I am submitting my paper “Sorrel in God’s Garden: Fra Angelico’s Frescoes at San Marco,” completed for Art History 324 (Dining with Michelangelo: Art and Food in Renaissance Italy) in Fall 2019. My assignment was to discuss the role of a particular plant, sorrel, in Italian Renaissance art and culture. For my paper, I chose to analyze the connection between two frescoes at the Florentine convent of San Marco, the north corridor *Annunciation* and *Noli me tangere*, painted by the Dominican friar known as Fra Angelico between 1438 and 1445. The defining link between these two frescoes is the repeated representation of the same plant between both. I argue that this plant is sorrel, and that its presence asserts themes of regeneration and nourishment in both frescoes.

For this assignment, I was given a choice of plants growing in Wellesley’s Edible Ecosystem, all of which were available in Renaissance Italy. I chose sorrel with relatively little background information, although I had read briefly that the plant had female healthcare applications. At the beginning of my research process, I learned about a similar plant, wood sorrel, which appears in a *Crucifixion* by Fra Angelico. As I started research into his work, I noticed what I believe to be sorrel in photographs of the north corridor *Annunciation* and *Noli me tangere* at San Marco. This topic captured my interest and I decided to explore it further.

The subject required me to use a wide breadth of sources, from early printed manuscripts and art historical texts to medical treatises and even cookbooks. While I wanted to find out more about uses of sorrel in the Renaissance more generally, I was particularly interested in how much of this information would have been available to Fra Angelico himself. I read about which titles were known to be held at San Marco’s library, and I used the online archives of the Laurentian Library to gain a sense of what manuscripts may have been circulating Florence in his lifetime. An early gynecological text by Albertus Magnus, also a Dominican friar, proved helpful to this end as well. I used online sources for some historical material, such as the writings of the physician Avicenna. However, early printed herbals from Wellesley College Special Collections proved among the most useful documents in my search. Many contained illustrations of sorrel, which allowed me to compare different representations to determine if Fra Angelico was likely painting the same plant. If I were to change anything in my research process, it would be to look closely at these sources earlier.
The different kinds of sources I used worked together to support my thesis. I started my research with art historical background on San Marco. The writings of William Hood and Georges Didi-Huberman were useful in this respect, as both discuss Fra Angelico’s frescoes in terms of Dominican theology. Didi-Huberman also analyzes the relationship between the figure of Christ and the surrounding plant life in *Noli me tangere*. By naming this plant as sorrel with additional information from herbals of the period, I was able to further speculate on the intended meaning and its relationship to the *Annunciation*. Initially, I hypothesized that the presence of sorrel in both paintings pointed to a connection between the figures of Mary and her Son, but I had difficulty articulating what this connection might be. Later, my research into sorrel’s use as a menstrual treatment and Renaissance ideas of menstruation allowed me to consider the idea of life-giving blood in the theology of the Annunciation and the Crucifixion. By the time I finished my paper, I had come to the conclusion that sorrel links the two paintings in that it emphasizes regeneration.

This paper proved an exciting challenge because it allowed me to consider my major field, Art History, in a different context. While the topic was initially intimidating, by the end of the project I understood Fra Angelico’s work much better than I would have through traditional study, because I had made an effort to approach his work through his perspective and to consider what he knew. Plant life is background rather than subject in both the *Annunciation* and *Noli me tangere*, and I would typically focus primarily on the figures. By redirecting my attention for this project, I feel that I was able to contribute something new, and I know that the shift in perspective will benefit my future work.