

Fra Angelico Paints the Crucifixion

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Calvary may not have been Fra Angelico's favourite theme; Vasari records the pious tradition that 'whenever he painted a Crucifixion the tears would stream down his face'¹. John Pope-Hennessy would not have us disregard the story simply because it has no contemporary sanction for, quoting William James, he reminds us that 'many saints ... have possessed what the Church traditionally reveres as a special grace, the gift of tears.'²

In the mid-1430s Fra Angelico painted a *Crucifixion with Mary and Saints John and Dominic* on the refectory wall at St. Dominic's Priory, Fiesole, but from quite early in its life the fresco suffered from damp and was frequently restored. In 1879 it was photographed, detached from its wall, mounted on canvas and sold, ultimately to the Louvre.³ The tau-shaped cross stands some twelve feet high on its conventional mound and the inscription panel is attached to the top with a lath.

Angelico was to use this design more than once. The composition is built on an upright rectangle whose top is the horizontal beam of the cross, ABCD in Figure 1. Diagonals AC and BD intersect axes IG and EF at point H in the diagram, coinciding with the Saviour's feet and linking the bystanders with the cross. Geometry, however, is only the basis of the plan, which is developed as a symmetrical rhythm in Figure 2. One curve, starting at Christ's right hand crosses to the left hip, then continues through the feet to touch Dominic's face before looping around the figure of John and coiling about his head. A similar line from Christ's left hand runs in an S-Shape to encircle Dominic's feet and terminate at Mary's head. These rhythms are developed in Figure 3 to produce free-spinning whorls reminiscent of vine tendrils.⁴

The figure of Christ is classically proportioned and the painter shows a certain awareness of anatomy in his treatment of muscle, bone-structure and tissue. In line with Fra Angelico's moderate realism, arm-muscles are still tense, while the abdomen sags; the moment appears to be soon after death. The photograph of 1879 records a face shaped by the light which falls on it from the upper right, so that the features are suggested by areas of shadow, rather than by precise drawing. None of this, however, is to be seen today in the Louvre picture, which has been cleaned of repaint to reveal delicately modelled features.

If initially Angelico followed Lorenzo Monaco's traditional iconography, he soon evolved an elegantly classical imagery; and though he was influenced by Ghiberti, Brunelleschi and Masaccio, it was still decidedly his own: consciously theological, alive to physical beauty and

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classical proportion, moderately realistic, not without tenderness, cerebral. The Cloister *Crucifixion with St. Dominic at the Foot of the Cross* in San Marco persists in memory because of its monumental simplicity and the classic nobility of the figure on the cross. Its design is not mathematically symmetrical, as there is nothing on the right to

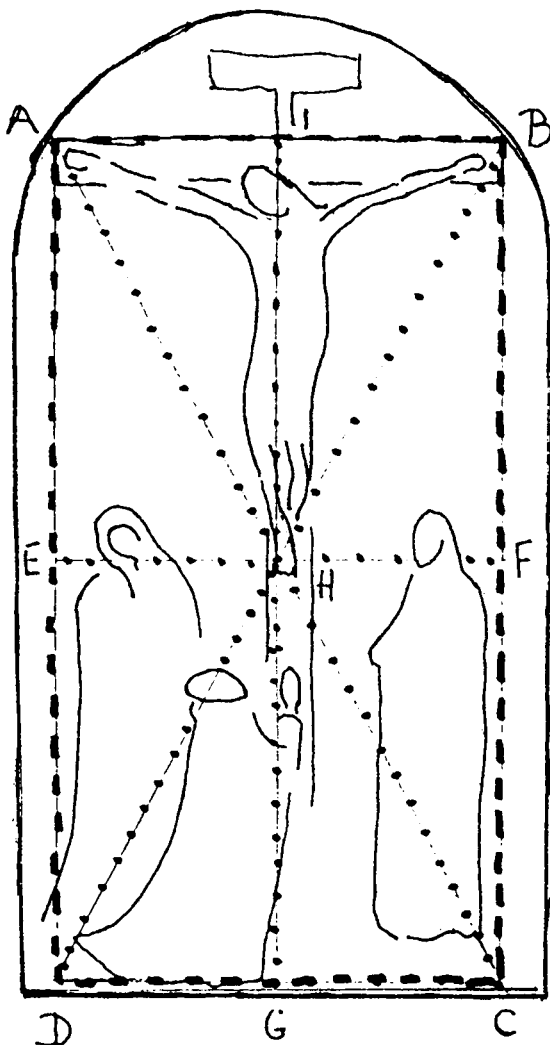


Figure 1: Rectangle ABCD is the geometrical basis. Axes IG, EF and diagonals AC, DB coincide at H, i.e., at the feet of the Christ figure.

counter the figure of Dominic embracing the wooden upright, yet there is no sense of imbalance: a case, perhaps, of theme out-weighting geometry. The artist is careful not to show blood on Dominic's hands, possibly for aesthetic, but more probably for theological reasons.

In the chapter-room at San Marco, Fra Angelico painted a fresco of the *Crucifixion with Attendant Saints*. Christ's cross is about fifteen feet tall and is topped by a signboard larger than usual because it carries the full inscription in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, as described in John 19. A lowering sky halves the composition horizontally and an ochre hilltop occupies more than half the remaining space, but the vertical crosses dominate the picture, while once more the unseen but inferable vine-tendrils motif underlies the artist's marshalling of the twenty saints in the foreground. A line from the right hand of Christ descends by His left hip to the feet, then travels to the right in whorls which enclose Saints Thomas Aquinas, Peter Martyr and the founders of religious orders; a line from the left hand moves from the feet to encircle the groups of mourning women and male saints.

Between 1967 and 1974 this fresco was cleaned, restored and proofed against damp and chemical pollution.⁵ One result is that what the viewer sees is now closer in colour values to what Angelico intended,

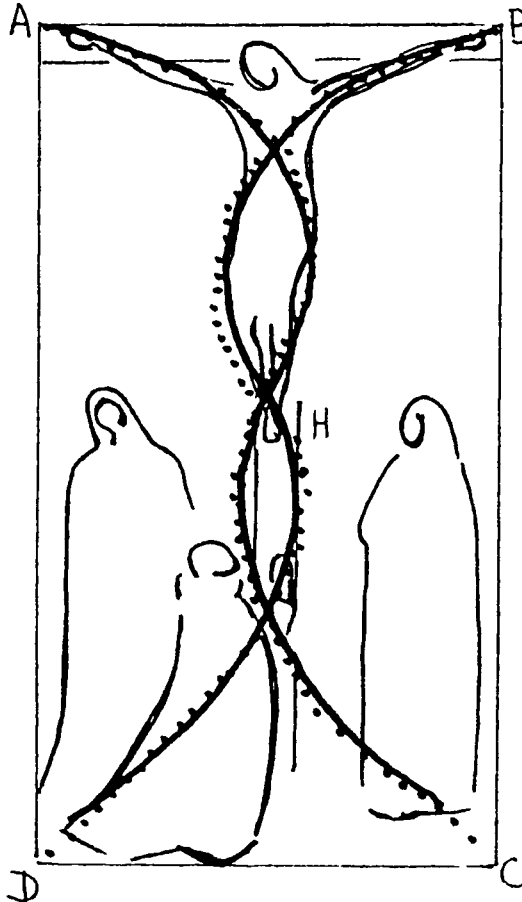


Figure 2: Rhythmical lines BHD and AHC form a double S-shape.

except for the sky. Here the ultramarine, always an uncertain pigment in fresco work, had long flaked off, leaving a dull red priming. At some stage a fresh coat of red had been laid on, probably in preparation for a further layer of blue; but none of this adhered properly. The outcome is a sombrely livid sky which, even if it is not what Angelico intended, might well have his approval.

Crosses and attendant saints stand on the narrow hilltop and beyond is nothing to suggest recession in space. Angelico has simply not applied his skill in perspective painting, and the result is a two-dimensional presentation of figures silhouetted against a monochrome background.

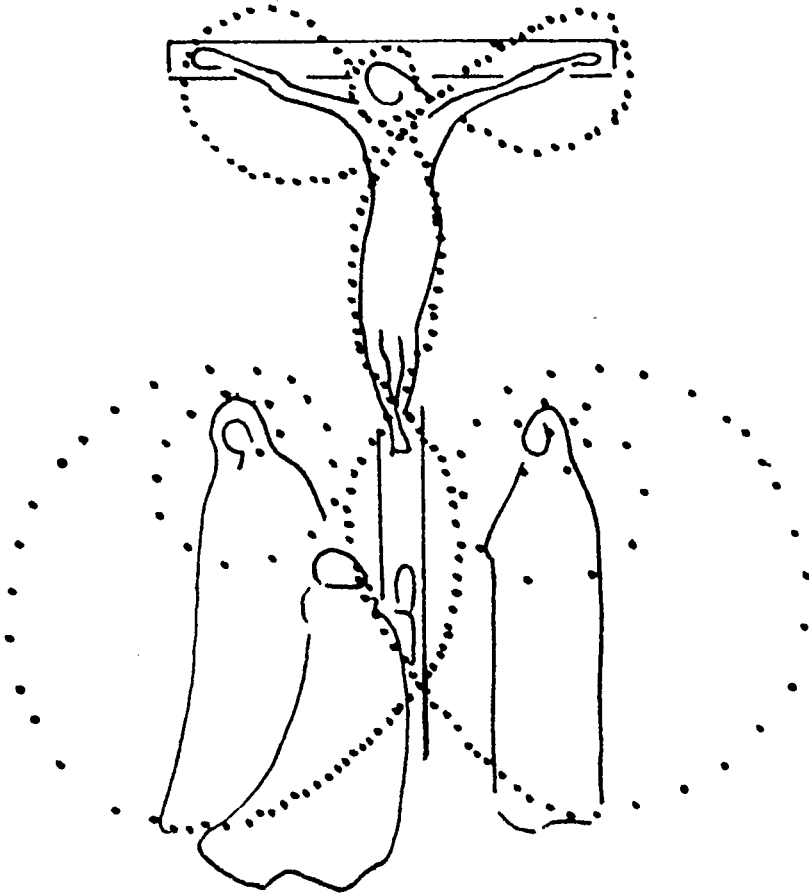


Figure 3: S-shapes developed to produce vine tendril whorls, a motif found at times in Crucifixion images from early medieval times.

Even the figure of Christ is lightly modelled, and there are critics who say that for all its impressiveness the Chapter-room *Crucifixion* is hardly Angelico at his best. The commissioning prior and chapter may have requested a flat treatment as more suitable in a hall of serious business

and austerity and in the minds of all, including Angelico, may have been a thrust for simplicity in reaction to the elaborateness of Andrea di Bonaiuto's frescoes in the chapter-room at Santa Maria Novella, where allegory is piled on history with an inescapable touch of public relations, if not of downright propaganda.

Until the appearance in 1990 of William Hood's essay on 'Fra Angelico at San Marco' it was assumed that the Chapter-room fresco dated from 1441—42, but Professor Hood thinks that it must have 'come very late in Fra Angelico's career, certainly after 1450'.⁶ This may set the cat among the pigeons, but it should be welcomed as a necessary adjustment to Anglican chronology. For too long the unfinished condition of the chapter-room, until August 1442, has led to the assumption that the painting must have followed immediately, whereas it may well have been executed fully ten years later.

Fra Angelico brought more to the work than a personal absorption in Christ's passion. Commissioned to paint something suitable for a chapter-room, he planned a visual extension of the liturgical anamnesis. It is no accident that the Old Testament prophets in the ornamental border connect with the Dominican portraits in the frieze below, which are to be viewed not as a gallery celebrating past greatness but as a bracing reminder of the order's prophetic role. His address to the brethren is solemn, encouraging, emphatic but hardly comfortable, because Fra Angelico carries out his full duty as a preacher without muffling the message that reform starts here.

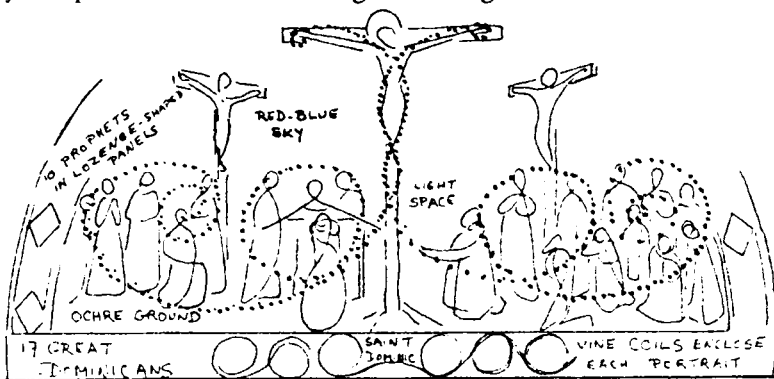


Figure 4: Vine tendrils underlie the structure of the Chapter-room *Crucifixion with Attendant Saints*.

- 1 Vasari, Giorgio: *Lives of the Artists* Penguin edition, 1988, translated by George Bull; Vol II, p. 206.
- 2 James, William: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* quoted in Pope-Hennessy, John: *Fra Angelico* London, 1974 (Second edition), p.3.
- 3 Pope-Hennessy, John: op.cit, figure 16 reproduces the photograph of 1879 between pages 194 and 195.
- 4 Hatfield, Rab: 'The Tree of Life and the Holy Cross' in *Christianity and the Renaissance* Syracuse University Press, 1990; pp. 133—155. (Paperback edition). The vine-tendrill motif may be seen in apse-mosaics of many Roman churches.
- 5 Baldini, Umberto: *Beato Angelico*. Firenze, 1986. Pages 26—32, for a detailed account of the restoration programme.
- 6 Hood, William: 'Fra Angelico at San Marco' in *Christianity and the Renaissance*, cited in 4 above, pages 113, 114 (Paperback edition).