

The Madonna delle Ombre (*The Madonna of the Shadows*)



The Madonna delle Ombre (Madonna of the Shadows) 1450AD, Fra Angelico, Museo di San Marco dell'Angelico, Florence, Italy



Above: Detail of the lower half of *Madonna of the Shadows*



Fra Angelico, *The Madonna of the Shadows*, 1450, Fresco and tempera, 193 x 273 cm, San Marco, Florence

The Madonna of the Shadows is a fresco by Fra Angelico situated in the east corridor of the dormitory of the monastery of San Marco. It is here where the clerics and novices would gather for their morning prayers (Hood). The work is distinctly divided into two equal halves. The top half depicts the theme of the Sacred Conversation, which shows the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus on her lap and surrounded by eight saints in an informal grouping, all within a unified perspectival space. The bottom half of the painting is comprised entirely of trompe-l'oeil, or fictive, marble panels.

The bottom half of the fresco, previously considered to be a mere decorative element of the work, has been argued to be a symbolic representation of Christ's tomb (Didi-Huberman). The representation of the painted marble panels is at eye-level with the viewer and is visually pushed forward in the pictorial plane. If the monks were indeed gathering here to pray, the marble would have been situated in the position of a sepulcher below an altar, acting as a *memento mori* similar to what we see in Massaccio's *Trinity* and common to the Florentine Renaissance.

Also notable, the depiction of the marble is splattered with paint, applied by the artist after the surface of the fresco had dried. Didi-Huberman argues that Fra Angelico knew how to paint marble in a highly precise manner, suggesting that this portrayal is intended to be representative of more than just marble. Thus, the marble is not intended to be mimetic but figurative, representing the mystery of the incarnation of the word of God as described by Saint Bernardino as "the unfigurable in the figure."

Comprising the lower half of the painting with four panels in succession may also have served to represent the four-fold method of interpreting the scripture, involving: allegory, typology, tropology, and analogy. If so, the panels would have been useful to monks as both a spiritual conundrum and a meditative tool.

Let us set aside for the moment the meadow of flowers in the *Noli me tangere*. When we leave cell 1, we discover the main corridor to the dormitory. There Fra Angelico painted “one of his loftiest and most sublime works,” and the most famous.⁴² It is a *Holy Conversation*, a *Madonna* and Child surrounded by eight saints: Dominic, Cosmas and Damian, Mark, John the Evangelist, Thomas Aquinas, Lawrence, and Peter Martyr. It is subtitled *Madonna of the Shadows* because of the small shadows cast toward the right, onto the wall, by each of the pilasters, which evoke the architecture of the convent itself, the work of Michelozzo.

This painting is admirable and famous, yet, paradoxically, it is a work that is practically untouched; up until now, it has only been half looked at, analyzed, and commented on. With the single exception of William Hood’s *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, the great monographs devoted to Angelico, the general catalogs of his work, have always only photographically reproduced the top half—have, in fact, only measured, hence designated, the top half: 2.73×1.95 meters. In reality the painting is nearly twice that height.⁴³ This incredible “scientific” neglect—art history too often likes to convince itself it is a science—this faculty for *not seeing*, gives a precise idea of how a theoretical prejudice can condition not only an interpretation but also the supposedly exhaustive gaze of a catalogue raisonné. Once again as always, this prejudice is the primacy accorded to what we could call the commonplace of “figurative figures” in the definition of a Renaissance work of art.

What does this noteworthy part of the *Madonna of the Shadows* consist of, this part that has almost never been seen by the scientists and that nevertheless must have been looked at by the Dominican friars of San Marco, since it was painted nearly at their eye level, about 1.5 meters? It is a gaudily colored surface with reds, greens, and yellows predominating, divided into four compartments and framed with bands of dark red and trompe l’oeil molding, as if, from the top “figurative” half to the bottom “decorative” half, the picture plane for the colors had shifted, that is, had been recessed. This is not the case, however: Angelico’s work is all painted on the same plane. It is certainly double, even duplicitous in its means of representation, in its technique, but it affirms its unity in the continuity of the picture plane. And this continuity constitutes a first step in the hypothesis that the two registers of the *Madonna of the Shadows* belong to a single figurative—we prefer to say *figural*—gesture, to a single and unique invention. An earlier restoration, which runs vertically on both sides of the fresco, confirms