



Fra Angelico (Guido di Pietro), Italian (Florentine), ca. 1395/1400 -1455
The Annunciation, ca. 1438-1445
Fresco, 7'1" x 10'6"
Monastery of San Marco, Florence, Italy (now museum)

Florence Italy in the 15th century

Fra Angelico (Angelic Brother) was also known as: Guido di Pietro, Fra Giovanni da Fiesole, and Beato Angelico (Blessed Angelic one). In 1982 he was beatified by Pope John Paul II. He was born in Vicchio, republic of Florence, and died in Rome.

Vasari wrote of Fra Angelico that "it is impossible to bestow too much praise on this holy father, who was so humble and modest in all that he did and said, and whose pictures were painted with such facility and piety." (Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*)

Fra Angelico was painting as early as 1408, and Vasari notes that he began as an "illuminator" (a painter of illuminated manuscripts). He also executed paintings in churches in the region around Florence in his early life, most no longer extant. In 1423 he entered the Dominican order at the Convent of Fiesole and became known as Fra Giovanni. The Dominicans were a medieval mendicant order whose members took a vow of poverty and lived in urban areas for the purposes of preaching, evangelizing, and ministering to the poor. The Dominicans relied on begging and donations.

In 1436, Fra Angelico was one of a number of friars from Fiesole who moved to the newly renovated Monastery of San Marco. The renovation was supported by Cosimo de' Medici (Italian banker, politician, and ruler of Florence during the Italian Renaissance). Cosimo commissioned Fra Angelico to decorate the walls of San Marco with frescos, including the altarpiece in the chapel, the inside of the friar's cells, the meeting house, and the hallways - fifty paintings in total. This *Annunciation* has become one of the best-known paintings at San Marco. It is situated at the top of the stairs in the North corridor, a route the monks would take each day on the way to their individual rooms (cells). The Annunciation scene depicts the moment in the Gospel of Luke when the Archangel Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary to inform her that she will give birth to Jesus. Here, Fra Angelico has placed this event in an outdoor setting under a columned portico very similar to that found at San Marco, with both Corinthian (front) and Ionic (back) columns. To the left is a walled, enclosed garden (hortus conclusus) symbolizing Mary's purity.

The technique that Fra Angelico uses at San Marco is called buon (true) fresco. A true fresco is when water-based paint is applied to wet plaster. A chemical reaction occurs as the painted plaster dries, bonding the pigments to the wall's surface. True fresco must be done quickly without making mistakes. The painter must plan what portion of the image they can complete each day - before the fresco dries. After the thick undercoat of plaster is applied to the wall, sometimes an under drawing (sinopia) would be made, then a thin coat of plaster was applied onto which the pigmented painting was made using the under drawing as a guide.

The placement of this fresco is interesting in that the monks would encounter it as they ascend the stairs on the way to their small rooms called cells. Fra Angelico was in his 40s when he undertook the paintings in the Monastery San Marco, and would have been aware of the many

artists and architects working in Florence and Rome. Fifteenth century Italian artists developed a system known as linear or mathematical perspective that allowed them to realistically show 3 dimensional depth on a 2 dimensional surface. The sculptor and architect Filippo Brunelleschi first demonstrated the system around 1420, while Leon Battista Alberti wrote about it in his treatise in 1436 titled *Della Pittura* (on Painting). Fra Angelico plays with linear perspective and portrays a steep vanishing point just beyond the bars of the small square window to the left of Mary's haloed head. This would be clear to the monks slowly climbing towards the painting from the stairs below, accentuating what Kelly Grovier wrote in an article for the BBC stating that "Fra Angelico's contemporaries would have instantly recognized his employment of the barred window, beyond which lies a secret and unreachable garden... luring us (the viewer) to contemplate, however subliminally, a penetration of the impenetrable."

This is a serene version of the Annunciation. No gold leaf, no pots of lillies (symbolizing Mary's purity), no small Christ figure (homunculus) being sent to Mary's womb. There is little movement, or surprise on Mary's face or in her gestures. Here, Mary is accepting of her role. Instead the announcement takes place in an unembellished, quiet enclosure, using subdued colors. The lighting which comes from the left is gentle, with some intensity perhaps emanating from Gabriel directly towards Mary. The two slender graceful figures in calm poses make subtle eye contact, creating a sensitive, measured atmosphere. Mary wears a blue robe symbolizing royalty and purity. Gabriel is wearing pink and gold with multi-colored wings. Silica has been added to the paint on the wings to increase the sparkle and thus the feeling of the divine. This is a sacred vision rendered in a contemporary setting.

Most of the cells had a fresco created by Fra Angelico, which the monks used for contemplation. The stairwell placement of the Annunciation was a visual reminder for each Brother with the following written underneath the image as a reminder: "As you revere this figure of the intact Virgin while passing before it, beware lest you omit to say a Hail Mary."