

On 23 May 1498 Savonarola was executed in the Piazza della Signoria. The community of San Marco was persecuted and deprived of its privileges, and even the great bell of the priory which had summoned the people to hear the sermons and to attend the liturgies was ordered to be brought out in a cart around the streets of Florence to be publicly flogged by the city executioner. Fra Angelico's vision was shattered.

- 1 J.R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici* (London, 1977), 21.
- 2 For a good summary of Florence and Cosimo de' Medici see, Vincent Cronin, *The Florentine Renaissance* (London, 1967), 61–84
- 3 Mervyn James, 'The Concept of honour, 1485–1642', in Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England*. (Cambridge, 1986) 270–308.
- 4 George Holmes, *The Florentine Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1992), 11–15; 119–24.
- 5 Quoted in Hale *op.cit.*, 28.
- 6 *ibid.*, 31
- 7 Bram Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage: The Rise of the Professional Artist in Renaissance Italy* (London, 1992) 36–7.
- 8 *ibid.*, 72–4
- 9 Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City States in Renaissance Italy* (London, 1979), 336.
- 10 Stefano Orlandi *op. Necrologio di Santa Maria Novella* (Florence, 1955), i, 40.
- 11 S. Antonino, *Summa Theologica*, iii, viii, 4.
- 12 Kempers, *op. cit.* 203–06

Fra Angelico's Deposition from the Cross: The Circumstances Explored

Michael Prendergast

The Strozzi were a large, rich and powerful family in the Florence of the 1420s. Like many aristocratic merchant families of the time, they planned a chapel where only they would have the right to be buried. Such privatised funerary and memorial arrangements were not unusual, though in combining theirs with a functioning sacristy in the monastic church of Santa Trinita, the Strozzi started a trend which was to be important in the evolution of Renaissance architecture. Because it was stripped of furnishings and pictures in the seventeenth century, the chapel-sacristy at Santa Trinita now looks bare, but in the early fifteenth century it was full of colour and religious imagery.

The head of the family, Palla Strozzi, took a leading part in the planning of the memorial chapel. He negotiated with the monks, engaged an architect, masons and stone carvers and had his deceased father

entombed in a wall of the as yet uncompleted building. In a real sense it was Palla's project. His choice of artists to paint pictures for it reveals his taste. He commissioned Gentile da Fabriano, the most famous artist in Italy, to paint the *Adoration of the Magi*, and Lorenzo Monaco, the leading practitioner in Florence of the International Gothic style, to produce a *Deposition of Christ from the Cross*. Gentile's work is now in the Uffizi, but Lorenzo died in 1425 leaving the *Deposition* unfinished. Twenty years later Fra Angelico completed it, and today it hangs in the Museum of San Marco, Florence.

There is no doubt in the critics' minds that the *Deposition* is substantially Fra Angelico's work,¹ though there is some uncertainty about when he executed it. Whether one follows John Pope-Hennessy in thinking that it was painted in the mid-1440s,² or Stefano Orlandi O.P. in his belief that Fra Angelico must have completed it in the early 1430s,³ an unexplained delay still exists between Lorenzo's death and the completion of the picture. Neither are we very much helped by surviving archival evidence. There is some documentation relating to Gentile's *Adoration* in the Strozzi account books, 150 florins 'per resto di pagamento di pittura della tavola'. An inscription on the frame, 'Opus Gentilis de Fabriano MCCCCXXIII', attributes the picture to Gentile, but nothing similar has survived for the *Deposition*. No commissioning contract or other document has been found, and the inscriptions on a garment hem and on haloes offer no textual clue to the date of the picture, though the lettering style may do so. The same can be said of the quotations from Matins for Good Friday inscribed on the foot of the frame.

In the absence of documentary records and evidence intrinsic to the picture, the investigation turns to the train of events and the character of Palla Strozzi for reasons why the painting of the second of his pair of memorial pictures was delayed. Between 1425 and 1434 Palla suffered the death of a son, financial losses and political reverses which culminated in his exile from Florence. This catalogue of disasters reads like those chronicled in the Book of Job. If individual sorrows like the early death of Palla's son Bartolomeo might be expected to have hastened rather than postponed re-letting of the contract for painting the *Deposition*, the distracting sequence is itself sufficient to explain if not justify the delay.

Palla Strozzi came of a banking family and inherited great wealth which he transformed into even greater wealth by his business skills and energy. A scholarly humanist, a book collector and patron of the arts, Palla was respected in Florence and beyond for his upright and serious character. If his membership of confraternities can be taken as an indication, he was more than conventionally religious.⁴ Twice knighted, once by the King of Naples and again by the Commune of Florence for diplomatic services, he took his honorific ennoblement seriously, and it is significant that the *Adoration of the Magi* is more of a sumptuous knightly cavalcade than a T.S. Eliot-type pilgrimage. In politics Palla was conservative, upholding the existing system of oligarchical government and supporting the Albizzi

who ran it; but beyond party and a belief in the constitution, he earnestly and consistently sought the peace of the republic.

The most important political event in Florentine politics of the late 1420s was the passing of the Catasto into law in 1427. This was a new system of taxation, akin to modern income-tax. It required a declaration of a citizen's total wealth and expenditure, but differed from normal income tax in two important ways: the levy was a flat half per cent; neither was it an annual affair, but could be levied as often as the government wished. As the basic tax-free allowance was high, the system was popular with the less well-off, but for magnates like Palla it was ruinous. In four years the tax was levied an incredible thirty-three times, and Palla was assessed at 162,295 florins. In 1427 he was reckoned the richest man in Europe, but by 1432 he was doing the rounds of his banker friends, raising loans to meet tax demands.⁵

Palla's vast wealth was invested in landed property, which was safe but difficult to realise in an emergency, and in government securities, which normally yielded 5 – 8 per cent. From 1429 Florence was at war with the neighbouring city of Lucca; the conflict was costly and badly managed. By 1430 it was consuming private wealth at the rate of 100,000 florins a month, and when the payment of interest on government stocks was suspended, Palla faced bankruptcy, a prospect as awful to the Florentine as the plague which recurred that year.

It has to be faced that while Palla was caught between the upper wheel of ruinously heavy taxation and the nether wheel of a stock market collapse, he does seem to have been slow in reacting to four years of financial stringency and the need to keep large sums available. The result was a liquidity crisis which if it did not quite wipe him out, left him in straitened circumstances and a debtor to bankers who included the Medici brothers. This is not to suggest that Palla's borrowing was the cause or occasion of friction between him and Cosimo de' Medici; the loan from the Medici was, in fact, arranged amicably.

The antagonism between Palla Strozzi and Cosimo de' Medici arose from Palla's support for Rinaldo degli Albizzi who had also been particularly identified with the disastrous Lucca campaign. Albizzi suspected Cosimo, his main rival, of planning to take over the government. As the war situation deteriorated, so did relations between the Medici and the Albizzi, and as a consequence, with Palla.

Rinaldo Albizzi was a hothead, devoid of political finesse, and Palla's continued support of him is hard to understand, unless Palla hoped to restrain Rinaldo's impetuosity. If so, it was a serious miscalculation which was bound to bring Palla into conflict with the Medici. When Rinaldo's attempts to end the war by a decisive military action came to nothing, Cosimo's diplomacy brought peace in July 1433. Bonfires in the streets of Florence and the ringing of church bells did nothing to assuage Rinaldo's frustration, and he began to plan Cosimo's impeachment for treasonable commerce with Niccolo da Tolentino, the mercenary general.⁶

Aware of Rinaldo's intentions, Cosimo moved thousands of florins to the Rome and Venice branches of his bank, and lodged thousands more for safekeeping with the monks at San Miniato al Monte. Anticipating the worst, he prepared against a run on his bank and possible confiscation of his wealth and property by the government. Having made his dispositions, he retired to his villa in the hills above Florence to await events.

Cosimo's arrest, imprisonment and banishment are the very stuff of television drama. His own account in his *Ricordi*,⁷ a dryly written memoir for his family, is devoid of self-pity and recrimination. Stoical as he was, Cosimo's fear is still perceptible, for Rinaldo wanted him dead, if not by execution, then by making away with him in prison. At first Cosimo was afraid to eat, in case the food was poisoned, and only when the jailer ate from the same dish was he reassured.

Enter Ambrogio Traversari, reformer of the Camaldolese Benedictines, humanist scholar and friend of Cosimo. Ambrogio was in Ferrara when he heard on September 15 of Cosimo's danger. Setting out instantly, he rode eighty miles or so to Florence in forty-eight hours. His ecclesiastical prestige gained him access to the prisoner, whom he supported and consoled. Next he got the Venetian envoys to intervene and work on Pope Eugenius, then in Florence, to dissuade Rinaldo from killing Cosimo.⁸

Meanwhile Palla Strozzi had been making it clear that he would not countenance Cosimo's murder, though he acquiesced in the sentence of exile passed on 29 September. On 3 October, Cosimo and a handful of supporters were taken under escort to the border; they went first to Padua, later to Venice. Though it has been called a coup d'état, it was hardly more than a manoeuvre by a ruling clique to be rid of a rival. Florence had a winter of internal strain, and by the early summer of 1434 Rinaldo discovered that members of the government were in secret communication with Cosimo. His reaction was to call his followers to arm for an uprising. He expected Palla Strozzi to join him, but Palla was for peace and declined. Gradually the government got a grip on the situation, exiled Rinaldo and repealed Cosimo's banishment. After dark on 6 October, the Medici quietly entered Florence and assumed the powers of government.

For the rest of the month, while a systematic programme of disenfranchisement and expulsion removed known opponents of the Medici from the city, Palla Strozzi did nothing. In November, he too was sentenced to ten years' exile in Padua where he lived until his death in 1462. He was buried locally, so the chapel he had designed as his memorial and family vault does not contain his tomb. Subsequent writers have tended to accept Machiavelli's assessment of his character without much question:

Peaceable, gentle and humane . . . better adapted for literary pursuits than restraining a party or opposing civil strife.⁹

In a recent article¹⁰, W.G. Wegener writes that 'Cosimo ordered

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pitture infamanti of his political opponents, the Albizzi, Peruzzi and Strozzi, on the Bargello'. This custom of painting the likenesses of condemned traitors hanging upside down on the walls of the central fortress may have been childish, but was at least less awful than the exhibiting of spiked heads. It raises the possibility that Cosimo may also have deleted portraits from existing pictures of those he had declared to be 'non-persons'. This, if it did occur, would strengthen the suggestion of Monika Cammerer-George¹¹ that the Deposition was actually completed by Lorenzo Monaco, only to be disfigured in 1434, presumably because it contained a donor-portrait of Palla Strozzi. The theory requires that Lorenzo Monaco must have finished the work, that it must have included Palla's likeness, and that it must have been defaced. Until further evidence comes to light it seems more economical to accept the traditional view that the painting was left unfinished in 1425.

Life as an exile in Padua was not harsh. By no means destitute, Palla settled down to study, declining any part in schemes for overthrowing the Medici. Careful not even to say anything ill of the regime, he made respectful applications to have his exile revoked, but was always refused. His wife, Marietta, who was not included in the sentence of exile, stayed in Florence, disposing of properties and dealing with the procuratori, or agents who managed the Strozzi businesses, until she joined her husband, probably in 1445¹². When searching for possible reasons why Fra Angelico agreed to finish the Strozzi picture, the presence of the able and, it may be, formidable Lady Strozzi should not be overlooked.

The *Deposition from the Cross* is a tempera painting on wood, almost six feet square (176 x 185 cm), still in its original Gothic frame. The uprights house twenty small panels of individual saints, while the pinnacles carry Resurrection pictures by Lorenzo Monaco; the work is in good condition and hangs just inside the Museum door.

Fra Angelico handles the sad, grim business of recovering an executed body for burial with restraint: mourners, for instance, do not throw their arms in the air as Giotto pictures them in his version of the scene. Though his provision of two ladders and sufficient manpower to take the weight of the corpse reveals a degree of realism, Fra Angelico eschews the macabre and stops short of such gruesome details as blacksmith's tongs for removing nails; the accent is on dignified grief.

For a picture composed on a pattern of verticals, diagonals and horizontals, the air of calm sorrow is remarkable. The colour-scheme is amazing in its brightness: reds, blues and ochres in light tones are not what every artist would choose for depicting the first phase of a funeral. Nowhere has Fra Angelico drawn the male nude to better effect than in the central tableau: in its proportions, flesh tones and posture the figure of his dead Christ is that of a classical hero triumphant in death. The head lies horizontally but does not quite loll inertly on the shoulder — a small detail, perhaps, but one that speaks of rigor mortis. The regularly modelled features are peaceful, with only the slight parting of the lips to

suggest a violent passing. The light auburn hair is neatly arranged, with small runs of blood from thorn punctures. Set upright, this head would not differ greatly from a thousand Veronica icons; Angelico's placing it so definitely on the horizontal is original, and adds emotive power.

The cross stands in a dark meadow some four feet back from the picture plane. Weaving the figures of the men around its stem and the ladders in a dramatic composition, Fra Angelico achieves mobility of line and an intricate set of shapes, while delighting the eye with the sophisticated delicacy of his colouring; but it is the poignancy of the scene that seizes the heart. The subject is death and the pity of being dead.

In the frieze of mourners, Mary Magdalen on the left and a young, unnamed beatus on the right stand out in their bright red robes and connect the centrepiece with the balancing groups of women and men. Behind the Magdalen, Mary the mother of Christ kneels, identified by an inscription on her halo: "VIRGO. MARIA. N(on). E(st). T(ibi). SIMILIS." [Virgin Mary, there is none like thee]. Haloes also mark three others of the women as New Testament characters, in distinction to the artist's contemporaries, inserted to bring the scene into the present. Whether they were intended to be recognised or not is uncertain, for their identity as models or as saintly characters is now unknown, but they include some freshly painted and lovely people.

Both the young beatus in the foreground and the man holding the nails and coronet of thorns wear a radial nimbus, symbol of saintly status recognised locally but not officially approved by the church. Orlandi thinks that Fra Angelico may have intended two Florentine laymen of the previous century who had a reputation for sanctity, Barduccio Barducci and Giovanni da Vespignano¹³.

It is impossible to identify any of the other men except Nicodemus, whose name is inscribed on the hem of his robe. To look for a likeness of Palla Strozzi among the mourners would be unrealistic because in 1443, when Angelico was at work on the picture, Palla was near the end of his ten-year sentence of exile and hoped to be allowed to return to Florence. His exile was, in fact, arbitrarily extended, but the last thing he wanted was his portrait in a major painting. This could, and almost certainly would, have been interpreted as an open challenge to the regime which had ordered his 'image of disgrace' on the Bargello wall.

The mourners and the landscape background can hardly have been included simply to fill space, but Fra Angelico's intention and his theological purpose in placing Calvary against an infinitude of distance must be left aside. While the picture's intrinsic aim is undoubtedly anamnetic, to bring comfort to the Strozzi's by associating their sorrows with the death of Christ, the painter may well have had extrinsic motivation also. His prior may have urged him to lend a sympathetic ear to a request of Lady Strozzi's; the plight of the family may have moved him; he may even have admired Palla Strozzi's dignified patience in the face of injustice.

Then there was Fra Angelico's long-term relationship with Zanobi Strozzi, which should not be forgotten. Zanobi was a younger son of a cadet branch of the Strozzi clan and a gentleman painter who was a pupil of Fra Angelico's and sometimes his studio assistant. He may well have acted as influential go-between in the relations between Fra Angelico and the patrons.

Quite separately from these considerations, Fra Angelico may have acted from a sense of *pietas* towards Lorenzo Monaco, a monastic painter great in his day and almost certainly known to Fra Angelico. Indeed the possibility should not be ruled out that Fra Angelico may have served his apprenticeship in Lorenzo's workshop. Here it is appropriate to ask whether Angelico inherited a blank panel, a developed outline composition or a partly obliterated painting. The investigation would benefit from microscopic examination, infra-red reflectograms and X-radiographs of surface pigment, undercoat and priming. If at present we can do little more than surmise about Fra Angelico's motives and the nature of the work he took in hand, such theoretical speculation may open lines of investigation and lead to factual discoveries.

It is well known that by 1443 Fra Angelico had completed a series of commissions for Cosimo de' Medici, to whom the San Marco Dominicans owed their priory, church and maintenance. The project had cost a staggering 36,000 florins and as it was Cosimo's private benefaction, not a charge on the public funds, Dominican indebtedness to Cosimo was correspondingly personal, and acknowledged¹⁴.

As the community's man of business, Fra Angelico was in close and frequent contact with their patron, his architect and the builders, and according to Vasari, relations between Cosimo and Fra Angelico were cordial¹⁵. In the context of this friendliness, Angelico's acceptance of the Strozzi contract is harder to understand, as there would seem to be something in it of a quiet snub to Cosimo. It must, in any case, have been a considered step, because if Cosimo was a friend as well as a benefactor it is inconceivable that Fra Angelico would have worked for his opponent without adequate reason. Cosimo, however, seems not to have noticed the implied rebuke; or if he did notice, not to have been greatly upset, because Fra Angelico was to receive fresh Medici commissions in the 1450s.

The San Marco Dominicans were and are grateful to Cosimo, and open their chapter meetings with a prayer for their benefactor; but they were not his employees, nor his clients in the old Roman sense, however the Medici might imagine them to be. They maintained their autonomy as preachers, and St. Antoninus, who was still prior in 1443, was vigorous in upholding their apostolic freedom. He was not the man to deter Fra Angelico from letting their benefactor know that the Dominicans disapproved of injustice to Palla Strozzi. Though there is nothing overtly critical of the regime in the painting and, as we have seen, the Strozzi would not have wanted anything of the sort, the very fact that the work was completed and erected in Santa Trinita may have irked Medici party zealots

and so, indirectly, have contributed somewhat to their implacable refusal to allow Palla back to Florence. This is conjecture, so the contrary proposition should also be looked at: namely, that only after the sentence of exile had been extended was the picture completed, when it could do no harm.

If finishing the picture was politically taboo from 1434 to 1444, the enquiry might more profitably focus on the earlier period and specifically on 1426, before money troubles and political preoccupations weighed so heavily on Palla's mind. Which artists were available? Uccello had gone to Venice; Masaccio was working on frescoes in the Brancacci chapel and so was his partner Masolino, whose style might have been more attractive to Palla. Fra Angelico was attending to his theological studies, painting very little and not at all as well known as he would be ten years later. The painter closest in style and feeling to Gentile da Fabriano and so most likely to appeal to Palla was Pisanello, who worked in almost every court in Italy. Had he been detained in Florence by a commission, he could have provided Palla with a richly painted, deeply religious picture, if his *Vision of St. Eustace* is an indication of his powers. Since a suitable artist existed and Palla was not in financial difficulties in the days before the Catasto, the reason for the delay in finishing Lorenzo Monaco's picture must lie in some inborn hesitancy, a Hamlet-like inability to press on vigorously with a course already determined. When, eventually, the painting was finished, Palla never saw it.

- 1 Baldini, Umberto: in Elsa Morante's *L'Opera completa dell' Angelico*, 1970. The last section is a useful *Catalogo delle Opere* by Baldini. Item 58, Pala di Santa Trinita, gives a brisk survey of critical opinion.
- 2 Pope-Hennessy, John: *Fra Angelico*, 1974, pp. 210–211 for a more discursive account of the picture's date and authenticity.
- 3 Orlandi, Stefano O.P.: *Beato Angelico*, 1964 p.48, citing the "Giornale e levate di messer Palla di Noferi Strozzi" (Carte Strozzi, S.IV, n.345) mentions gifts of wine [102 barrels!] as an indication that in 1431 and 1432 Palla was already asking Fra Angelico to finish Lorenzo Monaco's painting, but this seems to strain the evidence: making gifts in kind instead of cash hardly suggests more than a desire on Palla's part to continue his generosity to the Fiesole Dominicans in a time of financial stringency.
- 4 Belle, Lawrence William: *A Renaissance Patrician, Palla di Nofri Strozzi, 1372–1462*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, 1971. There is no biography of Palla Strozzi in English and I have been fortunate to have had access to Mr. Belle's dissertation on microfilm by courtesy of the British Library. The page references cited here are to a copy printed on paper by UMI in 1993 (72–28, 725). See pp.3–8 for a biographical summary.
- 5 Belle, op. cit., p.83; Gutkind, Curt: *Cosimo de' Medici, Pater Patriae, 1389–1464*, pp. 21–22, for useful accounts of the Catasto.
- 6 Belle, op.cit., pp. 291–306 for an account of the political crisis and dramatic events of 1433/34.
- 7 Ross, Janet: *Lives of the Early Medici as Told in Their Correspondence*, 1910, pp. 19–22, 22–25, for quotations from Cosimo's Ricordi. Curt Gutkind's book, cited in Note 5, above, is the last full-length biography in English. It was published in 1938 with useful appendices but, as Lawrence Belle politely notes, 'without access to archival sources'. Christopher Hibbert's *Rise and Fall of the House of Medici* (1974) offers a concise account of Cosimo in Chapter 4, while the essays in Cosimo 'il

- Vecchio' de'Medici, 1389-1464, published in 1992, illuminate many aspects of a man whose delight was to keep people in the dark. We look forward to the forthcoming publication of Susan McKillop's book.
- 8 Gutkind, op.cit., pp.82-5, seems to be the first to avail of the information given in Traversari's *Hodoeporicon*, printed in 1581 and more recently in Dino Traversari's *Ambrogio Traversari e suoi tempi*, 1912.
 - 9 Macchiavelli, Niccolo: *Istorie Florentine*, IV, 7, cited by Belle, p. 21; I have quoted from Morley's English translation, 1891, p. 222.
 - 10 Wegener, W.J.: 'That the practice of arms is most excellent declare the statues of valiant men' in *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, June 1993, p.151, and see her footnote 75 for Cambi's suggestion that the three sets of images were still on the Bargello wall in the 1490s.
 - 11 Cammerer-George, Monika: *Die Rahmung der Toscanischen Altarbilder im Trecento*. 1966, pp.187, 188. I am indebted to Mr. George Mayer for translating the relevant pages.
 - 12 Belle, op.cit., p. 317.
 - 13 Orlandi, op.cit., p. 52
 - 14 Lapaccini, Giuliano O.P.: *La Cronaca del Convento di San Marco*. Biblioteca Laurenziana No.370; printed (first part only) in *Archivio Storico Italiano*, LXXI, Vol.I, disp.1 del 1913, edited Raoul Morcay, p.23 for Cosimo's expenditure.
 - 15 Vasari, Giorgio: *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. 2nd ed., 1568; Penguin edition, 1965, translated George Bull, Vol.2,p.200: "Cosimo de'Medici was among those who loved and admired Fra Angelico . . ."

A New Interpretation of Fra Angelico

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Part I

Guido di Pietro, known to posterity as Fra Angelico, was born of peasant stock in Mugello, probably around 1400. He and his brother trained as illuminators and miniaturists and, when Angelico was about 21, they joined the Observant Dominican community of San Domenico in Fiesole above Florence. Professed as Brother John, Angelico's 'pastoral work' while studying for the priesthood was to paint for San Domenico, Sta Maria Novella, and elsewhere. These early commissions made him famous and funded his workshop. If he was still learning priestcraft he was also still learning to paint: for his skills as an illuminator were little preparation for altarpiece design, a duty laid on his shoulders along with his Dominican scapular. So he became acquainted with the works of his contemporaries such as Masaccio, Masolino, Gentile and Sassetta.

His most important contact, however, was Cosimo De Medici, a patron not only of the arts but of the religious orders, especially the more radical mendicants. On return to power in 1434, he set about installing the Observant Dominicans in Florence, renovating an abandoned monastery for them which was to represent "the best in Christian humanism".