

FRA ANGELICO

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HERE are those who have written of the spiritual life of Fra Angelico, and they have accomplished their purpose exceedingly well. Others have, in a general way, presented his simple life, with his rare achievements in the art of painting. It is the chief concern in this article to place in relief a few of his treasured masterpieces, and principally those for which the Dominican Convent of St. Mark's in Florence is renowned.

The Dominican prerogative of actively preaching the truths of the Gospel was not lost by those who spoke by means of artistic achievements; for Blessed Jordan of Rivalto very succinctly said that "art is the quasi-daughter of preaching." It is not surprising then, to find Dominicans of the fifteenth century acting as lodestars drawing art back to its exalted position. These friar artists preached by means of canvas and pigments, and by drawing from marble the beauty of religious truth and the happiness of heaven, led men back to God.

Art, before the advent of the Friars, had been relegated to an inferior position. By the Egyptians, it was made to inspire fear; the Greeks used it to satiate their refined voluptuousness; the Romans made of it a medium for glory and in the Byzantine pictures there was a leaning towards severe majesty, producing a profound veneration, but inspiring fear. Christianity elevated it from the mere beauty of outward form to that sweeter and more eloquent majesty radiating from the innermost court of the soul. The art of miniature painting had all but reached sublimity when, like all the glories of time, they abjured the heights attained, and began to decline.

But art of the fifteenth century found, in Fra Giovanni del Mugello, a man who could raise her from the dust; for he made The Supreme Archetype, the pattern and source of his paintings. His paintings of the divine and angelic all but live. Because God

and His angels and not art for art's sake was the impelling force which motivated his brush, he was called the Angelic. Hence, he was raised to an eminence like that of his brother religious, the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas, who surpassed all men in describing the angelic and Divine nature.¹

In epitomizing the life and works of one so inundated with tranquility, grace and masterly accomplishments, we are forced to give but a meagre outline of such sanctity of soul and rare merit.

The chronicles of the convent of S. Dominic at Fiesole, were commenced in 1516, by Father Giovanni de Tolosani. The annalist of the convent of St. Mark, Father Roberto Ubaldini, began his annals in 1505, discontinuing them after 1508, and Father Leandro Alberti of Bologna, historian and geographer of great merit, published probably earlier than 1517 a volume of Latin eulogies on illustrious men of the Preaching Friars. These three men give extremely short accounts of the life of the Angelic painter. However, Vasari who published his *Lives of the Painters and Sculptors* in 1550, places some light on the events of the Angelico's life. Father Marchese, O.P., reaches the conclusion that, although Vasari may not be depended upon for the solid truth, we can reasonably feel that he collected his minute details of our painter's life from tradition handed down by Fra Eustachio, a miniaturist, with an exceptionally retentive memory, who greatly aided Vasari, in the first edition of his work.²

In the province of Mugello, in Tuscany, in 1387 a child, who was later to become a world renowned painter, was christened Guido or Guidolino. His brother, Fra Benedetto, later became the celebrated miniaturist.

Guido was of an amiable disposition with a delicate taste for natural beauty, learning even in his youth the rudiments in miniaturizing the Predella of pictures, with histories.³ In 1407

¹ Marchese, O.P., translated by Rev. C. P. Meehan, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects of The Order of St. Dominic*, (Dublin, 7, Wellington Quay, James Duffy, 1852) I, p. 153 ff.

² Giorgio Vasari, painter, architect and writer of considerable repute, born at Arezzo, Italy in 1511; died at Florence, 1574.

³ The Predella or Gradino is defined by Montalembert as "a small longitudinal border, generally placed by the ancient masters under their principal pictures: on this border they were wont to paint various passages of the life of the saint or saints who formed the subject of their work." Thus Fra Angelico's chef d'oeuvre (The Coronation of Our Lady) has a "Predella" or "Gradino," representing the life of S. Dominic. This masterpiece is in the Louvre.

Guidolino, with his brother, asked to receive the habit of Saint Dominic. The political and moral upheaval which threatened to engulf all Italy, must have been a powerful factor in this decision. Father Marc di Venezia, superior, of the new convent of S. Domenico in Fiesole, received them. They made their novitiate at Cortona, were solemnly professed in 1408 and returned to the convent at Fiesole.

In January 26, 1409, the Florentine Republic formally renounced its allegiance to Gregory XII and the full fury of the schism hurled itself against the peaceful solitude of S. Domenico. Fra Giovanni and his brother Benedetto, with the other members of their community, were conscientiously bound to leave the quiet stronghold at Fiesole and sought refuge with the brethren within the fastness of the Umbrian hills. It was here then, that the Angelico took up his brush, that he might give to others the delicate imaginings of his soul. Fr. Marchese, commenting on the work of Fra Angelico, remarks: "that since Dante, in the *Paradiso*, mated the doctrine of Thomas of Aquino to the harmony of his verse; the Angelico incarnated and coloured the conceptions of these two great men. If we compare the pictures of the Angelico with the writings of the great philosopher and the great poet, we will have little difficulty in detecting the identity of thought that characterised the three Italians in their theories of the supernatural, and the imagery with which they clothed them."

We are led to believe that at this time Fra Angelico satisfied his eager desire to place upon canvas the intense affection of his soul. It is reasonable to suppose, in the absence of certainty as to his works at this time, that he began the altarpiece of the chapel of S. Niccolo dei Guidalotti, for the church of S. Domenico in Perugia. In this work he follows Giotto more closely than at any other period. We mention here just a few of his works, which he painted in the choir of S. Domenico; The Blessed Virgin on a throne, with her Son in her arms; on the sides two panels, one of St. John Baptist, the other St. Catherine, V., M.; and in the sacristy besides many other small pictures, two panels of the Annunciation and the Angel Gabriel.

About the year 1414 a pestilence broke out in Foligno and the exiled religious found refuge in Cortona. Here a number of other works were executed by the Angelic Painter. For the

sake of expediency we are forced to pass over the greater majority of Fra Angelico's paintings, but for this reason it must not be supposed that any of these paintings are of minor import. The wealth of paintings which the Angelico executed is astounding. It is likewise surprising that one man could, in a life time, produce all the pictures which are authentically attributed to the Fiesolan.

Through the efforts of the Blessed Giovanni Dominici and Pope Gregory XII, the convent of S. Domenico at Fiesole, which was in the hands of the Bishop of Fiesole, was returned to the Friars, in the year 1418. Although only four Friars are mentioned at this time as having returned to this convent, we may reasonably conclude that all who were forced to flee in 1409 returned at this time.

Here, then, on that beloved hill of Fiesole, where first his ideals of religious life were satisfied, the Friar painter gave of the most delicate fruits of his heaven-impressed soul. Let us quote the opinion of Fr. Tanzini, a man deeply skilled in art: "But amongst his marvelous and innumerable pictures, these that he executed for the armory in the chapel of the Annunziata . . . now in the Florentine Academy of Fine Arts, are perhaps the most admirable. They represent the life of Our Lord . . . this work alone by that sovereign genius, would suffice to prove that in religious expression he stands superior to every other . . . and that his exquisite pencil was guided by faith. The drapings, simple and majestic; the movements natural but full of dignity; the expression of the heads truly celestial, render these histories superior to praise; and they must be seen over and over again in order to form a correct estimate of them. The more one contemplates these of the Angelico, the more palpably does he behold their arcane and ineffable excellences. The ignorant, the learned, the sciolist who knows not the secrets of art, cannot stand before these pictures without experiencing unwonted emotions. Every one must admire them, and experience in presence of them, affections, not material but spiritual."

Vasari speaks of another picture of the Annunciation, which unfortunately is now lost. This picture was placed in the chapel of the Church of S. Domenico. He says, of our Lady and the Angel Gabriel; "the profile of whose countenance is so devout, so delicate and so well executed, that it does not seem to be the

work of man, but of paradise." And again Vasari is beside himself when he comments on the Angelico's Coronation of Our Blessed Lady. He says in part, that, "the entire colouring of this work seems to have been executed by the hand of a saint." There are numerous other paintings equally as masterful from the brush of this eminent Friar, which he executed at Fiesole. It is necessary, however, that we merely glance over these superb works, so that a more comprehensive view may be obtained of his paintings in the convent of St. Mark in Florence.

In the year 1436 Fra Giovanni went to Florence to portray on the walls of the new convent of St. Mark those immortal frescoes which have been the marvel of the centuries since that time. It was here, then, that he attained incomparable perfection in chiaroscuro design, and perspective. We might term this period in his life as the crowning point of his illustrious career. Truly it has been said of him that he is the painter *par excellence* of the Spiritual Christ, and the most unapproachable painter of the divinity.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century St. Mark's Convent was founded under the protection of the Silvestrine monks, who held it until the fifteenth century. Pope Martin V, at the earnest requests of the Florentines, placed it in the hands of the Order of Friars Preachers. The Silvestrine monks were amply compensated in relinquishing their convent. From the Annals of the Convent of St. Mark we learn that in the year 1436 Pope Eugenius IV, then in Florence, "ordained that the Dominicans should take possession of it in great state and solemnity. Three Bishops, of Taranto, Trevigi, and Parentino, accompanied the monks, who were preceded by the mace-bearers of the Signory who were sent thither to add to the pomp. Father Cipriano da Firenze then took formal possession of it in the name of his religious society." Cosimo dei Medici became keenly interested in renovating such an historic and venerated building. With characteristic generosity, he began lavishing his wealth upon the work of rebuilding the church and convent, and decorating such a worthy enterprise. He became so enthusiastic in pouring out his gold, that the friars were forced to remind him of their obligations in regard to poverty.

About the year 1441 the church was completed, and on the feast of the Epiphany in the following year it was consecrated

by Cardinal Niccolo Acciapaccio, Archbishop of Capua, in the presence of Pope Eugene IV and the College of Cardinals. During this restoration of the church, Fra Angelico painted an exquisitely beautiful Madonna for the main altar. A number of the Angelico's masterpieces have been ravaged by the retouchings of less capable hands than his, and, too, time has taken its toll of these rare productions of genius, so that in a few instances we are compelled to resort to the early chroniclers for the real worth of such specimens of his brush. Only in a few cases is this necessary, since the greater part of his handicraft retains its pristine beauty. As far as can be ascertained this painting of the Madonna is the only work coming from the hand of the divinely inspired painter, for the church of St. Mark.

Little has been written of the Angelic painter's frescoes in the cloister and cells of his brethren, yet, those particularly in the cells are by far (if any distinction in the perfection of his work must be made) his most beautiful conceptions of Christ, His Virgin Mother and the saints.

Near the entrance of the cloister is a Crucifixion group. True to the promptings of the divine Model Who had led him along the path of gentleness of character, the Angelico endeavored to portray Him as the most gentle of men, and this he accomplished with remarkable skill. His contemporaries had portrayed the Crucified Christ as dead and with no uncertain marks of intense agony depicted on His Countenance. But this was not the Preacher Painter's idea of Jesus Crucified. The Crucified Master, he represented as living, still pouring out His precious Blood; the divine Countenance gentle, calm, with infinite tender affection, even in the face of untold sufferings and death.

All the cells, thirty-two in number, of the upper dormitory in this convent were frescoed by the Master Painter. Only a faint idea of the loveliness of these matchless works can be given in writing. They must be seen and pondered over again and again to appreciate the sermon they preach. Among so many masterpieces there are two which deserve a somewhat detailed description; the first, an Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin. The abode of Our Blessed Lady is surrounded by a vestibule supported by Corinthian columns; beyond this a garden may be seen with a thick enclosure of hedge. Within, the Holiest of Virgins is seated on a chair; her tunic is tinted a very delicate shade

of red; folded over her knees, her azure mantle falls in graceful folds; her face is resplendent with heavenly serenity and charm, her fair hair falls gently over her shoulders. The Archangel, with surpassing beauty, smiles sweetly and with one knee bended awaits with heavenly eagerness Mary's *fiat*. Dante has described him as follows:

"Say, who that angel is, that with such glee
Beholds our Queen, and so enamoured glows,
Of her high beauty, that all fire he seems, . . ."

Paradiso, C. XXXII (Cary).

The Angelico wrote at the top of this painting, "*Mater pietatis et totius Trinitatis nobile triclinium. Maria.*" And underneath, "*Virginis intactae dum veneris ante figuram, pretereundo cave, ne sileatur Ave.*" We may read this, freely translated as, "Mother of love; Mary the august temple of the Holy Trinity." "When you pass before the picture of the Immaculate Virgin, remember, as you pass, to say an Ave."

In the Adoration of the Magi he has eminently surpassed his other beautiful paintings on this same subject. The cell in which the Master Friar Painter traced this peerless work, was that used by Pope Eugene IV, when he assisted at the consecration of St. Mark's Church in 1442. Because of the presence there, on the feast of the Epiphany, of the Vicar of Christ, it may be rightly conjectured that the Angelico made a supreme effort to honor Him of Whom the Pope was the visible representative.

Some of his other masterpieces are—The Sermon on the Mount—The Transfiguration—The Prayer in the Garden and The Institution of the Sacrament, of which Father Marchese says: "No one may ever hope to excell him in depicting the wonder, the tender devotion and impatient desire of the disciples to receive that divine food."

The Coronation of the Blessed Virgin, the last of the frescoes, is considered by Marchese as more a celestial vision than a painting. He describes it as follows: "He painted the Virgin seated on a white cloud, which is overarched by a charming rainbow; she is robed in white, her arms are folded on her bosom, a gentle smile is on her lips, and she leans gracefully forward towards her Divine Son. Mid all the glory, she is humblest of all. The Word is seated by her side, and seems to crown her. He does not, however, hold the golden diadem in His Hands; . . . He barely touches it with the extremity

of His Fingers, as though He had ordered it to go and encircle His mother's temples. . . . He also wears a white robe, which is shaded with a light tint of chiaroscuro, and appears to be as subtle as the air, . . . whosoever stands in the presence of it, may almost fancy himself translated to the society of the Blessed."

Besides these works which The Angelic Painter executed for his own brethren within St. Mark's, he also gratified the desire of others in Florence by giving of his best. Most of his works for S. Maria Novella are done in miniature. He painted a Coronation of Our Blessed Lady, Deposition from the Cross, a Pieta, a grand tabernacle, with the Blessed Virgin on a throne, and some Saints, The Adoration of the Magi, The Espousals and Transition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, The Final Judgment and many others. Of the Deposition from the Cross M. Montalembert remarks: "What a superabundance of love of God, of immense and burning contrition must that dear Angelico have had the day that he painted this! How he must have wept and meditated that day, in the retirement of his cell, on the sufferings of Our Divine Master! Every stroke of his pencil, every tint seems to have been so many acts of love and sorrow, springing from the depths of his soul. What a touching sermon is not the sight of such a picture."

His picture of the Final Judgment simply defies description. The joy of the blessed and despair of the damned are depicted perfectly by Fra Giovanni. He alone, of the masters before him and after him, has been able to accomplish this difficult task.

Sometime towards the end of the reign of Pope Eugene IV, Fra Giovanni was called by this Pope to Rome to decorate the Vatican. After Eugenius' death, Tommaso da Sarzana, of the Preaching Friars, who assumed the name of Nicholas V, retained the Angelic Painter.

During the stay of Pope Eugenius at St. Mark's, he had acquired a deep regard for Fra Giovanni. When in 1445 the Archbishop of Florence, Zabarella, died, the historian Vasari relates the following story in regard to the election of the new Archbishop:—"The Pope, knowing Fra Giovanni as a man of most holy life, gentle and humble, judged him worthy to fill the Archiepiscopal See of Florence, just then vacant. When the humble religious heard the news, he besought the Holy Father

to choose another, alleging that he felt himself utterly unfit to govern others, and then the simple-minded monk went on to inform the Pope that in his Order there was a brother, ardently devoted to the poor, most learned; who understood how to rule, and was filled with the fear of the Lord. Far better would it be that His Holiness should elect such a man." And the Pope acting upon this humble advice, we are told, nominated Antoninus Archbishop of Florence.

In the Vatican Fra Angelico frescoed a number of histories of the life of Our Lord and portraits of many of the distinguished men of his time. In 1447 it is believed he went to Orvieto to execute a painting of the Final Judgment. The people of Orvieto conferred on him the title of "Master of Masters," a title given only to distinguished artists. This work he left unfinished, having remained in Orvieto only a few months before his return to Rome.

Fra Angelico spent the last ten of his sixty-eight years at Rome. On March 18th, 1455, he surrendered his gentle soul to the Model Who had been his inspiration during all these years. Vasari places upon him an encomium, which is within the grasp of all, yet which is extremely difficult of attainment. Vasari says:—"Fra Giovanni was a most holy man, and very simple in his habits. . . . He might have been wealthy, but he did not care to become so; on the contrary, he was wont to say that true riches consist in being content with little. He might have commanded many, but he did not wish for it, and it was a maxim of his that there is less trouble and less danger of error in being subject to others. It was in his power to have had dignities conferred on him by the friars and others, but he did not esteem them. . . . What dignity can be compared to that which all religious, nay, all men of every condition, should seek, and which is to be found in God alone and a holy life? . . . Never did he exhibit anger amongst his brethren, a fact which seems almost incredible; and whensoever he had occasion to admonish his friends, he did so with a gentle smile. . . . In a word, this never-to-be-sufficiently lauded father, both in actions and words, was most humble and modest, and, in his paintings, simple and devout; and the saints that he painted have more of the air and resemblance of saints than those of any other painter. It was his custom never to retouch or heighten the effect of any of his works, but to leave them just

as they came from his pencil, believing, as he used to say, that such was the will of God."

His body entombed within the sacred walls of the Church of the Minerva awaits its reunion with the soul. His masterpieces continue to preach a sermon of joy and peace.

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