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1 Fra Angelico, *Paradise*
(without nineteenth-century frame).
Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi,
Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture

COMPELLING RADIANCE FRA ANGELICO'S SHINE

Alison Wright

Vid'i' sopra migliaia di lucerne
Un sol che tutte quante l'accendea,
Come fa x nostro le viste superne;
E per la viva luce trasparea
La lucente sustanza tanto chiara
Nel viso mio, che non la sostenea.
(Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, *Paradiso*, XXIII, 28–33)

The culminating cantos of Dante's *Divina Commedia* centre on a poetic conceit of the impossibility of its own task of describing paradise. How can language communicate the effect, or the emotional affect of this vision, or of sight that becomes blindness in the face of ever more brilliant manifestations of light?¹ Crafting worlds of imaginative, emotional, and cog-

nitive experience with an expanded linguistic palette, the poet, with his own 'visible speech', might be taken to throw down the gauntlet to the powers of painterly depiction of the heavenly after 1300.² This essay is dedicated to one central aspect of this challenge of visualisation, that of materially evoking the overpowering radiance that manifested divine being. The pictorial metalwork that concerns us, which developed time-honoured practices with gold leaf, is often well preserved on the surface of fifteenth-century panel painting, operating both with and against its fictive depth. The focus will be deliberately on a moment in the 1430s when Leon Battista Alberti, acknowledging in his treatise *De pictura* the brilliance of Virgil's poetic model, claimed that Dido's eye-grabbing splendour

¹ Dante the pilgrim passes through the heavens "di lume in lume", referring to intrinsic luminescence more than to reflected light (*Paradiso*, XVII, 115).

² The literature on this topic is substantial; see for example: Barbara J.

Watts, "Artistic Competition, Hubris and Humility: Sandro Botticelli's Response to *visibile parlare*", in: *Dante Studies*, XIV (1996), pp. 41–78; the essays in *Visibile Parlare: Dante and the Art of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by Deborah Parker (= *Lectura Dantis*, 22/23 [1998]); Patricia L. Rubin, *Images and Identi-*

in the *Aeneid* (“that abundance of golden rays, which strikes the eye of observers from all angles”) could more effectively be represented using paint rather than gold itself and he condemned attempts to “lend majesty” to painting with gold.³

The tonal modelling of all forms of reflected ‘natural’ light in the work of the painter, become Dominican friar, now known as Fra Angelico, has long been seen as exceptionally perceptive and nuanced and his art viewed, already in Cristoforo Landino’s preface to the *Divina Commedia*, as the opposite of intemperate.⁴ But his command of some of the most remarkable optical manipulations in European painting without recourse to the brush is only now being addressed.⁵ The work at the centre of this study (Fig. 1) shows with exceptional clarity how gold ground can become

foreground, transforming the perceptual effect and meaning of the depiction.

According to *Il Libro di Antonio Billi*, this work, now in the Uffizi Gallery, represents “il Paradiso”.⁶ The majority of recent scholarship has dated it to the earlier 1430s on stylistic grounds.⁷ Who commissioned it is uncertain, but it once occupied the left-hand side of the rood screen of Sant’Egidio, the modestly sized church serving the Florentine hospital of Santa Maria Nuova. The evidence on the surviving panel, which has been cut down, indicates that its earliest frame, now lost, would have had a semi-circular arch higher than the present one, amplifying an aureole-like, culminating effect. Two surviving panels in the Museo di San Marco, showing the marriage and burial of the Virgin by Fra Angelico (Fig. 2), are convincingly identified as the

ty in *Fifteenth-Century Florence*, New Haven/London 2007, esp. pp. 135–157; Lucia Battaglia Ricci, *Dante per immagini: dalle miniature trecentesche ai giorni nostri*, Turin 2018, esp. pp. 69–122.

³ Leon Battista Alberti, *De pictura*, II, 49, 4–10; the quoted words in the original read as follows: “eam tamen aureorum radiorum copiam, quae undique oculos visentiam perstringat”, ed. and trans. by Rocco Sinisgalli, (Cambridge 2011, p. 72) whereas Cecil Grayson translates “perstringat” as ‘almost blinds’ (*On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De pictura and De statua*, ed. by Cecil Grayson, London 1972, p. 89). This assertion (omitted from the Italian *Della pittura* of 1436) follows after a warning to painters not to overuse pure white and black either, since these “intemperate” extremes disrupt the convincing perception of the tonal range of depicted light (*De pictura*, II, 47).

⁴ Michael Baxandall (*Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, Oxford 1972, pp. 147f.) relates Cristoforo Landino’s description of Fra Angelico’s painting as “vezzoso”, in his commentary on Dante, to its tonal moderation, citing the physiological theory of Girolamo Manfredi (*Liber de homine*, 1474), according to which “temperate” colours enhance vision, whereas extremes of tone do the opposite.

⁵ Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window and the Telescope: How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed Our Vision of the Universe*, Ithaca/London 2009, pp. 108–116; Vitaliano Tiberia, “Spazio reale e astrazione nella pittura dell’Angelico”, in: *Angelicus pictor: ricerche e interpretazioni sul Beato Angelico*, ed. by Alessandro Zuccari, Milan 2008, pp. 83–90: 85–87, discussing gold as a form of visionary abstraction in line with Thomist theology. Another valuable recent corrective is Saskia C. Quené, *Goldgrund und Perspektive: Fra Angelico im Glanz des Quattrocento*, Munich 2022. Her study, based on the author’s doctoral thesis, was published when this article was in editing. Quené’s discussion of the interpenetration in Fra Angelico’s paintings of Quattrocento ‘perspectives’ broadly construed and an equally varied treatment of what is now termed gold ground is richly argued on the basis

of artisanal, theological, and literary sources; it shares my own concern to undo the perceived systemic clash between ‘Renaissance’ representational modes and the use of gold leaf.

⁶ “Una tavola in San Gallo [mistake for Gilio, i.e. Sant’Egidio] dove è dipinto il Paradiso” (Karl Frey, *Il Libro di Antonio Billi esistente in due copie nella Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze*, Berlin 1892, p. 18). I adopt the name *Paradise* here, in preference to the *Coronation of the Virgin*, as the latter description, used by Antonio Manetti (*Operette istoriche edite ed inedite*, ed. by Gaetano Milanesi, Florence 1887, p. 166) in 1480, is misleading.

⁷ See Alessandro Cecchi, in: *Miniatura del ’400 a San Marco: dalle suggestioni avignonesi all’ambiente dell’Angelico*, exh. cat., ed. by Magnolia Scudieri/Giovanna Rasario, Florence 2003, pp. 121–123, no. 1.23: p. 123. Magnolia Scudieri, “Due dipinti, qualche indagine”, *ibidem*, pp. 133–137: 135, notes the anomaly of the batons fixed with nails from the front onto the reverse of the panel, observing that a more advanced system of anchoring was adopted in works by Fra Angelico elsewhere, as well as in what looks to have been a pendant arched altarpiece of the *Virgin and Child* for the same rood screen by Fra Angelico’s pupil, Zanobi Strozzi, which was paid for in 1436 (now Museo di San Marco; see *ibidem*, pp. 125–127, no. 1.24). This could also suggest a date in the earlier 1430s for the *Paradise*. More recent discussions of the painting are: Laurence Kanter/Pia Palladino, *Fra Angelico*, exh. cat., New York 2005, pp. 139–142; Diane Cole Ahl, *Fra Angelico*, London 2008, pp. 78–81, 93; Serena Nocentini, in: *Beato Angelico: l’alba del Rinascimento*, exh. cat. Rome 2009, ed. by Alessandro Zuccari/Giovanni Morello/Gerardo de Simone, Milan 2009, p. 178, no. 13; Ada Labriola, in: *Fra Angelico et les Maîtres de la lumière*, exh. cat. Paris 2011/12, ed. by Giovanna Damiani/Nicolas Sainte Fare Garnot, Brussels 2011, p. 156, no. 26; Gerardo de Simone, in: *Bagliori dorati: il gotico internazionale a Firenze 1375–1440*, exh. cat., ed. by Antonio Natali/Enrica Neri Lusanna/Angelo Tartuferi, Florence 2012, pp. 168, no. 35; Cyril Gerbrun, *Fra Angelico: liturgie et mémoire*, Turnhout 2016, pp. 113–176: 122–125; Nathaniel Silver, in: *Fra Angelico: Heaven on*



2 Fra Angelico, *Marriage of the Virgin and Funeral of the Virgin*.
Florence, Museo di San Marco

predella to what is presumed to be an altarpiece ensemble.⁸ These open air narrative scenes include, in the one case, trumpeters who announce the wedding and, in the other, small angels and a gilded palm branch with stars brought from paradise (following the account of the *Golden Legend*) – features which directly anticipate the main panel.⁹

Within the visionary depth of the *Paradise* the gaze is relentlessly directed by the orchestration of light as much as by the heavenly company of angels and saints who encircle the Virgin and Christ enthroned. Importantly for the present analysis, the painting's shine is not just a fiction of the picture but real and active and, since perception of reflective brilliance from a surface depends on the three-way alignment of light, object, and subject, its shine can also destabilise the relationship between the beholder and the object beheld. Sudden fans of brilliance seem to issue from the centre of the work when the viewer moves before it. Unknowable and unworldly to the human viewer, such shine is hard to resist, grasping the eye in a way that is every bit as compelling as the eye contact of those saints who re-

gard and direct the viewer. Shine like this can productively be thought of, in the theoretical terms of Jacques Lacan, as the gaze returned from the painting itself.¹⁰

The success of the depiction of radiance in the *Paradise* can be measured through its emulation, directly or indirectly, even into the sixteenth century in altarpieces that set worked gold in dialogue with a broadly perspectival depiction of the heavenly.¹¹ Requiring the painter to straddle the worlds of the recognisable and the imaginable, the handling of religious visions brings into view the complex temporality, ontology, and ideology of shine. This article analyses the effects of material and painterly practice as they respond to visionary imagination and construct visionary experience, offering an alternative viewpoint onto the famed optical ambition of early Quattrocento art. In doing so it contributes to the broader rethinking of the value and function of gold in fifteenth-century Italian art and in particular the ways it could effectively puncture and activate the surface rendered 'transparent' by the painterly projection of depth.¹² As a contribution to the understanding of how the non-figural operates in

Earth, exh. cat. Boston 2018, ed. by *idem*, Boston/London 2018, pp. 180–187, no. 5.1; Carl Brandon Strehlke, *Fra Angelico and the Rise of the Florentine Renaissance*, exh. cat., Madrid 2019, pp. 37f.; Quené (note 5), pp. 265–289.

⁸ See esp. Nathaniel Silver, in: *Fra Angelico: Heaven on Earth* (note 7), pp. 188–193, no. 5.2, 5.3.

⁹ Nathaniel Silver, *ibidem*, p. 191, notes that Jacobus de Voragine says the palm branch's leaves "gleamed like the morning star" (*Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, ed. and trans. by William Granger Ryan, Princeton 2012 [Princeton 1993], II, p. 78).

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by

Jacques-Alain Miller, London 1998, p. 96; Andreas Cremonini, "Über den Glanz: Der Blick als Triebobjekt bei Lacan", in: *Blickzählung und Augentäuschung: Zu Jacques Lacans Bildtheorie*, ed. by Claudia Blümle/Anne von der Heiden, Zurich/Berlin 2005, pp. 217–278.

¹¹ One of the latest examples is the *Coronation of the Virgin* of 1508–1512 in Santa Maria in Portico a Fontegiusta, Siena, by Bernardino Fungai. It has a small, burnished hemisphere emanating a disc-like radiance between the Virgin and Christ.

¹² Iris Wenderholm, "Himmel und Goldgrund: konkurrierende Systeme in der Malerei um 1500", in: *Paragone als Mäistreit*, conference proceedings

the practice of the friar-painter Fra Angelico, it shares some ground with the seminal analysis of George Didi-Huberman into the rich exegetical potentials of his painting within scholastic understandings of the unfigurability of God.¹³ Yet, its emphasis is ultimately on the opposite, namely the optical and phenomenological capacity of worked gold to figure the numinous within a modern regime of representation.¹⁴

Violent Light

Seen within a paradigm produced by Alberti's treatise on painting, light in fifteenth-century Italian painting has tended to be thought of in terms of its fictively-rendered 'reception' on the various bodies that compose the picture, or otherwise as a mimetic surface.¹⁵ But light in religious imagery is often a more active agent and a source of spiritual or somatic transformation. Visions of godhead or gods that invoke radiance have a deep history and are held in common across many world cultures. Indeed, radiance from the body in various kinds of representation is a near-universal symbol or manifestation of cosmic power. This is most obvious in the case of ancient religions that reverence solar deities, including

Hinduism (Surya, also called Aditya), Buddhism, and the Graeco-Roman cults of Helios/Phoebus/Apollo. Ancient Assyrian and Akkadian modes of conceiving of and representing a radiant and sovereign body, it has been argued, inform the prophetic description of Yahweh in Judaic scripture upon which, in turn, Christian mystical writing and the visionary image of Jesus as Son of God depended.¹⁶ While a focussed analysis like the present one cannot do justice to the complexity even of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, what matters is to acknowledge at the outset the fundamental ideological operations of shine.

Solar radiance in particular is often presented positively as life-giving, inherently beautiful and associated with cosmic harmony, as it is in those myths of the marriage of Sol and Luna that Fra Angelico's *Paradise* ultimately inherits. Even now, landscape camera shots taken into the sun are the kitsch currency of religious sentiment. But powerful radiance when harnessed to a concept of almighty power is not all beneficent. In ancient Akkadian culture *melammu* – a radiance characteristic of supreme power – is represented in relief sculpture by a multi-sectioned nimbus around the body of kings, gods, and heroes and

Berlin 2012, ed. by Joris van Gastel/Yannis Hadjinicolaou/Marcus Rath, Berlin 2014, pp. 119–139; *eadem*, "Aura, Licht und schöner Schein: Wertungen und Umwertungen des Goldgrunds", in: *Geschichten auf Gold: Bilderzählungen in der frühen italienischen Malerei*, exh. cat., ed. by Stefan Wepelmann, Berlin 2005, pp. 100–113; Alison Wright, "Crivelli's Divine Materials", in: *Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice*, exh. cat. Boston 2015, ed. by Stephen Campbell, Boston/London 2015, pp. 56–77; Vera-Simone Schulz, "Bild, Ding, Material: Nimben und Goldgründe italienischer Tafelmalerei in transkultureller Perspektive", in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, LXXIX (2016), pp. 508–541; Quené (note 5). Gentile da Fabriano has, unsurprisingly, attracted some of the most ambitious thinking on the potentialities of gold: Andrea De Marchi, "Interferenze possibili tra oreficeria e pittura nel Nord Italia, prima e dopo Gentile da Fabriano", in: *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Classe di Lettere e Filosofia*, XV (2004), pp. 27–47; David Young Kim, "Points on a Field: Gentile da Fabriano and Gold Ground", in: *Journal of Early Modern History*, XXVIII (2019), pp. 191–226; and, more broadly, *idem*, *Groundwork: A History of the Renaissance Picture*, Princeton 2022, pp. 57–81. For the earlier period, Christopher R. Lakey, "The Materiality of Light in Medieval Italian Painting", in: *English Language Notes*, LIII (2015), pp. 119–136.

¹³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: dissemblance et figuration*, Paris 1990.

¹⁴ A rich contribution to the analysis of visionary images in Italian art of the early fifteenth century onwards is *Voir l'au-delà: l'expérience visionnaire et sa représentation dans l'art de la Renaissance*, conference proceedings Paris 2013, ed. by Andreas Beyer/Philippe Morel/Alessandro Nova, Turnhout 2017.

¹⁵ Leon Battista Alberti, *De pictura*, II, 30, 32, 47. For the principles of light as related to perception of colour see also *ibidem*, I, 10 and 12. Paul Hills (*The Light of Early Italian Painting*, New Haven, Conn./London 1987, pp. 115–127) analyses the alternative paradigm of light and textural effect represented by Gentile da Fabriano's art, which embraced the manipulation of gold. See also *idem*, "Ray, Line, Vision and Trace in Renaissance Art", in: *Word and Image*, VI (1990), pp. 217–225, for vision and light produced, affectively, from within religious images, and not just perceptually 'onto' objects. For an art historiography of light in relation to gold ground and to pictorial space, see Quené (note 5), pp. 33–37, 244–249, and, for her own analysis of Fra Angelico's *Paradise*, pp. 265–289.

¹⁶ Shawn Zelig Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and Its Biblical Parallels*, Münster 2012; *idem*, "Ezekiel's Adaptation of Mesopotamian 'Melammu'", in: *Die Welt des Orients*, XLV (2015), pp. 10–21.

attaches to the victor as he pitilessly crushes his foes beneath the wheels of his chariot. The prophetic vision of the glory of God (*kabod*) in Ezekiel I:4 is indebted to *melammu*, with Yahweh's glory moving with bright wheels by its own fiery, unstoppable force that can be unleashed against the rebellious Israelites.¹⁷ Christianity takes up Ezekiel's and Daniel's visions (Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14) as a prophecy of the anointed one who “will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead”, an image of sovereign power that dominates the *Last Judgement* depicted by Fra Angelico at the centre of the Corsini Triptych (Figs. 12, 13, ca. 1447/48?), to which I will return below.

In the *Paradise*, the community of saints around the throne shared by Mary and Christ are turned towards the other-worldly radiance. They enjoy the beatific vision and respond to the glory of God with serenity or joy as Christ places a jewel in the Virgin's crown.¹⁸ Yet such brilliance, like staring into the sun, is, as Dante insisted (*Paradiso*, XXIII), no serene *lux perpetua* for the unworthy. It is impossible to bear and potentially blinding. Devotees in the hospital church moreover knew that its enjoyment was posited theologically on the existence of its opposite, a counter-place of darkness and contamination, of sinful and tormented flesh, from which the vision in the painting has, as it were, been purged.

In both the *Last Judgement* triptych and the *Paradise* altarpiece, radiance is drawn out from refined, lustrous, and pristine gold. The Hebrew text of Ezekiel (I:4 and 27) compares the luminosity of God's dreadful glory or *kabod* to that of a gleaming metal or stone of a bright yellowish colour. The vulgate Bible known to fifteenth-century Italians plumps for “elec-

trum”, a prized and naturally occurring metal alloy of silver and gold. Ezekiel's vision was well enough known to the theologically trained to have allowed for an association between the brilliant metal leaf of the *Paradise* and the prophet's electrum-like radiance. But far more importantly, Fra Angelico's manipulation of gold ground in this context, conventional as it might seem, enables a crucial visionary sensation, trumping perspectival depth and producing an effect that could invoke a transcendent or an immanent presence. Shine, fashioned from burnished and ruled gold leaf, produces an equivalent in the painting to that radical ontological difference to human measure that is divine power.

Switching on the Light: Gold as Agent in *Paradise*

Dante's vision of paradise seems to have been tacitly informed by the imagery, and the deep glitter, of large-scale vault mosaics representing the heavenly hierarchy. He may have remembered the *Last Judgement* in the vault of the Florentine baptistery; he certainly knew the eschatological mosaics of Ravenna.¹⁹ More explicitly, the poetic Dante recognised the skills and ambitions of latter-day manuscript painters in the historical figure of Oderisio da Gubbio, whom he encounters in *Purgatorio*, XI. Illuminators, as the English term designates them, were masters of light effects, and Italian liturgical manuscripts of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries are characterised by sometimes startling juxtapositions of precise, high-toned brushwork and deeply burnished gold leaf, whose sudden flash could be activated with the turn of a page.²⁰ Fra Angelico was trained as an illuminator, and such work provides clear parallels for the kinds of disruptive, scintillating and other-worldly shine found in the *Paradise*, a painting

¹⁷ Ellen Van Wolde, “The God Ezekiel I Envisions”, in: *The God Ezekiel Creates*, ed. by Paul M. Joyce/Dalit Rom-Shiloni, London 2015, pp. 87–106.

¹⁸ For Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* paintings as honorific and aspirational images of the Church Triumphant, see Gerbron (note 7), pp. 113–176.

¹⁹ Laura Pasquini, *Iconografie dantesche: dalla luce del mosaico all'immagine profetica*, Ravenna 2008; *eadem*, “I mosaici ravennati come fonti figurative della

Commedia”, in: *Dante e Ravenna*, conference proceedings Ravenna 2018, ed. by Alfredo Cottignoli/Sebastiana Nobili, Ravenna 2019, pp. 193–203. Pasquini has found, for example, an echo of the apse mosaic of Sant'Apollinare in Classe with its star-encircled face of Christ in *Paradiso*, XIV, 97–104, where, within a circle, lights form a cross that “lumeeggiava Cristo”.

²⁰ For the development of a wide range of methods and effects in gold within manuscripts, see Nancy Turner, “Reflecting a Heavenly Light:

that is in dialogue with a range of visionary writing, biblical and otherwise.²¹

The manipulation of material surfaces, and therefore of light, to produce shine rewards attention in its own right. The effect of shine, even when its reflective ‘accidents’ were increasingly carefully controlled by Italian artists, has a unique capacity to hold viewers in the moment. The encounter fundamentally affirms the picture as material agent, operating beyond intended audiences and beyond words. Reflections in and off a burnished surface make us aware of our own physical, sensory presence before the object. This might seem to be particularly so in the gallery space, where collected pictures are hung at eye level and visitors’ movements are not conditioned by devotional practice. It is also the case, though, that some of the most revealing effects of reflection from gold are activated when looking at the picture surface obliquely and from below. The psychosomatic and ideological implications of such a viewpoint, as of a person kneeling before a superior or looking up towards an altarpiece, are far from just optical.

Equally, out-of-the-ordinary light effects would have had special eloquence for fifteenth-century audiences versed in various kinds of visionary literature and the devotional practices of visualisation these drew upon. Far from being the preserve of the ecclesiastical elite among which Fra Angelico could be counted, familiarity with the visionary was present at all levels of society. The biblical passage recounting the nocturnal annunciation to shepherds (Luke 2:8–10) was well known, and that sudden, fearful eruption of “the glory of the Lord” had been brilliantly represented in Florence.²²

Equally, Florentine schooling, preaching, and public readings from Dante’s poetry meant that citizens from across classes could carry around vernacular verse, especially parts of the *Divina Commedia* and liturgical hymns, in their heads.²³ While I return to Dante below, the aim here is not to align pictorial effects with known textual ‘sources’. Rather it is to sharpen the focus on effects themselves and on the interrelation of affect and meaning for those who viewed them, be it as devout beholders, admiring spectators, or just passers-by. Dante’s descriptive range offers one of the best means of accessing otherwise undocumented capacities for seeing and interpreting optical and aural effects in the Trecento and Quattrocento. Such effects could be embedded in everyday civic experience, but they also informed culturally-specific notions of supra-human splendour.

Dante’s poetry of light rarely uses similes of golden splendour, preferring – alongside the recurrent tropes of elemental fire and flame – materials like crystal, glass, amber, and gems as images invoking the translucence, depth, and sudden brilliance of heavenly bodies.²⁴ Yet in *Paradiso*, XVII, the soul-light that is the manifestation of Dante’s ancestor Cacciaguida is described as “coruscating” like the rays from a gold mirror as he acknowledges the pilgrim’s words.²⁵ Cacciaguida’s response invokes precisely the kind of bright flash of reflected light that can scatter from burnished gold leaf. In the *Paradise* of Fra Angelico, such reflections are themselves harnessed to a type of vertically-elongated sunburst. The 1430s, the very decade in which Leon Battista Alberti famously rejected the idea that gold should be employed to evoke golden radiance in painting, saw, in fact, some of the

Gold and Other Metals in Medieval and Renaissance Manuscript Illumination”, in: *Manuscripts in the Making: Art and Science*, conference proceedings and exh. cat. Cambridge 2016, ed. by Stella Panayotova/Paola Ricciardi, London 2017–2020, II, pp. 81–96.

²¹ For the interrelation of painting and illumination in his work, see especially *Fra Giovanni Angelico: pittore miniatore o miniatore pittore?*, exh. cat., ed. by Magnolia Scudieri/Sara Giacomelli, Florence 2007.

²² For the annunciation to the shepherds see for example those by Taddeo Gaddi in the Baroncelli Chapel murals in Santa Croce (ca. 1332–1338)

and by Lorenzo Monaco in the background of the *Adoration of the Magi*, the one-time high altarpiece of Sant’Egidio (ca. 1422).

²³ Dale V. Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, New Haven/London 2000, pp. 79, 81; Rubin (note 2), pp. 137f.

²⁴ For example *Paradiso*, XXIX, 24–27. For a recent art-historical contribution to the mass of scholarship on light in the third *cantica*, see Martin Kemp, *Visions of Heaven: Dante and the Art of Divine Light*, London 2021.

²⁵ *Paradiso*, XVII, 122–124: “La luce in che rideva il mio tesoro / ch’io trovai lì, si fe’ prima corusca / quale a raggio di sole specchio d’oro”.



3 Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture

most spectacular engagements with gold leaf for this very purpose in Dante's native Tuscany.²⁶ This engagement marks, at one level, an intervention in a long and complex history of Italian panel painting and framing, of the kind that unfolds canonically for visitors to the Uffizi Gallery: in the early fourteenth century simple gold haloes and 'Byzantine' chrysography cede to more richly tooled gold surfaces, like those animating the *Annunciation* altarpiece of Simone Martini from Siena

cathedral with its pulsating Holy Spirit and 'burning' or ardent haloes that radiate an expanded glory.²⁷

Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (1423; Fig. 3), commissioned by Palla Strozzi for the sacristy of Santa Trinita, develops a new narrative density punctuated by raised and gilded ornaments and attributes, alongside the nocturnal and sun-drenched light effects in the predella. The foreground star, whose potency and movement guided the Magi to

²⁶ A number of these are by Fra Angelico, including the Linaioli Tabernacle (ca. 1433, Florence, Museo di San Marco), the *Annunciation* painted for Cortona (ca. 1433/34, Cortona, Museo Diocesano) and the Berlin *Last Judgement* (possibly late 1430s, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemälde-

galerie) with its downward rain of light from Christ. See also, for example, Sassetta's *Ecstasy of Saint Francis* (1437–1444, Florence, Villa I Tatti) and Domenico di Bartolo's *Madonna of Humility* (1433, Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale).

²⁷ Hills 1987 (note 15), p. 113, notes how the archangel and Mary have



4 Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of the star of Bethlehem. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture



5 Fra Angelico, *Pontassieve Madonna*. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture

Bethlehem (Fig. 4), is exquisitely realised through a tight wheel of gold rays achieved using *sgraffito* as well as applied gold lines.²⁸ It seems to have acted as a kind of guiding light for the *Paradise* of Fra Angelico, even though obtained by a quite different technique.

The *Paradise* produces a powerful sense of heavenly scale through its extraordinarily skilful organisation of the saints and angels. Arrayed around the Virgin and Christ, who are set back and enlarged, they form a foreshortened, open halo. The controlled, perspectival massing of the crowds in depth over several levels is broadly similar, and perhaps coeval in design, to Ghiberti's *Solomon and Sheba* panel (cast by 1437) for the Paradise Doors of the Florentine baptistery, yet

radiant haloes that “describe a flare of light”. For this work see also Alison Wright, “The Transformation of Gold”, in: *Simone Martini in Orvieto*, exh. cat., ed. by Nathaniel Silver, Boston 2022, pp. 39–59: 54–58.

²⁸ For this *sgraffito* technique in the painting, see Nicola Ann MacGregor/



6 Fra Angelico, *Paradise* (detail). Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture



7 Fra Angelico,
Paradise.
Florence,
Gallerie degli
Uffizi, Galleria
delle Statue e
delle Pitture

it is achieved without the geometric support of civic, architectural space.²⁹ It could hardly be further from Gentile's meandering and distracted court. But in the terms of the art-historical nomenclature that has continued to dog early Quattrocento art, it still risks to fall into the misleading category of 'late gothic' by virtue of its gold ground.³⁰

In the Uffizi, the *Paradise* is currently placed opposite the same painter's *Pontassieve Madonna* from circa 1430

(Fig. 5), which helpfully draws attention to how both works centre on a gilded glory of light. In the latter, the radiance, disposed as a *mandorla*, attaches somewhat hypnotically to the Virgin's body and her postpartum belly, as she gazes out with surprising directness. In the former, the effect is instead more active than iconic, as though the painting itself is producing light. Something exceptional is *happening* in the heavens at a non-figurative level.³¹ Arising from the very centre, without a human

Sandra Freschi, "Il restauro dell'Adorazione dei Magi" in: *Gentile da Fabriano agli Uffizi*, ed. by Alessandro Cecchi, Cinisello Balsamo 2005, pp. 173–180: 174.

²⁹ For the *terminus ante quem* of the casting see Richard Krautheimer/Trude Krautheimer-Hess, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Princeton 1956, pp. 164f. and p. 368, doc. 23.

³⁰ Nocentini (note 7), notes the painting's effect on Fra Angelico's reputation as attached to the "Late Gothic".

³¹ Gerbron (note 7), p. 136, refers to the arrow forms as showing this intense light "taking place" ("en train d'avoir lieu") in all directions and ceaselessly.

point of emanation, is a controlled explosion (Fig. 6). Produced by burnished and tooled gold leaf, the indented rays register principally as dark against a lighter ground when seen in relation to the diffused light from the gallery window (Fig. 1). The broad gilded halos of the Virgin and of Christ fall brightly upon this darker foil. Move slightly to one side, though, and the haloes darken while the gilded ground activates, irradiating outwards in segmented flashes of light (Fig. 7).³² The combined effect of the inscribed surface and the changes in incident light produced on the reflective plane of the picture attract the gaze inwards like a target, disrupting the sense of a 'ground'.³³ Instead, the optical dialectic of outwards and inwards, brightness and darkness, makes the viewer aware of their own contingent position. The ambiguous push-pull between perception of a centripetal, non-perspectival point of convergence and centrifugal irradiation as well as the capacity for areas of brilliance to switch to shadow lie at the heart of the painting's optical performance. A wanderer in the gallery can be solicited, caught by the light from the centre of the picture itself. As suggested above, such an effect is powerfully reminiscent of Lacan's theorisation of shine from a highly reflective object as a gaze, which grasps the viewing subject as one 'seen' by a point of light that is shifting and ambiguous in respect to depth.³⁴ Shine enables the subject and object to effectively switch positions, in the act of looking, between active and passive, desiring and being caught.

Whereas Lacan's 'jewel' of reflected light (shining from a sardine can floating on water) was incidental, the eye-catching phenomenon of shine in

Paradise is, like the setting of the jewel in the Virgin's crown, exquisitely controlled. As the beholder moves, so light appears to turn around a centric point, like the spokes of a wheel around an axle. Moreover, the central blaze is deliberately answered by numerous smaller and brilliant wheels of light turning around it – the haloes of the saints whose compass circles contain differentiated bands of further rays. This is picture-making that shows the spatial and ontological stakes of painting with and against gold, insisting on gold's sometimes startling capacity for kinaesthetic effects, its ability to animate and act as well as 'represent'. In the process, the painting demonstrates how gold performs so much more deftly than is allowed by strictly socio-historical accounts that have tended to reduce it to a symptom of Italian patronal wealth or conservative taste. The experience of the painting also unravels those teleological and linear narratives that pit gold against Renaissance modernity.

As mentioned above, the star of Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 3), with its tiny centre and elaborated splendour, might well have been a shining example to Fra Angelico. Whereas Gentile's is incised through the tempera paint layer to reveal the brilliant gold leaf underneath, Fra Angelico's ruled radiance is impressed or indented into a continuous and fully visible gold ground. The naked eye can now discern that the individual squares of gold leaf comprising that ground were laid in concentric arcs falling parallel to the arched frame, and so also parallel to the central circle of light. Cennino Cennini's late fourteenth-century painter's handbook, though referring to fresco, makes

³² Norman Muller ("In a New Light: The Origins of Reflective Halo Tooling in Siena", in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, LXXV [2012], pp. 153–178: 156), speaking of the gold haloes of saints, put it neatly: "[...] simply moving a step to either side would often change the appearance of the tooling just as if one were flipping an ON-OFF light switch."

³³ Gerbrón (note 7), p. 137, aptly describes the effect as "hologramatic".

³⁴ Lacan (note 10), p. 96; Antje Krause-Wahl/Petra Löffler/Änne Söll, *Materials, Practices, and Politics of Shine in Modern Art and Popular Culture*, London 2021, pp. 1–20.

³⁵ "Quando hai disegnata la testa della figura, togli il sesto, e volgi la corona. [...] col coltellino va' tagliando la detta calcina su per lo filo del sesto, e rimarrà rilevata. Poi abi una stecchetta di legno, forte; e va' battendo i razzi d'attorno della diadema" (Cennino Cennini, *Il Libro dell'arte o trattato della pittura*, ed. by Fernando Tempesti, Milan 1984, pp. 88f.).

³⁶ "Quando vedrai che sia ben brunito, allora l'oro viene squasi bruno per la sua chiarezza" (*ibidem*, p. 109). See recently for Cennini especially Wolf-Dietrich Löhr, "Handwerk und Denkwerk des Malers: Kontexte für Cenninis Theorie der Praxis", in: *Fantasie und Handwerk: Cennino Cennini*

clear that rays of sanctity were a specialist enterprise. The painter, he explains, should “turn” the circle of a saint’s halo (“diadema”) with a compass and stamp its raised surface using a short stick to beat the rays into the still damp plaster before gilding.³⁵ On panel, the process of tooling, which requires a completely flat but pliant preparatory ground, would come only after gilding and before painting. But to produce clean and durable results, each final effect needed designing from the outset with virtually no room for changes of mind. On a brilliant white gesso ground, figures needed to be drawn to reserve areas to be painted. In the *Paradise*, unusually for his practice, Fra Angelico also applied further *gesso sottile* with a little brush as relief work (*pastiglia*) to highlight small markers of ecclesiastical authority or supreme virtue: the croziers and maces of bishop saints, the boss-like mace of the Virgin’s cloak and the gem that Christ is setting in her crown. These elements stand proud of the ground and reflect powerfully when seen from the optimum angle. Over the gesso, assistants would then have applied multiple layers of polished red clay bole where gold leaf was to be placed. This provided a mirror-smooth substrate to receive and cushion the leaf, as well as warm its colour from below. With the bole readied quickly by a brush of water, gold (probably acquired from a *battiloro* who had beaten it from high purity florins) could be taken up as a gossamer thin *foglio* from the gilder’s cushion and blown flat on to the bole. This was then tamped down ready to be burnished in to the substrate with a slim semi-precious stone or canine animal tooth. As Cennini vividly described it, this process makes the

gold “become almost dark” as it gains reflectivity and hence starts to animate the panel.³⁶

Subsequent tooling could take many forms. Norman Muller notes how Simone Martini’s development of ‘granulated’ haloes, using point or ring punches to produce sparkling highlights, exploited the tonal potential of reflective gold in increasingly eloquent ways.³⁷ A hundred years later, numerous early fifteenth-century painters were finding new means to figure forms in gold. For some, the ground became a revelatory medium, mimicking hierophany: lamenting or rejoicing angels could be conjured from the ground with *pointillé* (stipple marks) so that – depending on the fall of light and one’s view onto the gold surface – they appear or disappear at the ambiguous threshold between sky and heaven.³⁸ Such angelic go-betweens in works by Giovanni di Paolo and Gentile da Fabriano both tease and reward the attentive viewer.³⁹

The *Paradise* exploits ruled lines and the charm of ‘embroidered’ ornaments rather than stippling. It is, above all, the precision, patience, and absolutely systematic treatment of spoke-like, radial lines inscribed on the gilded surface that controls light and seems to produce it, as though it emanates from within the painting. Three tools were wielded: a compass to establish the trajectory and rhythm of the dense, evenly-spaced lines, a blunt stylus applied with a sustained, even pressure, and a ruler. At one end, the troughs left by the stylus appear to meet and (with the line stopping and starting as the rays pass behind the figures), at the other, they expand and terminate to produce a regular pattern of longer

und die Tradition der toskanischen Malerei von Giotto bis Lorenzo Monaco, exh. cat., ed. by *idem*/Stefan Weppelmann, Munich 2008, pp. 153–177.

³⁷ For the granulation of gold leaf, pioneered in Siena, see Cennino Cennini’s *Il libro dell’arte: A New English Translation and Commentary with Italian Transcription*, ed. by Lara Broecke, London 2015, p. 179, note 4; Erling S. Skaug, *Punch Marks from Giotto to Fra Angelico: Attribution, Chronology and Workshop Relationships in Tuscan Panel Painting*, Oslo 1994; Muller (note 32), pp. 164–178.

³⁸ Cennini (note 35), p. 110, refers to angels among the figures that “traspaiono nell’oro” (appear in the gold).

³⁹ Examples are the horizontal *Crucifixion* panels by Giovanni di Paolo of the 1420s (Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale, and Rochdale, Touchstones) and the *Virgin and Child* by Gentile da Fabriano (Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell’Umbria). Kim 2019 (note 12), pp. 213–221, offers an acute analysis of this kind of stipple work, its application to angels, and its implications. See also De Marchi (note 12); *idem*, “Gli angeli graniti: la Madonna di Perugia”, in: *Gentile da Fabriano e l’altro Rinascimento*, exh. cat. Fabriano 2006, ed. by Laura Laureati/Lorenza Mochi Onori, Milan 2006, pp. 93–122: 94f.

and shorter beams, as of a conventionalised star.⁴⁰ By making the intervals between the rays of this elongated burst of light as even and narrow as possible and resolving them in sharp directional points, the craftsman (arguably Fra Angelico himself) could ensure viewers perceived a vector of light beams comprised of diverging rays. Capturing and scattering light, these beams shift in response to the movement of the viewer and, at some angles, offer a secondary effect of concentric arcs.⁴¹ As the angle of reflection of light to the eye changes, the burnished gold leaf seem to flash outwards or its brilliance seems to turn around an occluded central point, concealed by the head of a haloed cherub head.

Quené's visual juxtaposition of these 'burning' rays with discussion of the eternal light of God as inaccessible to human sight (from Saint Paul's letter to Timothy, Thomas Aquinas and Dante) is especially powerful.⁴² Her beautiful close-up photographs of these ruled rays likewise reinforce the precision of the technique. They do not, in my view, support her case that Fra Angelico intended to present a complex geometric 'body' of light, namely a perspectively-rendered star polyhedron.⁴³ The 'stellated' polyhedra, devised by the contemporary Florentine painter Uccello and later *maestri di prospettiva*, took many forms, but the only stellated bodies that would produce such a wealth of sharp spikes of varying height along its outer edge (if projected flat) would seem to be those popularly known as a Moravian star: a stellated dodecahedron or the more densely spiked 'complete icosahedron', of which only the former was known in the Quattrocento.⁴⁴ But neither produce points of different acuity or aligning at regular intervals, as in the *Paradise*. Moreover, to perceive the third dimension of such a mathematical body on a flat surface requires

foreshortened and/or faceted stellations, for which we have no cues within Fra Angelico's star burst with its evenly spaced radial lines.

As a captivating brilliance, Fra Angelico's shine nonetheless presents as a textbook case of what the anthropologist Alfred Gell called the "technology of enchantment".⁴⁵ This kind of artful working, he argued, is what attaches humans to crafted objects in order to achieve these objects' social purposes. He also insisted, persuasively, that this enchantment operates powerfully in respect to non-figural patterns where geometric disposition produces a sense of movement. Patiently inscribed on the burnished surface of the Uffizi picture, line produces an effect of rapid emanation. In the process it draws attention to the artisanal performance that enables shine to act in relation to, but independently from, the system of figure representation. Reflected light is harnessed as a central agent of movement in the artwork as well as in the vision. For contemporary beholders of a Marian altarpiece, what appears as an impeccable technique could also reinforce a larger message of faultless clarity and immaculacy in the imagery, as discussed below.

The radiance of the *Paradise*, when the altarpiece was in the church of Sant'Egidio, would have responded to changing daylight and occasional illumination from altar candles, and its animation could have been variously staged. Set against a rood screen when seen by Vasari,⁴⁶ the altarpiece was not only differently framed but may once have been illumined by a lamp of the kind often hung before devotional and cult images of Mary. In its later, more exposed life as a gallery painting, the capacity to shine has found powerful (even overwhelming) support in the spotlight, and it is under this much brighter and more focussed light that we see the painting at work (Figs. I, 6, 7).

⁴⁰ Each point is made up of either 5, 15 or 21 lines (counting twice the shared shortest line), in a rhythm a-b-a-c-a-b-a-c.

⁴¹ It is unclear whether these rings result from technique, subsequent treatments, or an optical illusion.

⁴² Quené (note 5), pp. 274f.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, pp. 275–278.

⁴⁴ Peter Cromwell, *Polyhedra*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 168–171, 267–280, pl. 10, analysing these forms and outlining their history.

In Figure 6, a spotlight or two, directed just left of centre and below the enthronement, produces reflections that manifest as upward radiance from the throne twinned with a more powerful downward stream of beams against a darkened ground; in Figure 7, the upper beams predominate. Artificial light also reinforces the effect of golden rays (applied as gold leaf over a mordant) peeping through the deep blue cloud of cherubs. That with the passage of nearly six centuries the modern viewer can be struck by such effects also owes of course to the makers' concern with material durability. As an altarpiece whose temporal frame is eternity, the work seems designed to maintain a permanent radiance.

Radiance and Splendour

For present-day viewers, an arch-topped scene of paradise accidentally inherits the decorative connotation of an Art Deco sunburst. But when seen as a protagonist in a visionary glory of saints, this radiance breaks the perception of gold ground as a secondary ornament. The tooled gold holds its effect as a kind of secret to be activated, issuing like an exclamation mark or sudden blast from the centre of the picture. In this scene, the sonic analogy is strongly encouraged from within the picture by the sounding of trumpets, especially those long, slender silver ones that fan out against the heavens. Though sounded by angels, these are instruments of heralding that would have recalled the broadcasting of great ceremonies and triumphant entries in the European court or city. As such, Fra Angelico's metal trumpets lend an emphatically celebratory, honorific, even victorious character to this metallic radiance. A similar trumpet blast supports the radiant resurrected Christ in the predella of his earlier high altarpiece of San Domenico at Fiesole

(Fig. 8), but the *Paradise* also invokes dance music as well as the odour of sanctity and sacred presence by the swing of censers below the throne of Godhead (Fig. 7). Hence radiant light is the central feature of a multi-sensory and culturally-specific staging of glory that spoke to the experience, memory, and language of historical beholders.

For fifteenth-century viewers, the many available nuances of shine that could be accessed linguistically in Italian or Latin were just as rich as their equivalents in modern English and likewise overlap in their reference to natural effects, emotions, and social values. While we have inherited this vocabulary's encoding of rank, the hierarchy of light was probably felt more intensely in the Quattrocento. *Splendore* (splendour), describing a powerful irradiation of light outwards, a blaze or refulgence, was also a distinguishing attribute, an effect or an act attendant on the highest social status. To be splendid was to behave like the sun, magnificently, producing steady heat (beneficence and patronage), reflected light (admiration and emulation), and, by dispelling darkness, signifying active virtue.⁴⁷ The word *brillante*, often used to describe faceted gems and their flashing glint or gleam, connoted an intense, but less overwhelming shine. A smaller scale of light again – and one full of movement – is denoted by *sfavillante*, which has the sense of glitter or scintillation. It is used for dancing flames or sparkling light, like the “faville vive” of the angels in *Paradiso*, XXX, 64 who rise from, then re-submerge in, the river of light. In the painting of Fra Angelico, the nearest pictorial equivalents to the word *sfavillante* are, perhaps, the many minute and frequently flame-shaped embroideries, formed with mordant gilding, that powder the garments of the angels and saints. Bringing with them the flash of the otherworldly, these burning or falling

⁴⁵ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford/New York 1998, pp. 74–80.

⁴⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, ed. by Gaetano Milanesi, Florence 1878–1885, II, p. 516.

⁴⁷ For lustre, splendour and resplendence as attaching to the public bodies of the prince and surrounding courtiers, see in particular Tim McCall, “Brilliant Bodies: Material Culture and the Adornment of Men in North Italy's Quattrocento Courts”, in: *I Tatti Studies in the Ital-*

lights – signifying ardent love or the descending grace of the Holy Spirit – often denote a state of merited blessedness in the wearer.

The type of shine that dominates the *Paradise* is certainly *splendore*, but it can also be described as *raggiante*. This refers literally to radiating light and, as with the English poetic sense of ‘radiant’, can invoke the expression of infectious joy. In Dante’s *Divina Commedia* the smile of his poetic beloved, Beatrice, and her active gaze – for which alone Dante adopts an extramission theory of vision – are radiant in both these senses.⁴⁸ In Latin, the word *radius*, from which *raggio* derives, describes both a beam or rod and a ray of light. Virgil, Dante’s great poetic model – and guide in the first two *cantiche* – also used it in the *Aeneid* in these senses: hence King Latinus entering the field on a chariot, his temples ringed with golden rays (“*auri radii*”), wears this radiance as a solar glory, a sign of his grandfather the Sun, and an indicator of worldly fame. In a Christian context, ‘crowning’ radiance is the reward of virtue, and it underpinned the convention of the saintly halo as it developed in art.

In the devotional cultures of the medieval and post-medieval West, shaped by the values of the monastic orders and penitential Christianity, the economy of spiritual glory apparently reverses that of Virgil’s triumphant King Latinus. In prayer and visionary writing, as well as religious painting, glory is given to those who offer service in humility and perfect obedience to God. Bodily radiance, as seen for example in the glorification of Saint Francis, is sign and symptom of closeness to Christ, who entered into glory through sacrificial death; shine marks a special participation in that glory. The shining body, overtaken by, and manifesting, divinity is reserved for those

showing God’s power via the Holy Spirit. Unlike the conventional halo, it can be experienced, if only exceptionally, on earth (as at Jesus’ Transfiguration on Mount Tabor) and seen in revelatory visions that blur the boundary between metaphor and phenomenon. When revealed, glory often brings with it a strongly sacrificial and apocalyptic register.

Immaculate Light and Glory

In the *Paradise* altarpiece, radiance associated with Mary as mother of God and prime intercessor has a particular purchase. She shares the spotlight with Christ in accordance with her promotion, in the previous century, to co-*redemptrix*. When represented as mother, her transfiguring radiance is a marker of difference and, above all, of her perpetual chastity or immaculacy. Hers is a glory of bodily spotlessness, and its physical symptoms are extreme *chiarezza* and *pulitezza* – clarity or lightness and polish or cleanliness, as well as external beauty. Whether standing, enthroned, or seated on the ground with the Child in her arms, the spotless body of the Virgin radiates light in all directions. Even when shown in the context of an event, these visionary manifestations take her out of time, rendering her accessible to prayer even as they open up greater distance to the everyday and the corruption of human flesh.

Depictions of the radiant Virgin type were often associated, sometimes directly, with the prophetic *mulier amicta sole* (“woman clothed with the sun”, Revelation 12:1) of the biblical Apocalypse attributed to Saint John the Evangelist. The Woman appears in the cosmic vision of the end of time and was identified by medieval exegetes with *Ecclesia*, a personification of the Church, and hence with Mary as a

ian Renaissance, XVI (2013), pp. 445–490: 446f., 452f. See also Evelyn Welch, “Public Magnificence and Private Display: Giovanni Pontano’s *De Splendore* (1498) and the Domestic Arts”, in: *Journal of Design History*, XV (2002), p. 211–221, for domestic goods and legitimate splendour.

⁴⁸ For love and looking in Dante, see Rubin (note 2), pp. 157–160.

According to this preceding theory of vision, rays emitted from the eyes go out to touch objects of vision. Dante’s intention is strategic: Beatrice’s eyes communicate the joy of the blessed and the intellectual God-light that guided his inner vision. Richard Kay, “Dante’s Empyrean and the Eye of God”, in: *Speculum*, LXXVIII (2003), pp. 37–65, proposes more



8 Fra Angelico, *Christ Glorified in Heaven*. London, The National Gallery

figure for the Church and bride of Christ.⁴⁹ Before 1430, Fra Angelico had produced one of the most exquisite of his irradiating, visionary Marias on a small painted reliquary tabernacle known as the *Madonna della Stella*, one of four reliquaries painted for the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella.⁵⁰ The standing Virgin, with Christ in her arms, is adored by angels and awaited by a crown and Christ now in heaven, gazing down from among cherubim in the apex of the frame. The much larger, enthroned *Pontassieve Madonna* (Fig. 5) – as we have seen – also has a sun-like emanation, which was presumably expressly requested by the donor brothers whose names appear at the base of the image. Their presence below the Virgin's feet seems to affirm that the expensive and patient-

ly-worked gold surface also puts material weight behind a petition for the Virgin's intercession. In the context of a private chapel's intercessory function, the other-worldly glory is an honorific form that places Mary in the temporal perspective of future judgement and invites her favour.

Fra Angelico's earlier *Madonna di Cedri* (Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, ca. 1423), with its radiance extending almost to the edge of the panel, participates directly in the Trecento tradition of glorifying the humble.⁵¹ Fra Angelico did not invent this visionary attribute; a radiant body accompanies a number of Virgins of Humility across Europe in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century, and some even use the same device of a mandorla of gold leaf incised with rays.⁵²

controversially that the empyrean ray itself is extramitted by God's eye.

⁴⁹ Frederik van der Meer, *Maiestas Domini: théophanies de l'Apocalypse dans l'art chrétien. Étude sur les origines d'une iconographie spéciale du Christ*, Città del Vaticano 1938, pp. 421–431; Natasha O'Hear, *Picturing the Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation in the Arts over Two Millennia*, Oxford 2015, pp. 111–129.

⁵⁰ For the *Madonna della Stella* see recently Nathaniel Silver, in: *Fra Angelico: Heaven on Earth* (note 7), pp. 174–179, no. 4.

⁵¹ See De Simone, in: *Beato Angelico* (note 7), pp. 150–153, no. 3.

⁵² See Beth Williamson, *The Madonna of Humility: Development, Dissemination and Reception, ca. 1340–1400*, Woodbridge/Rochester, N.Y., 2009, p. 155,

This glory is just one of a set of symbols, including a circlet of twelve stars – as seen in the left-hand panel of the Corsini Triptych (Fig. 12) – and a crescent moon beneath her, that identified the Virgin more closely with Saint John’s vision of the Woman of the Apocalypse.⁵³ In Revelation 12, the portent describes a cosmic woman in the pain of labour, who gives birth in defiance of the six-headed beast, and her son is taken up into glory. In the *Madonna di Cedri*, Mary’s radiance is associated more specifically with divine impregnation by the Holy Spirit, which hovers above her, but the mystical register of the bodily glory intimated future fulfilment, including Christ’s sacrificial death and glory, which the Virgin was worthy to be marked by.

In the light of these Marian visions, the radiance that emanates from the *Paradise* altarpiece strikes as explicitly honorific as well as triumphal. Writing in 1480, Antonio Manetti, the earliest source to refer to the altarpiece in Sant’Egidio, took the painting to show the pinnacle moment of Mary’s apocryphal legend after her bodily assumption, her coronation.⁵⁴ This is small wonder since the structure of the painting is so closely based on the more common apotheosis in which the heavens are shown rejoicing at Mary’s crowning. Indeed, the earliest precedent for Fra Angelico’s radiance would seem to be the radiant sun motif inscribed at the centre of Giovanni dal Ponte’s *Coronation of the Virgin* altarpiece (Florence, Galleria dell’Accademia), probably dating before 1430 and made by the Florentine painter for a private chapel in Arezzo.⁵⁵ But the Virgin of the *Paradise* already

wears her heavenly crown. This is entirely consistent with the fact that a terracotta relief over the entrance to Sant’Egidio (introduced after its rededication to Mary in 1420) already depicted that crowning moment.⁵⁶ In the *Paradise*, Christ’s gesture is one of super-added honour; watched intently by his mother he reaches to place a gem alongside those in the band of her crown. As Serena Nocentini showed, the action derives from a relatively recent vision recounted by the fourteenth-century Swedish mystic Saint Birgitta in her *Revelations*.⁵⁷ While the Virgin’s appearance is not otherwise close to Birgitta’s revelation – no golden tunic, hair modestly covered by a veil rather than loose – the specificity of the action matters. The gems placed in her crown by Christ represented, according to Birgitta, her virtue, complete purity, beauty, wisdom, power and brightness (*claritas*) “for she shines so clear that she even sheds light on the angels, [light] which is so bright that the angels, whose eyes shine more clearly than light, and the demons do not dare to look upon her shining clarity”.⁵⁸ The gesture enhances the Virgin as celebrated *sponsa*, but also as a highly emotive model and guide to female purity who vanquishes evil. Moreover, Birgitta’s visionary experience, which was mediated for her by the prophet John the Baptist, accesses a continual heavenly state rather than a crowning moment. Birgitta’s visions were known in Italian translation by the early fifteenth century in Florence, where a Birgittine convent, Santa Maria e Santa Brigida al Paradiso, had already been founded shortly after her canonisation in 1391.⁵⁹

for a thorough-going analysis and rethinking of this highly diverse image type across Europe in the later fourteenth century.

⁵³ See De Simone in: *Beato Angelico* (note 7), p. 150, for the *Madonna di Cedri* and the apocalyptic “mulier amicta sole”.

⁵⁴ Manetti (note 6), p. 166.

⁵⁵ See Angelo Tartuferi, in: *Giovanni dal Ponte: protagonista dell’Umanesimo tardogotico fiorentino*, exh. cat., ed. by *idem*/Lorenzo Sbaraglio, Florence 2016, pp. 150–153, no. 37, and p. 194, proposing a date in the later 1420s on stylistic grounds.

⁵⁶ For Dello Delli’s painted terracotta, now inside the Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova, see Brunella Teodori, in: *The Springtime of the Renaissance: Sculpture and the Arts in Florence, 1400–1460*, exh. cat., ed. by Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi/Marc Bormand, Florence 2013, pp. 458–489, no. IX.2.

⁵⁷ Nocentini (note 7), citing Saint Birgitta, *Revelations*, I, 31.

⁵⁸ *The Revelation of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. by Bridget Morris, Oxford 2006–2015, I, pp. 104f.

⁵⁹ Brian Richardson, “Birgitta and Pseudo-Birgitta: Textual Circulation and Perceptions of the Saint”, in: *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden: Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Unn Falkeid/Anna Wainwright, Leiden/Boston 2023, pp. 34–55: 35–37; Isabella Gagliardi, “Prophetic Theology: The Santa Brigida da Paradiso in Florence”, *ibidem*, pp. 80–106: 80–87.

But it is not known who would have asked for this gesture to Birgittine revelation. The painting gives prominence to Saint Jerome, who is shown kneeling in the first row to the left, but, rather than doubling for a donor, his place here probably relates to Jerome's imagining of the dazzling assumption and reception of the Virgin in glory and the claim that her coronation is perpetually celebrated in heaven.⁶⁰ The rood screen altarpiece by Fra Angelico would have marked a temporal progression in the hagiography of Mary for visitors who entered beneath the façade relief and approached the east end. The decade of the 1430s saw a surge in Marian devotion in Florence more generally, with the consecration of Florence cathedral to her in 1436, and from 1439 onwards the high altar chapel of Sant'Egidio further reflected the hospital's dedication to Santa Maria Nuova by its decoration with scenes from the life of the Virgin, paid for by the administrators of the hospital.⁶¹

Is the radiance of the *Paradise*, then, essentially a 'Marian' glory? Arguably the answer to this depended on the perceptions and liturgical expectations of those who once addressed the altarpiece as devotees. The familiarity of hymns repeated in the liturgical hours as well as in secular *laude*, would certainly have supported a mental relay between the painting's radiance and famous antiphonal hymns to the Virgin such as the *Ave Maris Stella* and *Alma Redemptoris Mater*. These address Mary as a guiding star, "precious gem", and "portal of heaven".⁶² Bearer of Christ and glorified by God, the Virgin is petitioned as the most powerful intercessor

for the salvation of souls, sending forth light to the spiritually blind and dispelling evil. It would be surprising if the same imagery did *not* speak directly to those who might have prayed before the altar to Mary for themselves and the suffering souls of the sick or dying. Nonetheless, if we follow the cues provided in the painting itself this is not the given sense of the central radiance. Light is not attached to Mary's body, and the differentiated tonal modelling of the pairing of mother and son makes it clear that the intense brightness of the Virgin's blue garments is not intrinsic but lent by Christ – or otherwise reflected from the central splendour. With perfect theological correctness, that same radiance does not illuminate Christ.⁶³

Distributed Glory

Light effects in Fra Angelico are never accidental. In the inventive predella panel of the *Funeral of the Virgin* now in Philadelphia (Fig. 9), where Mary's body is being lowered into the tomb, she reappears in the heavens, standing with Christ after her Assumption.⁶⁴ Her position is one of intercessory prayer, and her figure is absorbed in the stream of painted yellow radiance that emanates from her son as he holds open the Book of Judgement. In the *Paradise*, their dual enthronement places them on an even footing, while the radiance issues from between them to suggest a third presence (Fig. 10). This can only be that of God. The opening words of the *Sanctus* from the Eucharistic prayer, which are inscribed in gold on the upper border of Christ's mantle, reinforce this identification of

⁶⁰ As per the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin in the *Golden Legend* (note 9), II, pp. 84f. Caterina Caneva ("L'Incoronazione ritrovata", in: *L'Incoronazione della Vergine del Botticelli: restauro e ricerche*, exh. cat., ed. by Marco Ciatti, Florence 1990, pp. 33–50: 40–42) and Ronald Kecks (*Ghirlandajo: catalogo completo*, Florence 1995, p. 148) both note this connection in respect to the mediating role of Saint Jerome in later *Coronation of the Virgin* altarpieces (Figs. 15 and 16, discussed below).

⁶¹ See Raffaele Marrone, "Oltre la soglia di Sant'Egidio: committenza, programma e vicende del perduto ciclo pittorico della cappella maggiore", in: *Prospettiva*, 185 (2022), pp. 31–52.

⁶² In Domenico di Bartolo's *Virgin of Humility* of 1433, the words "Ave

stella maris gemma que pretiosa" appear on a scroll which, together with a winged halo, miraculously descends towards the Virgin's head. See Andrew Ladis, "The Music of Devotion: Image, Voice and the Imagination in Domenico di Bartolo's *Madonna of Humility*", in: *Visions of Holiness: Art and Devotion in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by *idem*/Shelley E. Zuraw, Athens, Ga., 2001, pp. 163–177.

⁶³ In the apocalyptic register that is characteristic of the *Coronation of the Virgin*, we might see the Virgin as the moon to Christ's sun, rather than sun herself.

⁶⁴ For the *Funeral* see recently Nathaniel Silver, in: *Fra Angelico: Heaven on Earth* (note 7), pp. 194–197, no. 6, with further bibliography.



9 Fra Angelico, *Funeral of the Virgin*.
Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art

the glory of God the Father: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory, hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”⁶⁵ For scripturally-versed viewers of the *Paradise*, the idea of God’s glory being manifested in the painted vision would, moreover, have been signalled by the particular form and colour of the central throne. Studded with the blue-winged heads of cherubim, this gleaming cloud formation references the Mercy Seat carried by cherubim on which God appears in the Old Testament.⁶⁶

The painting effectively shows an expanded field of glory that extends outwards and is distributed through the heavenly hosts: firstly the ranks of angels and then the saints who, in their bodies and

lives, showed God’s glory. Thomas Aquinas insisted that glory was manifested generally in the bodies of the blessed as *claritas*, rendering them beautiful from within (as we have seen in the representation of the radiant Mary).⁶⁷ But further specificity in the Uffizi *Paradise* is suggested by the prominence of the group of standing female saints participating directly in the vision, who represent virgin martyrs of the early church (Fig. II). At least three of these saints, Lucy, Cecilia, and Agnes, had already appeared in the chapel of the women’s ward of the adjacent hospital.⁶⁸ Their prominence in the altarpiece seems though particularly pertinent to a structure of expanded radiance since, according to the widely-read *Golden Legend*, they were known for experiencing or

⁶⁵ See Gerbrón (note 7), p. 132; Silver (note 7), p. 182. In this acclamation, said or sung at mass, God’s glory fills the heavens and earth (Is 6:3) and is messianically grafted on to Christ’s entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21:9).

⁶⁶ Numbers 7:89; 1 Samuel 7:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; Psalm 80:1 and 99:1; Isaiah 37:16.

⁶⁷ For the blessed in Dominican theology as possessing *claritas* and for colour as luminosity in Fra Angelico, see Gerbrón (note 7), pp. 149–152.

⁶⁸ For the identification of the saints in the *Paradise* and the chapel images see Silver (note 7), pp. 181–184.



10 Fra Angelico, *Paradise* (detail).
Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi,
Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture

producing visions of light. Only one is tricky to identify. Turning outwards with a gesture of wonder that is also an invitation, the saint with a martyr's palm and green cloak has been connected to Saint Margaret (who was surrounded by miraculous light in her prison cell).⁶⁹ Her eyes are turned towards women martyrs characterised by their protection by light:

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 182, 186. The legend characterises Margaret as a young, noble beauty who refused to renounce her Christianity or virginity (*Golden Legend* [note 9], I, pp. 369f.). De Simone (note 7) suggests the saint is

Saint Lucy (with a lamp) and Saint Agnes (with a lamb). Agnes refused marriage, preserving her virginity and considering herself wedded to Christ who – she tells her Roman suitor – had already adorned her with jewels.⁷⁰ A guardian angel subsequently protects her chastity, appearing in the brothel to which the thwarted suitor condemns her and shedding a

one of the other biblical 'Marys', but this identification is excluded by her martyr's palm.

⁷⁰ *Golden Legend* (note 9), I, p. 102.

miraculous radiance such that “anyone who honoured the light came out cleaner than they went in”.⁷¹ This decontaminating brilliance is also active in her defence, engulfing an assailant who breaks in upon her. After her martyrdom, the saint appears to her parents to declare that she now has a throne of light in heaven. In the case of Saint Lucy, shown here looking towards her inspiration, Saint Agnes, the famous etymological introduction to her name in the *Golden Legend* explicates her special relevance:

Lucy comes from *lux*, which means light. Light is beautiful to look upon; for, as Ambrose says, it is the nature of light that all grace is in its appearance. Light also radiates without being soiled; no matter how unclean may be the places where its beams penetrate, it is still clean. It goes in straight lines, without curvature, and traverses the greatest distances without losing its speed. Thus we are shown that the blessed virgin Lucy possessed the beauty of virginity without trace of corruption; that she radiated charity without any impure love; her progress toward God was straight [...].⁷²

This double movement – in one direction the pure radiance of *lux* and in the other the unerring path towards God – is effectively channelled by the central splendour of Fra Angelico’s *Paradise*. Together with the organ-playing angel who bends to its shine, the demonstrative gestures of the green-cloaked saint (Margaret?) and Lucy both align loosely with the rays that direct to the central vision. The organisation of, and associations between, saints represent, then, not a lesson in hagiography, but a thoughtful underpinning for both the effect and the materiality of shine. As told in the *Golden Legend*, these stories reveal virginity as an active principle and discipline that, when under

threat, not only defends against moral pollution but expels it. Such moralised cleanliness has a power that equates to the *finezza*, *chiarezza*, and *pulitezza* of gold – refined, cleaned, polished, and tooled into reflective shine by the painter. In turn, shine as *lux* cannot be bent, but leads the eye in straight lines back to its source in God.

Mediated Vision

Like so many visionaries, from Ezekiel to Saint Lucy, from Dante to Saint Birgitta, the beholder of the *Paradise* has their own gaze directed and modelled by exemplars and guides. Fra Angelico shows saintly intermediaries caught in varying states of *photophilia*. Those closest to the charismatic centre are turned away from the viewer and gaze fearlessly inwards towards the source. So too does the titular saint Egidius (Saint Giles), dressed in a sky blue cope and labelled in gold on the hem of his Benedictine hood; his smile is also a squinting into the light. The foreground fringe of holies, including the Florentine patron Saint Zenobius to the far left, Saint Dominic with his lily and a star-studded book and the exemplary penitent, Mary Magdalen, open the circle to admit the viewer and look outwards to acknowledge their beholders.

The prominent role given to high-ranking female mediators in presenting the vision – their haloes are differentiated in a way the male saints’ are not – is common to both Fra Angelico’s *Paradise* and Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. In *Inferno*, Saint Lucy appears as a link in an intercessory chain that begins with the Virgin Mary, who sends the saint to Beatrice. Beatrice, in turn, is instructed to rouse Virgil to come to the pilgrim Dante’s aid. In a vision within the vision, Lucy, in the form of an eagle, appears to him in a dream and bears him up, at dawn, to purgatory.⁷³ It is there that

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁷³ *Purgatorio*, IX, 52–60. Finally, in *Paradiso*, XXXII, Lucy appears near the Virgin Mary in the vision of the Mystic Rose in the Empyrean.

⁷⁴ *Purgatorio*, XV, 10–23. For Dante’s understanding of the principles of light reflection in *Purgatorio*, XV and *Paradiso*, I and his likely sources, including Albertus Magnus, see Simon A. Gilson, *Medieval Optics and Theories of Light in the Works of Dante*, New York 2000, pp. 110–128.



11 Fra Angelico, *Paradise* (detail).
Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi,
Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture

he first encounters a sudden dazzling light ahead of him on the road, as intense as a beam reflected from water or a mirror, compelling him to shade his eyes with his hands: he is literally struck (“percosso”) by what emerges as being the reflected light of an angel.⁷⁴ In *Paradiso*, XIII and XXIX, Saint Thomas

Aquinas and Beatrice explain that angelic intelligences, like those Dante met in Purgatory, reflect the light of God and transmit it.⁷⁵ Monica Rutledge has analysed such similarities of behaviour in divine and material light to account for the power of Beatrice’s eyes to lift Dante through the successive circles of

⁷⁴ *Paradiso*, XIII, 52–60, and XXIX, 136–138, 142–145. Dante does not employ here the optical terminology of the Franciscan Roger Bacon or of other perspectivists, though his knowledge of it is apparent elsewhere (*Convivio*, III, 9). See Alessandro Parronchi, “La prospettiva

dantesca”, in: *idem*, *Studi su la ‘dolce’ prospettiva*, Milan 1964, pp. 3–90; Monica Rutledge, “Dante, the Body and Light”, in: *Dante Studies with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, CXIII (1995), pp. 151–165: 151–154; Gilson (note 74), pp. 242f.

heaven.⁷⁶ As Beatrice turns her eyes to God (*Paradiso*, I, 47–66, and V, 85–93), the down-pouring of spiritual light or force is reflected from her eyes to Dante’s own, making possible his spiritual movement. He looks directly at the brilliance, too, and then back to Beatrice, with whom he is then able to rise to the higher heavens, like an arrow to its target.

Fra Angelico is likely to have been familiar with the optical theory of reflected rays entering the eyes (intromission), as it was developed from Arabic sources by scholars of perspective, notably Roger Bacon, in the late thirteenth century. But just as importantly for our purposes, he seems to draw on Dante’s mediation of divine light in the visionary mode. In this mode, beholding offers spiritual understanding and to gaze at ultimate perfection is to share the acuity of the eagle, who is reputed to be able to stare straight into the sun. For sinners, like Saint Paul, struck blind on the road to Damascus by the sudden flash of light from heaven, God’s extreme brightness humbles and disarms. Likewise, in *Paradiso*, XXV Dante is temporarily blinded by the blazing out of the light of the soul-star that is Saint John the Divine, the ‘eagle’ who had seen the glory of heaven in a vision. Dante needs Beatrice, his mediator in paradise, to restore his sight, by advancing his understanding. The same occurs when in *Paradiso*, XXX he finally passes beyond the sphere of fixed stars to the Empyrean, a place of pure light (“luce intellettuale, piena d’amore; / amor di vero ben, pien di letizia; / letizia che trascende ogni dolzore”, *Paradiso*, XXX, 40–42). But it is already before this, in the Ninth Sphere of heaven or *primum mobile* (*Paradiso*, XXVIII), that Dante, turning from the “true mirror” of Beatrice’s eyes, sees a point that radiates light “so acute that anyone who faced the force with which it blazed would have to shut his eyes” (“un punto vidi che raggiava lume / acuto

sì, che ‘l viso [vista] ch’elli affoca / chiuder conviensi per lo forte acume”).⁷⁷ This is the ‘God point’, infinitely small and infinitely bright that moves the universe – around which the hierarchy of angelic intelligences spin in ever faster circles as they approach it, driven towards truth by love. Beatrice’s gaze becomes fixed to that point and she falls silent (as at the moment of planetary equilibrium when sun and moon are both cut by the horizon) while Dante is temporarily vanquished by it, and by the paradox of God as prime mover.⁷⁸

The ensuing image of the Empyrean, with its river of light from which living flames of angels arise and dive into the flowers on the banks “painted with spring”, is one of the most visually enchanting in the *cantica*. What Fra Angelico’s Uffizi *Paradise* owes to Dante is not, though, a painted garden, nor even spinning angels, but the absolutely distinctive image of God as a point of intensity from which radiance streams. This unimaginable point of origin – charged in the poem with the conjunction of intellect, love, truth, and joy – is, in Fra Angelico’s *Paradise*, just hidden behind the angelic throne (a ‘horizon line’ holding Christ and Mary in equilibrium, like sun and moon, to follow Dante’s image). The obstruction of the point allows more effectively to intimate unimaginable depth at the centre, which the earth-bound devotee cannot access. The ‘God-point’, from which light beams seem to pull in or expand outwards from the painting, shares something with the vanishing point (Alberti’s “centric ray”) in respect to the orthogonal rays posited by the principles of perspective construction. But the spatial structure of Fra Angelico’s painting does not correspond to it; the notional centric point for the view on to the more distant saints lies near the feet of the Virgin and Christ and still lower down the panel for those in the foreground. As the light of God, the “alta luce”,⁷⁹ on

⁷⁶ For Rutledge (note 75), pp. 163f., Beatrice “tempers” the splendour of God for Dante’s feebler sight.

⁷⁷ *Paradiso*, XXVIII, 16–18.

⁷⁸ The alignment of source (God) and reflection (Beatrice) is perhaps also

suggested in Dante’s planetary analogy. The paradox is that God is at the centre of the immaterial universe yet also circumscribes the material one. Dante accepts Beatrice’s explanation of this.

⁷⁹ Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX, 49–54, and XXXI, 25–30.

which the saved gaze directly, the origin of shine is emphatically non-perspectival.

Light Motif

Fra Angelico continued to explore the optics and valence of heavenly shine in a number of later works. The treatment of radiance in the Corsini Triptych (Fig. 12), where it appears slightly varied across two related scenes, the central *Last Judgement* and the *Ascension* on the dexter, rewards particular attention.⁸⁰ Viewers of this intimately-scaled painting would have seen it not hanging, as it does now, flat against a wall, but standing on an altar or other table surface with its supporting wings set at angles. This brings the three moments depicted closer to one another and encourages a temporal reading of shine as pointing forward to the apocalypse.⁸¹ While the central gold field forms a conventional mandorla, to the left the glory around Christ, who displays his wounds as he passes between realms, extends as though in tongues of flame against the gold ground. The exegesis of the feast of the Ascension in the fourteenth-century *Golden Legend* emphasised that Jesus ascended to the Empyrean “by the power of his own godhead”, and Jacobus de Voragine quotes Saint Augustine on the cosmic tremor and rejoicing in the heavens produced by his passage.⁸² In the triptych, Christ’s Ascension is structured to align with Pentecost in the opposite wing, the next major feast in the liturgical year, which commemorates the Holy Spirit descending from heaven in tongues of fire to empower Christ’s followers to act in his stead.

In Acts I, the disciples are told that Christ will return “in the same way you have seen him go up into heaven” and, in the following chapter, Saint Peter preaches to Judaea on the visions and prophecies that will accompany the “last days” and the outpouring of the spirit on earth before the coming of the Lord in glory.⁸³ Consequently, Fra Angelico shows Peter gesturing both earthward and heavenward, while the disciple beside him is apparently cross-checking the prophecy of Joel from which his companion is quoting at length.

It is through the blast of radiance itself that the Ascension in the left wing is vividly related to Christ’s second coming as judge. In each case, the visionary light is created by a series of highly controlled, wave-like, and near-parallel stylus lines impressed into the burnished gold surface. The wave structure, which is apparently unique to this work, produces a strong optical effect of concentric circles or pulsations outwards, like the ripples from a stone dropped in water. But this is not natural observation, still less a proto-physics of light waves. Instead it is an active blaze that signals glory and other-worldly power.⁸⁴ Its consequences for all time are laid out starkly in the ultimate scene, where the throbbing aura around Christ as alpha and omega accompanies his gesture of smiting the damned (Fig. 13). The face of Fra Angelico’s Christ remains impassive, but his raised right hand in its glittering sleeve leaves no doubt as to his capacity for implacable judicial wrath against those cast as his enemies, in this case principally heretics. The silver-white, almost metallic relief of Jesus’

⁸⁰ Recent literature on the Corsini Triptych includes Kanter/Palladino (note 7), pp. 165–168; Silvia Pedone, “Il Trittico di Beato Angelico: qualche novità iconografica”, in: *Il Trittico del Beato Angelico della Galleria Corsini*, ed. by Daniela Porro, Rome 2015, pp. 51–61; Daniela Porro, “Il Trittico Corsini di Beato Angelico: nuove indagini”, *ibidem*, pp. 11–14; Maria Giulia Aurigemma, “‘Con bellissima osservanza’: giudizi dell’Angelico”, in: *Angelicus pictor* (note 5), pp. 199–213: 202–207 (proposing a later date of the early 1450s); Paola Mangia, in: *Beato Angelico* (note 7), pp. 210–213, no. 27; Ann Leader, in: *Fra Angelico: Heaven on Earth* (note 7), pp. 204–209, no. 8 (dating the painting circa 1447/48); Victor M. Schmidt, “Alcune considerazioni sul

Trittico Corsini di Fra Angelico”, in: *Predella*, 49 (2021), pp. 7–17, I–VIII.

⁸¹ For the thematic logic connecting these three scenes see Aurigemma (note 80).

⁸² *Golden Legend* (note 9), I, p. 295. The supposed prophetic resonance of this event is also telling, deriving from Psalm 47:5: “God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.”

⁸³ Acts I:11 and 2:14–21.

⁸⁴ For the meaning and manifestations of glory in Western Christianity see Christian Hecht, *Die Glorie: Begriff, Thema, Bildelement in der europäischen Sakralkunst vom Mittelalter bis zum Ausgang des Barock*, Regensburg 2003.



12 Fra Angelico, *Last Judgement with Ascension of Christ and Pentecost* (Corsini Triptych). Rome, Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Galleria Corsini

garments set against the brilliant massed and heated forces of radiance beg to be experienced affectively as much as optically.

After recent restoration, the visual and thematic inventiveness of Christ's glory in the Corsini Triptych is once again visually captivating, but it was clearly tailored at the outset for a specific audience.⁸⁵ This was

almost certainly a high-ranking ecclesiastic in Rome, where Fra Angelico was resident in his last years; the owner – sometimes identified with Cardinal Juan de Torquemada, theological defender of papal supremacy – could have used this revelatory work as a kind of mirror for his own mission.⁸⁶ Not only does Christ's vicar, Peter, enjoy a position of honour in all three

⁸⁵ See Elisabetta Zatti, "Il restauro del *Trittico* del Beato Angelico", in: *Il Trittico del Beato Angelico* (note 80), pp. 41–49; Paola Mangia, "Note sul restauro in corso del Trittico Corsini", in: *Beato Angelico* (note 7), pp. 284f.

⁸⁶ See Schmidt (note 80); Alessandro Zuccari, "L'Angelico dei Corsini e un modello per Michelangelo", in: *Il Trittico del Beato Angelico* (note 80), pp. 15–20: 16; Leader (note 80). Aurigemma (note 80), pp. 203–206, considers various potential ecclesiastical patrons in the sphere of Nicholas V.



13 Fra Angelico, *Last Judgement with Ascension of Christ and Pentecost*, detail of Christ in Judgement. Rome, Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Galleria Corsini

panels, but the central Judgement enacts the Roman Church's views of the heretical status of the *fraticelli de opinione*. These tonsured brothers, whose unorthodox beliefs were viewed as a threat to papal authority, dominate the dun-coloured company of those cast down into hell. They try unsuccessfully to flee the scourge of Christ's anger and the demon's whips, and in a particularly vicious detail we see the thrash of red paint, representing blood, running over their flesh and grey-brown habits. Unlike the river of fire sometimes shown issuing below Christ at the Last Judgement,⁸⁷ the absolute power of divine radiance that emanates from Christ does not act as a medium of apocalyptic

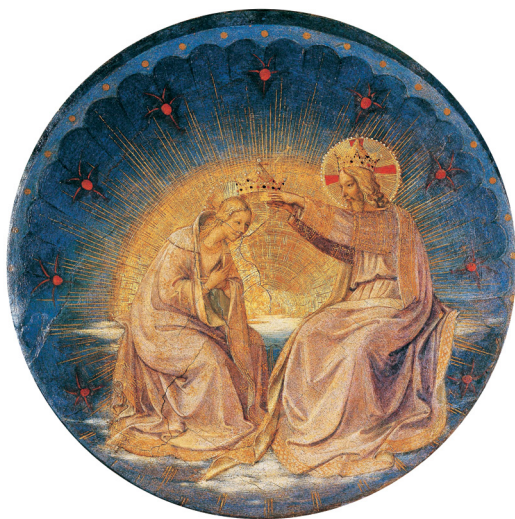
judgement. Yet, casting its light on the founders Peter and Paul, it still performs overtly ideological work in the interests of someone who shared the anti-heretical zeal of pope Nicholas V and the Dominican Order, to which Fra Angelico himself belonged.⁸⁸ Juan de Torquemada, who repelled the arguments of conciliarism and supported crusade, is known for his 'orthodox' visionary writings. His more radical nephew Tomás would, as grand inquisitor, bring to Spain the first burnings of heretics and mass expulsions of Jews and Muslims.

Another, still more complex rendering of divine radiance is achieved by quite different means in the small

⁸⁷ The river of fire derives from Daniel 7:10. See Yves Christe, *Jugements derniers*, Saint-Léger-Vauban 1999, pp. 31–41. Giotto represents the motif, which was common to Byzantine Last Judgements, on the west wall of the Scrovegni Chapel. See Irene Hueck, "Il programma iconografico dei

dipinti", in: *La Cappella degli Scrovegni a Padova*, ed. by Davide Banzato/Giuseppe Basile, Modena 2005, I, pp. 81–96: 93–95.

⁸⁸ Aurigemma (note 80) p. 204, notes that Jean Jouffroy in his funerary oration for Nicholas V aligns him, as Christ's vicar, with apocalyptic justice.



14 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*.
Florence, Museo di San Marco

Coronation of the Virgin now in the Museo di San Marco (Fig. 14). Generally dated around 1440, this highly ambitious image formed one side of a double-sided tondo with a *Crucifixion* on its reverse.⁸⁹ In it, powerful solar rays arising from a point between Christ and his mother are staged against a deep blue, apsidal heaven shaped as a shell-niche seen from below. Spoke-like rays, applied as broken pulses, emanate from this central point between Christ and the Virgin before shooting out as solid rays over the blue. But all this appears on top of closely-spaced concentric circles of brilliant light. While the linear rays against the blue seem to have been applied with a brush as shell gold,

the inner rings have been scored using a compass both through and slightly beyond the central disk of yellow ochre paint, exposing the shine of underlying gold leaf. Lastly, dark-winged seraphim, like red gems emitting sparks, seem to have shot out from that heated radiance.⁹⁰ Whereas the shine of the Uffizi *Paradise* carries only a lurking perception of concentric circles, here the effect is meticulously worked out. The collaboration of brush and stylus, paint and gold leaf is purpose-made to enhance the sensation that this jewel-like, artful picture emanates light from God, a convincingly solar light that is also a crowning glory for Mary.

That the, quite literally, sensational radiance of God in the gold ground *Paradise* enjoyed lasting success as a painterly vision is also witnessed in a series of altarpieces of the later fifteenth century that adopted and variously adapted its splendour. Significantly, all celebrate Mary as crowned Queen of Heaven. The latest of these, produced by Botticelli and his workshop for the counter-façade of San Marco in Florence, shortly before the fall of the Medici, had obvious institutional rationales for the choice of the motif (Fig. 15).⁹¹ The church of San Marco was best known for serving the convent of Dominican Observants, to which Fra Angelico had belonged (and for which he supplied the church's high altarpiece). Moreover the *Coronation* was commissioned for the chapel of Saint Eligius, patron of goldsmiths who, in Florence, were themselves affiliated to the guild of the Arte della Seta, which administered the church.⁹² In the lower tier of this imposing single-field work of the early 1490s, Saint John the Evangelist holds open the (empty) Book of Revelation and gestures up to sanction the elabo-

⁸⁹ Fra Giovanni Angelico (note 21), p. 139, no. 1/10 a–b; Sonia Chiodo, in: *La fortuna dei primitivi: tesori d'arte dalle collezioni italiane fra Sette e Ottocento*, exh. cat., ed. by Angelo Tartuferi/Gianluca Tormen, Florence 2014, pp. 238f., no. 27a–b. The tondi are now 18 cm in diameter for the *Coronation*, 18,2 cm for the *Crucifixion*.

⁹⁰ The two near Christ's head retain legible faces painted on top of the vermillion.

⁹¹ Caneva (note 60); Damian Dombrowski, *Die religiösen Gemälde Sandro Bot-*

ticelli: Malerei als pia philosophia, Berlin et al. 2010, pp. 306–325; *idem*, *Botticelli: Ein Florentiner Maler über Gott, die Welt und sich selbst*, Berlin 2010, pp. 105–111; Charles Burroughs, "Indicating Heaven: Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* and Mediated Imagery", in: *Artibus et Historiae*, XXXV (2014), 69, pp. 9–34. Dombrowski notes (*Botticelli*, p. 114) that Botticelli's patrons must have known the Saint Egidio altarpiece as well as the Fiesole *Coronation* of Fra Angelico.

⁹² Caneva (note 60). The altarpiece (378 cm high) was set into the wall and appeared, along with the arms of the guild, beneath a baldachin.



15 Sandro Botticelli,
*Coronation of the
Virgin with Saints
John the Evangelist,
Augustine, Jerome
and Eligius*. Florence,
Gallerie degli Uffizi,
Galleria delle Statue
e delle Pitture

rate vision of heaven, which replaces the missing text. This vision of a gilded paradise that combines sun and dome of heaven centres on a point that extends its radiance into the painted realm of seraphim and cherubim. Upsetting the equilibrium of mother and son found in the Fra Angelico model, a hyper-potent God

the Father dominates over the humbly bending Virgin.⁹³ The emulation of Fra Angelico's shine must have been explicitly required here not just because it effectively manifested God's power and the Virgin's glory, but because of the active role it gave to gold and some of its principal qualities: reflective brilliance, mallea-

⁹³ Yumi Watanabe ("Filippo Lippi's Frescoes at Spoleto, Cardinal Eroli, and the Immaculate Conception", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes*

in Florenz, LXIV [2022], pp. 220–229; 221f.) argues that the depiction of God the Father, rather than Christ, refers to the Immaculate Conception.

bility, and preciousness. All are placed in the service of heavenly patrons while obliquely doing honour to the goldsmiths themselves. Botticelli is not known as a fastidious worker of gold leaf, but the controlled shine achieved here (with rays falling to exquisite effect across the face of a witnessing angel), is essential to the visionary effects of the altarpiece. Equally, the noted likeness between the circling angels and those in Botticelli's drawn illustrations to the *Paradiso* of the *Divina Commedia* indicates that the artist considered the heavenly radiance as a tribute to Dante's vision.⁹⁴

Perhaps more surprising in its debt to the *Paradise* of Fra Angelico is the high altarpiece produced under the direction of Domenico Ghirlandaio in 1484–1486 for the Franciscan church of San Girolamo in Narni, southern Umbria (Fig. 16). This is a remarkably spectacular as well as expensive work for a Franciscan community. The commission was, though, likely to have been mediated by Cardinal Berardo Eroli who had remodelled the church. Eroli had already served as patron to the Florentine Fra Filippo Lippi for the *Coronation* apse fresco at his bishopric of Spoleto, where Lippi produced a unique, apocalyptic glory enhanced with broad snaking rays which, together with the symbols of sun and moon, associate the Virgin to the Woman Clothed with the Sun of the Book of Revelation and suggest her immaculate conception.⁹⁵ The special optical effect of radiance at Narni is, however, much closer to that of the *Paradise*, which may have been requested as a model for the altarpiece even if, once again, shine is adapted in ways

that variously inflect the meaning of the vision.⁹⁶ The neatly circular radiance extending into the arch is now contained by the ellipse of a crown-shaped baldachin whose fringes spell out a line from the Lauds of the Virgin of the Roman breviary: “Come my elected one and I will place [in you my throne]”.⁹⁷ Still more distinctive for our purposes is the large polished golden sphere between Christ and the Virgin from which the burst of rays emanate.⁹⁸ This prominent body as a place of origin, at odds with Dante's description of the *primum mobile* as a vortex-like point, seems almost too material. Yet the effect of breaking the picture surface relative to the represented figures is justified as impressing on devotees the idea of divine radiance as completely ‘other’ but *also* as real and active. It is offered beyond the picture as an object of visual contemplation that, through its specular surface, also looks back at its viewers. Tellingly, Saint Francis, who received a brilliant seraphic vision that marked his body with wounds, kneels in prayer directly below this eminence and at the centre of reverencing saints, many of whom look straight into its light.

Realised as a sphere, the origin of shine becomes emphatically solar. For the Franciscans, this radiance visually affirms the encomium in Saint Francis' hymn, the *Canticle of the Creatures*, that “Lord brother sun” is a sign of God: “beautiful and radiant with great splendour: of you Most High he bears the likeness” (or in Saint Francis' Umbrian: “Et ellu è bellu e radiante cum grande splendore: / de Te, Altissimo, porta significazione”).⁹⁹ Saint Francis' “signification” of the created

⁹⁴ Burroughs (note 91) has analysed the visionary and rhetorical specificity of this altarpiece in relation to Dante and Savonarola's possible disapproval of it. Granted that the place and nature of heaven were disputed, it is not persuasive that the gilded heaven represents Botticelli's own “limited confidence” in the representability of heaven (p. 18). My thanks to Patricia Rubin for discussing the relationship of the painting to Dante's *Paradiso* and to the drawings of the *Divina Commedia* made by Botticelli for Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici.

⁹⁵ For these rays as referring to the Virgin as *mulier amicta sole*, see Watanabe (note 93), pp. 222–224. For Berardo Eroli (1409–1479) and Fra Filippo Lippi, see also Jean K. Cadogan, “Rome and Spoleto: Fra

Filippo Lippi and Bishop Berardo Eroli in the Duomo of Spoleto”, in: *Predella*, XLVII (2020), pp. 133–146.

⁹⁶ This is suggested already by Kecks (note 60), p. 148. Jean K. Cadogan (*Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan*, New Haven 2000, p. 256) proposes, less convincingly, Lippi's Spoleto *Coronation* as an immediate model for the sunburst.

⁹⁷ “Veni electa mea et ponam [in te thronum meum alleluja].” The office drew on the nuptial imagery of Psalm 44 and the Song of Songs 4:8.

⁹⁸ The high relief of the gilded wooden ball appears in the revealing close-up photo published in Quené (note 5), p. 280, fig. 79.

⁹⁹ My thanks to Giosuè Fabiano, whose research addresses special lu-



16 Domenico Ghirlandaio,
Coronation of the Virgin and Saints.
Narni, Palazzo Comunale

sun points to the way the sunlight, experienced in the everyday, is always already a metaphor of a transcendent principle. Berardo Erolì's later nineteenth-century descendant Giovanni Erolì, who knew that the altarpiece had once been freestanding on the high altar, conjectured that the figures would have been brilliantly illuminated by sunshine streaming through the oculus window high on the facade of the church at noon, visually detaching them from the gilded ground.¹⁰⁰ In fact, periodic solar effects of this kind operating in dark churches are still observed elsewhere, for example in the case of the *Coronation of the Virgin* fresco of the 1340s at Chiaravalle near Milan.¹⁰¹ But with the removal of the Ghirlandaio altarpiece and the extensive remodelling of the church any such dramatic effect of natural sunlight coinciding either with figures or with gilded radiance is now quite unverifiable.¹⁰²

Major *pale* like Ghirlandaio's and Botticelli's upset expectations of Florentine painting of the 1480s and 90s otherwise presented as emancipated from gold ground. But they are not a throw-back. In the years between the mid-1430s and the Narni *Coronation*, a suc-

cession of *Coronation* altarpieces with radiant gold disks issued from the Florentine workshop of Neri di Bicci (at least eleven have recently been counted), showing the popularity of the motif of shine for a varied clientèle.¹⁰³ As referred to above, Giovanni dal Ponte had introduced a radiating sun at the centre of the *Coronation of the Virgin* altarpiece for Arezzo, including a beardless face in its central disk. This divine Sun appears, too, in Bicci di Lorenzo's *Coronation* for the Davanzati Chapel in Santa Trinita and some thirty years later in Neri di Bicci's Lenzi *Coronation* altarpiece painted in 1460 for the hospital church of the Innocenti, this time the face being formed by stippling and the surrounding gold disk enhanced with flaming sparks.¹⁰⁴ But elsewhere Neri also centred radiance on the dove of the Holy Spirit or, like Fra Angelico, on a point.¹⁰⁵

Laura Ștefănescu has recently argued that Neri di Bicci based his recurring gilded disk on the apparatus of a "nuvola", the spectacular device for transporting holy protagonists upwards into heaven in contemporary sacred theatre. Neri himself refers to a wooden star or sun ("overo chiamato Sole") used in the Ascension

minous phenomena of directed lighting in churches, for this observation, as well as for discussing Ghirlandaio's altarpiece with me in relation to Franciscan instances of such effects. For the radiance in the painting as a "sunburst" see Cadogan (note 96), pp. 255f., no. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Giovanni Erolì, *La coronazione di M. V. del Ghirlandaio e la Madonna del Libro di Raffaello: con appendice sulla incoronazione del B. Angelico e dello Spagna*, Narni 1880, p. 29. This idea has been taken up by Michele Benucci, "In linea con la tradizione fiorentina del Quattrocento", in: *La pala di Narni: Ghirlandaio*, Terni 2004, pp. 58–62: 60, and Roberto Nini, "Una sorprendente cascata di luce: l'Incoronazione del Ghirlandaio nella sua primitiva collocazione", *ibidem*, pp. 75f. Nini (p. 76), makes a rough calculation that solar illumination through the rose window would have occurred for around a month from the time of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes.

¹⁰¹ Eva Spinazzé, "La consuetudine medioevale nell'orientazione degli edifici sacri secondo il trattato di Guido Bonatti", in: *Atti dell'Accademia 'San Marco' di Pordenone*, XVI (2014), pp. 521–570; Giosuè Fabiano, *Natural Lighting, Art and Temporal Experience in Late Medieval and Early Italian Churches (c. 1100–1427)*, PhD diss. Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 2024, p. 97. For Pietro Lorenzetti's *Madonna dei Tramonti* illuminated by the evening sun in San Francesco, Assisi, see Darrelyn Gunzburg, "Reflecting on Mary: The Splendor of the Madonna in the Lower Church of Assisi", in: *Medieval Franciscan Approaches to the Virgin Mary*, ed. by Steven J. McMicha-

el/Katherine Wrisley Shelby, Leiden/Boston 2019, pp. 302–334; Donal Cooper, "Windows, Light and Worldly Space in Italian Annunciation Imagery around 1300", in: *Manuscripts in the Making* (note 20), II, pp. 15–22; Fabiano, pp. 21, 88–94.

¹⁰² That direct sunlight could make the figures appear in relief seems doubtful (cf. the reviews of *La pala di Narni* [note 100] by Gaetano Federici, in: *Critica d'arte*, 8th s., LXVII [2004], 23/24, pp. 10f., and Chiara Coletti, in: *Bollettino della Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Umbria*, CII [2005], I, pp. 335–337).

¹⁰³ Jennifer Adrienne Diorio (*The Production Methods of Neri di Bicci and the Prevalence of Cartoon Usage in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, PhD diss. Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 2013, https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/bitstream/handle/1974/8232/Diorio_Jennifer_A_201308_PhD.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y [accessed on 20 July 2022], pp. 115f., Table 13) illustrates eleven such works.

¹⁰⁴ The surface of this painting, now in the Museo degli Innocenti, Florence, can be explored here: https://www.flickr.com/photos/prof_richard/8027458869 (accessed on 10 July 2022). I am grateful to Samuel Vitali for his observation regarding Neri's solar faces.

¹⁰⁵ An example of the former is the *Coronation of the Virgin* for the nuns of Sant'Apollonia, Florence, and of the latter the altarpiece now in Avignon, Musée du Petit Palais.



17 Neri di Bicci,
*Coronation
of the Virgin*.
Paris, Musée
Jacquemart-
André

of Christ play at Santa Maria del Carmine, for which he had responsibility as a member of the church's lay confraternity of Sant'Agnese in the 1460s.¹⁰⁶ The Carmine "Sole" included a red parchment centre backlit by a lamp to appear behind the ascending Christ while, behind that, a device made of wooden spokes supported a mandorla of lights. This and other mobile wheel-like stars supporting angels on clouds recorded in sacred plays in this period testify to the specifically

Florentine relish for the circling movements of light and of angels in the rendering of hierophanic visions of paradise. When, in Neri's altarpieces, a gilded radiance appears against a painted sky or framed by angels, rather than emerging from a gold ground as in the *Paradise*, the central light burst becomes not an emanation in space but a massive, quasi-independent mechanism of golden light. And yet, the specific set of refined light effects reflected from a surface of tooled gold leaf on

¹⁰⁶ See Laura Cristina Ștefănescu, *Staging and Painting Musical Heavens: Performance and Visual Culture in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, PhD diss.

Sheffield 2020, <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/27985/1/Laura%20Stefanescu%20-%20PhD%20Thesis%20-%20No%20Images.pdf>,

panel remain, I would argue, distinct from the luminous, three-dimensional apparatus of the sacred plays and seem rather to owe their pictorial means and qualities to other altarpieces, perfected on the model of the *Paradise* of Fra Angelico. In most instances, the gilded disk contains fine, inscribed spokes of radiance, sometimes manipulated to produce further optical effects, such as the expanding concentric circles of Neri di Bicci's *Coronation* of 1461 from San Leonardo in Arcetri, Florence, now in the Musée Jacquemart-André (Fig. 17).¹⁰⁷ Neri's was a show-stopping as well as transferable motif, and it clearly appealed to clients eager to invest in the gorgeous material, and impressive labour, of heavenly light.¹⁰⁸

Propaganda for Paradise?

In a highly personal and poetic essay written to accompany the *Classici dell'arte* monograph on Fra Angelico (1970), Elsa Morante characterised 'Beato Angelico' as the "beato propagandista del Paradiso".¹⁰⁹ Having once despised him, she finds that, looking again, she instead envies the painter the pre-capitalist "real world" he presents, a world she herself construes as a kind of pre-lapsarian place of unalienated encounter, intimate with the heavens. Morante's Fra Angelico is in love with sensible light and uses his art to bear witness of the light, in the words of Saint John, whose name he takes on becoming Fra Giovanni da Fiesole. Gold becomes the painter's way of disseminating the

heavenly vision for the ignorant and, for Morante, these materials form part of larger epiphanic gifts wrought with his own hands. The light of *Paradise* investigated in the present article, rather than catering to the innocent or ignorant, bears witness to the theological sophistication of the friar-painter, so clearly established by the scholarship of William Hood and Georges Didi-Huberman in the 1990s.¹¹⁰ At the same time we should not discount the valence of Fra Angelico's shine as the painter-craftsman's own kind of artistic and visionary gift. The many later variants of the radiance effect at the centre of the Sant'Egidio *Paradise* suggests it was treated as exemplary by later Florentine painters and as a memorable model by patrons of various social classes.

This study has sought to acknowledge the lure of brilliance by emphasising the particular material formations and theological-poetic frameworks in which effects of radiance become eloquent or compelling. For all its irresistible shininess, such optical refinement escapes the merely spectacular. Fra Angelico's *Paradise* may stop us in our tracks with its sheer control of means, but radiance as a special effect of the beatific vision demonstrates the multifaceted power of light on as well as within sacred painting. By leading us to consider how a pictorial surface behaves and not only represents, gilded radiance draws us towards a fuller understanding of fifteenth-century painted visions in all their sensory and affective ambition.

pp. 154–159 (accessed on 24 June 2022). Neri di Bicci's description of this device was published by Nerida Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltarno: Plays in Churches in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, Florence 1996, I, pp. 74f.

¹⁰⁷ The altarpiece was commissioned by Bernardo Salviati; cf. Neri di Bicci, *Le ricordanze (10 marzo 1453–24 aprile 1475)*, ed. by Bruno Santi, Pisa 1977, pp. 162f., no. 321; Diorio (note 103), pp. 45f., 98f.

¹⁰⁸ Neri di Bicci's skills in gilding and tooling were manifestly valued by Fra Filippo Lippi who, in 1455, employed him to gild parts of a painting

of *Saint Jerome*; see Neri di Bicci (note 107), pp. XIX and 24; Eve Borsook, "Fra Filippo Lippi and the Murals for Prato Cathedral", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XIX (1975), pp. 1–148: 42; Diorio (note 103), pp. 203f.; Ștefănescu (note 104), p. 158.

¹⁰⁹ Elsa Morante/Umberto Baldini, *L'opera completa dell'Angelico*, Milan 1970, pp. 5–10: 5.

¹¹⁰ William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, New Haven, Mass./London 1993.

The depiction of radiance was a major challenge both to painters' means and the limits of their materials in the early decades of the fifteenth century. Yet, because it falls outside the obvious analytical grasp of other types of figuration, radiance or shine often escapes critical attention. Focussing on Fra Angelico's *Paradise* altarpiece from Sant'Egidio, Florence, this article explores the facture, optical effects, and varied meanings of radiance in the hands of a painter who was sensitive to the character of radiant light in biblical, Christian, and poetic sources. A distinctive strand of brilliant radiance, similarly using tooled gold leaf, is addressed in Fra Angelico's small triptych of the *Last Judgement* for a Roman patron. Finally, the legacy and variants of gilded splendour are shown in a number of later fifteenth-century Florentine altarpieces of the *Coronation of the Virgin*. In exploring a historical material practice applied to visionary, heavenly, and apocalyptic themes, the analysis also acknowledges the appeal and affect of moving light, a phenomenon experienced differently, but still actively, in the present.

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Umschlagbild | Copertina:
Bronzino, *Portrait Francesca Salviati (?)* | *Ritratto di Francesca Salviati (?)*
Frankfurt a. M., Städel Museum
(S. 260, Abb. 16 | p. 260, fig. 16)

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