

Pinion, Palette

by Kathryn Allan

An analysis of the use of colour in Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, 1438-45 Fresco, Upper corridor, San Marco, Florence (see Campbell & Cole, 6.7, p.151)

In Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* the palette arrives by wing, the chromatic span of the scheme contained in Gabriel's aerial transport – flying colours, literally. Campbell and Cole note, 'ocher, (*sic*) vermilion, grayish (*sic*) blue and blue-green' as the four main colours. (2017, p.151)

Towards the tip of the angel's primary feathers we see a dark greyish blue. Matching the folds and creases of the Virgin's robes, particularly where the shade gives weight to her seat and its intensity allows fabric to pool onto the floor, its use on the wingtip provides a counterbalance to the visual heaviness on the right side of the fresco. Cover the wings and the composition lists to the right, as though Fra Angelico has deliberately applied colour as weight on a pair of balanced scales. The repetition of this dark tone further up the wing describes the form – colour as outline – and helps to place Gabriel as having arrived *between* the columns of the loggia (*behind* one column, *in front of* the other).¹ The dark greyish blue also helps our eye to travel around and through the composition: as well as appearing on the two actors, the colour is used to convey a sense of depth, appearing in the foliage beyond the convent's walls, above and below the fence on the left, and through the cell window to the left of the Virgin's head.

Moving up the angel's pinion we next have the blue-green, which is repeated adjacent to the vermilion. The use of blue-green has two visual effects. Being the same hue as the triangle of lawn and glimpsed trees on the left – the world beyond the cloister – it denotes Gabriel as being not of the convent: he is of elsewhere, a visitor to the *hortus conclusus*.² Making the green a neighbour of the vermilion increases the intensity of the red and diverts our attention the angel's way: *Look at me*, he says, *I have something important to announce*. Gabriel's drapery borrows from this

¹ The exact colour here is ambiguous in reproduction, for example appearing as a dark greyish blue in the Campbell & Cole image, but a very dark red in reproductions elsewhere. Both serve to make wing distinct from architecture, pinion from pillar.

² *hortus conclusus* meaning 'enclosed garden' and being symbolic of the Virgin Mary.

vermilion – diluted, but just red enough to distinguish the figure from the stone architecture and push him into the foreground of the picture, a little further in front of the Virgin whose cooler-coloured robes help to hold her more in middleground.

Then there is the ochre which, in terms of fresco real estate, has the monopoly: it covers the majority of the picture's surface in various tints and shades, describing the loggia's illogical vaulting, the roundness of columns, the floor on which the actors kneel and sit, the skin tones of the figures (which extends to the torso of the Virgin – indeed, her upper body looks more carved than painted creating an appearance at once both solid and sculptural *and* ghostly and translucent) and, at its darker extreme, the fence on the left and the space in the cell in the background.

This is indeed a winged palette.

This essay was submitted for the University of Oxford's Italian Renaissance c.1400-1600 in 2024.

Bibliography

Acton, M. (2009) *Learning to Look at Paintings* 2nd edn. Abingdon: Routledge

Bartz, G. (1998) *Masters of Italian Art: Fra Angelico*. Cologne: Könemann

Campbell, S.J. & Cole, M.W. (2017) *A New History of Italian Renaissance Art* 2nd edn. London: Thames & Hudson

Hood, W. (2003) *Angelico, Fra* [Fra Giovanni da Fiesole; Guido di Piero da Mugello], Grove Art Online

Jones, J. (2023) *Earthly Delights: A History of the Renaissance*. London: Thames & Hudson

Lloyd, C. (2001) *Fra Angelico* 2nd edn. London: Phaidon Press Ltd

Painting the Modern Garden – Monet to Matisse (2016) Directed by David Bickerstaff

Rubin, P.L. & Wright, A. (1999) *Renaissance Florence: The Art of the 1470s*. London: National Gallery Publications