“He who does Christ’s work must stay with Christ always.”

Fra Angelico

While Ghiberti was designing the doors for the Florence Baptistery, another young artist named Guido di Pietro and his younger brother, Benedetto, began their training as manuscript illuminators in Fiesole, Tuscany, where they both devoted their lives entirely to the Lord by becoming Dominican Friars in 1407. Since 400 A.D. illuminated manuscripts were books hand made by monks to copy and preserve the Bible and other important writings. The letters are written in fancy calligraphy and the story illustrations are highly decorated with silver and gold leaf. Gold leaf is a thin sheet of real gold and applied in small pieces onto a painting. Sometimes they were stamped with patterned designs after they were burnished. Guido was influenced by other artists from Italy and he incorporated some new features in his illustrations. The people looked more realistic by depicting shadows in the clothing and the letter forms contained elements from nature.

Guido took his artwork very seriously. To him it was an act of devotion to God. He was known to pray before he began every work of art. And he became famous for saying, “He who does Christ’s work must stay with Christ always.” Because of his humble piety, he was nicknamed Fra Giovanni Angelico, which means Angelic Brother John.
In 1436, Fra Angelico moved to the monastery in San Marco, Florence. Cosimo Medici, the Signora of Florence, urged Angelico to paint frescos on the monastery’s walls. The Medici family was very wealthy and paid artists well to paint and sculpt. Angelico was compelled to fill the walls of the monastery with passionate illustrations of Jesus’s life. In 1439 he completed the altar piece. An altar piece is a large art work placed in the front of the chapel. It helps set the mood for worship and has a stage like setting. Usually, the figures are life sized and there is much gold covering different parts of the art piece. In addition to gold, artists used expensive paints made from lapis lazuli and vermilion, which are deep, brilliant blue and red-orange colors.

The wealthy patrons who commissioned the altar piece, displayed their wealth to worshippers by the amount of gold that was used. One of the most popular themes for an altar piece was the Madonna and Child, (the Virgin Mother Mary and Christ Child) and they were usually painted in a heavenly arrangement, set apart from other figures. However, Fra Angelico’s altar piece was unique because he seated Mary and baby Jesus in a natural setting surrounded by people. This became known as the “Sacred Conversation” because it looked like the people in the painting were having a conversation with Mary. This was a revolutionary way to paint the Virgin Mother because it allowed viewers to feel their humanity as well as their divinity and many other artists copied this style.

Angelico painted other frescoes in the monastery that were meant for private devotion. “Transfiguration” is a devotional fresco painted without any gold or bright colors, but still displays the pure intensity and reverence of the subject matter.

A few years later, in 1445, Angelico traveled to the Vatican in Rome where he was offered to be appointed the Archbishop of Florence, a high-ranking leadership position in the Catholic church, but he refused because of his commitment to present the glory of God through his artwork. While in Rome, he and his apprentices painted frescoes in the Vatican chapel. They covered the walls in gold leaf which gave the feeling of being inside of a jewel box.

Fra Angelico lived from 1395-1455 and painted many frescoes and altarpieces containing divine subjects that inspired many other artists of the Renaissance.
Take a Closer Look

Have students look at the artwork on the following pages and answer these questions:

   - What are the most popular colors? (Blue and red-orange.)
   - Angelico uses linear perspective to emphasize Mary's importance. Can you find the horizon line, vanishing point and orthogonal lines (diagonal lines that lead to the vanishing point)? (See the photo on the right for answers)
   - The two men on the bottom front represent the donors of the painting. The man on the left is Cosimo Medici. If you drew a line between the heads of the two men and the head of Mary, what shape would it make? (It would make an equilateral triangle. This triangle arrangement became popular in Renaissance painting and sculpture because it showed symmetrical balance and order.)
   - What do you think the miniature painting of Jesus is about? (Since this altarpiece was placed at the front of the church, where the priests prepared the bread and wine for communion, the painting of Jesus symbolizes the consecrated body and blood.)

2. Look at *The Annunciation*, by Fra Angelico, 1450.
   - Do you know what story is being told in this painting? (The angel Gabriel is telling Mary that she will become pregnant with God's son.)
   - This fresco is on a wall at the top of a stairway and appears to be like a window looking out onto a garden. Angelico used the same architectural features of the building where it is located. What architectural features do you see? (Corinthian columns, barrel vaulted ceilings, rectangular doors and square windows.)
   - How did he create the illusion of space and three dimensional forms? (He used shadows in the ceiling and folds in the clothing. He attempted linear perspective.)
   - What kind of person does Mary appear to be? (Humble, reverent, serious, gentle.)
**Practice Drawing the Madonna and Child**

**Supplies Needed:** white drawing paper 9 x 12, pencil, crayons or oil pastels, black construction paper 9 x 12, gold foil wrapping paper or tissue paper, scissors, glue stick.

Draw with a pencil onto white drawing paper by following the steps. Color with crayon or oil pastel.

1. Use a 3” and 4” circle template to trace onto gold tissue or gold wrapping paper foil. Cut out and glue onto black construction paper where the heads are positioned.

2. Cut out the colored drawing and glue on top of the gold circles.

3. Alternative: Instead of using gold foil circles and black construction paper, draw and color gold halos directly onto the white paper.
Practice Drawing Linear Perspective

1. Use an 8 1/2 x 11” piece of paper. Fold one corner over diagonally to create a diagonal fold. Unfold paper.

2. Fold the opposite corner over diagonally to create an diagonal fold that crosses the first one. Unfold paper.

3. Fold the extra edge up at the diagonal fold marks. Cut off the bottom rectangle or fold it to the back so it’s unseen. The paper should be a square.

4. Fold the square in half. Unfold paper.

5. Use a ruler to lightly draw lines over the folds. This is the horizon line and orthogonal lines.

6. Use a ruler to measure and mark a point along each orthogonal line that is 2 inches from the top and bottom of the paper.

7. Connect the two dots on the bottom and top with a horizontal lines. These lines should be parallel with the bottom and top edge of the paper.

8. Connect the dots with two vertical lines. Use a ruler for accuracy. These lines are parallel to the vertical sides of the paper.

9. Erase unwanted lines.

10. Draw Mary and baby Jesus inside.