

CELEBRATING ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

■ By Lucy Gordan



Left, a view of the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi (Photos: Sala Stampa del Sacro Convento)

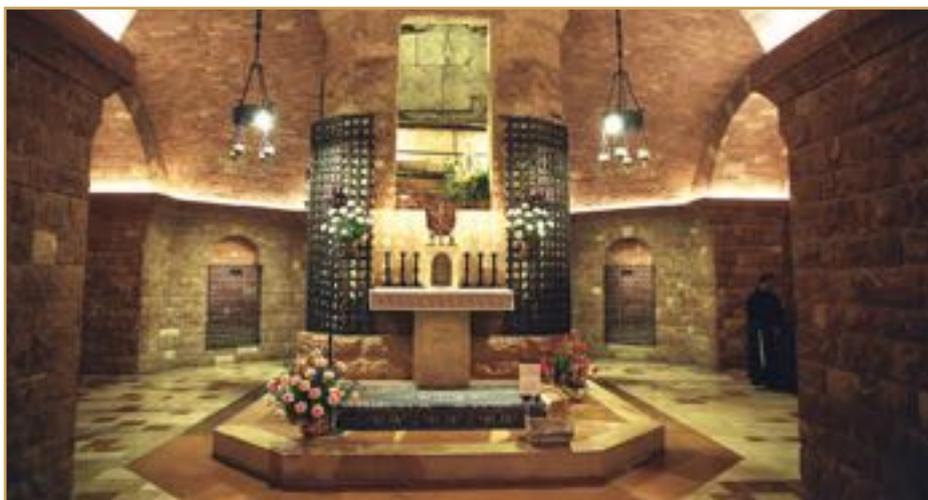
Below left, the crypt of the Basilica where the saint's mortal remains are kept and where they will return

Below right, the mortal remains of St. Francis ready for display

The patron saint of Italy, animals, ecology and tapestry makers, St. Francis was born in Assisi, a town in the region of Umbria, reputedly on September 23, 1181 or 1182, to Peter Bernadone, a wealthy cloth merchant, and his wife Pica de Bourlemont, a noblewoman from Provence in France. After a carefree youth of luxury, he renounced all his worldly possessions to live a life of poverty, eventually dying of multiple causes: malnutrition, malaria, trachoma, dyspepsia and leprosy among them, on October 3, 1226. Four special events — one spiritual, two exhibitions and one festival — in Umbria will commemorate the 800th anniversary of his death.

According to his first biographers, Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure, he was first buried in a paupers' cemetery until, shortly afterwards, his followers carried his body in a solemn procession to the Church of San Giorgio, which later became part of the Basilica of St. Clare, and is today known as the Chapel of the Crucifix. Almost two years later, on July 16, 1228, Pope Gregory IX, a friend of Francis, confirmed his miracles, declared him a saint and the next day laid the foundation stone for the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi.

Francis was buried here on May 25, 1230, under the high altar of the Lower Church, but his tomb was soon hidden on the orders of his fellow-Franciscan Brother



Elias to protect it from Saracen invaders, feuds among powerful Italian families, and relic hunters. It remained hidden for over 600 years until it was rediscovered during the night of December 12-13, 1818, after a 52-day search authorized by Pope Pius VII. The saint's remains were authenticated in 1819, and the tomb rebuilt in a specially constructed crypt under the Lower Church, which was restored during the 1920s.

For the first time in 800 years, from February 22 to March 22, St. Francis' mortal remains will be publicly displayed for veneration in the Lower Church. This special viewing requires free but mandatory online booking at www.sanfrancescovive.org, with options for a guided tour by a Franciscan or a self-guided visit. So far, over 250,000 pilgrims from all over the world have booked. The guided tours of up to 60 pilgrims each on Monday through Friday from 10 AM to 4 PM last 30 minutes and are given in English, Italian, French, Spanish, German and Polish; the Italian tours are sold out with limited availability for the other languages. The self-guided tours — only in English and Italian — on Monday to Friday 8-10 AM and 4-7 PM, and Saturday and Sunday 8 AM-7PM, last an hour and a half. At the same website it's also possible to book attendance at a Mass in the Upper Church.

Being held at The National Gallery of Umbria in Perugia, the capital of Umbria, from March 14 to June 14 is the art exhibition, "Giotto and St. Francis: A Revolution in Fourteenth-Century Umbria."

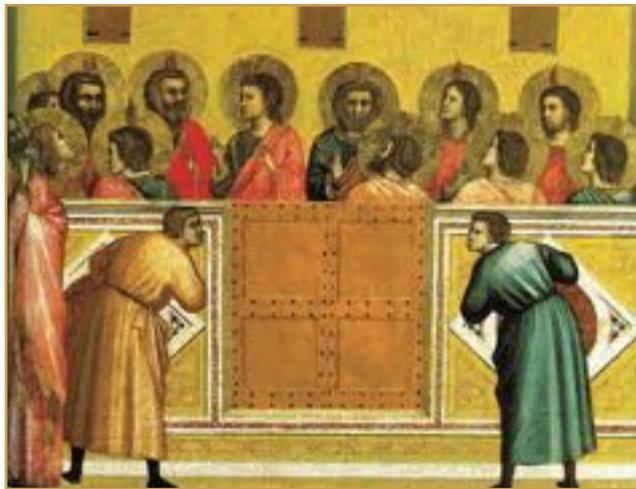
Focusing on the encounter between the spiritual message of St. Francis and the innovative artistic language of Giotto (1267-1337), the exhibition explores the historical moment in which, between the late thirteenth and early four-



Left, Simone Martini, *Madonna and Child*, Orvieto, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. Right, Pietro Lorenzetti, *Madonna and Child*, Cortona, Museo Diocesano.



Below, Giotto's *Pentecost* from the National Gallery in London



The second art exhibition, "Francis and Brother Wolf: Art Recounts the Legend of the Encounter," including paintings, sculptures, ceramics, engravings and illustrated books

teenth centuries, a new way of depicting reality emerged, replacing the static Byzantine-inspired *maniera greca* without perspective in favor of a more natural and emotionally credible artistic language. This transformation — from Byzantine to Gothic to Proto-Renaissance — took shape at the Basilica of St. Francis, where Tuscan-born Giotto, who may have been an apprentice to Cimabue, went in 1288 with his teacher to paint the frescoes in the Upper Church.

Since frescoes are not transportable, the press release tells us, "The exhibition itinerary will retrace the different phases of Giotto's activity in the Basilica through coeval works. It will start from his beginnings, documented by the *Madonna and Child* from Pieve di San Lorenzo in Borgo San Lorenzo and the *Madonna and Child with Angels* from San Giorgio alla Costa, to arrive at the most mature phase, represented by the fragment of a fresco with an *Allegorical Figure*, from the Lower Church and now preserved at

the *Szépművészeti Múzeum* in Budapest. Also contributing to the master's stylistic evolution are masterpieces such as the *Madonna and Child* from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the panel with *Pentecost* from the National Gallery in London, originally part of a Franciscan dossal."

Thanks to the construction of the Basilica, Assisi joined Florence, Siena, and Orvieto as an important artistic center, and the exhibition of the "Giottesque revolution" continues with works by Giotto contemporaries: paintings by Sieneese Simone Martini (1284-1334) on loan from Orvieto and some early panels on loan from the

Diocesan Museums of Cortona and Pienza by Sieneese Pietro Lorenzetti (c. 1280/85-1348), both of whom also frescoed the Basilica.

Of Books, Art and People

On display in a third section are works by lesser-known painters of Umbrian origin who trained at the Franciscan Basilica and later worked throughout Umbria: in the 13th century the Master of the Cross of Gubbio, the Master of Cesi, the Master of the Farneto, Marino di Elemosina and Palmerino di Guido, the so-called Expressionist of Santa Chiara, Giotto's collaborator in the building site of the Lower Church; in the 14th century Puccio Capanna, the Master of the Cross of Trevi, the Master of Fossa and the Master of the Silver Cross.

The final artifact of "Giotto and St. Francis" is not a painting, but a gold-plated silver chalice with enamels made by the Sienese goldsmith Guccio di Mannaia and donated to the Treasury of the Basilica by Pope Nicholas IV (r. 1288-92).

The second art exhibition, "Francis and Brother Wolf: Art Recounts the Legend of the Encounter," is on until April 19 in Gubbio, the Umbrian town



MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL

A "Medieval Festival" is held every year in late September in Gubbio. This year, September 24-27, it will be called "In the Time of St. Francis" and will feature artifacts, concerts, and lectures about the saint and his teachings, as well as the usual stands where medieval professions are demonstrated and taught, and books about the Middle Ages and "medieval" products are sold.

where St. Francis first wore his religiously-symbolic tunic in 1206 and where he lived again in c. 1220. Its 250 artifacts, dating from the 1400s to the present — including paintings, sculptures, ceramics, engravings and illustrated books — illustrate the legendary event of St. Francis and the Wolf.

First recounted in the 14th *florilegium*, "Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi," it's one of 53 episodes recounted about St. Francis' life. The townspeople of Gubbio were terrorized by a fierce wolf who attacked them and ate their livestock. St. Francis tamed the wolf after the townspeople agreed to feed it.

When the wolf died of natural causes some two years later, Gubbio gave him an honorable burial and later built the Church of St. Francis of the Peace at the site of the taming. During renovations in 1872 the skeleton of a large wolf, apparently several centuries old, was found under a slab near the church wall and reburied. ○