

How Northern was the Northern Master at Assisi?

Dr Paul Binski, *University of Cambridge*, delivered the 2001 *Aspects of Art Lecture* at the *British Academy* on 29 March 2001. In an edited extract below, Dr Binski explores the artistic influences on the painters who worked in the great basilica at Assisi.

The *Aspects of Art Lecture* is one of three Academy lecture series established by the Henriette Hertz Trust. Provision was made for a lecture 'on some problem or aspect of the relation of Art in any of its manifestations to human culture; Art including Poetry and Music as well as Sculpture and Painting'. The first lecture was delivered in 1916.

Figure 1. The basilica of San Francesco at Assisi, nave of upper church

The devastating earthquake which hit the basilica of San Francesco at Assisi in 1997 (Figure 1) has once again focused scholarly attention on this revolutionary monument of European painting, a veritable foyer for most of the major Central Italian painters of the generations around 1300. At the time of the earthquake, I was working on one of the less well-known aspects of the church's decoration: the earliest evidence for the painting of the Upper Church prior to the activity of the workshops of the great artists Cimabue and the painters closely associated (though in ways which remain controversial) with Giotto. Seldom is academic research so abruptly interrupted by an act of God; yet miraculously my particular subject, the paintings by the so-called 'Northern Master',

survived largely unscathed despite the total destruction of frescoes by Cimabue nearby. Understanding these earliest but complex and poorly-preserved images is valuable in at least two senses. First, it is important to assess the date and character of the first scheme of decoration in the Upper Church in order to understand how or whether it determined what was to follow; second, the 'Northern Master' has been placed by German and Italian scholars in the context of English art. The history of pre-Giottesque painting in the Upper Church at Assisi is thus held to be profoundly cosmopolitan, and reasonably so: San Francesco's position as a harbinger of the Gothic style in Italy is emphasised by its French-influenced rib-vaulted structure and architectural sculpture and by its extensive use, from the middle



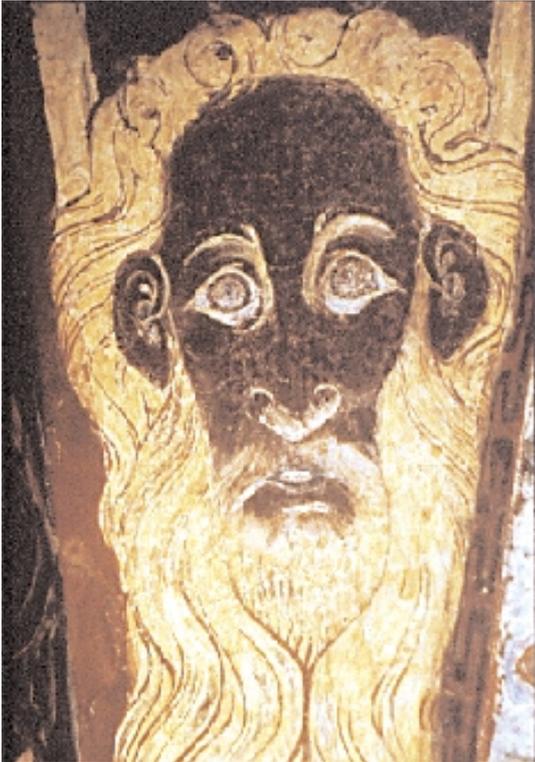


Figure 2. Mask from vault of right transept

of the thirteenth century, of stained glass, until then a predominantly northern medium. So a major objective of the present research has been to assess the truth of the assertion that the greatest early showcase of Italian art was influenced directly or indirectly by English artists, and to explore alternative hypotheses.

The 'Northern Master' and his team were employed in painting the right transept of the church including its vault (Figure 2). Investigations conducted by Italian experts after the earthquake suggested that this workshop collaborated rather more closely than has been thought, starting probably during the pontificate of Pope Nicholas III (1277–80). The northern artists introduced distinctively Gothic detailing and figure styles and are now also known to have used oil paint, a technique of predominantly northern currency at this time. They began the decoration of the upper part of the transept with murals of the Transfiguration and Majesty of Christ raised up over an arcade of paintings of the Apostles. It seems sensible to place these images in the context of English imagery of the thirteenth century. The results of this comparison provided the first grounds for thinking that the painters may not in fact have come from England or have been influenced by English art. The Transfiguration

mural (Figure 3) is related to a small group of early thirteenth-century English Psalters in showing God the Father with Christ Transfigured; but in fact this iconography was more widespread in Europe than has been believed and from Assisi's perspective is perhaps most readily comprehensible in the light of Franciscan theology, especially that of St Bonaventure, Minister-General of the Franciscan Order (d. 1274). St Bonaventure's *Tree of Life* states that the Transfiguration is a revelation of the mystery of the Trinity, and its glory a prefiguration of the Resurrection. Bonaventure in his *Life of St Francis* also implies that the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor offers a powerful subtext to the greatest Franciscan theophany, the Stigmatization of St Francis himself on Mount La Verna, not least in its emphasis on the esoteric nature of the events as a kind of *imitatio Christi*; the Ascension and Majesty images are thus disclosures of those things kept secret before the Resurrection. The inclusion of God in the representation is in any event a sign of what John Fleming has called the 'radical Trinitarianism' of Franciscan and, doubtless, Bonaventuran spirituality: the Transfiguration with God is located over the Apostles because the Franciscan evangelical mission has been handed down to Christ and his Apostles and apostolic followers from 'the father of all illumination' in the words of Nicholas III's Bull *Exiit qui seminat* of 1279. In short, the artists at Assisi may perfectly well have been able to arrive at this formulation as a result of mainstream Franciscan promptings about the nature and significance of this Gospel event, rather than the stimulus of comparatively obscure English sources. If so, these paintings, which are not true frescoes, anticipate important aspects of

Figure 3. Christ, detail of the Transfiguration mural



the Evangelical tone of Cimabue's paintings on the adjacent crossing vault.

Much the same point emerges about the general style and approach of these painters (Figure 4). Their techniques and general approach to decoration undoubtedly suggest familiarity with Gothic art north of the Alps. This was certainly a period when Anglo-Italian artistic exchanges were getting under way: English thirteenth-century pictorial art was known in influential quarters in the form of *Opus Anglicanum*, or embroidery, imported to Italy and to papal circles. The period in which the right transept was being painted coincided, too, with the employment by the court and abbey at Westminster of Roman Cosmati

Figure 4. St Matthew Evangelist symbol, detail from right transept



mosaicists between the mid-1260s and 1280s. This points to a dialogue of sorts. However, a close examination of the style of these paintings casts doubt on the confident assertion of recent writers on Assisi, most notably the German scholars Hans Belting and Frank Martin, that they should be placed in an English context. The key English works cited in connection with Assisi have been the celebrated Westminster Retable in Westminster Abbey, the Douce Apocalypse (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 180), and the murals of St Thomas, St Christopher and St Faith also in Westminster Abbey. Belting was especially attracted to the Retable and the Abbey murals by their co-ordination of figurative and architectural composition, which he saw as linked intimately with the architectural *mise-en-scène* of the Assisi murals. But there are pressing objections to this theory. The first is that the stylistic analogies are insufficiently strong; the second is that the English group of works is not so securely dated that we could be confident of their ability to influence Italian commissions around 1280. Belting very properly noted that equally good comparisons can be found in north-eastern French or Netherlandish manuscript painting of the later thirteenth century.

One powerful argument fully explored by Belting for the employment of artists who were closely acquainted with Gothic monumental art is provided by the painters' *mise-en-scène* of the upper parts of the right transept: a Gothic '*struktive Illusionismus*' in which painted architecture of a type developed by the 'Rayonnant' style in France combined with the actual architecture to form a complex network within which figurative compositions are located. In this illusion lie in part the origins of the *trompe l'oeil* effects employed throughout the church by Cimabue and the Giottesque painters. What then were the origins of the motifs used by the 'northern' painters in forming this painterly illusion? After an exhaustive search a clear answer can be found. Hans Belting made little of the one sector where this type of painters' architecture became a leitmotiv in the late thirteenth century, namely in stained glass produced in the upper Rhineland. The key monument is the clerestory glazing of the nave at Strasbourg cathedral, of which construction began in the 1240s and was still underway in the 1260s. The extraordinarily ambitious canopies developed in the glass of the nave clerestory at some point between the 1260s and about 1275 include the earliest instances of the motifs repeated at Assisi. Exactly this language characterises the drawings

prepared probably around 1277 or slightly later for the west facade of the cathedral, notably the interior triforium of the tower bays which are to all intents and purposes identical to the Assisi instances.

Several points follow from the suggestion that the architectural sources for Assisi are more likely to have been found in Rhenish Rayonnant of the 1260s and 1270s than in London or Paris. The first is that if this supposition is correct, it would render a date for the start of work on the right transept before *c.* 1275 unlikely, and a date in the 1250s or 1260s highly unlikely, in terms of the dates of the sources. The Rhenish connections help to stabilize the chronology of this generally poorly-documented building. Even at a date of *c.* 1280 the Assisi work is tellingly up to date. Thus Cimabue probably followed quickly on the heels of the 'Northern Master'. Second, it is striking that artists at Assisi turned to the one source, Strasbourg, which was a key centre of influence for architectural design in central Italy throughout much of the trecento. It has not before been suggested that Assisi might have inaugurated this Rhenish orientation, nor that this orientation might have arisen not merely because of Strasbourg's relative proximity, but also because of the size and authority of its stained glass workshops, a natural attraction to the designers of a church like Assisi where stained glass was emerging as a major, indeed in the early stages the dominant, medium of interior decoration.

We arrive then at the conclusion that the art of the Rhineland – ironically almost totally neglected in accounts of Assisi by German scholars – may have been a more fundamental influence at Assisi than that of England. Whether or not the painters involved were themselves Rhenish in origin is

unclear. Many features of the paintings under discussion suggest an unusual co-operation between painters familiar with northern art, and Italians – in fact the same type of eclecticism also found in the basilica's stained glass. The 'Northern Master' and his assistants were sufficiently heterogeneous to cast doubt on any single 'national' understanding of their art. We must recall that the circumstances at Assisi were fundamentally Franciscan: the basilica of San Francesco was built, and in its early stages decorated, very much in line with the norms of northern European Gothic churches, but in the knowledge too of earlier Franciscan art, as for example at Erfurt. The murals actively celebrate the Franciscan evangelical mission in a meeting of styles. Such circumstances favoured an eclecticism unmatched elsewhere in Italian art of the later thirteenth century. The existence of a far-flung aesthetic regime at Assisi can be seen as a corollary of the evangelical objectives of its Order. Artistic eclecticism in this sense was not circumstantial but ideological. It exemplified both an assimilation of, and a reaching-out to, the World. The next two or three decades at Assisi, starting with the assumption of power by Cimabue's clearly much more centralized and homogeneous workshop, and then by Romans and Giottesque painters, were to witness a form of *rappel à l'ordre*, and the replacement of an evangelical eclecticism by 'Roman arguments' and a papal *gravitas* appropriate to a building which acted as a papal chapel. A once-inclusive Franciscan vision was replaced by a vastly more exclusive, and, it has to be said, vastly more successful, project of renewal.

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