Domesticity, Intimacy, and Pictorial Space
in the Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Italian Renaissance

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Forma vero est duplex, forma tractatus et forma tractandi. — Dante Alighieri
[And the form is twofold: the form of the treatise, and the form of the treatment.][1]

Among their many achievements, Italian Renaissance artists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries transformed conventions for the depiction of space within the medium of painting. The flat, intangible, "otherworldly" spatial representations of the Gothic iconographic style fell increasingly into disuse as the tastes of the Quattrocento audience shifted to favor treatments of greater sophistication, illusionism, and naturalistic detail—treatments in which the figures depicted were perceived as occupying the same theoretical spaces of the domestic, devotional, and monastic as their audiences. A pictorial space that simulates three-dimensionality via the use of one-point perspective is intuitively more relatable, especially to an audience whose focus was shifting to a humanistic model—a philosophy which espoused that man was the measure of all things. The intentional blurring of the line between pictorial space and real space was a device put to powerful use in Renaissance painting as a tool to enforce the sense of intimacy and accessibility of devotional works.

This connection between feeling and seeing is often exemplified in paintings that include depictions of either devotional or prominent secular figures within a carefully created domestic environment. The Dominican priest Michele da Carcana elucidates this point in his 1492 sermon:

> Second, images were introduced on account of our emotional
> sluggishness, so that men who are not aroused to devotion when they

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[1] Dante Alighieri, "Letter to Can Grande della Scala, c. 1319," in Paget Toynbee, ed. and trans., *Dante Alagherii epistolae: The letters of Dante*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 200.

> hear about the histories of the Saints may at least be moved when they
> see them, as if actually present, in pictures. For our feelings are aroused
> by things seen more than by things heard.[2]

Experiencing the emotional potential of the sense of sight would have been a familiar experience for the

Renaissance audience, for whom the figures depicted in iconographic art could manifest their power at

any time. Images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints, devils, and other figures were capable of exercising

real power over their viewers' lives. As such, devotional art could serve as a gateway between the world

of the devotional object and the world of the devotee—a relationship that extended both ways. The

painting of devotional figures within an appropriate and recognizable environment, whether that

environment was a cloister or a private residence, manifests the reciprocity between the divine and the

individual in spatial terms.[3]

Simone Martini's *Altarpiece of St. Louis of Toulouse* (c. 1319) is an early Trecento work that

demonstrates the highly decorative stylistic conventions carried over from the previous Byzantine

tradition. The stiffly posed, rigidly two-dimensional quality of the painting makes pointed reference to

firmly established techniques deployed in earlier altarpieces of this type, such as Bonaventura

Berlinghieri's 1235 *Altarpiece of St. Francis*. St. Louis appears to exist outside of tangible space and time,

here evinced by the use of a gold background to symbolize celestial space, thus implying the saint's role

as an intercessor with the Divine. Despite the artifice of the diagonals placed on the floor and a

billowing, rather voluminous treatment of anatomical forms, the artist conspicuously indicates that St.

Louis belongs to a realm clearly outside of the viewers' own physical reality—a space that is shared with

God. This heavenly space is reinforced by the presence of two angels, who reward the saint with a

heavenly crown while he presents his brother, King Robert of Naples, with an earthly one.[4]

In contrast, Piero Lorenzetti's *Birth of the Virgin* (1335-1342), painted some sixteen years later, is

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[2] Michael Baxendall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 41.
[3] Bruce Cole, *Italian Art 1250-1550* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), xxii.
[4] John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy* (London: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 131.

a more naturalistic treatment of the Virgin's birth, a lively scene in which midwives and family in contemporary dress flock to support Anna in her confinement, bathing the baby Mary while a young boy informs Joachim of his daughter's delivery.[5] The illusionistic space of a contemporary bedchamber and anteroom is richly detailed, presenting a scene that would have been intimately familiar to an audience accustomed to seeing very similar images on commemorative childbirth plates, the traditional gift for expectant mothers.[6] This sense of shared space unites the sacred and the secular by employing the same environment to achieve similar ends. Within a secular context, a childbirth plate such as Bartolomeo di Fruosino's birth plate of 1428 shows a composition based on conventions drawn from sacred art. Bartolomeo increased the immediacy of this work by borrowing specific details from a drawing of the birth of John the Baptist by one of his contemporaries, Lorenzo Monaco.[7]

Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Piero's brother, is more emphatic in his choice of environment for the *Purification of the Virgin* (c. 1342), setting Mary's ritual Presentation of Jesus at the Temple in a scene that directly references the interior architecture of the cathedral in which the piece was installed. The works of both brothers conflate their depicted time and space with that of the viewers; Ambrogio makes the Virgin's life a clear and present part of the specific Sienese experience, emphasized by the Christ Child's realistic childlike behavior, sucking on his fingers and kicking at his blanket.[8] Placing their narratives within a familiar setting, both artists enhance the accessibility of the figures and enrich the viewing experience of their audience.

Members of the Renaissance clergy were well aware of the potential of the sacred within the context of the vernacular. Itinerant preacher Girolamo Savonarola's sermons were not only published in the vernacular, but also included illustrations to provide immediate and easily understood spiritual didactics. In *The Art of Dying Well* (woodcut, unknown master, c. 1470), both angels and devils appear in

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[5] Paoletti and Radke, 109.
[6] Paoletti and Radke, 219.
[7] Andrea Bayer, ed., *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 152-53.
[8] Paoletti and Radke, 109-10.

a dying man's bedchamber to wait for the moment of death. While the narrative of competing for souls was an established spiritual convention, the setting—an illusionistic presentation of a domestic interior—demonstrates a very human reality, making the ephemeral—that is, the idea of a life being evaluated based on how well it was lived—manifest within an immediately palpable environment, the domestic sphere.[9]

During the Renaissance, laity and clergy alike were encouraged to use visualization as a tool to increase the accuracy, efficacy, and emotional resonance of their spiritual experiences. Specifically, they were exhorted not only to use devotional images as a visual reference point, but also to create their own individualized mental images of sacred characters upon which to meditate, placing the events within their own cities, streets, churches, or homes, while using images of people from their own lives to internally explore sacred events and biblical stories. This practice put painters in the position of needing universal, archetypal visualizations to avoid competition with the individualized versions of persons and scenes that already existed in the viewer's mind. Painters such as Piero Perugino (1450-1523), whose works were highly popular with the devout, relied on an ability to paint figures and environments that were generic, non-individualized archetypes that would not encroach upon the viewer's personal visualizations. Facilitating the opportunity of the beholder to integrate his or her individual vision into the pictorial space could then enhance the emotional impact of the piece. The painter's role was to create a work of art that suggested and structured, providing a solid visual construct and allowing the narrative to co-exist with the viewer's personal visualizations while simultaneously existing within the painting itself.[10]

Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (1438-45)*,* in the North Corridor of the monastery of San Marco, was created for an audience who spent much of their lives in private meditation and prayer. Enhanced by the use of one-point perspective, the scene extends the austere monastic space into the imagined

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[9] Paoletti and Radke, 287.
[10] Baxendall, 46-47.

space of the fresco, which in turn evokes the actual cloister. Being a monastery, there was no real differentiation between domestic and sacred space; climbing the stairs from the ground floor to the cloister's upper corner, a Dominican brother would have seen the *Annunciation* framed by the entrance door at the top of the stairway, the pictorial space established by the painting sharing and extending the avenue of the stairwell. The fresh, delicate palette and graceful, gently swaying figures complement the tone of quiet, meditative intimacy befitting this semi-private space. As a work of art set within the domestic environment of the cloister, it served as a constant reminder to the brotherhood that these scenes lived within them. To reinforce these scenes' immediacy, the caption beneath the image exhorts, "As you venerate, while passing before it, this figure of the intact Virgin, beware lest you omit to say a Hail Mary."[11]

This sense of shared, cloistered space evident in the *Annunciation* takes on yet greater depth and intimacy in another *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico, painted specifically for a single monk's cell at San Marco. Again, the space depicted extends and echoes the viewer's own space, a sparse, sequestered room dedicated to contemplation and prayer. The Virgin appears reflective; she is observed by St. Peter Martyr of the Dominican order, meditating on the same subject as the cell's occupant would. The sense of closeness and physical proximity is augmented by the dimensions and size of the space portrayed, while the integrative and exclusive location of the painting heightens its quality of intimacy, creating a visual prayer to complement the monk's internal one. Originally, works of this locative type were only displayed within the privacy of the monks' cells at San Marco. They were deemed so successful that this treatment was later expanded to include the communal spaces of the corridors.[12]

As with concepts of sacred and secular, distinctions between public and private spaces are of limited use when considering the functions of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century painting. Private lay commissions could play very public roles, often in public or semi-public places; an altarpiece or a fresco

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[11] Paoletti and Radke, 258-59.

[12] A. Richard Turner, *Renaissance Florence: The Invention of a New Art* (London: Pearson Prentice Hall, 1997), 120.

cycle for a family chapel or in the chambers of a private residence would not have been private in any significant way.[13] Utilizing domestic environments to enforce a sense of shared space and immediacy also occurred within works of art created for private homes. Domestic life in Renaissance Italy encompassed multiple generations who cohabited in rooms that shared functions—a single room could be a bedroom, a hallway, a dining room, and concurrently a receiving room for guests,[14] allowing layers of meaning to accumulate within spaces over time.[15] Andrea Mantegna's private frescoes for the Camera degli Sposi (Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, c. 1465-1474) do not merely decorate the walls of this large, semi-private courtly space. The artist has instead integrated the pictorial space with the space occupied by the viewer, which is a technique similar to Fra Angelico's works for the monastery of San Marco. The pictorial space here appears as a continuation of the room's actual space, incorporating the *in situ* stone mantelpiece into the painted courtiers' floor, which then continues as a painted staircase. Along with the high level of detail in clothing, architecture, and decoration, the illusion of shared space acts to reinforce the close relationships of the specific sitters and the relatively informal, secular nature of the work.[16]

Fra Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation* (c. 1445-1450) utilizes a combination of devices to create meaningful associations for the viewer. While the space inhabited by the Virgin and Gabriel is ostensibly a contemporary *camera*, or bedchamber, most of the detritus of an earthly woman's life— cosmetics, jewelry, ornate curtains, tapestries, bedclothes, and so on—are deliberately omitted, a reference to the Virgin's worldly poverty and a subliminal warning against the lasciviousness that follows luxury. Here, Fra Filippo has cleverly transmuted part of a golden bed canopy into a drapery for the back of a suggested throne. Other deliberate departures from typical *camera* often appear in depictions of the *Annunciation* from this period; while chairs with arms and backs, such as the one upon which Mary rests

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[13] Baxendall, 3.
[14] Cole, 1.
[15] Paoletti and Radke, 14.
[16] Cole, 10.

in the *Annunciation* are rarely found in inventories of fifteenth-century homes, these throne-like benches and chairs appear in the Virgin's *camera* with regularity. For this Christian audience, such subtle indicators would have been a visual cue that the painted domestic interior was in deliberate service to a devotional function.[17]

In accordance with the apocryphal Gospel of the Birth of Mary (based on an anonymous Franciscan text, c. 1350-1400), it became conventional to depict the Virgin Annunciate in a carefully controlled domestic setting that included a bed. The popularity of this text led to a widely accepted belief that the Annunciation took place within the bedchamber of the Virgin's own house. Although the appearance of a bed indicates the scene's location, sleeping beds were also associated with conception, a moment foreshadowed by the dove of the Holy Spirit emanating a golden light and pointing directly at Mary's womb. Based on a long-standing connection between the bedchamber of the Virgin and the bridal chamber referenced throughout the Old Testament book Song of Songs, it becomes possible to overlay the imagery of the bridal chamber onto the Virgin's *camera*; this overlay makes the chamber described in the Song of Songs belong metaphorically to both the Virgin and to Christ. St. Augustine took this association a step further when he wrote of "[Christ's] appearance as an Infant Spouse, from His bridal chamber, that is from the womb of a virgin." In a sermon he further elucidated upon the theme of the Virgin's bridal chamber doubling as a surrogate womb for the Incarnation of the Word by describing the latter as "a marriage which…is impossible to define." The overlapping layers of meaning evoked by a simple painted bedroom may have contributed to the increasing popularity of this domestic setting for private devotional images of the Virgin and Child.[18]

By understanding the potential for transference of the emotional associations inherent to domestic and devotional spaces into the illusory space of painting, artists were able to use specific

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[17] Marta and Flora Dennis Ajmar-Wollheim, eds., *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 89.

[18] Ajmar-Wollheim, 91-92.

locations to enhance the two-way relationship between actual and pictorial space, and thus, between the secular and the divine. The increasing sophistication and complexity apparent in the multiple layers of meaning evinced through painted reconstructions of these places set the stage for works such as Giovanni Bellini's *Transfiguration* (c. 1460) to resonate within contemporary beholders' minds*,* a work in which the artist does not show a personalized version of locations and persons as much as he evokes and augments the viewer's private, interior vision.[19] The same evocative suggestion of actuality would allow for future developments of increasing intellectual sophistication in Renaissance art, like Andrea del Sarto's *Birth of the Virgin* (1513-1514), in which the highly contrived casualness of the portrayed domesticity works to convince the viewer of the vitality and accessibility of this "shared" world.[20] The transference of emotion through the illusion of shared space, pioneered in the Trecento and Quattrocento Renaissance, allows for the continued spatial accessibility of these works. They are the "dreams, hopes, ideas, and ideals" of the Renaissance made visual.[21]

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[19] Baxendall, 47-48.

[20] Freedberg, S. J. *The Pelican History of Art: Painting in Italy 1500-1600* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 92.

[21] Cole, xxiii.

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