

THE TALE OF THE FRANCISCAN POEM BY FRA GIUSEPPE DA GRAVINA

A Wall, a Space, a Scene: the Lunettes

In the cloister, Fra Giuseppe covered the walls with frescoes of Franciscan stories, following a plan that was both orderly and varied in its proposals. A project that shows how the master was following a cultural tradition rooted in distant origins.

Cassio, in an insightful study on the protomartyrs of Morocco, writes that in Italy,

“a form of devotional illustration emerged that enriched the covered walls of cloisters and enclosed areas, especially those of cloisters—spiritual hearts of convents where friars encountered God through meditation, walking, prayer, chanting, reading, and reflection, sometimes prompted by pictorial or sculptural images significant for the evolution of the Order. Very often, one finds cycles of stories from the life of St. Francis, interspersed with medallions bearing portraits of particularly venerated Franciscan saints and blessed.”

To avoid confusing the viewer's gaze by blending such different scenes, Fra Giuseppe enclosed each episode within a lunette—an enclosed pictorial space outlined by prior architectural choices.

“A wall, a space, a scene.”

Thus Gombrich summarizes a thought by Leonardo, who had criticized contemporary painters for juxtaposing scenes with different horizons, thereby risking the loss of the narrative's dramatic power. The necessary sequence was: **separation of scenes, protection of their content, enhancement of their drama, empathetic response from the observer.**

“The compositions of painted stories must move the viewers and observers toward the same effect for which the story was created; that is, if the story represents terror, fear or flight, or rather sorrow, weeping or lamentation, or pleasure, joy and laughter [...] and if it does not, the artist's intellect is in vain.”

In a different context, driven by other motivations, **Saint Ignatius of Loyola**, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, suggests the same approach. After reading a biblical passage—short and focused—one must strive to **see** the described situation. For example:

to see the place; and here, with the imagination, to see the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, considering its length and width, and whether it is flat or winding through valleys or hills; likewise, to consider the cave or stable of the Nativity, how large or small it is, how low or high, and how it was prepared.

Then follows **contemplation, meditation**, and finally...

Let us kneel with Mary and Joseph and all the devout faithful before that manger, and respectfully ask the Holy Child, seeking the answer in his radiant gaze: “*Why, my Savior, all this?*”

The result is a **movement of the soul**, an empathetic moment that arises from the creation of mental images—an essential spiritual exercise inspired by the written word. Not everyone could perform it: **Saint Gregory the Great** had written centuries earlier:

“For the illiterate, painting is what writing is for the literate.”

That empathetic moment, which leads those who can read to kneel and live the situations evoked by a text, can be offered to all—through an image. On one condition: **the same one suggested by Saint Ignatius.**

Gombrich writes:

This experience obviously requires a certain way of looking. We must concentrate and focus our attention on the figures, one at a time, as we immerse ourselves in the represented event. It is for this purpose that all the painter’s tools are mobilized.

The artistic image, like poetry, thus leads us into mystery, into the sacred, making us witnesses of the unspeakable and the invisible.

The harmonious architectural articulation divides the space of the lunettes, but at the same time enhances it, placing them in an orderly sequence that transforms such diverse events into chapters of a single narrative whose protagonist is Franciscanism and its history—with the trials to overcome, the antagonists, and the humble and powerful helpers of every age, the struggles, the victory.

The wall-songs of the poem

"Nothing, in its didactic and ritual purpose, prevents the artist from fully using the structure provided by the architect. The articulation of the building coincides with the grouping of the images," writes Gombrich.

The walls of the cloister’s portico were used with the same narrative function as the lunettes. While each lunette tells and encloses a single episode, each of the four walls contains a chapter, a canto of the poem.

The **First wall-canto** (lunettes 1 to 6) begins at the door of the sacristy. It opens with a sort of prologue, one of the two large frescoes: the Franciscan tree with popes and cardinals around the Immaculate. This is followed by lunettes depicting symbolic scenes or episodes from the lives of Franciscan “champions”. Diverse lives, diverse models of life, linked by the red thread of an immense, passionate faith. It ends with Francis’ encounter with the Sultan, a fresco that has been completely lost. The content of the commentary was suggested by the few readable words of the caption.

The **Second wall-canto** (lunettes 7 to 12) is dedicated to martyrs. It is introduced by the second of the large frescoes, with Franciscan saints in the glory of Paradise.

On the **Third wall-canto** (lunettes 13 to 17) are scenes from the lives of saints who lived Franciscan spirituality in princely and wealthy contexts, where choices of poverty, humility, and charity flourished. It is introduced by the fresco whose caption can be considered Fra Giuseppe’s artistic manifesto.

On the **Fourth and final wall-canto**, unfortunately, there remains only a great incipit: St. Francis receiving the stigmata. The caption is complete, while the image, like all the other frescoes on this wall, has been lost. It is a beginning not only because it is located at the start of the wall, but because the stigmata, while being the crowning of the Saint’s life, also inaugurate his second “life” that reaches into our own times.

At the base of the lunettes, on the plinths of the main panels, are painted noble coats of arms of prominent Gravina families, and at the edges, medallions with portraits of Franciscan saints and blessed, including female figures—great, enterprising, intellectual, and courageous saints of the Second and Third Orders—entirely absent from the lunettes and the frescoes in the cells on the upper floor. Here, large painted arabesques frame the faces of Jesus, Mary, and Franciscan saints, some not depicted elsewhere in the cloister, including Saint Bernardino of Feltre, Saint Anthony, and the Protomartyrs of Morocco.

The Exemplum at the Crossroads of Time

In Greco-Latin culture, *exemplum* was a literary genre, a historical anecdote presented as a legal or political argument. In the Middle Ages, the Christian preacher-moralist transformed it into a tool for teaching and/or edification. The *exemplum* became “a short story presented as true (historical) and intended to be inserted in a discourse (usually a sermon) to convince the audience through a salutary lesson.”

The lunettes tell stories that make each fresco an ancient *exemplum*. The medallions encourage investigation in the same direction. Saint Francis was considered a model, the *exemplum* par excellence. His life has been written many times. In the mid-19th century, J. Renan, a positivist historian of religions, called him “the Father of Italian art.” Fra Giuseppe dedicates four lunettes to Francis: the pope’s dream who saw him as a “new Atlas” bearing the Church that was faltering; Saint Dominic’s dream who saw himself and Francis pointed out by Mary to appease a Jesus who was throwing bolts like a thunderous Jupiter; Francis fighting temptations by facing fire protected like a salamander; Francis offering himself to the angel to have the wounds imprinted on his body and, as Thomas of Celano says, from that moment it is not he who lives but Christ who lives in him.

Fra Giuseppe’s Francis is neither the jester who talks to birds, nor the poet who embraces the universe in a love song; he is a fiery Seraph, a suffering and victorious “champion,” another Christ. His choices are radical, without concessions for body or soul, as the Rule was meant to be, *sine glossa*.

The Franciscan poem is enriched with new contents drawing from other stories painted by Fra Giuseppe in the cloister; stories almost always dedicated to different saints or blessed. These episodes belong to a distant time and are therefore fascinating, richly colored with poetry and full of meaning. While the fresco fixes the story in this remote past, the explanatory captions may, when necessary, allow the use of imperfect and present tense. The texts in fact end with a phrase that makes the story still current, unfinished:

“... he is buried in the church of the Friars Minor where he performs many miracles. Praise be to God;”

“he died in the conquest of the Holy Land. The Lord illustrates him with miracles;”

“buried in the homeland shines with miracles;”

“his incorrupt body was illustrious [...] seen in the homeland.”

These notes suggest direct experience or an oral transmission of information. Le Goff writes: “It is no accident that the mendicant friars are the great spreaders [...] of exempla. They are specialists of proximate time.”

Saint Francis was not an expert in Theology, perhaps because he had decided to seek elsewhere the answers he needed. However, in this cloister one might glimpse an idea of Theology that belongs both to him and to our time. Horkheimer, the German philosopher of the Frankfurt School, says in an interview:

Theology is — I must express myself very cautiously — the hope that, despite this injustice that characterizes the world, injustice cannot be the last word. [Theology] is the expression of a longing, according to which the murderer cannot triumph over his innocent victim.

Le Goff's essay opens horizons that go beyond simple recovery of the present. The *exempla*, and thus also Fra Giuseppe's Franciscan stories, point to an elsewhere also understood as a future full of hope, the time of salvation. To those who listen and look, a real, immediate conversion is asked, the only one capable of opening the path leading to a nostalgically desired world where there will be peace because there will be justice and love. In the future there is the return to the Father's house. Forever.

And it is only the unveiling of this secret time, crossroads of past, present, and future, that gives meaning and sense to the crazy choices of those who voluntarily seek martyrdom like Saint Diego, who refuse to drink while thirsty and through long fasts reduce their bodies to a dry bark like Saint Peter of Alcantara, who leave a protected and comfortable life to live in the narrow cell of a convent like Blessed Margherita Colonna.

The narrative dimension, the taste for action, the intellectual and emotional participation in the drama represented in the frescoes, together with the solid and sober columns, the mysterious and magical well, the identical and all closed little windows looking out on the roses celebrating all around, create an aura that also gives life to the portraits in the medallions.

The Colorful Truths of Fra Giuseppe

Like Jacopo da Varagine, who wrote the timeless text *The Golden Legend*, Fra Giuseppe had to research stories about the lives of Franciscan saints, compare them, assess their credibility, and recount them with the colors of his palette without ignoring the kind of truth they conveyed. Those sources were often transcriptions of oral tales passed down by word of mouth and therefore altered by the narrators. In the lunette depicting the episode of Francis's temptation, a vague young lady enters his chamber to tempt him while he is a guest of Frederick II at the castle of Bari. Francis resists. In the *Little Flowers* he is visiting the Sultan, and everything goes as above. Perhaps the two accounts go together if one considers the significant Saracen presence at Frederick's court.

Fra Giuseppe likely encountered various difficulties of this kind during his research. To choose, he probably used rigorous criteria, but the sources were numerous and sometimes contradictory, making it impossible to fully evaluate their historical reliability. He selected stories and characters as *exempla*. This is revealed, for example, in the passions of the martyrs, often too similar to each other, and in the figures of their persecutors: monsters capable of every cruelty, all alike in their wickedness [...]. It is equally easy to observe that all the saints are remarkable because they all possess the same virtues and that some episodes are attributed to more than one of them [...] it is a sign of faith that looked toward eternity and as such beyond and above those scholarly cognitions that vary over the years and are the delight of human minds.

The inconsistencies and improbabilities do not diminish the value of the narrative. Through these stories, many visitors to the cloister have come to know the virtues and victories of the saints just as "from songs of deeds they learned the profane exploits of heroes."

The cloister's stories have historical roots and carry an ancient truth, which the oral transmission has not deprived them of. Over time, the initial historical truth, sparse and essential, has been enriched by narrators' truths inspired not by sources but by their life experiences and desires. The narrators wove their truths like colorful and original threads into the fabric of the received story and, thus transformed, passed it on to others. A chain that sinks into the earth's depths... to which it is time to connect, perhaps thanks to Fra Giuseppe's images.

In the lunettes...

In the lunettes there are recurring elements that masterfully link even very different scenes, enhancing the cohesion and coherence of the entire cycle. All reveal the frontal viewpoint of the fresco artist. The saint to whom the image is dedicated usually occupies the center. On the right and left, other figures often form different groups engaged in various activities.

The sky is always present. In the background, if the scene is indoors, there are large openings or windows through which a small piece of sky can be glimpsed — sometimes blue, sometimes cloudy — which in some cases illuminates a delicate but flourishing vegetation. According to iconographic rules, "in front means inside." The characters stand in front of the opening, but the action should be considered internal.

Often, a beam of light descends from above towards the saint, revealing the presence of the Most High, of whom the saint is an elect and from whom he draws strength. Clouds surround, support, or allude to supernatural presences.

The characters belong to the Franciscans and various social classes. The clothes of nobles and prelates are elegant, lavish, rich in lace, embroidery, and precious colorful fabrics; the Saracen garments are also abundant both in colors and styles. Executioners are bare-chested or scarcely covered. All costumes contrast with those of the Franciscans (if present), always the same, in that strange color reminiscent of barren earth.

Long swords arm the hands of soldiers, various instruments of torture those of the Saracens who inflict martyrdom. In four lunettes dedicated to a martyr, a Saracen (in one, a Saracen woman) holds a knife called the "mercy": the executioner used it for the coup de grâce, that is, to end the torture with an immediate death.

The eyes of the saints and especially the martyrs are raised toward the sky, often with the pupils barely visible. They seem inspired by St. Paul's exhortation: "Set your minds on things above." The martyrs' bodies are stretched out, and their posture expresses not so much pain as ecstasy. They often hold a palm branch (in Paradise angels carry bunches of palms). The palm is not a symbol of martyrdom, but of victory and even resurrection: in the Apocalypse, martyrs who conquer death and the devil carry palm branches.

Many saints hold a book: they are founders of religious orders, bishops, or great preachers. In the first case, the book is the Rule they wrote; in the other two, it is the Gospels whose dissemination they were responsible for.

Fra Giuseppe and women: from Eve to Clare

Fra Giuseppe does not dedicate any lunettes to women, but they appear in some stories in marginal or negative roles.

There are vague maidens tasked with tempting men: in one lunette, a girl sent by the lord of the castle vainly tries to tempt even Francis; in another lunette, girls from the Moluccas tempt and then publicly torture a martyr to make his death even more humiliating. In these cases, the woman was still Eve, whom the Church continued to present as a looming danger to be avoided.

There is the mother/stepmother woman who witnesses her son's death without showing emotion only because, by choosing to be a hermit, he had withdrawn from the power project she had dreamed for her life.

There is the faithful spouse woman, who achieves her perfection by sharing the chastity choices of the man she married (the spouse of Blessed Henry of Cyprus, Saint Delfina, spouse of Saint Elzear). There is the great Saint Teresa of Ávila, presented only as a witness to the holiness of Saint Peter of Alcantara and as his disciple.

Six great women are in the medallions: mystics, founders, intelligent and cultured abbesses, who lived protected by great monasteries and engaged in apostolic works, in which they managed to involve nobles and the wealthy (sometimes because they themselves came from these social classes).

And then there is Clare: she is alone on the wall of the staircase leading to the friars' cells, where there is only one other woman: Mary. Clare's figure placed there along the staircase suggests a maternal, almost protective figure. I think of Clare caring for Francis when he was sick and almost blind, tending to his simplest needs: treating his wounds, sewing bandages for him, making cloth shoes to avoid irritating the wounds on his feet. Evoking the mother is not forced; Francis entrusted two older friars, whom he called mothers, with the training period of two young friars, saying that living in isolation, they would share the roles and duties of Martha and Mary.

Clare is not in the cloister, but close to the friars; she is not even at the door of a cell because all the friars in the convent are entrusted to her. Francis is absent and distant; Clare rightly stands alone, almost emphasizing that her path is symmetrical, parallel, not complementary to Francis's. The Saint's example did not prevent her from outlining her own path, in which she continued to walk alone. But did Fra Giuseppe really think so? Some doubts arise when it is discovered that in the great fresco of Paradise there is no woman, not even Clare.

Bible of the poor, or better, of the illiterate

There certainly was a time when being poor meant being illiterate, and thus the Bible of the poor, made up of images, was the Bible of those who could not read. Yet, there were other ways to acquire literary knowledge: oral storytelling, passed from mouth to mouth, and semi-oral listening, through reading aloud. In both cases, people could acquire bookish knowledge without needing to be literate. The lives of the saints, the legends, were among the preferred texts.

The Council of Trent had set and imposed on the Church, especially on religious orders, the goal of a more rigorous catechism for the people. At the same time, the Baroque promoted works that inspired wonder and amazement. The encounter between these two aims, seemingly different, was inevitable: the Tridentine Counter-Reformation found in the Baroque a valid instrument of persuasion, and art found in religious subjects a wealth of stories where beauty has always dwelled.

In the mid-17th century, in the cloister of San Sebastiano, Fra Giuseppe was mostly inspired by the sincere but demanding devotion of a provincial patronage (many families are present with their coats of arms) that considered the doctrinal aspect of the works essential. The examples presented — images supported by brief but essential and expressive narratives — become, for the believer, a

stimulus for devotion and prayer. Thus, more than the imposing and dramatic Caravaggesque scenes, these frescoes recall the Bible of the poor/illiterate and bring to mind the delicate, magical icons of Giotto.

Cardinals and Popes: cardinal's cap, galero, triregnum

Cardinals were clerics assigned to serve a church or a diaconate. Hence the name “cardinal,” meaning “incardinated.” When they came to Rome to serve the pope, their duties changed, greatly increasing their prestige. Over time, the College of Cardinals became a juridical entity with the function of closely collaborating with the pope, substituting for him in his absence, and electing the new pope.

In one of the two large frescoes, all the cardinals, except one, wear the cardinal's cap on their heads or hold it in their hands. Some look at it; others ignore it. Only Cardinal Vicedomino de Vicedominis wears the camauro, a cap that popes used in winter, perhaps to recall that when he died — having been elected pope only a few hours earlier — he was old and ill. Thus, death takes upon itself the task of proclaiming him pope by placing the triregnum on his head. The cardinal's cap was granted in 1464 by Pope Paul II, but the final definition of its four panels and shape was achieved around the mid-16th century. To keep them in shape, cardinals inserted a stiff cardboard inside.

The best-known headdress, symbol of cardinal dignity, is the red galero, with a wide brim. It dates back to 1245, granted by Pope Innocent IV during the Council of Lyon. Red symbolizes the Passion and indicates willingness for martyrdom; thus, purple is the color of cardinals, princes of the Church, ready to sacrifice themselves for her (though many have forgotten this over history). The triregnum resulted from a transformation of the papal tiara over time. The crowns stacked threefold indicate the three powers of the pontiff: father of princes and kings, ruler of the world, vicar of Christ. After the proclamation of Paul VI, the triregnum was abandoned but not abolished.