

*The Cover*

# The Attempted Martyrdom of Saints Cosmas and Damian with their brothers

by  
FRA ANGELICO (1387-1455)

36 × 46, tempera on panel. Purchased by the National Gallery of Ireland, Christie's, London, 1886, Catalogue No. 242. Reproduced by kind permission of The National Gallery of Ireland, Merrion Square, Dublin 2. The cover is sponsored by Boehringer Ingelheim, Ltd.

This painting depicting the attempted martyrdom of two third century physicians, Cosmas and Damian painted by the Florentine, Fra Angelico, is one of the many treasures of The National Gallery of Ireland.

Angelico, born Guido di Pietro from the Mugello valley north of Florence, joined the Dominican Priory at Fiesole, just a few miles north of the city of Florence, as Fra Giovanni. His aptitude for painting was encouraged by his superiors, and later one finds him moved to the Dominican Church of San Marco in Florence, where the priory today is a public museum virtually entirely dedicated to his work, especially the superb frescos in a whole series of monks' cells. On the high altar of the Church of San Marco was an altarpiece which Cosimo de Medici ordered to be removed to the Dominican establishment in Cortona, where it was placed in position in 1440. This display of power by the temporal ruler left the Dominicans with a significant gap. However, they had the resources in the person of their own gentle Fra Giovanni. For the high altar he painted a large panel, a little over two metres in height and width, and virtually square. On this he depicted the Virgin and Child enthroned, with angels, and Saints Laurence, John the Evangelist, Mark, Cosmas and Damian, Dominic, Francis, and Peter the Martyr. Beneath the main altarpiece itself was the predella, comprised of nine small panels each of which depicted a scene related to the figures in the principal panel. Dublin's Fra Angelico is one of the panels from the predella, which only would have been visible to people standing very close to the altar or on the steps of the altar itself.

The painting depicts the attempted martyrdom of the Saints and their brothers by the Roman prefect Lysias, who found his task more difficult than usual. First, the Saints chained and weighted, were thrown into the sea, but surfaced and came ashore chainless; Lysias ordered them to be stoned to death, but the stones turned back and merely injured those who threw them; archers were called to the scene, but with similar results; put into a great fire (the subject of the painting), Cosmas and Damian and their three brothers stood unscathed, while the flames reversed and injured the torturers; other methods were tried, but to no avail. Finally, in desperation Lysias had them beheaded by sword, successfully.

In 1955, on the occasion of the fifth centenary of the death of Fra Angelico, a major exhibition of his work was organized, being shown first in the Vatican, and then at San Marco in Florence. There the National Gallery of Ireland's little panel showing Cosmas and Damian, and their brothers, in the middle of a huge fire with the flames blowing backwards into the faces of their persecutors, was reunited with the other eight panels that constituted the original predella, and placed under the main altarpiece panel itself.

(For further details of this painting see: "Two Patron Saints of Medicine: Cosmas and Damian" by Michael Wynne on p. 14 of this issue of the *Irish Medical Journal*.)

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