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Note on Fra Angelico's Rendering of Light and Shadow

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The following remarks are a summary of my observations and ideas on the rendering of light and shadow in the pictorial works of Fra Angelico (ca. 1400-1455).

I would like to begin not with Fra Angelico, but rather with Masaccio. We know that Masaccio first systematically introduced cast shadows caused by natural light coming from a real window in his frescoes painted for the Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence. *The Tribute Money* appears a perfect example (fig. 1). The cast shadows in this scene, however, are somewhat inaccurate from a strictly 'scientific' point of view. Indeed, the window on the back wall of the Chapel is not the only source of light for the wall-decoration, and we cannot but wonder why the shadows of the Apostles are cast only on the ground where they stand and not on the other Apostles as well. Roberto Casati calls this type of shadow a 'carpet shadow'.¹ Furthermore, the shadow cast by the building on the

¹ Roberto Casati, *La Scoperta dell'Ombra: Da Platone a Galileo la storia di un enigma che ha affascinato le grandi menti dell'umanità*, Milano, 2001, pp. 196-98; Eg. trans., *Shadows: Unlocking Their Secrets, from Plato to Our Time*, Vintage ed., New York, 2006, pp. 163-166; and his oral presentation at the Symposium entitled "The Logic of Shadow", 11 Jan 2008 at the Mita campus of Keio University.

Fig.1 Masaccio, *The Tribute Money*, The Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.

right does not fall on the Apostles or Christ. Are these inconsistencies the result of an immature or incomplete application of shadows, or of Masaccio's preference for an elaborate and successful design?

I. Early works

It is generally accepted that Angelico was trained as a miniaturist in the orbit of Lorenzo Monaco's workshop in Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence. Many visitors to the exhibition "Painting and Illumination in Early Renaissance Florence 1300-1450" held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 1994-95² likely noticed that a major concern in Angelico's production of miniatures was the preservation of a highly saturated, pure color. Therefore, we could say that in trying to minimize the use of white or black, he tended to avoid shading as much as possible.

In his early altarpieces, such as the triptych made for the Dominican Observant nunnery of San Pier Martire in the mid-20s of the Quattrocento,³ however, Angelico, under the influence of Masaccio, depicted shade to render the figures as three-dimensional and realistic (fig. 2). But cast

² Laurence B. Kanter, "The Illuminations of Early Renaissance Florence", in *Painting and Illumination in Early Renaissance Florence 1300-1450*, Ex. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1994-95), New York, 1994, esp. pp. 12-13.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 30, in which Carl B. Strehlke dated San Pier Martire Altarpiece in late 1424 or early 1425. L. B. Kanter, however, dated the beginning of its execution shortly after 1421. The dating seems too early.

Fig. 2 Fra Angelico, *San Pier Marire altarpiece*, Museo di San Marco, Florence.

Fig. 3 Fra Angelico, *Saint Peter Praying in the Presense of Saint Mark* (Predella of the *Linaiuoli Tabernacle*), Museo di San Marco, Florence.

shadows come later: we find them in his work only after the predella for the Linaiuoli Tabernacle (fig. 3)⁴ in the marble frame that Lorenzo Ghiberti was commissioned to design on August 11, 1433. Although there are no documents that can clearly prove the completion date, a notice of payment for the painting, brickwork and glazing suggests that the work was finished around August 6, 1436.

Essential to understanding Angelico's rendering of light and shadow is his serious interest in Flemish painting. In the late 1430s, Filippo Lippi introduced Nordic chiaroscuro in his *Tarquinia Madonna* (1437, Palazzo Barberini, Roma), his earliest documented work, and the *Martelli Annunciation* (ca. 1440, San Lorenzo, Florence). In contrast to Filippo, who had direct contact with Flemish painting, probably during his stay in Padua,⁵ Angelico had a more complex and indirect relationship with the North. I believe that Angelico, with the miniaturist's strong interest in pure color, lagged behind in incorporating chiaroscuro, and it was only through his emulation of trends followed by contemporary 'pittura di luce' artists like Filippo Lippi and Domenico Veneziano⁶ that he began to take the technique seriously. That these artists were well informed about each

⁴ This work is actually under restoration at the Fortezza da Basso, Florence.

⁵ Filippo Lippi is documented painting in Padua for the Santo in 1434 on Feb. 1.

⁶ Luciano Bellosi (ed.), *Pittura di Luce: Giovanni di Francesco e l'arte fiorentina di metà Quattrocento*, Ex. cat. (Casa Buonarroti, Florence), Milan, 1990.

other's activities is evidenced by the famous letter sent from Perugia by Domenico Veneziano to Piero de' Medici in 1437.⁷ Therefore, we assume that Fra Angelico was inspired primarily by Filippo Lippi, who had introduced Nordic chiaroscuro into his work somewhat earlier.

II. Dating of the Perugia Triptych

As suggested by Ulrich Middeldorf in the note attached to his important paper 'Forte chiaroscuro e il trattamento quasi fiammingheggiante dei colori' published in 1955,⁸ the Perugia Triptych (mainly in Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia, fig. 4) is key to understanding Angelico's concern with Nordic chiaroscuro. Middeldorf dated the Triptych to as late as 1450 on stylistic grounds. Until recently, however, art historians ignored Middeldorf's dating and, basing their conclusion on a Perugia chronicle from the sixteenth century, have consistently given a date of 1437 for the Triptych. Middeldorf's later date was taken seriously only after it was supported in a more recent article by Andrea De Marchi. De Marchi has proposed a date of 1447, pointing out that no work before 1440 shows Angelico's interest in Nordic chiaroscuro and identifying the figure of St Nicholas to the left of the Virgin as a portrait of Pope Nicholas V (pontificate 1447-55).⁹

De Marchi's tentative later dating would explain the discrepancies between the Perugia Triptych and the Cortona Triptych (fig. 5), a work that in spite of a very similar construction shows clear stylistic differences apparent even in its extremely damaged state. The Cortona Triptych was dated to 1438 (one year later than the Perugia Altarpiece), primarily because of documentary evidence placing Angelico in Cortona at that time. To explain the stylistic discrepancy between the two triptychs, it was thus

⁷ Hellmut Wohl, *The Painting of Domenico Veneziano: A Study in Florentine Art of the Early Renaissance*, New York, 1980, pp. 339-40.

⁸ Ulrich Middeldorf, "L'Angelico e la scultura", *Rinascimento* 6, no. 2 (1955), pp. 179-94.

⁹ Andrea De Marchi, "Per la cronologia dell' Angelico: Il trittico di Perugia", *Prospettiva* 42 (1985), pp. 53-57.

Fig. 4 Fra Angelico, *The Perugia Triptych*
Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia.

Fig. 5 Fra Angelico, *The Cortona Triptych*
Museo Diocesano, Cortona.

necessary to date the Perugia as late as possible. However, thanks to Machtelt Israëls' research,¹⁰ the Cortona Triptych has been shifted to an earlier date, around 1433, and thus we have lost at least one reason why the Perugia Triptych must be dated as late as 1447.

Among the works I believe should be dated earlier than the Perugia Altarpiece are several predella scenes of the San Marco Altarpiece noticeable for the 'early' suggestions of Angelico's interest in light and shadow effects that will appear in a more mature form in the Perugia Altarpiece. Examples include the depiction of a domestic setting incorporating well defined shadows in *Saints Cosmas and Damian Healing the Deacon Justinian* and the reflection of the metallic jar in the *Healing of Palladia by Saints Cosmas and Damian* (fig. 6).

The *Entombment* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich, fig. 7), included originally in the San Marco Altarpiece as a central scene of the predella, is said to be a source for Rogier van der Weyden's work of the same subject and a similar composition now conserved in the Uffizi, Florence. The fact that Rogier's *Entombment* is painted on oak, according to Nordic rather than Italian custom, suggests that he produced the work in Brussels under a Medicean commission and not during his visit to Italy in 1450, as reported

¹⁰ Machtelt Israëls, "Sassetta, Fra Angelico and their patrons at S. Domenico, Cortona", *The Burlington Magazine* 145 (2003), pp. 760-76.

¹¹ Paula Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence: The Impact of Netherlandish Painting, 1400-1500*, New Haven – London, 2004, pp. 4-6, 26-29.

Fig. 6 Fra Angelico, detail of *Healing of Palladia and Damian and Saint Damian Receiving a Gift from Palladia* (predella of the *San Marco Altarpiece*), The National Gallery of Art, Kress Collection, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 7 Fra Angelico, *The Entombment* (predella of the *San Marco Altarpiece*), Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

by Fazio.¹¹ At any rate, we could say that Angelico's *Entombment* incorporates enough Nordic elements to have induced a Nordic painter like Rogier van der Weyden to willingly use a similar composition.

The San Marco Altarpiece, originally on the high altar of the church of San Marco, would have been finished in time for the solemn consecration of the church and the convent by Eugenius IV and the principal members of the Roman Curia and the Florentine government on the feast of Epiphany, January 6, 1443. I am strongly inclined to date the Perugia Triptych between the completion of the San Marco Altarpiece and the departure of Angelico from Florence to Rome in 1445.¹²

III. The Frescoes at San Marco, Florence

The execution of the frescoes in the convent of San Marco, including forty-

¹² For further reasons why the Perugia Altarpiece should be dated in 1443-44 see my presentation at Hamamatsu (Japan) for the Associazione di Studi Italiani in Giappone, of October 2006 (forthcoming).

Fig. 8 Fra Angelico, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints (Madonna of the Shadows)*, Convent of San Marco, Florence (inner wall, east corridor).

Fig. 9 Fra Angelico, *The Mocking of Christ with the Virgin and Saint Dominic* in the cell no. 7, Convent of San Marco, Florence.

five cells, the chapter house and the cloister, began in 1438 and continued until Angelico's departure to Rome in 1445, being taken up again after his return to Florence in 1449/50. The experience of painting on panels (San Marco Altarpiece and Perugia Triptych) and on walls in Rome (Chapel of Nicholas V), as well as his reading of the humanistic writings on light, such as Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435/36)¹³ and Ghiberti's *Commentarii*, further sharpened Angelico's sense of the effect of light and shadow. The final result can be seen in his depiction of the Virgin and Child with saints, known as *Madonna of the Shadows* (fig. 8), most likely executed after his return to Florence. The nickname for the painting derives from the cast shadows on the capitals depicted in the fresco as if illuminated by the actual light in the long corridor where it stands. These fine shadows are quite remarkable, but we have to notice that they are not consistent—there are no shadows cast by the saints standing before the Virgin. Perhaps even this late painting follows the old norm in which buildings, objects and animals take priority over human figures in the casting of shadows.¹⁴

The rendering of the cast shadow is inconsistent in the cell frescoes as well. This is evident even in the *Mocking of Christ* (fig. 9), generally

¹³ See Carl B. Strehlke, "Fra Angelico: A Florentine Painter in 'Roma Felix'", in *Fra Angelico*, Ex. cat. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Laurence Kanter and Pia Palladino (eds.), New York, 2005, esp. p. 210.

believed to be by Angelico himself, in which the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic cast shadows, but Christ behind them does not. The rendering of shade, however, is extremely consistent. Almost all the scenes on the cell walls are depicted near or next to a window situated generally to the right of the frescoes and shaded as if illuminated from these actual windows; that is, from the right. Fra Angelico and his assistants were thus strictly following the rule of wall painting introduced by Masaccio and Masolino in the Brancacci Chapel some twenty years earlier, in which the direction of the fictive illumination in the depicted scene must coincide with the natural light from an actual window. The rule's consistent application can be seen even in the *Triple Crucifixion with Saint John the Evangelist, the Virgin, and Saints Dominic and Tomas Aquinas* in cell no. 37, which was executed by Angelico's assistants with the drawing done by the Master. This scene is the only one depicted as if illuminated from the front, and that is because the window in the cell is located exceptionally on the wall opposite the fresco (fig. 10).

There is, however, one exception among the cell frescoes concerning

¹⁴ I would like to distinguish cast shadows for the human figures, because almost all sporadically surviving cast shadows in the Trecento and Early Quattrocento are limited to animals, objects or architectural parts, such as 1) the Passion cycle frescoes in the Lower Church of San Francesco (Assisi) by Pietro Lorenzetti, see H. B. J. Maginis, "Cast Shadow in the Passion Cycle at San Francesco, Assisi: a note", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* CXXVII (1971), pp. 63-64; idem., "Assisi Revisited", *The Burlington Magazine* 117 (1975), pp. 511-17; 2) the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* in the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce (Florence) by Taddeo Gaddi, cf. Paul Hills, *The Light of Early Italian Painting*, New Haven-London, 1987 pp. 75-94, fig. 46; 3) *St. Jerome* on the column fresco in S. Nicolò (Treviso) by Tomaso da Modena, see R. Gibbs, *Tomaso da Modena: Painting in Emilia and the March of Treviso, 1340-80*, Cambridge - New York - New Rochelle - Melbourne - Sydney, 1989, pls. 48a-d; 4) *The Stoning and the Burial of Saint Stephen* in the National Museum of Western Art (Tokyo) by Mariotto di Nardo, see Marvin Eisenberg, "The 'Confraternity Altarpiece' by Mariotto di Nardo", in *The 'Confraternity Altarpiece' by Mariotto di Nardo: The Coronation of the Virgin and The Life of Saint Stephen*, the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, 1998, esp. pp. 45-46, pls. XII-2 and XIV-3; 5) *Entombment of Christ* (Private Collection) attributed to Arcangelo di Cola da Camerino, see Millard Meiss, "Some Remarkable Early Shadows in a Rare Type of Threnos", in *Festschrift Ulrich Middeldorf*, Berlin, 1968, pp. 112-118, fig. LVII-2.

Fig. 10 Fra Angelico assistant, *Triple Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints* in the cell no. 37, Convent of San Marco, Florence.

Fig. 11 Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation* in the cell no. 3, Convent of San Marco, Florence.

the direction of light and shadow: the famous *Annunciation* in cell no. 3. Although the window in this cell is situated to the right of the fresco, as is true of most of the other scenes, the shade and shadows are depicted as if illuminated from the opposite side, namely from the left. We wonder if this is simply because of the convention of presenting the Archangel Gabriel addressing the Virgin from the left, or if we have to interpret the direction of illumination symbolically as caused by unnatural, and therefore divine light. Would Victor Stoichita interpret the cast shadow projected by the Virgin on the wall just behind Her as an *umbra* of the God who ‘*obumbrabit tibi*’ (“will overshadow thee”;¹⁵ Luke 1: 38)?¹⁵

IV. Addendum

I am particularly interested in another *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico, a work now in the Prado, Madrid. It includes the interior of the cell, the depiction of which is quite astonishing. We find not only a shadow cast by the simple wooden bench, but also a depiction of the light shining in from the small window onto the wall above the bench (fig. 12). This is exactly the same ‘*rombo di sole* (rhombus of sunlight)’ that Roberto Longhi

¹⁵ Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, London, 1997, esp. pp. 67-71.

Fig. 12 Fra Angelico, detail of the *Annunciation*,
The Prado, Madrid.

pointed out in Piero della Francesca's *Senigallia Madonna* (Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino), suggesting that it is an innovation seen again only among the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century like De Hooch and Vermeer.¹⁶ However, we find this innovation in the *Annunciation* of Fra Angelico, long before Piero della Francesca.

This *Annunciation* was originally painted for the convent church of San Domenico in Fiesole, where by 1423 Fra Angelico had started his career as a Dominican friar, Fra Giovanni, and where he later served as prior (1450-52). Generally, critics date this work to between the mid 1420's and mid 1430's; and indeed, the Virgin and the Archangel Gabriel appear to be of an earlier figure type, the strong shading indicating the influence of Masaccio. If the work was painted entirely by the Master at such an early date, the interest in the effects of light and shadow clearly demonstrated in the depiction of the interior would be all the more striking and might contradict what we have observed. Therefore, I would like to find an explanation for its appearance in this work. I must stop here, however, and limit myself to just pointing out this innovative treatment as a subject for future research.

¹⁶ Roberto Longhi, *Piero della Francesca (1927) con aggiunte fino al 1962*, Florence, 1963, paper back ed., Firenze, 1975, p.93, English ed. trans. by David Tabbat, New York, 2002, p.72, Japanese ed. trans. by Koichi Toyama & Kohei Ikegami, Chuo Koron Bijutsu Shuppan:Tokyo, 2008, p.139.