Captured on canvas

by Carol Zaleski in the December 23, 2015 issue

Annunciation by Fra Carnevale, circa 1448

The year has rolled round, its course arrested by violent events on the world stage as well as by personal joys and griefs, but it has rolled round nonetheless, and now it is Christmas again. As a foretaste of the holidays, my husband and I recently visited the National Gallery of Art in Washington. The mood in the great rotunda was festive, the marble columns as triumphantly neoclassical as the Parisian Pantheon, the massive central fountain garlanded for the season; and atop the fountain was a bronze Mercury—patron of eloquence and art—rising from the mist on winged tiptoe, one arm bent down to grasp his caduceus and the other raised in a graceful arc, his finger pointing skyward as if directing our gaze to the empyrean where the arts reside.

How best to follow Mercury's direction, I wondered, with my wingless feet? We've all experienced the enervation produced by tromping through every gallery of an important museum; it's not the amount of walking per se, I think, but the angst that

comes from speed-dating masterpieces that deserve a committed relationship. I did do a fair amount of speed-dating and was exhausted by it, but then I settled down to study two works that seemed especially intriguing.

Traveling east from the rotunda, I entered a smaller round gallery dedicated to the four-part series *The Voyage of Life*, twice painted in the early 1840s by Thomas Cole (the first version belongs to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute) and the subject thereafter of popular engravings. Cole was a pioneer of the Hudson River School, a group of Romantic painters whose images of the American landscape, both pastoral and sublime, were suffused with impressions of divinity.

The Voyage of Life—which Cole created while undergoing his own voyage into the Anglican communion—passes beyond impressions to overt allegory. In the first painting, *Childhood*, a golden boat laden with flowers emerges from a dark cavern ("emblematic of our earthly origin, and the mysterious Past," as Cole explained) bearing an infant who stretches out his arms for joy at the natural beauty revealed by the rising sun. Steering the boat, unnoticed by the child, is his guardian angel. In *Youth* the same child, now come of age, takes the helm for himself and steers the ship in the direction of a hallucinatory "cloud-built palace" ("emblematic of the day-dreams of youth, its aspirations after glory and fame"); his guardian angel watches pensively from the shore. *Manhood* follows, as the ship, riven by storms and beset by demons of intemperance and despair, rushes toward the ocean of death; the voyager, now middle-aged and seriously frightened, looks to heaven in search of rescue by a higher power, and so faith is born. In *Old Age* the circuit is complete; with his ship shattered and the landscape reduced to uninteresting barren rocks, the voyager turns his eyes away from the things of this world, sees his heavenly guardian for the first time, and rejoices in the light streaming from above as distant angels bid him welcome.

This delightful allegory is fittingly exhibited in the round, for it has the circularity of a universal myth. Here is timeless wisdom and serenity and beauty; I could imagine circling this little gallery forever. But instead I crossed the rotunda again, heading for medieval and Renaissance Italy, to visit a small *Annunciation* by Fra Carnevale, the 15th-century Dominican priest-painter who learned his trade in the workshop of Filippo Lippi.

Compared to the natural wilderness and rushing river of *The Voyage of Life*, Fra Carnevale's painting seemed remarkably static. The angel Gabriel and the blessed

Virgin meet on a city street paved in polished marble of varying hues, framed by the colonnades of neighboring buildings, with an incongruous vase of roses on the ground between them. A heightened use of perspective draws the eye toward a slightly off-center doorway opening upon a distant garden. Gabriel, whom we see only in profile, seems frozen in time and place as he bends the knee, grasps the lily, and lifts his hand in greeting. Mary’s face is turned partially in our direction, as if to signal that she is pondering the angel’s message in full consciousness of the joys and terrors it will bring. A dove—the Holy Spirit—descends on the diagonal.

No circles, no winding, tumultuous streams of life, but straight lines and vanishing points make up the visual lexicon of this image. And fittingly so, for the story we are being told concerns a particular moment when the history of Israel and of humanity narrowed to a point. Perhaps the Virgin wasn’t standing on a street in Florence, as Fra Carnevale suggests. Perhaps the angel held out an olive branch rather than a lily. But if it is Christmas we are celebrating, then we have left the realm of allegory far behind. Our faith tells us that there was a day, never to be repeated, when Christ was born; and that this came to pass because of a moment nine months earlier when a young girl, chosen from eternity, freely chose to bear Emmanuel—and a daughter of Israel became the mother of God.