The Functions of Early Franciscan Art

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The last quarter century has witnessed the proliferation of scholarship on early Franciscan art. While the famous fresco cycle in the Upper Church in Assisi has long been a major focus of Franciscan scholarship, in recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized the value of earlier, smaller, and lesser-known works of Franciscan art as important sources on the early movement. William R. Cook has devoted much of his scholarly career to documenting and analyzing the earliest extant images of Francis, most notably in his comprehensive catalogue of Franciscan art, *Images of St. Francis of Assisi*. More broadly, Cook’s scholarship has established the centrality of the visual arts to the early Franciscan movement, as depictions of the life and miracles of Francis were, together with vernacular preaching, the primary method through which the friars propagated their message and explained the order’s mission to the laity.

Building on Cook’s scholarly legacy, this essay examines the evolution of early Franciscan art, focusing specifically on the eight surviving thirteenth-century altarpieces depicting at least four narrative scenes of the life and miracles of St. Francis. More specifically, this essay will consider the function of these

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3 These eight altarpieces in order of execution are identified as: Bonaventura Berlinghieri, *Altarpiece of St. Francis of Assisi and Stories from His Life*, 1235, San Francesco, Pescia; Master of the Bardi St. Francis, *St. Francis with Scenes from His Life*, c. 1245, Santa Croce, Florence; unknown Florentine artist, *Saint Francis and Eight Stories from His Life*, c. 1250,
dossals and what changes in their function reveal about the concerns of the local Franciscan communities that played a role in their creation. Furthermore, by examining the early panel paintings, this essay also aims to deepen our understanding of the broader development of the Franciscan order in the thirteenth century.

Francis’s lifetime coincided with an extraordinary development: the proliferation of high-quality portable religious imagery in Western Europe, and especially in the city-states of central and northern Italy. While clearly influenced by earlier Byzantine art in terms of form and function, there quickly developed an impressive amount of diversity in early thirteenth-century Italian art. In these paintings, we see artists experimenting with ways of depicting the divine and discovering the possibilities of the medium. Surviving early thirteenth-century works typically include a central holy figure (or two, in the case of the Virgin and Child) surrounded either by other saints or by scenes from the central figure’s life, as is the case in a pair of altarpieces depicting St. Peter and St. John found in the Pinacoteca in Siena.4 Often scenes from the saint’s life are supplemented by other stories depicting the saint performing miracles.

These works of art had several related functions and could be devotional and didactic. The central image of these panels, depicting a front-facing saint identifiable based on established iconographic traditions, clearly served a devotional purpose. Built to sit atop altars in churches large and small, individuals would come and pray before these devotional images, often believing them to have special power. Francis’s own experience before the cross of San Damiano demonstrates the widely accepted medieval idea that images had real power and that holy figures, and even Christ himself, were often present within them.5 While the central images served a devotional purpose, the accompanying scenes depicting a saint’s life and miracles were included for different reasons. Christian leaders had long recognized that images could serve as powerful instructional tools, and painted scenes could teach the laity key stories from saints’ lives in a

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