Sorrel in God’s Garden: Fra Angelico’s Frescoes at San Marco

The frescoes at San Marco are among the finest work of the Dominican friar and painter Giudo di Pietro, called Fra Angelico after his death.¹ More than that, his work at San Marco is particular in its intimacy. Painted by and for Dominican friars, the frescoes are a window into the ideology and visual lexicon of the order, above all its veneration of the Virgin Mary.² Fra Angelico painted three Annunciations for San Marco alone.³ One, near the friars’ cells in the north corridor, is in curious dialogue with the fresco in the first cell, Noli mi tangere, a scene of Christ and Mary Magdalene in the garden after his Resurrection.⁴ As the cell doors were always left open, a passerby in the corridor would have seen both.⁵ Both scenes take place in a hortus conclusus, an enclosed garden.⁶ What is notable is that the plant life in both frescoes is markedly similar, two wild masses of red-and-white flowers and low-lying greens.⁷ One plant may be identifiable as sorrel, an herb known in the Italian Renaissance. As unremarkable as it first appears, this herb may point to the connection between the two frescoes. The appearance of sorrel in Fra Angelico’s Annunciation and Noli mi tangere at San Marco is representative of nourishment and regeneration in the human body of Mary and the divine body of Christ.

⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration, 163.
In 1437, under the leadership of Michelozzo and Cosimo de’ Medici, extensive renovations began on the Florentine convent of San Marco. Originally built for Silvestrine monks in 1299, the complex was given to the Dominican Order of monastic preachers. Fra Angelico, who had entered the order some fifteen years before, was chosen to paint the new interiors.

*Noli mi tangere* (Fig. 1) was among the first frescoes completed, likely by an assistant rather than Fra Angelico. It lacks the depth of color and clear sense of space of the north corridor *Annunciation*. Still, one would imagine that the composition would have been set by the master himself. On the left, Mary Magdalene kneels before Christ, the looming shape of the tomb behind her. Christ stands gracefully, if unnaturally, so that the stigmata on his feet and right hand are visible. He holds a gardener’s trowel over his shoulder. His right hand is held out in warning to his friend: *do not touch me*. The space between them is awash with greenery, including several clustered, oval-leafed plants which appear to be sorrel. Notably, the cluster by Christ’s foot is marked with five blotches of red in a strange echo of his own five wounds.

The north corridor *Annunciation* (Fig. 2) almost appears the mirror of *Noli mi tangere*. Like Mary Magdalene, Gabriel kneels on the left side, his resplendently colored wings thrusting behind. The indoor-outdoor composition has been reversed, so that the garden is on the left, while Mary sits under an enclosure on the right. Despite its Corinthian columns, her shelter has an empty austerity which alludes to the tomb of *Noli mi tangere*. This dichotomy, literally of

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11 Paolo Moraciello, *Fra Angelico: The San Marco Frescoes*, 44.
womb and tomb, was one expressed by Thomas Aquinas.\textsuperscript{13} His \textit{Summa theologica} served as the de facto Dominican textbook.\textsuperscript{14} Mary is inclined toward her visitor, her softly folded arms reflecting his. Like the figures of \textit{Noli mi tangere}, Mary and Gabriel share a sacred space yet do not touch. In the garden behind them, sorrel springs forth in bunches. While its contents are similar, the garden here is a more vibrant green than that of \textit{Noli mi tangere}, like a spring which has known no suffering.\textsuperscript{15}

In establishing what sorrel would have meant to Fra Angelico, we must first ask what he knew. The answer is more than one might expect. As a Florentine friar, he was at the center of one of Italy’s intellectual hubs. The library at San Marco, installed during the renovations, was the first library in Italy to be relatively publicly accessible.\textsuperscript{16} San Marco was the holding place rather than the owner of the library, which had been endowed by the humanist scholar Niccolo Niccoli for the public good.\textsuperscript{17} The sixteen trustees of his will, including Cosimo de’ Medici, selected San Marco as a suitable location.\textsuperscript{18} Cosimo played a significant role in this agreement, keeping the books in his possession until construction of the library was completed.\textsuperscript{19} It is unclear where Cosimo chose to hold the collection (perhaps Santa Maria del Fiore), but letters indicate that books were available for loan.\textsuperscript{20} If this is the case, Fra Angelico would likely have had access to herbals by Pliny and Theophrastus.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{14} Georges Didi-Huberman, \textit{Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration}, 17.
\textsuperscript{15} Georges Didi-Huberman, \textit{Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration}, 163.
\textsuperscript{16} Allie Terry-Fritsch, “Florentine Convent as Practiced Place,” 234.
\textsuperscript{17} Allie Terry-Fritsch, “Florentine Convent as Practiced Place,” 237-238.
\textsuperscript{18} Allie Terry-Fritsch, “Florentine Convent as Practiced Place,” 237-238.
\textsuperscript{20} Berthold L Ullman, \textit{The Public Library of Renaissance Florence}, 11.
\textsuperscript{21} Berthold L Ullman, \textit{The Public Library of Renaissance Florence}, 73-75.
Unlike most artists, the friar could read Latin. As a young man, he began his career at the priory of San Domenico at Fiesole, and may have read manuscripts from the collections of Santa Maria degli Angeli and Santa Maria Novella as well. He therefore may have read other herbals, such as Avicenna’s Canon, which had been translated into Latin by 1187 and was established in Italian university curriculums. For a glimpse of what Fra Angelico’s reading material may have looked like, we can turn to the collections of the Laurentian Library. Founded by the Medici in 1571, the collections include manuscripts from religious centers, including books originally held at San Marco. Notably, many of the works by Pliny, Theophrastus, and Avicenna lack illustrations, although some attributed to Dioscorides contain beautifully colored models. This suggests that Fra Angelico had few illustrated examples to work from, or that he painted from specimens he had seen in nature.

Two texts provide examples of the kind of illustrations Fra Angelico may have encountered. A woodcut in a 1520 Venetian edition of Arnoldus da Villanova’s Herbarius (Fig. 3) provides an example of sorrel’s visual lexicon in Renaissance Italy. Its leaves are closely clustered and pointed, with a young sprig shooting up the middle. A manuscript copy of the Circa Instans, a text originating around 1300 in Salerno, illustrates wood sorrel and sorrel together on the same page (Fig. 4). Here, sorrel grows less tightly, and while still pointed, the

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22 Carl Brandon Strehlke and Ana González Mozo, Fra Angelico and the Rise of the Florentine Renaissance, 15.
23 Carl Brandon Strehlke and Ana González Mozo, Fra Angelico and the Rise of the Florentine Renaissance, 19, 58.
27 Arnoldus da Villanova, Herbarius (Venice: Alexandrum de Bindonis, 1520), v.
28 Bartholomaei Mini de Senis, Platearius, and Nicolaus of Salerno, Tractatus de herbis (Herbal);
leaves have a teardrop shape. As in the woodcut, the leaves shoot up from a central axis. As botanical illustrations were frequently copied between herbals by different authors, it is possible that Fra Angelico may have been familiar with versions of these two images.29

In the north corridor *Annunciation*, there are several clusters of tear-drop shaped leaves which may be sorrel. Most are opaque, some delicately-veined, but the structure is similar throughout and something of a hybrid of the two previously mentioned manuscript illustrations. In *Noli mi tangere*, the leaves are slightly shorter and paler, perhaps owing to their treatment by another artist, but the structure is essentially the same. This makes it probable that the plant illustrated in both paintings is intended to be the same. The clustering of the leaves and their pointed shape bear a similarity to Elizabeth Blackwell’s later illustration of the plant in *A Curious Herbal*, although hers have a spade-like base (Fig. 5).30 Another eighteenth century herbal portrays garden sorrel with spade-shaped leaves, but field sorrel (Fig. 6) with the tear-drop leaves of Fra Angelico’s frescoes.31 Beyond this resemblance, sorrel’s associated meanings fit logically into the dialogue surrounding the Virgin and her role as the mother of Christ.

In his *Natural History*, Pliny describes sorrel and its several closely related subspecies.32 Sorrel provides a myriad of medical cures, ranging from treatments for an upset stomach to scorpion stings.33 Pliny also writes that sorrel’s properties are quite similar to that of another family of plants, mallow.34 Mallow varieties are described as promoting menstruation and sexual

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33 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 20.85.
34 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 20.85.
desire, and can even be used to perform an abortion or speed a birth.\textsuperscript{35} Avicenna, meanwhile, cites sorrel in his cure for abnormal uterine bleeding.\textsuperscript{36} Interestingly, sorrel may actually be effective in treating cervical cancer.\textsuperscript{37} Dioscorides described the ability of sorrel roots to both initiate and end the menstrual cycle: “pounded into small pieces and applied, they also stop women’s flows [...] Boiled with wine and taken as a drink they [...] draw out the menstrual flow.”\textsuperscript{38}

Bistort, another relative of sorrel, was used as an aid to both conception and childbirth.\textsuperscript{39} An undated printed French book describes it as a dry, cold plant which conveys “the retaining virtue to the mistress.”\textsuperscript{40} Sorrel was likewise considered to be of a dry and cold melancholic humor.\textsuperscript{41} Trotula’s \textit{On the Diseases of Women}, an Italian medical text of the late medieval period, similarly advises that “excessive warmth and humidity of the womb” could be an impediment to conception.\textsuperscript{42} A melancholic herb stands as the ideal cure. Elizabeth Blackwell likewise affirmed the usefulness of long bistort to “promote the Menses and the Birth,” while William Salmon described sorrel as stopping “the Terms in Women,” perhaps a euphemism for menstruation.\textsuperscript{43} All of this suggests that Fra Angelico may have considered sorrel as part of a larger family of plants, and that he may have related it to issues of reproduction, particularly in regards to conception and menstruation.

\textsuperscript{35} Pliny the Elder, \textit{Natural History}, 20.84.
\textsuperscript{38} Dioscorides, \textit{De Materia Medica}, Translated by Tess Anne Obaldeston and Robert P.A. Wood (Johannesburg: Ibidis Press, 2000), II.140.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Le Grand Herbier}, French, n.d., 29v.
\textsuperscript{41} Terence Scully, \textit{The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages} (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1995), 65.
\textsuperscript{42} Monica Green, ed., \textit{The Trotula} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 113.
\textsuperscript{43} Elizabeth Blackwell, \textit{A Curious Herbal}, plate 257.
Moreover, he would have encountered sorrel and its relatives on a sensory level in his daily life. Wood sorrel, a plant believed to be in the sorrel family, was a symbol of Easter, known by the nickname “alleluyah.”\(^{44}\) Identifiable by its shamrock-like leaves, it was associated with the Trinity, and appears in a *Crucifixion* by Fra Angelico.\(^{45}\) Bistort was likewise a symbol of Easter and rebirth.\(^{46}\) Sorrel itself may have found its way onto Fra Angelico’s plate in the form of green sauces and vinegar substitutes.\(^{47}\) His contemporary Platina recommended a simple first course of bread and sorrel.\(^{48}\) Given that Renaissance medicines were often ingested, it is possible that these dishes were considered health cures in the same way that poultry was used to fortify new mothers.\(^{49}\) The later English herbalist John Gerard, for example, suggested a tart of sorrel to cool the blood.\(^{50}\)

Moreover, the friar may have witnessed sorrel growing in the gardens of San Marco or other Florentine convents. Michelozzo’s renovations included the construction of a garden with a hydraulic irrigation system.\(^{51}\) Filarete’s description of this garden is brief but tantalizing: “All noble fruits, oranges, palms, and many other kinds of plants are found in it. I omit all the other details concerning it in order not to be too long.”\(^{52}\) Towards the end of the century, San Marco

\(^{47}\) Terence Scully, *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*, 78-79.
would further extend its gardens with the purchase of adjacent Medici land. That sorrel existed among the bounty of the original garden is quite possible.

The sorrel represented in *Noli mi tangere* and the north corridor *Annunciation* therefore exists among various meanings relating to rebirth and conception. This is a clue to not only the role of sorrel in each individual painting, but to the relationship between the two scenes as well. An understanding of Renaissance interpretations of menstruation, conception, and the doctrine of the Virgin Mary, particularly among Dominicans, further establishes this connection. A Dominican friar may have held a surprising textual knowledge of female health. Writing two centuries before Fra Angelico, the Dominican saint Albertus Magnus describes issues of sexual health in detail in his *De secretis mulierum*. The embryo is conceived of the “seed” of the father and the menstrual blood of the mother, which is itself a kind of seed.\(^{53}\) Moreover, he understands that menstruation ceases during pregnancy.\(^{54}\) The continued metaphor of plant life is striking; Albertus Magnus advises that a man can tell a woman is no longer a virgin if her body accommodates him too easily: “... then he may depend upon it that some other Person has ploughed up the ground before him.”\(^ {55}\) This relational understanding of human conception and regeneration in the natural world was widely held throughout medieval Europe. The menses were often referred to as “flowers” necessary to bring forth new life.\(^ {56}\) Hildegard of Bingen furthers the metaphor: “The stream of the menstrual period in woman is her generative greenness and floridity, which sprouts forth offspring; for just as a tree flowers in its floridity and sends forth branches and produced fruits, so the female extrudes flowers from the viridity of the stream of

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\(^{53}\) Albertus Magnus, *De secretis mulierum*, Translated by John Quincy (London: E. Curil, 1725), 2.

\(^{54}\) Albertus Magnus, *De secretis mulierum*, 78.

\(^{55}\) Albertus Magnus, *De secretis mulierum*, 86.

\(^{56}\) Monica Green, ed., *The Trotula*, 21.
menstrual blood and produces branches in the fruit of her womb.” In his *Canon*, Avicenna concurred that menstrual blood nourished a growing fetus, and that it turned into breast milk once the child was born. Starting in the thirteenth century, menstruation would increasingly be viewed as a more poisonous process. However, the visual evidence in Fra Angelico’s paintings, alongside Dominican beliefs about the Virgin Mary, argue for the earlier interpretation of menstruation as life-giving.

Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Virgin’s womb was metaphorically considered a garden, and for this reason she is often depicted in a *hortus conclusus*, as is the case in the north corridor *Annunciation*. Theologians debated whether she herself had been conceived asexually, complicating her status in this garden of regeneration. What was agreed upon, however, was that Mary was a kind of anti-Eve. Saint Antoninus, whose cell was next to the *Annunciation* when he was the prior of San Marco in the early 1440s, wrote that this is why Gabriel’s greeting to Mary is “ave” (“Eva” backwards) when he brings her the news that she will bear the Son of God. It was believed that Eve’s original sin necessitated sexual reproduction for continued life, and that this sin was passed from mother to child in conception. Christ, of course, was exempt from original sin. It was thought that Mary stopped menstruating after his birth, and was therefore also free from the curse of Eve’s sin.

57 Hildegard of Bingen in Monica Green, ed., *The Trotula*, 21.
Furthermore, Saint Antoninus maintained that in giving birth to Christ, Mary herself freed the world from sin.  This view is in keeping with Dominican theology, as Dominicans were known for their veneration of the Virgin—the Annunciation itself includes an instruction to bow and sing the *Salve Regina*.  It also urges a deeper connection: the Virgin’s menstrual blood nourished not only Christ, but by extension all of humanity.

This concept of the blood which nourishes draws us back to *Noli mi tangere*. It is, after all, a painting of Christ the gardener.  The wildflowers are perhaps symbolic of Christ himself, strewn throughout humanity.  Christ’s blood is dispersed like planted flowers, landing perfectly upon the five leaves of sorrel.  Above all, it is the notion of care-taking which pervades, the echo of “Drink of it, all of you./ For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” With the forgiveness of sins, of course, comes eternal life in Heaven.  The Virgin and her holy Son, then, are much more alike than at first they seem. Both generate new life from their own blood in a role reminiscent of nature.

The presence of sorrel in both frescoes invites us to see the close link between these two figures. It is worth remembering that sorrel is an herb of spring, the season of rebirth. In theology, March 25 was a date of triple importance: the day of Adam’s creation, the Annunciation, and the death of Christ on the cross.  The north corridor *Annunciation* and *Noli mi tangere*, then, represent the same season, in which spring herbs are proof of nature’s cycle of

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67 Grace Johnstone, “What Manner of Salutation This Should Be,” 22.
72 Matthew 26: 27-28 (ESV).
life and death. Among peasants, March 25 was a celebratory day of fertility. What is remarkable about the inclusion of sorrel in both frescoes is that it brings the metaphysical into contact with the tangible world. *The Annunciation* and *Noli mi tangere* are essentially medical miracles which transcend the normal limitations of the human body and require a theological understanding. By including an herb which belongs to the physical, human side of conception—rather than the divine, heavily theorized domain—Fra Angelico seems to draw a parallel between the Gospels and his contemporary world. A breath of spring air and the sharp scent of sorrel penetrate cold monastery walls.

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Appendix

Figure 1, with detail. Fra Angelico, *Noli mi tangere*, 1438-1445, fresco, 166 x 125 cm, Florence, Museo di San Marco.

Figure 2, with detail. Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, 1440-1445, fresco, 230 x 297 cm, Florence, Museo di San Marco.
Figure 3. *Acetosa*, hand-colored woodblock, from Arnoldus da Villanova, *Herbarius* (Venice: Alexandrum de Bindonis, 1520), v.

Figure 4. Illustration from Bartholomaei Mini de Senis, Platearius, and Nicolaus of Salerno, *Tractatus de herbis (Herbal); De Simplici Medicina; Circa instans; Antidotarium Nicolai* (Salerno: c. 1280-1310), f. 12.
Fig. 5. Elizabeth Blackwell, *Sorrel*, engraving, from *A Curious Herbal* (London: S. Harding, 1737), Plate 230.

Fig. 6. *Sorrel Field or Sheep*, woodblock, from William Salmon, *Botanologia: The English Herbal* (London: I. Dawks, 1710), 1,050.
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Bartholomaei Mini de Senis, Platearius, and Nicolaus of Salerno. *Tractatus de herbis (Herbal); De Simplici Medicina ; Circa instans; Antidotarium Nicolai*. Salerno: c. 1280-1310.


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