

The Language of Splendour: Fra Angelico's 'Madonna and Child Enthroned'

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When he painted his numerous altarpieces on the theme of Madonna and Child Enthroned, Fra Angelico accepted a traditional image and used it again and again, with variations. The archetypal scene of Our Lady sitting in state, holding her Son and surrounded by the trappings of a royal court, was inherited from the Eastern Church, where the underlying notion seems to have been that since the Byzantine Empress was presented in court finery, the Mother of God should be presented in no less splendour; and the idea had an immediate and wide appeal. For centuries, Our Lady was portrayed in painting and sculpture as a reigning monarch, not precisely as Queen of Heaven, but as a queen of men and women on earth, surrounded by angelic and saintly courtiers. So the image was part of Angelico's mental furniture. It was not, of course, the only image of Our Lady then in vogue.

The impact of Masaccio's *Madonna and Child*, now in the National Gallery, London, is hard to exaggerate, and its influence is more evident in an altar panel which Angelico did for the nuns of St Peter Martyr Convent, Florence, than anywhere else. Angelico follows Masaccio in so positioning the figure of Our Lady as to bring the right shoulder slightly forward, presenting an almost straight line from the elbow to the top of the head. The resulting bulkiness of figure suggests maternal protectiveness and an air of mystery. Documentary evidence points to 1428 as the likely date of Angelico's painting, which is interesting in the light of Orlandi's surmise that Angelico was ordained in 1429; he must have been still a student of theology when he painted the work.

In an altarpiece for his own church at Fiesole, Angelico avoids the suggestion of bulkiness in the figure of Our Lady by keeping the neck line slender and more vertical. Mary holds a pair of carnations, and the naked Infant reaches for them. Maternal tenderness rather than protectiveness is the note; the Virgin's brown eyes are unfocused, pensive. The four male saints are dark visaged to emphasize the delicate paleness of Mary's complexion; the image is of a young matron of good family who does not spend much time out of doors and who is tastefully though plainly dressed.

The painting has been much changed since Angelico's day: in its
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- 1 Detail drawn freely from the St. Peter Martyr Triptych, illustrating Angelico's accentuation of the central figure's massivity, mentioned in paragraph 2.



- 2 This shows the artist's use of abstract forms in drawing the Virgin's head in the Annalena Altarpiece (paragraph 7).

original Gothic shape, the gold background—replaced by a landscape in 1501—would have made the saints loom when the picture stood on the high altar, dominating the church. (For an illustration of how the picture may have looked, see Sassetta's *Funeral of St Francis* in the National Gallery, London.)

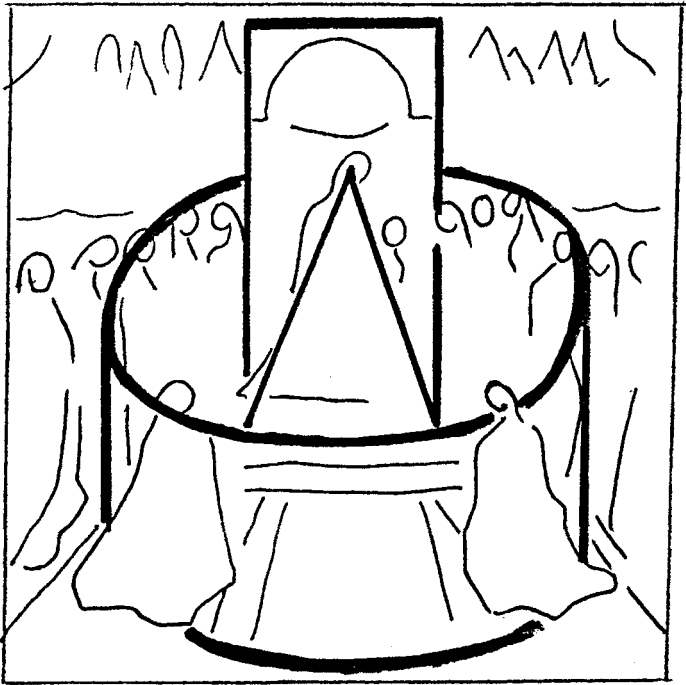
When, in 1433, the linen merchants of Florence commissioned Angelico to paint a triptych for their guildhall, it was because he had already made a name as a competent artist. Today *The Madonna of the Linen Merchants* is in the Museum of San Marco, and no description or reproduction in a book adequately prepares the visitor's mind for the impact of this great icon. In its carved Renaissance marble frame it dwarfs people standing before it. The essential image remains, although the imperial throne has almost disappeared. Instead, Our Lady sits on a brocade-covered bench with cloth of gold curtains draped behind her. The Child stands on her left thigh, wearing a dark tunic and extending his hands, smiling.

In the late 1430s Angelico painted two altarpieces for the Dominican churches at Cortona and Perugia. Both are set in Gothic frames, both have gilded backgrounds, both have attendant saints standing parallel to the picture plane. They are, in fact, interesting accommodations to the demands of commissioning patrons, and contrast sharply with the Annalena altarpiece of the same period, which is a fully Renaissance picture, now in San Marco.

In the Annalena altarpiece the saints are grouped informally on either side of the throne. The picture is almost square, not a triptych. The Madonna's blue cloak is deeply modelled and at the shoulder is arranged to frame the head and features in an abstract composition of delicate shapes. The mother's gaze is on the infant, who returns it with affection. Though tenderness was never foreign to the icon, in this new, Renaissance image it is emphasized. The most remarkable feature of the painting is the grouping of the attendants: the princely court, though still formal, is more relaxed, as the courtiers gather in conversational groups. This is a new development in the treatment of the Mother and Child Enthroned with Angels theme. Called a *sacra conversazione*, it would become a regular and fashionable mode of treating the subject, and this is its beginning.

Is the *sacra conversazione* of the San Marco altarpiece (1438—40) an interior? The background of wooded parkland is separated from the throne by a William Morris-type curtain running across the picture, but it is not clear if it marks the end of a throne-room or the division of a patio where a turkey rug has been spread and a splendid Renaissance throne erected on the paving. Looped curtains and swags of flowers suggest a stage set, but are placed too far back to be a proscenium.

When this large square picture was erected on the high altar, it caused a sensation. Even a public used to the size of maesta paintings was astonished, though it was not just size which impressed: brilliant



- 3 A diagrammatic drawing of the San Marco Altarpiece to indicate its structure. See paragraphs 8 to 10.



- 4 A simplified drawing of the central tableau in the *Madonna dell' Ombre* to suggest the geometrical basis of its design, as mentioned in paragraph 12.

colouring, lifelike figures and accurate perspective carrying the eye to distant trees and sky all contributed to the conviction that the viewers were in the presence of a great composition. Today, shorn of the original frame and associated panels, the altarpiece is in the Museum of San Marco, its chromatic brilliance dulled by an old and unwise attempt to clean it with soda; only at the edges, where a former frame occupied more space and shielded a centimetre width of paint from the soda, can something of its original quality be seen.

The altarpiece is so cardinal to the development of Renaissance painting and has so many features which are seen here for the first time that its character as a religious image is in some danger of not being properly appreciated. The tenderness of the Madonna and the undoubted humanity of her son are what the congregation in church would have noticed after admiring the picture's size and brilliance. Then the expressively modelled face of St Cosmas would have caught their eyes as he gestured their attention to the central group.

Angelico rather eschewed the obvious in portraying affection. His ways are subtle and are nowhere more delicately tender than in the Pontassieve *Madonna and Child*, now in the Uffizi. Though it is the centre panel of a dismembered triptych and is Gothic in structure, it has some points of similarity with the *Mother and Child Enthroned with Saints* of the Bosco ai Frati altarpiece, which was a Medici commission and Renaissance in shape, design and feeling. In both pictures the Infant reaches his right hand affectionately behind his mother's neck, resting his forehead on her cheek. Both panels are products of the 1450s, painted perhaps while Angelico was Prior of Fiesole, though some writers put the Pontassieve picture earlier.

Lastly, in the large mural of *Our Lady Enthroned with the Infant and Saints* in the dormitory corridor of San Marco Priory we have what clearly is designed as the thinking man's version of the image, relying as it does on an arrangement of strong shapes and colours to make its appeal to the mind seeking proportions. Called 'La Madonna dell' Ombre', after the *trompe l'oeil* shadows of the pilasters cast supposedly by the light from an existing window, it is a *sacra conversazione* with a background of classical architecture and a foreground which is utterly plain—no tiling, no marbling, no turkey rug. The central tableau is based once more on a triangle in an upright rectangle; the Virgin's cloak is plain, the Infant wears a pink toga over a white tunic.

So Fra Angelico's pictures on this subject punctuate his work from the 1420s to the 1450s, and illustrate the development of his painting style as they mark the transition in his mind from late Gothic traditionalism to Renaissance inventiveness.