

Analysis: Fra Filippo Lippi's *Coronation of the Virgin*

The Quattrocento was a period of new and ever-changing art and art forms in the Italian Renaissance. Fra Filippo Lippi was a friar artist that joined the trend of creating a more modern depiction of religious scenes of worship. *Coronation of the Virgin*, made between 1441 and 1447, was made as an altarpiece created for the church of Sant' Ambrogio, Florence. As opposed to the altarpieces that were made on separate panels and brought together as one piece via hinges, Lippi creates a single-paneled altarpiece, while still calling upon some traditional altarpiece styles. *Coronation of the Virgin* replaces the polyptych with a more undivided format. The three arches at the top of the plane are reminiscent of a typical triptych. By doing this, Lippi creates a piece that is split, yet still meticulously consolidated and densely detailed.

The altarpiece is a depiction of the Virgin Mary's induction into heaven by God as the Queen of Heaven. At first glance, there are a plethora of faces reflected on the canvas. The main focal point, of course, is of the Virgin Mary, clothed in her distinguishable blue and red robes, kneeling before God with her head inclined as he places a crown on her head.

Light that seems to emanate from the viewer's left, which would be God's right-hand side (a place of the highest honor, the left being a place of lesser honor). This is evident in the shadows cast on the patron's clothing, and especially of the angel holding the inscription at the bottom right. The light shines on Mary's back as if the light itself is blessing her and this auspicious occasion.

From there, the eye moves downward, following the staffs of the two saintly figures who stand at the bottom left and right of the stage that elevates Mary and God (which also serves to elevate them amongst all the other figures in the composition, another show of their greater importance); to the crowd of figures directly below. Of these figures, four of them make direct eye contact with the viewer, grounding us to the scene and demanding our attention. These figures holding the viewer's gaze, almost tethers us to the scene and demands our attention, while also inviting us to be a part of or maybe even participate in the scene as they are.

Taking a step back to look at the picture as a whole, symmetrical balance via the use of color and figures becomes more evident. Lippi covers the canvas in many vibrant yet uniform colors. The deep rich blue of God's robes are echoed in the robes of the figure directly in the bottom middle of the composition (identified as the martyr Eustace), as well as the blue in the left and right archways. This in turn creates a triangle in the picture plane, which is a reoccurring symbol of the Trinity in many works of Renaissance art.

Other colors seem to be balanced out throughout the canvas. The green of the bishop Saint Martin to Eustace's right, and to the woman with downcast eyes to Eustace's left. Also notable are the muted pinks of St. John the Baptist to the far front right of the viewer and to the opposite side on the far right left of the viewers, the pink of St. Ambrose's robes. Additionally, the white of the robes of angel who carries the scroll with the inscription "ISTE PERFECIT OPUS" at the mid-right is also mirrored in the two friars at the opposite end of the platform.

There are also many vertical lines throughout the composition, seemingly pointing to Mary's ascension to Heaven as Queen. The staffs held by St. John and St. Ambrose, the railing balusters of the pedestal on which Mary and God stand, and the flowers that step from some

points in the background amongst the spectating angels and nuns, as well as the ends of the railings of the platform.

Lippi's mastery of textile texture is also seen through the minute details of this composition. Mary's veil gives the image of being light and airy in the way that it is pleated in her crown and flows down her shoulders and folds over her arm that grips God's legs. The folded drapery of the Virgin's robes as she kneels before God, and of the other patrons and saints that scatter the composition. There is also incredible attention to detail seen upon Lippi's precise etching of the individual designs of the clothing of the many characters.

The composition is painted in one-point perspective. The throne that frames God and the Virgin are painted in perspective, with the side rails seemingly jutting out towards the viewer. The angels and nuns in the background are portrayed as smaller and standing in front of and behind each other. The receding base of the main platform act as orthogonal lines, giving way to the illusion of a three-dimensional occupied space.

Besides the figures in the foreground, there are exactly twenty-one figures in the background with only their heads showing, as they are painted as further away from the viewer and in perspective. By including an almost equal number of figures on both sides of the composition, Lippi creates a seemingly perfect balance throughout. The gold archways at the top seem to tie the piece together, despite it's the initial feeling of disarray one might experience upon first glance.

Fra Filippo Lippi's *Coronation of the Virgin* is a masterful rendition of one of many important biblical scenes; one that combines the tradition of medieval story telling with the appearances and adaptation of newer artistic techniques that began to develop during the Renaissance. His following of this new style would create a trend for many other talented painters who began to elevate the art of religious single-panel altarpieces.