

# Religious Imagery of the Italian *Renaissance*

## Structuring Concepts

- The changing status of the artist
- The shift from images and objects that are strictly religious to the idea of Art
- Shift from highly iconic imagery (still) to narratives (more dynamic, a story unfolding)

## Characteristics of Italian Images

- Links to Byzantine art through both style and materials
- References to antiquity through Greco-Roman and Byzantine cultures
- Simplicity and monumentality of forms— clearing away nonessential or symbolic elements
- Emphasizing naturalism through perspective and anatomy
- The impact of the emerging humanism in images/works of art.

## TIMELINE OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE: QUATROCENTO, CINQUECENTO and early/late distinctions.

### The Era of Art

In Elizabeth's lecture crucifixes, she stressed the artistic representations of crucifixions as distinct from more devotional crucifixions, one of the main differences being an attention paid to the artfulness of the images as well as a break with more devotional presentations of the sacred.

We are moving steadily toward the era which Hans Belting calls "the Era of Art"

- Artists begin to sign their work, take credit for their work
- Begin developing distinctive styles and innovate older forms (rather than copying)
- A kind of 'cult' of artists originates with works such as Giorgio Vasari one of the earliest art histories, *The Lives of the Artists*, which listed the great Italian artists, as well as inventing and developing the idea of the "Renaissance" Vasari's writing serves as a kind of hagiography of primarily Italian artists.

## Altarpieces and Polyptychs (compare to German winged altarpieces)

*Crucifixion, Anonymous Artist/School of Pisa, Cross, 13<sup>th</sup> ce (12.5 x 7.5 feet)*

*Detail Crucifixion, Anonymous Artist/School of Pisa*

*Christus Triumphans* Christ floating in a liminal space half dead, half living before the cross

Iconic composition

strong affiliations with the Byzantine tradition –flatness of the overall form

- washing of apostles feet
- betrayal of Christ
- flogging
- deposition
- entombment
- Christ descent into hell

*Slide of 6 additional italo-byzantine crucifixions*

Examples of the way forms and images are repeated by numerous artists.

*Enthroned Madonna with Child, Angels and Prophets, Cimabue, 1280 - 85, (11.5 x 7.5 feet)*

An iconic composition of the Madonna – *iconic in appearance* though it is not an icon and doesn't function that way. It functions as a high altarpiece. Mary points to the Incarnation.

Mary enthroned in majesty, the Hodegetria pose, pointing to Christ, flanked by Angels

Old Testament prophets below hold scrolls describing Old Testament prophecy of the birth of the Virgin.  
(typology: Old Testament prophecies of the New Testament Messiah)

Note the “punched’ gold halos

*Maesta by Duccio, 1308 – 11, tempera on panel, 7 x 13 feet (view of front panel)*

*Maesta* means “In Majesty”

The incredible detail in this piece compared to earlier works – note the garments of St. Catherine of Alexandria (left, front with the palm of martyrdom).

This image is, again, very iconic, still and does not suggest a narrative; it simply ‘is’

There is an inscription on the painting that reads:

*“Holy Mother of God, be thou the cause of peace in Siena and, because he painted thee thus, of life for Duccio.”*

A kind of supplication or prayer through (1) the act of painting, and (2) quality of the painting. Also the implication that Siena is worthy because of Duccio's achievements as a painter.

***Maesta by Duccio, tempera on panel, (view of back panels)***

***(detail of back panels)***

the 26 back panels of the altarpiece were painted with narratives from the Passion of Christ.

The front of the altarpiece is iconic / the back images are more narrative

This work has been disassembled and the panels are in various collections – most of them are in Siena. (this image was put together digitally – it does not appear this way in Siena)

***Three Marys at the Empty Tomb  
and Christ's Descent into Hell detail, verso Maesta by Duccio***

The narrative is carried primarily by the figures and the background is fairly generic.

Monumental, stable, clear composition to address the narrative

***The Crucifixion with Life of St. John and the Passion, by Lippo di Benivieni, 1315, tempera on panel***

Left wing: John in the wilderness with Agnus Dei  
John baptizing Christ  
John beheaded

Right wing: Christ praying in Gethsemane  
Flogged at column  
Deposition from the cross

Central panel: Crucifixion with Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mary brother of Lazarus and John the Disciple plus two monks

The monks suggest that this may have been an altarpiece in a monastery – we'll see similar images in San Marco Convent later in the lecture.

[the frame encasing the entire altarpiece deprives the piece of its original function and design – turns it into a picture]

The significant use of gilding harkens back to Byzantine images as well as suggesting the expensive valuable materials used for devotional images/objects.

A combination of narrative side images (the Passions of Christ and John) along with a more iconic composition/strategy in the main panel

***Annunciation with Saints Ansanus and Margaret by Simone Martini, 1333, tempera and gold leaf on panel, (10 x 9 feet)***

Gabriel's greeting -- raised gesso words that are then covered with gilding and paint: *Ave gratia plena dominus tecum* ("Hail thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee") from the Gospel of Luke.

Gabriel wears an olive branch garland in addition to the usual halo in gold.

He bears an olive branch (the sign of peace)

lilies in the vase between the angel and Mary. (symbol of purity)

the holy spirit above the Annunciation conversation – pointing at Mary.

Depicts St. Ansanus ("the Baptizer" the patron saint of Siena) and St. Margaret flanking the Annunciation (Margaret patron of childbirth)

In medallions above: Old Testament prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Daniel (prophecy of the Messiah)

Naturalism: Gabriel's garments are still floating from having arrived suddenly, the Virgin withdraws initially fearful

This work hovers on the edge of becoming truly narrative. The work still has a rather formal presentation in an ahistorical space – similar to an icon

### **San Marco Convent, 1437 – 39, Fra Angelico, wall paintings, Florence, Italy**

#### The Convent

The Convent of San Marco was a Dominican community and home to Fra Angelico, a Dominican friar, who designed and painted the wall paintings throughout the convent.

prayer, adoration, meditation, and contemplation were the main objectives and foci of the Dominicans, who devoted themselves to blessing God. Fra Angelico's paintings make clear reference to these values.

With the help of his Dominican assistants, he painted 43 frescoes that function as spiritual guides to life in their community.

Each inhabitant had his own room for prayer and meditation with his own fresco.

### Fra Angelico

Fra Angelico's approach to painting had some similarities to icon writing.

He painted with unceasing diligence, painting only sacred subjects;

he never retouched or altered his work, probably with a religious feeling that he was a humble, lowly channel of the divine and if God had caused such images or elements to appear, he was not in a position to change what God had inspired.

Tradition holds that he painted constantly in a state of fervent prayer; he wept when he painted a Crucifixion.

As Keith Thomas indicates in our reading, the notion of Art didn't really exist yet and to Angelico, painting was a form of prayer and the images were meditational supports.

Angelico was beatified in 1982 by JP II / patron of artists

**Beatification** is a recognition (third of four steps toward canonization) accorded by the Catholic church of a dead person's accession to Heaven and capacity to intercede on behalf of individuals who pray in his or her name (intercession of saints).

### The Paintings

Function of Images: MEDITATIONAL though not in the manner of icons; more in the manner of devotional manuals. The archetype was not present in the images. The images were visual prompts for meditation.

#### ***view of dormitory hallway with Annunciation*** ***Annunciation***

The Dominican constitution required that an image of the Virgin appear in the dormitory hallway and be lit, night and day.

One objective of his work was not to make it too sensual (artistically facile or aesthetically compelling). Doing so would distract the devotee from the content of the image and attract them to the artist's skill.

The aim is to represent only the bare image of Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, in order to encourage a *spiritual* concentration of the figures.

The reality of The Annunciation, the imaginative space it occupies, is precisely on the threshold that separates what is empirical from what may be ascertained only subjectively.

### ***View of San Marco's cloister arches and vaults***

Angelico made the environments of most of the paintings appear as if the events were taking place within the Convent architecture as a way of bringing the events for meditation to the present, familiar context.

### ***view of monk's cell with Virgin and Child with Ss. Augustine and Dominic (cell 11)***

#### ***Virgin and Child with Ss. Augustine and Dominic (cell 11)***

Most of the cells' frescoes contain at least one identifiable person from monastic history, either St. Dominic, St. Thomas Aquinas, or St. Peter Martyr.

Together they represent the central values that distinguished the Dominicans.

**Saint Dominic** (founder of the Dominican order) stood for a holy life dedicated to poverty, preaching, and monastic contemplation

**Saint Thomas Aquinas** represented the single-minded dedication to the primacy of study;

**St. Peter Martyr** stood for the willingness to suffer martyrdom for the sake of orthodoxy. (he was ambushed while traveling on the road, wounded in the head and stabbed numerous times. He wrote with his own blood, as he lay dying, "I believe.")

### ***Crucifixion with John, Virgin Mary, St. Dominic and St. Jerome (cell 4)***

Dominic's gesture: Hands outstretched = imploring the Divine

Jerome holds his Vulgate

A common image in the novices' cells depicted *Saint Dominic before the Crucifix*. In these frescoes, Saint Dominic is the main subject matter rather than Christ.

This image appears to show a scriptural event: the Crucifixion of Christ, but in fact it focuses not on the narrative of the crucifixion,

but the Crucifix as an **object**,

Saint Dominic does not witness an *action* so much as respond to an **object**.

This emphasizes Fra Angelico's association of this major image crucifixion images intended to strengthen the formation of novices in Dominican consciousness through private meditation.

***View of monk's cell with Annunciation with St. Peter Martyr (cell 3)***

***Annunciation with St. Peter Martyr (cell 3)***

In this image, St. Peter Martyr, models for the viewer a meditative contemplation of the Annunciation.

The sparseness of the image was to bring the viewer's mind to the content, not the artistry of the image.

***Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah and St. Dominic (cell 6)***

St. Dominic's gesture of hands before chest suggests meditation on the Transfiguration

An image that encourages the viewer to consider the mystery of Christ's divinity and humanity.

***Christ Mocked with Virgin and Dominic (cell 7)***

Both the Virgin and Dominic touch their faces in gestures of dismay and compassion;

Dominic's book suggests 'recollection' – encouraging the viewer to recall all the ways that Christ was mocked and humiliated.

***Christ nailed to the cross***

This image does show a scriptural event – complete with text/language issuing from Christ's mouth in the form of written text.

***Crucifixion with St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Dominic, Virgin Mary and John (cell 37)***

Both humility and imploring gestures are depicted in the two saints gestures.

John the Disciple is overcome with grief and remorse (suggesting that we should feel similar remorse for our part in Christ's crucifixion).

The crucifix works more like an object and less in the form of a narrative.

***Man of Sorrows with Virgin Mary and St. Thomas Aquinas (cell 26)***

This image draws from the rich tradition of medieval Man of Sorrows prints and paintings.

Not a scriptural event, but an ahistorical, image for meditation and contemplation

## **Italian Use of Perspective**

One of the most important developments of the Italian Renaissance was Brunelleschi's system of perspective, collected and documented further by Alberti the architect.

It is one of the ways that the Italian renaissance was hailed as one of the most innovative periods of artistic and intellectual activity.

Further, the use of a mathematical system of perspective was, for centuries one of the many characteristics that placed the Italians in higher art historical esteem than the Netherlandish and Northern artists of the same period.

[bear this in mind when we read *The Mirror of the Artist*]

### ***St. Augustine teaching, by Benozzo Gazzoli, 15<sup>th</sup> ce***

Example of the use of one-point perspective. All parallel lines converge on a single vanishing point.

Systems of perspective were studied extensively by high Renaissance artists who relied increasingly on other disciplines to inform their art including the emerging theories of optics, anatomy, and systems of perspective (geometry)

Perspective is one characteristic of Italian art that suggests the artist's liberal arts knowledge and the desire to harness the arts to more philosophical and mathematical systems.

### ***Dead Christ, by Mantegna, 1490, tempera on canvas***

Addresses the corporeality of Christ by placing the viewer very, very close to Christ's dead body. As if we are kneeling at the foot of the body (a meditative and grieving/mourning position).

We clearly see the 5 wounds, so this devotion which is more medieval continues in this image.

The perspective is a little off (the feet are too small)

### ***Martyrdom of St. James, by Mantegna, 1449-51, fresco***

This image also places the viewer in a kneeling position (this was painted on a wall, so our position below the image makes some sense).

We look up at St. James blessing a man on his way to his execution. We are encouraged to mimic the kneeling man's position, asking for blessing.

This kind of perspective, still one-point, is called "worm's eye-view"

***two views of Camera degli sposi ceiling painting, by Mantegna, 1465-74, fresco***

also one-point, worm's eye-view perspective, but employed in a clearly more secular work.

This work looks back to Greco-Roman antiquity with puti, and other images and forms of antiquity.

The illusion of an oculus in the ceiling of a home, also the illusion of painted ceiling mouldings

***Detail of Annunciation from the St. Anthony Polyptych, by della Francesca, 1470, panel painting***

Clear one-point perspective – indeed perspective seems to be the point of this image: it intervenes in the holy conversation between Gabriel and Mary.

***St. Anthony Polyptych, by della Francesca, 1470, panel painting***

***Flagellation of Christ, della Francesca, 1449 oil on panel***

A kind of 'bait-and-switch' compositional strategy that suggests the innovative imagination of the artist. Here the foreground figures are not the point; the event in the background is the focus of the image: the flogging of Christ. It is the use of perspective that carries the eye back to this part of the image.

***Annunciation, Fra Filippo Lippi, approx. 1450, tempera on panel***

Analogy of a house for the body is worked out in the enclosed garden and the house: open bedroom and stairs ascending

The *sacra conversazione* has already taken place that the image deals specifically with the theological mystery of how the Virgin will become pregnant with the Christ child.

The dove is held within a transparent golden disc with a kind of 'slip stream' of spirals suggesting its origin in the Hand of God.

This suggests Francis Bacon's theories about vision: 'Bacon believed that an object or form "produces a likeness of itself in the second part of the air, and so on" until it reached its destination.' More evidence of the Italian Renaissance artist's interdisciplinary approach to art.

A golden spray from the dove's beak meets with a similar spray issuing from a slit in Mary's tunic. The slit in the tunic corresponds, again, to optics and vision: her womb is like an eye.

My interest in the Drury piece is his insightful suggestion that (1) "...Christian mysteries...demanded...tact in the telling." And (2) "...painters must make decisions which more modest Christians are spared.... To visualize what previously had been veiled and misted in figures of speech."

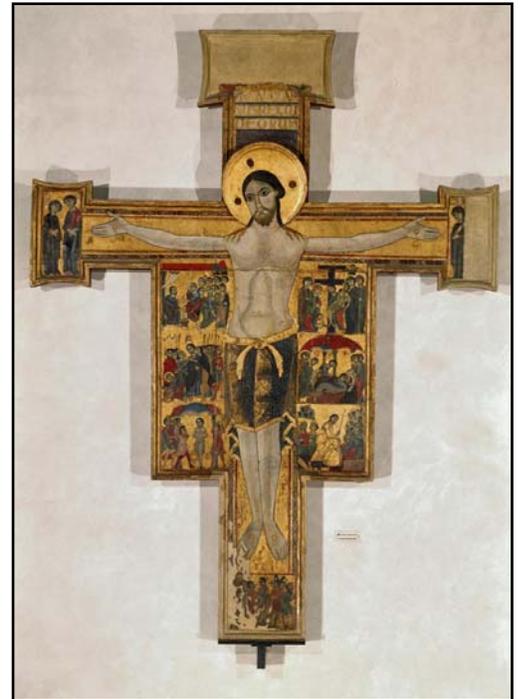
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