

Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy



In the wake of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, the Catholic Church placed an even greater emphasis on devotion to the saints as examples and intercessors for the faithful. Of these saints, there was probably none more popular than the Italian Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), founder of the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans). Francis renounced his wealth in favor of a life of austerity, preaching, and ministering to the poor. Even while still living, he was considered by many to be a “second Christ.”

Francis assumed Christ’s Passion through the stigmatization, a visionary experience in which the saint received the same hand, foot, and side wounds (stigmata) that Christ suffered on the cross. The

stigmatization was described in several early accounts of Francis's life, including the biography written by the Minister General of the Order, Saint Bonaventure. In the late summer of 1224, Francis had withdrawn with his confessor, Brother Leo, to the desert at Mount Alverna near Arezzo to fast and pray for forty days in honor of Saint Michael the Archangel. On the morning of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross,

while Francis was praying on the mountainside, he saw a Seraph with six fiery and shining wings descend from the height of heaven. And . . . there appeared between the wings the figure of a man crucified, with his hands and feet extended in the form of a cross and fastened to a cross.

. . . When Francis saw this, he was overwhelmed and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. . . .

As the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a marvelous ardor and imprinted on his body markings that were no less marvelous.

Immediately the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet just as he had seen a little before in the figure of the man crucified

. . . . Also his right side, as if pierced with a lance, was marked with a red wound from which his sacred blood often flowed, moistening his tunic and underwear.

This narrative was depicted in an engraving of circa 1620 by Lucas Vorsterman, after a painting by Peter Paul Rubens.



*Lucas Vorsterman, after Sir Peter Paul Rubens, **Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata**, c. 1620, engraving on laid paper, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Marjorie G. and Evan C. Horning, 84.431.*

Toward the end of the 16th century, a new subject was invented: Francis in ecstasy, supported and consoled by an angel after the stigmatization. The subject may have been first introduced by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio in a canvas painted in Rome circa 1595–1596, now in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, c. 1595–96, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1943.222.

Caravaggio appropriately adapted this subject from depictions of the dead Christ supported by an angel, like the painting by Paolo Veronese exhibited here.

Caravaggio was an enormously influential artist in the early 17th century and was imitated by painters from all over Europe, especially in regard to his strong contrasts of light and dark. Several Italian artists adopted Caravaggio's new Franciscan subject; among them, his older contemporary Orazio Gentileschi, who painted the subject several times, including the painting here in the collection of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation.

Gentileschi transformed Caravaggio's invention into a vertical composition and depicted the angel fully supporting the weight of the ecstatic saint. The Blaffer painting may depict a moment closer to the stigmatization—rays of light in the upper left suggest the vision itself, and the saint's eyes are open wide, fixed and staring, as if seeing spiritually rather than physically, before he closes them in a swoon.

The popularity of the subject of Saint Francis supported by an angel soon waned, although Franciscan subjects in general remained common in Italy, as well as in Spain, where devotion to the saint was just as fervent. More than a half-century after the initial spate of versions of the subject, the Sevillian artist Juan de Valdés Leal painted the canvas exhibited here, on loan from the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.



Paolo Veronese

Italian (Venetian), 1528–1588

**The Dead Christ Supported by
an Angel and Adored by a
Franciscan, c. 1586–1587**

Oil on canvas

*Museum purchase funded by Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Arnold, Jr. in memory of
Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen, 79.254*

The subject of the dead Christ supported by an angel or angels occurs frequently in Veronese's work, especially in his last years.

These paintings are marked by an intense pathos, and the artist's contemplation of his own mortality may have led him to a particularly poignant devotional subject. This painting differs from Veronese's other versions of the theme in its inclusion of the adoring man, whose hands are marked by stigmata. His highly individualized features indicate that the figure is probably a portrait, very possibly of Veronese's patron in the guise of a stigmatic like Saint Francis.



Orazio Gentileschi

Italian, 1563–1639

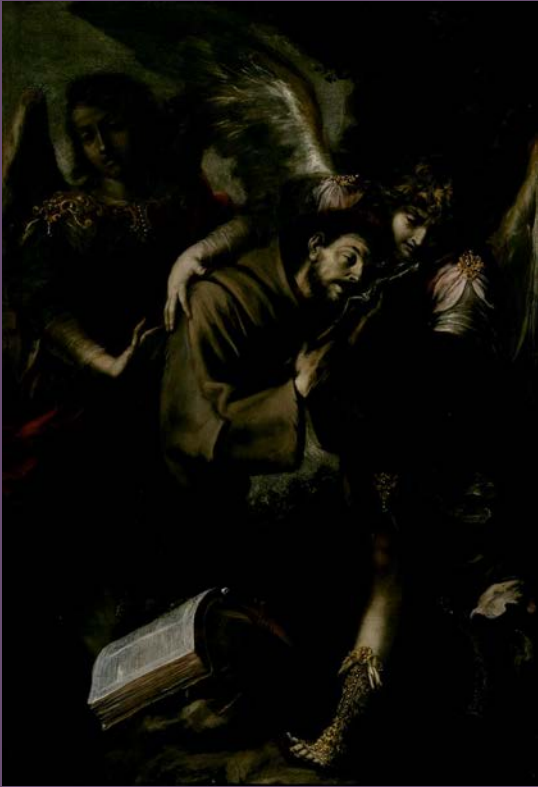
The Ecstasy of Saint Francis of Assisi,

c. 1600–1601

Oil on canvas

*Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston,
2008.11*

The substantial figures, naturalism, and dramatic treatment of light in this painting reflect Gentileschi's encounter with the work of Caravaggio. Like Caravaggio before him and Valdés Leal after, Gentileschi brought the figures close to the picture plane, causing the viewer to sense their palpable presence and to participate in Francis's experience. He also included several touches that heighten the realism of the supernatural subject: the carefully rendered vegetation in the upper and lower left; the way the angel grips Francis's rope belt, struggling to hold him up; and two studio props—the swan wings used for the angel and the monk's habit—known to have been owned by Gentileschi, which he lent to Caravaggio.



Juan de Valdés Leal

Spanish, 1622–1690

The Ecstasy of Saint Francis of Assisi,
probably 1660s

Oil on canvas

*Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Bequest of
Suzette Morton Davidson*

In Valdés Leal's version of the subject, a large book—presumably the Bible—is propped against a rock in the foreground. According to Bonaventure's account of the stigmatization, during Francis's forty days of fasting and prayer, his companion, Brother Leo, opened the Gospel book three times in honor of the Trinity. Each time the book opened to an account of Christ's suffering and death on the cross, and "the man filled with God understood that just as he had imitated Christ in the actions of his life, so he should be conformed to him in the affliction and sorrow of his passion." Valdés Leal has excluded Leo from the painting, focusing the viewer's attention on Francis's intense experience.