duchamp, and Warhol. Why bother depicting a story that cannot signify after Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Einstein, and Sartre? Well, look at Mary’s Annunciation in the small side chapel devoted to the life of the Virgin in her Chapel of the Holy Spirit. It is not asking you to come to it believing what you can’t believe. Just look at it and let yourself, your *whole* self, see what the painting reveals by being what it *is*. You may not come away from it a convert to any creed. But you will have seen and hence believed in the reality of a young woman’s readiness to be the bearer of a profound and redemptive meaning that she has neither invented nor understood, a meaning greater than a human self can contain, greater than nature, greater than art, greater than psychology, greater even than history.

Look more. The angel Gabriel addresses the Virgin. In the fiery cloud the prophecy (the destiny of the prefigured child) is made visible to us as it is being made known to the Virgin in Gabriel's words. Mary has painted the Virgin, who will bear the Lamb of God, as a shepherdess. She holds a natural lamb, whose own mother too knows something that the Virgin's mystified puppy does not. Fire is in the heavens and water on the earth, both symbols of the spirit, which enters the world just as the soul enters the flesh through woman in conception and as Christians believe Christ enters the world through the Virgin in the Incarnation. The traditional lily held by the angel symbolizes the Virgin's purity.

Now look at the body of this image, the colors, shapes, relation of forms. Feel the movement of comprehension, of descending grace and ascending receptivity. Study the angel's wings and the Virgin's gesture. Feel the pregnancy of the sky, the circumambient air, the water, the grass, the animals, all poised in this moment to receive the promise of the day of fulfillment. Can you sense that nature in this painting is not a function of Darwinian warfare but a gift of love? That the pain of existing is not the result of an accidental, random, meaningless conflict (survival of the fittest) but rather the fruit of an ineffable grace at work in us? Don't try to believe it. Can you see it? Yes? Then you are ready. No? Then go on. Look at the place where the gold of Angel, vision, and hair meet the blue of water and dress, where heaven meets earth, spirit is made flesh, meaning is revealed in form. Look at the face of the Virgin.

What is made visible in her face cannot be put into words. But look. Keep looking. Are you tempted to name these realities made visible? Humble awe . . . loving wonder . . . receptive purity . . . acceptance of mystery . . . foresight in readiness . . . innocence on the brink of knowledge . . . sadness looking toward redemption . . . the gentle pulling of a soul together for a sacrifice and a reward unimaginable? Is not this every mother at her best when she knows she is to bear a child? Is not this the feminine in every one of us at our best when we know at a particular moment of truth that we are stepping from our past into our future? Is this not also what we *would* be at our best if we could, for seeing the good is also recognizing how short of it we have come, though our deepest selves long for it. Is this not a visible reality before which we would not be ashamed to worship?

These paintings do not exist to prove a doctrine, to impose, to convert. Mary paints them, as she says, because she wants to see such images and no such images are otherwise available. (C.S. Lewis said the same about the books he wrote: he wanted to read them, but because they didn't exist, he had to write them himself.) If Mary could have seen them without having to paint them herself, she would not have had to go to the trouble. They don't impose, but they do reveal. And because seeing is believing, is not revelation also invitation, instruction, demonstration, imposition, even proof? Don't answer before you have looked at Mary's paintings with your whole self.