

Chapter 9

The Wolf of Gubbio in Context: The Igreja da Pampulha, Brazil*

Mary R. McHugh

When Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio, formerly cardinal of Buenos Aires, Argentina, took Francis as his papal name, it provided a powerful example of the continued influence of St. Francis of Assisi. In fact, evidence of Francis's legacy can be found seemingly everywhere, from the fresco cycle in the Upper Church of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi to the work of late nineteenth-century Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, and in the lives touched by Franciscan friars and nuns in every corner of the modern world. Yet, as the scholarship of William R. Cook has demonstrated, the ways in which Francis, his life, and his ideas have been understood have changed significantly over the past eight hundred years. In particular, artistic depictions of Francis's life have varied in important ways based on the needs of the societies in which they were created and the values that the artists or commissioners wished to highlight. This is true of the frescoes in Assisi, and as this essay will show, it is true for the artistic cycle found in Brazil's Igreja da Pampulha. In particular, this essay will examine Cândido Portinari's depiction of the Wolf of Gubbio on the façade of the Igreja da Pampulha. It will suggest that this unusual story was so prominently depicted on the church in Brazil because it highlights key Franciscan themes, specifically peacemaking and social justice, which spoke profoundly to societal needs.

* The topic of this paper emerged from my participation in the 2008 NEH Summer Seminar, St. Francis and the Thirteenth Century, led by Prof. William R. Cook and capably assisted by Dr. Bradley Franco. Thanks to the generous hospitality of Dr. Maria Cecília de Miranda Nogueira Coelho, organizer of the 2012 11 Congresso Brasileiro de Retórica at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil, I was able to visit and learn more about the Igreja São Francisco de Assis, Lagoa da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil. Dr. Nogueira Coelho's insights, her generous assistance in checking Brazilian Portuguese-language sources, and her consultation of the Portinari archives in Rio de Janeiro were invaluable in the final stages of writing this essay. Much of the research conducted for this paper took place during my sabbatical year 2012–13 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., which allowed me access to resources I would have been unable to consult otherwise. Special thanks are due, too, to the librarians and staff there, who were adversely affected, as were all federal employees termed “non-essential,” by the federal government shutdown in October 2013. Some of the final edits to this paper took place at the American Academy in Rome in late January 2014, and my conversations with two of the Fellows, Mari Yoko Hara and Irene San Pietro, helped me to think through Portinari's depiction of the “Wolf.”
in mid-twentieth-century Brazil. And as we will see, the story of the Wolf of Gubbio and its promise of peace through social justice continue to resonate up to the present day.

The story of the Wolf of Gubbio first appeared in the *Fioretti di San Francesco*, a compilation of stories about St. Francis circulating in the mid-fourteenth century and attributed to Ugolino Brunforte. According to this account, published nearly a century and a half after the death of St. Francis, a fierce wolf terrorized the city of Gubbio and attacked and killed their flocks in the countryside before developing a preference for human flesh. The wolf would lurk outside the walls of the city, lying in wait to attack and kill anyone who dared to emerge. The citizens of Gubbio warn St. Francis not to leave the city, but he, wishing to resolve the situation peacefully, goes out to seek the wolf anyway. He rebukes the wolf for its wicked behavior, but he also offers an opportunity for the wolf to repent, to turn away from its evil habits, and be forgiven, as St. Francis understands that the wolf’s savagery has been motivated by its hunger. He offers a practical solution as well: should the wolf promise not to attack either flocks or people ever again, the townspeople promise to feed the wolf daily. The wolf agrees to this bargain with St. Francis, and then, later, with the townspeople as well. And so the wolf becomes the pet of Gubbio until its death of natural causes two years later. According to Cook, “the story is genuinely Franciscan although I do not know to what extent it is historical.”

Given the story’s late origin, the Wolf of Gubbio is not found in Bonaventure’s *Legenda Maior* nor is it represented in the fresco cycle in the Upper Church at Assisi. At the same time, themes endemic to the story are present in a number of the stories depicted in the Assisi fresco cycle. In order to understand the

---


2 The late nineteenth-century Nicaraguan poet, Rubén Darío, gives a different twist to the end of the story in his poem based on the story of the Wolf of Gubbio, “Los Motivos del Lobo.” Ruben Dario, *Poesias Completas*, ed. Alfonso Mendez Plancarte (Madrid: Aguilar, 1967), 833–837. Submitting for a time to the social contract with the citizens of Gubbio organized by St. Francis, the wolf witnesses first-hand the envy, anger, hate, lust, dishonor, and lies endemic in human society and, also experiencing human maltreatment, decides to revert to his savage state to again defend and feed himself. See Weston L. Kennison’s essay (Chapter 8), also in this volume.


4 The earliest artistic representation of the Wolf of Gubbio in Italy is a fresco inside the Church of San Francesco at Pienza, dated to the second half of the fourteenth century and painted by artists of the Siene school, Cristofano di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero. Of the seven scenes of the life of St. Francis on the Borgo San Sepolcro altarpiece by Sasseta (1437–44), the Wolf scene is the only narrative not found in St. Bonaventure’s *Legenda Maior*. 