

Fra Angelico

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Masters of Art

Fra Angelico

(c. 1395-1455)



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Fra Giovanni da Fiesole (1550) by Giorgio Vasari
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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

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Masters of Art Series

Fra Angelico



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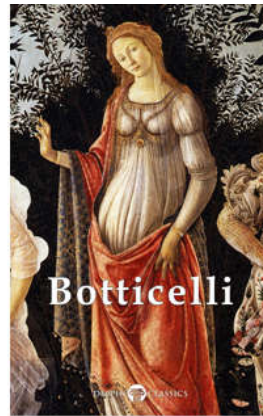
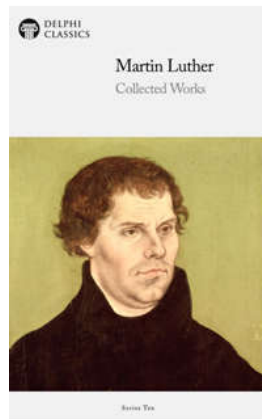
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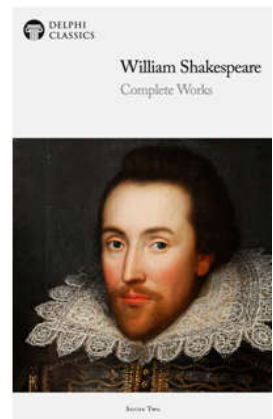
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The Highlights



Vicchio, Tuscany — Fra Angelico was born Guido di Pietro in the hamlet of Rupecanina, Vicchio, towards the end of the fourteenth century.

The Highlights



In this section, a sample of Fra Angelico's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

Fiesole Altarpiece (1425)



One of the most prominent figures of fifteenth century painting, Fra Angelico (*'Angelic Brother'*) was born Guido di Pietro in Vicchio, north east of Florence. No information survives regarding his childhood years and adolescence. His first mention in documents occurs in 1417, where he is listed as a lay painter. Between the years 1420 and 1422, he became a Dominican friar and resided in the priory of San Domenico at Fiesole — situated in the suburbs of Florence — taking on the name of Fra Giovanni da Fiesole. There he was likely influenced by the teachings of Giovanni Dominici, the militant leader of the reformed Dominicans, whose writings defended traditional spirituality against the advancing ideology of humanism.

He also came under the influence of his fellow friar Saint Antoninus Pierozzi, who is believed to have inspired Angelico's devout faith. Legend tells that Angelico was later offered the position of archbishop of Florence, which he refused so that Antoninus could take the vacancy. According to the art biographer Giorgio Vasari, Angelico was trained by the greatest painter and miniaturist of the Gothic tradition, Lorenzo Monaco, whose influence is manifest in Angelico's clear and painstaking expression, as well as in the depicting of sacred figures with a vibrant luminosity.

While living in Fiesole, Angelico was occupied with two principal pursuits: the life of a pious friar and the vigorous life of a prolific painter. Vasari describes him as "saintly and excellent" and, not long after his death, he was bestowed the epithet of *Angelico* due to his extreme moral virtues. In his early years as an artist, he followed closely the new artistic trends of the early Renaissance, revealing an increased appreciation for the representation of space through perspective, as shown in the groundbreaking works of Masaccio (1401-1428).

Angelico's earliest major work is the *Fiesole Altarpiece*, which was completed in 1425 for the Convent of San Domenico, Fiesole. It had been originally commissioned for the high altar in the convent's church, but was later moved to a side altar where it is on display today. In 1501 Lorenzo di Credi, a student of Andrea del Verrocchio and contemporary of Leonardo, repainted the original background, which was probably gilded, with a more modern landscape, featuring a throne with baldachin, *trompe-l'œil* reliefs and two landscapes between the pillars. The Gothic cusps were also eliminated during that time.

The altarpiece is a *Maestà* artwork, which was fashionable in the Florence at the time, presenting the Virgin enthroned. The central group of the Madonna and Child is surrounded by eight angels, all depicted in smaller size. The naked Christ Child is represented holding two flowers: a white rose, symbolising purity, and a red rose, foreshadowing the Passion and the Eucharist. The panel was intended for the high altar, where the celebration of the sacrament takes place. Masaccio's influence can be seen in the space conveyed by the tiled floor at the foot of the panel. Also, in the two side panels, the lines of floor stretch in towards the centre point at sharper angles, encouraging the impression of greater depth to an otherwise crowded scene of angels and saints.

In the left section, there are the figures of Saint Thomas of Aquino and Saint Barnabas, while to the right Saint Dominic and Saint Peter of Verona are portrayed. Three of these saints were of the Dominican Order, in keeping with the convent, while

the fourth, the namesake of Barnaba degli Agli, was a Florentine citizen that had donated 6,000 florins for the convent's restoration and enlargement.

Art scholars have pointed out the resemblance of the altarpiece to Masaccio's *San Giovenale Triptych*, completed a few years before in 1422. The scheme is also similar to the cartoon of the *Assumption* by Lorenzo Ghiberti for the windows in the façade of Florence Cathedral (c. 1405). The *Fiesole Altarpiece* is an important work of the early Renaissance as it is one of the earliest polyptychs to represent figures that occupy the same painted surface, without being divided into different compartments. It was originally given a predella (a ornately painted platform, which serves as a base), which is now held in London's National Gallery. The predella depicts the Adoration of Saints, Prophets and Members of the Dominican Order. The side pillars were decorated with ten small panels, detailing saints and the blessed — four of which have survived: two at the Musée Condé of Chantilly and two in private collections.





Central panel: Virgin and Child Enthroned with Eight Angels



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Left section: Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Barnabus



Right section: Saint Dominic and Saint Peter the Martyr



The Predella of the altarpiece



Central section of the predella



Convent of San Domenico, Fiesole



A source of inspiration to Angelico's 'Fiesole Altarpiece': 'San Giovenale Triptych' by Masaccio, housed in the Masaccio Museum of Sacred Art at Cascia di Reggello, Florence, 1422. The triptych is the first work attributed to Masaccio and the earliest known painting to employ a geometric Renaissance perspective.



Masaccio was the first great Italian painter of the Quattrocento period, who, according to Vasari, was the best painter of his generation due to his skill at imitating nature, recreating lifelike figures and movements, as well as for his convincing sense of three-dimensionality. In spite of his early death at the age of twenty-six, Masaccio's influence on the course of Western art was profound.



Posthumous portrait of Fra Angelico by Luca Signorelli —detail of 'Deeds of the Antichrist' fresco, Orvieto Cathedral, 1501



End of Sample