



Fig. 1. Mary Alexandra Bell Eastlake, *The Annunciation*, 1896, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 53.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

A New Vision of Mary in *The Annunciation* by Mary Alexandra Bell Eastlake

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Mary Alexandra Bell Eastlake's (1864–1951) striking painting *The Annunciation* (1896) (fig. 1) was acquired by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2003.¹ The religious subject matter and the Symbolist style of this work depart from Eastlake's typical works,² which include depictions of children, such as *Fairy Tales* (1921) and *Blue and Gold* (1925), and naturalistic images of women and landscapes.³ While critics praised her work, some reviews diminished her sensitivity to a modern style and the emotive range captured in her pastels and oils by describing them as decorative and naïve.⁴ However, *The Annunciation* demonstrates Eastlake's experimentation with new ways of painting that were emerging in Europe, and her desire to position women as central, autonomous and unique individuals in her paintings.



Fig. 1. Mary Alexandra Bell Eastlake, *The Annunciation*, 1896, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 53.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In the foreground of *The Annunciation* Mary is standing in a blue dress with a red shawl around her shoulders, looking beyond the frame and holding her hands to her chest. To her left, an angel with a shock of bright orange hair and vibrant purple and blue wings is kneeling on the ground, arms lifted to communicate a message to Mary. The middle ground features an array of flowers and grasses, illuminated by orange light which also forms the haloes of the two figures. A crescent moon above a line of silhouetted trees is the source of the illumination. Eastlake rejects a traditional interpretation of the Annunciation; instead, she presents a relatable image of a young woman on the cusp of an important moment in her life.

When the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts acquired *The Annunciation* it was hailed as an example of the Pre-Raphaelite style.⁵ However, rather than a return to a Late Medieval and Early Renaissance style, or fidelity to nature emblematic of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,⁶ Eastlake's painting shares strong affinities with pictorial Symbolism. Emerging in France in the late nineteenth century, the Symbolist movement, which began with poetry and prose, was soon identified with visual artists such as Émile Bernard (1868–1941) and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903).⁷ Diverse labels have been attached to those early French Symbolist artists, and over time Symbolism came to be understood in different ways, but an enduring central tenet is the depiction of idea and emotion as a foremost subject and the rejection of naturalism.⁸ Having trained in Paris and lived in England, Eastlake travelled extensively and regularly exhibited in both London and Paris, where she was exposed to diverse art trends. The influence of Symbolism on Eastlake's *The Annunciation* becomes apparent when compared to Bernard's similar treatment of the same subject.

Bernard's painting *The Annunciation* (1890) (fig. 2) shows two haloed figures in the foreground wearing blue robes with yellow highlights.



Fig. 2. Émile Bernard, *The Annunciation*, 1890, oil on canvas, 34.9 x 47 cm, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. © VEGAP, Madrid. http://www.museothyssen.org/en/thyssen/ficha_obra/632.

To the left, the angel Gabriel is kneeling on a white cloud; one hand is raised, lifting a finger to the sky, while the other is holding a stem with three white lilies. Pink fabric billows from Mary's shoulders as she turns away from Gabriel. The two have matching bright golden hair, and their facial features remain vaguely defined. The green field in the middle ground contains flecks of white, while cloud-like orange and yellow forms in the shape of foliage stand in the background. Bernard leaves distinct brush marks, allowing colouring mixing on the canvas itself and selecting bright areas to highlight with yellows and whites.

While adhering to certain conventions in depicting the Annunciation, Eastlake and Bernard also depart from them in significant ways. Bernard places the figures in a more traditional

configuration, with Mary on the right and the angel Gabriel kneeling to her right. Importantly, Eastlake has reversed this positioning so that Mary is in the foreground and becomes the dominant subject.⁹ While historical representations of the Annunciation are ripe with religious motifs, Bernard and Eastlake focus on the Madonna's lily, a widely recognized symbol of her purity.¹⁰ In Eastlake's painting, the lilies are included among many other flowers, creating a natural setting in which the bright white lilies stand out. Mary is bathed in the same light as the flowers and foliage, suggesting an inner spirituality in harmony with this sacred garden. Whereas Bernard makes the symbol of the halo evident, Eastlake paints a bright orange contour around Mary's head and shoulders to suggest her divinity. Another Marian symbol utilized by Eastlake is the crescent moon, the light of which defines the silhouettes of the forms in the composition. The moon may be read as a waxing moon foreshadowing Mary's pregnancy. The symbolic relationship between the Virgin Mary and the moon is based on the moon's associations with fertility, as well as its constancy and control of tides.¹¹

Colour carries symbolic significance in both works. The deep blue sky in Bernard's painting contributes to the ambiguity of the setting, thus enhancing his Symbolist representation of subjective reality. In both paintings Mary is wearing blue, a colour that symbolizes divine love. She is also sporting a shawl that is red or pale pink, a colour that signifies willing sacrifice.¹² Eastlake emphasizes the humanity of Mary through her simple clothes. In both images the cloak that Mary is wearing mirrors the wings of the angel. Gabriel's face is partially obscured in both paintings, perhaps to respectfully refrain from depicting the heavenly on earth. However, whereas Bernard also forgoes the details of Mary's face, Eastlake draws the viewer's focus towards Mary's strong gaze. She does not return the angel's gaze, but is instead focused inwardly,

contemplating the responsibility ahead of her. Eastlake's work highlights a woman's transition from youth to motherhood.

Women and children are the subject of the majority of Eastlake's works, although she also executed landscapes. Few of her paintings are religious. In selecting the Annunciation among moments from the Bible to depict, Eastlake investigates the psychological state of a young woman in a moment of deep contemplation. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary she reacts with surprise and takes time to listen to and question the words of his message. After asking the angel how she could bear the child of God, she hears his response before deciding: "Let it be with me according to your word."¹³ With these words she autonomously accepts the duty of carrying a son deemed to be holy. Eastlake depicts Mary as a young woman whose posture and gaze reveal her intense deliberation as she processes the angel's words and recognizes the responsibility of bearing a holy child. This event may be read as a coming-of-age moment. The decisive poise of Mary distinguishes Eastlake's *The Annunciation* from other interpretations and is the source of the work's power.

Eastlake's Symbolist depiction of Mary as a youthful and strong woman discovering her divine destiny is dramatically different from her later painting *Mobilization Day 1914: French Fisherwomen Watching the Departure of the Fleet* (1917) (fig. 3), which depicts three forlorn and weary women watching the horizon, where the French fleet is presumably leaving port during the beginning of the First World War. The naturalistic style of this painting suits the subject of a historically situated social reality.



Fig. 3. Mary Alexandra Bell Eastlake, *Mobilization Day 1914: French Fisherwomen Watching the Departure of the Fleet*, ca. 1917, oil on canvas, 86.3 x 109.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada. <https://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=14341>.

In common with *The Annunciation* is the depiction of women in a natural landscape. Eastlake uses sombre colours to present a grey day on the coast. This landscape was inspired by Japanese prints and is depicted from an angular perspective as opposed to the flattened background of flowers in *The Annunciation*.¹⁴ The background in *Mobilization Day 1914* is dotted with the white bonnets of other women watching the sea and a town of white houses. The naturalism of the vista and figures in this work reveal the extent to which Eastlake explored new stylistic territory in *The Annunciation*. As with her portrayal of Mary, Eastlake delves into the psychological state of the women in *Mobilization Day 1914*. Their individual expressions and gestures capture a range of emotions in response to watching their family members leave to the frontlines at the onset of war. The woman on the right carrying a baby in her arms is perhaps mourning the absence of her child's father. The infant's face is directed away from the viewer so that the focus remains on this young mother's experience.

The psychological state of a new mother is again explored in *Happiness* (1892), a portrait of a mother with an infant in her arms (fig. 4).¹⁵



Fig. 4. Mary Alexandra Bell Eastlake, *Happiness*, ca. 1892, pastel and graphite on illustration board, 75.9 x 62.9 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
<https://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=13234>.

Created a few years prior to *The Annunciation*, this pastel work was acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in 1915, much to Eastlake's delight.¹⁶ This image and its title seem to idealize motherhood, portraying the joy of a mother whose wedding band implies that she is married and ensconced in a domestic lifestyle. However, Eastlake disrupts this conventional image of motherhood by placing the woman and her child before a vivid floral background, rendered schematically and appearing flattened due to the application of solid tones. This background is similar to that in *The Annunciation*. Flowers symbolize femininity and youth. Art historian David Tovey describes Eastlake's use of flora as "equating the blossoming of these tender plants with

that of her youthful human subjects.”¹⁷ However, the natural setting may also be read as a desire to re-situate women outside the private sphere. By freeing her subjects from interior spaces, Eastlake denies the confining psychological space constructed by walls and instead draws the viewer's attention towards the facial expressions of women as outward manifestations of their inner selves.

The internal state of Eastlake's subjects is also conveyed through their hand gestures. The mother's hands in *Happiness* appear to gently support and interact with her infant, while the hands of the angel Gabriel in *The Annunciation* offer a reassuring gesture as Mary reacts with surprise to his message. Mary's own hands are clasped in a gesture that suggests she is seeking her own strength, while also offering the possibility that she is prepared to open up her arms to hold a child, foreshadowing her maternal role. Neither of the women in these works by Eastlake meet the viewer's eye, a demeanour that is common in her oeuvre. Looking beyond the frame, the women's gazes are not defiant but rather signal introspection.

Similar to many of her other depictions of women, Eastlake's *The Annunciation* examines the psychological state of Mary as she contemplates motherhood. While the ordinary women in *Mobilization Day 1914: French Fisherwomen Watching the Departure of the Fleet* and *Happiness* are rendered in a naturalistic style, *The Annunciation* employs a Symbolist approach in order to capture not only the transcendental nature of the event but also Mary's subjective experience. Neither merely naïve nor decorative, as contemporary critics asserted, Eastlake's *The Annunciation* presents an original, complex and powerful image of Mary as an autonomous subject.

NOTES

¹ The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts dates the painting to 1896. See “The Annunciation,” accessed October 27, 2015, https://virtualexhibition.ca/oeuvre-artwork/2003_61-eng. However, the Museum's acquisition documents date it as early as 1894. The painting is dated to 1895 by David Tovey in *Pioneers of St. Ives Art at Home and Abroad (1889-1914)* (Gloucestershire: Wilson Books, 2008), 172. The figure and choice of a religious subject matter may indicate the influence of other artists working in St. Ives Cornwall, such as Marianne Preindlsberger Stokes. See Tovey, 79. Thank you to Barbara Tekker for identifying Stokes' painting *The Passing Train*, which has striking visual similarities to the figure in Eastlake's *Annunciation*, both presenting a woman in a blue dress with red cape standing at the edge of a field of flowers.

² Although there are few known religious works by Eastlake, this may not be the only Annunciation painting she created. A painting of the same title is included in a catalogue of works exhibited at the art gallery in Phillips Square in Montreal in 1902. This was a joint exhibition with her husband, Charles H. Eastlake. A painting titled *The Annunciation* is the most valuable of the works by Eastlake, listed at \$250.00. See H. Ford, *Catalogue of Pictures, Pastels and Enamels, by Charles H. Eastlake, R.B.A. And M. A. Bell, (Mrs. Eastlake)* (Montreal: The Art Gallery, Phillips Square, 1902). However, this painting's description indicates that it is a different work than the one discussed in this essay: “[I]ts tone is quiet and soft and the picture is full of deep religious feeling. The Virgin sits with a face full of adoration and awe, while an angel is dimly seen speaking his message into her ear.” See “Art Gallery Exhibit A Credit to Artists: Mr. and Mrs. Eastlake Show Excellent Pictures and Pastels and Work in Enamels,” *Montreal Gazette*, April 8, 1902.

³ Among the first wave of professional Canadian women painters, Mary Alexandra Bell Eastlake predominantly depicted mothers and children. Born in Douglas, Ontario, in 1864, Eastlake began her artistic training in Montreal with Robert Harris. She continued her education in New York and Paris. Returning to Montreal to teach in 1892, she relocated to England the next year, following her marriage to British artist Charles H. Eastlake. Together they travelled extensively throughout Europe and Asia. A member of the Pastel Society of London, Woman's International Art Club and an Associate of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art, Eastlake is represented in many Canadian and European collections. She returned to Canada in 1939 with her husband, and she later moved from Montreal back to Almonte, Ontario, before passing away in 1951. See Jacques Des Rochers, “Prime Example of Pre-Raphaelitism in Canada,” *Collage: The Magazine for Friends of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts* (Winter 2003–4): 12.

⁴ See Tovey, 172; Des Rochers, 12; Jane Quigley, “Volendam as a Sketching Ground for Painters,” *Studio* 38 (1906): 123.

⁵ Des Rochers, 12.

⁶ Jennifer Meagher, “The Pre-Raphaelites,” in Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), last modified October 2004, accessed October 27, 2015, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/praf/hd_praf.htm.

⁷ Gauguin was among the first painters to be identified as a Symbolist in an article by G.-Albert Aurier in 1891. See Reinhold Heller, “Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of Surface,” *Art Journal* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 146, accessed October 27, 2015, doi: 10.2307/776792.

⁸ Heller, 147.

⁹ Hanneke Grootenboer, "Reading the Annunciation," *Art History* 30, no. 3 (June 2007): 351, accessed October 27, 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8365.2007.00549.x.

¹⁰ Anne Neale, "Considering the Lilies: Symbolism and Revelation in 'Convent Thoughts' (1851) by Charles Allsten Collins (1828-73)," *The British Art Journal* 11, no. 1 (2010): 93–98, accessed October 27, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41615395>.

¹¹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 267.

¹² Neale, 96.

¹³ Luke 1:38 (New Revised Standard Version).

¹⁴ This landscape is reminiscent of Hokusai's (1760–1849) prints, popular in France during this era. Eastlake made at least one trip to Japan alongside her husband. See Mary Bell Eastlake to Eric Brown, October 24, year unknown, NGC Drawing Files #947, Mary Bell Eastlake file, CWAHI, Concordia University.

¹⁵ As a member of the Pastel Society of London, Eastlake produced many works in pastel. She demonstrated a command of the medium and her works have been widely exhibited. See Art Gallery of Toronto, *An Exhibition of Oils, Water Colours, and Pastels by Mrs. C. H. Eastlake (M. A. Bell): Art Gallery of Toronto, January 15–February 6, 1927* (Toronto: The Gallery, 1927).

¹⁶ "Report of the Auditor General," 1915, vol. III, V-340 & 341, from the National Gallery of Canada Archives. See also Mary A. Bell Eastlake, correspondence to Mr. Brown, May 20, year unknown, NGC Drawing Files #947, from the National Gallery of Canada Archives.

¹⁷ Tovey, 172.

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