

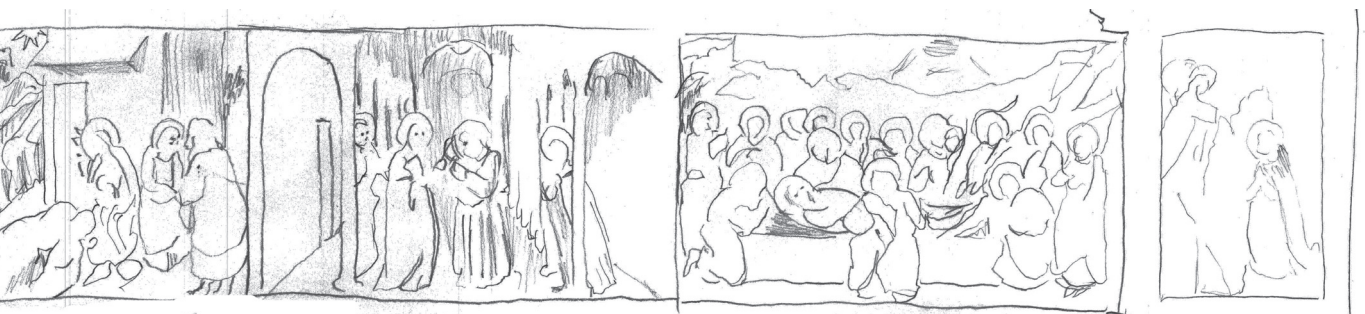
Fra Angelico

The Cortona Altarpiece

If we have established a good rapport during our visits to the Prado and decide to get together again (as I hope we will), may I suggest that we next meet in Italy, in Tuscany, in Cortona?

As I am sure you will have realised, my three summers in Cortona were a turning point in my life, literally a renaissance, a rebirth. It has become something of a cliché for the young from northern Europe, accustomed to grey light and short winter days, to find life transformed by a first visit to the shores of the Mediterranean. Matisse, who was born and brought up near Flanders, was in his late 20s when he made his first such visit, and it changed the course of his art and life. Goethe was in his mid-30s when he first crossed the Alps, full of hope and expectation. He was so taken with the benign climate and fertile landscapes of Italy, finding humankind and nature to be in such harmony, that he returned home to Weimar with the greatest reluctance. The Napoleonic Wars prevented J.M.W. Turner from visiting Italy until he was in his early 40s but the experience was a revelation – never had he seen light and colour of such intensity. As a consequence he began to change his palette and the way he painted gradually became much looser, so that some people thought he had taken leave of his senses.

The reason for our visit is to see *The Cortona Altarpiece* by Fra Angelico. It is one of the gems of the early Renaissance and painted on the spot in Cortona for the church of San Domenico. It is still in the town, although modern standards of conservation and security mean that it is no longer in a church but in the Museo Civico where it is admirably





and sensitively displayed. The main panel shows *The Annunciation*, and under it five predella panels illustrate the supplementary scenes from the *Life of the Virgin*. It still has the original tabernacle frame – it is the earliest surviving example of such a frame – and the whole altarpiece is intact. Regrettably most were broken up in the nineteenth century when the religious institutions that had commissioned them were dissolved. The various components were then sold on the art market to private collectors. Today, most of those parts can be seen dispersed around museums internationally but their original purpose and context are lost. A complete and entire altarpiece of such quality, still in the place where it was created, is very rare.

Before we go to the Museo Civico and start exercising our eyes, I would like to have a wander round the town together to talk about life in Italy, the Tuscan temperament, and to recall what we might both remember about Fra Angelico. Afterwards I suggest we enjoy a glass of wine and a

light lunch in the main square of Cortona. We should then aim to spend a couple of hours or so looking at *The Cortona Altarpiece* in the afternoon, and in the evening we might muse on what we have absorbed during the day over a decent dinner with local specialities.

Cortona is one of the most ancient cities in Italy, founded long before the Romans, and once part of the Etruscan federation. The Etruscans were an urban people, and the high point of their civilisation was in the sixth century BC. Their heartland covered modern Tuscany. Cortona was subjugated by the Romans, and Hannibal laid waste to their fertile land the surrounding valley. I doubt if the higgledy-piggledy layout of narrow streets in the centre of the town inside the mediaeval walls has changed much since Fra Angelico resided there. During our walk I would like to go to the highest point to show you a bird's eye glimpse of the little church of Santa Maria del Calcinaio tucked in at the side of the winding road that leads up from the plain to Cortona, and to share a splendid panoramic view over the Val di Chiana with a glimpse of Lake Trasimeno in the far distance.

The centre of Cortona is rather short of memorable examples of pure Renaissance architecture – most of the buildings are Etruscan in origin with later alterations and additions. Santa Maria del Calcinaio is a small gem of Renaissance proportion and perspective, a perfect example of 'Man the Measure of All Things'. Although it postdates Fra Angelico's stay in Cortona by half a century, the painter was one of the first to experiment with perspective in paintings and knew all about the new Renaissance architecture with its mathematically calculated curves, human proportions and classical references, ambitiously innovative in its aims and superseding the soaring pointed arches and superhuman scale of the Gothic.

To get to the summit of the town we should walk up the precipitously steep via Berrettini so that I can point out number 37 which is where I spent two summers. I also want to make you puff. Even when we were young it was hard work climbing that steep street with weighty shopping bags. On market days it was a quick and easy walk down the street to the centre of town, under an archway and into the Piazza Repubblica or the adjoining Piazza Signorelli, to spend our precious

communal money or have a drink in one of the surrounding cafés and bars. So it is there that I shall propose we pause for our glass of wine and bite to eat. We should choose to sit out in the open air so that we can watch the world go by, be entertained by the traders and customers doing their business if it is a market day, and pass judgement on whom we see.



The Piazza is the centre of Italian life, as much so today as it was in Fra Angelico's time. It is around the Piazza that civic and ecclesiastical buildings are ranged, and they sit happily alongside the shops, bars and cafés. The benign climate encourages the Tuscans to live their lives out of doors, and they are a people with great visual awareness. Elegant,

with fine faces and graceful movements, they like to look and be seen. As we watch them pass by, we might catch glimpses of faces that seem to have stepped straight out of a Botticelli or a Fra Angelico.

All Italians like to keep up appearances and dress elegantly – and have the knack of doing so on a shoestring. Tuscans also enjoy calculating. They will look you up and down and assess you, especially if you are a stranger. That is what the evening *passeggiata* is all about – the leisurely stroll around the Piazza to acknowledge friends, plot against enemies or weigh up new arrivals. They are commercially shrewd. The stallholders in the Cortona market know exactly what the commodities they are selling should be priced at, as do the customers, and if their expectations do not tally there will be intense haggling. I will also ask you to notice how, if a banknote is handed over in payment and coins are given in exchange, they are carefully examined in the palm of the hand to make sure that the adding up has been correct. Also important is good design, whether it is a building, a piece of furniture, a pair of shoes, a suit or a skirt. The best design depends on the right proportion, mathematical calculation, precision of measurement and cut, and meticulous craftsmanship and finish. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the world's greatest fashion houses have a Tuscan origin. In the Cortona marketplace we, as visitors, will be able to see plainly how men and women are still the 'measure of all things'. That, for me, is one of the joys of Italy.

Whether you agree or not, I am conscious that what I have just expressed is influenced by what I have gleaned about Fra Angelico's life and personality. Not much is known about him for certain. A native Florentine, his date of birth at the end of the fourteenth century or early in the fifteenth is obscure. He died in 1455, probably in his 60s or 70s, and was probably in his late 20s or early 30s when he lived in Cortona. He obviously had extraordinary natural talent. He liked clarity, order, detail, purity, anecdote, possessed a profound Christian faith, and was well versed in the Scriptures and religious symbolism. Rather than make his way in the world as a journeyman painter he chose instead to become a Dominican friar and devote his life to the worship of God. His art was his manifestation of this devotion.

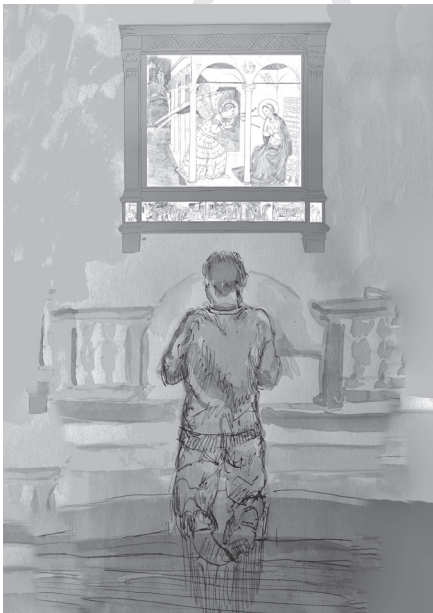
The Dominican Order was founded in the early thirteenth century to preach the gospel and to oppose heresy. The focus of the Order was to be scholarship and teaching, and it was at the forefront of intellectual life in the Middle Ages. Dominicans have a conviction that a belief in God and the Christian faith is rational, perfecting the human person and completing the fundamental human desire for truth and goodness. Strict and demanding, Dominican clergy earned the nickname ‘Domini Canes (The Hounds of the Lord)’ as they were perceived by their ‘barking’ to be acting as guard dogs against deviations from God’s word of salvation.

Before he turned to the painting of altarpieces and ecclesiastical mural decorations Fra Angelico mastered the art of the illuminated manuscript. It is clear beyond doubt that, even in his own day, he was considered to be an utterly blameless, sweet-natured, pious and wholly admirable human being. Born in Fiesole just outside Florence, he was called Guido di Pietro. When he became a monk he was known as Fra Giovanni da Fiesole. He was referred to, even in his lifetime, as Beato Angelico – ‘Blessed Angelico’. He was officially canonised by Pope John Paul II in 1994. He was a dyed-in-the-wool Tuscan: practical, shrewd, alert, precise, careful, manually skilled, interested in intellectual matters, conscious of human and man-made (as well as natural) beauty, well read, observant, curious, attracted by innovation and modernity yet never losing sight of the importance of tradition and history. We will, I think, be able to confirm this assessment in every square inch of *The Cortona Altarpiece*.

Over lunch I would like to ask: How well do you know the New Testament? Do you know the biblical account of the *Adoration of the Magi*? Do you know any other tellings of the same story? Would you know in which gospel to find the account of the visit of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin whose name was Mary? If you do, would you be able to recite the thirteen verses from memory? It does not matter if you cannot. My point is simply that when we are in front of *The Cortona Altarpiece* we need to have those exact words from the Bible in mind. Forewarned and forearmed I have them in my pocket on a piece of paper.

It is a short walk from the café in the Piazza to the Museo Civico. As we make our way you might well ask my reasons for choosing *The Cortona Altarpiece*. Although its Christian and spiritual content is not unimportant to me, I chose it principally because it is everything that the Velázquez is not. *Las Meninas* comes entirely out of the artist's own imagination. *The Cortona Altarpiece* depends entirely on a pre-existing written narrative. *Las Meninas* is rich with ambiguity, reflections, memories, sadness, mortality, inflexibility, tradition, shadows and half-light. *The Cortona Altarpiece* thrives on precision, clarity, brightness, innovation, birth, newness and joy. Aesthetic pleasure is very often stimulated by the juxtaposition of contrasts. Chefs know how to place sweet against sour or use a silky texture as a foil to crunchiness. Winemakers know how important it is to balance sweetness and acidity. Painters know how to heighten a feeling of warmth generated by an area of red by introducing an adjacent detail with a cool blue. Knowledgeable architects are well aware of the enhanced impact of a curve when set amongst straight lines. Sculptors will mix polished smoothness and chiselled roughness. Musicians will play hide and seek with fortissimo and pianissimo.

There is nowhere to sit in front of *The Cortona Altarpiece*. Instead, it is displayed at a height that presupposes an altar beneath it, and the clever curators have provided an altar rail so that the visitor can kneel when contemplating it. This is not necessarily an invitation to show Christian



devotion. Rather it is a recognition of how the *Altarpiece* was intended to be displayed and looked at. It is only from a kneeling position that the spiritual significance and spatial perspective of this truly remarkable work of art can be properly seen and understood.

From the altar rail the first things that are noticeable, because they are at eye level, are the predella panels with the scenes that narrate incidents from the *Life of the Virgin*. The spatial arrangements in each presuppose that