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Arts

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St. Francis Of Assisi Exhibit at London's National Gallery

It sheds light on how his image has evolved over the centuries and on his universal appeal



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



The house in Assisi where St. Francis lived with his family. Wikipedia

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Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) is the patron saint of Italy, animals, ecology and tapestry makers. Born to a prosperous silk merchant in Assisi, he was christened Giovanni, but, because his mother was French, he was nicknamed Francis ("Francesco" meaning "little Frenchman"). A debonair nature-lover and Francophile, he enjoyed the typical life of a wealthy young man, but his disillusionment with the world's social and economic injustices weighed on his conscience. His friends' mockery and his father's rage when he helped beggars and lepers, the trauma of war, a year-long imprisonment, and a debilitating illness caused him to reassess his values.

In 1205, on his return home from his imprisonment, he prayed for guidance in the ruins of San Damiano's chapel, just outside Assisi. The altar's crucifix told him, "Repair my falling house".

Francis took the Christ literally, so, in need of funds to repair San Damiano, he sold cloth from his father's warehouse inducing his father to disinherit his "mad son". Consequently, with eleven like-minded companions, Francis began his fervent life of poverty, wandering the Umbrian countryside preaching penance, brotherly love, charity, and peace, nursing lepers and caring for the poor.

In 1209 Francis composed a simple rule for his followers, the *Regula primitiva* or "Primitive Rule". He then led them to Rome



St. Francis's tomb. Wikipedia

to seek Innocent III's permission to found a new religious order. In a dream he'd envisioned Francis holding up the Lateran Basilica, so the Pope gave his endorsement, which traditionally occurred on April 16th 1210.

Determined to bring the Gospel to all peoples, beginning in 1212, Francis traveled to Dalmatia, Spain, France, and most importantly to Egypt and the Holy Land where the Franciscans have been present almost uninterruptedly since 1217.

Other noteworthy events in Francis's life were his 1223 Christmas visit to the town of Greccio, where he created a live nativity scene, the precursor of today's crèche; in 1224 he composed the *Canticle of Creation*, the oldest poetic text in Italian by a known author; and on September 13 of that same year received the stigmata.

Francis also suffered from trachoma. After receiving medical care in several cities, but to no avail, Francis returned to Assisi where he died blind on October 3, 1226.

On July 16, 1228 Pope Gregory IX proclaimed Francis a saint and the next day laid the foundation stone for the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. Francis was buried there on May 25, 1230, under the Lower Basilica, which Giotto later (1297-1300) decorated with frescoes of Francis's life. His remains are still venerated there today.

Francis's life and his some 40 post-mortem miracles have inspired artists from Giotto to the present. The most represented saint in art, art historians estimate that c. 20,000 images of Francis, not including those in illuminated manuscripts, were drawn in the first century after his death.



Fra Angelico's *St. Francis Before the Sultan* (1429) (Courtesy of London's National Gallery)

On at London's National Gallery until July 30, is *Saint Francis of Assisi*, the first major exhibition in the United Kingdom to explore his life and legacy. Sponsored by Brunello Cucinelli, the Umbrian fashion and cashmere magnate, on display are some 40 works-of-art. Many belong to the National Gallery, The British Museum and other British museums and many are by contemporary British artists.

The three oldest, all on loan from Assisi, are a habit worn by St. Francis, an ivory and wooden horn with rods (1219-1350): a precious relic Francis brought back from Egypt, and a *Vita-retable of St. Francis* (1253). On display from the United States are Caravaggio's *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy* (1595-6) and Francisco Ribalta's *Saint Francis' Vision of the Musical Angel* (1620), both on loan from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, *Saint Clare Rescuing a Child Mauled by a Wolf* (1455-60) from the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and Giuseppe Penone's *Door Tree-Cedar* (2012) from New York's Gagosian and Marian Goodman Gallery.



The Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. Wikipedia


Additional masterpieces in the exhibition's six rooms also depict Francis's deep devotion, his poverty, his travels, his suffering, and his love of nature. The earliest are the manuscript *Chronica maiora* (1240-55) with the first English depictions of the saint by Matthew Paris, and Sassetta's medieval painted panels of the *San Sepolcro Altarpiece* (1437-44), one of the most celebrated "visual biographies" of the saint, based on Thomas of Celano's and Saint Bonaventure's early biographies. They continue with Fra Angelico's *St. Francis Before the Sultan* (1429) and Botticelli's *St. Francis of Assisi with Angels* (1475-80).




Andrea Büttner's *Beggars Suite* (1-9) (2016) (Courtesy of London's National Gallery)

Later spell-binding works here are El Greco’s *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (1590-5), Murillo’s *St. Francis Embracing the Crucified Christ* (1668-9), ending with Marvel Comics’s Disney cartoon, *Francis, Brother of the Universe* (1980) by Buscema and most recently Büttner’s *Beggar’s Suite* (2016).

Thus, the exhibition (admission free) sheds light on how St. Francis’s his image evolved over the centuries, and how his universal appeal has transcended time, continents, and different religious traditions. It won’t travel, but a beautifully illustrated catalog is available on the internet for 20 pounds.

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Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

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