

A Saint to be Looked at: The Image of St. Francis in Thirteenth-Century Panel Paintings

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“Un santo da guardare: l'immagine di san Francesco nelle tavole del Duecento”

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1. The panel paintings of St. Francis: an innovation

Thirteenth-century pictorial representations of St. Francis are very numerous, at least in Italy. Begun in the immediate wake of his canonization, they were soon so widespread that Francis became the most often depicted saint in thirteenth-century Italy, surpassed only by images of Christ and Mary. The technique, material, and iconographic structure of these pictures varies considerably. There are temperas on wooden panels, frescoes and miniatures—though never statues. The saint may be depicted alone or with other saints or with scenes from his life. Our subject does not include this entire production (cfr. for example Scarpellini 1982; Frugoni 1993). Instead we will consider the most characteristic genre of the iconography of Francis, the illustrated panel painting.

Used for the first time for Francis, illustrated panel paintings were produced in great numbers throughout the thirteenth century (but not beyond). They occupy a very prominent place in the general process by which new iconographic types and new ways of using images are introduced into Italian panel painting. Through a series of works (very few in number compared to those actually produced) whose formal characteristics were

similar, there developed a cult of painted images that was both original and powerful. It was not long before other thirteenth-century religious communities and institutions adopted this model.

The series of painted panels of St. Francis is like a series of variations on a single theme. One very innovative feature of the panel is that it is always approximately the same shape: a rectangle surmounted by a cusp. Moreover, the invariable combination of the saint's figure and the illustrated episodes that surround it is without precedent in panel painting (Hager 1962, pp. 90ff; Krüger 1992, pp. 13ff, 195ff).

The panel is laid out in such a way that actually combines two essentially different genres of image in a single object, formally complete. In the center, depicted frontally and with solemn severity, is the full-length figure of the saint. This is the *imago*. It is surrounded by a running series of small images representing episodes from his legend. This is the *historia*. The *imago*, since its purpose is to represent the saint, strives to create an impression of his presence, just as the narrative or *historia* represents his life and work in chronological order.

The two genres, the *imago* and the *historia*, derive from different traditions and their function is linked to different contexts. As a cult image, the *imago* was an object of religious veneration. According to the liturgical practice of the medieval Church, it was used primarily as a miraculous icon to be carried in procession or placed above the altar. On the other hand, the *historia* takes its origin from the epic or biographical narrative through images, as in the series of episodes that ran along the walls of the nave of the church or were found in liturgical manuscripts. These commemorated historical facts, either in the sense of liturgical memory or in the sense that they evoked the saint's legend.

Thus the panels of Francis combine "the cultic image as a symbol of his presence with narrative through images as a symbol of his story" (Belting 1990, p. 20). The purpose of this new form is complex, artistically speaking. How did such an extraordinary innovation come about during this period and for this saint? What were the historical circumstances that hastened and favored the rapid spread of these panels? What was their devotional function? Above all, what message was conveyed by this presentation of the saint, whose panels were making his portrait and biography known everywhere through images?

2. The origin: two remote models

The question of the origin of this new form of image turns out to be complicated. The large format of the panels, with the characteristic shape

ending in a tympanum, goes back to a type of votive image that was very common in the past. Like the panels of Francis, it formed part of the altar and ended in the same way. We are referring to the "tabernacle of Mary," which contained within its illustrated doors a sculpture of our Lady enthroned (fig. 1). This type of devotional image became widespread in the twelfth century, especially among the older monastic orders and the secular clergy. The panels of Francis, in their shape and in the relationship between the central figure and the side scenes, clearly harked back to this revered model. But they added something new. On the one hand, they rejected the expressive forms of three-dimensional sculpture and used instead the alternative form of the flat icon painted on a gold background. Consequently they no longer arranged the episodes from the saint's life on movable doors, but on a single surface, surrounding the figure. The panels created an association between the narrative scenes and the figure of the saint through a sort of two-dimensional, or even, as in the case of the Marian tabernacles, three-dimensional integration.

This brings us to the image of the saint. This type of monumental icon-portrait, new in Western panel painting, harked back to a second prototype, the Oriental form of the icon, with the figure of the saint surrounded by scenes from his life, which had been widespread for a long time in Byzantium (Stubblebine 1966, pp. 91ff; Demus 1970, pp. 211ff). But in Byzantium these icons were rectangular and were considerably smaller than the images of Francis. Another difference is that, unlike the latter, the Byzantine icons never served as altarpieces. And so, with regard to material, the panels of Francis borrowed the elongated form (not the dimensions) from the Oriental tradition and combined it with an upper part ending in a tympanum as established in the Western tradition of the great altar tabernacles.

The illustrated panel of Francis is thus a mixed form. It explicitly harked back to the Byzantine icon, repeating the latter's visual effect, but it joined to this the functional need, typical of Western tradition, for an altar image with the characteristic cusp.

3. The panel as a witness to Francis's holiness

We need to ask what special circumstances gave rise to this very new and distinctive form of image and what were the motives, whether they were iconological or of a more general nature. First of all, the lack of interest in three-dimensional votive statues (which, as mentioned, were venerated especially among the older orders and the secular clergy) can be linked to the rigorist tendencies of the reforming orders. Among the latter were the Franciscans, for whom statues were seen as idols par excellence.

But this is not enough to explain the historical anomaly of panels and their particular shape. Their origin is closely linked to the person of the saint himself and the specific features of his cult, whose spread they were meant to promote.

Francis captured the imagination of his contemporaries like no other medieval figure. A man of his time, this brother from Assisi was very much alive in contemporary thought. His rapid canonization (barely two years after his death) had given him a power of attraction so extraordinary that it immediately eclipsed that of even the oldest and most venerated martyrs and the saints of early Christianity. The novelty of the miracle of the stigmata, the physical impression of the five wounds that raised him to the level of a living image of Christ, played a decisive role in this. In him, the new consciousness of oneself as a follower of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) reached perfection. The Franciscan Order claimed to be the most radical expression of this, with its return to the preaching of the apostles and evangelical poverty.

The saint's conformity to Christ gave him a charism of incomparable power, but it also gave rise to many doubts and uncertainties, even accusations of blasphemy. Thus the figure of Francis was at the center of violent controversies over the interpretation of his meaning in salvation history. What is more, other images came to be gradually superimposed on the historical reality of the saint. Although mythical, these were no less real since they were expressions of various social choices and religious ideals (Stanislaw da Campagnola 1981; Krüger 1992, pp. 106ff; Frugoni 1993).

This vibrant cultural and religious context gave new meaning to images in the strict sense of the term, namely painted images. The panel paintings, which spread Francis's picture and episodes from his life everywhere immediately after his canonization, enhanced the saint's cult even as hostile voices were being raised in many quarters. They were like so many responses to the doubts raised by the detractors. This explains why the painters and the friars who commissioned them paid special attention to the stigmata, which are so visible in portraits of the saint. The legendary accounts that mention the miraculous power of the images of Francis always focus on the stigmata, for which the paintings serve as a kind of proof, since the stigmata are "wounds painted by God." That is how Bonaventure of Bagnoregio describes them in his account of a cleric who, while contemplating an image of Francis, had serious doubts as to the authenticity of the stigmata. A miracle caused him to believe again immediately. This story explains the special value attributed to the images of Francis as witnesses to his conformity to Christ: "Concerning the sacred stigmata let

there be no room for ambiguity" (LMj, Miracles I, 6; cfr. I, 4; similarly 3C 6, 8 and 9).

As an authentic memory aid and a guarantee of the saint's presence, the picture claimed to contain the truth, a fact that transformed the images of Francis into visible proof of his stigmata. The real importance of this can be seen most clearly in the many stories of the violent criticism—attacks that were bitter and offensive—to which the images of Francis were subject from the very beginning. One witness from the late thirteenth century mentions a Dominican who "removed all the stigmata from the picture of blessed Francis," who miraculously caused them to reappear, bleeding. In Genoa, during the 1250s, the bishop had to take action against the scandalized opponents of the Friars Minor "who had maliciously removed the sacred stigmata from the image of St. Francis." Similar excesses are mentioned during the same period in Venice and various places in the Iberian Peninsula, where painters were explicitly told to omit the stigmata. In the thirteenth century, a Silvestrine monk from Foligno was brought to trial for spreading propaganda against images of the saint. The reason, he claimed, was that "Francis never had the stigmata, but the Friars Minor have him depicted with the stigmata" (Vauchez 1968; Krüger 1992, pp. 47ff).

In reaction to these attacks, the popes issued repeated warnings during the thirteenth century. Images of the founder of the Order must be shown all due respect since they are powerful witnesses to the stigmata, which have been verified by repeated investigations on the part of the Order and the Roman Curia and by depositions from eyewitnesses who had seen the saint and his stigmata while he was alive or after his death. In 1257, Pope Alexander IV testified to the general chapter in Rome that "he had seen the sacred stigmata with his own eyes while the saint was still alive" (LMj XIII, 8). Between 1255 and 1259, the same pontiff issued no fewer than four very severe bulls and official documents against those who attacked the images and against all those who had erased the stigmata from paintings of Francis.

As documents for establishing the saint's true appearance, and especially the alleged reality of the stigmata, the images were primary proof. The importance of this fact can be seen if we recall that his bodily remains—and thus the "true" testimony to the wounds—were not visible. His tomb in Assisi had been removed from all direct access, walled up as it was in the foundations of the church (Belting 1977, pp. 17ff). Increasingly, the painted image was able to claim an aura of irrefutable testimony that only the saint's relics would have had if they were visible.

At this point the meaning of the innovation represented by the panels of Francis becomes clear, especially their close imitation of the Oriental icon. Contrary to the tendency represented by the votive images

that were widespread in the Western Church, in order to construct *ex novo* their own unique model of cultic image, the Franciscans took the visual experience of the Byzantine icon and developed it. They not only adopted its form and material typology (the wooden panel); they also appropriated the Byzantine theology of images, the power of the saint's "reality" possessed by his image. The icon preserves, in form and expression, the "true" figure of the saint. It makes him alive and present, thus extending his beneficial effect and revealing his miraculous power. The image, because of its resemblance to the actual saint, makes him virtually present. Externally speaking, the panels of St. Francis were monumentalized versions of the Oriental icon, a feature that gave them an extraordinary ability to "represent" the saint and a new power over the faithful who contemplated them. They were fulfilling the role of actual relics, material signs of a person who had once lived. Or better, they were another expression of that ability peculiar to relics to be the saint's "personal" omnipresence, either as a substitute for it, or at least as an alternative to it. Just as the relic of a saint (a part of his body or an object that belonged to him) could make him physically present in several places, so the reproduction of a series of images of Francis made his person omnipresent.

4. The panels of the first half of the thirteenth-century as legends of Francis

Despite all this, we know that the criterion of physical resemblance or *similitudo* has nothing in common with the modern concept of a realistic and faithful portrait. To portray Francis's features, a pre-existing format widely used by the Benedictine monks must surely have been used. The ideal "type" of saint was a man mortified by asceticism, thin and emaciated in appearance, wearing a beard. But Francis's characteristic attributes—besides the stigmata, of course—were the habit (brown tunic, with cord and capuche), the bare feet and, not least, the Gospel Book in his hand, testimony to his exact observance of the *Rule*. These were unambiguous signs of the saint, to be sure, but also of his Order, upon which the image of his holiness reflected as source of strength and reinforcement (Ladner 1964).

As mentioned, the saint's images were the subject of major quarrels. This was one aspect of the more general internal and external debates and controversies regarding his person. For this reason, the images were a powerful witness not only to the external aspects, but also to the specific content of the founder's "new sanctity," which had been proclaimed in a manner as impetuous as it was controversial. The debate over the meaning of his existential religious choice, his *forma vitae*, is one of the most

fascinating chapters in the history of the thirteenth-century Church and spirituality (Stanislaio da Campagnola 1981). It was carried on by the Franciscans in their quarrels with the secular clergy and rival religious communities, as well as within the Order in the quarrels between the various factions and groups. It is clearly reflected in the different stages of development of the hagiographic legend of Francis, as we have seen in the previous articles in this series. The first official version, Thomas of Celano's *First Life*, was approved in 1229 by Gregory IX. Written as a biographical account in view of his canonization and the rapid spread of his cult, its typology and function were in a direct line with traditional lives of saints, and it was based on the undisputed validity of a standardized, official, obligatory portrait. But by the middle of the century, just twenty-five years after Francis's death, several versions were in circulation. These differed considerably from one another in terms of specific content and were constantly trying to outdo each other in order to communicate the "true" image of the saint, his person, and work. Immediately, they appealed to the eyewitness nature of their testimony, to the testimony of the first companions, and to other forms of "authentic" testimony. In each case they used the saint's image to support their particular ideas, to give themselves and their religious message an aura of legitimacy. Only the new legend of Francis written in 1263 by the general of the Order, Bonaventure, attempted to combat this tendency and check the proliferation of biographies by claiming that it alone was canonically valid.

The spread of illustrated series of episodes in the panels of Francis and the progressive change in subject matter play their part in this historical development. As illustrated legends, the panels show obvious similarities to the development of the written legends. The oldest are the San Miniato from 1228 (fig. 2), which has been lost, the Pescia from 1235 (fig. 3), and the Pisa from around 1240 (fig. 4). Without exception their *historiae* depict miracles of the founder of the Order, mostly cures of those who were sick, blind, or paralyzed. The concept of holiness they express does not yet stress the virtues and merits of the saint during his lifetime. Rather, in accord with the recent canonization, they stress exclusively the saint's wonderworking power. The iconography of these first illustrated episodes often follows pre-existing models, which were widespread in the medieval iconographic tradition.

The single important exception to this tendency are the two depictions of miracles worked during the saint's lifetime: the sermon to the birds and the reception of the stigmata. From the very beginning, they formed an essential and distinctive part of the illustrated legend of Francis, completely detached from their hagiographic setting. The stigmata confirms

with utmost clarity his conformity to Christ, while the sermon to the birds presents him as the prototype of the apostolic preacher who draws from the power of the *verbum simplex*. The fact that the message is accepted by all creatures manifests the charism of its herald and his closeness to Christ. This pair of images testifies to the saint's full share in the mind and suffering of Christ. At the same time it shows how he made the apostolate and the Passion come alive again, two things that were the expression and program of the entire Franciscan movement (sometimes overshadowed by the concept, not completely identical, of the *ecclesiae primitivae forma*). The special significance of this pair of episodes in the iconography of the saint is clear from the fact that they became common not only in panel paintings but, just as quickly, in manuscript illustrations and in the monumental fresco cycles.

In summary, we can say that in the first phase of development of the iconography of Francis—in other words, in the San Miniato, Pescia, and Pisa panels—we see that the saint's good works during his lifetime (*opera pietatis in vita*) are portrayed only minimally, whereas the miracles give greater prominence to the manifestation of heavenly favor and the work of God (*Deo auctore*). What is more, the pictures of the episodes conform strictly to stereotyped models of the image, which do not easily allow for anomalies and variations.

Then, around the middle of the century, the panel paintings show a radical change in content. The miracles are replaced by a real biographical narrative, which becomes the determining theme in the choice of episodes. The Pistoia panel and that in Santa Croce in Florence, painted during this same time period (between 1250 and 1255) are evidence of this.

The Pistoia panel (fig. 5) still follows the rule of four miraculous episodes, as in the earlier paintings. But for the first time it adds a biographical series conceived chronologically. The approval of the Rule, the reception of the stigmata, and a preaching scene illustrate the important stages in the saint's activity as head of the Order; the series ends with the portrayal of his funeral. Francis's holiness is manifested in his teaching and in his Rule, and no longer through miracles alone. Francis's miraculous powers were no longer enough to validate the form and ambitions of the Order. The addition of the biographical episodes, typical of a founder, reveals a marked practical concern for the needs of the institution.

The series of episodes depicted on the panel of the Franciscan church of Santa Croce in Florence (called the Bardi panel, because it was later moved to the chapel of that name) is entirely designed to portray the saint's life (there are twenty scenes, unlike the maximum of eight found earlier). It is considered one of the most important witnesses to the first

period of panel painting in Italy (fig. 6). It was done between 1250 and 1255 in a shop in Lucca or Florence, with the help of at least two, or perhaps more, painters (Bughetti 1926; Frugoni 1988; Krüger 1992, pp. 119ff, 199ff). It deserves special attention because of the number and kind of innovations it presents.

First of all, in the painting for the great friary in Florence the format and dimensions of the panel change—in other words, the overall layout. The format of the Pistoia panel is almost exactly identical with that of the Pescia and Pisa panels. But a new format was chosen for the Bardi panel. The saint's image was lengthened, and the panel was enlarged considerably. As a result, its series of episodes is much larger and more extensive than in the earlier panels.

But the most important thing is the iconographic strategy. The episodes are arranged in a clear threefold division. From the saint's youth (on the left), we move to his apostolic activity (on the bottom), finishing with his work after death (on the right). The series of images about his life, which depicts the saint's youth in six episodes, portrays Francis as the special favorite of church authorities. In the first scene, Francis, who has been imprisoned by his father, is set free by his mother; the second scene shows the young man's separation from his father. This is followed by his choice of habit for the Order, his listening to the Gospel of the sending of the apostles (Lk 10:7ff), the approval of the *Rule*, and, finally, the celebration of Christmas in a church in Greccio (scenes three through six). Here the episodes focus on the monastic ideal of giving up all earthly things (*fuga mundi*) and on his new family (separation from his earthly father, acknowledgment by the heavenly Father, adoption by the Church). Thus they emphasize, on the one hand, Francis's call to holiness (even as a child he is portrayed with a halo); on the other hand, they show the Church's authority and its contribution as guide to his growth in holiness.

The next eight scenes on the bottom portray the various ascetical and charitable aspects of the apostolate of the founder of the Order. Appearing on the right side, one above the other, are panels showing the sermon to the birds and the sermon to the Sultan, two episodes thematically related and portrayed in exactly the same form. They reveal a Francis who shows the same ability to preach Christ, and at the same time they confirm the apostolic self-awareness of his Order—an allusion to the contested right of the lay brothers to preach. The other panels in this section also show the saint closely and obviously associated with Christ. Two episodes portray his solicitous concern for sheep and lambs, an allusion to the Good Shepherd; the others repeatedly utilize artistic formulae for representing the Passion. The saint's self-mortification (where he subjects himself to public

humiliation) recalls the stigmata, the scene that shows him serving lepers recalls the washing of the feet, and the reception of the stigmata—which alludes to his conformity to Christ—recalls the prayer on the Mount of Olives. Last but not least, the scene in the lower right corner, which depicts the sermon at Arles, during which Francis appeared to a brother in a heavenly vision in the form of a cross (*secundum crucis figuram*), repeats the theme of the saint's conformity to Christ.

The final series of episodes, on the right side, moves chronologically from bottom to top. Very concisely, it focuses on the saint's miraculous activity after his death. For example, there is the canonical *topos* of the miracle at his tomb in Assisi, which was depicted in no fewer than three scenes in the earliest panels, and which is here reduced to a single image, almost a simple stenogram. At the same time, various scenes show crowds of religious, pilgrims, and flagellants flocking to his tomb in Assisi, as if to testify to the supra-regional influence of his cult. In addition, his likeness to Christ is evoked again in the episode of the rescue of the shipwrecked (third from last scene), which recalls the calming of the storm in the Gospel (Mt 8:23ff).

If, after analyzing the different sections of the illustrated legend series (*historia*), we consider how this is combined with the figure of the saint (*imago*) in the overall construction of the picture, it becomes clear how the two are harmonized and reinforce each other in their artistic intent. The aspect of conformity to Christ, which the figure highlights by means of the prominently displayed stigmata, is shown in "documentary" form by the episodes. Conversely, the truthfulness of what they tell is confirmed by the "authenticity" of the portrait.

The strategy of depicting Francis as another Christ (*alter Christus*), which is dominant in both the portrait and the episodes, is carried through and clearly expressed in the central part of the panel's tympanum. There, two angels, intermediaries and heralds as it were, display a message that hangs from part of the sky: "Listen to this man who presents the dogmas of life" (*Hunc exaudite perhibentem dogmata vitae*). The heavenly message confirms the fact that the founder of the Order received his mandate and meaning of his mission in salvation history from God; at the same time it points to imitation of behavior whose model is made explicit in the episodes. More precisely, the cartouche recalls the gospel episode of the Transfiguration of Christ (Mt. 17:5; Lk 9:35), in which a heavenly voice reveals that he is the Son of God in words that are similar: "Listen to him." In keeping with the context, the iconography of the saint itself, unlike in the other panels where his right hand is raised or he is holding a cross, depicts

him in a gesture of blessing, as in the iconographic rules for the Transfiguration of Christ (Frugoni 1988, pp. 9ff; Krüger 1992, pp. 123-24).

One final detail. Small busts of friars, aligned in collective veneration of the saint's portrait, are found where the decorative bands meet; at one time they could also be seen in the outer frame, on the sides and bottom. Their purpose is to praise the saint and illustrate his particular charism. These friars are obviously gazing at the divine command expressed in the cartouche. In that gesture, they are presented to the viewers of the work, namely the actual members of the friary, as an example of special veneration and following of the saint.

In the Santa Croce panel, the interpretation of conformity to Christ achieves a clarity and boldness unparalleled in the thirteenth-century iconography of Francis. In it, the appeal for legitimacy becomes very apparent, whether with respect to the cult of the new saint, or especially with regard to the young Order itself, which did not fit into the traditional structure of the church hierarchy and so was always seeking institutional recognition. The panel sheds much light on the role of images in the thirteenth century, especially the legitimizing role played by collective representations.

5. Eclipse of the genre

The Santa Croce panel is an attempt to express hagiography more fully and create models for a new illustrated biography of the saint. It is only the first example of a tendency to experiment that affects all panels painted in the latter half of the thirteenth century, even though they do not reach a comparable level of success. A model that was now general, that of the illustrated panel, lacked a solid iconographic set of rules, a unified set of contents. The illustrated legends produced after the middle of the century are not part of an authorized iconography; there is rarely a conscious parallelism. Numerous and varied as they are, they show the same constant transformations and adaptations of the hagiography of Francis seen in the many contemporary written legends. This diversity continued until the end of the century. Then, with the monumental fresco cycle in the upper basilica of St. Francis in Assisi (ca. 1290-1295), we finally have an authoritative and binding iconographic model, subsequently imitated by many frescoes in the churches of the Order (Blume 1983).

Illustrated panels of Francis continued to be produced for a whole century. The Orte panel (ca. 1282) and the Siena panel (1285-1290, fig. 7) are the last examples preserved from the long series that began with the saint's canonization. In the fourteenth century, this kind of image, once so

innovative, becomes increasingly less significant for the cult of Francis. Historically speaking, how is the fourteenth-century eclipse of the illustrated panel to be explained?

Here we need to consider various circumstances; we need to return to the question of the panels and their original function. Their actual use has not yet been clarified beyond the shadow of a doubt. They must have served as festival images of the saint. During the octave of his feast, they were placed on or above the high altar of the church of the Order, where they were the visible center of attention for the liturgical feast and choral reading of his legend. In other words, these paintings were placed on the altar, not permanently, but for a limited time. With the late-thirteenth-century development of a new form, the altarpiece, came the custom of adorning the high altar with a polytych, permanently installed. This made the use of festival icons increasingly obsolete. At the same time, the monumental fresco cycle assumed increasing importance as an artistic adornment in churches of the Order. More often, the illustrated legends of the saint were being depicted in large mural paintings in the choir chapels (Blume, 1983). The episodes depicted in small format on wood could no longer compete.

There were other reasons as well. These are no longer of an external nature, but have to do with the intrinsic development and gradual transformation of the panel itself. This paralleled the continuous change in iconography, which was the bearer of hagiographic and ecclesiological messages, especially starting in the mid-thirteenth century. As mentioned, the original function of the panel was to communicate an experience of the saint's true and authentic presence. Added to this original and primary function was a series of other artistic purposes. These were related to story, program and subject matter. The Bardi panel already makes this change of function quite clear. In the later Siena panel, the traditional artistic arrangement (where the episodes surround the figure of the saint) is enriched with another iconographic element. The tympanum presents a figure of the Savior giving his blessing and accompanied by a host of angels, a sign of Francis's exaltation and glorification. This is an illustration of the idea, developed by Bonaventure and later by Matthew of Acquasparta, that Francis's ascent to conformity with Christ is associated with the heavenly choirs of angels. The angelic hierarchy is interpreted as an image of the saint's mystical perfection. Thus, Matthew of Acquasparta explains that Francis, as an angel, lived in the world "not as sharing the same nature but as conformed by grace."

In the case of Giotto's famous Louvre altarpiece (1300-1310), the various needs expressed in the late-thirteenth-century images of Francis are seen more clearly (fig. 8). The panel terminates in a cusp and shows the

usual combination of episodes and central figure; but once again its concept and internal structure have been profoundly transformed and restated in an original way. The series of illustrations has been moved to the predella and reduced to the sober choice of just three episodes. There is no pretence of biographical sequence. The three scenes depicted are the dream of Innocent III, the approval of the *Rule* and the sermon to the birds. The iconographic program, reduced to a minimum, is clear. A few strokes serve to confirm the ecclesial mission of the saint and his Order (still subject to hostility and criticism), the fact that it rests on papal authority, and the right to apostolic preaching.

But the most decisive change in the Louvre altarpiece with respect to the traditional model is the transformation of the central portrait of the saint. No longer standing, he is in the act of receiving the stigmata. The *imago* has been replaced by a *historia*, a biographical episode. But the portrayal is not narrative in the strict sense; the image is like a portrait of the saint with commentary. It shows him being raised to perfect conformity with Christ, like the monumental crosses that depict Christ at the moment of his crucifixion.

Giotto's innovation was the final step in the development of a clear and specific image of Francis. The thirteenth-century illustrated panels depicted the saint according to the traditional form for saints' portraits, in other words, full-length, with one hand holding the book and the other in a gesture of prayer. In Francis's case, the stigmata were added as a sign of his status as chosen by God, and with this the position of his right hand became strangely ambivalent: it could be understood as a gesture of prayer or as a display of the wounds. With the Bardi panel things become more complicated. There the hand is represented in a gesture of blessing rather than display, even though it shows the wounds. In the Siena panel, where the saint holds a cross in his right hand, the wound in his side is added as a clear indication of the stigmata. As for these portrayals, the Louvre altarpiece with its new artistic approach strives to attain iconographic clarity and present a new and vigorous message. It presents the saint at the precise moment of his ecstatic rapture and bodily impression of the stigmata, which become, in no uncertain terms, the distinctive and essential element in the portrayal of Francis.

Once again, such a radical change can be explained if we keep in mind the ongoing debate about the true nature of the stigmata. As always, the discussion hinged on the question of the true physical nature of the stigmata; but at that stage, especially, some were questioning whether they were the physical effect of a mystical, ecstatic experience. We need to remember the stories, increasingly more frequent at the time, of mystical

experiences concerning the vision of God and spiritual rapture; there were even new cases of stigmata, especially among women mystics. These presented a major threat to the exceptional and extraordinary nature of Francis's holiness. Therefore, the Franciscans made a special effort to praise the unique nature of the miracle their founder had received and to base it on new arguments. They tried to prove that Francis had really received the stigmata and that the phenomenon was not due to autosuggestion (*vehemens imaginatio*) but was miraculous since received solely in virtue of the power of God. They were not challenging the primary and basic meaning of the stigmata as an expression of conformity to Christ crucified, inherent in their spiritual and interior dimension. Rather, they were guaranteeing the unique nature of the miracle experienced by Francis, who had been conformed "not only in mind and soul, but also in body." "The stigmata are signs that expressly represent the passion of Christ in a singular and wonderful manner."

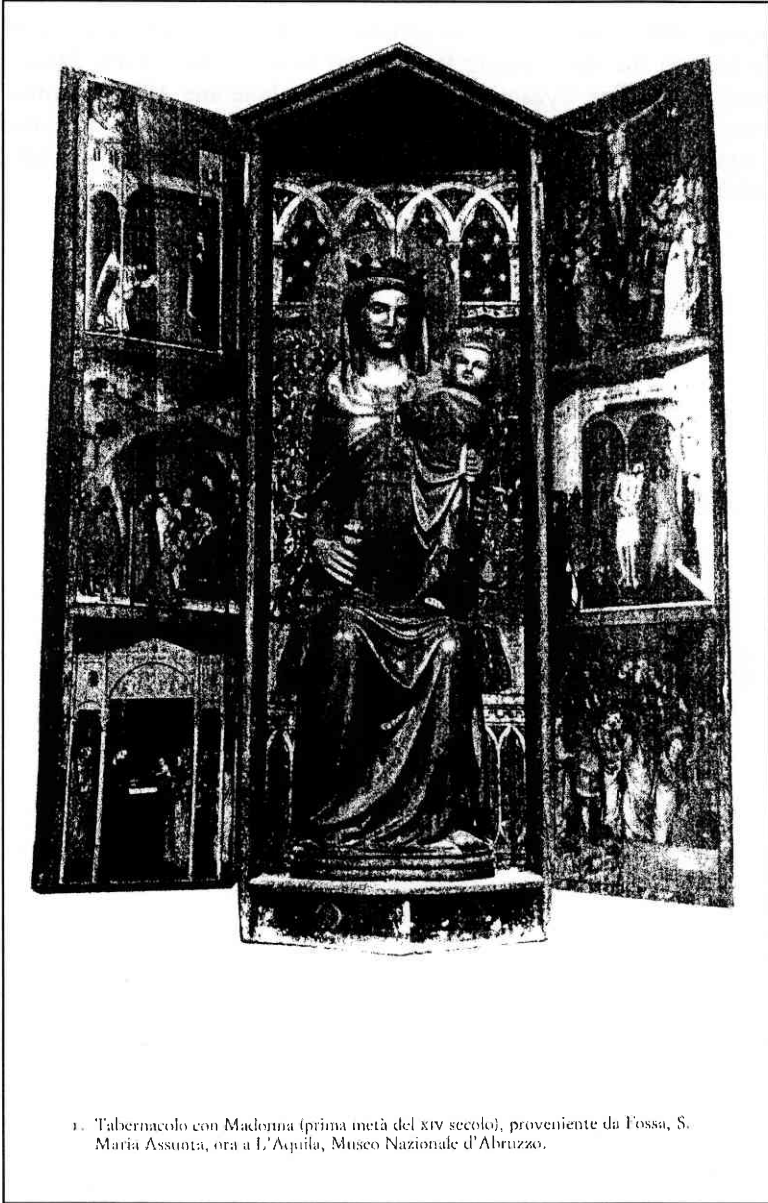
Thus, it is no accident that the iconography of Francis changed along with this debate. Even though successively reworked, the old set of artistic formulae adopted at the beginning of the thirteenth century no longer served. It was necessary to seek a new iconography. It was necessary to prove irrefutably, by means of his image, that Francis had truly received the stigmata, by which he had been personally and really crucified with Christ.

The change in iconography inevitably changed the nature and function of the image. One hundred years later, the image created a very different impression in the viewer than it had at the beginning of this history of iconography. Then, it had been the luminous experience of the saint's presence, effectively and spectacularly confirmed by the bleeding stigmata and the artistic depiction of the miracles. Now, there was the perception of an event explained by means of the image, made visible (although in an imaginary way) by the painting. The image was no longer, as in the past, meant to create an effect similar to that of the relic. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the image no longer promises the real presence of the saint, as if it could magically recall him. Instead, it offers to the imagination of the viewer a chance to confront a historical reality visually illustrated. Herein lies one of the proofs of the new sense of the real that characterizes the figurative arts in the age of Giotto. Once again, it is a result of the question raised in the collective consciousness by the holiness of Francis.

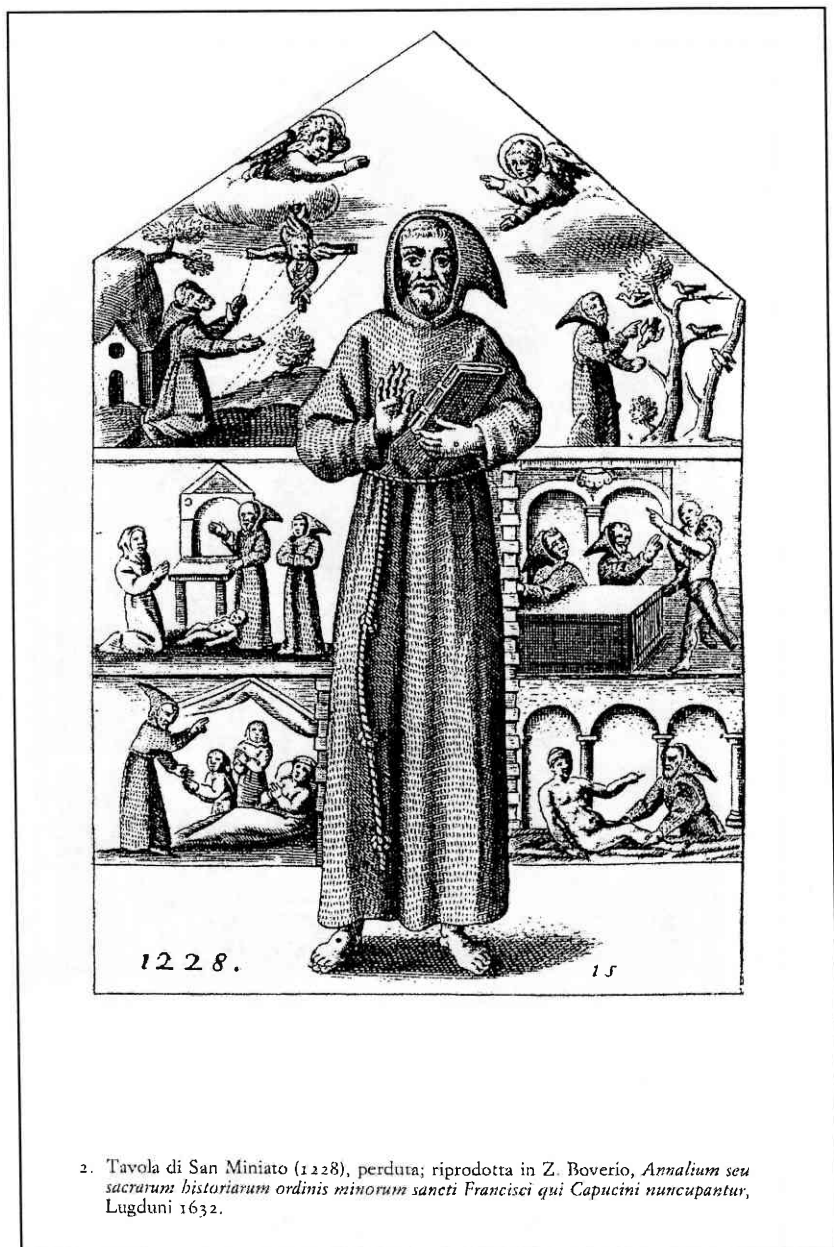
Critical Note

Basic works, containing ample bibliography, for the cult of the images of Francis and the development of his iconography respectively, are

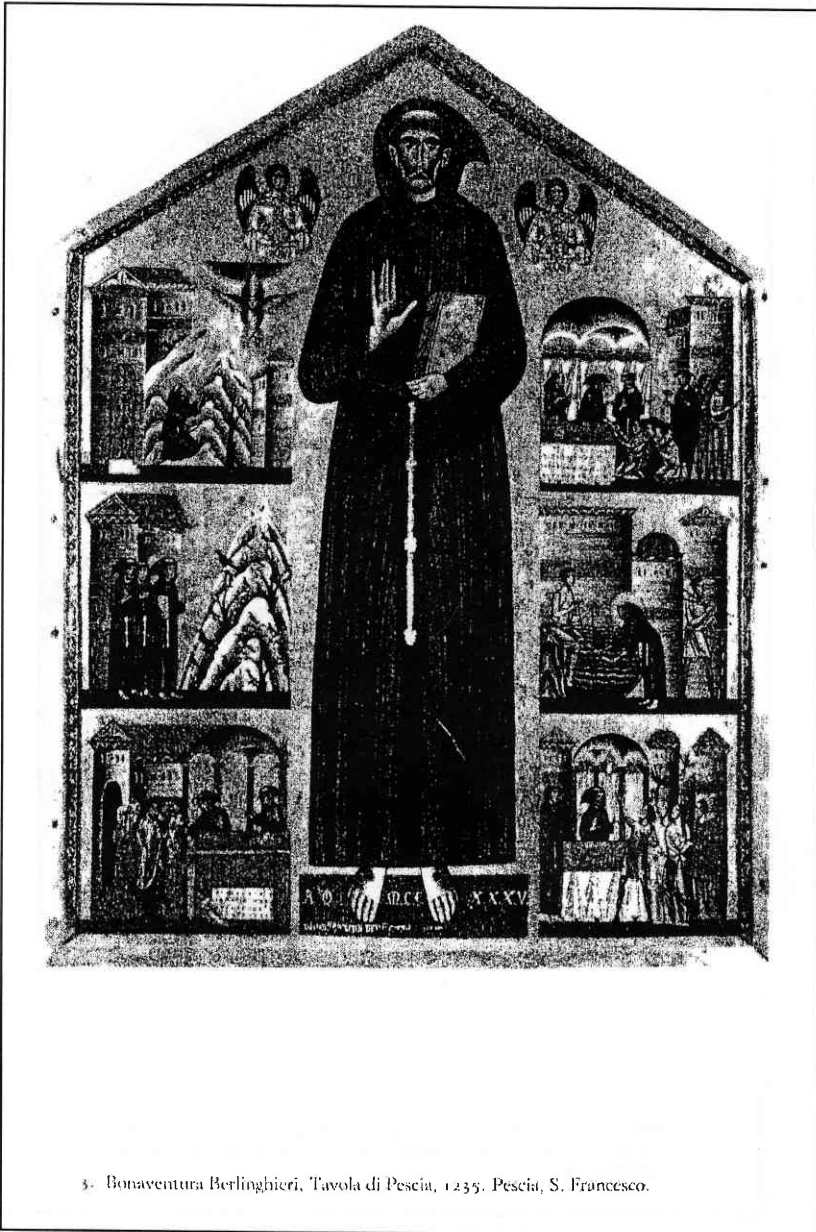
Krüger 1992 and Frugoni 1993. On particular aspects of the iconography of Francis, see Bughetti 1926, Ladner 1964, Belting 1977, Van Os 1983, Frugoni 1988, Goffen 1988. In general, on the early history of painting in Italy and on the determining factors and forms of sacred art, Hager 1962, Belting 1990. For Byzantine influences, Stubblebine 1966, Demus 1970, Belting 1982. For the historical development of the legends of Francis and the evolution of the ideals of holiness in hagiography, Vauchez 1968, Stanislao da Campagnola 1981, Vauchez 1981.

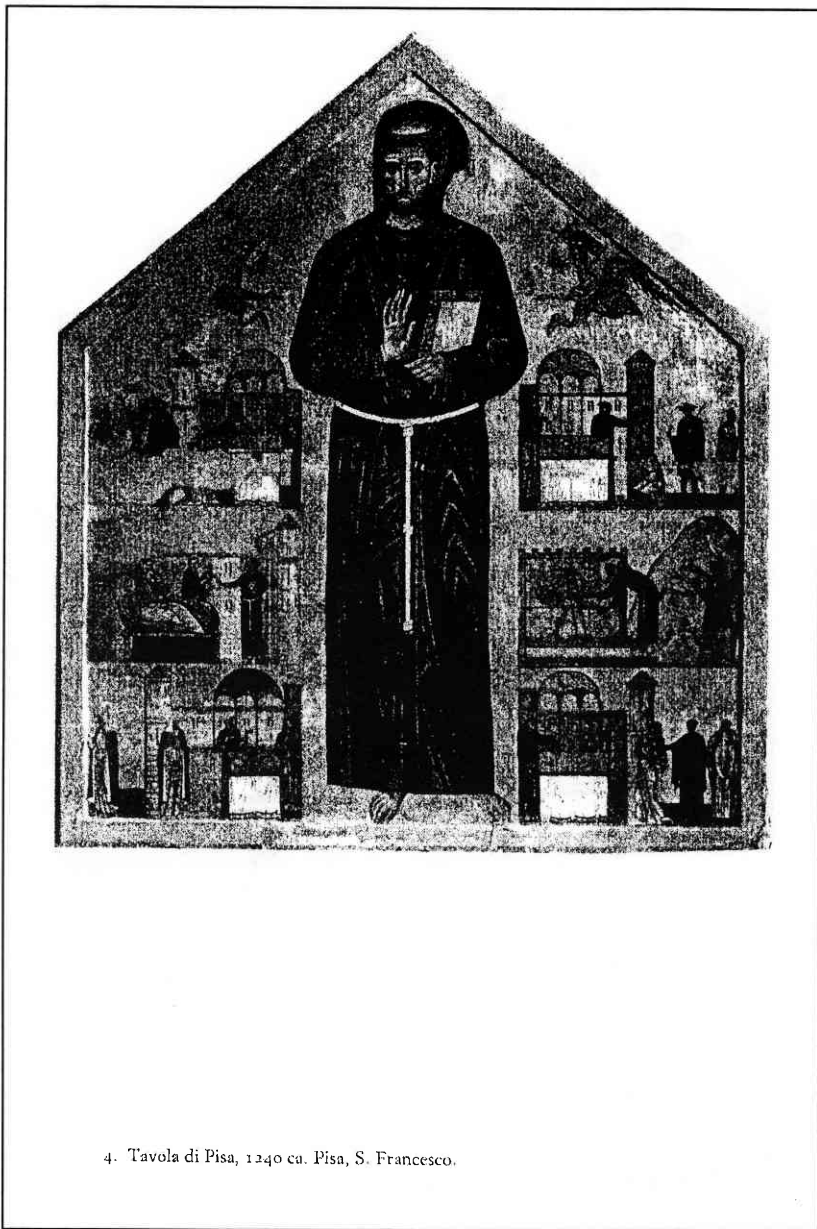


1. Tabernacolo con Madonna (prima metà del XIV secolo), proveniente da Fossa, S. Maria Assunta, ora a L'Aquila, Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo.

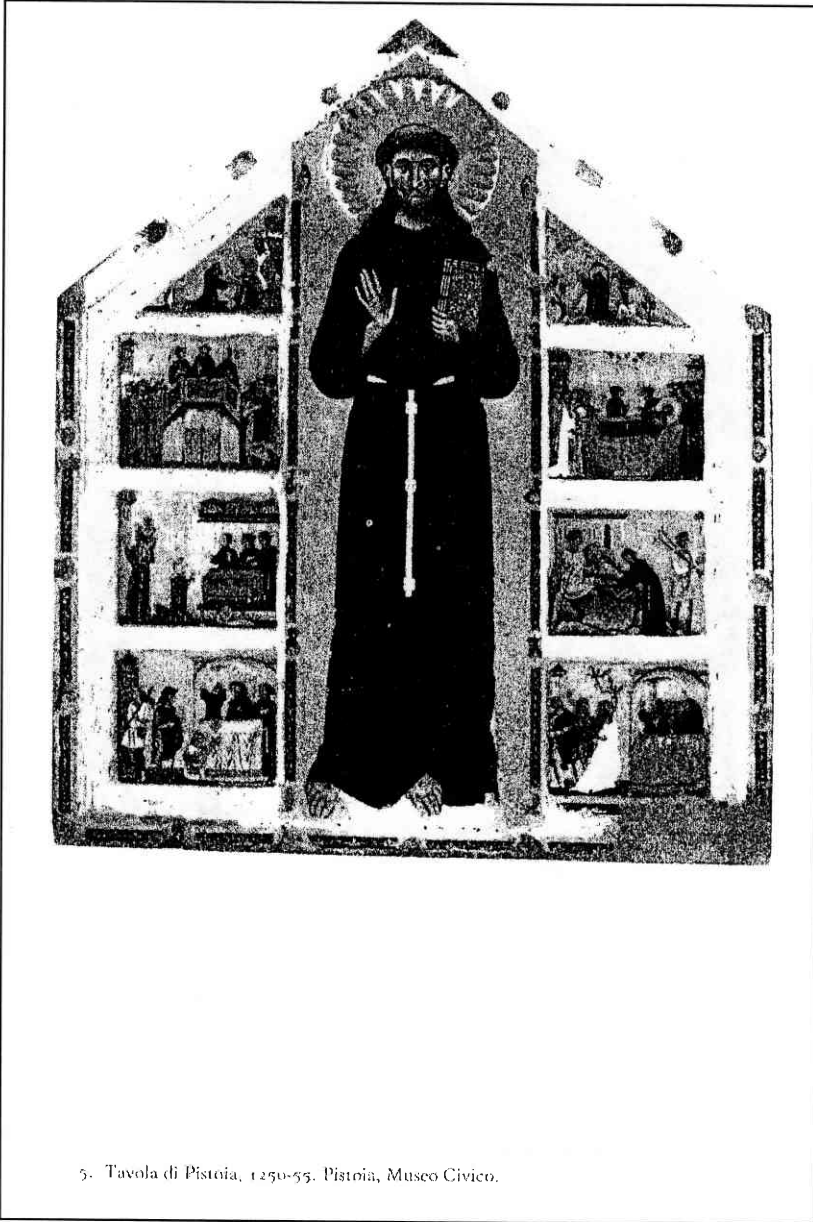


2. Tavola di San Miniato (1228), perduta; riprodotta in Z. Boverio, *Annalium seu sacrarum historiarum ordinis minorum sancti Francisci qui Capucini nuncupantur*, Lugduni 1632.

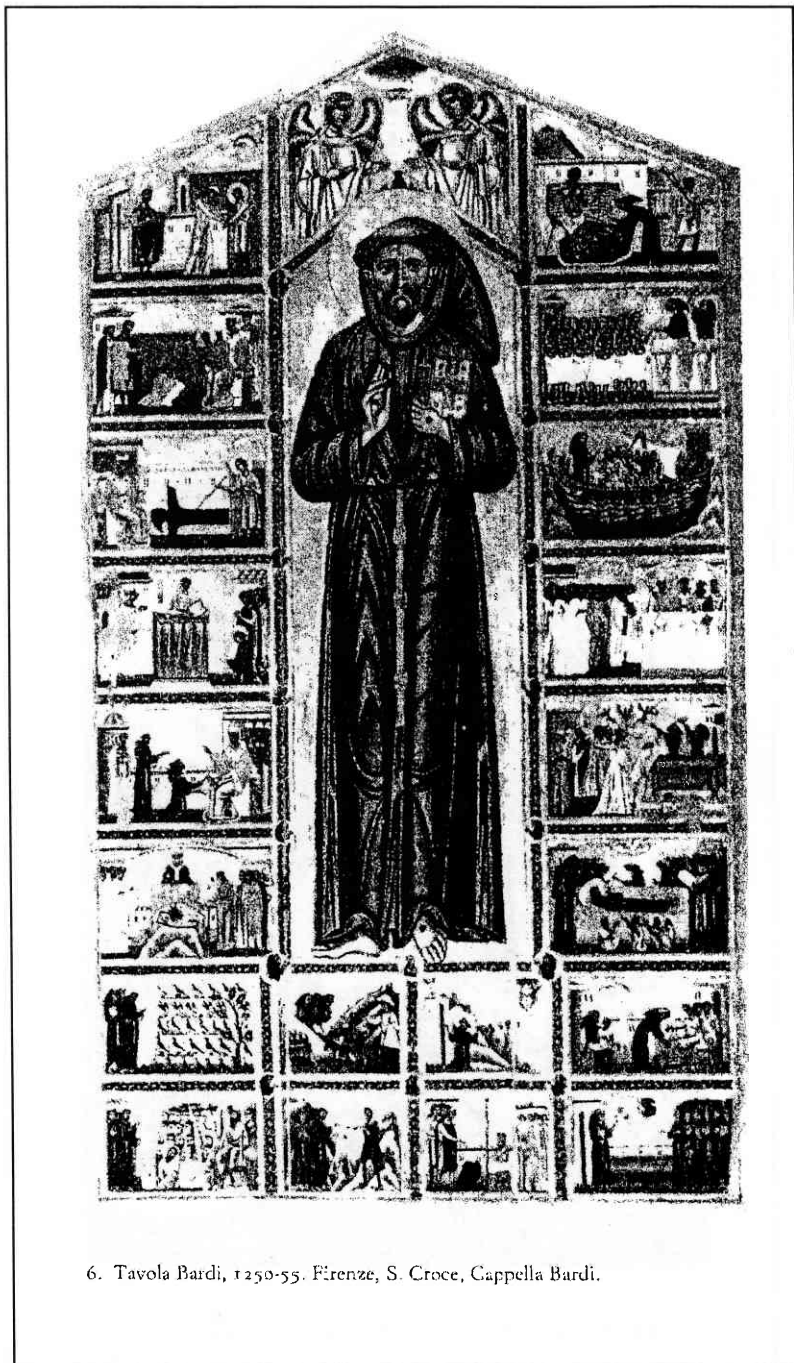




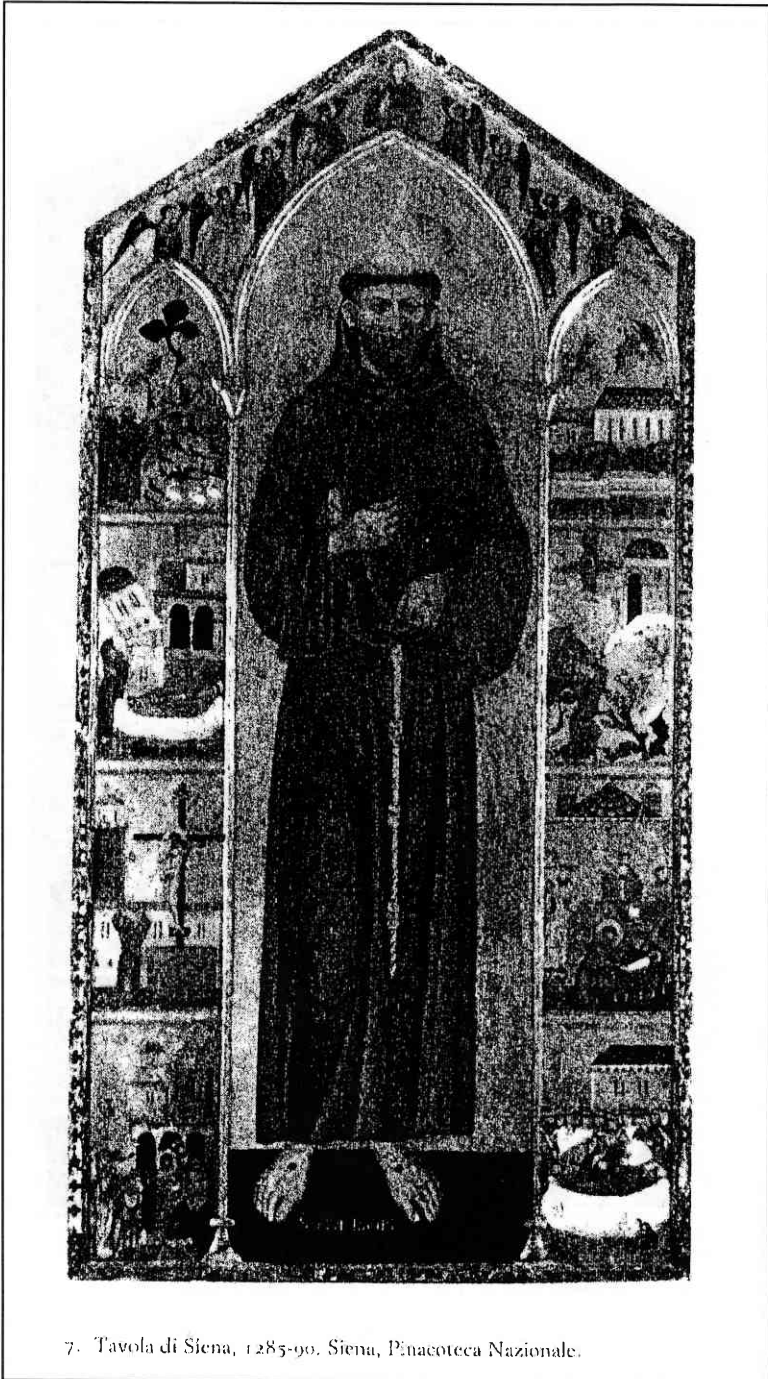
4. Tavola di Pisa, 1240 ca. Pisa, S. Francesco.



5. Tavola di Pistoia, 1250-55. Pistoia, Museo Civico.



6. Tavola Bardi, 1250-55. Firenze, S. Croce, Cappella Bardi.



7. Tavola di Siena, 1285-90. Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale.



8. Giotto, Pala del Louvre, 1300-10. Parigi, Musée du Louvre.

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