

Article

Hortus Conclusus—A Mariological Metaphor in Some Renaissance Paintings of the Annunciation in the Light of Medieval Liturgical Hymns

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Abstract: This article seeks to shed light on the doctrinal meanings of the closed garden included in some Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation. To justify the iconographic interpretations that we will give of these paintings, we will base them on the analysis of many medieval liturgical hymns that poetically designate the Virgin Mary through the metaphorical expression *hortus conclusus* (closed garden) with which the Husband or Bridegroom requisites the Wife or Bride in the *Song of Songs*. We will divide our article into two parts as a strategy for analysis. First, we will analyze an extensive series of fragments of liturgical hymns that repeatedly praise Mary through this biblical metaphor. In the second part, we will examine some artistic representations of the Annunciation that, in the Italian Renaissance, depict a closed garden in the scene. From this double comparative analysis, textual and iconic, we will conclude that, in direct and essential correlation, those hymnic texts and those paintings clearly illustrate that the *hortus conclusus* is an eloquent symbol of the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and her perpetual virginity, as well as the excellence and fullness of her supernatural virtues and privileges.

Keywords: Annunciation; Virgin Mary; divine motherhood; perpetual virginity; Mariology; liturgical hymns; Renaissance art



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1. Introduction

To justify various crucial Mariological dogmas, the Church frequently resorted to interpreting some Old Testament texts as explicit prophetic references to the Virgin Mary. This is especially evident in the dogmas of her virginal divine motherhood and her perpetual virginity, which several Old Testament passages foretell clearly, according to the millenary, consistent interpretive tradition of the Fathers and theologians of the Eastern and Western Churches. Among those precursors biblical texts, we are interested in highlighting in this article the quote from the *Song of Songs*, in which the Bridegroom or Husband (*Sponsus*) praises the Bride or Wife (*Sponsa*) in these lyrical terms: *Hortus conclusus, soror mea sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus*. (Song 4, 12). “A garden shut up is my sister, my bride; A spring shut up, a fountain sealed.”¹

We have explained in another article (Salvador-González 2023) the interpretations given to this passage of the *Song of Songs* by some Church Fathers and medieval theologians, such as Proclus of Constantinople,² Hesychius of Jerusalem,³ John of Damascus,⁴ Ambrose of Milan,⁵ Jerome of Strido,⁶ Just of Urgell,⁷ Isidore of Sevilla,⁸ Ildephonse of Toledo,⁹ Paschase Radbert,¹⁰ Peter Damian,¹¹ Hugh of Saint Victor,¹² Honorius of Autun,¹³ Bernard of Clairvaux,¹⁴ Peter of Blois,¹⁵ and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio.¹⁶

Now, based on that millenary, coherent patristic, and theological tradition, numerous medieval writers composed countless antiphons, chants, and liturgical hymns in Latin using with poetic variations the metaphor *hortus conclusus*, and other expressions alluding to flowering and enclosure to extol Mary’s perpetual virginity and her virginal divine motherhood.

In this order of ideas, in the second section of this article, we will present an abundant series of fragments of medieval liturgical hymns that refer to the perpetual Virgin Mary through the *hortus conclusus* metaphor or other similar poetic expressions. We will give the pieces of hymns in chronological order, grouping them by centuries, to better perceive the eventual evolution of the conceptual variants given by hymnographers to these metaphorical proclamations.

Similarly, in the third section, we will analyze the iconography of ten paintings of the Annunciation depicted by some Italian Renaissance artists that in various ways illustrate the Mariological symbol *hortus conclusus*.

This double analysis of hymnic texts and visual images will allow us to infer to what extent we could justify the eventual direct relationship between those hymns and those images.

2. The *Hortus Conclusus* in the Medieval Liturgical Hymnography

We have found many hymns and liturgical chants that developed and poetically strengthened various tropes derived from the Biblical figure *hortus conclusus* and other analogous metaphorical expressions throughout the Middle Ages. Now, to better appreciate the eventual evolution in medieval hymnographers' treatment of these metaphors, we will present these fragments of hymns in chronological order, grouping them by centuries.

Hymns from the 11th–12th century

From an approximate date between the 11th and 12th centuries, we have only found the *Hymnus 98. Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem*, which addresses Mary requesting her protection in the following terms:

Enclosed, irrigated garden, abundant in crops,
Pure, sealed source that floods the river
Source that springs, inexhaustible, that exudes goodness,
I ask you, merciful Virgin, grant me your protection.¹⁷

12th-century hymns

From the 12th century, we have documented these two hymns:

The *Hymnus 326. De conceptione sanctae Mariae virginis* pleads for the protection of the mother of God with these verses:

Oh, Mary, enclosed garden,
port of the world that is shipwrecked,
appease us [before] who made you
his chosen mother.¹⁸

The *Hymnus 516. De sancta Maria* praises the Virgin with these lyrical concepts:

Hail, blooming garden of the Sun,
Star of the sea, safe harbor,
The best draught always.¹⁹

13th-century hymns

From the 13th century, we have found these three hymns:

The *Hymnus 260. De sancta Maria* celebrates the perpetual virginity of the mother of God the Son with these short verses:

Garden blooming by the blow of the south wind,
Closed door before and after [delivery],
Road impassable for men.²⁰

A few stanzas later, the *Hymnus 260* pleads for the saving help of the Virgin with these warm statements:

Star of the sea, calm the sea,
So that the storm does not envelop us
nor the wild storm,
but you lift us up
to the heavenly palace
Our consolation,
Oh, merciful Queen of heaven.²¹

The *Hymnus 524. Prosa de beata Virgine* celebrates the perpetual virginity of Mary in these rhetorical figures:

Closed door, fountain of the gardens,
compartment that keeps ointments,
perfume container.²²

The *Hymnus 136. De Beata Maria Virgine* extols the perpetual virginity of the mother of God with these lyrical metaphors:

1a. Hail mother of the Lord
double-scented flower,
single mother virgin
1b. Sealed fountain of grace,
garden of modesty,
You are designated as a closed door.²³

Hymns of the 13th–15th centuries

From some imprecise date between the 13th and 15th centuries, we have found these two hymns alluding to the subject under study:

The *Hymnus 49* greets the virginal mother of God, helper of Humanity, in the following way:

Oh saving
port of the poor
flourishing
And closed garden,
The sun was born from you
You give birth to God as a virgin.²⁴

The *Hymnus 186* expresses several concepts relatively similar to those of the preceding *Hymn 49*, singing the universal protection of the mother of the Savior with this outstanding stanza:

Mary, flower of wonderful
Beauty,
And tower of the fortress
Of the prisoners,
Garden of delights,
Harbor for the shipwrecked,
Through you the supreme Son was born.²⁵

14th-century hymns

From the 14th century, we have documented these fourteen hymns:

The *Hymnus 593. Ad eandem [beatam Virginem Mariam]* greets the mother of the Redeemer with these eloquent analogies:

Hail, glorious
well of living waters,
graceful light,
fountain of delights,
Virgin artery of forgiveness,
seal of virginity,
Hope of our conscience,
Mother of the Saviour.²⁶

The *Hymnus 472. Ad nonam* qualifies the Virgin Mary with these poetic figures:

Closed and pleasant garden,
Always full of all the flowers,
To whom singularly the south wind
Gently breathed.²⁷

The *Hymnus 541. De sancta Maria* greets the perpetually virgin Queen of Heaven through these warm compliments:

Illustrious advocate,
Garden of the Trinity,
Empress of Heaven,
temple of deity,
shining sky star
With great clarity,
Please be for me, Madam.²⁸

The *Hymnus 548. Ad vespas. Hymnus* exalts the virginal mother of God, whose protection it pleads in every trial, with these moving verses:

Wife, sister, dowry, and daughter
of the supreme Creator,
who begets the Father, born of her offspring,
the first among the virgins,
blooming garden, source of sweetness,
great hope of the world,
hear the cry of your children,
fountain of mercy
consoling the orphans,
grant us the gifts of grace
and add us to the chorus
of the heavenly host.²⁹

The *Hymnus 507. Oratio, quae dicitur crinale beatae Mariae virginis* praises the ever-virgin Mary, begging for her saving help, with this vibrant stanza:

Oh, Mary, closed door,
Enclosed garden, comfort us
You, who are the first of the virgins,
born of a line of kings,

Take us to Paradise.³⁰

In the long *Hymnus 5. Hortulus Beatae Virginis Mariae*, entirely devoted to the metaphor *hortus conclusus*, its author Konrads von Haimburg (Conradus Gemnicensis) celebrates Mary's perpetual virginity and her divine virginal motherhood with these ingenious stanzas:

1. Oh, Mary, Paradise,
Garden of joy,
Full of all the goods,
An undivided source,
And a quadruple river irrigates you
With the gifts of grace.

[. . .]

4. You are the closed garden
that the Supreme architect of the universe,
planted with flowers.
This favorite [Son] of yours,
Who has his head covered in dew,
Is not excluded in any way.³¹

In a new stanza, the hymnographer Konrads von Haimburg assumes the role of Christ to address the Virgin with these poetic expressions:

7. Entering you, who were dedicated
For me as a virgin, daughter.
My sister, wife,
I will pick the lilies
hidden in your garden
Delicate with the breath of the south wind.³²

Finally, in a new stanza, Konrads von Haimburg insists on similar tropes, stating:

8. The garden of your chest
Blown by the south wind of the [Holy] Spirit
Will sprout with flowers.
God, hidden and veiled
With the veil of your body,
Will germinate in you.³³

The *Hymnus 53. De conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis* sings to the ever-virgin Mary, mother of the Saviour, with these verses:

Sealed fountain, enclosed garden,
An indication of this is the fact that
the present birth of Mary
is the destruction of death,
which [Mary], being the port of salvation,
starts life.³⁴

The *Hymnus 12. De conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis*, in *Pars 3. Nocturne. Ad Laudes. Antiphonae*, addresses the mother of God as follows:

This is that sealed fountain,
The closed garden, breathed

From Heaven by the breath of the south wind,
With whose covering shadow she conceived.³⁵

The *Hymnus 59. In Annunciatione Beatae Mariae Virginis* glorifies the virginal mother of the divine Redeemer with these epithets:

4a. Rejoice, earth, that through the dew
You conceived the Savior
At the same time with joy.

4b. Fountain of the gardens, enclosed garden,
Distilling honey, port of life,
Open Heaven's gate.³⁶

The *Hymnus 83. De beata Maria Virgine* greets the Queen of Heaven with this stanza:

You are the sun
Star of the sea,
Enclosed garden,
Harbor of life,
Virgin Mary.³⁷

The *Hymnus 58. In Assumptione Beatae Mariae Virginis* glorifies the mother of God with these lyrical effusions:

The name of the mother is a star of light
Or an alabaster jar for scents
Very soft for the sense,
The body of God, the castle of the Word
The closed garden, the rake of the Father
That produces optimal fruit.³⁸

The *Hymnus 90. Jubilus de singulis membris Beatae Mariae Virginis* extols the power of help and protection of the ever-virgin Mary, by expressing:

You are the star of the sea
healthy medicine
Of bodies and hearts,
You are the sealed source, the closed garden,
The path of peace, the port of life,
The refuge of the poor.³⁹

Probably from the 14th century is also the *Hymnus 531. Alia sequentia*, which offers these brilliant lines about the virginal mother of God:

Blooming garden, pleasant to the sick,
sealed source of purity,
That gives the currents of grace.
Throne of the true Solomon,
To whom the King of glory
Adorned with the illustrious gifts of heaven.⁴⁰

15th-century hymns

We have documented these ten hymns from the 15th century on the subject under analysis.

The *Hymnus 600. Laudes Mariae* repeatedly praises the virtues and supernatural attributes of the ever-virgin Mary with these splendid rhetorical figures:

Queen of mercy,
 Called Mary,
 designated in antiquity
 With various modes:
 You are rod, you stem,
 you sealed virgin,
 You bed, you bedchamber,
 You gifted spouse.⁴¹

Then this *Hymn 600* goes on to express with even greater brilliance this splendid string of poetic tropes:

You [are] temple, you chamber,
 you closed door
 You ship, you anchor
 you called star
 You sun, moon, balm,
 armed army,
 you shining dawn,
 You proven gem.
 You fountain, garden, plantain,
 raised cedar.
 You palm, you olive tree,
 planted cypress,
 most chosen myrrh,
 burning bush;
 You glass window
 irradiated by the sun.⁴²

The *Hymnus. 515. De sancta Maria* sings the perpetual virginity and the divine virginal motherhood of Mary with these brief but dense verses:

You are the door that became accessible only to the Lord,
 the garden in which the divinity was hidden,
 the star, which brought the Sun into the world.⁴³

The *Hymnus 21. Historia de Domina in sabbato. Ad Laudes. Antiphonae* eulogizes the sublime perpetual virginity of the mother of God with these illustrative rhymes:

You are the garden of aromas,
 What delights the beloved,
 The sweet source of charismas
 That sweetens affection.
 You are the enclosed garden
 Blossomed by the breath of the south wind,
 The placid sealed fountain,
 The port in storms.⁴⁴

The *Hymnus 24. Centinomialium Beatae Virginis. Secunda Pars. Capitulum quartum* sings the perpetual virginity of Mary with these concepts:

As [Solomon in *Song of Songs*] himself said,
 You are the enclosed garden
 that germinates various
 herb species,
 with which a beautiful matter
 is done,
 by which the flood of the mind
 Is repelled.⁴⁵

The *Hymnus 38. Abecedarius XIII* praises the ever-virgin Mary with these eloquent words:

You are the flowery garden
 that produces delights,
 and shines with the various
 flowers of virtues.⁴⁶

Several stanzas later, it follows:

You are designated as the garden
 ventilated by grace,
 that provides the wonderful fruit of heaven,
 please give us the remedy
 to the wretched,
 and to the defeated
 in the darkness of purgatory.⁴⁷

The *Hymnus 50. Rosarium* exalts the virginal mother of God with this stanza:

Oh Mary, closed garden
 And little casket (?) from the garden,
 From which a flower [Christ] grew for us,
 whom you cared for diligently,
 And who, when he was tormented on the cross,
 Absolved all wrongdoing.⁴⁸

The *Hymnus 14. In Nativitate Domini Nostris* sings of the virginal mother of God by these poetic words:

Seed of Zion, root of David,
 Enclosed garden, which he entered
 The heavenly splendor of the Father.⁴⁹

The *Hymnus 100. Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem* praises the ever-virgin Mary with these idyllic analogies:

Pure sealed source,
 Enclosed and fenced garden,
 Full of sacred fruit
 And fertilized with perfumes.⁵⁰

Finally, the *Hymnus 113. De Beata Maria Virgine* sings to the always virginal mother of God and helper of humanity with these lyrical metaphorical figures:

Hail, venerable
 mother of mercy,
 admirable Mary

form of holiness,
 incomparable flower,
 virginity garden,
 ineffable splendor,
 Temple of the deity.⁵¹

As a summary

From what we have been able to see in this second section, all the medieval liturgical hymns we have brought here focus on designating the Virgin Mary through the well-known metaphors “closed garden” and “sealed fountain” (*hortus conclusus*, *fons signatus*), with which the Bridegroom praises the Bride in *Song of Songs*. Now, although the various hymns given assume these two biblical metaphors with different approaches and expressive modes, all unanimously agree in interpreting both metaphorical expressions as clear references to Mary in two of her exclusive privileges: her virginal divine motherhood and her perpetual virginity (*virgo ante partum*, *virgo in partu*, *virgo post partum*: virgin before childbirth, virgin in childbirth, virgin after childbirth).

On the other hand, from the comparative analysis of the verses and stanzas presented here, one can deduce that many of these hymns relate the concepts *hortus conclusus* and *fons signatus* to the eastern *porta clausa* (closed door) of Jerusalem temple foretold by the prophet Ezekiel (Ez 44:1–4) during the exile of the Jews in Babylon. Such relationship is wholly coherent since, as we have shown in other works (Salvador-González 2020b, 2021d, 2021e), this Ezekiel’s *porta clausa* is also an eloquent metaphor of the perpetual virginity and virginal divine motherhood of Mary in the Christian exegetical tradition.

In addition, many hymns analyzed here highlight Mary’s privilege as virginal mother of God when they state that she is the fertile “closed garden” that, irrigated by heavenly dew and receiving the breath of the south wind (that is, when fertilized by the Holy Spirit), produces an admirable heavenly fruit (sometimes, it also says a flower), which is Christ, the Savior. For this reason, some hymns say that Mary is the “closed garden” in which the deity was hidden, or they designate her as the “garden of the Trinity” and the “temple of the deity”.

In a similar way, many fragments of the hymns exposed here associate the closed garden with the exclusive virtues of Mary: The Virgin is the flowery or flourishing *hortus conclusus* that, like an exuberant garden of delights, produces, preserves, and is filled with the flowers and perfumes of the Virgin’s virtues, especially her purity, her charity, her goodness, her sweetness, and her mercy.

As if that were not enough, several of these liturgical hymns take advantage of the homophony between the words *hortus* (garden, orchard) and *portus* (port, harbor), to highlight the mercy, the help, the protection, and the consolation that Mary grants to human beings (navigators and shipwrecked), thanks to her sublime privilege of being the Mediatrix, Helper and Co-redemptrix of Humankind.

3. An Iconographic Analysis of Some Renaissance Paintings of the Annunciation with a “Closed Garden”

We will now analyze chronologically ten representations of the Annunciation painted by some Italian artists of the 14th and 15th centuries that include an enclosed “garden” in their scene. It is convenient to specify that the iconographic motif of the *hortus conclusus* is not limited to the images of the Annunciation but also extends to other Marian representations, among them, the iconographic type of *The Virgin of Humility*. On the other hand, we have chosen ten significant representations of *The Annunciation* of the Italian Renaissance to better focus the research on a relatively homogeneous country and era. However, we do not mean by this that these ten paintings we have chosen are the only ones—and not necessarily the most important ones—on the subject; considering that, together with those from Italy, we could have studied other *Annunciations* painted by artists from Flanders, France, Spain

or Germany. Even without leaving Italy, we could have analyzed other equally relevant *Annunciations*, such as the one already mentioned by Fra Angelico in the altarpiece of San Giovanni Valdarno, c. 1430–1432, that of Benedetto Bonfigli (c. 1445) from the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, or two others by Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Annunciation with Two Donors*, 1450, from the Galleria d'Arte Antica in Rome, and *The Annunciation with Two Angels*, 1450, from the Church of San Lorenzo in Florence.

Fra Angelico (c. 1396–1455) painted six different versions of the Annunciation: the first three on altarpieces (today preserved in museums in Madrid, San Giovanni Valdarno, and Cortona), two more as fresco murals in the Convento di San Marco in Florence—we will soon analyze the most important of them—and one more on a small table that is one of the many scenes that make up the *Armadio degli Argenti*, which we will also analyze later.

From the outset, it is interesting to note that, in almost all these representations of the Annunciation, Fra Angelico brought to light, with greater or lesser emphasis, the theme of the *hortus conclusus*. The only exception is the small fresco mural in the Convento di San Marco because the painter staged the episode in a bare, cramped convent cell. In turn, in his *Annunciation* of the altarpiece in the Prado Museum in Madrid, the artist, despite having included in the composition a flowery garden through which Adam and Eve wander, leaves in suspense the enclosure of the *hortus conclusus*; however, this could be subtly suggested by the thick forest that closes the garden at the bottom of the scene.

The Annunciation from the Museo Diocesano di Cortona, c. 1433 (Figure 1) is the third representation of this Marian episode that Fra Angelico shaped as an altarpiece, after the first, preserved in the Prado Museum, c. 1426, and the second, housed in the Museum of Santa Maria delle Grazie Basilica in San Giovanni Valdarno, c. 1430–1432. In this third version of Cortona, the painter makes a narrative and compositional approach quite like the two previous versions of Madrid and Valdarno, with more remarkable similarities to the latter. In fact, after changing the vanishing point in a linear perspective, the Cortona's *Annunciation* resembles Valdarno's in these four elements: the representation of the house like a loggia open towards the flowery garden and covered by a flat roof; a similar bust of the prophet Isaiah in the tondo over the central column; the resplendent dove of the Holy Spirit flying over the head of the Virgin, without the usual ray of light descending from above; an analogous scene of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden in the upper left corner of the composition, to illustrate the antitheses between Eve and Mary, and between Adam and Christ, who is being conceived in Mary's womb at the final moment of the Annunciation.



Figure 1. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, c. 1433. Museo Diocesano di Cortona.

However, the most relevant detail for our interests is the wooden fence that, although small (almost imperceptible), closes the garden in the median plane, to signify the Mariological metaphor *hortus conclusus*. The cultured Dominican friar Fra Angelico put up this fence enclosing the garden to signify the dogmas of the divine virginal motherhood of Mary and her perpetual virginity, so unanimously proclaimed by some theologians and composers of medieval liturgical hymns, many of whose stanzas we exposed in the second section.

To better manifest the mystery of the supernatural human conception/incarnation of God the Son in the virginal womb of Mary, Fra Angelico has made the dialogue between the two protagonists visible through several inscriptions in gold letters that flow from their mouths. Gabriel's speech appears in two separate lines: the upper line, curving upwards, expresses *Sp[iritu]s S[anctus] sup[er]ve[n]iet i[n] te*; the lower line, descending rectilinearly, enuncia *virt[us] Alt[is]si[m]i ob[um]brabit tibi*. Mary's response, *Ecce ancilla Do[mi]n[i] fiat mihi secundum v[er]bu[m] tuum*, appears in the middle line with its letters inverted from bottom to top: with this rather naive reversal of the statement of Mary, Fra Angelico intends to make the ignorant faithful understand that God can read it from the heavenly heights.

In the large fresco of *The Annunciation*, c. 1440–1450, painted in the first-floor corridor of the Convent of San Marco in Florence (Figure 2), Fra Angelico re-enacts the Marian episode in a house shaped like a vaulted loggia. Inside this classical setting, Gabriel and Mary dialogue with reverent attitudes: the angel respectfully announces the heavenly message to the Virgin; she humbly accepts the divine design like the submissive “slave of the Lord.” Surprisingly Fra Angelico does not incorporate any symbolic feature of the godhead in this fresco, not including either the (more or less aniconic) figure of God the Father, the beam of light (God the Son), or the dove of the Holy Spirit.



Figure 2. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, c. 1440–1450. Convento di San Marco, Florence.

However, in front of his other *Annunciations*, Fra Angelico depicts in this fresco with a strong emphasis the wooden fence that encloses the flowery garden of the Marian abode. In that way, this erudite Dominican friar wants to highlight the profound Mariological meanings of the *hortus conclusus*, according to the firmly established theological tradition.

Therefore, it is outstanding that the commentators we know of this work (Pope-Hennessy 1952; Argan 1955; Berti 1966; Baldini 1970; Bonsanti 1984; Guillaud and Guillaud 1986; Hood 1993; Bartz 1998, 50; Zuccari et al. 2009) leave unexplained with patristic and theological arguments the Mariological meanings of this *hortus conclusus*, proclaimed by countless medieval liturgical hymns.

In *The Annunciation*, c. 1451–1453, which is one of the scenes that decorate the *Armadio degli Argenti* in the Museo del Convento di San Marco in Florence (Figure 3), Fra Angelico sets the composition according to a rigid monoaxial symmetry, in which characters, architectural elements and components of the natural landscape are perfectly balanced.

In this geometric setting, the angel Gabriel, with his right knee on the ground and his left index finger pointing heavenward to indicate the celestial origin of his message, communicates the divine plan to the humbly kneeling Mary. This is specified in the message *Ecce concipies et paries filium, et vocabis nomen eius Iesus* (Lk 1:31) (“Behold, you will conceive and give birth to a son whom you will name Jesus”), inscribed in a band at the bottom of the painting. To highlight the prophetic background of this announcement by Gabriel, the artist places the prophecy of Isaias on the upper edge of the painting: *Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium, et vocabit nomen eius Emmanuel* (Is 7:14) (“Behold, a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.”)

It is interesting to note that, right on the axis of the compositional symmetry, the painter reveals, through the doorless entrance, a garden whose enclosing wall appears in the background. Once again, the erudite Dominican painter Fra Angelico highlights this *hortus conclusus* to illustrate that in the event of the Annunciation, two fundamental Mariological dogmas are condensed: Mary’s virginal divine motherhood and her perpetual virginity.



Figure 3. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, c. 1451–1453. A scene from the *Armadio degli Argenti*, Museo Convento di San Marco, Florence.

Fra Filippo Lippi (1406–1469) painted this *Annunciazione delle Murate*, 1443, from the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (Figure 4) for the convent of the *suore murate* (enclosed nuns) in Florence. The artist has represented here Mary’s humble house in Nazareth as a splendid palace to symbolize the particular Mariological and Christological meanings we have highlighted in other articles (Salvador-González 2021a, 2021b). Escorted by angels in the upper left corner, God the Father sends towards the Virgin the fertilizing ray of light (symbol of God the Son), in whose wake the Holy Spirit’s dove flies. In the middle of the room, the archangel, holding a lily stalk in his left hand, kneels reverently before Mary, while a second angel stands with another lily stalk on the door lintel on the left side. The standing Mary listens to the celestial announcement, humbly showing her submission like the “slave of the Lord” by lowering her head and putting her right hand on her breast.



Figure 4. Fra Filippo Lippi, *L’Annunciazione delle Murate*, 1443. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

It is relevant to note that Lippi wants to highlight in this painting the double enclosure of the garden (*hortus conclusus*), perceivable through the three arches: the first enclosure is a low white wall in the mid-ground; the second one, more strong and high, is the heavy wall stretching out on both sides in the background, with a wide door under a triangular pediment.

Megan Holmes (1999, pp. 239–40) has rightly suggested that both walls of the garden may allude to the *suore murate* (enclosed nuns) for whom the painting was intended. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the cultured Carmelite painter who was Fra Filippo Lippi decided to make visible with both closing walls of this garden the Mariological symbolisms we have explained following the long-lasting doctrinal tradition embodied in the numerous medieval liturgical hymns we have exposed.

Therefore, it is pretty disappointing that most commentators on this outstanding painting by Lippi (Marchini 1979; Ruda 1993; Christiansen 2005; Fossi and Pinci 2011) have forgotten to mention the *hortus conclusus*, or, if mentioned, to justify documentarily its deep dogmatic meanings. Instead, in her well-documented monograph on Fra Filippo Lippi, Megan Holmes (1999, pp. 239–40) is, as far as we know, the only one who, when

commenting on this painting, alludes to the Marian symbolism of the *hortus conclusus*, although without justifying it through primary sources.

Domenico Veneziano (1410–1461) framed this *Annunciation*, c. 1445, from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK (Figure 5), with a relatively symmetrical composition (with a marked offset to the left), which is quite reminiscent of the compositional approach given by Fra Angelico in the just analyzed panel of the *Armadio degli Argenti*. Although housed today in an English museum in Cambridge, this small painting by Domenico Veneziano is a scene from the predella of the famous *Pala di Santa Lucia de' Magnoli* (also called *Sacra conversazione coi santi Francesco, Giovanni Battista, Zanobi e Lucia*), c. 1445, preserved today in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence. In this small panel at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Domenico Veneziano—as did Fra Angelico in the panel just analyzed—stages the episode in a sizeable porticoed patio. Kneeling on the ground with a lily stem in his left hand, the archangel points his right index finger up to indicate the heavenly origin of the message he is addressing to Mary. Standing on the right side of the painting, she shows her obedience to God's will, bowing her head and crossing her hands on her chest.



Figure 5. Domenico Veneziano, *The Annunciation* (predella of the *Pala di Santa Lucia de' Magnoli*), c. 1445. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK.

Even if avoiding the physical or symbolic representation of the godhead—God the Father, God the Son (the ray of light), and the Holy Spirit (the dove) are absent in this panel—Veneziano highlighted the dogmatic meanings of the biblical metaphor *hortus conclusus*. That is why he places in prominent centrality, at the back of the scene, a wooden door, with a heavy security bar—an explicit reference to Ezekiel's *porta clausa*, whose Mariological and Christological meanings we have explained in other articles (Salvador-González 2021e, 2021d, 2020b)—that closes the flowery garden in the central corridor.

Furthermore, Benozzo Gozzoli (1420–1497), in *The Annunciation* that is part of the predella of the famous altarpiece *La Madonna della Cintola*, c. 1445, from the Vatican Pinacoteca (Figure 6), reflects the same dogmatic meanings of the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and her perpetual virginity symbolized by the metaphor *hortus conclusus*. For this reason, in the foreseeable context of the dialogue between the two protagonists of the episode, the painter places the Virgin in the portico of a symbolic palace, while the angel Gabriel is in the nearby garden. It is important to emphasize here that this garden is enclosed (not to say walled) by a high marble wall, which shows the enclosure and impassability of this symbolic Marian garden.



Figure 6. Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Annunciation*, c. 1445. A scene of the predella of the *Madonna della Cintola* altarpiece. Pinacoteca Vaticana.

Fra Filippo Lippi poses *The Annunciation* (*L'Annunciazione Doria*), c. 1445–1450, from the Galleria Doria-Pamphilj in Rome (Figure 7), with some compositional novelties: for example, the inversion of the position of the two protagonists, with Gabriel on the right side and Mary on the left, the double stem of lilies, one carried by the angel, the second in a vase on the floor. While Gabriel, beginning to kneel before the Virgin, greets her reverently, she turns her head toward the angel, raising her open right hand in a gesture of unconditional obedience to the will of the Most High. Behind Mary's back, her impollute marriage bed stands out, a bed whose Mariological and Christological meanings we have shed light on in other articles (Salvador-González 2021c, 2020a, 2019).



Figure 7. Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Annunciation* (*L'Annunciazione Doria*), c. 1445–50, Galleria Doria-Pamphilj, Rome.

However, the most interesting for our purposes is the exuberant enclosed garden seen through the opening in the center of the painting. Once again, the cultured Carmelite friar that was Fra Filippo Lippi visualized through the symbol of this enclosed garden the dogmatic meanings of the divine virginal motherhood of Mary and her perpetual virginity, and even her sublime virtues and supernatural privileges, on which many of the liturgical hymns analyzed here insist.

Zanobi Strozzi (c. 1412–1468) stages *The Annunciation*, c. 1453, from the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Figure 8) on the outside of a building, whose “courtyard” is enclosed by a high wall. Still descending from heaven with his colorful wings outstretched and

almost about to touch the ground with his feet surrounded by clouds, Gabriel blesses the Virgin while carrying a lily stem in his left hand. Seated under a baldachin-balcony, Mary expresses her obedience to God's design by the gesture of crossing her hands on her chest. The painter depicts the presence of the godhead through the fertilizing beam of light (symbol of God the Son) and the dove of the Holy Spirit.



Figure 8. Zanobi Strozzi, *The Annunciation*, c. 1453, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA.

It suits our purposes to highlight in this painting the high wall that closes off the vast courtyard (an analogy of “garden”). It sounds evident that, through this high wall, Strozzi seeks to communicate the idea of the *hortus conclusus*, as a symbol of Mary's virginal divine motherhood, her perpetual virginity, and the fullness of her sublime virtues and privileges, as the medieval liturgical hymns celebrate.

Alessio Baldovinetti (1427–1499) stages *The Annunciation*, c. 1457, from the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (Figure 9) in the vaulted portico of a Renaissance palace, to whose dogmatic meanings we have already drawn attention. With his arms crossed on his chest, the angel Gabriel begins to kneel before the Virgin, who stands up after rising from her seat due to the unexpected arrival of the heavenly messenger. She expresses her unconditional acceptance of the divine will with the gesture of raising her right hand and humbly lowering her head and eyes. Apart from the foreseeable compositional and narrative details in this Marian scene, it is interesting to highlight the high marble wall that closes the garden surrounding the palace. It seems evident that the intellectual author of this painting wants to convey the Mariological symbolism of this *hortus conclusus*, with the multiple doctrinal projections that medieval liturgical hymns gave to this eloquent metaphor.



Figure 9. Alessio Baldovinetti, *The Annunciation*, c. 1457. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510) shapes the *Cestello Annunciation*, 1489–1490, from the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (Figure 10), with some impressive narrative novelties, primarily through the highly expressive gestures and attitudes of both protagonists. Even if it would be beneficial to interpret this bodily expressiveness, however, we are more interested in emphasizing the simple garden enclosed by a low white wall that one can see through the door before an extensive landscape of a river and a town. Undoubtedly, Botticelli brings in this *Cestello Annunciation* a fine example of *hortus conclusus* to underline its Mariological meanings, following the poetic tropes expressed by many medieval liturgical hymns.



Figure 10. Sandro Botticelli, *The Cestello Annunciation*, 1489–1490. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

That is why it is surprising to note that, as far as we know, none of those who have commented on this outstanding painting (Schneider 1911; Argan 1957; Mandel 1967; Horne 1986, 1980; Meltzoff 1987; Lightbown 1989; Grömling and Lingesleben 2000; Magaluzzi

2003; Cecchi 2005) has highlighted this *hortus conclusus* and, even less, has justified its true Mariological meanings from primary sources of Christian doctrine. A partial exception to this embarrassing silence is Ronald Lightbown (1978), who, when analyzing this *Cestello Annunciation* in his monograph on Botticelli, does mention the enclosed garden without any further doctrinal explanation.

4. Conclusions

We could synthesize the main results of this double analytical survey over texts and images through these four brief conclusions:

1. Numerous medieval liturgical hymns repeatedly insist on extolling the Virgin Mary, designating her through the biblical metaphor *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden) and *fons signatus* (sealed source)—its correlative twin expression in *Song of Songs*—or even with other relatively similar rhetorical figures, such as *porta clausa* (Ezekiel's closed door) or *florens hortus* (flowering garden), emphasizing both its enclosure and its splendid fecundity.
2. For more than a millennium, countless Fathers and theologians of the Eastern and Western Churches unanimously interpreted the biblical expression *hortus conclusus* as an eloquent symbol of the Virgin Mary in her double privilege as the virginal mother of God and perpetual virgin. Although we have not analyzed it, because it was not the objective of the current article, this ancient patristic and theological tradition constituted the legitimizing doctrinal source in which medieval hymnographers got inspiration and arguments when writing the liturgical hymns alluding to the analyzed biblical metaphor.
3. Some paintings of the Annunciation from the Italian Renaissance show a garden—or an equivalent domestic space—enclosed by a fence or a wall. In this sense, it seems logical to conjecture that the different intellectual authors of these paintings, who coincide in including this enclosed garden in the representation of the decisive episode of the Annunciation, want to transmit through this metaphorical figure the conceptual content shared by all of them: the one expressed by the millenary doctrinal tradition on the Mariological meanings of the biblical trope *hortus conclusus*. We deliberately use the term “intellectual author of the painting”, because, except for the few privileged ones, such as Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi or Lorenzo Monaco, who, due to their position as clerics, had a vast theological culture, most artists lacked it. That is why it is logical to suppose that, when executing important commissions of Christian art, artists of a lesser cultural level would have at their side an ecclesiastic or scholar who would indicate to them the characters, situations, attitudes, dresses, attributes, objects, and symbols that they should include in the religious scene to be represented.
4. Therefore, this double analysis of liturgical texts and pictorial images allows us to infer that both hymnographers and painters, based on the same millenary patristic and theological tradition, assume the metaphor of the *hortus conclusus* as an expressive Virgin Mary's symbol in her double privilege of virginal mother of God and perpetual virgin, as well as in the excellence and fullness of her supernatural virtues and attributes.

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Notes

- ¹ Song of Songs 4,12. American Standard Version (ASV). <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Song+of+Songs+4%2C12&version=ASV> (accessed on 21 September 2022).
- ² Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio VI. Laudatio sanctae Dei genitricis Mariae*. PG 65, 758.
- ³ Hesychius Hierosolymitanus, *Sermo V. Ejusdem de eadem [de sancta Maria Deipara Homilia]*. PG 93, 1460–1461, y 146.
- ⁴ Iohannes Damascenus. *Homilia II in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*. PG 96, 691.
- ⁵ Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *De Institutione Virginis et S. Marie virginitate perpetua. Liber Unus*. PL 16, 321, and 335–336.
- ⁶ Hieronymus Stridonensis, *Epistola XLVIII, Seu Liber apologeticus, ad Pammachium, pro libris contra Jovinianum*, 21. PL 22, 510.
- ⁷ Justus Urgellensis, *In Cantica Canticorum Salomonis. Explicatio Mystica*, 91. PL 67, 978.
- ⁸ Isidorus Hispalensis, *De ortu et obitu Patrum*, 111. PL 83, 148.
- ⁹ Ildefonsus Toletanus. *Liber de virginitate perpetua S. Mariae adversus tres infideles. Caput X*. PL 95, 93–99; *De Partu Virginis*, PL 96, 214–15.
- ¹⁰ Paschasius Radbertus, *Expositio in Mattheum. Liber II, Caput 1*. PL 120, 106.
- ¹¹ Petrus Damianus, *Sermo XLVI*. PL 144, 760–61; Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et preces. LXI. Rythmus de S. Maria virgine*. PL 145, 938.
- ¹² Hugo de S. Victore, *De Bestiis et aliis rebus Libri Quatuor. Liber Quartus. De Proprietatibus et Epithetis rerum serie litterariae in ordinem redactis. Caput II*. PL 177, 138–39.
- ¹³ Honorius Augustodunensis, *Sigillum Beatae Mariae ubi exponuntur Cantica Canticorum. Caput IV*. PL 172, 492.
- ¹⁴ Bernardus Claravaellensis, *Sermones sobre El Cantar de los Cantares. Sermón 47, 3–5*. In *Obras completas de San Bernardo. Edición bilingüe promovida por la Conferencia Regional Española de Abades Cistercienses*, vol. V. *Sermones sobre El Cantar de los Cantares*, Madrid, La Editorial Católica, Col. BAC, 1987, 619.
- ¹⁵ Petrus Blesensis. *Sermo XXXVIII. In Nativitate Beatae Mariae*. PL 207, 673.
- ¹⁶ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, *De Assumptione B. Virginis Mariae. Sermo IV: Q IX*, 695b–698b.
- ¹⁷ Hortus conclusus, perfusus, messis abundans,
Fons illibatus, signatus, flumen inundans,
Fons saliens, indeficiens, stillans bonitate,
Praesidium, pia virgo, tuum tribui precor a te. (Hymnus 98. AHMA, 15, 125)
- ¹⁸ O Maria, clausus hortus,
Naufragantis mundi portus,
Placa nobis, qui te fecit,
Matrem sibi quam elegit. (Hymnus 326. Mone, 1854, 12). This Hymn is also included in AHMA, 5, 47, where it stands with the entry Hymnus 2. Dew conception Beatae Mariae Virginis. In I. Vesperis. Antiphonae.
- ¹⁹ Ave solis florens hortus,
stella maris, tutus portus,
optatus semper potus. (Hymnus 516. Mone, 1854, 298)
- ²⁰ Florens hortus austro flante,
porta clausa post et ante,
via viris invia. (Hymnus 260. Mone, 1854, 53)
- ²¹ Placa mare maris stella,
ne involvat nos procella
et tempestas valida,
Sed ad coeli palatium
nostrum tu solatium
subleves, o pia
coeli regina. (Hymnus 260. Mone, 1854, 53)
- ²² Porta clausa, fons hortorum,
cella custos unguentorum,
cella pigmentaria. (Hymnus 524. Mone, 1854, 310)
- ²³ 1a. Ave, mater Domini.
Flos odoris gemini,
Virgo mater unica,
1b. Fons signatus gratiae,
Hortus pudicitiae,
Sera clausa diceris. (Hymnus 136. AHMA, 10, 104)
- ²⁴ O salutaris
Miserorum portus,

- Ortus
Et conclusus hortus,
Ex te sol exortus,
Virgo deum paris. (Hymnus 49. AHMA, 1, 86)
- 25 Maria, flos mirae
pulchritudinis,
Et reorum turris
fortitudinis,
Deliciarum hortus,
Naufragantium portus,
Per te summi natus exortus. (Hymnus 186. AHMA, 1, 170)
- 26 Ave gloriosa,
viventium aquarum
puteus lux gratiosa,
fons deliciarum,
virgo vena veniae,
signaculum pudoris,
nostrae conscientiae
spes, mater salvatoris. (Hymnus 593. Mone, 1854, 407)
- 27 Hortus clausus et amoenus,
omni flore semper plenus,
quem totum singulariter
auster perflavit suaviter. (Hymnus 472. Mone, 1854, 187)
- 28 Advocata inclita,
hortus trinitatis,
imperatrix coelica,
templum deitatis,
stella coeli fulgida
summae claritatis,
esto mihi, domina. (Hymnus 541. Mone, 1854, 333)
- 29 Summi sponsa creatoris,
soror, dos et filia,
parens patris, nata prolis,
virginum primaria,
florens hortus, fons dulcoris,
mundi spes eximia,
Audi planctum filiorum,
fons misericordiae,
consolatrix orphanorum,
dona praesta gratiae
ac adscribe nos ad chorum
coelestis militiae. (Hymnus 548. Mone, 1854, 343)
- 30 O Maria, clausa porta,
clausus hortus, nos conforta,
tu de stirpe regum orta,
paradiso nos reporta.
virginum primitiae. (Hymnus 507. Mone, 1854, 271). This hymn is also included in AHMA, 3, 25, with the entry Hymnus 2.
Crinale Beatae Mariae Virginis.
- 31 1. O Maria, paradisu,
Voluptatis hortulus,
Plenus cunctis bonis,
Rigat te fons indivisus,
Quadruplexque rivulus
Gratiarum donis.
[...]
4. Summus orbis architectus,
Quem plantavit floridum,
Hortus es conclusus.

- Iste tuus praedilectus
Caput habens roridum
Nusquam est exclusus. (Hymnus 5. AHMA, 3, 30)
- 32 7. Intrans ad te dedicata
Mihi virgo, filia.
Soror mea, sponsa,
Austro flante delicata
Horti tui lilia
Colligam absconsa. (Hymnus 5. AHMA, 3, 30)
- 33 8. Pneumatis austro perflatus
Hortus tui pectoris
Floribus vernabit.
Latens Deus et velatus
Velo tui corporis
In te germinabit. (Hymnus 5. AHMA, 3, 30)
- 34 Fons signatus, clausus hortus
Hujus est indicium,
Quod Mariae praesens ortus
Mortis est exitium,
Quae, cum sit salutis portus.
Vitae dat initium. (Hymnus 53. AHMA, 4, 40)
- 35 Haec est ille fons signatus,
Hortus clausus et perflatus
A supernis austro flante,
Quo concepit obumbrante. (Hymnus 12. AHMA, 5, 58)
- 36 4a. Gaude, terra, quae per rorem
Germinasti salvatorem
Simul cum laetitia;
4b. Fons hortorum, clausus hortus,
Favus stillans, vitae portus,
Porta coeli pervia. (Hymnus 59. AHMA, 9, 51)
- 37 Tu solaris
Stella maris,
Clausus hortus,
Vitae portus,
Virgo Maria. (Hymnus 83. AHMA, 9, 69)
- 38 Nomen matris lucis astrum
Vel odoris alabastrum
Sensu suavissimum,
Corpus Dei, verbi castrum,
Hortus clausus, patris rastrum,
Fructum ferens optimum. (Hymnus 58. AHMA, 15, 86)
- 39 Tu, Maria, stella maris,
Medicina salutaris
Es corporum et cordium,
Fons signatus, clausus hortus,
Via pacis, vitae portus,
Pauperum refugium. (Hymnus 90. AHMA, 15, 110)
- 40 Florens hortus, aegris gratus,
puritatis fons signatus,
dans fluenta gratiae.
Thronus veri Salomonis,
quem praeclaris coeli donis
ornavit rex gloriae. (Hymnus 531. Mone, 1854, 318)
- 41 Regina clementiae,
Maria vocata,
diversis antiquitus

modis nominata:
 tu virga, tu virgula,
 tu virgo signata,
 tu lectus, tu thalamus,
 tu sponsa dotata. (Hymnus 600. Mone, 1854, 411)

42 Tu templum, tu camera,
 tu porta serata,
 tu navis, tu anchora,
 tu stella vocata,
 tu sol, luna, balsamum,
 acies armata,
 tu aurora rutilans,
 tu gemma probata.

Tu fons, hortus, platanus,
 cedrus exaltata.
 tu palma, tu olea,
 cypressus plantata,
 myrrha electissima,
 arbor inflammata;
 tu fenestra vitrea
 sole radiata. (Hymnus 600. Mone, 1854, 411)

43 Tu porta, quae soli domino patuit,
 hortus, in quo deitas latuit,
 stella, quae solem saeculis attulit. (Hymnus 515. Mone, 1854, 297)

44 Hortus es aromatum
 Delectans dilectam,
 Dulcis fons charismatum
 Dulcorans affectum.

Austro flante floridus
 Es conclusus hortus,
 Fons signatus, placidus,
 In procellis portus. (Hymnus 21. AHMA, 5, 74)

45 Ut idem retulit
 hortus conclusus es,
 Diversas proferens
 herbarum species,
 Quibus conficitur
 pulchra materies,
 Per quam repellitur
 mentis proluvies. (Hymnus 24. AHMA, 6, 81)

46 Es hortus floridus
 pollens deliciis
 Virtutum floribus
 splendescens variis. (Hymnus 38. AHMA, 6, 132)

47 Perflatus gratia
 hortus describeris
 Fructum mirificum
 quae praebes superis,
 Nobis remedium
 qui donet miseris,
 Et purgatorii
 vinctis in tenebris. (Hymnus 38. AHMA, 6, 133)

48 Hortique arcola,
 Qua flos nobis est exortus,
 Quem fovisti sedula,
 Qui, cum fuit cruce tortus,
 Absolvit piacula. (Hymnus 50. AHMA, 6, 161)

- 49 Germen Sion, radix David,
Clausus hortus, quem intravit
Splendor patris coelitus. (Hymnus 14. AHMA, 10, 69)
- 50 Fons signatus illibatus,
Hortus clausus et vallatus,
Fructu sacro cumulatus.
Et pigmentis fecundatus. (Hymnus 100. AHMA, 15, 132)
- 51 Ave, venerabilis
Mater pietatis,
Maria mirabilis,
Forma sanctitatis,
Flos incomparabilis,
Hortus puritatis,
Splendor ineffabilis,
Templum deitatis. (Hymnus 113. AHMA, 15, 139)

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- Hymnus 59. *In Annuntiatione BMV.* AHMA, 9, 51.
- Hymnus 83. *De beata Maria V.* AHMA, 9, 69.

- Hymnus 90. Jubilus de singulis membris BMV.* AHMA, 15, 110.
- Hymnus 98. Ad B. Mariam V.* AHMA, 15, 125.
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