

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI AT LONDON'S NATIONAL GALLERY

■ BY LUCY GORDAN



Caravaggio's *St. Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy* from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut.

Below, Botticelli's *St. Francis of Assisi with Angels*.
(© The National Gallery, London)

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) 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 around him, full of its social and economic injustices, soon weighed on his conscience. His friends’ mockery and his father’s rage when he helped beggars and lepers, the traumatizing experience of war, a year-long imprisonment and a debilitating illness he caught in jail caused him to reassess his life.

In 1205, on his return home from his imprisonment, he stopped to pray in the ruins of the country chapel of San Damiano, just outside Assisi. The altar’s crucifix’s Christ told him, “Repair my falling house.” Francis took Christ

literally, so, he began to repair San Damiano and churches near Assisi, including the little chapel of St. Mary of the Angels known as the *Porziuncola*, selling cloth from his father’s warehouse, eventually causing his father to disinherit his hopelessly “mad son.”

Consequently, with 11 like-minded companions, Francis dressed in a coarse brown woolen tunic and began his fervent life of poverty, wandering the 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”: “to follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and to walk in His footsteps.”

He then led them to Rome to seek permission from Pope Innocent III to found a new religious order. In a dream the Pope envisioned Francis holding up the Lateran Basilica, so he gave his endorsement, dated traditionally to April 16, 1210.



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

Another important event in Francis's life was his 1223 Christmas visit to the town of Greccio, where he created a live nativity scene complete with farm animals—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 (the five wounds that appeared on his body in the same places as those on Christ's body during His crucifixion).

Besides the stigmata, Francis suffered from trachoma. After receiving medical care in Siena, Cortona, and Nocera, but to no avail, Francis returned to Assisi. By now completely blind, he died in a hut next to the *Porziuncola* on the evening of October 3, 1226, singing Psalm 141: "*Voce mea ad Dominum.*"

On July 16, 1228, Pope Gregory IX declared Francis a saint, and on 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 decorated with frescoes (1297-1300) of Francis' life. His remains are still venerated there today.

Francis' life and his some 40 approved *post-mortem* miracles have inspired artists from Giotto to the present.

The most represented saint in art history, art historians have estimated that c. 20,000 images of Francis, not including those in illuminated manuscripts, were drawn in the first century after his death.

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. On display are some 40 works of art from European and American public and private collections, spanning more than seven centuries.



Fra Angelico's *St. Francis Before the Sultan*.
Below, the horn St. Francis brought back from Egypt



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 *St. Francis' Vision of the Musical Angel* (1620), both on loan from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut; and *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.

Additional masterpieces in the exhibition's six rooms, with a seventh dedicated to St. Clare (1194-1253), one of Francis' first followers, depict Francis' deep devotion, his poverty, his travels, his suffering and his love of nature. The earliest are the manuscript *Chronica maiora* (1240-55) with the earliest 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 St. Bonaventure's biographies. They continue with Fra Angelico's *St. Francis Before the Sultan* (1429) and Botticelli's *St. Francis of Assisi with Angels* (1475-80).

Later spellbinding 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' 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 captured the imagination of artists, how his image evolved over the centuries, and how his universal appeal has transcended time, continents, and different religious traditions. The display will not travel, but a beautifully illustrated catalog is available on the internet for 20 British pounds. ○