

Explore the extent to which Fra' Angelico's work engages with new issues in pictorial representation. How can he be seen to develop his own aesthetic sensibility?

Fra' Angelico is best known for his artistic innovations in style, building on the earlier work of Masaccio and Masolino to create an aesthetic sensibility that reflected the importance of beauty and wealth of material in art, and in particular religious art. His contributions to the development of the 'sacra conversazione', and to the merits of a naturalistic composition are notable, but most importantly, his ability to paint creations full of ethereal light without resorting to the heavy black lines of contemporaries such as Fra' Filippo Lippi. His life was mostly confined to the monasteries of Florence, and the spiritual intensity of his paintings led Guido di Pietro di Gino to be known as the "Angel painter". The bulk of his work was done for monasteries and churches, and thus he was mostly able to operate outside the stringent demands of wealthy and important patrons, only receiving commissions for his most opulent works, and always keeping a religious subject as the central concern of the work.

Since the end of the international Gothic trend in art, the quattrocento provided artists with new ways of thinking about painting – the earliest examples of which are probably found in the Brancacci Chapel painted by Massaccio (and Masolino in parts). Certainly, the earliest examples of Fra' Angelico's work also bear the marks of international Gothicism – his altarpiece at *San Pier Martire* (1428) is a simple three-panelled triptych, showing the Madonna and Child surrounded by four Dominican saints in a centralised and very linear composition. The Madonna wears robes of ultramarine blue and the flat 'wallpaper' background is gold leaf and sgraffito. The Child stands on her lap rigidly, and without any naturalistic expression, his ornamental robes are like the dress of an older man and fall awkwardly. There is only one possibly Massaccian innovation – the Madonna appears to have knees underneath her robes, and it is this feature which separates her from the earlier trecento Madonnas. The Madonna's face is very fine, and she is young – the influence of Masolino can also be seen. In his slightly later work, Guido di Pietro can be seen to adapt and alter his style to incorporate the new ideas about pictorial representation.

For example, his 1434 Annalenna Altarpiece, a Medici commission featuring the preferred Medici saints, is displayed in a very innovative square frame – the 'tavola quadrata'. Unlike trecento works, the saints flanking the Madonna and Child are not separated by panels, but are all included in the same rectangular painting. It is perhaps the first example of a "sacra conversazione" - where all the saints are in direct communication with the Madonna and the viewer. The new architectural features of quattrocento Florence, with humanist reversions to the Classical forms, are interpreted in this painting by having a conch-shaped scalloped niche above the head of the Virgin, and new pink and green Classical arches which crown the saints around the throne of the Virgin. Angelico has approached this innovation with some trepidation, keeping the background between the saints in the archetypal gold "wallpaper" backing, replete with very detailed sgraffito, showing his unwillingness to dispose of the older values all together. The other central innovation of this painting is the clear recession of space, with the first two saints standing on ground in front of the floor of the Virgin's throne, and other saints situated behind others. The lack, however, of a vanishing-point perspective shows that there were greater developments to come later in his work.

The greatest example of how Fra' Angelico adapted to new concepts about pictorial representation can be seen in the 1440 *San Marco altarpiece*, in which the painter experiments with the concepts of true perspective and the contrast between flatness and depth within his work. Another Medici commission, the saints are recognisable as members of the powerful family, and the patron saints Cosmas and Damian are kneeling in the centre of the composition. Another aspect of the "sacra conversazione" is communication between the figures in the painting and the viewer – Saint Cosmas looks directly out at the viewer, in a daring and new innovation. Another central innovation of the painting is the contrast between the vanishing-point perspective that sets the Madonna and Child centrally on a receding throne, and a rectangular inset Crucifixion, which stands flatly in the centre bottom of the square frame. This unusual inset not only makes the definite point that Fra' Angelico has understood Massaccio's *Trinity* but also that he is able to manipulate the new ideas about painting with relative ease and accomplishment.

The new ideas that Fra' Angelico was beginning to understand and would develop fully in the San Marco altarpiece were first realised in the extremely lush and ornate Annunciation for San Domenico in Cortona, 1434. Here, the use of jewel-like colours and definite naturalistic shapes created by graduating the brightness of the colour without resorting to black lines, makes a magical scene. Fra' Angelico's use of this 'colour modelling' makes his work full of light and glowing colour, and is one of his greatest contributions to quattrocento painting. The luminous pink and gold robe of the angel is spectacularly rich and detailed, and the Madonna is young and beautiful with a deep ultramarine blue robe. The intensity of the blue shows the quality of the Afghanistani lapis lazuli used to create the pigment. Like Masolino's fashionable Florentine 'dandies' in the Brancacci Chapel, the delicate beauty of the human faces is almost otherworldly in perfection. The representation of pictorial space in the painting is another way in which Angelico experimented with materials, to make use of the new humanist ideas about mathematical precision in art and perspective – one of the ways this can be explained by art historians is that he re-discovered the qualities of transparent green earth, and used it to indicate areas of darkness and light in a subtle way. The use of highly Classical motifs, such as pillars with capitals, and the slightly awkward recession of space all show how these new concepts were being experimented with and would be developed later at San Marco.

From the examples I have looked at, which do not cover in any way the large number of paintings and frescoes completed in Fra' Angelico's lifetime, it is possible to see a very definite trend in his work – from the earliest undecided attempts to create more naturalistic figures within a Classical surrounding, abandoning the older precepts of the international Gothic to the highly modelled "sacra conversazione" with clear recession of space and the square 'pala' frame. Through his understanding of materials such as green earth, and the lack of darkness in his paintings, it is clear that he develops his own unique aesthetic sensibility replete with ornate motifs and lush symbolic gardens.