

The Making of Assisi: The Pope, the Franciscans and the Painting of the Basilica.

Donal Cooper and Janet Robson.

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This book examines how the first Franciscan pope, Nicholas IV, initiated the painting of the upper church frescoes, which were completed between 1288 and 1297, thirty-five years after the basilica's architecture was completed in 1253. The analysis focuses on decoding the frescoes' meanings instead of determining their authorship. This important shift away from the "Assisi problem" allows the authors to explore the frescoes by analyzing the messages they communicated to their medieval audience. This new and innovative approach is to be welcomed and applauded.

The first chapter explores how Nicholas IV and his allies in the curia provided the necessary patronage for initiating the artistic activity in Assisi, which parallels the artistic renewal occurring in Rome during Nicholas IV's papacy (1288–92). The second chapter focuses on the Umbrian context and how the Franciscan brothers in Assisi received Nicholas IV's papal bull that commissioned the work on the basilica. His *Reducentes* bull (May 1288) commanded Franciscan leaders to “maintain, repair, build, modify, enlarge, furnish, and decorate” the basilica (3). Accordingly, the ensuing mural decoration was the responsibility of the order. Chapter 3 argues that the upper church was not a blank canvas when the mural painting began in 1288. Instead, it provides an inventory of what the basilica contained in 1288 before the decoration began. This includes the stained glass, fully frescoed apse and transepts, the gilded vault of the Evangelists, and the great panel crucifix with lateral panels atop the nave's rood beam. The nave's mural decoration had to incorporate these existing works of art.

Chapter 4 considers the practical challenges the brothers faced in planning the nave's mural program, which is complex yet coherent. This analysis identifies key narrative points of intersection among the New Testament, Old Testament, and Francis cycles, which then served as narrative and artistic anchors that allowed other scenes to be painted around them. Chapters 5 through 7 turn the focus on the twenty-eight scenes of the Francis cycle that structure the overall narratives of the nave's mural decoration. Chapter 5 primarily examines scenes 19 to 28, which appear below the two registers of the New Testament cycle. The core theme is Saint Francis as *alter Christus*. Chapter 6 turns and primarily inspects scenes 1–9, which appear below the two registers of the Old Testament cycle. These scenes depict Francis's early life, his conversion, and his mission to rebuild the church. Here, typological parallels link Francis's prophetic actions with God's promises to the patriarchs. Chapter 7 primarily investigates the middle section of the Francis cycle, which wraps around the counterfaçade (scenes 10–18). It begins with the approval of the rule and ends with the stigmata — two events that Bonaventure continually linked in his theology of Francis. Here the frescoes depict Francis, like Christ, as the mediator who ascends to God and descends to neighbor. Hence he is a suitable guide to lead others on the Christian journey.

The conclusion emphasizes that Nicholas IV was the catalyst and facilitator of the mural decoration, but he left the planning and execution of the mural story to his brothers in Assisi. Overall, the frescoed narratives form a very complex and theologically coherent interpretation of Saint Francis. This interpretation, displayed with exquisite artwork housed within the grand Romanesque architecture of the basilica, fulfilled Pope Nicolas IV's intent — the construction and decoration of a pilgrimage site that would promote the cult of Saint Francis.

While some could quibble about how the authors have structured or interpreted some of the narrative patterns, this book is a must read for anyone interested in learning more about the theology, artistry, politics, history, and ideologies of the Basilica San Francesco di Assisi. While every bay and scene of the upper church does not receive equal attention, the book's interpretation of the nave's multitiered program offers key theological, political, and

ideological interconnections that together construct the meanings and messages that fostered the cult of Saint Francis of Assisi. Overall, the book does an excellent job in providing both pertinent historical contextualization and explanation of the nave's interlocking narrative plan, which ultimately tells a theological story structured around Francis of Assisi. The many color images complement well the engaging and informative prose.

JAY M. HAMMOND, *Saint Louis University*