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### The Will and Power of the Saints in the High Renaissance

Italian Christian art underwent a significant change from their overbearing flatness of early panels of tempura and gold leaf during the early Renaissance in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, to the more elegant, courtly, and “realistic figure depiction” during the time of the short-lived High Renaissance in the latter half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, from the year 1450 to about 1520. The arts during this time were highly influenced by the Classic linear Flemish paintings from the Netherlands, in which artists from both North and South had a cultural exchange of each other’s style, and Florence, or *Firenze*, became the center of the world’s greatest artistic achievements and movements in Italy. The Medici family was the main power in Florence, and became the most highly regarded patrons of artists during that time since they exemplified a “courtly way of life” that everyone else in the middle class tried to emulate. Once the “Palazzo Medici” was built, “vibrantly lively lines over sculptural modeling, and the inclusion of decorative detail” became main trend for artists.

“Sandro Botticelli and Fillippino Lippi were outstanding representatives” of this art style, since they were both taught by the elder Filippo Lippi, who also used the “delicate... linear quality” in his works, particularly his most famous work of art “***Madonna and Child with Angels***” which is a prime example of a first “pyramidal figural composition”. Botticelli made use of the lively lines as a “means of heightening expression”, whereas Fillippino Lippi took it a step further: he “exaggerated the line to virtuosic brilliance, with no inhibitions about effect”. The fluidity of the painterly line heightened the realistic and religious authority meant to be seen in Italian Christian Art. From the iconic images of Jesus Christ on the Cross to the cult of the Madonna, the Saints have been made as the sole supporters of the principle characters, but not so much as given their own religious voice in the divine light. Here, three main works, two by Fillippino Lippi, “***Saints Benedict and Apollonia***” and “***Saints Paul and Frediano***” and the other “***Christ on the Cross with Saints Vincent Ferrer, John the Baptist, Mark and Antoninus***” by the mysterious and unknown artist entitled “Master of the Fiesole Epiphany” used the power of the fluid line to reveal the divine, authoritative power of the Saints in Christian art during the High Renaissance.

Fillippino Lippi, born in 1457, Prato, was the son of Fra Filippo Lippi, a friar from the “monastery of the Carmine”, and his mother, Lucrezia Buti, happened to be one of the nuns of the Order. All this caused great scandal for the elder Lippi, in which he was eventually forced to leave the Order. Fillippino was only twelve when Filippo died, and

already artistically trained by his late father, he later took apprenticeship in the workshop of Botticelli. He also, finished his father's work in the Spoleto cathedral, and the patron Lorenzo de Medici, recommended him to the friars of the late Brancacci family's chapel to finish the frescos started by the artist Masaccio. Already by this time, the younger Lippi was an accomplished artist, and his gentle nature won him several more commissions. One such commission was his signature work, "***Vision of Saint Bernard***", and his "graceful depiction and transparent halo reveal the influence of his father and Botticelli".

The same could be said of the two main works discussed earlier, both created prior to his Saint Bernard altarpiece in 1483, and are two panels that originally "formed a triptych on either side of a statue of St. Anthony" in the church of San Ponziano in Lucca, located about an hour away from Florence. Beginning with the panel "***Saints Benedict and Apollonia***" Lippi's "decorative linear manner" is clearly visible in these two figures that take up the mass of the panel's surface with a "monumental presence". The transparent halo of the elder Lippi's style and the distant "emotional depth" of the landscape give these two Saints an impressive earthly quality while maintaining their Biblical calling.

Saint Benedict holds a decorative staff and red book, and he's draped in a rich, blue fabric, probably a cape or part of his habit as the "founder of Western Monasticism". His story simply states that he was finishing his education with a nurse, and learned "rhetoric- the art of persuasive speaking" but then he suddenly realized this rhetoric technique was being used as the wrong way to address the public, especially those who preached the Gospel. He lived as a hermit, until he heard God's call, and his consistent way with prayer, word of his holiness reached out beyond Christian communities. The "Rule of St. Benedict" has been used for over 15 centuries, and it simply compiles his instructions for living a religious life and the "power of speaking and oratorical rhythms at the service of the Gospel" and the "truest foundation for the power of words was the Word of God Himself".

As for Saint Apollonia, she was a 3<sup>rd</sup> century martyr, and in the panel she holds her instruments of torture, which are almost hard to indicate what they are exactly. However, her legend tells us that during a "local uprising against Christians in Alexandria" Apollonia was known as a "virgo presbytera, or deaconess" and she was "held in high esteem". She was seized and suffered severe blows that broke all her teeth. Her torturers threatened her with death by fire if she didn't comply with their rule that she renounced her faith in Christ as blasphemy. She sprang into the fire by her own doing, and to this day, she's associated with healing diseases. In the panel, Apollonia folds her arms across her chest, and holds a pincers in her left hand, and tooth in her right hand. Her face reveals a kind of graceful melancholy as she gazes downward, possibly focusing on her instruments of torture.

The second panel, "***Saint Paul and Frediano***" applies the same treatment of landscape, and the two figures are again monumental in size, taking up most of the panel. Saint Paul holds his instrument of torture: a long sword almost completely obscured beneath the folds of his robe and the long right sleeve of Saint Frediano. The Story of Saint Paul was that he originally was a Jew, and his image of is well-known of riding on a horse towards Damascus and miraculously thrown off by the call of God for his conversion to Christianity. The horse isn't shown in this panel. He's known as the "Apostle of the Gentiles" and made it his mission to preach and convert non-believers to Christ, which unfortunately made him a target by Jewish persecutors, and threatened his life. He spent some time in prison before setting out for Rome, where he again faced imprisonment. After that, he was beheaded in the year 67.

To his "left" stands the figure of Saint Frediano, the "patron Saint of Lucca" who is dressed in reds like a Pope Cardinal while holding a staff similar to that of Saint Benedict, as well as a book. It is hard to tell if Lippi used two different colors for the skin of Frediano's hands, or possibly that he's wearing gloves. Saint Frediano may have been the first person of royal Irish decent to make a pilgrimage to Rome to visit the Pope, and was "inspired the many hermitages scattered throughout the countryside. Lucca had no Bishop, so he was persuaded to act as Bishop, which he agreed. Then, he was forced to leave when the Lombards invaded Italy. He decided to build another church in view of the river Serchio, called Church of St. Martino. The river burst upon the banks of countryside, and threatened with flooding and destruction. He called upon Divine help, and with a rake (not shown in the panel) he "changed the course of the river". The people of Lucca proclaimed him a hero of Divine miracles.

Fillippino Lippi's life was short-lived when he died of fever in his 40's in Florence, where he spent the remainder of his life working in 1504. He was mourned on a monumental scale. The writer Vasari writes "all the shops in the Via de Servi were closed when he was borne to his burial...at the funerals of princes". Both of his panels are housed in the Norton Simon Museum.

Now, we then come to the masterpiece entitled "***Christ on the Cross with Saints Vincent Ferrer, John the Baptist, Mark and Antoninus***". The artwork reveals the central Christ on a floating cross, but instead of him with the usual white undergarment, he is fully dressed as a king, wearing a dark, royal blue robe with gold trimmings and fringe and a crown adorns his head. It appears he's nailed to the cross, but there are no nails. He seems to hover in front while balancing on a golden chalice with his right foot. The chalice is debated to be the cup used to catch the blood from the side of his ribcage wear he was speared, or that it's symbolic of the "Holy Grail" Christ used at the Last Supper. On either side of him are two sets of Saints, one that stands and other kneels. The figure standing to his "left" is Vincent Ferrer, dressed in the Dominican Order fashion, and holding a manuscript, since he himself entered the

Dominican Order, while he continued his studies in philosophy and theology, which he later taught. He felt a calling to become a messenger to “preach penance for sin and preparation for the Judgement”, and his apostolate work spread throughout Europe. Kneeling between him and the Christ figure is John the Baptist, dressed in lambskins and red cape, holding a long crucifix, and a small scroll. John was the first Baptist to baptize people in the waters to cleanse them of sin, and he baptized Christ when he knew him to be the Messiah, and proclaimed him as the “Lamb of God”. He continued to baptize followers, until he was beheaded at the hand of Salome. Kneeling on the other side of the Christ figure is believed to Mark the Evangelist, symbolized by the small lion peeking out from his robe. He too holds a manuscript and pen, since he was the secretary to St. Peter. The final standing figure behind him is St. Antoninus, another prominent Dominican leader, he was the “first to receive the habit for the Convent of Fiesole” which was painted by the famous Fra Angelico.

Behind them all maybe considered a return to Early Gothic and Byzantine, with the mandorla behind Christ with angels and the seraphim surrounding him as they let flowers fall from their hands. The landscape represents that emotional depth that Lippi had painted in former two panels. This is based on the cult of the volto santo, or Holy Face of Jesus, where it seems rather ironic, since it not just focuses on his face, but his place as a King in full form. The Saints indicate a final authoritative approach before the Last Judgment. Their eyes focus the viewer on them, almost like a prophetic warning, while Christ welcomes them with open eyes and soft eyes into the glory of the Divine. It is interesting to note that Fiesole had Dominican Monks, so that’s probably how the unknown master painter created this work for the “Fiesole Epiphany” which refers to the “adoration of the magi”. Sources indicate that it might have been Fillippino Lippi himself who may have painted the masterpiece, since a sample drawing was found to have his signature style, but it’s still “open to speculation”. The painting was originally in the Dominican Church of San Marco in Florence, and “passed through several English collections, and thought to have been destroyed by bombs in 1943” and remained hidden inside a “crate for more than 50 years. Only then did it fall into the hands of conservationists at LACMA to restore it to its natural beauty, and helped bridge an art gap in the 15<sup>th</sup> century collections.

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