

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Immaculate Conception as a Motif in Sacred Art: Two unpublished items from Rab, Croatia and Hrastovlje, Slovenia

Abstract

From the historical and medical point of view, this paper purports to illustrate two motifs of Immaculate Conception in Christian art. The first painting is an altarpiece of unknown author from the 17th or 18th century, known as Our Lady of Conception in the church of St. Antony the Abbot in the city of Rab on the island of the same name in Croatia, and the other is a mural from 1490, Mary's Annunciation of John from Kastav in the Holy Trinity Church in Hrastovlje, Slovenia. This review ends with the conclusion that Christianity, with the accompanying iconography, other than sending just a religious message, if properly perceived, may also encourage the believer to a series of practical, in this case, biological thoughts on conception, i.e. the beginning of life.

Key words: History of medicine and religion, Conception, Sacred painting, Croatia, Slovenia

Received: 4 Sep 2013; Accepted: 8 Feb 2014; Online published: 20 Feb 2014

Research on History of Medicine/ 2014 Feb; 3(1): 3-10

Ante Škrobonja¹
Tatjana Čulina²
Vedran Frančišković³

1- M.D., Ph.D., Professor of the History of Medicine in retired. Croatian Scientific Society for the History of Health Culture, Rijeka, Croatia

2- M.D., Ph.D. Child and adolescent health specialist. Teaching Institute for Public Health, Rijeka, Croatia

3- M.D. Ph.D., Specialist in gynaecology and obstetrics. Rijeka University School of Medicine, Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics. Rijeka, Croatia

Correspondence:

Prof. Ante Škrobonja
M.D., Ph.D. Croatian Scientific Society for the History of Health Culture.
Ul. Braće Branchetta 20, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia.
anteskrobonja@yahoo.com



Introduction

Authors find motive for this portrayal in the knowledge that traditional, sacred fine arts, as a kind of *libri laicorum* (books for the laity) often very distinctively anticipate not only global religious contents and messages, but also realistically depict various practical aspects of everyday life. From that point of view, conception, as the first and practically the most important moment in the life of a child has been selected for this study. We shall see and comment on two typical Christian motifs, as examples of traditional intuitive perception of conception – the meeting of St. Anne and Joachim as legendary annunciation of conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary to her parents, St. Anne and At, Joachim, after their repeated meeting and their kiss at the Golden gates of Jerusalem^{1,2,3} and in *Annunciation*, the chapter from the Gospel where it is described how the Blessed Virgin Mary was announced she would give birth to the son of God, Jesus Christ.⁴ As is the fact with previous papers with similar topics^{5,6,7} basic data are selected from relevant religious literature^{8,9} as well, and the specific examples are partially the result of several years' worth of fieldwork.

From our own photo library we chose two recently discovered and not previously released characteristic examples of symbolic illustrations on two paintings. The first one is *Our Lady of Conception* from the island of Rab (western Croatia), and the other *Mary's Annunciation* from Hrastovlje (southern Slovenia), which complement this text suitably.

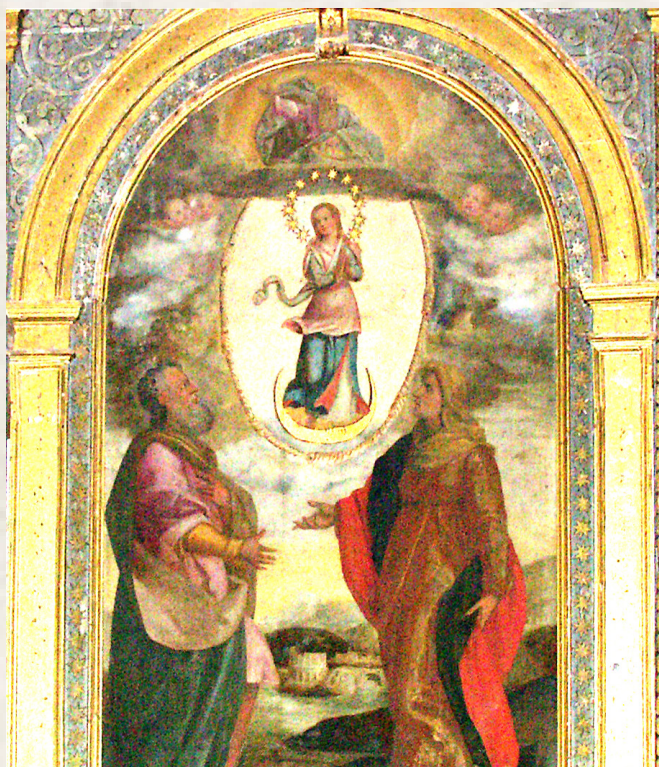


Figure 1. Unknown Venetian author. *Our Lady of Conception*, 17th – 18th century, altarpiece in the church of St. Antony the Abbot, in the city of Rab, Croatia.

- 1- Fučić, 1990a.
- 2- Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.
- 3- Protoevangelium of James.
- 4- Luke, 1,26-38
- 5- Škrobonja et al., 1990.
- 6- Škrobonja, Muzur, Kotošić, 1999a
- 7- Škrobonja, Muzur, Kotošić, 1999b.
- 8- Glazier & Helwig, 1998
- 9- Rebić, 2002.
- 13- Fučić, 1963.
- 14- Zadnikar, 1988.
- 15- Černeka-Šubič, 1988.
- 16- Peternelj-Urem, 2003.
- 17- Fučić, 1990b.
- 18- Fučić, 1990a.
- 19- Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.
- 20- Protoevangelium of James.
- 21- Google Images.
- 22- Maksimović, 2007.
- 23- Giotto, 1304-06.
- 24- Lippi, 1440.
- 25- Master of Moulins, 1488.
- 26- Gozzoli, 1491.
- 27- Dürer, 1504.
- 28- Škrobonja et al, 1999.
- 29- Bellegambe, 1516-1517
- 30- St John the Apostle, 1,14.
- 31- St. Luke, the Apostle, 1,26-38.
- 32- Pseudo-Matthew.
- 33- James.
- 34- Kren & Marx, 1992.
- 35- Glazier & Helwig, 1998.
- 36- Rebić, 2002,
- 37- St. Luke, the Apostle, ibidem
- 38- Škrobonja et al, 1999b.
- 39- Fučić, 1992.
- 40- Zadnikar, 1988.
- 41- Černeka-Šubič, 1988.

Our Lady of Conception in Rab – Example of Parenthood Annunciation to St. Anne and St. Joachim

In the church of St. Antony the Abbot, in the city of Rab on the island bearing the same name, in the northern Adriatic, one of the altars is adorned with an altarpiece of unknown Venetian author from the 17th or 18th century, commonly known as Our Lady of Conception.^{10,11} The lower part of the painting, in the stylized exterior with the contours of the City of God in the background, is dominated by elderly spouses facing each other. Joachim on the left and Anne on the right, reaching out and looking at the skies, showing their confusion about the unexpected news of their daughter showing from the skies in a golden, framed, oval image. Angels are also present; they are hiding behind some clouds and watching Mary's appearance, while God is watching over the whole scene from the top of the image. Mary is shown as the Holy Virgin standing on the half-moon, crowned with stars, her eyes cast down, while the Edenic Serpent is coiling around her carrying apple in its mouth. Thus, this is a painting made after a model which appeared at the end of the 15th century, based on the description of a woman from the Apocalypse.¹² Although the Golden gates of Jerusalem are not explicitly depicted, the golden frame and elegant retable replace these functionally, actually suggesting the look through the gates of Jerusalem toward the spouses who have just arrived.

10- Domijan, 2001.

11- Barić, 2007.

12- St. John the Apostle. The Revelation of Jesus Christ; 12,1.



Figure 2. John from Kastav. Mary's Annunciation, a mural dating from 1490, in the Holy Trinity church in Hrastovlje, southern Slovenia.



Mary's Annunciation – Conception of Jesus Christ in Hrastovlje

Mary's Annunciation motif chosen for this paper is one in the series of murals in the Holly Trinity church of Hrastovlje, in southern Slovenia. The subject in question is a church painted in 1490 by the Croatian master John from Kastav (*Croat. Ivan iz Kastva*) and his associates. The church inarguably provides the most complex series of church paintings in Istria^{13,14} owing to the abundance of iconographic contents, the scope and preservation of murals in which even medical historiographers discovered some interesting details.^{15,16}

As an inevitable motif in Gothic painting, local depiction of Annunciation is unique for its several qualities. While most of churches of that time render Annunciation on the central triumphal arch above the altar, here the scene is painted in two parts above the apses. There is an angel kneeling above the northern part of the painting with a message written on a band, and above the southern part, in an undefined background, we see Mary sitting at the book counter with an open book on top. A dove is descending from above – the symbol of the Holy Spirit, while the whole scene is observed by God the Father, atop a cloud. The most interesting detail for us is the flying *homunculus* (a diminutive human, i.e. Christ the Child) with a halo and a lively gaze of a mature child. Whereas the dove, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, is metaphorically announcing fertilization and conception, the *homunculus* has a more overt role, all the more so since they are both oriented towards the head, or, to be more specific, towards Mary's ear, which corresponds to the more explicit notion and iconographic representation of conception according to the principle *conceptio per aurem* (conceiving through listening).

Discussion

The phenomenon of Immaculate Conception of the Holy Virgin (*lat. immaculata conceptio*) is a part of the doctrine on the Holy Virgin's immunity against the Original Sin, from the moment she was conceived. This immunity is perceived as a privilege and an honor for the future mother of Christ.¹⁷ Chronologically speaking, the first Immaculate Conception in Christian history, represented as early as the Jewish times, is the one from the legend of apocryphal parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Anne and Joachim, who have long been denied their parental bliss and who could experience it only in their advanced age. Although this issue is not found in canonic Gospels, it appears in written form only in the *Apocrypha*^{18,19,20} and later popular Christian religious literature. The texts in question are the ones where, in addition to discussing other topics, contain some detailed descriptions of the life of Jesus Christ and his mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the details of which were not previously described by the four evangelists. However, since some of those issues not only did not contradict the canonic Gospels, but also conveniently filled some chronological gaps, eventually they tacitly acquired a kind of legitimacy and was accepted in sacred literature and fine arts. However, they were never officially accepted by neither the Eastern nor Western Churches.

This subject matter little by little found its place in the Early Christian painting as well. However, while the Western Church has gradually neglected this subject matter, in the Eastern Church there have been a number of icons preserved, leaving a more permanent trace.²¹ In terms of

- 13- Fučić, 1963.
- 14- Zadnikar, 1988.
- 15- Černeka-Šubič, 1988.
- 16- Peternelj-Urem, 2003.
- 17- Fučić, 1990b.
- 18- Fučić, 1990a.
- 19- Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.
- 20- Protoevangelium of James.
- 21- Google Images.



iconography, the hug and very often the kiss of Anne and Joachim are placed in the foreground. This is precisely what indicates physical touch as an inseparable act of biological conception. Even though in apocryphal documents and in this case (as with the case of the Blessed Virgin Mary later) the *Immaculate Conception* is mentioned, it acquired completely another, and by far a more practical, meaning (in iconography).²² In the painting of Western Church, this subject matter is especially exploited by numerous master painters from Giotto di Bondone (1304-06)²³, Fra Filippo Lippi (c. 1440)²⁴, Master of Moulins (c. 1488)²⁵, Benozzo Gozzoli (1491)²⁶ to Albrecht Dürer (1504)²⁷ between the 14th and 16th century.

In one of rare examples of Croatian sacred art, where the act of conception is announced with a comparatively clear physical foreshadowing – a kiss, which has been treated from the historical and medical aspect, is present in a series of murals painted under the title “The Life of the Mother of God” in a Franciscan monastery on Trsat by Fra Serafin Schön in 1641.²⁸ However, with the exception of the Meeting at the Golden Gates which especially discretely illustrated the physical act of fertilizing and conceiving a wanted child, the further course of Anne’s pregnancy, up to her giving birth, i.e. the birth of Mary, has been virtually neglected in the sacred art. However, the immaculate conception and the consequential pregnancy, together with the motif of Mary, as a little naked girl, illuminated with golden light in shiny *mandorla* (*Ital. = oval, almond-shaped sacred painting*), are painted on the stomach of St. Anne like a medallion. One of the well-known and most intriguing rarities of this kind is the painting of St. Anne conceiving the Virgin Mary by the Flemish master Jean Bellegambe from 1516-1517, held in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.²⁹

When we look at the conception and the pregnancy of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as compared to her mother St. Anne, the situation is entirely different. Mary was unexpectedly designated to bring the Son of God, Jesus Christ, to this world. What should be noted here is that the incarnation of Christ does not begin with his birth, but rather his conception, which was ingeniously written by St. John in his Gospel: *Et verbum caro factum est* (And the word was made flesh).³⁰

The conception of Jesus Christ is not only one of the key events in Mary’s life, but also the first scene in the life of Jesus Christ’s series. As an iconography motif, the *Annunciation* appeared in the Old Christian catacomb art, and in the mediaeval iconography programs, it occupies a prominent position inside the church. It is commonly placed in the triumphal arch above the main altar, especially if the church is explicitly dedicated to Annunciation or the Blessed Virgin Mary in general, or to an event from her life. Rich iconography is primarily based on the previously mentioned Gospel of Luke³¹ and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew³² and Protoevangelium of James.³³

By studying the literature and other sources, one can easily see that this subject matter has indeed been employed to a great extent and that it was a permanent interest for all painters, from the Early Middle Ages until today. Thus, there is virtually no one master of any importance that hasn’t presented this subject matter in their own special way.³⁴

All in all, the iconography is curiously rich; it developed systematically and appeared with more and more details. Nevertheless, three very important elements are always present: the archangel, the Virgin Mary and the dove representing the Holy Spirit descending upon her. In so doing,

- 22- Maksimović, 2007.
- 23- Giotto, 1304-06.
- 24- Lippi, 1440.
- 25- Master of Moulins, 1488.
- 26- Gozzoli, 1491.
- 27- Dürer, 1504.
- 28- Škrobonja et al, 1999.
- 29- Bellegambe, 1516-1517
- 30- St John the Apostle, 1,14.
- 31- St. Luke, the Apostle, 1,26-38.
- 32- Pseudo-Matthew.
- 33- James.
- 34- Kren & Marx, 1992.



Mary is placed in various backgrounds and positions. The scene very often takes place near a well in the moment when Mary is picking up water with a jug; other times she is in her house weaving on a loom, and most often she is holding a book and praying. In the beginning, the angel was most frequently on his feet, and since Renaissance he is levitating, flying in the air or coming down on a cloud. The message on annunciation is first presented with a hand gesture, index finger pointing out, and later on, angel's greeting can be found written on a scroll coming out of the angel's mouth or wrapped around a rod.^{35,36}

Even though the phenomenon of Immaculate Conception is indisputable from the theological point of view, in everyday life, where all pragmatic thoughts are involved, the situation is very intriguing and the original message of the canonic Gospel of Luke³⁷ is additionally, and not without reason, embellished with apocryphal motifs. That is why Annunciation, as a concept of Jesus Christ's incarnation, is traditionally perceived in two ways – implicitly or explicitly. The most common explicit example of metaphysical cognition of conception is experienced by Mary's listening (*conceptio per aurem*), whereupon the Word of God (*lat. Verbum and Greek Lógos*) enters the Holy Virgin through the ear in the form of light beams. To make the explanation even more impressive, sometimes in addition to the beams and the dove, there is also *homunculus* – a small, naked child, Christ, aspiring towards Mary's ear. For theological reasons, at the beginning, this motif was frequently disputed, and after the Trident Council in the 16th century it was forbidden and severely repressed. That is why there are few examples preserved to this day.

Two such fairly rare examples are preserved in Istria, on the murals of Vincent from Kastav, in Berm, dating back to 1474^{38,39}, and John of Kastav in Hrastovlje^{40,41}, which appeared for the first time in this paper.

Conclusion

On the whole, we may conclude that with its primary messages, it largely surpasses religious frames and that relevant cognitions, with appropriate perception, can encourage the believer to a series of practical, in this case, biological thoughts on conception, i.e. the beginning of life.

References

- Barić I. *Heritage of Isle Rab*. Rijeka: Adamić, 2007, p.155. [In Croatian].
- Bellegambe J. *St. Anne conceiving the Virgin Mary*. Available: <http://www.bestpriceart.com/painting/?pid=5355>.
- Černeka-Šubič Z. Frescoes in medieval Holly Trinity church of Hrastovlje with elements of sanitary culture. *Acta hist med pharm vet* 1988;28:173-80. [In Slovenian].
- Domijan M. *Rab City of Art*. Zagreb: Barbat, 2001, p. 317. [In Croatian].
- Dürer A. *Life of the Virgin: 3. The Meeting of Joachim and Anne at the Golden Gate*. Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich Available: <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>.
- Fučić B. *Birth of Mary; Birth of Isus Christ*. In: Badurina A. Ed. *Lexicon of iconography, liturgy, and symbolics of Western Christianity*. Zagreb: Krscanska sadašnjost, 1990. Zagreb: Krščanska sadašnjost, 1990, pp. 510-2. [in Croatian].

- 35- Glazier & Helwig, 1998.
 36- Rebić, 2002,
 37- St. Luke, the Apostle, ibidem
 38- Škrobonja et al, 1999b.
 39- Fučić, 1992.
 40- Zadnikar, 1988.
 41- Černeka-Šubič, 1988.

Fučić B. *Faultlessly conception*. In: Badurina A. Ed. *Lexicon of iconography, liturgy, and symbolics of Western Christianity*. Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 1990: 1990, pp. 144-5. [In Croatian].

Fučić B. *Istrian frescoes*. Catlog. Zagreb: Zora, 1963, p. 22. [In Croatian].

Fučić B. *Vincent from Kastav*. Zagreb / Pazin: Kršćanska sadašnjost / Istarsko književno društvo «Juraj Dobrila», 1992, pp. 38-9. [In Croatian].

Giotto di Bondone. *Scenes from the Life of Joachim: Meeting at the Golden Gate*. Capella Scrovegni Padua. Available: <http://www.wga.hu/art/g/giotto/padova/1joachim/joachi6.jpg>.

Glazier M, Helwig M.K. Ed. *The modern Catholic encyclopedia*. Split: Laus, 1998, p. 648. [In Croatian].

Google Images. Le Rencontre de Saint Joachim et Sainte Anne. Available: https://www.google.hr/search?q=Le+Rencontre+de+Saint+Joachim+et+Sainte+Anne&bav=on.2,or.r_qf.&bvm=bv.49478099,d.bGE,pv.xjs.s.en_US.c75bKy5EQ0A.O&biw=1258&bih=665&wrapid=tlifl37443550725810&um=1&ie=UTF-8&hl=hr&tbm=isch&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi&ei=vDjsUeW0E6zZ4QTW9oDoBQ

Gozzoli B. *Meeting at the Golden Gate*, Biblioteca Comunale, Castelfiorentino. URL: <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>.

James. *Protoevangelium of James*. Available: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm>

Kren E, Marx D. *The Annunciation*. Web Gallery of Art, Available: <http://www.wga.hu>.

Lippi Fra Filippo. *The Meeting at the Golden Gate*. Available: <http://www.catholictradition.org/Anne/anne6-1.htm>.

Maksimović J. Pregnancy, birth and maternity in the baroque art of Vojvodina. *Acta med-hist Adriat* 2006;4(1):71-84.

Master of Moulins. *Meeting at the Golden Gate*, National Gallery, London. Available: <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?cgi-bin/search.cgi>.

Peterelj Uran L. Health culture elements in the frescoes in the Holly Trinity church of Hrastovlje, Slovenia. *Acta med-hist Adriat* 2003;1(1):131-9.

Pseudo-Matthew. *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. Available: <http://www.gnosis.org/library/psudomat.htm>

Rebić A Ed. *Universal religious lexicon*. Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2002, pp. 219-20. [In Croatian].

St John the Apostle. *New Testament, the Gospel*, 1,14.

St. John the Apostle. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 12,1.

St. Luke, the Apostle. *New Testament, the Gospel according to Luke*, 1,26-38.

Škrobonja A, Kontošić I, Muzur A. Conception and pregnancy in several examples from Croatian sacral patrimony. *European JNL of Obst. & Gyn and Rep Biol* 1999;85:215-7.

Škrobonja A, Krpan K, Pahor D, Perić D. Child in Istrian folk medicine. *Acta Fac Med Flum* 1990,15:75-82. [In Croatian].

Škrobonja A, Muzur A, Kontošić I. Birth of St. Mary (St. Anne's parturition) in the light of the medical education. Some examples from Croatian sacral art. *J Perinatal Med* 1999;27:417-22.



Zadnikar M. Hrastovlje – *Romanesque architecture and Gothic frescoes*.
Ljubljana: Družina, 1988, p.102. [In Slovenian].

