

FRA ANGELICO AND THE QUATTROCENTO

The National Gallery has recently exhibited some of its earlier Italian paintings that have been inaccessible since the outbreak of war. Amongst these are two works, both by anonymous artists of the Florentine Quattrocento and members of the school of Angelico. One represents the 'Adoration of the Magi' and the other tells the story of our Lady conferring the habit of the Order of Preachers on Reginald. Although not of the highest artistic endeavour they offer a commentary on the aesthetic position of the great Dominican painter. Exhibiting a difference that is significant, they bring out very clearly the divergent aspects of the master's style. Unquestionably the demands of the two subjects are not identical; even so the treatment accorded to the latter is more directly in conformity with the affinity that Fra Angelico showed with earlier traditions, and the painter of the 'Adoration of the Magi' displayed a greater sympathy with the new naturalistic trends although they were still in an experimental stage.

The composition of the legend of Reginald is notable for its simplicity and the absence of ornamentation. The picture is divided into two main groups by the device of placing a pole a little to the right of the centre of the composition, but it might be more accurately described as being subdivided into three areas. This division of the picture into several distinct masses owes a certain amount to the system employed by Fra Angelico's master, the Camaldolese monk, Dom Lorenzo Monaco, as can be seen in the painting of 'Legends from the Life of Saint Benedict' which hangs in the same gallery. The colour is more coordinated, the arrangement of the forms more integrated and the whole exhibits considerably more strength and maturity than the school piece. Primary colours are used throughout the latter in a somewhat unimaginative manner, the canopy over Reginald's bed is a pale ultramarine blue and the bedspread is a conventional red. Reginald is depicted sitting up in bed filled with joy at this momentous piece of divine favour; radiating lines of gold surround his head to emphasise the new sanctity he has just been granted. Our Lady standing at his bedside proffering the Dominican habit with outstretched hands is clothed in a rose coloured gown with a blue veil on her head. She is accompanied on this errand of mercy by two young women who stand beside her in attitudes of comparatively formal inactivity. The one on her right wears a green mantle over a red dress and the other is represented in a rose dress similar to that worn by the Madonna. Compared with that of his master (the friar of Fiesole) the treatment of the heads is manifestly weak and the analysis

of the human form decidedly shallow—nevertheless he obviously derives his type directly from him. The heads from the point of view of characterisation are to be found in many of the paradisaical scenes by Angelica. Again the holy group appears on the right of the picture, this time elevated from the ground with the Virgin holding out the habit as before. In the foreground is the kneeling figure of Saint Dominic, perhaps the most compelling figure in the panel, although it shows the same structural weaknesses that are to be found in the entire painting. He expresses a spirit of fervour that is quite rare considering the absence of dramatic gesture to help the description of such a state. If we accept his limitations this artist reveals to us the spirit of piety and tenderness that played a fundamental rôle in the art of Angelico; he lacks the technical accomplishments of his master but has inherited a portion of his religious integrity.

The 'Adoration of the Magi' displays a greater penetration and assimilation of technicalities, greater proficiency in the handling of the brush, and more skilful draughtsmanship. The influence Fra Angelico exerted over its painter was much more closely linked to the later field of his development with increasing deference towards naturalism. It never found expression in the use of the monumental universalities adopted by Massaccio (who died twenty-seven years before him and who seemed to be born so curiously before his appropriate period) but rather in the rediscovery of the importance of significant gesture, a new delight in the portrayal of flowers and the like and a corresponding increase in the use of landscape.

A strangely unequal work, this 'Adoration' possesses many delightful qualities, as for instance the aged figure of the kneeling king eagerly leaning forward to kiss the feet of the Holy Child. Although the main directions of the pose may have been inspired by the similar movement of the king in the fresco of the same subject by Angelico, there is a vitality that belongs wholly to this panel. The landscape is rudimentary and remains undeveloped in comparison with the work of his master, the background being composed almost entirely of distant mountains conceived in a conventional form. But again a delight in nature is shown in the foreground which is carpeted with flowers, star-like amidst the shadows of the grass, and also in the flowering tree behind the stable. This tree has been most beautifully seen and recorded and gives evidence of considerable ability. The choice of colour too has on the whole been happier; crudity creeps in here and there but generally speaking the panel displays that jewel-like quality so often associated with the art of illumination. The background is kept relatively low in

key—grey, brown, and sombre greens accentuated suddenly by these small gem-like flowers and the fine blossoms on the tree. They are well handled so as not to obtrude with the equally brilliant colours of the raiment of the kings and their retinue. The drawing of the figures themselves markedly demonstrates the inequality of the artist, they are varied in pose and form, some are much more convincing than others—the forms of the infant Christ for instance are meagre and lacking the generosity of genius.

Despite all his conventional lapses the painter of this panel was closely allied to Angelico, and upon looking at the 'Adoration' one instantly recalls his series of paintings concerned with scenes from the lives of Saints Cosmas and Damian, and in particular with the 'Incitement to Idolatry' and the 'Martyrdom of Sts Cosmas and Damian'. Whilst revealing the affinity existing between the two, it also immediately illustrates the disparity existing side by side with it. There is a freedom and largeness in Angelico's execution that is mainly absent in the other, a carefree naturalism combined with naïvety. One instance of this is in the figures casting themselves into the sea from the rocks where the shapes are reduced to a formal simplicity and the introduction of soft blue, pink, lemon-yellow, and pale green for the colour of their garments cleverly indicates recession against the brilliant colours used in the foreground. It is probable that he commenced his artistic career as an illuminator and the tremendous purity of his pigments would seem to support this assumption particularly in the present series. The composition in the 'Incitement to Idolatry' is complex and superbly carried out. Filled with lively incident it is greatly enhanced by the poetically conceived landscape which is a strange contradiction, for whilst containing much that would have been considered modern in the early fifteenth century it also boasts a gold tower, a direct return to mediaeval archaicism, which admittedly lends it an ingenuous charm. The seascape on the other hand is suggestive of the ocean in Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus'.

Sts Cosmas and Damian raised high upon their crosses are figures of profound tranquillity contrasting vividly with the immense activity of their persecutors below, and the graceful lines of the trees offer a beautiful foil for the stark uprights of the crosses and the flowers patterning the ground spring up fresh and cool.

Thus Fra Angelico came to occupy rather a unique position in the contemporary art of Florence since, standing at the cross roads in its growth, his art points in both directions; on the one hand towards the past traditions evinced in the sinuous design of his drapery and the use of pure pigment, and on the other, the treatment of form derived from Masolino's influence united to his love

of naturalistic detail and sturdiness, carving out a course opposite to that of the mannered elegance of the late Gothic which flourished in the court arts. Thus it can be seen that he made a vital contribution to the development of Florentine painting in its journey away from the Gothic system. The transition from Gothic to Renaissance was too sudden in Massaccio for the appreciation of any but the most enlightened of the intellectual groups in the city, whereas the unexpected marriage of the two elements in Fra Angelico rendered him more accessible.

He reflected in part the uncertainties of his epoch by these differences, for the cloister was far from immune to such disturbances. He was driven with its other inmates from the priory at Fiesole to Foligno and Cortona on account of the fierce dispute then raging concerning pope and anti-pope, the Florentine government in company with the Master General supporting Alexander V, the house at Fiesole continuing to champion the cause of Gregory XII. However all these events ultimately only seemed to strengthen his inner calm enabling him to travel forward slowly to a new art form without losing his regard for those of the immediate past. He stands then a figure of artistic innovation, which he used as a vehicle for the interpretation of a singular spirituality. The dominant mood in his painting was one of deep underlying piety and charity embodied in a meditative serenity. He appears to have bestowed it in some measure upon the two members of his school who painted the pictures we have been considering although it was soon to be obscured in the increasing paganism of the age.

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