

# **The Saint is Growing Old: Signs of Ageing in the St. Francis Legend in the Upper Basilica of Assisi**

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The saints we see in medieval icons are mostly depicted as dignified elders, with long beards and stylized wrinkles. These features, however, did not provide the viewer with accurate knowledge regarding the real age of the people who were crowned as saints, rather they served as generic attributes, signifying their authority and wisdom, and presenting them as teachers of the faith. It was Saint Francis that brought about a change in attitude, and subsequently in visual representational modes. His move toward a type of devotion which is rooted in subjective and emotional experience resulted in a new perception of the saint: he "who walks in the ways of God" may now be depicted as a man amongst men, whose physiological features and bodily qualities are exposed to the influence of time, and in consequence they constitute part of his individuality. This novel approach is first depicted in the fresco cycle of the St. Francis Legend in the upper basilica of Assisi – the mother church of the Franciscans and the burial place of their founder. The frescoes represent St. Francis in a new and unprecedented manner—as an ageing man. Throughout the painted cycle the saint is depicted in different stages of his life, clearly affected by the signs of time.

In modern, and in fact even in medieval terms, St. Francis did not really reach old age: at his death he was no more than forty five years old. Nonetheless, both in his official biography, written by St. Bonaventure in the early 1260's, and in the painted cycle depicting his life in the Upper Basilica, explicit references to the process of ageing that the saint underwent throughout his life are provided. These references are especially noticeable in the painted cycle. The progress of ageing is apparent in the changes made to St. Francis's facial features and headdress in the course of the nineteen scenes depicting his life cycle. At first his face is shown as round, even plump, with a smooth beardless skin and a healthy glow on his cheeks. But as the cycle progresses, gradual physical transformation becomes evident: as more and more wrinkles appear on Francis' forehead and beneath his eyes, his face loses its initial roundness, becoming thinner and more emaciated. Paradoxically, in the final scenes of the cycle, which depict the miracles performed by the saint postmortem, Francis is shown with his face young and healthy, as he now belongs to the unearthly realm, untouched by the powers of temporality.

The depiction of ageing is not solely restricted to the outer appearance of St. Francis, but is present throughout the cycle. Thus, for example, in the *Death of the Knight of Celano* (scene 16), amongst the women of the knight's household, one can easily discern an

elderly woman alongside the younger ones. Her face is wrinkled and her loose headdress has slipped back, revealing gray hair, a strikingly distinguishing her from her younger, browned haired companions. Such attention to the precise depiction of the signs of ageing is unheard of in the art of the preceding centuries.

In my research I consider this phenomenon in a wider historical and scientific context. I inquire into the perception of age, and in particular of old age, during the Middle Ages, especially focusing on the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – a period preceding the creation of the Saint Francis cycle. In order to better understand what prompted the depictions of ageing in the later years of the thirteenth century, when the cycle was created, I consult contemporary writings dealing with the medical and physiological aspects of the human body, in particular the monumental *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas, medieval treatises on physiognomy, as well as works of visual art, preceding and contemporary to the creation of the St. Francis cycle, especially other cycles which represent personal biographies in a series of narrative scenes.

Old age has been understood during the Middle Ages in different and sometimes even contradictory ways. In the St. Francis cycle the process of ageing held a new meaning, one which conforms with the general Franciscan spirit, which sought to conquer and deprecate one's own body. The natural process of ageing was speeded by the harsh disciplining of a monk's body (self-starvation, flagellation, severe repression of sexuality). The physical deterioration toward the ultimate consumption of the body was seen as positive and even desired, since it was perceived as reflecting the process of spiritual perfection, while attaining this state of perfection was only possible after the death of the earthly body. Paradoxically, the attainment of spiritual perfection was expressed by the metaphor of acquiring a new, explicitly young body. Thus, the Franciscan perception of the body is invested with an unresolvable contradiction in its very base. This contradiction, as well as the constant emphasis on the temporal state of the human body, directed the attention toward the physical and the material world, consequently a new artistic paradigm emerged, aiming at visually reflecting the temporality of earthly existence. Thus, this visual record of the ageing body is not only part of the realistic tendencies in the art of late thirteenth century, but also a theological assertion of didactic and moralistic character. It is evident in other artistic representations of monks, in which special attention is given to the moral characterization of the monk, and his correlation within a particular age group, and also appears in contemporary Franciscan writings which discuss the monk's body and the behavioral norms attached to it.

The depiction of realistic signs of old age in the art of Italian *Trecento* has not yet been the subject of substantial research. My research proposes a new reading of a particular work of art, the St. Francis cycle in the upper basilica of Assisi, alongside new insights regarding the representations of temporality in general, and the notion of old age in particular, in the art of fourteenth century Italy.