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Masterpiece

Murals at the Monastery of San Marco (1435-45)



The Annunciation (c.1450) by Fra Angelico

Piety Meets Power and Wealth

The resources of the powerful Medici family supported Fra Angelico, allowing him to create the stunning murals at the monastery of San Marco.

by James Romm

To stand in the quiet halls of the monastery of San Marco, today a Florentine state museum, is to revisit a unique moment in Western cultural history. In a setting barely changed by the passage of nearly six centuries, the frescoes of Fra Angelico attest to the deep piety of the community that lived here, as well as to the power and wealth of the man who commissioned them, Cosimo de' Medici. Politics, religion and artistry come together at San Marco in a creative tension that exemplifies the spirit of early 15th-century Florence, the very cradle of the European Renaissance.

It was a strange circumstance that made partners of Fra Angelico, a Dominican monk adored for his “angelic” painterly style, and Cosimo, a worldly banker on the verge of becoming Florence’s unofficial head of state. Exiled in 1434 by Florentines mistrustful of his ambition, but then brought back a year later by cheering throngs, Cosimo had a formidable public-relations challenge. His fellow citizens wanted him to lead, but not to exalt himself or threaten their

cherished democratic traditions. Building a new monastery, and commissioning Fra Angelico to beautify it, was the perfect benefaction, a way for Cosimo to convey a sense of his piety and humility while also—an important goal in a city where envy drove politics—divesting himself of surplus wealth.

For Fra Angelico, the task of adorning his own monastic home, and addressing his Dominican brethren, conferred a new kind of inspiration. In his earlier works (many of which have been brought to San Marco and are today collected in its hospice room), he had excelled at detailed narrative sequences from the Gospels and fearsome Last Judgment scenes. At San Marco, by contrast, his art did not need to teach or to terrify. His frescoes here are more spare and static, with figures often set against blank or monochrome backgrounds. The figures of saints, martyrs and above all the crucified Christ became his sole focus, their faces exquisitely crafted to reveal their transports of anguish, adoration and awe.

Art here was closely tied to the life of the monastic community, a life that Fra Angelico shared. Each of the 43 private cells that can be visited today contains a single frescoed scene, most of them depicting moments from the life of Christ or from the crucifixion and resurrection. Inside these tiny rooms, their doors locked either from inside or out, the Dominican monks of the 15th century had only these scenes as objects of contemplation, along with one small window looking into the cloister below. When even this view became too distracting, wooden shutters could close out the physical world, leaving the cell's occupant alone with a radiant vision of holiness.

San Marco's communal spaces, too, were frescoed by Fra Angelico, though with sparse, isolated scenes that give a much different effect than the continuous murals of the great Renaissance chapels. The most renowned of these scenes, "The Annunciation," greeted the brothers as they ascended the stairs to reach their cells, and a message inscribed below urged them not to pass by without praying. This haunting scene features a reed-thin, youthful, solemn Mary, seated on a simple wooden stool and dressed in a plain, colorless robe. Her face reveals neither joy nor fear but a kind of bewildered attentiveness; her frailness and humanity are emphasized over her holiness. It's a heartbreaking portrayal, depicting a woman who can only dimly imagine the destiny that awaits her.

The most worldly of Fra Angelico's frescoes was reserved, not surprisingly, for the cell that Cosimo de' Medici set aside for his own use—a specially designed "duplex" with two rooms at different levels. The outer of these rooms featured a classic crucifixion tableau, but inside, in greater seclusion, Cosimo could contemplate the Adoration of the Magi, a perennial favorite of the Medici clan. The colorful procession of wealthy potentates, winning glory as they bestowed their riches, must have pleased Cosimo greatly, for it mirrored his own strategy for maintaining the favor of the Florentines. San Marco itself was the first, and in many ways the greatest, of the gifts that he gave them.

Adding luster to this gift was the monastery's library, an elegant, light-filled wing built to house Cosimo's growing collection of manuscripts. Though owned by the Medicis, the books—including both sacred and secular volumes—were made available to all, giving San Marco a fair claim to be the first public library in Europe. Here too, Fra Angelico made his mark, illuminating the gorgeous volumes in his own hand or teaching his now-nameless assistants to follow his

signature style. On the books' leather bindings and opening pages, the Medici seal, a circle dotted by small red balls, reminded Florentines of the largess, and the humanistic values, of their rising (though not yet acknowledged) leaders.

Remarkably, much of San Marco remains as it was in Cosimo's day. This site was left alone by the Baroque architects and sculptors whose elaborate fancies have filled so many other Florentine churches. A few post-Renaissance frescoes have been added to the ground-floor level of the cloister, crowding out the sole image—St. Dominic below the Cross—with which Fra Angelico adorned it. But the second floor, where the brothers slept, prayed, painted and studied, is remarkably untouched, a time capsule of the bright morning of the Medici golden age—the six decades that would be dominated by Cosimo and his grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent.

One corner of this upper level, however, also captures the gloomy twilight of that golden age. Half a century after Cosimo created San Marco, a new prior took up residence there, a fiery-tongued preacher who urged Florentines to repent their excesses and reject the Medici way. Girolamo Savonarola briefly made this monastery, and the church that adjoins it, the center of a democratic insurgency that, in the 1490s, succeeded in throwing the Medicis out of the city. When the family returned to power in 1530, it would be as autocrats backed by a foreign army. There would never again be a moment such as the one that produced San Marco: a partnership between the political moderation of Cosimo and the pious devotion of Fra Angelico, resulting in artwork of unforgettable sublimity.

—*Mr. Romm is the author of "Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero" and "Ghost on the Throne: The Death of Alexander the Great and the War for Crown and Empire."*

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