

Master of Saint Francis

Umbrian, active third quarter 13th century

BIOGRAPHY

Active, so far we know, solely for Franciscan churches and perhaps himself a member of the order, this anonymous artist was first identified and his oeuvre reconstructed by Henry Thode (1885).[1] The name-piece of the group of works that Thode assembled is the panel with a full-length figure of Saint Francis in the museum of the basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi. Also assigned to this painter by Thode were five frescoes with stories from the legend of Saint Francis in the lower church of the same basilica; the painted crucifix in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Perugia, dated 1272; and other works, not all of which are now recognized as works by this master. Subsequently this nucleus was first whittled down by the elimination of reattributed works, and then augmented with various other paintings, such as the fragmentary fresco (*Madonna and Child with an Angel*) in the lower church of the basilica in Assisi; although the authorship of the latter is disputed, it should probably be considered the result of the painter's first stylistic phase and as having been executed in connection with the burial of Cardinal Pietro di Barro in 1252.[2]

The characteristic features of the style of the Master of Saint Francis, an artist probably trained in Umbria, are rapid and energetic drawing, brilliant color, and the effort to capture the character and state of mind of the personages represented, who express themselves with vivid and elegant gestures. In his painting, as Luigi Coletti (1941) observed, "the bronze-like hardness and the dramatic tension [of his predecessors of more direct Byzantine dependence] are dissolved in a composition characterized by gentler rhythms . . . by planar masses concentrated entirely in the foreground, and by broad stains [of color] that absorb the chiaroscuro in delicate pearly harmonies." [3] Attempts have also been made to consider the Master of Saint Francis a kind of "humorist" [4] who exaggerated the formulae inherited from Byzantine art to give a stronger expressive charge to the personages he created. But in fact the roots of the style of this anonymous master are to be sought not so much in the figurative culture of Byzantium as in painting in Spoleto in the mid-thirteenth century [5] and in French and English Gothic painting. A clear testimony of this latter influence is given by the stained-glass windows of the upper church of San Francesco, where the large quatrefoils of the transept

were realized by transalpine artists, probably from France, on the south side, while the style of the Master of Saint Francis can be recognized in the forms of the opposite side.[6] In some of the windows of the nave, for example in the one with the stories of Saint Thomas,[7] the two workshops seem to have worked side by side. The execution of these works is variously dated; from the stylistic point of view, they suggest a phase less advanced than the crucifix of 1272 and the panels being discussed here, with a provenance from Perugia. It may be assumed that the artist began his career in Assisi, in contact both with exponents of local painting and with the transalpine masters active in the basilica, and that he produced not only stained glass and paintings (both murals and on panel) but also illuminated manuscripts in the 1250s and 1260s.[8]

[1] Henry Thode, *Franz von Assisi und die Anfänge der Kunst der Renaissance in Italien* (Berlin, 1885), 86–87, 219–221.

[2] Cf. Fra Ludovico da Pietralunga and Pietro Scarpellini (intro. and comm.), *Descrizione della Basilica di S. Francesco e di altri Santuari di Assisi* (Treviso, 1982), 181. Recently, Alessio Monciatti has placed in doubt both the authorship of the fresco and its relation with the tomb of Pietro di Barro but has confirmed the dating of the fragment to c. 1250–1260; see Alessio Monciatti, in *La basilica di San Francesco ad Assisi*, ed. Giorgio Bonsanti (Modena, 2002), 341.

[3] Luigi Coletti, *I Primitivi*, vol. 1, *120 tavole* (Novara, 1941), 25: “la bronzea durezza e la tensions drammatica [dei suoi predecessori di più stretta osservanza bizantina] si sciolgono in una composizione a ritmi più dolcemente cadenzati . . . a masse pianeggianti affiorate tutte in primo piano, larghe macchie che assorbono il chiaroscuro in raffinati accordi perlacei.”

[4] Roberto Longhi, “Giudizio sul Duecento (1948),” in *Edizione delle opere complete di Roberto Longhi*, 14 vols. (Florence, 1961–1984), 7(1974):8; Ferdinando Bologna, *La pittura italiana delle origini* (Rome, 1962), 78.

[5] The earlier literature (and more recently Coletti 1949; Martin and Ruf 1997) assumed the Pisan origin of the master’s art, while Jürgen Schultze (1963) and Pietro Scarpellini (1982) considered it influenced by Serbian painting of the mid-thirteenth century. The present writer (Boskovits 1973) has emphasized the artist’s links with painting in Spoleto in the mid-thirteenth century. See Luigi Coletti, *Gli affreschi della Basilica di Assisi* (Bergamo, 1949), 19–23; Frank Martin and Gerhard Ruf, *Die Glasmalereien von San Francesco in Assisi: Entstehung und Entwicklung*

einer Gattung in Italien (Regensburg, 1997), 65–72; Jürgen Schultze, “Zur Kunst des ‘Franziskusmeisters,’” *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 25 (1963): 109–150; Fra Ludovico da Pietralunga and Pietro Scarpellini (intro. and comm.), *Descrizione della Basilica di S. Francesco e di altri Santuari di Assisi* (Treviso, 1982), 180; Miklòs Boskovits, *Pittura umbra e marchigiana fra Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi nella Galleria Nazionale di Perugia* (Florence, 1973), 4.

[6] On the stained glass attributed to the Master of Saint Francis, cf. Frank Martin and Gerhard Ruf, *Die Glasmalereien von San Francesco in Assisi: Entstehung und Entwicklung einer Gattung in Italien* (Regensburg, 1997), 267–290, who attributed the rest of the stained glass of the nave and that of the south transept to a *gotische Werkstatt* (253–267).

[7] I refer in particular to a stained-glass window panel in the north wall of the third bay of the entrance that Frank Martin and Gerhard Ruf (1997) attributed to a “Gothic workshop.” These authors suggested a date of c. 1275. See Frank Martin and Gerhard Ruf, *Die Glasmalereien von San Francesco in Assisi: Entstehung und Entwicklung einer Gattung in Italien* (Regensburg, 1997), 265, figs. 119, 125. It seems clear to me, however, that the figure to the extreme left of the scene was drawn not by the same artist as the rest of the scene but by the Master of Saint Francis.

[8] The chronology of the artist is still very controversial. Most art historians have followed Edward B. Garrison (1949) in dating his career to the period c. 1265–1280, while the older literature proposed for the frescoes of the lower church of San Francesco at Assisi dates close to or even antecedent to the midcentury; cf. Edward B. Garrison, *Italian Romanesque Panel Painting: An Illustrated Index* (Florence, 1949), 27–28. My own suggestion, placing the execution of the frescoes in relation to the consecration of the church in 1253, now seems to me to push the dating too far back; cf. Miklòs Boskovits, *Pittura umbra e marchigiana fra Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi nella Galleria Nazionale di Perugia* (Florence, 1973), 3–7. The frescoes were probably painted c. 1257–1261, as suggested, for example, by Luiz Marques, *La peinture du Duecento en Italie centrale* (Paris, 1987), 59, 114. For the activity of the Master of Saint Francis as a miniaturist, cf. Laurence B. Kanter and Pia Palladino, in *The Treasury of Saint Francis of Assisi*, ed. Giovanni Morello and Laurence B. Kanter (Milan, 1999), 140–141.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)

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