

Introduction

In the mid-thirteenth century, the Italian legal expert (*causidicus*) and lay preacher Albertanus of Brescia defended extensions made to Franciscan churches and convents as follows:

The Lord rules out neither need nor utility but *desire*. In fact religious who do not add field to field or house to house are as nothing. For if these Friars minor do not have adequate churches large enough for congregations of the faithful, they add to the church, and if they do not have a place suitable for a kitchen or refectory, then they add to their house.¹

Albertanus was preaching in the Franciscan church in his hometown of Brescia. His main concern was to illustrate the central role of utility in making decisions, and in this the Franciscans are held up as models. In passing, however, he touched on an area in which his hosts might be vulnerable to criticism: the tension between the ideal of poverty and simplicity embodied by their founder and the need for property in a fast expanding order. Albertanus came down clearly in favour of property, but he made no mention of the quality or decoration of these buildings. The Franciscans' model of humility and emphasis on simplicity was (and is) often seen to be incongruous with the production of art. Practice, as we know, could not be more different. It does, however, require some explanation.

Religious life during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was dominated by the mendicant orders, notably the Franciscans and Dominicans, and their ascendancy also extended to the artistic life of the day. After an austere and almost iconoclastic start in the early 1200s, there followed a relaxation in some Franciscan practice regarding poverty of architecture by the time Albertanus was writing, and the friars minor no longer took over pre-existing buildings but began to commission their own foundations in a new style of architecture. The first decorative cycles used the didactic values of painting to disseminate the Order's official teachings and to encourage

the devotion of both friars and the laity. The Order was quickly shaken by internal conflicts, accusations of laxity, spiritual and moral decline and the threat of division between those friars who wished to remain faithful to a strict interpretation of St Francis of Assisi's austere and mendicant way of life (known as the Spirituels) and the majority who accepted life in large convents, celebrating mass in spectacular churches and assenting to the use of property (known as the Conventuels).² Despite these inner troubles, the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in particular were marked by intense artistic activity in the Order's Italian churches.

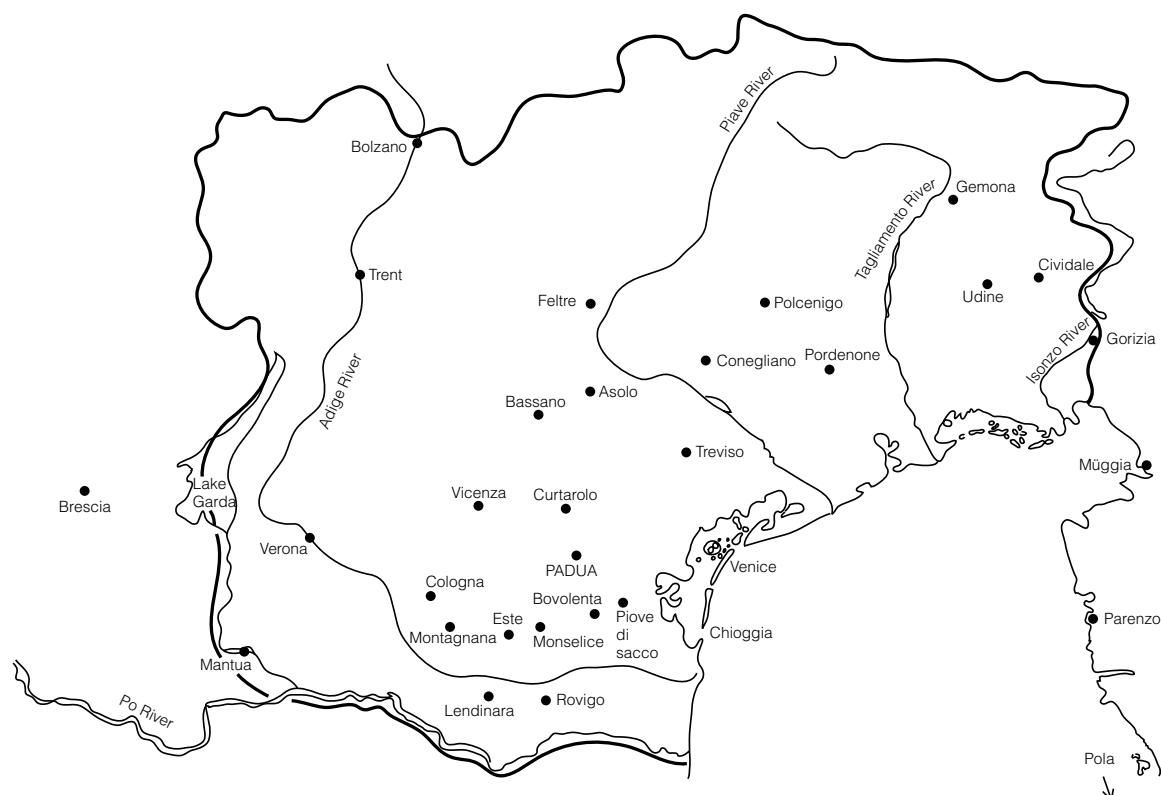
The earliest images associated with the Franciscan Order centered on the founder and consisted of gabled panels of St Francis standing in the middle and flanked by episodes from his life and posthumous miracles, as painted by Bonaventura Berlinghieri (San Miniato al Tedesco, 1228, and San Francesco, Pescia, 1235).³ The most elaborate example is the unsigned and undated Bardi panel (Santa Croce, Florence) depicting twenty scenes from the saint's life and posthumous miracles and dated variously between 1243 and 1263.⁴ New subjects such as the stigmatisation of Francis were modelled on the vast repertoire of Christian iconography and on Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in particular. Despite the popularity of the *vita* retable and its more simple exponent, a single standing figure of Francis, little is known of these panels' patronage and function. Because body relics were not available, Klaus Krüger has argued that early panels acted as substitutes and were initially placed on high altars as temporary feast icons and later moved to side altars. Others see them as *memoria*, commemorative panels hung on walls or rood screens.⁵

The earliest extant mural paintings are the fragmentary nave frescoes of the lower church of San Francesco in Assisi, begun in 1228 and consecrated in 1253. Five episodes of Francis' life (the renunciation of his father, the dream of Innocent III, the sermon to the birds, the stigmatisation and the death of the saint) faced a similar number focusing on the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus, though it would seem that these were not placed according to a precise typology as has been suggested in the past.⁶ Rather, as Chiara Frugoni recently proposed, the images reflected what the Order wished to underline and promote and were particularly aimed at the detractors of the stigmata; thus posthumous miracles were omitted in favour of possibly the first appearance of Francis' side wound and the dream of Innocent III. Although the frescoes are undocumented, the fact that they are in the tomb church of the founder has been interpreted as a signal that the entire Order must have had a say in their iconography and production; moreover, the consecration date of 1253 is an indicator for Frugoni that the paintings must

have been in situ by that time.⁷ Her reading suggests decision making from the higher echelons of the Order, perhaps even from the papacy itself.

At least two of the Assisi scenes, the renunciation of the father and the dream of Innocent III, served as models for the right apsidal chapel of San Francesco in Gubbio, created soon after 1280.⁸ The Assisi frescoes quickly lost their appeal, however, and were partly destroyed by the 1290s to make way for side chapels.⁹ In their stead twenty-eight scenes in the upper church nave demonstrated the conformity of Francis and Christ as told in Bonaventure of Bagnoreggio's official life of the saint, the *Legenda Maior*, composed between 1263 and 1266. Each scene is carefully annotated with passages lifted from Bonaventure's tale, but the sequence is not identical. Although the *Legenda Maior* is a useful starting point for the dating of such images, the debate surrounding the timing of the cycle's execution (placed anywhere from the 1280s to the 1320s) and attribution (from Giotto to a Roman School) has become legendary.¹⁰ Naturally, with such a wide range of possibilities, the avenues for patronage are equally open, from the collective of friars minor to a high-ranking official of the Order (a minister general) or the curia (perhaps a cardinal or even the pope himself). In turn, the upper church cycle of the life of St Francis was reproduced in several of the Order's churches in Umbria and Tuscany, most famously in the Bardi chapel, Santa Croce, Florence (itself of unresolved date and patronage), and in San Francesco, Rieti; San Francesco, Pistoia; and San Fortunato, Todi.¹¹ Unfortunately, none of these manifestations are securely documented, and their mechanisms of patronage elude us.

Tuscany and Umbria were not the only regions touched by Franciscan expansion; most of Western Christendom and some areas beyond were settled by friars minor.¹² Following the death of Antony of Padua, the second Franciscan saint, the Veneto became an important centre for theological and artistic activity. Originally known as the Province of the Trevisan March and later renamed as the Province of St Antony, its boundaries were fixed by the Sarca Valley in the west, by the west bank of Lake Garda, by the area of the eastern Alps excluding the Val d'Adige to the north, by the Isonzo River in the east and the Po River in the south (Fig. 1).¹³ Some eighty-six churches are documented, and twenty-five survive, most in an altered or heavily restored state.¹⁴ Three extant churches are particularly noteworthy and form the basis for this study of artistic patronage: San Fermo Maggiore in Verona, San Lorenzo in Vicenza and Sant' Antonio (known as 'il Santo') in Padua (Figs. 2–4). Each church occupies a unique place in the development of painting or sculpture in the fourteenth-century Veneto. The early-fourteenth-century fresco decoration of San Fermo Maggiore was one of the



1. Province of St Antony (originally Province of the Trevisan March).

first responses to Giotto's Arena chapel outside of Padua. Moreover, its extensive use of narrative stories is unique in the city, and, as we shall see, some of its subjects were highly original and new to both the region and the Franciscan Order. San Lorenzo's contribution, on the other hand, is sculptural. Its carved façade portal is the first known by the Venetian stonecutter Andriolo de Santi, the sculptor whose workshop dominated the secular and religious market in the Veneto for more than thirty years in the mid-fourteenth century. The iconographic scheme of its tympanum was also a first and was copied by the Dominican friars of Santa Corona in the city and the Humiliati of Viboldone near Milan. Finally, the Santo outshines all its Franciscan and mendicant neighbours. Raised as a great pilgrimage basilica to enshrine the body of Antony of Padua, its fame in the region was surpassed only by San Marco in Venice, the ducal church, symbol of the republic. Its significance lies not only in its unusual architectural solutions but in its numerous painted chapels. The second half of the fourteenth century might be termed the golden age of fresco painting at the Santo, as exemplified in the works of Giusto de Menabuoi and Altichiero. Both Giusto and Altichiero had previously been employed by the ruling families of Padua and Verona



2. General view of San Fermo Maggiore in Verona (Louise Bourdua).

and were now engaged by the inner circle of employees, allies and friends of the Carrara.

Although the paintings and sculpture of San Fermo Maggiore, San Lorenzo and the Santo have at times been singled out for their stylistic and iconographic characteristics, they have not to date been viewed in their original Franciscan context. This book aims to uncover the role played by the Order of friars minor in these artistic projects, from the planning stages to execution. In those instances in which the friars were not involved, it investigates who the responsible parties were; in cases in which Franciscans and lay persons cooperated, it discusses their association in detail. This study thus exposes the relationship between the friars minor, the sponsoring laity and the artistic workshops in three of the most important and popular Franciscan churches of the Veneto during the later Middle Ages.



3. General view of San Lorenzo in Vicenza (Louise Bourdua).

It might be thought helpful to construct a typical picture of a religious order's decoration and mechanisms of artistic patronage, as was recently undertaken by Martin Kemp. His fictional scenario of an altarpiece stipulated in the will of a notary, ordered by his widow and destined for a Franciscan church draws on various contracts to cover all the main processes. But as he himself admits, 'there is probably no single transaction which is so well documented that it can on its own provide a wholly comprehensive account of how the business of ordering and obtaining a painting proceeded', and as he says, it would be surprising if any actual episode corresponded precisely to his fictional account.¹⁵ His synthesis is a helpful way to construct a model for preliminary discussion, but if we cannot standardise even a single commission, we should not expect to find a 'typical' Franciscan or mendicant church. If we wish to arrive at a better understanding of Franciscan artistic commissions for the fourteenth century, this can be achieved only by moving away from the usual models of the upper and lower churches of San Francesco at Assisi and Santa Croce, Florence, which are riddled with problems of dating and attribution. The Franciscan churches of northeast Italy, on the other hand, are unique in possessing both substantial extant decoration and excellent documentary records. The accessibility of this abundant documentation is due to the pioneering efforts of



a local historian and Franciscan friar, Antonio Sartori (d. 1970). His lifetime pursuit of the history of his home province of St Antony led him to trace, note and publish an unrivalled number of records highlighting the activities (from contracts to accounts) of artists, patrons and individual Franciscan friars, whom he painstakingly identified in wills and witness lists of conventual chapter meetings. His posthumous legacy consists of the publication of his notes, extracts and articles in a multivolume series, the *Archivio Sartori*, which contains excerpts or full accounts of more than 70,000 documents.¹⁶ Sartori's work was soon subjected to a roundtable discussion of his methodology and opus which drew attention to both the strengths and weaknesses of his investigation.¹⁷ While the researcher is guided through an otherwise vastly dispersed series of archives, scholars noted the need to verify his transcriptions against the originals because his observations lack modern critical apparatus. Fortunately, in most cases he conscientiously noted the location of his sources, which makes the verification relatively simple. Unfortunately, not every Franciscan province has had its Sartori.¹⁸

4. General view of Sant'Antonio (il Santo) in Padua (Louise Bourdua).

The Primacy of Franciscan Patronage

Historians made connections between friars and art more than one hundred years ago. Nine years before Paul Sabatier published his ground-breaking

study of the life of St Francis,¹⁹ Henri Thode, in *Francis of Assisi and the Beginning of the Art of the Renaissance in Italy*, proposed that Francis and his followers were responsible for crucial developments in the visual arts. Although Thode's work never had the same impact as Sabatier's text, it deserves attention alongside the other famous contemporary classic by Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, published in 1860.²⁰ Unimpressed by Burckhardt's chronology, Thode shifted the boundaries of the Renaissance back to the thirteenth century, a period which gave birth not only to a 'renewed' art but to a religious renewal linked with the figure of Francis of Assisi.²¹ Thode himself argued, 'The name of a single man stands out again in the title of this book; but the historian certainly has the right to indicate with the name of one great individual all the collective energy of a substantial group of people who have found self-awareness in that unique man and in him found the incarnation of their desires and actions.'²²

Art was thus 'reborn' as a result of three factors: 'the natural and innate predisposition of Tuscan people for art, the favourable conditions in which these people found themselves in the thirteenth century and the advent of a new religious conception, all subjective and sentimental', sparked by Francis of Assisi. Moreover, the abandonment of Byzantine models in painting for the attentive representation of nature and humanity was directly linked to Francis of Assisi's own preaching. And thus according to this model, the influence of St Francis was first expressed visually by Giotto di Bondone in the cycle of the life of the saint in the upper church of San Francesco at Assisi. A further crucial and less controversial part of Thode's study was a detailed and careful investigation of the Order's architecture which remains a strong starting point.²³ Although few authors would now actively support Thode's antipositivist and neo-romantic stance, its influence is still deeply felt.²⁴ Apart from some ongoing claims that Francis was responsible for triggering a new outlook on nature and realism, art historians (whether conscious of the historiographical tradition or not) have found it difficult to resist the temptation to begin any discussion of the development of form, iconography and narrative with the early images of Francis.²⁵ The dramatic response by both the wider public and the art historical community to the earthquake at Assisi in 1997 and the panic at the possible loss of the cycle of the life of St Francis in the upper church testifies to the longevity (whether consciously realised or not) of Henry Thode's tradition.

Despite a veritable industry of books and articles on the art of the Franciscan Order, the approaches to the subject have been few.²⁶ After Thode, the second method of enquiry initially focused on the earliest representations of St Francis, then sought to trace the development of his image. This

exploration was boosted by the 700th anniversary celebrations of his death in 1926, but already in 1924, the Franciscan Vittorio Facchinetti began the process by commemorating the anniversary of the stigmatisation with the publication of a contextualised study of the stigmata in literature, poetry and art.²⁷ Francis' stigmata has always featured prominently in subsequent iconographic studies, and the phenomenon itself, together with its development over nearly one hundred years, received full coverage again in Chiara Frugoni's recent monograph.²⁸ Even his beard has come under scrutiny.²⁹ His holy brothers and sisters, Antony of Padua, Louis of Toulouse, Clare of Assisi and Margaret of Cortona, have also been the focus of in-depth studies (including at times their bodily remains) by Conrad de Mandach, Julian Gardner, Fabio Bisogni, Servus Gieben, Jeryldene Wood, Joanna Cannon and André Vauchez.³⁰

Meanwhile, a parallel quest for the meaning of 'Franciscan art' was taken up in 1924. In another celebratory volume, the friar Leone Bracaloni asserted that 'Art can be Franciscan by origin, when it is the work of the Franciscans; for its subject and content, when it deals with Franciscan things; for its character, when it can be explained according to the spirit and the form of the Franciscan ideal'.³¹

He noted, however, that, 'only in the last category' was there 'true Franciscan art'. What was this Franciscan ideal? Not poverty as Gillet had suggested in his classic study of 1912,³² but 'seraphic love' in 'humble simplicity' and 'joyous serenity', and through this idea art emerged as full of 'naturalism'.³³ Not surprisingly, given Bracaloni's membership in the Order, his definition owed more to Franciscan theology and mysticism than to art historical scholarship. To be fair, he listed useful visual examples of seraphic love including the stigmatisation, the vision of Francis in a chariot of fire by the brethren at Rivo Torto and the later representation of Francis emerging from the side wound of Jesus as described by Bartholomew of Pisa. His method remained dominated by his Franciscan outlook, however, and fuelled by rivalry with the Dominican Order; for example, he claimed that a Crucifixion painted by a Dominican such as Fra Angelico could never pull the heart strings of the observer in the same manner as a Franciscan painting would.³⁴

Interestingly, the definition of 'Franciscan art' as a phenomenon independent of other artistic manifestation has remained representative of a particular line of enquiry, and some recent works are worth singling out. Anne Derbes has linked the transformation of narrative painting in duecento images of the Passion of Christ with the Franciscan Order.³⁵ This idea is not entirely new: Julian Gardner noted a correlation between narrative painting and Franciscan provenance in an article published in 1982.³⁶ Derbes,

however, focused on late-thirteenth-century Tuscan crosses (many of which were of Clarissan origin) and found that the narrative panels on their aprons laid increased emphasis on the sufferings of Jesus and corresponded to descriptions in Franciscan writings. Thus she concluded that ‘the Order must have had a considerable hand in the construction and diffusion of the new images that transformed the look of the Passion in duecento painting’.³⁷ Interestingly, narrowly focused case studies such as Dillian Gordon’s work on Umbrian *staurotheca* have also highlighted the importance of the relics of the wood of the cross and related objects for the friars minor.³⁸ Again, Gardner noticed this repetition of motifs (compositional, iconographic or structural) and tentatively connected it to the Franciscan Order and their ‘modes of thought’.³⁹ We shall return to this issue of repetition in later chapters.

The relationship between text and images as recently exemplified by Gardner, Derbes and Wood goes back to at least 1926, when Bughetti discussed the early panels of Francis in relation to the texts of his life and placed them in a sequence of development.⁴⁰ His study was ambitious, but it was hampered by the poor state of preservation of many panels and the limitations of early photography. In the 1950s, George Kaftal stated that ‘scenes’ (in contrast to devotional images of saints) ‘were always an illustration of an existing text and that Franciscan texts were ‘themselves affected by the domestic dissensions among Friars Minor’. Kaftal, however, did not explore how these dissensions might be reflected in changing imagery.⁴¹ This explicit relation between changing iconography and changing policy was put forward most recently by Chiara Frugoni, as was the possibility that Franciscan texts (especially the earliest) may have derived from pictures.⁴² To give one example, Frugoni associated the increasingly common appearance of Francis’ chest wound in paintings to the bull issued by Pope Alexander IV in 1255 which affirmed the authenticity of the stigmata, especially that of the chest.⁴³ Thus, in her view, the images reflected what the Order wished to underline and promote and were particularly aimed at the detractors of the stigmata.

Claims that the Franciscan Order influenced subject matter and artistic style remain popular, though in many ways now far removed from Thode’s original thesis. Attempts to define the principal characteristics of the Order’s art, its centres of diffusion and its iconography are standard fare, promoted by those who believe in the existence of an atelier in the convent of San Francesco at Assisi responsible for the production of Franciscan images for the basilica and the surrounding region.⁴⁴ Pietro Scarpellini and Florenz Deuchler have cited the numerous repetitive panels depicting