

# Fra Angelico

**Modern Italian:** Beato Angelico—literally, “Blessed Angelic One”

**Birth Name:** Guido di Pietro

**Monk Name:** Fra Giovanni di Fiesole

b. ca 1395

Repecanina (Modern-day Vicchio) ,  
Mugello, Republic of Florence

d. 18 February 1455

Rome, Papal States



Born Guido di Pietro, Fra Angelico grew up in the same region as Giotto.

While no one knows who his parents were, he did have a brother, Benedetto, and a sister Checca. Benedetto joined a Dominican monastery and chose the name “Frater Benedictus” (Brother Benedict). Fra Benedictus was trained as an illuminator, an artist who painted illustrations in books. His sister Checca (possibly short for Francesca) married and had at least one son, Giovanni di Antonio.

When Guido di Pietro also joined the Dominican Friars like his brother, he took the name Fra Giovanni (Brother John) and was known by this name during his life. His gentle nature and love of people, inspired people to call him Fra Angelico (Brother Angel or Angelic Brother) after his death—the nickname stuck.

Scholars believe Fra Angelico was taught painting by Lorenzo Monaco (“Lawrence the Monk”) (c 1370 – 1425), because they both share a number of similarities in paint colors and styles.

Fra Angelico was so skilled, he was working commissions for the Pope by the time he was in his 20s. In 1982, Pope John Paul II proclaimed his beautification. Later, in 1984, Fra Angelico was proclaimed the patron saint of artists, especially painters, by the same pope.



## The Virgin Mary Coronated ca. 1434-1435

Fra Angelico, (ca. 1395 – 1455)

*Tempera and gold leaf on wood panel*

44" x 45" (112 cm x 115 cm)

*Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy*

Each halo, and the light burst behind Mary and Jesus, is created by texture under the gold leaf. Solid gold leaf backgrounds like this one were supposed to reflect the glory of heaven. This type of scene is called "Gold Ground" painting. While a Gold Ground panel may represent heaven in Medieval and Renaissance paintings (remember Giotto and Cimabue's "Madonna Enthroned"), in certain places in Asia, they were used as a simple background for images of nature..



This piece, the “Tabernacle of the Linaioli” is a unique piece created in a partnership between two artists:

- Lorenzo Ghiberti who designed (and perhaps carved) the marble frame
- Fra Angelico, who illumined and painted the wooden panels.

This type of piece is called a “Triptych” (*trip-tick*), which means “Three-fold”. Triptychs are a hinged piece of art, frequently created for church altars, which have hinged pieces which can open and close like doors.

Also intriguing about this piece and the partnership between Ghiberti and Angelico is the fact that Angelico’s teacher, Monaco, rejected style of visual perspective which was growing popular. Some scholars believe that Fra Angelico learned perspective from Ghiberti while this piece was being designed, just as Ghiberti learned perspective from his friend and rival, Brunelleschi while the Door of Paradise were conceived. Note Fra Angelico’s use of perspective in his “San Marco Altarpiece” which was done following this piece and his time with Ghiberti.



**The Tabernacle of the Linaioli (1432-1435)**

Fra Angelico (ca 1295 – 1455) and Lorenzo Ghiberti (1381 – 1455)

*Tempera and gold leaf on wood; carved and gilded marble frame*  
100 in x 130 in; (260 cm x 330 cm)

*National Museum of San Marco, Florence, Italy*





A detail from the Tabernacle of the Lanaiooli Tabernacle which shows the exquisite burnished and engraved gold leaf detailing which Fra Angelico was famous. Because paint did not easily stick to any metal surface, all gold leafing had to be done first,

leaving blank spots for the paint. Occasionally, some gold details (like the trim on the angel's neckline) could be done afterwards, but the large fields of gold were done first.

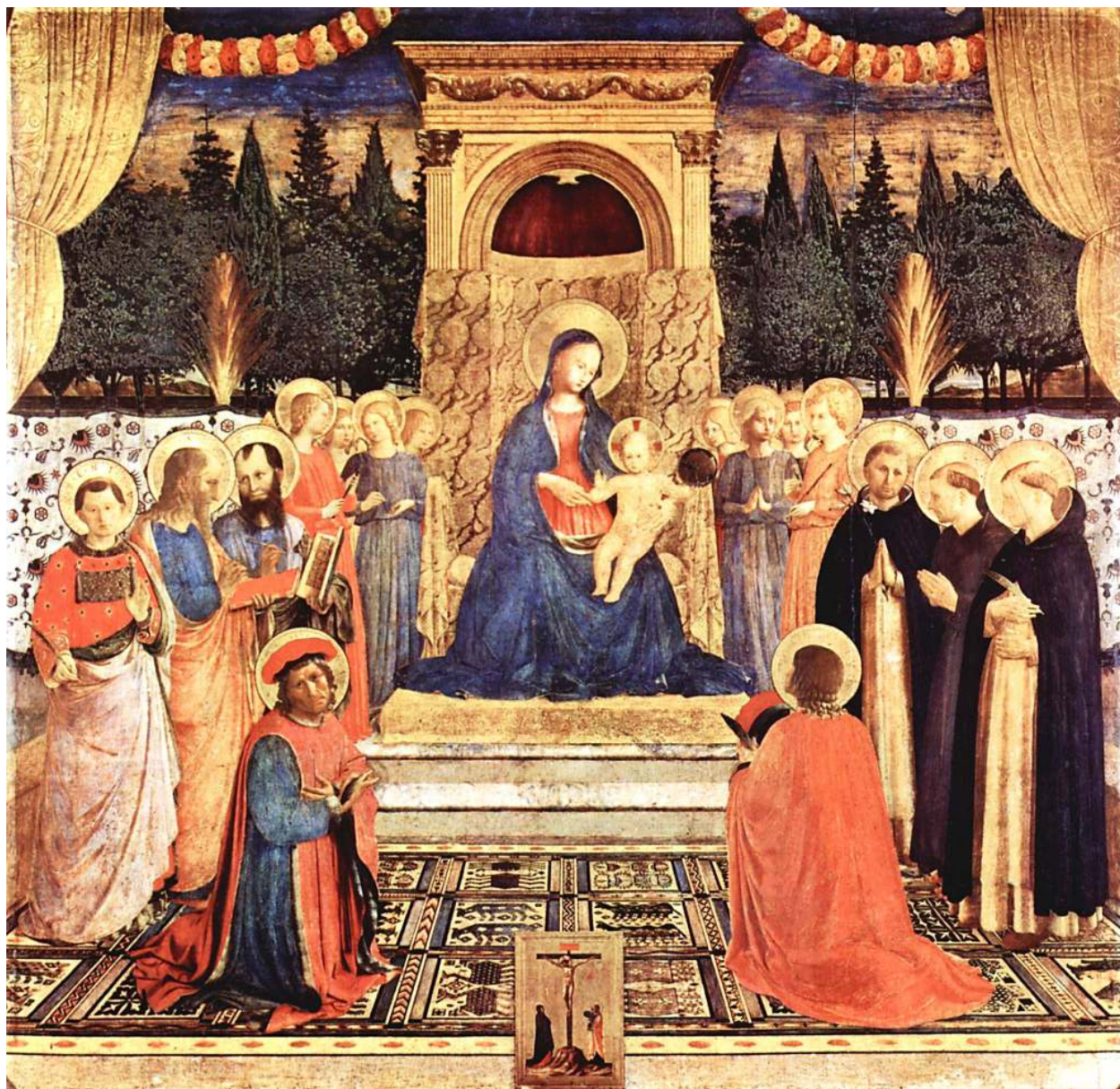
The angels in the Tabernacle are found in a narrow strip, playing instruments and worshipping in the border surrounding the central Mary and Jesus panel. This particular angel is on the right-hand side, fourth from the bottom, and just adjacent to the orb the child Christ holds in his outstretched hand.

“The Adoration of the Magi” below, is the center painting of the small insets below the central panel showing Jesus and Mary. Here you can see some use of oblique perspective, similar to what Giotto pioneered one hundred years earlier.

Contrast this painting to the “Adorations” done by Giotto and Ghiberti for their works. What elements did Fra Angelico choose to keep, and what elements did he change?







## Madonna and the Saints (“The San Marco Altarpiece”) (1438 – 1443)

Fra Angelico (c. 1395 – 1445)

*Tempra and gold leaf on wood panel*

87 “x 89” (220 cm x 227 cm)

*San Marco Museum, Florence, Italy*

Commissioned by Cosimo de Medici, founder of the famous Medici dynasty, this altarpiece was commissioned for the newly-renovated San Marco monastery. This piece was unusual because instead of setting the scene in heaven (remember Giotto and Cimabue?) he set the scene on earth. You can also see Fra Angelico’s use of single point perspective, giving the painting a sense of depth.



## VOCAB:

Covering paintings, statues, buildings, carvings, and fabrics with precious metals is an ancient practice. Gold leaf coats the sarcophagi of the Egyptian Pharaohs, was made into the crowns of ancient royalty, and the silk and paper screens painted in Japan and China, and illuminate thousands of works of Medieval and Renaissance art.

**Gilding:** To use gold leaf to cover a portion of an artwork with gold. **ETYMOLOGY:** From the Old English word *gyldan*, (to gild with gold) which comes from through the Norse word *gylla* and from the Old High Germanic *uberguldan*.

**Gold Leaf/Silver Leaf:** Sheets of gold and silver which have been pounded into a very thin sheet. Silver leaf, like all silver, will eventually tarnish black with time and exposure to air, and was therefore, used more rarely than gold leaf, which wouldn't tarnish. On some occasions, tin leaf would be used in lieu of silver.

**Shell Gold:** Powdered gold dust mixed with an egg or gum Arabic binder (Gum Arabic is the binder for modern watercolors). For some very delicate detailing, especially on miniatures in books, shell gold would be mixed and painted as a final detail. It is called shell gold because the gold "paint" would be mixed in a sea shell. (Shells were commonly used to mix all paint from the ancient world through the Renaissance and beyond.)

**Illumination:** A manuscript which has been decorated with painted images, borders, or decorative capital letters. Originally, it referred specifically to manuscripts whose illustrations included metal leaf decorations, and therefore, gleamed, or "lit up" the page, but the term now refers to all decorated manuscripts. **ETYMOLOGY:** from the Latin *illuminare*, meaning, "to light up".



Figure 1: "Wreath of Gold Oak Leaves and Acorns" 4th cen. BC Greece. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts USA



Figure 2: "Iris" ca. 1705 by Japanese artist Ogata Korin (1658 - 1716). Gold Leaf and ink on paper. Nezu Museum, Tokyo Japan. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC has a similar set of screens by the same artist.)

# “He who wishes to do Christ’s work must stay with Christ, always”

-Fra Giovanni da Fiesole (Fra Angelico)

Fra Giovanni/Fra Angelico was known for his personal faith. He would not accept a commission which painted non-Biblical subjects, and always prayed before beginnings each day’s work in art. Some accounts even record that he wept whenever he painted the Crucifixion.



This is his epitaph on his tomb:

**NON MINI SIT LAUDI, QUOD ERAM VELUT ALTER APPELLES, SED QUOD LUCRA TUIS OMNIA, CHRISTE, DABAM; ALTERA NAM TERRIS OPERA EXTANT, ALTERA COLOE; URBS ME JOANNEM FLOS TULIT ETRURAE.**

**GIVE ME NOT PRAISE FOR BEING ANOTHER APPELLES <sup>1</sup>, BUT [rather say] THAT I GAVE ALL I HAD TO THY POOR, O CHRIST; THUS PART OF MY WORK REMAINS ON EARTH AND PART IN HEAVEN; THAT CITY WHICH IS THE FLOWER OF ETRURIA [Florence] BORE ME, GIOVANNI.**

<sup>1</sup> Apelles of Kos (ca. 395 BC – ca 306 BC) was a painter for Philip II of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great. Described by Roman author and historian Pliny the Elder (AD 23 – AD79; Pompeii) as the greatest painter of classical Greece, his work allegedly changed Greek, and later, Roman art. None of his works survive, (Julius Caesar was said to own one which burnt down with his home) but many copies of his work are scattered throughout the Roman Empire’s remains.