Theme 2: Leonardo da Vinci and the Italian Renaissance

Lesson 2: Fra Angelico

Part 1

At age 18, Guido di Pietro walked into the Tuscan town of Fiesole and devoted the rest of his life to Christ. When he became a friar, or brother, of the Dominican order of monks, he received the name Giovanni da Fiesole: John from Fiesole. From all accounts humble and profoundly religious, he began illustrating manuscripts and soon was given more important commissions, such as altarpieces and frescos. It was at this time that he painted one of the masterpieces of Western art, The Annunciation, now in the Prado Museum of Madrid (below).

Both his temperament and his artistic gifts brought him the nickname Angelico, which means angelic in Italian, while others called him Beato, or blessed, long before the Roman Catholic Church officially beatified him in 1984. No one knows who his master was, if any, but his use of perspective and color to achieve spatial effects thrust him to the forefront of artists of his day.

In 1436, he and other monks transferred to the convent of San Marco in nearby Florence, artistic capital of the Italian Renaissance, and a few years later the pope himself summoned Fra Angelico to work in Rome. In those days Florence and Rome were two of several independent city-states on the Italian peninsula, among which rivalries and even wars were not uncommon. There seems to be no awareness of this political strife in Fra Angelico, who concerns himself only with the contact between heaven and earth. Virtually all of his works fit the technical term of illustration, since they give visual form to scenes found in literary texts, principally the Bible, though he also draws upon stories and traditions that evolved during the Middle Ages, such as the lives of saints. He ventured into portraiture only to include religious figures—his contemporaries and near contemporaries—in larger works illustrating religious episodes.

Fra Angelico worked about a hundred years after the “official” start of Italian Renaissance painting, which is generally said to begin with Giotto (1266–1337). As in the case of most painters from the early Renaissance, there remains a distinctly medieval sensibility visible in Fra Angelico’s works, but a brief comparison with Giotto should show us what is new. The story of the Annunciation itself comes from the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke in the New Testament, given here in the International Version:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her

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1 See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 21–26.
and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26–30)

Part 2

Giotto’s Annunciation, finished about 1305, is split into two sections around the arch in a chapel in Padua, Italy (above). Gabriel and Mary are thus some distance apart, though unified in color, position, and the architectural rendering of a curtained room between two towers topped by balconies.

If we set Giotto’s angel (below left) side by side with Fra Angelico’s (below right), the sheer plasticity of the second Gabriel becomes readily apparent. The body, ethereal as it may be, is more supple, and the anatomical structure supposedly beneath the robe is more convincing. Giotto’s angel has one flat droopy wing rendered in profile that effectively blocks any view of the other wing; Fra Angelico’s angel has two distinct wings, the wing closest to us curving in a foreshortened arc that makes it seem to be caught in mid-flutter. Likewise the hands overlap perfectly as if in three-dimensions. The folds of his robe, like the colors, are far more adventurous and reveal texture as well as gradation of light. Perhaps most striking is the way each angel interacts—or not—with his surrounding. Giotto’s angel is apparently inside a room and kneeling on a solid floor. He gives off a nearly opaque red effulgence that obscures anything behind it. In Fra Angelico’s vision, Gabriel still glows, but the golden light is translucent: for example, we can see the columns behind him through the glow. Speaking of
columns: the foremost column anchors the angel firmly within the illusion of three-dimensional space.

Fra Angelico places both figures more convincingly in the architecture. True, the severe one-point perspective of the porch makes the space recede too drastically, and yet its appearance seems almost natural when contrasted with the inconsistent perspective in Giotto: we peer head-on into the cutaway interior of the buildings while also viewing the exterior at an odd angle.

Fra Angelico also makes use of color, of the pattern of lights and darks, to compose a more harmonious whole. Consider how he overcomes the most medieval element of all, the use of continuous narrative to round out a story: on our left, as if in Mary’s own back yard, we find an angel in a far different role. Here he is driving out Adam and Even from the Garden of Eden with a fiery sword in his hand, an event believed to predate the Annunciation by thousands of years. The import of the combined episodes is that Jesus, in the act of being conceived on the right, will reopen the gates of paradise that have been closed ever since the original sin of Adam and Eve, still scattering apples (actually pomegranates, as the tree behind them indicates) on the left. The marvelous way the scenes are integrated reveals how much Renaissance painters have already learned about naturalistic illusion since Giotto’s time. The dark yard recedes from the bright foreground, blending seamlessly with the expulsion from the garden and separating one narrative from the other. At the same time, the dark patch of Mary’s blue gown offers a visual counterweight on the right side of the picture. Adam and Eve are not only smaller than Gabriel and Mary, and thus perceived as farther away; they are also hazier, less distinct: this is the technique called atmospheric perspective, mentioned earlier. The angel is even smaller and hazier. Thus the Renaissance principles of harmony, proportion, and unity are achieved.
Part 3

Having considered the composition at length, if indirectly, we can now turn to some interesting ekphrastic texts that deal with Fra Angelico’s Annunciation. You may first want to read a description in Great Masters of Western Art to see the image treated in prose (35). Poems are more selective in their focus. Jean Gallagher’s “Annunciation/expulsion,” published in the Catholic journal Commonweal, takes into account both sides of the continuous narrative:

Inside, the house open like a doll's,
The done deal is just starting to settle

Over the leaning-toward and -away
Of arched walls, lily, her averted, attentive face.

Outside, the future is blowing
Its gold hurricane. They are crossing

Out of their companioned solitude among the animals,
The intelligent upstanding rabbits and red edible

Flowers, their feet curving carpet needles
In the blue-green domestic grasses

They are turning to leave. Crossing into next,
Its gravities, necessities, haphazard plots.²

Interestingly, the portion of poem dedicated to each narrative is the reverse of the painting. Fra Angelico fills most of the image with Gabriel and Mary, while Jean Gallagher limits them to the first four lines and concentrates instead on Adam and Eve. The symmetry of couplets, even when unrhymed or half-rhymed, is intense and reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Of all the flora and fauna of the fabled Garden of Eden, why does the poet give us only the “intelligent upstanding rabbits and red edible // flowers” and the carpet of lawn?

The famous American poet William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) addresses the Annunciation in one of his early works, “March,” published in 1921. Unlike most of us, he got to see many of Fra Angelico’s paintings first-hand while traveling in Italy. Section IV of the poem relates the month of March to the painting:

My second spring—
passed in a monastery
with plaster walls—in Fiesole
on the hill above Florence.
My second spring—painted

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1252/is_4_130/ai_98572425
a virgin—in a blue aureole
sitting on a three-legged stool,
arms crossed—
she is intently serious,
and still
watching an angel with colored wings
half kneeling before her—
and smiling—the angel’s eyes
holding the eyes of Mary
as a snake’s holds a bird’s.
On the ground there are flowers,
trees are in leaf.\(^3\)

The comparison of the angel with a snake and Mary with a bird must be the most arresting image of the entire poem. Is it not faintly sinister?

The following anonymous and somewhat flowery translation of an ekphrastic sonnet by the Spanish poet Manuel Machado (1874–1947)—“On the Annunciation of Fra Angelico”—can be found in a religious journal published on the Internet. Without considering its literary merits as a translation, the text serves our purpose by showing a different approach to the painting: not its appearance, but the act of its creation:

The silver caroling of Matins woke
The angel artist from his couch to paint,
While round him throng a rosy chorus quaint
Of cherubs waiting on his brush’s stroke.

They guide his hand to set the snowy light
On Mary’s brow and o’er her lovely cheeks
To show the eyes wherein her pureness speaks,
To limn her slender fingers amber white.

Their angel wings unto his eyes they hold
So he may copy of their child-like snows
The plumes of him who brought her message here;

Who rays amid his pearly vestment stole,
His light upon the Virgin’s breast of rose,
Like vivid sunburst on some crystal sphere.\(^4\)

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Here the angels are practically painting the picture for Fra Angelico, moving his hand and showing him the colors he must use. Do the colors in the poem correspond to the colors in the painting?

Given the exquisite delicacy of Fra Angelico’s masterpieces, it comes as a surprise to read the assertion made by Giorgio Vasari, the Renaissance writer, that the wondrous paintings came about virtually in a single stroke: “It was the custom of Fra [Angelico] to abstain from retouching or improving any painting once finished. He altered nothing, but left all as it was done the first time, believing, as he said, that such was the will of God.” His success might also be due, at least in part, to another practice Vasari tells us about: “It is also affirmed that he would never take the pencil in hand until he had first offered a prayer” (46).

A reminder: The assignments in Theme 2 include both Discussion Board participation and Journal Entries. The work will be particularly important, since the Theme 3 entries count as 40% of the final Discussion and Journal grades.

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