Active, so far we know, solely for Franciscan churches and perhaps himself a
member of the order, this anonymous artist was first identified and his oeuvre
reconstructed by Henry Thode (1885).[1] The name-piece of the group of works that
Thode assembled is the panel with a full-length figure of Saint Francis in the
museum of the basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi. Also assigned to this
painter by Thode were five frescoes with stories from the legend of Saint Francis in
the lower church of the same basilica; the painted crucifix in the Pinacoteca
Nazionale in Perugia, dated 1272; and other works, not all of which are now
recognized as works by this master. Subsequently this nucleus was first whittled
down by the elimination of reattributed works, and then augmented with various
other paintings, such as the fragmentary fresco (Madonna and Child with an Angel
) in the lower church of the basilica in Assisi; although the authorship of the latter is
disputed, it should probably be considered the result of the painter’s first stylistic
phase and as having been executed in connection with the burial of Cardinal Pietro
di Barro in 1252.[2]

The characteristic features of the style of the Master of Saint Francis, an artist
probably trained in Umbria, are rapid and energetic drawing, brilliant color, and the
effort to capture the character and state of mind of the personages represented,
who express themselves with vivid and elegant gestures. In his painting, as Luigi
Coletti (1941) observed, “the bronze-like hardness and the dramatic tension [of his
predecessors of more direct Byzantine dependence] are dissolved in a
composition characterized by gentler rhythms . . . by planar masses concentrated
entirely in the foreground, and by broad stains [of color] that absorb the
chiaroscuro in delicate pearly harmonies.”[3] Attempts have also been made to
consider the Master of Saint Francis a kind of “humorist”[4] who exaggerated the
formulae inherited from Byzantine art to give a stronger expressive charge to the
personages he created. But in fact the roots of the style of this anonymous master
are to be sought not so much in the figurative culture of Byzantium as in painting in
Spoleto in the mid-thirteenth century[5] and in French and English Gothic painting.
A clear testimony of this latter influence is given by the stained-glass windows of
the upper church of San Francesco, where the large quatrefoils of the transept
were realized by transalpine artists, probably from France, on the south side, while the style of the Master of Saint Francis can be recognized in the forms of the opposite side.\[6\] In some of the windows of the nave, for example in the one with the stories of Saint Thomas,\[7\] the two workshops seem to have worked side by side. The execution of these works is variously dated; from the stylistic point of view, they suggest a phase less advanced than the crucifix of 1272 and the panels being discussed here, with a provenance from Perugia. It may be assumed that the artist began his career in Assisi, in contact both with exponents of local painting and with the transalpine masters active in the basilica, and that he produced not only stained glass and paintings (both murals and on panel) but also illuminated manuscripts in the 1250s and 1260s.\[8\]


des ‘Franziskusmeisters,’” Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch 25 (1963): 109–150; Fra
Ludovico da Pietralunga and Pietro Scarpellini (intro. and comm.), Descrizione della
Basilica di S. Francesco e di altri Santuari di Assisi (Treviso, 1982), 180; Miklós
Boskovits, Pittura umbra e marchigiana fra Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi nella

and Gerhard Ruf, Die Glasmalereien von San Francesco in Assisi: Entstehung und
Entwicklung einer Gattung in Italien (Regensburg, 1997), 267–290, who attributed
the rest of the stained glass of the nave and that of the south transept to a
gotische Werkstatt (253–267).

[7] I refer in particular to a stained-glass window panel in the north wall of the third
bay of the entrance that Frank Martin and Gerhard Ruf (1997) attributed to a “Gothic
workshop.” These authors suggested a date of c. 1275. See Frank Martin and
Gerhard Ruf, Die Glasmalereien von San Francesco in Assisi: Entstehung und
Entwicklung einer Gattung in Italien (Regensburg, 1997), 265, figs. 119, 125. It
seems clear to me, however, that the figure to the extreme left of the scene was
drawn not by the same artist as the rest of the scene but by the Master of Saint
Francis.

[8] The chronology of the artist is still very controversial. Most art historians have
followed Edward B. Garrison (1949) in dating his career to the period c. 1265–1280,
while the older literature proposed for the frescoes of the lower church of San
Francesco at Assisi dates close to or even antecedent to the midcentury; cf.
Edward B. Garrison, Italian Romanesque Panel Painting: An Illustrated Index
(Florence, 1949), 27–28. My own suggestion, placing the execution of the frescoes
in relation to the consecration of the church in 1253, now seems to me to push the
dating too far back; cf. Miklós Boskovits, Pittura umbra e marchigiana fra
Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi nella Galleria Nazionale di Perugia (Florence,
1973), 3–7. The frescoes were probably painted c. 1257–1261, as suggested, for
example, by Luiz Marques, La peinture du Duecento en Italie centrale (Paris, 1987),
59, 114. For the activity of the Master of Saint Francis as a miniaturist, cf. Laurence
B. Kanter and Pia Palladino, in The Treasury of Saint Francis of Assisi, ed. Giovanni
Morello and Laurence B. Kanter (Milan, 1999), 140–141.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)
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