



Christ in Limbo

"Christ in Limbo" is a painting of Jesus coming to the underworld to take the ancient scholars into Heaven. The Catholic Church teaches that Heaven was closed off to humanity until Jesus came as savior. When he died on the cross he went to Limbo, or what the Greeks called the underworld, and took all of the good souls that were trapped there into Heaven. Fra Angelico paints Limbo as a part of Hell: do you see the demons lurking in the shadows? A few flee to the caverns, while one lies crushed beneath the door.



This fresco was painted in a guest room in San Marco. The room was used by scholars who needed to use the library. No doubt they were happy to see a painting of Jesus leading their fellow scholars into Heaven!



VIRGINIS INTACTE CVM VENERIS ANTE FIGVRAM PRETEREVNDO CAVE NE SILEATUR. AVE

The Annunciation



The Annunciation was a popular theme for paintings during the Renaissance. Every artist did a version of the scene, and some painted it more than once. The Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to have child, and to name him Jesus. This particular painting is in the north corridor at San Marco. Unlike the other paintings in the friary, this one is visible to the public. It is perhaps Angelico's most popular and best piece of work.

Fra Angelico was able to paint this scene with the architecture of the friary in mind. He also created an invisible light source; the wall behind the figures seems to glow. Angelico planned for his viewer to see this painting in the darkness of the north corridor; that way, the painting seems to shine with its own light. Take a look at how he manipulated the perspective, using the diagram shown.



The Annunciation was Angelico's favorite scene to paint. He did many versions of it. To the left are two more of his paintings of the same scene.

Annalena Altarpiece

The "Annalena Altarpiece" is a good example of Fra Angelico's use of color. The gold accents make the figures look radiant. The date of the painting is disputed, as well as its original location. Today it is in the Museo di San Marco in Florence. It is known as the "Annalena altarpiece" because it was found in a Dominican convent, St. Vincent in Annalena (San Vincenzo d' Annalena), a community of nuns. Some scholars are convinced that Angelico did not paint this altarpiece for the nuns, because St. Vincent is not even in the painting. Standing beside Mary are St. John the Evangelist, St. Lawrence, and St. Francis. Under the picture is a series of smaller paintings that show scenes from the lives of St. Cosmo and St. Damian. Cosimo Medici was named after St. Cosmo, and so it was common for St. Cosmo to show up in paintings. Artists, no doubt, wanted to flatter their patrons!



The Coronation *of* the Virgin

The "Coronation of the Virgin" is another painting in San Marco. It depicts Mary in Heaven, surrounded by saints, being crowned queen of Heaven by Jesus. The two saints at the center of the painting are St. Dominic and St. Francis. Notice that Mary has her hands crossed in a humble gesture, exactly as she is depicted in the "Annunciation."



Deposition from the Cross

Angelico was considered one of the greatest landscape painters in the fifteenth century. In the altarpiece shown, "Deposition from the Cross" he paints generalized images of the Tuscan countryside in the background. There are very detailed flowers, grasses and trees in this painting. The scene is after the death of Christ, when he is being taken down from the cross to be buried. The individual paintings on the spires show his resurrection (center), greeting a follower after the resurrection (left), and the empty tomb (right). No doubt Angelico was inspired by the Gothic art of Simone Martini.



THE LAST JUDGMENT



"The Last Judgment" is perhaps one of Angelico's most impressive works.

This painting is of Christ, come to judge the souls on earth at the end of the world. On the left the blessed go to Heaven, on the right the damned go to Hell. Christ is in the center, surrounded by saints and angels. Fra Angelico paints the saints and the blessed souls in bright colors, some of them adorned in gold.

Sinners in Hell



Saints in Heaven



Here are detailed shots of the painting. The saints in Heaven are brightly adorned. Do you see St. Francis? The sinners in Hell, however, are cast in shadows. In one part, gluttons sit at a table unable to eat. In another, demons pour hot gold into the mouth of a greedy man. People who were self destructive on earth continue to punish themselves in Hell. Fra Angelico was inspired by Dante, an Italian poet who wrote the 'Inferno.'



Fra Angelico is the first of the five greatest Italian artists in the Renaissance. He used colors and perspective to create lighting and depth, becoming the norm for the artists that were to paint after him, and separating him from the Gothic artists before him. Angelico went further than Giotto, making his paintings much more realistic. The frescos of the two Italian painters are similar, but Angelico took a gigantic step forward.