
By Eloquence to Persuade: Rhetorical Synthesis in Florence's San Marco, 1436-1452

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Abstract: What can an old building tell us about how best to “build” our world today? What can an old “construct” say about modern cultural construction? If we listen and look closely, Florence’s San Marco monastery speaks eloquently across the centuries about choice: what to remember, what to imagine, and what to do – in other words, how to choose influences, how to approach those choices for creative and productive discourse with them, and how to translate that process of memory and imagination into moral action? The monastery was paid for by the dynastic Florentine boss Cosimo de’Medici for the glory of his family and city, for the salvation of his soul, because he was besotted by the new Humanist writers and artists, and because he needed a unifying civic project; it was built from 1436-1452 by the architect Michelozzo with a most deliberate floor plan and an emphasis on the manipulation of light; it was frescoed by Fra Beato Angelico, a devout Christian and a spongelike intellect; and it was supervised by the Observant Reformed Dominicans, led by prior Antoninus, with a severe eye on negotiating the tricky line between Cosimo’s worldly money and Humanist enthusiasms and the Dominican vocation to teach and preach. I want to explore the discourse in this complex of buildings among the various rhetorics of secular power/politics, spirituality/theology, humanism and art. All these rhetorics came into dialogue and into focus during this moment of change: of tumult and political upheaval, of rearrangement of medieval institutions, of contact with wider worlds, and of consolidation of new urban worlds, values and rules. San Marco can provide a fascinating and useful text for us to look at in the 21st century, as our worlds, values and rules are being rearranged, and as we must decide what to preserve from various pasts, what present to create and inhabit collectively, and what future to imagine, define and deliver.

Key Words: San Marco, Cosimo de’Medici, Antoninus, Fra Angelico, Michelozzo, Humanism, Reform Dominicans

What can an old building tell us about how best to “build” our world today? What can an old “construct” say about modern cultural construction? If we listen and look closely, Florence’s San Marco monastery speaks eloquently across the centuries about choice: what to remember, what to imagine, and what to do – in other words, how to choose influences, how to approach those choices for creative and productive discourse with them, and how to translate that process of memory and imagination into moral action? The monastery was paid for by the dynastic Florentine boss Cosimo de’Medici for the glory of his family and city, for the salvation of his soul, because he was besotted by the new Humanist writers and artists, and because he needed a unifying civic project; it was built from 1436-1452 by the architect Michelozzo with a most deliberate floor plan and an emphasis on the manipulation of light; it was frescoed by Fra Beato Angelico, a devout Christian and a spongelike intellectual; and it was supervised by the

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Since I claim San Marco as a brilliant piece of rhetoric ideally representative of Florentine Humanism's moment of synthesis and full flowering, I should let the complex speak for itself. Along the way, I will point out the translation of literary rhetorical tropes into art, and the goals and contributions of various communicants in the *conversazione*, spiritual and otherwise.

To be moved by rhetoric, one must be present, so I want to position us physically in the space of which I speak. We will move, as the people of Florence were forced to do by the artists and patrons who designed the journey, from public to semi-public to private space – and then, importantly, back again. And we will move, again carefully guided by artists and patrons, from a completely spiritual space in a secular setting (the church in the city) to a secular space in a spiritual setting (the classical library in the monastery). So, let's begin at the Medici palace at one end of Florence's Via Largo.

When Cosimo Medici returned to his home in triumph from political exile in 1434 (where he lived in Venice and was thus exposed to the ideals of early Veneto humanists and the international art that pervaded Venice), he was faced with several realities, old and new, and had the education and intelligence to recognize their significance with regard to the future of his family, his city, and his envisioned world.

Old. The catastrophic thirteen hundreds had seen the collapse of the medieval world and the undermining of the texts and institutions that supported that world. Nothing – not Aristotle's logic, not scholasticism, not the church, not the literature of saints' lives, not gold-leafed flat art pronouncing One Truth, not agriculturally-based governmental structures – could address the problems of a horrified world dealing with famine, plague, population decimation, economic depression, wars among nobility for succession and nations for land, a discredited spiritual authority (3 popes at once?), and peasant revolts such as the Ciompi in Florence in 1378 led by one of Cosimo's own ancestors in the wool trade who, parenthetically, was exiled.

New. Two equally important developments, one secular and one spiritual, were claiming a high level of attention. First, urban intellectuals had begun to articulate a program to save the world by recreating it as an improved version of the last urban golden ages, the classical periods of Greece and Rome. This literary movement began with a few individuals who loved classical thought and language, most notably Petrarch. It had grown into an education program the goal of which was ethical action in an informed citizenry. The vehicle of this lofty goal was a reading of

Greek and Roman classics for both their content and their technique, that is for their ethical stance which, because of its natural rightness, would appeal to a student's reason, and for their rhetoric which, because of its beauty and grace, would inspire and stimulate a student's will. Emulation and translation-to-the-modern-world of such authors as Cicero and Livy would surely produce an active citizenry and an ethical society of happy people. Humanism had become Civic Humanism. In this view of historical relevance, intellectuals and the leaders they influenced saw themselves as **in** history, therefore as **making** history, and therefore as **responsible** for themselves, their communities and the future of their world. Politics (the competitive art of civic engagement) became a good thing. History, poetry and literature were added to the seven liberal arts, and the theological sciences were de-emphasized. Salvation on earth, in the city of man, through the full realization of individual human potential and through contribution to the welfare of community, was the new utopia. Truth, if not relative, began to be seen as at least contextual and possibly multiple. This Humanist world view was eloquently and enthusiastically propounded by people like Bruni, Alberti and Poggio, who were armed with hundreds of manuscripts collected by people like Boccaccio and Niccolò Niccoli, and who were just beginning to be able to access Greek thanks to teachers like Chrysoloris, imported from Byzantium. Their ideas had quickly been translated to art and architecture by such citizen creators as Masaccio (who used linear perspective to set modeled figures in recognizable urban spaces full of recognizable Florentine characters, rich and poor), Ghiberti (who maximized the use of frame space and whose clustered figures moved in and out of the borders trying to hold their story), Brunelleschi (with his explorations of measurable and harmonious proportion and relationship), Donatello (who probed human grace, sensuality and psychology), and again, Alberti (who published *On Painting* in 1435 and translated that treatise into Florentine Italian in 1436). Alberti did for the fine arts what the new philologists did for literature: create a theory of art by asking questions about both substance and technique, not just how to paint but why, not just style but meaning.

Second, and to my mind equally important, there was a reform movement in the Dominican order, the purpose of which was to solve the world's problems by getting back to the founding fathers' teachings, rules and practices, and by launching a serious recruitment program through creation of confraternities for both boys and adults. The movement was promoted at first by Giovanni Dominic's fiery preaching and severe reforms, but his pupil Antoninus brought a new balance through contact with the urban Humanists. He made dispensations so that both strict observance/private study and public teaching/preaching became possible, and equally important.

At this point, I would like to propose a new view of the relationship between these two developments. In the centuries-long discussion of the Florentine humanist program, emphasis has usually been placed on differences between medieval and renaissance assumptions. Humanism is seen as emerging, somewhat miraculously, in spite of and in contrast to doctrinal scholasticism. This notion arose, of course, in part because early humanists were anxious to define themselves as something new in the world, or at least new in their contemporary world.

I suggest that the structures put in place, and rigorously defended in preaching and practice, by trecento and quattrocento Florentine Dominicans went a long way both to making humanism possible, making it happen in Florence, and providing it with its own structures. I would further

suggest that these similarities are precisely what Michelozzo and Fra Angelico, supported by the dual patronages of Cosimo on behalf of the Civic Humanists and Antoninus on behalf of the Reform Dominicans, were able to tap into to create their remarkably harmonious synthesis of spirituality and secularism, Christian theology and Civic Humanism – San Marco.

Let me borrow the rhetorical technique of parallelism to illustrate similarities in the two programs, the better for you to see and hear the argument. I offer a simple (simplistic) equation: The Dominicans' project was to promote Christian Doctrine. The Humanists' project was to promote Classical Doctrine. The Dominicans' vocation was centered on meditation on Classical Christian texts and preaching, for the improvement of self and community. The Humanists' vocation was centered on studying Classical texts and oratory, for the improvement of self and community. The Dominicans employed a system of exemplars drawn from Biblical history, temporal history (Saints' lives), contemporary church history (important living people and events in their order), and nature. The Humanists employed a system of exemplars from Classical mythological history, temporal history (classical authors), contemporary political history (important living people and events in their city), and nature. The Dominicans' goal was spiritual perfection as reflected in individual and collective earthly perfection. The Humanists' goal was individual and collective earthly perfection as a path to spiritual perfection. The Dominicans' modus operandi was to affect the will via the spirit, with the grace of God. The Humanists' modus operandi was to affect the will via reason, to earn the grace of God. Both Dominicans and Humanists rejected a dichotomy between the contemplative and active life, promoting instead a necessary relationship between the two, as if the rural medieval model of hermit and pilgrim knight had morphed into an urban dual model of friar and preaching soldier of Christ, and scholar and merchant prince (see the backgrounds of many paintings, like Angelico's Deposition, which unite city and country in the central figure). Thus for the Reform Dominicans: study = the means, preaching and teaching = the way, rhetoric = the tool, and salvation of souls = the goal. For Civic Humanists: study = the means, oratory and teaching = the way, rhetoric = the tool, and salvation of society = the goal. Finally, for both Dominicans and Humanists images were an important part of the equation, because the eye, which lets in and interprets light, was the window onto the soul and the highest of the senses.

One of the first acts of the new Capo was to reject a Brunelleschi design for a glorious new Medici palace on the grounds that it was too ostentatious – a public gesture that really ticked off the greatest architect of the moment. One of the features of rhetoric is that it is public, especially overtly political rhetoric, and its audience can read its messages. Cosimo's decision communicated clearly: humility by the most powerful man in the state; simplicity by the wealthiest man in the community; political acumen by a cultivator of the "just-one-of-you" image to the city's elite, many of whom probably would have made a different decision had they had the opportunity (as witnessed by the Pitti family a few years later); the power of the patron over the increasingly enthusiastic and therefore potentially upstart artist; and, I believe from reading his letters, a genuine interest in classical clarity. Cosimo sent Brunelleschi across the street to work on the Medici chapel at San Lorenzo and gave the domestic commission to the young Michelozzo, who had gone with him into exile in Venice.

Another of Cosimo's first acts was quickly to glom on to the opportunity presented by the Fiesole Reform Dominicans who wanted to be closer to city life. The reason given by the friars was the better to carry out the Dominican vocation (teach-to-preach), but frankly, it's a long and arduous walk down and back up the mountain from Fiesole to Florence, and even a sincere religious would get sick of that journey – practically barefoot in rain and other weather anomalies (the use of horses had been banned since the General Chapter of 1220). Further, exciting intellectual stuff was happening down in the secular urban world that educated monks might have wanted to be closer to. Learning, albeit Christian learning, had always been an essential component of the Dominican program, as had close contact with large urban centers. With new power in hand, Cosimo got papal approval to be the total money behind the total reconstruction of an old Domician monastery and church that “happened” to be at one end of his street – there were other dilapidated structures he could have chosen. So, the resident friars got booted out, the resident altar piece got moved to a different church, and the project was underway. I find it interesting that the symbolic and real centerpiece of the original church, its art, needed to be removed. I am less of a cynic than are post-freudian, and especially post-modern critics. I would like to keep alive, in this paper, Cosimo's earnest and honest desire for salvation for himself and his family, the Dominicans' earnest and honest belief in their program for all of mankind's salvation, and the Civic Humanists' earnest and honest belief in the possibilities for personal and collective happiness through classical ideas, expressed through the literature, art and architecture.

As we exit the Medici family complex we travel two short blocks on Via Largo (now Via Cavour), and without altering our angle more than a few degrees walk straight into the nave of San Marco church, our steps halted only by the back wall of the high altar. Thus the sacred space becomes an extension of the urban space, with secular power at one end and spiritual power at the other. As Alberti was busy describing at that exact moment, a street is the most important line in the urban built environment and is a symbolic and real path from locus to locus, from origin to goal, from self to other and back on the secular journey. Likewise, the nave is the most important line in the spiritual built environment and is a symbolic and real path from locus to locus, from origin to goal, from self to God and back on the spiritual journey. Street and nave are here declared to be one, with different sorts of gods glorified at each end – God the creator of the universe, Cosimo the creator of the city. A characteristic of rhetoric is its obviousness, its clarity of intentions as demonstrated by the physical direction of its argument.

So here we are in the completely public part of the San Marco complex, the church. We are probably surrounded by fellow citizens from all walks of life, *populo minuto* to *Magnati*. We have possibly just completed a procession for a saint's day, with older boys from a Dominican confraternity carrying the crucifix in silhouette against the cloudless Tuscan sky, and younger boys dancing and singing in the rear for all the world like Luca della Robia's and Donatello's marble putti on their recently carved Cantoria. Here, the natural tensions between Christianity's ideals and merchants' daily practicalities, complicated and exacerbated by the humanists' resurrection of pagan classicism and ethics, dissolve, or rather are harmoniously resolved. Civic values, Classical values and Christian values are deftly connected, especially in Fra Angelico's remarkable altarpiece. And here, the conscious project of recording and celebrating Medici history, as re-membered by the Medicis themselves, is launched.

In a city, the high altar is a point of intersection of religious and civic life. Fra Angelico, the author of this Altarpiece, himself embodied this intersection. According to all sources, most notably Vasari, Angelico was a devout Christian friar, a constantly curious and thoughtful intellectual, and THE painter of the moment – Massaccio having died. This Altarpiece is considered the first to embody Renaissance ideals and motifs. So what is “Renaissance” about the work?

The San Marco altar piece is like a theater scene. As a choreographer myself, Angelico’s creation reminds me of Act III of my Nutcracker, where Clara and her prince sit centrally enthroned on a platform under an arch far upstage, weirdly in and out of the scene at once. They are framed by swaths of drapery pulled back to reveal the inhabitants of Candy Land who presumably relate to them, but who equally and obviously project outwards to the audience. Here we have a framed proscenium space full of light, color, movement and pageantry. Gesturing actors, costumed appropriately, are choreographed into careful groups – symmetrical enough for continuity and asymmetrical enough for dynamics. After all, Alberti’s *historia* (those things worthy to be set forth or narrated in a painting) requires *histrion* (actor). Appropriate props, like books, feathers and pens appear, loaded with meaning. Meticulous and transparent perspective techniques create deep space, and a painted backdrop rises behind the characters, providing a setting while remaining separate. Finally, program notes point at, contextualize and interpret the performance – like the crucifixion set into the bottom of the panel.

Pageantry was an important part of Florentine civic and religious life, but there is much more going on in Angelico’s drama than symbolic entertainment. As the scholar William Hood has so elegantly described, the exact gestures and groupings are drawn from Dominic’s treatise on gesture as a means of meditation and way to experience the Christian Mystery. For example, Dominic’s gesture number nine means “conversation,” and demonstrates an enthusiasm for preaching. The two saints on the left, behind Cosmas and Lorenzo are engaged in “conversation” as a way to moral truth. Humanists could easily have also read these figures as philosophers engaged in “discourse” as a way to ethical truth, and as a demonstration of enthusiasm for “oratory.” We will see an elaboration of this theme in Cosimo’s cell at the end of our journey.

Speaking of Cosimo de’ Medici, the predominance of reds and greens reminds us that the Medici colors are red and green. St. Cosmas’s cap is the signature merchant’s cap worn by Cosimo (see his posthumous portrait). The presence of the patron’s name-saint is not subtle, nor is his function. He stares out at us with a profoundly sad, pious and concerned face, his brow furrowed with the weight of his responsibilities. He acts as Alberti’s *interlocutor*, or link between our world and the painted world, but he also introduces us to God and invites sober participation in the celebratory moment. He is our secular guide to the spiritual event. The only other figure that looks out at us is Lorenzo, one of the founding saints of Florence who was also closely connected with the Medici family. Cosimo’s brother Lorenzo, of whom we will hear more, died as this altarpiece was being painted, and Lorenzo Magnifico would be christened in the baptistry in a few years.

Secular humanist and Florentine civic values abound. The Virgin's throne is flanked by classical columns with ornate Corinthian capitals. A dome-of-heaven over the Virgin morphs into a Roman arch from which hangs the Holy Spirit. The whole is capped with sculpted swags featuring the golden oranges or balls of the Medici family's *impressa*. The sumptuous fabric of the gold-embroidered brocade drapery is a reference to the new Florentine silk industry, deliberately created to rival and replace the Eastern silk trade which was being threatened by the encroaching Turks. The backdrop sets the whole scene in the modern Tuscan landscape, complete with Lake Trasemene.

The startling oriental carpet, besides functioning as a perspective grid, clearly references the most important recent event in Medici, Florentine, Church, and Humanist history, and is itself a locus for the intersection of those worlds. In 1393 Cosimo convinced the pope, who was his friend as a result of having spent nine years in exile in Florence, to move the General Council of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches from Ferrara to Florence. His brother Lorenzo was the negotiator. Over 700 secular and spiritual leaders, scholars and interpreters came to Florence with their fabulous outfits, their beards, their opulence, their Moorish servants, their never-before seen animals, their money and, most importantly, their Greek books and scholars. Cosimo's brilliant stroke solidified his association with the honor and power of his church and city, increased business for Florence's merchants and bankers, and opened a door for the Humanists, never to be closed, onto the golden world of Greek scholarship. Scholars like Bessarion and Isidore stayed behind or returned to Italy with their manuscripts, taught Greek, taught effective translation, and molded such young Platonic philosophers as Cosimo's protégé and Antoninus' future novitiate, Marsilio Ficino.

One characteristic of effective rhetoric is that it communicates on many levels, thus reaching all sorts of people and groups with individual agendas, and uniting their individual "truths" in a larger "Truth." Surely Angelico's central panel fulfills that goal.

For some reason, when looking at a Fra Angelico work, I am always moved to ask, what is missing? The most obvious missing element in this work is the side panels. This picture can not be closed up when its ritual function is fulfilled. The great painting remains always present, a reminder of the glory of God, the Dominicans, Cosimo de' Medici, Civic Humanism, and Florence. This art transcends liturgy.

If the Central panel is a theatrical scene, the pedella's nine panels are a motion picture. There has been much scholarly discussion about which of the panels, now scattered around the world, originally belonged to the altar. I am going to treat all nine as importantly related to the whole work. Seven of the panels portray key scenes from the lives of St. Cosmas and his brothers, and the other two show important miracles performed by the twin healers, Sts. Cosmas and Damian. I want to glance briefly at the execution panel with its horrific violence, and the burial panel which shows the miracle of the camel and some very familiar architecture.

Brace yourself before you enter the execution panel. The scene is piercingly tragic. The preceding panels depict failed attempts to kill the troublesome brothers by drowning, fire and crucifixion. I wonder if there is any connection with Christian baptism by water, desire and

blood. Finally, the executioners blindfold the brothers, tie their hands behind their backs, force them onto their knees, and whack their heads off. Sts. Cosmas and Damian are already dead with their heads rolled aside and blood spurting out of their necks. The next brother in age has just had his head severed. His kneeling body starts to fall forward and blood spurts from its neck. An executioner is in the act of raising his sword to decapitate the fourth brother, and the baby brother is kneeling, blindfolded and bound, awaiting his turn, his body straining with fear. I can't write about this image calmly. It is an agitated scene. The brutality of tyranny is here graphically illustrated for a city that is, nominally at least, a republic.

In the next panel the brothers are being buried in separate graves when a miraculous camel shows up and says, "Nolite eos sepati a sepultura quia no sunt sepati a meritas." Do not separate them in death as they were not separated in merit. The brothers, so isolated in the execution panel, are united in death. The role of both church and Cosimo de' Medici in the defense of liberty, even to the point of martyrdom, would not be lost on the viewers. To reinforce this theme, the buildings in the background are Florence, in fact, are San Marco in the very act of being restored by Michelozzo, Fra Angelico, Cosimo and Antoninus. We have here the union of the city of man (Florence) and city of God (Jerusalem). This self-conscious, self-referential linkage is a manifestation of Florence's evolving sense of chosen-ness that actually reminds me of Blake's idea of London as the New Jerusalem. In the late trecento and early quattrocento the liberty of Florence was seen, at least by Florentines, as key to the liberty of Italy – *Libertas Firenze = Libertas Italiae*. This is the city that carried the Virgin through the streets as a symbol of Liberty (Our Lady of Liberty), and that elected Christ and Mary as King and Queen of Florence! The burial panel is certainly a piece of affective and effective, unifying rhetoric.

The two miracles depicted by Angelico seem uniquely appropriate to Cosimo's self-defined role in Florentine life. Justinian Deacon had lost his leg to cancer when the then-dead saintly brothers saved his life in a dream by robbing the grave of a recently buried Ethiopian Moor, cutting off the corpse's leg and attaching the black leg to the white Deacon. Cosimo inherited a diseased city threatened with death, then unified and healed it, by whatever means possible. Florence's self-image before Cosimo was as the underdog of Italian politics, especially vis a vis Milan, Naples and the Papacy who were eating away at its territories. This perception is in no small part behind the choice of little David, who killed the giant Goliath, as the city's symbol. In addition, Cosimo, influenced by his classical humanist circle of young intellectuals, emphasized earned nobility, through the merit of deeds, as more noble than inherited nobility. The miracle of Justinian Deacon was also cited at the Nicene Council and thus connects Florence with the origins of Christianity. Finally, Sts. Cosmas and Damian were doctors who cured, with medical skill and miracles, people's bodies and souls, while Cosimo cures, with political skill and the grace of God, Florence's body and spirit. Medici means medic.

In the other miracle, St. Cosmas refused to accept payment from Dame Palladia whom he and St. Damian, had miraculously cured. The brothers had taken a vow never to accept payment and were called the "unmercenaries." Dame Palladia prostrated herself before Damian and pleaded with him to accept three eggs in the name of the holy trinity. He accepted in God's name, and because not to have done so might have amounted to the sin of pride. Cosmas ordered his brother not to be buried with him because of the broken vow – thus the miracle of the camel who speaks

with a human voice that we have already seen. The justification of financial transactions among pious and meritorious Dominicans, artists, merchants, bankers and humanists must indeed have been a comforting picture to meditate upon.

The San Marco altar is more than the sum of its parts. More than a giant thank you note to Cosimo – or reminder to the citizenry of his magnificence and munificence. More than a proclamation of Humanism’s classical foundations. More than a spectacle to appeal to the less educated. More than a celebration of the Reformed Observant Dominican program. More even than a locus for the Christian mystery. Without creating an overly crowded stage, how much Fra Angelico gives the eye of the worshipper to feast upon! To move the citizenry to do what? Be inspired to emulate Christ and the saints in their spiritual lives? Be motivated to emulate Cosimo and Lorenzo in their civic lives? Enter both “mystery” and “history” and, through emulation, go forth and generate both?

I always leave with questions. Why is Lorenzo so elegantly dressed, with gold embroidery and jewels? Are these possibly burial robes? He died on September 23, 1440 in his beloved villa at Corregio, and we know the altar was not complete when it was consecrated. Was Lorenzo the missing piece? What might be the relationship of the dramatic, mystery-play feeling of the sequential pedella panels to Antoninus’ fondness for processions, and to Angelico’s early membership in a confraternity that performed mystery plays and emphasized the role of images in encouraging participation in worship? Does the Camel hint at the prophetic messenger John Baptist, with his famous Camel hair cloak? Such a suggestion would extend the meaning of the scene to point at another healer/savior, Christ, and to Cosimo who is the savior of Florence. What is the intention behind, and effect of, extreme violence in religious art (see Fra Angelico’s Last Judgement and the fresco in his own cell in San Marco)? Is the artist performing a symbolic artistic flagellation? Is the artist urging a meditation on the violence of Christ’s murder?

One final question occurs to me as I gaze on this deftly integrated altar. The Dominican community is a corporation that issues contracts. Cosimo is a banker used to contracts. Angelico apparently had no contract because he was a friar in the order, but what about Michelozzo? It would be interesting to find evidence of negotiations among the lay patron (Cosimo), the corporation (Antoninus for the Reform Observant Dominicans), and the artists (Michelozzo and Angelico). Who had control over what when? Who wrote which checks to whom? It seems to me as if Cosimo had a LOT of control – heraldry, namesake saints, family symbols, key and representative stories, colors (we know that pigments were sometimes ordered through the Medici bank), and the inclusion of their namesakes in the altarpiece’s formal name. Did Fra Angelico have a freer hand in the frescoes of the more private spaces inside the monastery? But these are all questions for research, not this experiential journey I am on.

Speaking of private spaces, it’s time to go.

In order to enter the monastery, we have to pass through another transition space – a public space – Piazza San Marco. Just as we had to encounter a linear city street before we entered a linear nave, we are now forced to encounter a city square before we pass directly into a square cloister. A piazza is an urban cloister, in form and function. This parallelism again recalls the

urban/spiritual connection, but on a more intimate scale. Space is contracted, and framed. Since Brunelleschi's 1419 commission for a Foundling Hospital on the next piazza over, dell'Annunciata, classicism had to be dealt with in the architecture of squares. As we pause for a moment we realize that the sound of Florence is construction. Active citizens chip away at stone, hammer beams, draw water for mortar, thump ladders against walls and holler instructions. Florence is literally "building" itself. Many of the buildings we tour today were rising or being renovated or getting their domes and elaborate sculptural programs at this time. We might also hear a poet reciting in one corner of the square and two merchants deep in negotiations in another corner, while shoppers bustle across the space admonishing unruly children.

Now we move into the monastery of San Marco's semi-public ground floor, and immediately find ourselves in the Sant'Antonino Cloister. A sense of calm falls on us and the stresses furrowing our foreheads fall away, as we remember St. Cosmas's furrowed brow in the altarpiece. We can still hear the urban sounds of the square, but they are muted. The plain, undecorated walls erase our tensions. Their surface slowly shifts through shades of white, from pale cream to almost yellow, as the day's light moves from dawn to dusk. We feel welcomed into the purely classical arms of this human-scaled, open air room. It seems as if Michelozzo has extracted the essence of, has formalized, Brunelleschi's vocabulary. What was, for Brunelleschi, a muscular, ostentatious and obviously theoretical approach to architecture is molded by Michelozzo, especially in this spiritual context, into a quiet, subtle, loggia space supported by classical columns with understated ionic capitals that look suspiciously like scroll manuscripts. For example, where Brunelleschi heavily outlined the intersections of his barrel vaulting, Michelozzo lets the light do the work. Each curved triangle spreads down from the apex in a billow like a weightless parachute with the setting sun behind it, and speaks eloquently with a slightly different version of the same glowing color. In fact, everywhere the light does the work of sculpting, of leading the eye into and out of the enclosure's shadowed recesses. Words to describe this cloister could easily apply to a piece of Ciceronian oratory: Logic, repetition, rhythm, symmetry, a smooth surface that allows the mind to glide easily from one point to another, few embellishments to muddle the argument/impact, a horizontal inevitability (emphasized by the dormitory windows of the first floor), and a hidden mathematical structure that quietly supports a sense of unified beauty and grace – wholeness. The single Angelico fresco that confronts us, directly across from the entrance, is of St. Dominic worshipping the silhouetted crucifix we just saw being carried in procession against that blank sky. Angelico's evolving interest in form, light, color and space is minimized here, indeed, is conspicuous by its absence. His debt to Masaccio, whom he certainly studied (see Vasari), is, on the other hand, clear, and underlines the rhetorical conversation artists were having with each other. Christ's shape seems like a quote from the Santa Maria Novella *Trinity*. He is fully humanized, down to his abs, but is deliberately removed from Masaccio's extremely well-known (at the time) context of heavy-handed earthly perspective – here Christ is set out of time and space. We have in this fresco a near neo-platonic idea of the essential relationship between Christ and human through meditation on, and dialogue with, the crucifix. Further, the image is set in a cloister that seems more like the Idea of cloister than hard stone and stucco. And we are moved to do what by this classical/Christian/neo-platonic/humanist encounter? Drop our worldly confusions and, like Dominic, focus. Experience, be inspired, emulate, become transformed, transform. Almost as if there were arrows painted on the walls, we follow the line of the loggia to our next stop.

Of the many semi-public, communal rooms on the ground floor, each with its own function and fresco relating to that function, I will just look at the Chapterhouse, which is, in fact, adjacent to the cloister. The room's function involved judgment of friars' actions according to the Dominican rule. Thus one of the two frescos shows Dominic holding up the rule, and the other fresco, huge and inescapable, filling an entire wall above the benches of the "accused" and the "judges," shows the single moment that encapsulates judgment and mercy through the rule of God – the crucifixion. How could any Christian not be moved to moral action after contemplating the stark trinity of crucifixes silhouetted against the empty blue sky? Just look at how the characters from both Biblical and temporal history are moved, as if they exist together in the higher reality of the crucifixion moment. The background is removed to concentrate the mind on the event. The line of heads delineates the symbolic separation of realms – heaven and earth. The volumes have a physical reality, especially Magdalene's back. She supports the limp Virgin whose arms are parallel to her son's in the helpless Dominican gesture imploring divine power. The placement of the fresco above eye level encourages an attitude of submission. And the cardinal's hat is off, indicating humility. The very presence of that brilliant red moment in the work also underscores church hierarchy. Many of the figures in this dramatic scene would have been read by its image-literate audience in multiple ways. I have already mentioned Sts. Cosmas, Damian and Lorenzo, who here appears with his prop – the grate on which he was grilled. Let's look more closely at John the Baptist.

One of the tools of rhetoric is economy of language. Translated into art, this characteristic manifests itself as economy of image. John the Baptist as patron saint of Florence (thus the extraordinary symbolism of its Baptistery) invokes, as always, Florentine civic life. John is also the patron of the Medici, suggesting that Cosimo unites Florentine spiritual and civic life. In much the same way, Dominic, painted beneath the crucifix and supporting a tree hung with portraits of living Dominicans, connects the order's temporal history with the defining moment of Biblical history. John is a problematic figure for a city – a wild man, untamable, who acts weirdly with no apparent reason. In fact, reason, is not an appropriate word for John. He is a mystery, and as such, perhaps, can provide a conduit to The Mystery for reasoned, ordered, urban merchants who may have become removed from access to the intuitive aspect of their faith. I think it no accident that John is usually depicted on the same side of a painting as the patron's saints and the women, not mingling with the order's saints. John connects both baptism and the passion through oratory (see Donatello's young John). Like Orpheus, a classical hero often invoked by humanists, John's ability to "sing" was most symbolically ended by decapitation. John was a hermit and preacher who, like the Dominicans, retreated to gather wisdom and resources in order to go forth and preach. John was expected, in popular theology at the time, to return as Elijah, his typological ancestor in the Old Testament, who was "a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:8; cf. 2:8). He thus also suggests the Medici themselves, who keep bouncing back from various exiles and threats – remember the Ciompi uprising. John as both a prophet and messenger is a transition figure between worlds (divine and human) and between fields in art (the viewer's field and the painted field). John occupied both scary uncivilized space (the wilderness) outside the city walls and was able to negotiate and affect ordered civilized space within the city walls. Interestingly, Giovanni was the Dominican name taken by Fra Angelico, although I suspect the reference was to the Evangelist.

I leave this room, too, with lingering questions: When and where does blood look and act like blood (see cells 4, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 37, 42, 43 and the North hall crucifix with Dominic), and when does it look like the flutes on a classical column, with the platform for Christ's feet serving as a capital? To what extent might this powerful image also have echoes of civic judgment and mercy through the rule of Cosimo? Speaking of justice, Judas always seems so present in his absence in crucifixion scenes. John Baptist, Magdalene and Judas are clearly the transgressive figures in the Christian story and almost always have the look of "the other" in art: hairy and dark skinned, engaged in acts that cross personal and divine boundaries, like pointing at, reaching for, or kissing Christ. Is it possible that Judas takes over for John Baptist in some way, furthering Jesus's necessary progress from baptism as human to resurrection as divine, as suggested in some Gnostic texts? We often see Magdalene and Baptist or Magdalene and Judas sharing image space. But do the three ever appear together? Would such a configuration be possible, chronologically or theologically – not that historicity seems to bother anyone? Different versions of Christianity tell such different stories about the figures and sequence of events in the Passion.

Now let's go upstairs.

Again, the architect forces us to pass through a transition space that affects our perception of the next stage of our journey. In order to get upstairs we must encounter a tiny cloister called the *Spesa*. The function of this lovely space is to unite the ground floor's semi-public areas with the first floor's completely private spaces, and separate the face of the monastery presented to its visitors from its hidden support system of kitchens, laundry, etc. Again, as our journey becomes more focused, space is contracted. Sure enough, here is another small reminder of the union of the secular and the spiritual, and of the hidden money that supports, as surely as the kitchens do, the monastery – the Medici symbol of a shield with seven *palle* (balls).

We have the imprint of the cloister architecture in our minds as we move to the corner staircase and begin our literal and metaphorical ascent to the area of higher activities than such communal ones as eating and dispensing earthly justice. This staircase, originally a spiral one, is the only way provided to get upstairs. We are architecturally squeezed into a solitary mode. The physical motion involved in "reading/negotiating" a spiral staircase is a choreographed meditation, and makes me wonder about its connection with the mystical wheels and labyrinths so common in Late Medieval Europe. Angelico himself painted *Mystical Wheel with the Vision of Ezekial* for a Silver Chest. As part of the choreography of a personal journey toward God, many cathedral floors featured a labyrinth that mirrored the architectural, gold-starred dome-of-heaven above.

The Annunciation. The pilgrim reaches the top of the stairs and is literally stopped in her tracks by a wall with a fresco of The Annunciation. She must make a decision to go right or left down one of the hallways. As with Mary in the Annunciation, there are only two options. At this point, to do as full justice as possible to Fra Angelico, I want to concentrate on the lived experience of encountering and engaging with this remarkable work. I am in a narrow hallway and cannot back up or I'll fall down the stairs. Space is yet again constricted. I am forced to be an intimate participator in this intimate drama. Silence is now complete and palpable because I am indoors

and alone. The fresco is slightly above eye level and the figures are life-size, as if the three of us (and Angelico's spirit), share the moment, making me feel like a voyeur. This fresco reveals not so much an annunciation as a serious conversation. The eye contact between Gabriel and Mary is piercing and suggests urgency and solemnity. Mary is really listening! She gets it. She's smart. She understands the power of the information she receives; she understands that it is in her volition to assent or not; and she understands the consequences of her choice for all humanity. She is a reminder that we all make choices that have larger consequences.

Technique is, of course, present, but not nearly as obvious as in the Altarpiece, or even the Chapterhouse crucifixion. Mary and Gabriel, in an unusual and I think original stroke, are portrayed in the same architectural space, emphasizing the intimacy of the encounter. Mary's cloister is a reference to the *Spesa* cloister we just left, with Michelozzo's classical columns and ionic capitals but without the Medici's balls. The empty cell in back with its high window shows us where we are going next, pulls us deeper into the scene via the space between the protagonists' eyes, hints at the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit, and urges us to meditate on the theological meaning of the event. The single light source comes from high downstage left and falls diagonally onto the stage, giving the actors form. Mary's face is spotlighted, while Gabriel's is cast in partial shadow. The Angel's robes are molded by the light so that they drape and fall naturally, as if in a Ghiberti Baptistry panel, and the swept-back hem indicates the forward movement of the recently landed messenger. Angelico had collaborated with Ghiberti. Speaking of light, in the quattrocento an eternal flame burned under painting. I wonder if the lamp was placed near the lower left corner, which is also the turning point where the two halls are connected. Placed in that spot, the lamp would accentuate both the angle of light in the fresco and the importance of choice. The simple, undecorated lunette functions again as both an echo of Michelozzo's architecture and a reminder of where the light is coming from. Gabriel's and Mary's backs echo the arches. The palette is jarringly different from the altarpiece, and even the crucifixion. The colors are so luminous, they glow like enamelware. I am reminded of the early della Robias starting to appear at that time, and the Raphaels not yet born. Perspective is present but subtle. Unlike in his altarpiece, the artist here resists accentuating the mathematics underlying the experienced world – evidence of his accommodation, or even suppression, of technique to subject. This scene abounds with the modern: renaissance naturalism, intelligence, psychology, Florentine affection for Tuscany and its own built environment, self-conscious nods to patrons and fellow artists, humanist ideas about free will. Yet Angelico goes back to medieval hierarchism by making the cloister way smaller, vis-a-vis the players, than it would have been had Mary and Gabriel been having their chat downstairs in the *Spesa*. Angelo has selected the best of the old (medieval) and the new (contemporary) for own purposes. As an artist, he places himself out of time.

As always with Angelico, I am urged by the spare, clear work itself to ask, what is missing, what is deliberately left out? No book, no lily, no glass vessel, no candle, no linen towel, no elaborate backdrop between the two actors to distract the three-way eye journey: painter/observer-Gabriel-Mary. No mortal observer in the frame as there is in the cell 3 Annunciation, where Dominic peeks from behind a pillar. No little door in the corner, again as in cell 3, where it functions both as a *porta clausa* (reference to Mary's virginity as a temple door through which only the Lord can enter - Ezekiel 44:1-4) and as a reference to the real door in the corner of the *Spesa*. No *fait-*

accompli holy spirit already on the way to Mary's womb on a ray of light bearing a tiny cross, thrown on stage by God's hands sticking out of a golden cloud, in case we didn't get it. No big thwack of diagonal gold taking over the human narrative. No other narratives at all: not Michael, not Adam and Eve, not references to the two final pieces of the story: Christ's passion and Mary's elevation to her role as Intercessor. Just an intelligent, alert and literate young Florentine girl about to make a choice (action) of her own volition (will) based on knowledge, for the good of civilization. As a piece of rhetoric, *The Annunciation* is a perfect conflation of Dominican and Humanist ideas.

There is a lot of empty space in the image. Empty space in painted rhetoric functions the same way as do commas, periods and paragraphs in written rhetoric, pauses in oratory, silence in music, and stillness in dance. Absence gives the observer an opportunity to assimilate and make connections, and gives effective rhythm and structure to meaning, to the "argument."

There is also, I believe, a spiritual/secular connection suggested in the artist's only glaring, almost prideful, demonstration of technique – Gabriel's remarkable wings. Bands of color had shown up a lot recently on representations of Gabriel's wings, suggesting to my mind a rainbow – the symbol of God's Old Testament covenant with man now realized in the New Testament incarnation. But this Gabriel's banded wings are arrestingly embellished with peacock eyes – a lavish gesture uncharacteristic of this spare fresco. The peacock was both a symbol of the Virgin-as-vehicle-for-incarnation and of the Medici family. Specifically, Cosimo's personal emblem was a trinity of peacock feathers, perhaps most clearly represented in the Medici chapel frescos.

No *populo minuto* would have made it up here and any *Magnati* who made it would be humbled. This image is intended for a literate audience with a shared vocabulary, and is oddly both narrative and iconic at once – without the usual trappings of either. Mary's body is, as usual, a tabernacle within the tabernacle of the painted cloister within the tabernacle of the monastery, within the secular tabernacle of the Humanist city. But she is also a human being with free will at a sober moment of significant choice. Mysticism and naturalism, the invisible and visible world, are synthesized in this graceful image.

I reluctantly move away from Angelico's Mary with, again, questions. In what ways, if at all, can a painting be seen as active – not just a passive artifact awaiting the imposition of the observer's mind upon it, but an agent of change, perhaps even of salvation? In what ways might art-as-salvation be problematic for the religious artist? I am thinking here of proscriptions against depicting Muhammed in Islam, and of Milton's self-consciousness about justifying the ways of God to man. Does religious art in any way function as a man-made relic, with monastery or chapel or church as reliquary? An object (*figura*) telling a story (*istoria*) through non-narrative means? A relic object and an art object rendering visible the invisible, emotionally tangible the intangible, through the inner eyes of both creator (God/artist) and worshipper? With regard to the then-contemporary view that light rays from the eye affect the object seen, in what way does the eye of the painter alter what it looks at? In the end, I am simply grateful that Fra Angelico did not accept the papal offer of the archbishopric of Florence, but passed that temporal prize on to Antoninus. This Annunciation suggests that Angelico's humility in that matter might not have

been entirely disingenuous. He clearly loved to paint, not administer and orate. Painting was his vocation, in the highest sense of that concept, and had been at least since he was 17.

There are 54 frescos in San Marco, entirely a result of Fra Angelico's vision, plan, supervision and, often, personal hand – an unprecedented and, I would argue unequalled, achievement. 43 of them are in the friars' private cells. The scenes vary widely in complexity of form, color scheme and psychological or political content, but share at least one important characteristic, especially from the point of view of a 21st century culture of multiple, quickly switching, fast moving experience. There is only one image per cell. The observers spent weeks, months, maybe years, experiencing the same image. What are the differences between being able to hold multiple images in your mind on a single computer screen with many windows open at once, and being able to hold multiple meanings in your mind while meditating on a single image for a week at a time? For example, among the usual symbols that make the usual appearances with the usual synthetic effects is the lily. The lily suggests Mary's virginity, is an attribute of St. Dominic, is a symbol (with three blossoms – as in the trinity) of Florence, and, lest we forget, is an emblem of the Medici. I have no doubt that an observant friar would go crazy before the end of *The Matrix* and one of my students would go crazy after a week of staring at one image in a San Marco cell, although both individuals do seem able to sit still for long periods at a time. I find it interesting that each, in the other's context, would probably think they were suffering from deprivation – lack of stimulus.

A few other characteristics are common to all cells. Michelozzo has made ascetic, but not grim, retreat spaces that invite the simple friar to contemplation of a beautiful Mystery. Their function is clear from his uniform and spare design, from the color of the walls which echoes the cloister walls below, and especially from the single, small high window in each room. These altar-shaped openings are placed so high that they are good only for gazing upward toward God's heaven, for allowing in enough light to read and meditate on the fresco, and for reminding the occupant of the single ray of light on which the Holy Spirit travels in Annunciation scenes. I imagine a friar placing his cot so that he can see the moon, when it comes that way, or a star. It is also clear, even if we only look at the uniform light source in the frescos, that Angelico had a uniform vision for the whole program. Both artists convey with clarity that a central premise of the entire project involves enlightenment and spiritual enhancement, through meditation. The mendicant meditates. I meditate. The artist himself, as he paints, meditates. In fact, a friend suggested that we look for lines in The Annunciation plaster corresponding to the bands of color in Gabriel's wings, to see if Angelico might have painted them one day at a time, as an act of meditation.

The cells designed for novices and lay friars (i.e. the less educated and those in training) feature simple images. Dominic and/or the Virgin worship(s) the crucifix in Dominic's various positions and gestures. These images are painted in an understated palette. Does the simplicity honor Antoninus's belief that crowded scenes with multiple narratives are too obfuscating for simple worshippers? Or Alberti's artistic principles? Or, in the spirit of this paper, both? Clearly, their purpose is to reveal mystery, not intellectually to beat people over the head with meaning. Less educated people may respond more empathetically to imagery than those whose brains have been cluttered up with multiple possibilities. Antoninus wrote a treatise recommending the education

of children with pictures, acted-out stories and dramas in both domestic and confraternity settings. Angelico has translated his prior's theory into practice.

I will glance briefly at a few cell frescos and one corridor fresco, *Mary of Shadows*. But first, it seems worth noting that although there are 43 rooms, there are only 40 doors on the corridors (excluding the staircase and corridor to the library). That means there are 40 choices. There are three significant passages in the Bible that link the number forty with a retreat before salvation/understanding, before going forth and doing something, building something good. *For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.* (Genesis 7:4) *The people of Israel ate the manna forty years, till they came to a habitable land. They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan.* (Exodus 16:35) *And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.* (Mark 1:13)

San Marco functions as a big quattrocento artificial memory system. From Cicero, at least, to Quintillian, to the anonymous medieval text *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, to Florentine humanists and Reformed Dominicans – secular and spiritual leaders and writers sought ways to access and regulate individual and communal memory. Whether for purposes of oratory or worship, a system was devised, described, and evolved that relied on associations among sites, pictures, objects and texts. Called “the art of memory,” the system functions in part by connecting an image with an important the idea. The simpler, more unusual, more specific, more startling, or more beautiful the image, the more likely it is that its related idea will be recollected, and recollected in the proper way with all of its complexities and meanings. Often humor is even employed, certainly an incongruous notion in religious art. Each cell in San Marco uses an image in this way – to deepen a profound, almost collective in a Jungian sense, memory of a piece of the story of Christ's life and death.

Cell 31 was Antoninus's personal cell while he was prior from 1439-46. He loved this space so much that he kept the keys to it after he was called to Rome. Its fresco, *Christ in Limbo*, is certainly startling in its light, motion, gesture and what looks to me like a scary vision of what it would look and feel like if the Orsanmichelle or Duomo sculptures came to life and stepped out of their niches into the real world. This image is a downright Dickensian vision of risen spirits, like something out of *A Christmas Carol*. I suspect the shaggy, dark-haired figure being hauled up from hell is Elijah, yet another San Marco reference to John the Baptist returning as Elijah. But look at the little demon that has been squashed, like Oz's Wicked Witch of the East, by the door Christ just kicked in. That's funny. Once you notice him you will never forget this scene.

The weirdest frescos in San Marco are, to my mind, *The Mocking of Christ* (cell 7) and what seem like its companion pieces, *Christ in Sepulchre with the Virgin and Saint Dominic* across the hall in cell 26 and the *Temptation of Christ* in cell 32a, where a hysterically funny demon is dressed, I think, like a scholastic! We remember *The Annunciation* because of its beauty and grace. We remember these images because of their oddness. Was Angelico channeling Dali? Of course, the message/meaning of the *Mocking* is: patience. But how does the observant friar access that meaning? The Negroid features, rude gestures and disembodied hands of the

tormentors would have been read in at least three ways: funny, threatening, and incredibly frightening. Moors were featured as almost clown figures in Florentine drama of the time. The Turks were on the Italian horizon and were conflated in the Florentine mind with Moors. The hands, coming out of nowhere to attack the pure white Savior would have had the impact of the dark hairy winged monkeys swooping down on Dorothy. Fra Angelico has created the equivalent of the disembodied knife in the shower scene of *Psycho*, attacking the purity of the naked, virginal heroine. Christ's presence in the scene, but essential absence from the activities, needs to be mentioned. He is isolated from what is being inflicted on him, by blindfold, serene posture and white robe. He clearly exists in the image, but almost appears as a hole in the fresco, a nonexistence. His patience is not so much endurance as lack of vulnerability. The frantic motion all around him becomes irrelevant. Within the fresco, Dominic and Mary use different and complimentary mnemotechniques: meditation on text and meditation on feeling, contemplation and sorrow, rationalism and mysticism, intellect and intuition, authority of text and authority of experience. Between them they embody different "true" paths to the "Truth" of faith. I love this fresco. It definitely puts me in mind of a quattrocento *The Matrix*.

Resurrection of Christ and Women at the Tomb (cell 8) shows especially clearly the layers of both creation and meditation involved in accessing the meaning of The Mystery. Concentric circles move in and then out of the fresco. Angelico has created an image in which Dominic image-ines the moment of discovery of the empty (classical by the way) tomb by Mary, who has a vision in her image-ination of her resurrected son. The worshipper meditates on the picture in which Dominic meditates on the resurrection in which Mary hangs over the tomb and meditates on the meaning of the loss of her son who becomes the risen Christ hovering above the cloud of his mother's vision. He is The Mind itself and radiates beyond the frame of any painting that attempts to capture him. This fresco reverberates. The worshipper looks into the picture. Dominic looks into the scene. Mary looks into the coffin and her own mind. Christ looks out directly at us. Thus we move into then back out of the picture, from unenlightened mind to enlightened mind.

The Arrest of Christ adorns the wall of Fra Angelico's personal cell, #33. This scene is a violent, gnarled, wrestling match. The palette is intense and rich, the opposite of the peaceful pastels in *The Annunciation*. I am reminded of the Altarpiece pedella execution panel. At the exact center of the work, framed in a circle made by the two halos and Judas's arm, Judas is about to kiss Christ, who looks him square in the eyes. The kiss and the gaze are central to human love. There is something especially horrific about a kiss and a gaze at the core of such a brutal event – the ultimate acts of affection and understanding employed in the service of uncontrollable aggression and hatred. This is the scene Angelico chose for himself to meditate upon day after day for years. I am no psychologist. All I can note is, once again, how much control Angelico exercises in such different images, with different audiences and purposes, as the High Altarpiece, *The Chapterhouse Crucifixion*, *The Annunciation*, and this. The artist himself is the only intended audience for his painting.

The Institution of the Eucharist in cell 35 features the high windows of the San Marco cells, as if The Last Supper is happening right there, right then. The painted windows look across San Antonino's Cloister to more painted windows of what would be cells 15 and 16. In the cloister

we see a well, a source of pure water for believer and community. Christ is the well for Christians as Cosimo is for Florentines. The prince was seen as a fountainhead trickling virtue down to his subjects. Mary's appearance in this and other scenes of The Passion (*The Mocking, The Agony* in cell 34), besides acting as Alberti's *interlocutor* and the Dominicans' meditative presence, shows the influence of Eastern theological tradition. This version of Christ's story had recently become a subject of much translation and study in Florence. Mary has a vision of her son's impending crucifixion, secretly follows him around all night, and never lets him out of her sight. Note the dark, shaggy Judas directly under well, looking a lot like the John the Baptist and Elijah we have already met.

I want quickly to mention *Baptism of Christ*, in cell 24, and *Noli me Tangere* in cell 1, as examples of both the intimacy and otherness of Magdalene and the Baptist. Pop your head into these cells and contemplate the need for such figures in both the Christian and Humanist agendas.

Madonna of the Shadows, a more intimate echo of the High Altarpiece (appropriate to this more private space), is painted on the hallway wall around the corner from the simple *Annunciation*. This image, thought to be the last one painted, demonstrates again Angelico's use of formal and elaborate Corinthian columns to frame a formal scene, manipulation of light, transposition of sculptural motifs to the two dimensional field, and the manipulation of the eye through color. Follow the blacks, reds, blues and greens on each side up to the enthroned Virgin and child. This is a completely symmetrical scene, so all is well with the world. Note the Medici balls in the virgin's halo and in Sts. Cosma's and Damian's halos, while Lorenzo (who appears with his grate this time) is given clusters of seven balls in his halo. The stars on Dominic and the Virgin, a motif throughout the fresco cycle, identify them as the patron and patroness of the order and, as always with stars, remind us of God's orderly, planned universe. We remember Dante's use of stars in the *Divina Comedia* and all the starry domes of heaven scattered around Florence. I want to point out an affective entrance into this and other scenes – Peter Martyr. Blood always gets people properly upset, and the gory sight of Peter's gashed and bloody head, where he was gruesomely murdered with an axe, reminds the viewer of the horrific, bloody end of the earthly chapter of Christ's story.

So we have arrived at the last cell at the end of the north hall, a double room, cells 38 and 39. We enter the great Cosimo de' Medici's personal retreat space. The outer room reminds us of where we are by including St. Cosmas in the crucifixion. I think of this room as functioning like "the bends chamber" on a submarine. As we stand in this antechamber we feel our expectations being shifted, not only by the reintroduction of Cosimo into the cell art, but by a new color – a brilliant, almost ostentatious, very expensive, blue with a hidden copper glow. We take the opportunity to become acclimated to a new level of atmospheric pressure before descending into the depths of a truly dense image.

The principal thing to remember is that Fra Angelico and his assistant Gozzoli designed and executed this *Adoration of the Magi* first and foremost for the secular patron. The Magi's procession is here a specific quote of the Byzantine Emperor John Paleologos' recent entry into Florence at the instigation of Cosimo. Just look at the Eastern outfits. We noted the suggestion of

this event at the other end of our journey, in the High Altarpiece. The motif will soon be much elaborated upon in the Medici Chapel frescos, also painted by Gozzoli, where the handsome king in gold who rides with both Cosimo and the young Lorenzo is a portrait of John. The second king in Angelico's fresco also suggests Paleologos with his pointed beard and sharp features, while the prostrate king suggests the elderly Byzantine patriarch. Is the young king here Cosimo or his brother Lorenzo? Unlike anyone else in the picture, he sports the fashionable Florentine hairdo of merchant bankers. He wears a Florentine outfit in the Medici colors – red and green. His red stockings are especially a clue of some kind. He alone has one foot out of the picture frame, connecting the image with the cell space. Nowhere else is the picture space punctured. His left leg is parallel to the classical column in the inset Man of Sorrows and smack up against it. Speaking of that inset, to what extent does Christ in the tomb, or Christ in the womb, like the crucifix discussed earlier, remind a Medici of exile? Can this be read as sort of an "I'll be back" statement? Joseph gazes down on the progress beneath him just like an Orsanmichelle sculpture would have, complete with a niche in the rock opening behind him. The groupings of figures suggest the humanist art of Masaccio and the "conversation" gesture of the Dominicans, but also the sheer excitement of the civic event. The strong diagonal of the heads and the landscape leads down to baby's head. The heavenward gaze of the two back figures on the right parallels both the other line of hills and the arc of the frame. The curve of the frame is echoed on the left by the curve created by Mary and Joseph's heads, and leads from Mary's head around to the head of the camel. Mary's face and the camel's face also face each other across the space, and we are encouraged to notice this by the reinforcing gaze of the camel-keeper and the second king. We have already seen the camel as a possible reference to John the Baptist with his camel coat, in the High Altarpiece pedella burial panel. Here, in addition, the camel keeper seems to me to be a reference to Donatello's young John the Baptist now in the Bargello. Compare the contraposto, the shape of the arm holding his garment, the direction of the gaze, the sash tied around a rustic garb. Indeed, the line from Camel to Mary, and the arc from Mary up and around to Camel, form the shape of the painting, and create a mini-narrative within the mega-narrative.

We are gazing at the beginning of the Medici self-fashioning project, not in a later Machiavellian cynical sense but in an early humanist sense. The Magi were astrologers, wise men, and the guardians of knowledge (as much knowledge as we can have on earth). They are subservient to the higher spiritual knowledge of Christ, but they represent the Humanist values of curiosity, thirst for understanding, pleasure in thinking and conversing, life as a journey and as a work of art. For a humanist like Cosimo, true power comes from self-confidence born of earned worth. Salvation comes through self-creation of an ethical being and active performance of good works in the community. The responsibility of intellect and wealth is *caritas* and charity. We see the kings here in Dominican gestures representing humility, meditation and compassion. The procession also recalls the Medici-sponsored and led procession, every five years, of the Magi through Florence, along the route we have just traveled, on the Epiphany to celebrate the Epiphany. San Marco was dedicated on the Epiphany and baby Lorenzo (The Magnificent) was baptized on the Epiphany in 1449. Indeed, the strong connection between the Medici family and the Magi in art suggests an identification – the Medici as the Magi of Florence, in procession, bearing gifts for the salvation of the civic community.

Colors! The palette seems to combine the complete range of colors used before, from the soft and fragile tints of the annunciation to the bold tones of the High Altarpiece, to the rich depths tangled up together in Angelico's own cell, with that remarkable blue of Cosimo's entry cell reserved here for Christ. I love the two horses in discourse on the right, like the many horse groupings in the Medici chapel fresco. Is that chapel fresco a quote of this epiphany?

In this humble space the pilgrim reaches end of a voyage designed by two patrons and two artists – from the Medici home to the Medici cell. One of the tenets of good rhetoric is to make the style appropriate to the subject. Michelozzo's carefully choreographed physical journey through the San Marco buildings is most appropriate for an order that emphasizes physical postures and gestures as a means to participate in Christian mysteries, and for a patron who sees himself as connecting the political and spiritual aspects of his city's life through, among other things, the built and decorated environment: Cosimo, the bookends of Florence, holding all its diverse texts (narratives) together in an orderly fashion.

We must turn around, and pass once more through the Decompression chamber. We are invited to make one final stop, if we choose. A left turn off of Cosimo's hall leads to a room distinctly separate from the main paths of the monastery – Cosimo's Library. This is the first public library in the modern western world. Dominicans, though necessarily literate and well-educated in the writings of the Christian fathers, were not classical library people. The great reformer, Domenico Antoninus' teacher, railed against the tendency in the young humanists to read pagan literature. When one of those humanists, Niccolò Niccoli, died in 1437 he left his vast library – 800 volumes - to Cosimo in exchange for Cosimo paying his debts. This room surely reflects increased lay literacy in the merchant culture. It is ironic to find great pagan classics in a Dominican monastery. Here we see more worldly and extravagant architecture: high of arches, two tiers of big windows to let in lots of reading light, a vast central hall lined with reading desks, a huge space to encourage gathering and conversation. Here Cosimo and Ficino discoursed on all the new learning and probably planned the Platonic Academy soon to be established in a Medici villa. This big, bright room perfectly captures the relationship between God's light coming through the windows and the light of learning coming from the books.

We have to go back same way came. Back into the city to “do” something based on our recharged spiritual and intellectual batteries.

It is no accident that the mortal remains of Pico della Mirandola – he who sought, among the religions and philosophies of the Mediterranean world, a unified truth – are interred here in this building complex that unifies so many truths so beautifully. As are the remains of Antoninus, in a glass coffin to the left of the high altar, uncorrupted. Miracles, human and otherwise, abound.

I hope I have demonstrated, through a close reading of San Marco, a lost (or at least much de-emphasized) function of the arts, at a moment when they were considered by artists and patrons as a branch of rhetoric – before artist as hero or art-for-arts-sake, and before cynicism about intentions. Document, preserve, praise, criticize, create examples to emulate (or not), force paths to thought and to multiple truths, motivate, inspire to act, empower, improve, be beautiful.

So what do we walk out of San Marco, and out of mid-fifteenth century Florence, inspired to do?

On a general level, ask a question: Who owns ideas? Or rather, who owns what ideas?

On a specific level: William Ferris from UNC Chapel Hill suggested in a New York Times op-ed (12/27/08) that Obama create a cabinet-level position – a secretary of culture. Ferris says, “Mr. Obama has an opportunity to revitalize our national spirit by strengthening our cultural programs at every level. It’s hard to imagine what could be a more important – and enduring – legacy.” He could be speaking of Cosimo Medici. Maybe President Obama needs a Michelozzo and Fra Angelico to synthesize the best aspects of our diverse society beautifully. Maybe critics of Obama’s choice of fundamentalist Pastor Warren to give the invocation at the could look back to Florence’s quattrocento and seek for shared values, structures, goals, and methods among apparently disparate ideologies. So much depends on perspective, and even more on where the light comes from and therefore what it illuminates. Maybe we could at least ask the question, what can be subtracted from the confusing frame of our world, the better to see its essential form, action and maybe even Truth.

References:

Because this is a personal, experiential paper and close reading, there are no quotes except of the King James Bible, which are cited within the paper.

San Marco is a religious complex in Florence, Italy. It comprises a church and a convent. The convent, which is now the Museo Nazionale di San Marco, has three claims to fame. During the 15th century it was home to two famous Dominicans, the painter Fra Angelico and the preacher Girolamo Savonarola. Also housed at the convent is a famous collection of manuscripts in a library built by Michelozzo. Book online the museums of Florence and skip the line at the entrance.Â A bit of history about the San Marco Museum. Built between 1473 and 1452 by Michelozzo; an architect highly respected by the Medici. By the end of its construction, this convent was one of the newest and more comfortable in Italy. This Michelozzo project ended with the construction of a large renaissance-style, sober, graceful and elegant building.Â The convent of San Marco was expropriated during the Napoleonic time in 1808, returning to the Dominican Friars at the fall of the French empire. During its restoration in 1866 it was confiscated by the Italian government, which eliminated all religious orders. In 1869 it was declared a National Monument and it open its doors to the public.