A way of seeing: Reflections on a work of art

by Carol Zaleski in the March 6, 2007 issue

A few weeks ago, oppressed by some worrying news, I stopped into our college art museum. On the floor devoted to American and modern European paintings, I paused to admire Charles Sheeler's *Rolling Power*, a close-up of train wheels, pistons and steam commissioned by *Fortune* magazine to honor the dynamism of the industrial age. Then I stepped around the corner, and Sheeler's steely monochrome gave way to an effulgence of golds, greens and blues so brilliant it bleached out the engines of modernism and lit up the floor. The radiance was emanating from *The Coronation of the Virgin*, a newly acquired triptych altarpiece by the 16th-century German painter Bartholomäus Bruyn the Elder, and housed in a room of its own with didactic panels on the walls recounting the coordinated campaigns of conservation, restoration and provenance research by which the treasure had been salvaged, as it were, from shipwreck. It was the best distraction I could hope for. I returned the next day, and the day after that. After a week of such visits I realized I was embarked on an experiment. How deeply could I come to know this magnificent work of art and devotion? How much would my amateur eye and restless heart permit me to discern?

Here's what I saw: a maiden in a dark blue-green tunic, her hair falling down in golden curls, is kneeling on a stone dais under a canopied throne, her fingertips touching in prayer, her eyes cast down. To the left a youthful Christ, his naked body thinly cloaked in a passion-red cope, holds a crown over her head with his wounded hand. To the right, also holding the crown, is an elderly God the Father, in a jeweled bishop's cope decorated with emblems of vegetative life, and he balances the glassy orb of endless dominion on his knee. The family resemblance of Father and Son, and Christ and Mary, is unmistakable, almost unnerving. Above them, in a luminous sphere which seems to have burned through the central panel, the Dove of the Holy Spirit rushes toward the viewer, rays of gold streaming out in cruciform glory, his face and little red beak tilted sweetly toward the Father. Thanks to Bruyn's skill, the whole ineffably grand scene is suffused with domestic warmth and naturalness, a

study of majesty expending itself in love. Eight childlike angels, reminiscent of the elves in the film *The Santa Clause*, hold open the curtains of the canopy. The donors of the altarpiece, jurist Peter von Clapis and his wife, Bela Bonenberg, take up their stations at the bottom of the panel, prayer books in hand, their wealth marked by the number of ermine tails lining their cloaks, their humility indicated by diminutive size, and their stay in purgatory lessened, one hopes, by the generous gift.

The side panels are dominated by larger-than-life figures of patron saints. On the left St. Ivo of Chartres, the great 11th-century canon lawyer, is the idealized counterpart to Peter von Clapis; on the right, St. Anne, the grandmother of Jesus and focus of an ardent cult, is the perfected alter ego of Bela. St. Ivo represents balanced judgment, competence, law; St. Anne represents marital union, purity, grace. The saints stand, with their prayer books open, before a garden wall. Beyond the wall is a gentle landscape, stock image of pastoral well-being. It is summertime, for the trees are fully leafed. A watermill sits beside a quiet pond near a grain tower and a miller's house. Perhaps the miller's family is going about its chores not suspecting that the Virgin, whose sooty image they keep by the hearth, is being crowned in glory overhead. A distant mountain range harmonizes with the undulating green curtains of the canopy. A cool light shimmers along the edge of the mountain, and a warmer light slants in from the left. Is it dawn or twilight? Is it Vespers of the Assumption? One ought to be able to tell, from the season and quality of light, what feast is being marked, what page the saints and donors consult in their prayer books, what praises of the Virgin are being sung. The canopy, I realized, is a baldachin, the radiant sphere of the Holy Spirit a consecrated host, its light mirrored in the moonlike face of the Virgin. The whole scene resolves into an abstract dance of circles (Christ's wound, the Dove's effulgence, the Father's orb, Mary's crown, Mary's face) and triangles (the parted curtains of the canopy, the bent arms of the Father and Son, Mary's bent elbows and the prayer tent formed by her hands): Eucharist and Trinity. Bruyn knew how to make human and symbolic horizons fuse; where is the quarrel, then, between the iconic and the natural?

But there was much more to see. The exterior panels, visible when the altarpiece is closed, show the annunciation, with each figure painted in grisaille to give the effect of a statue in a niche. Mary's hair is flat and tucked into her plain garment, her eyes puffy and darkly ringed, a prayer book in her hands; Gabriel wears a bishop's cope like the Father and carries a scepter like the Son, but all is colorless. When the altarpiece is opened, Mary is transported from earthly drab to heavenly glory, rather like Dorothy quitting monochrome Kansas for Technicolor Oz. Astonishingly, this

passage from monochrome to full spectrum is supposed to be the crowning gift to all humanity. Yet Mary’s face betrays no exultation. She is practicing custody of the eyes, a way of seeing which instills trust, whatever the cross or crown may be. “I do not ask to see / The distant scene—one step enough for me.” Could we believe enough, could we trust, could we let works like this altarpiece seep into our consciousness, surely it would dissolve our worries—at least for a time.