Theme 2: Leonardo da Vinci and the Italian Renaissance

Lesson 3: Fra Angelico (continued)

Part 1
The Annunciation is manifestly one of the most popular religious themes of the Renaissance, and Fra Angelico painted his share of them. An early version reminds us a little of Giotto’s Annunciation: Gabriel and Mary are seen on separate panels of a larger triptych, and the treatment seems crude by Fra Angelico’s standards, almost as flat and bright as an icon (at left). Even so, the figures make a more convincing illusion of real bodies in real clothes than what we find in the Annunciations of earlier artists like Giotto. It must also be pointed out that the materials for painting on a wall do not allow the precision and delicacy of color possible with tempera, such as Fra Angelico used with such success elsewhere.

As a monk Fra Angelico was also called upon to execute a number of miniature paintings to illustrate texts. Among his illuminated manuscripts—in this case, a hymnal—we find, not surprisingly, the Annunciation (at right). However even here he uses modeling to suggest round forms and presents bodies in lifelike poses and with harmonious proportions. Neither technique had been used competently in the Middle Ages; yet the overall effect of the decorative flourishes and the flat masses of gold leaf looks to us at least as medieval as it does modern: which is to say, Renaissance.

Fra Angelico never merely copied himself, even when retaining some of his favorite elements. In an Annunciation from Cortona, for example, we see Gabriel on the left as usual, Mary on the right, both blond, both beautiful, both young, both on a porch with columns as the angel makes his announcement. Yet the angel’s hands no longer mirror Mary’s, as in the Prado Museum’s Annunciation, but seem to be instructing her. If we look closely, in fact, Fra Angelico has painted chains of golden words passing from Gabriel’s mouth and fanning out over Mary, as in a comic strip. (Mary’s response is written upside-down so that God can read it from heaven.) The dramatic shaft of light seen previously has thus been replaced by a biblical text in Latin, while the Holy Spirit is rendered as a golden bubble hovering over Mary. Adam and Eve reappear in this version as well, being chased from paradise by another angel with a fiery sword. Although still on the left side behind Mary’s back yard, they are much farther away, remote on a barren hilltop that forms the horizon.

In another version (at right), Gabriel and Mary find themselves alone on the porch, which is now more spacious. Through the columns we see the back yard, now fenced-in… or perhaps Adam and Eve are fenced out, denied the age of grace. In the version at left, the porch is not quite convincingly inside or outside, though the figures remain separated in symmetrical archways posing as part of the colonnade. In yet another version, Gabriel not only appears to Mary indoors,
but inside the bare vault of a church or another windowless recess, as another saint—in the habit of a Dominican monk—looks on piously (at right). This practice of introducing other saints and patrons into biblical scenes as worshipful witnesses was quite common in the Renaissance.

More Annunciations can be found, but these are enough to give us an idea of the frequency with which the theme appears in Fra Angelico’s work. Although the Annunciation might seem a near obsession, the number of renditions could have more to do with the temper of the times than of the painter. Artists were considered craftsmen like goldsmiths and carpenters who created what they were commissioned to create. As a monk who had taken a vow of obedience, furthermore, Fra Angelico painted what his superiors wanted. Perhaps his personal preferences played a small part. Perhaps the abbot or the bishop or the cardinal or the pope pointed to an empty spot in a church and asked him to compose a panoramic Last Judgment, let’s say, and after a moment of thoughtful silence the painter meekly suggested that the particular space was too small, more fitting of an intimate theme such as the Annunciation. We will never know what he thought about most of his works.
Part 2

It is important to bear in mind that Fra Angelico belonged to the order of preaching friars. Although he did not travel the world giving sermons, his particular preaching came through his paintings. The images are often narrative or, as we have seen, composed of continuous narrative. He captured the essence of a narrative in order to elucidate the spiritual fact, as he understood it. Preachers still use good stories in their sermons. In addition to the narrative tool, Fra Angelico made use of symbolism. Look closely again at the Annunciations. Things are obviously what they are—fruit, birds, fences, porches, shells, flowers—and yet may symbolize some higher truth as well. Colors are equally symbolic. For example, why does Mary wear red and blue so often? Similarly, the triangular composition is not accidental. Nor is the number of columns, arches, pomegranates, etc. Naturalistic illusion also has its limits: the Jewish maiden is sitting with a Catholic missal or prayer book on her lap—an anachronism as out of place as the medieval architecture and Italian landscape.

To preach Christianity is also to preach the Cross. The gentle monk best known today for his tranquil treatment of brightly colored angels and beautiful blond Madonnas, does have another side: the passion and triumph of Jesus and the martyrdom of saints. If he expressed delight in the Good News of the Annunciation, he also took pains to show the sacrifice such Good News entailed. Vasari tells us Fra Angelico "is said never to have painted a Crucifix without tears streaming from his eyes, and in the countenances and attitudes of his figures it is easy to perceive proof of his sincerity, his goodness, and the depth of his devotion to the religion of Christ" (46).¹

One of his most unsettling works is the Mocking of Christ, now in the San Marco Museum in Florence. It is a fresco, part of a series of scenes painted on the monastery walls to inspire the monks to deeper piety and prayer. The image is based on gospel accounts of what Jesus suffered at the hands of the temple guards and the Romans before his crucifixion. Luke tells of the blindfold:

The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophesy! Who hit you?" And they said many other insulting things to him. (Luke 22:63–65)

Other details come from the conflation of episodes in the other three Gospels. Here we have the account of Matthew:

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and

mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spat on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (Matthew 27:27–31)

This is a fairly large wall painting, about two yards (almost two meters) high, painted into the very architectural space of the monastic cell: that small bare place where a monk was alone to study and meditate upon the Gospels and other religious texts, as St. Dominic—founder of Fra Angelico’s religious order of preaching friars—is doing at the lower right corner of the painting. The cramped cell made it impossible to back away from the image, which would seem to wrap around you, as large paintings tend to do when viewed up close; the painting’s architecture, blending with the architecture of the cell, would virtually pull you into its plane. The floating elements are equally hallucinatory: disembodied heads, hands, sticks. This is powerful stuff. Of course, with the fresco shrunken down to a small picture on a monitor screen, we must use our imagination to overcome the distance and the reduction in scale. We should try to feel the closeness of the little room and smell the thick dank walls to experience the work as Fra Angelico conceived it… preferably on Good Friday, with no food or drink or sleep since midnight, on a chilly day in late winter or early spring.

The American poet Angie Estes has written a series of poems inspired by the monastery, called the San Marco Suite—after Fra Angelico. The following poem is “Cell 7: The Mocking of Christ” and you can hear her reading it on the Internet. Be sure to read the text along with her.

The pages of the book have turned to stone and cracked, but Saint Dominic, seated on the floor to the right, reads on while Mary sits alone on the left, bella cosa² beatified—not to be confused with bellicose, inclined to start quarrels or wars, like the bodiless hands of the Roman soldiers, positioned around the face of Christ.

Kosmos, the Greeks would call it, everything in order like a chess game before it begins, but no architecture can be truly noble which is not imperfect, Ruskin advised, because it does not resemble life—Venetian palazzos,³ gladioli—

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² Italian. Bella cosa = a beautiful thing.
one third in full bloom, one third spent, and one third on the way. Blindfolded above and behind Mary and the Saint, Christ is the apex of their triangle, check of their mate, point toward which everything retreats—even the gaze of Mary, although for now it is turned away while she touches her cheek to make sure she is real.

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.

3 Misconstrued Italian. Palazzi = palaces.