

Richard Hamilton's 'Chiara & chair'

by FANNY SINGER

RICHARD HAMILTON WAS introduced to the possibility of using a computer in his art in 1987 while filming a BBC documentary called *Painting with Light*.¹ He later wrote that 'all the prints and paintings I made subsequently utilized, in a variety of ways, digital image processing equipment'.² He immediately saw the potential of the computer to develop his use of collaged imagery; it was a modern technology perfectly adapted to his enterprise. As Hamilton grew more fluent and the technology more refined, he turned increasingly to subjects that explored the computer's capacity to assemble images seamlessly. These late works are among his most conceptually complex, and as a result of layers of mediation and meaning, register as potent critiques of the medium with which they are made.³ The computer offered Hamilton both technological and narrative fodder and, in the final decade of his career, it allowed him to work through thematic concerns with frequent reference to religious subject-matter. Indeed, Hamilton may have seen the act of digital creation as analogous to that of immaculate conception, borne out in one of his favourite paintings, Fra Angelico's *S. Marco Annunciation*.

Hamilton might have bristled at the suggestion that he was creating devotional pictures, but in adopting the Annunciation theme in 2005 for a print called *The annunciation*, he knowingly invited a religious reading. Hamilton's was a faith in the computer, and his late works are a testament to this creed. They evince an attrition of autographic mark-making as he began to rely less on the materials and expressions that defined the aesthetic of his earlier work. Indeed, his print *The annunciation* (Fig.33) succeeded in eliminating the evidence of human mediation altogether; it, more than any of Hamilton's works, resembles a straightforward photograph.⁴ Together with the prints and paintings that bracket it, *The annunciation* demonstrates his growing interest in creating an *acheiropoieton* – an image, typically sacred, that comes into being without intervention from the human hand. The theme of the Annunciation is a thread running through many of Hamilton's works from the late 1990s onwards and can thus be seen as central to his commerce with digital and religious imagery.

When Hamilton was invited by the National Gallery, London, to make a work for an exhibition *Encounters: New Art from Old* (2000), he selected a religious theme. The resulting picture was *The Saensbury Wing* (1999–2000; Fig.34), a digital 'painting' of a



33. *The annunciation*, by Richard Hamilton. 2005. Inkjet digital print, printed on an Epson Stylus Pro 9800 printer using Epson UltraChrome K3 eight-colour lightfast pigment inks on Somerset enhanced radiant white velvet paper, 44 by 44 cm. (image); 59.4 by 68 cm. (sheet). (Courtesy R. Hamilton).

lightwashed colonnade in which he placed the nude model who was later to serve as the Virgin Annunciate in his *Annunciation* print. Hamilton was among twenty-four artists contacted by the Gallery to make a picture inspired by a work of art in the permanent collection.⁵ He selected Pieter Saenredam's painting of a sacred space, *The interior of the Grote Kerk at Haarlem* (1636–37; Fig.35), and set about finding an interior that could provide the basis for his own piece. The Sainsbury Wing, one of the National Gallery's recent architectural additions, provided precisely the type of environment Hamilton had envisaged. Designed by the American architect Robert Venturi, it was built between 1988 and 1990 and opened to the public in 1991. Its blend of clean, modern lines and neo-Mannerist detail appealed to Hamilton's

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¹ In *Painting with Light*, Hamilton collaborated with a Quantel Paintbox operator, Martin Holbrook, on the creation of the image that became the foundation for the print *The apprentice boy* (1988) and the painting *The subject* (1988–90). The documentary was directed by David Goldsmith and produced by Griffin Productions for the BBC, London, in 1987. The other artists featured in the multi-part series were Howard Hodgkin, Jennifer Bartlett, Larry Rivers, Sidney Nolan and David Hockney. Launched in 1981, the Quantel Paintbox was a dedicated computer graphics workstation created for the purpose of composing videos and graphics for broadcast television. It heralded a shift toward instant creativity, as it enabled traditionally

trained illustrators, artists and graphic designers to use its revolutionary user interface to work within the digital medium at every creative stage.

² R. Hamilton: *Painting by Numbers*, London 2006, p.7.

³ Several of the works under discussion are on view in *Richard Hamilton: The Late Works* at the National Gallery, London (10th October to 13th January 2013).

⁴ For more on the repercussions of digital technologies for the critical analysis of photography and its relationship to reality, see W.J.T. Mitchell: 'Realism and the Digital Image', in J. Baetens and H. van Gelder, eds.: *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula's Photography*, Belgium 2006.

⁵ As part of its Millennium celebrations, the National Gallery invited 'the great artists of our time to converse with the greatest artists of all time'; N. Macgregor: 'Director's foreword', in R. Morphet, ed.: exh. cat. *Encounters: New Art from the Old*, London (National Gallery) 2000, p.7.



34. *The Saensbury Wing*, by Richard Hamilton. 1999–2000. Canvas, 59.7 by 82 cm. (Courtesy R. Hamilton).



35. *The interior of the Grote Kerk at Haarlem*, by Pieter Saenredam. 1636–37. Panel, 59.5 by 81.7 cm. (National Gallery, London).

taste for elegant design.⁶ He chose for his perspective a view on the uppermost level, a vantage from the crest of the grand staircase. From this point the visitor's gaze is drawn through a series of arches towards the Early Renaissance galleries. He saw in this view the possibility of transforming a secular space into a sacred one, and over the course of his creative process, effectively rendered a church interior from a section of the National Gallery, populating it with his versions of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

As Richard Morphet has noted, Hamilton's attraction to Saenredam lay in the spatial complexity of his church interiors and in his being 'among the earliest artists to develop the potential of parallel perspective as a strictly controlled dimensional system for use in painting'.⁷ Indeed, Saenredam was a pioneer in constructing paintings based on actual measurements. In seventeenth-century Holland it was not uncommon for artists to paint portraits of fictive environments, while the work of a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century architectural painters was entirely fabricated.⁸

Saenredam's method demonstrated to Hamilton the value of mapping and measuring his subject so that every aspect of a composition could be referred to at scale. Saenredam's preparatory sketches and paintings of Jacob van Campen's Nieuwe Kerk in Haarlem indicate that, in addition to working from observation, he sometimes had access to blueprints made by the architects of the spaces he depicted. His series portraying the Nieuwe Kerk is the most vivid example of the dual nature of his sources.

Constructed in 1646–49, the church was a new building when, in 1650, Saenredam began his series dedicated to it. Although it is uncertain whether he assisted Van Campen as a draughtsman, a signed plan and his inclusion, in one composition, of planned but unrealised details of the interior of the church, indicate that he was familiar with the design at a nascent stage.⁹ This recalls Hamilton's process in constructing *The Saensbury Wing*, for which he had access to all Venturi's architectural blueprints for the addition to the Gallery.

Hamilton endeavoured to adhere to Saenredam's sequence of preparatory procedures. The most crucial of these was to measure the building, but perspective drawings, studies on paper and observations of colour, texture and lighting were also essential to the process.¹⁰ For Hamilton, this also meant taking advantage of the most advanced technical tool available: the computer. It facilitated each of the previously enumerated stages; because he was able to use a scanned photograph of the space and input known measurements from Venturi's blueprints, Hamilton was already a good deal of the way towards replicating Saenredam's exactitude.¹¹

Hamilton allowed Venturi's blueprints and measurements to inform but never restrict his vision; ultimately he contorted the existing architecture considerably in order to achieve a composition that felt more authentically aligned with the painting he had taken as a model. After scanning his photograph of the Sainsbury Wing into his computer, he worked with a CAD

⁶ In the foreword to Colin Amery's *A Celebration of Art and Architecture*, London 1991, Lord Rothschild said of the Sainsbury Wing: 'We live at a time when the museum building rather than the cathedral [...] has become the architect's paramount vehicle of expression in the West'; quoted in Morphet, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.144.

⁷ I am much indebted to Richard Morphet's essay on the *The Saensbury Wing*, which provides a wealth of first-hand information on the motivations and stages of the painting; *ibid.*

⁸ See J. Giltaij: exh. cat. *Perspectives: Saenredam and the architectural painters of the 17th century*, Rotterdam (Museum Boymans-van Beuningen) 1991, p.11; and G. Schwartz and M. Jan Bok: *Pieter Saenredam: The Painter and His Time*, London 1990, p.80.

⁹ W. Liedtke: 'The New Church in Haarlem Series: Saenredam's Sketching Style in Relation to Perspective', *Simiolus* 8/3 (1975–76), pp.145–66, esp. p.145.

¹⁰ Morphet, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp.144–45.

¹¹ In creating *The Saensbury Wing*, Hamilton used Photoshop on both an Apple PowerMac 9600 and an Apple G4 DP500. His son, Rod Hamilton, an Apple

technician, used his PowerBook to assist with some of the drawing performed in Adobe Illustrator.

¹² Morphet, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp.145–46.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ M. Kemp: 'Simon Stevin and Pieter Saenredam: A Study of Mathematics and Vision in Dutch Science and Art', *The Art Bulletin* 68 (1986), pp.237–52, esp. p.244.

¹⁵ Hamilton's version of super-reality differs from Mitchell's conception of digital 'super-copies', as 'improved, enhanced and (yes) manipulated – but not in order to fake anything'; Mitchell, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.15.

¹⁶ The image of the nude that Hamilton used both in his print *A mirrorical return* and in *The Saensbury Wing* was taken from a selection of more than seventy photographic exposures made of this model (a former student of his wife's) during a session in 1998. He was working on the painting *The passage of the bride* when he began work on *The Saensbury Wing*. When he showed *A mirrorical return*, *The annunciation* and *The passage of the angel to the Virgin* at the Fondazione Bevilacqua, Venice, in 2007, he

2D/3D programme called MicroStation at the Richard Rogers Partnership to create a three-dimensional computer model of the space. This enabled him to manipulate the angle of view, as well as the internal spatial dynamics and dimensions of the vista. Later he collaborated with Mark Spencer at Colourspace on lighting effects, using LightWave to colour and texture a computer visualisation.¹² The more Hamilton began to tinker with the image the more the peculiarities of Venturi's architecture vexed him. In the diminishing perspective of Venturi's design the prominent pillars are shorter and closer together the further they are from the vantage point at the top of the staircase. Hamilton therefore aimed to correct what he saw as flaws in the architecture, methodically broadening the openings, flattening the nearly semi-circular arches, breaking through the low ceilings and opening up the spaces of the more distant rooms.¹³ In making these changes – intended to achieve something approximating the spatial order and purity of the source painting – he effectively diverged from his ambition to adhere to Saenredam's commitment to his subject. Although Saenredam is known to have exercised some creative flexibility, shifting between different systems of perspective and prioritising the potential aesthetic impact of a composition, he never intervened in the way that Hamilton did.¹⁴ Still, Hamilton's divergence from his original aim to follow Saenredam's exacting programme betrays a loosening of his interest in constructing a 'real' space. Indeed, despite its affinities with photography, *The Saensbury Wing* veered further from the familiar space of the National Gallery with each progressive state, ultimately leaving behind the porous texture of 'reality' altogether. In his final version, Hamilton achieved a kind of super-reality¹⁵ in which female 'angels'¹⁶ stroll naked through the Gallery and an excrement-smearing Irish Republican prisoner replaces Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Hamilton's digital print *Chiara & chair* (2004; Fig. 37), achieves a similar tension between the real and the invented.¹⁸ In the light of Hamilton's interest in Saenredam and his Dutch peers, there is an evident affinity between the parallelogrammatic shape affixed to the nearest column in Saenredam's composition and the grey square in the upper-left quadrant of the print. In *The interior of the Grote Kerk at Haarlem*, this darkened shape is not the abstract compositional element it might seem to a modern viewer, but a heraldic tablet; other similar shapes are affixed to distant pillars. Its analogue in *The Saensbury Wing* is a solid black diamond that appears, as if in flight, in the upper-right corner of the composition. In *Chiara & chair*, the grey square is as much an echo of this detail of Saenredam's painting as it is a seeming nod to Mondrian's abstract shapes trapped in their rigid chassis and to Hamilton's own abstract installation *An exhibit* (1957). The latter



36. *Lobby*, by Richard Hamilton. 1985–87. Canvas, 175 by 250 cm. (Courtesy R. Hamilton).

consisted of a room filled with variously sized monochromatic squares and rectangles of Perspex hung from the ceiling and laid on the floor.

In *Chiara & chair* the grey square's frontal orientation, its nonconformity to the system otherwise delineated, implies a negation of dimensionality. Although its two left corners are tethered to Hamilton's perspectival armature – its lower edge sits flush on the line labelled 'horizon' – it is the only element in the composition that is not pulled into perspective in keeping with the matrix. Even the representation of Hamilton's painting from 1985–87, *Lobby* (Fig. 36), which began as a photograph of the original painting taken straight on, has been altered to adhere to the perspectival order. Hamilton explained that the "'Lobby' painting in the photograph [of the Hotel du Rhône lobby] was substituted by a scanned transparency of the original which of course had to be pulled into perspective, so lines were introduced to allow the various parts to be fitted into a prescribed schema'.¹⁹

The abstract monochromatic shapes in *Chiara & chair* also recall earlier interior spaces of Hamilton's in which the environment fractures, where walls and planes rotate through space. In these, Hamilton encouraged a collision of abstract and representational features, especially in the interiors from the mid-1960s, and in particular in his *Interior* paintings and the coeval screenprint *Interior* (1964–65; Fig. 39). For this image, Hamilton used a photograph culled from a magazine showing the elderly Julie Rouart, née Manet, the daughter of Berthe Morisot, sitting in her living room.²⁰ He later replaced her with a female model extracted from

called the exhibition *A host of Angels*.

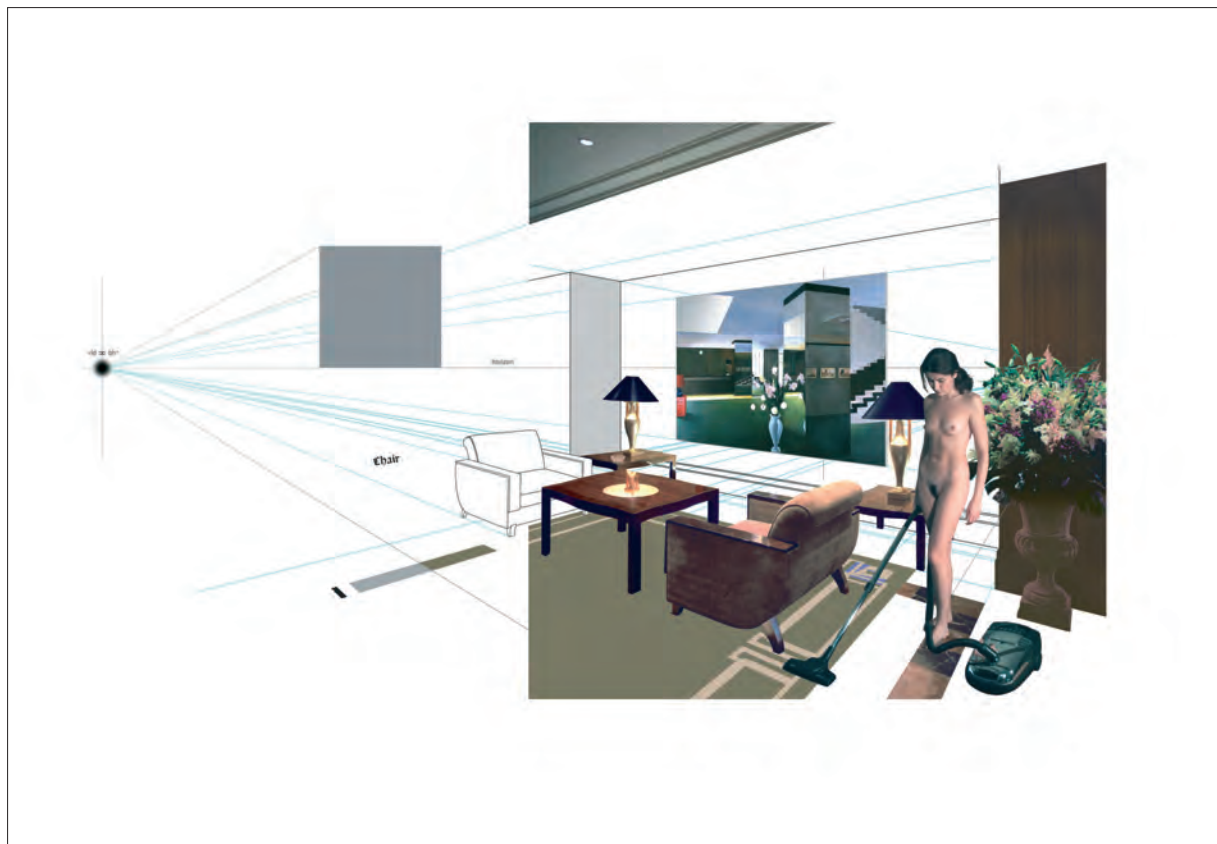
¹⁷ In *The Saensbury Wing*, Hamilton replaced the altarpiece that hangs at the end of the vista, Cima's *The incredulity of St Thomas* (c.1502–04), with his own painting *The citizen* (1982–83), the first work in Hamilton's trilogy dealing with the conflict in Northern Ireland in the 1970s; it depicts a Republican inmate named Hugh Rooney in the Maze H blocks of the Long Kesh high-security prison near Belfast during the 'no wash' protest, a retaliation against the British government's refusal to grant political prisoner status to the IRA inmates. Hamilton was interested in how these prisoners, formerly seen as IRA thugs, were reframed as Christian martyrs, hence the particularly apposite positioning of *The citizen* in place of Christ. Hamilton wrote: 'One became acutely aware of the religious conflicts that had resulted in the civil inequalities that gave a platform for IRA activity. The symbols of Christ's agony were there, not only the crucifix on the neck of prisoners and the rosary which confirmed the monastic austerity, but the self-inflicted suffering which has marked Christianity from the earliest of times'; see R. Donagh and R. Hamilton: exh. cat. *A Cellular*

Maze, Derry (Orchard Gallery) 1983, unpaginated.

¹⁸ *Chiara & chair* was created using a number of photographic sources, with digitally drawn additions, on a Macintosh G5 using Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. It was printed in an edition of 60, with six artist's proofs, by Ian Cartwright at The Print Room in London and distributed by Alan Cristea. The image measures 60.7 by 89.2 cm., while the Somerset paper measures 73.2 by 107.5 cm. Cartwright's printer was an Epson Stylus Pro 9600 that used Epson UltraChrome seven-colour lightfast pigment inks (with permanence ranging from 75–200 years). The idea for the print was the product of Hamilton's participation in a group exhibition at the Hotel du Rhône in Geneva in 2000, in which he assembled a group of works centred on his installation of *Lobby* (1985–87) in the Hotel du Rhône's own modernist lobby.

¹⁹ Hamilton, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 40.

²⁰ J. Darby in R. Morphet and R. Hamilton, eds.: exh. cat. *Richard Hamilton*, London (Tate Gallery) 1992, p. 158.



37. *Chiara & chair*, by Richard Hamilton. 2004. Inkjet digital print, printed on an Epson Stylus Pro 9600 printer using Epson Ultra-Chrome seven-colour lightfast pigment inks on Somerset paper, 60.7 by 89.2 cm. (image); 73.2 by 107.5 cm. (sheet). (Courtesy R. Hamilton).

a washing-machine advertisement.²¹ In *Interior (state)* and *Interior*, as well as in the studies for the prints, a chair in the foreground is blurred, ostensibly the object closest to the 'lens' – here the eye of the artist – and therefore indistinct. The manner in which this collaged addition mimics the effects of the photographic lens (the impossible total focus of an environment) is something Hamilton would later play with in *Chiara & chair*. An exacting all-over focus can now be achieved in digital photography (one can even, using recently developed software programmes, selectively alter the foci of different elements within a picture after the fact). The omniscient eye is thus a hallmark of digital vision.

In *Painting by Numbers*, a catalogue produced in conjunction with his exhibition at the Alan Cristea Gallery in London in 2006, Hamilton spoke of striving to systematise an approach to spectator motion, and of his use of a target-like symbol to indicate vanishing points.²² In *Chiara & chair*, the lobby is bisected by the horizon line; the eye is drawn to the faint symbol located there, a target to indicate a collision of perspectival lines, both horizontal and vertical. This sign is at the exact centre of *Hotel du Rhône*, the painted version of *Chiara & chair* (2005; Fig.38), whose dimensions are square. Because *Chiara & chair* exceeds the square format, the emphasis shifts from this central point of concursion to the vanishing point at its left boundary. For Hamilton, this point:

took on a new significance when [he] began to think of it not as a place where things disappear but as a pinpoint from which all the visual elements emerge [. . .] Black holes are totally negative and compress matter into unimaginable density; now, however, we are led to believe that the black hole might be a way into another dimensionality or dimensionalities.²³

Hamilton's interest in the possibility of the black hole as a threshold to another dimension is consistent with Marcel Duchamp's theorising of the fourth dimension, something he explored in several pieces and in his White Box notes, and which Hamilton grappled with in his earlier print *A mirroral return* (1998; Fig.40).²⁴ The idea that Hamilton's computer-generated image is, in effect, the uncompressed matter from the third-dimension, as processed by a black hole, is a compelling one, as it places the computer at the centre of the debate over dimensionality.²⁵ Where do its materials and media lie? In what cyber-ether are they altered before being reified, two-dimensionalised, on paper?²⁶ Hamilton marvelled at the leap between data and image, conceding that 'the idea that you can express everything with something as simple as ones and zeros [. . .] means you're in another kind of space altogether'.²⁷

²¹ R. Field: exh. cat. *The Prints of Richard Hamilton*, Middletown CN (Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University) 1973, p.30.

²² Hamilton, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.40. The earlier paintings that contain such symbols include *Respective* (1951), *d'Orientation* (1952), *Out and up* (1953) and *Sketch for 'Super-Ex-Position'* (1953).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Hamilton consistently reworked Duchamp's concepts, and was responsible for popularising a number of his most influential works, including *The large glass*, which he reconstructed in 1966 for the Tate Gallery. *A mirroral return* borrows its title and subject from Duchamp's *Green Box notes* for the *Large glass*.

²⁵ For an investigation of the relevance of Renaissance perspective in the context of new media, see F. Burda Stengel: *Andrea Pozzo und die Videokunst: neue Überlegungen zum barocken Illusionismus*, Berlin 2001.

²⁶ The question of how images are made, transmitted, perceived and retained (in the mind and body) in the light of new technology is a subject that Hans Belting and his peers at the School for New Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, have dealt with at length; see H. Belting: *An Anthropology of Images: Picture Medium Body*, Princeton 2011; and *idem*, ed.: *Bilderfragen: die Bildwissenschaften im Aufbruch*, Munich 2007.

²⁷ 'Richard Hamilton in conversation with Michael Craig-Martin', in A. Searle, ed.: exh. cat. *Talking Art 1 (ICA Documents 12)*, London (Institute of Contemporary Arts)

In *Chiara & chair* Hamilton knit together many of the artistic concerns that thread through his *œuvre*. The computer became for him not just a tool with which to seamlessly synthesise photographic and autographic media, but one that could allow him to gather and rationalise a variety of conceptual concerns in one picture. In *Chiara & chair* the system is laid bare: the horizon is both a taut black line bisecting the print and a named thing, the word 'horizon' hovering just above it. Perhaps his naming it thus was Hamilton's way of drawing the eye to a compositional component that defined the structure of Renaissance perspective, but the word 'horizon' is equally an astronomical term. Within the environment of a black hole in outer space, an 'event-horizon' is the theoretical surface beyond which no matter or radiation can reach an outside body. In other words, it is a space of measurable dimensions within which matter and light rays are confined by gravity. In Hamilton's print his 'horizon' quantifies space; it reaches the length of the print, describing its totality.

For Hamilton, the vanishing point became not just a black hole but its opposite, the 'positive side' out of which information emerges. This inverse of a black hole, separated by a symbol of infinity and bisected by a longitudinal axis, is thus the genesis point of the image.²⁸ If the information is spilling out of the black hole, as Hamilton suggested, then the action of the image can be seen as unfolding left to right. Correspondences abound: lobby to lobby, chair to chair, vase to vase. Objects are manifested typographically, photographically and digitally, showing the breadth of Hamilton's digital facture. An abstract language of words and diagrams migrates rightwards into the photographic/representational space: the word 'chair' in Gothic font becomes the sketch of a chair, a tracing of its contours becomes a photograph of a chair, which becomes a girl, whose name, Chiara, is an anagram of the object depicted, 'a chair'. This experience of simultaneity – in which an object is visualised in each progressive state of evolution – is consistent with depictions of the Annunciation. The Word of God is often portrayed within one picture as text radiating from Heaven, as an inscription in a book laid open before Mary and as an unseen incarnation within her womb. Hence her crossed-hand gesture, at once a humble acquiescence and a protection of her fetus. It may have occurred to Hamilton that the French word for 'flesh' is 'chair', for in *Chiara & chair*, the word that emanates from the point of genesis finds literal incarnation, becomes flesh, in the figure of the nude.²⁹

Nowhere in Hamilton's *œuvre* are the structural lines, the bones of the work, so clearly articulated as in this print.³⁰ The series of blue lines that extends beneath the lower edge of *Lobby* appear to continue toward some infinity. Like the polka dots of *Lobby*, which seem to pierce the surface of the mirrored column, these blue lines puncture a surface that should be solid (the invisible wall on which the painting hangs), extending outwards to an unseen infinitude. Although these lines would run together at the target indicated at the far right edge of the image, they are



38. *Hotel du Rhône*, by Richard Hamilton. 2005. Oil on Fuji/Océ LightJet on canvas, 100 by 100 cm. (Courtesy R. Hamilton).



39. *Interior*, by Richard Hamilton. 1964–65. Screenprint from eight stencils on Crisbrook paper, 49 by 63.6 cm. (image); 56.5 by 79 cm. (sheet). (Courtesy R. Hamilton).

severed at the left edge of the column; only the grey line that serves as quasi-parameter of the lower-right side of the image meets with the horizon line at this point. It, unlike its 'mirrorial' counterpoint, the black hole, is virtually obscured by an explosion of flora.³¹

1993, pp.73–74.

²⁸ Hamilton, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.40.

²⁹ Of equal semantic serendipity is the fact that 'Chiara' is the Italian word for 'light' or 'clear'. Not only is her body shaded in subtle chiaroscuro, but as a product of the computer it is also the result of Hamilton's so-called 'painting with light'. In medieval and Renaissance religious painting God was synonymous with light and was thus often visually reified as beams of light descending from above. For this reason, Fra Angelico oriented his S. Marco *Annunciation* fresco to reflect the conditions of its environment; the flare of divine light streaming from left to right in the composition would have been intensified by real light from the small east-facing window to its left.

³⁰ Rita Donagh said that the 'double lines' in this print 'pleased Richard' (in conversation, Northend Farm, 5th February 2012) ostensibly because the technology was so refined both in the drawing and the printing of the image that these parallel lines could be clearly drawn.

³¹ When Hamilton installed *Chiara & chair*, along with *Hotel du Rhône*, in the *Host of Angels* exhibition in Venice, he included a three-dimensional vase of flowers, a custom-made version of the bouquet featured in the painting. The bouquet is emphatically artificial, and placed on a digitally printed ectype of the carpet seen in the print. The real space of the gallery is, for the purposes of the installation, populated with simulacra; only the vacuum cleaner, borrowed from Hamilton's home, is authentic.



40. *A mirrorial return*, by Richard Hamilton. 1998. Iris digital print, printed on Somerset paper, 53 by 66 cm. (image); 73 by 89 cm. (sheet). (Courtesy R. Hamilton).

Several aspects of the print would seem to indicate that the Annunciation myth was very much on Hamilton's mind when he began work on *Chiara & chair*, and indeed this was also probably the case with *A mirrorial return*, which predates *Chiara* by six years.³² Hamilton provided very literal evidence for this reading by choosing a Gothic typeface for the word 'chair' in the print. This was born of his decades-long fascination with the S. Marco monastery in Florence, where he had originally hoped to display a group of paintings and prints which were eventually shown as *A host of Angels* in Venice in 2007. In his search for an appropriate font he chanced upon one called San Marco.³³ Whether the detail was for Hamilton merely an inside joke, it nonetheless ties *Chiara & chair* to his other works in this vein. Bracketed by *A mirrorial return* and *The annunciation*, *Chiara & chair* falls intuitively into this conceptual narrative. It may look as little like a traditional Annunciation as *A mirrorial return*, but Hamilton was without question already thinking about Fra Angelico and *The annunciation* print that was to follow the next year.

The black hole, or its positive inverse, in *Chiara & chair* becomes emblematic of superhuman force and, perhaps, symbolic of God. This is a point in his print to which Hamilton has assigned omnipotence; it is 'the pinpoint from which all visual elements emerge'.³⁴ And indeed, such was the power of the Christian deity who, according to the Judeo-Christian narrative, on the sixth day of creation, having made all other

flora and fauna, shaped Adam, and from him, Eve.³⁵ This same God was later manifest as the Holy Ghost in order to visit Mary immaterially. Chiara-cum-Mary is, like Fra Angelico's Virgin, passively poised to the far right of the composition. With downcast eyes, she focuses on the task at hand: using a mechanical extension of herself for the suction within her of the seed of God.³⁶ And indeed, the coil of its flexible hose disappears suggestively between her legs.

In his investigation of the iconography of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Annunciations, David Robb explained that 'it is common to find in examples from the end of the century a vase with a long-stemmed flower or flowers, placed between the two protagonists. [...] its popularity is attested by the fact that it is seldom absent from subsequent representations [from the thirteenth century onward]'.³⁷ Hamilton's amphora of irises behaves compositionally much in the manner as those vases of flowers that symbolise Mary's unblemished chastity and which are present in so many of the Renaissance Annunciations that influenced him.³⁸

As is the case in Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation, and, in particular, in the Fra Angelico fresco to which Hamilton was referring, the Virgin is positioned to the right of the composition, with the Archangel Gabriel approaching from the left. He observed the practice, evident in many Annunciations, of dividing the composition into indoor and outdoor space. In *Chiara & chair* the architectural space to the right is anchored by photographic elements: the right triangle of ceiling, the column and a strip of marble on which the model stands (the carpet, though identical to its photographic source, has been entirely redrawn digitally). The white, open extension to the left becomes a wilderness, analogous to the space seen beyond the architecture of many Annunciations. Here, *Lobby* becomes a window to the *hortus conclusus* beyond, its green carpet a dandelion-spangled field and its empyreal blue sky a reflection of the cloud-strewn heavens into which the staircase evanesces.

Chiara, as one of Hamilton's nude 'angels', is a pure spirit and, like the Virgin of *The annunciation*, is neither painting nor photograph. Situated thus, she functions as a comment of the immaterial data from which Hamilton coaxed each of his digital works. *Chiara & chair* is at once an exposition of digital technique and an obfuscation of the artist's mediations. For Hamilton the immaculate conception inherent in digital image-making was not merely a technical development but became a subject on which he meditated in several iterations, some more literal than others, throughout the last decade of his career. In adopting the Annunciation as a guiding narrative, Hamilton was able to explore the implications of one of mankind's most enduring stories and do so in exploiting one of its newest forms of creative media.

³² In 2005, a year after Hamilton created *Chiara & chair*, he made *The annunciation*, which he described as a 'direct response to Fra Angelico's great annunciation fresco to be found in the corridor of San Marco'; Hamilton, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.53.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Hamilton explained that his famous collage, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different so appealing?* (1956), to which *Chiara & chair* variously refers, 'derived its resolution from the Bible rather than Darwin. [...] my "home" would have been incomplete without its token life-force so Adam and Eve struck a pose along with the rest of the gadgetry'; R. Hamilton and D. Schwarz: exh. cat. *Exteriors, Interiors, Objects, People*, Winterthur (Kunstmuseum), Hannover (Kestner-Gesellschaft) and Valencia (IVAM, Centre Julio González) 1990, p.44.

³⁶ Hamilton's choice of appliance echoes *Just what is it . . .* In the early collage, a

housewife poised at the crest of the stairs cleans her carpet with the latest model of vacuum. From the original appliance advertisement, Hamilton retained an arrow that points to the middle of the extended tube and boasts 'ordinary cleaners reach only this far'. The ability for a machine to prosthetically extend the limited powers of the human body was a subject that Hamilton had already explored in his installation *Man, machine and motion* (1955), which prefigured the role of the computer in his practice.

³⁷ D. Robb: 'The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', *The Art Bulletin* 18 (1936), pp.480–526, esp. p.482.

³⁸ The iris is an alternative to the lily as the flower of the Virgin, and first appears as a religious symbol in the works of early Flemish masters, where it either appears with or replaces the lily in paintings of the Virgin. 'Iris' means 'sword lily' and was adopted by Spanish painters as an attribute of the immaculate conception; see G. Ferguson: *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, New York 1961, p.32.