

FINAL

Heavenly Earth

Images of Saint Francis at La Verna

Early accounts of the life of Francis of Assisi report that in September 1224 the friar retreated with his companion Brother Leo to the wilderness of La Verna, a solitary mountain east of Florence, Italy. There he began a forty-day fast and contemplation of Christ's Passion, during which he prayed fervently to share in Christ's suffering. The answer to his prayer came in a vision of a fiery six-winged angel, or seraph, enfolding the figure of Jesus on a cross. As the seraph departed, the wounds of Christ's crucifixion, called the stigmata (nail marks through hands and feet, a piercing of the torso), appeared on Francis's own body. He bore these wounds for the remaining two years of his life. Today the Sanctuary of La Verna is an active monastery and, after Assisi, the second-holiest site for the Franciscan order.

In the centuries following Francis's death and subsequent canonization, the Franciscan order fostered the creation of pictorial narratives of his life that often draw parallels to the life of Christ. Few artists depicted the dramatic landscape of La Verna with any degree of accuracy until the gifted draftsman Jacopo Ligozzi accepted a Franciscan commission in 1608 to travel to La Verna and render its breathtaking topography. Ligozzi's drawings appeared as full-page plates in the *Description of the Sacred Mountain of La Verna*, one of the great illustrated books of the period. Two copies of this celebrated publication, both recent acquisitions, are joined here by a range of Franciscan imagery drawn primarily from the collection of the National Gallery of Art.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington

COSMÈ TURA

Ferrarese, c. 1433 – 1495

*Initial G:**Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*

1470s

miniature on vellum

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Rosenwald Collection, 1946

This elegant illustration featuring the letter G in the shape of a dragon-like creature was cut from a now-lost choir book, where it adorned a page marking the Feast of Saint Francis (October 4). The first line of the text would have read *Gaudeamus omnes in Domino* (Let us all rejoice in the Lord).

Here a serene Francis kneels in a riverbed that winds past several tree stumps symbolizing Christ's suffering. This unusual depiction of Francis in water parallels images of Christ's baptism. In the background, Francis's companion Brother Leo reads next to a modest chapel representing the new religious order of friars that Francis established.

GERMAN 15TH CENTURY

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata

c. 1480

hand-colored woodcut

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Rosenwald Collection, 1943

Religious woodcuts, often hand-colored, circulated widely in the fifteenth century. Owing to their ephemeral nature, however, few exist today. Here Francis looks up toward the vision of the crucified Christ as Brother Leo sits behind him. Although churches are commonly included in images of the stigmatization, none existed in the wilderness of La Verna at the time Saint Francis journeyed there to meditate.

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GERMAN 15TH CENTURY

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata

1500/1510

hand-colored woodcut

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Rosenwald Collection, 1943

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ITALIAN 15TH CENTURY

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata

1470/1480

woodcut

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Rosenwald Collection, 1943

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NICOLÒ BOLDRINI

Italian, born c. 1510, active c. 1530 – c. 1570

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata

(after Titian)

c. 1530

woodcut

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 2005

Created at the height of the Renaissance, this virtuoso woodcut achieves greater tonal complexities than earlier examples of the medium. The dynamic lines in the landscape serve to heighten the open-armed gestures of Brother Leo and Saint Francis. The approaching vision, now simplified to the form of a cross, dissolves the trees in its brilliance.

FEDERICO BAROCCI

Italian, probably 1535 – 1612

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata

c. 1581

etching and engraving

Kirk Edward Long Collection

FEDERICO BAROCCI

Italian, probably 1535 – 1612

Vision of Saint Francis, or The Pardon

(Il Perdono d'Assisi)

1581

etching and engraving

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1972

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, repentant sinners sought papal forgiveness (referred to as a pardon, or indulgence) to shorten their time in purgatory. This print represents Francis's vision of Christ and the Virgin granting him the full pardon he sought for the poor people of Assisi, who could not afford to travel to Rome to receive such forgiveness from the pope. Francis then requested papal approval to designate the small chapel where the vision occurred — the Porziuncola chapel outside Assisi — as an alternate place to obtain a pardon. Although no papal bull, or decree, was ever written, the request was evidently approved: pilgrim records invoking the "Pardon of Assisi" date back to 1277.

For this episode Barocci used the conventional pose of Francis receiving the stigmata — kneeling with his arms outstretched — possibly to legitimize the pardon as coming directly from Christ, despite the lack of a papal bull. The same pose appears, in reverse, in the adjacent print by Barocci of the saint receiving the stigmata at La Verna.

SEBASTIANO RICCI

Venetian, 1659 – 1734

The Ecstasy of Saint Francis

1706/1720

pen and ink and wash

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of Mrs. Rudolf J. Heinemann, in Honor of the
50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, 1991

Saint Francis turns and sinks into the supporting arms of angels as he is pierced with rays from an apparition above. With lively ink strokes, Ricci only hints at the stigmatization through diagonal lines descending toward Francis. A shadowy witness to the right — possibly Brother Leo — hides his face from the dazzling scene before him.

GIROLAMO ROMANINO

Brescian-Venetian, 1484/1487 – c. 1560

*The Madonna and Child with Saints Francis
and Anthony Abbot and a Donor*

1515/1519

chalk

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Woodner Collection,
Gift of Andrea Woodner, 2006

A composition with the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus side by side with saints and a donor, called a *sacra conversazione* (holy conversation), suggests a mystical yet familial relationship between the holy figures and was common throughout the Renaissance. Francis was frequently included because of his tender devotion to Mary and the Christ child.

PIETRO FACCINI

Italian, c. 1562 – 1602

Saint Francis with the Christ Child

1590s

etching

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1972

In the wake of the Protestant Reformation and its rejection of most religious art, the Catholic Church responded by reaffirming the importance of images for teaching doctrine to laypeople. This emphasis on pictorial religious instruction led to the introduction of new subjects, such as this composition. Here Francis looks up toward a floating vision of the Virgin Mary, from whom he has mystically received the baby Jesus. Pressing her hand tenderly toward her breast, Mary indicates her maternal sacrifice and emphasizes her separation from the reaching infant, whose future stigmata would be transferred to the devoted saint.

LODOVICO CARRACCI

Bolognese, 1555 – 1619

The Nativity with Saints Francis and Agnes

c. 1605

pen and ink and wash with heightening over chalk;
traces of incising

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Adolph Caspar Miller Fund, 1975

Francis often appears in nativity scenes, for he is said to have initiated the reenactment of the adoration of the infant Christ in a manger, a tradition that endures today in the Christmas crèche.

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FRANCESCO VILLAMENA

Italian, 1566 – 1624

The Vision of Saint Francis
(after Ferraù Fenzoni)

1597

engraving

Kirk Edward Long Collection

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CLAUDE MELLAN

French, 1598 – 1688

Saint Francis Adoring the Christ Child

third quarter of the 17th century

engraving

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1974

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AGOSTINO CARRACCI

Bolognese, 1557 – 1602

Saint Francis Consoled by the Musical Angel

(after Francesco Vanni)

1595

engraving

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1974

In an episode from a fourteenth-century collection of stories from the life of Saint Francis, an angel came to the meditating friar a year after he received the stigmata, consoling him with music: “An angel appeared to him with exceeding great splendor, that held a viol in his left hand and a bow in his right; and...the angel drew his bow once upwards across the viol; and straightway Saint Francis heard such sweet melody that it ravished his soul and lifted him beyond all bodily sense” (*The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*).

JOHAN BAPTIST ENZENSBERGER

German, 1733 – 1773

The Stigmatization of Saint Francis

1760s

pen and ink with wash over graphite

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Wolfgang Ratjen Collection, Patrons' Permanent Fund, 2007

Most images of Francis's stigmatization show him receiving the wounds from a small figure of the crucified Christ held by a seraph, an angel of the highest rank. Here, instead, the figure of Christ is depicted without the cross and merges with that of the winged seraph. In this dynamic composition, Francis receives the stigmata via connecting lines that descend directly from Christ's right hand to Francis's right hand (for example) without crossing. The artist added God the Father above and a winged figure in the middle ground, presumably an angel, who serves to fill the space with dramatic movement.

PIETER CLAESZ SOUTMAN

Dutch, c. 1580 – 1657

Saint Francis

(after Francesco Bassano II)

1620 – 1657

etching

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1984

AGOSTINO CARRACCI

Bolognese, 1557 – 1602

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata

1586

engraving

Private Collection

ANNIBALE CARRACCI

Bolognese, 1560 – 1609

Saint Francis of Assisi

1585

engraving

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Andrew W. Mellon Fund, 1977

Annibale Carracci's emphatic manner of engraving, with thick, rough lines, emphasizes the rugged, coarse aspects of nature as well as Francis's utter disregard for his own comfort. Francis appears in harmony with the wilderness around him, his fingers raw and jagged, his habit patched and frayed, and his toes gnarled and knobby like the roots and rocks nearby. The tiered, prominent halo around his head radiates like the sun.

LUCAS EMIL VORSTERMAN

Flemish, 1595 – 1675

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata

(after Sir Peter Paul Rubens)

1620

engraving

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Andrew W. Mellon Fund, 1978

Rubens turned to popular Catholic literature such as *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* for some details of his design, including the falcon in the oak tree in the upper right, said to awaken the saint for prayers each day he spent at La Verna.

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JOHANN MATTHIAS KAGER

German, 1575 – 1634

The Stigmatization of Saint Francis

1607

pen and ink with wash

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Director's Discretionary Fund, 2000

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GUIDO RENI

Bolognese, 1575 – 1642

Head of Saint Francis

before c. 1632

chalk on blue paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1972

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BERNARDO STROZZI

Genoese-Venetian, 1581/1582 – 1644

Saint Francis in Prayer

c. 1620/1630

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Gift of Joseph F. McCrindle, 2002

Trained as a painter, Strozzi became a Franciscan monk in Genoa. In 1610 he left the monastery to care for his ailing mother and sister and never returned, instead pursuing a career as an artist. He was influenced by Caravaggio, as is evident in the dramatic lighting in this painting. Here the prayerful pose and direct gaze implore the viewer to a life of devotion through Saint Francis's example.

ANDREA ANDREANI

Italian, 1558/1559 – 1629

Saint Francis of Assisi

(after Alessandro Casolani)

1591

chiaroscuro woodcut from four blocks

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 2016

Andreani was highly skilled in the printmaking technique of the chiaroscuro woodcut, a process whereby separate blocks of wood are carved for each color in the design and then printed one over the other. The tradition of comparing Saint Francis with Christ is evident in this image, where the weary saint walks through the wilderness with a full-size cross, recalling images of Jesus carrying his cross to Calvary. Francis's hands are positioned to display their wounds and his fingers point toward a skull, representing the fleetingness of earthly pleasures and vanity.

LUCAS VAN LEYDEN

Netherlandish, 1489/1494 – 1533

Saint Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata

c. 1514

engraving

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Rosenwald Collection, 1943

JEAN-JACQUES DE BOISSIEU

French, 1736 – 1810

Desert Monks

(after Francisco de Zurbarán)

1797

etching, drypoint, and roulette

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 2000

This image of Saint Francis was based on a vision reported by Pope Nicholas V, who descended into the crypt of the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi in 1449 and encountered the saint standing before him, his eyes cast upward.

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN

Dutch, 1606 – 1669

Saint Francis beneath a Tree Praying

1657

drypoint and etching

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Rosenwald Collection, 1943

Rembrandt was clearly still working out this composition when he set the plate aside: at right, in a largely preliminary passage, the hooded figure of Brother Leo studies in a setting that is difficult to decipher, whereas the saint and the crucified Christ are fully developed.

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FRANCESCO VILLAMENA

Italian, 1566 – 1624

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata
(after Federico Barocci)

1597

engraving

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Purchased as the Gift of Jimmy and Jessica Younger, Houston, 2015

This print includes several popular details from *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, such as the presence of the falcon who reportedly woke Saint Francis daily for his prayers, and the blazing light on the mount of La Verna witnessed by local farmers, one of whom is depicted here in the background pointing toward the sky.

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PIETRO ROTARI

Venetian, 1707 – 1762

Saint Francis

1730 – 1762

etching

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1974

[DEX 17 (left side of vitrine)]

JACOPO LIGOZZI (DESIGNER)

Italian, 1547–1627

DOMENICO FALCINI (ENGRAVER)

Italian, born c. 1570

The Chapel of the Cardinal [plate G] in Fra Lino Moroni,
Descrizione del Sacro Monte della Vernia
(*Description of the Sacred Mountain of La Verna*)
(Florence, 1612)

bound volume with one engraved frontispiece and 22 etched or engraved
illustrations with overslips on plates F, G, I, R (2)

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Acquisition funded by a grant from The B. H. Breslauer Foundation, 2013

[DEX 29 (right side of vitrine)]

JACOPO LIGOZZI (DESIGNER)

Italian, 1547–1627

DOMENICO FALCINI (ENGRAVER)

Italian, born c. 1570

The Bed of Saint Francis [plate R] in Fra Lino Moroni,
Descrizione del Sacro Monte della Vernia
(*Description of the Sacred Mountain of La Verna*)
(Florence, 1612)

bound volume with one engraved frontispiece and 22 etched or engraved
illustrations with overslips on plates F, G, I, O, R

National Gallery of Art Library, David K. E. Bruce Fund

Description of the Sacred Mountain of La Verna

In 1608 the Franciscan brother Lino Moroni invited the head of the Academy of Drawing in Florence, Jacopo Ligozzi, to accompany him to La Verna to illustrate the experiences of Saint Francis and the buildings of the Franciscan community established there. Meticulously observing the site, Ligozzi designed a frontispiece and a set of twenty-two illustrations to be etched for a book describing the sanctuary. Seven of his drawings were subsequently etched by Raffaello Schiaminossi and the remaining engraved most likely by Domenico Falcini. Five of the illustrations boast the innovative addition of pasted overslips, which when lifted reveal the changes to the topography of La Verna over time or features otherwise hidden in the rocky landscape. Both volumes on display here are open to pages with overslips.

[DEX 29 (right side of vitrine)]

Plate R depicts the so-called bed of Saint Francis, a flat stone the friar slept on in a cave beneath jagged, overhanging boulders, here cleverly depicted on overslips viewers can lift to see the dwelling hidden beneath. This area is a short distance from the first cell of Saint Francis, seen in the volume at left (plate G), and is nestled along a gorge that cuts through La Verna. The text on the facing page notes that at some point before Ligozzi visited, the “bed” was covered by a metal grate, to discourage pilgrims from chipping away at the rock to obtain a personal relic. (Ligozzi, however, did not depict the grate.)

[DEX 17 (left side of vitrine)]

Plate G depicts the exterior of the Chapel of the Cardinal, perched at the top of a deep chasm that cuts into the mountain of La Verna. The engraved overslip of a boulder lifts to reveal the stairs leading down to the Chapel of Saint Mary Magdalene, the first cell Saint Francis purportedly resided in at La Verna.