



Saint Francis of Assisi and Giuseppe Nicola Nasini

An Episode of Medici Patronage

Exhibition background texts

CON IL PATROCINIO DI



Basilica Papale e Sacro convento di
SAN FRANCESCO IN ASSISI



On the occasion of the eighth centenary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi (1226–2026), Palazzo Medici Riccardi presents a small exhibition devoted to the Poverello, recounting a little-known episode of Medici patronage and devotion towards the patron saint of Italy. The exhibition brings together four of the five paintings originally commissioned by Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimo III de' Medici from the Sienese painter Giuseppe Nicola Nasini as a gift to the friars of the Sacred Convent of Assisi, in gratitude for the hospitality extended to him during his pilgrimage to the tomb of the Saint in the autumn of 1695.

The exhibition is divided into two complementary sections. The first presents the iconography of the painter, Nasini, and that of the prince and patron, Cosimo III, through a number of portraits, chiefly relating to the sovereign's mature and later years. The second room contains the four paintings (the fifth is lost) depicting the 'stories' of Saint Francis, with episodes relating to the final years of his earthly life, displayed together with the preparatory drawing for one of them, the letters concerning the commission exchanged between Florence and Assisi, and an important reliquary containing a fragment of the habit that belonged to Saint Francis.

Giuseppe Nicola Nasini, Medici painter

Born in 1657 in Castel del Piano, on Mount Amiata, into a family of artists, Giuseppe Nicola soon won the favour of Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici. After seeing some of his works, the Grand Duke selected him as one of the young artists sent to Rome, to the Academy he had founded with the aim of renewing the local school, by drawing on the Roman Baroque tradition at its source.

Nasini remained in Rome for three and a half years, from November 1681 until the summer of 1685. There he distinguished himself through the care he devoted to producing works to be sent to the sovereign as evidence of his progress, while successfully taking part in the competitions organised by the local Accademia di San Luca. Once his Roman experience was over, Nasini's grand-ducal patronage was extended, and he was sent to Venice for three years to perfect his painting through the study of the tonalism and colour of the great masters active in the lagoon city.

On returning to Florence, Cosimo entrusted him with important commissions from the early 1680s onwards, some of which had already been begun in Rome, such as the canvas for the church of the Alcantarine convent in Montelupo Fiorentino. In October 1689, he was appointed “honorary chamber assistant”, with “an annual salary of three hundred scudi for his maintenance”, and the following year, on 4 March, superintendent “of the drawings to be made for the Gallery of Florence”. Giuseppe Nicola soon became one of the leading artists of the late seventeenth century, and the sovereign’s preferred artist, executing numerous works for him: these included the fresco for the chapel altar at the Villa of Artimino; the four paintings of the ‘Four Last Things’, intended for a room in Palazzo Pitti designed by Giovan Battista Foggini; the paintings sent to the Sacred Convent of Assisi – the subject of this exhibition; the fresco on the vault of the church of the Conservatorio delle Signore Montalve at Villa ‘La Quiete’; the frescoes on the ceilings of the ‘Mezzogiorno’ Corridor in the Gallery; and other works commissioned by the prince.

After returning to Siena in 1699, Nasini continued to produce an impressive number of works for the city, the surrounding towns and other places throughout the Italian peninsula. He returned to Rome in 1716 for important commissions, including papal ones. He died in Siena in 1736, at the age of seventy-nine, at the end of a brilliant career that had also brought him prestigious honorary titles bestowed by the pope and by Emperor Joseph I, who in 1707 granted nobility to him and his descendants, recognitions awarded in return for a life devoted to his work.

Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany

The penultimate Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de' Medici, was born in 1642 and died in 1723. He ascended the throne in 1670, following the death of his father Ferdinand II. In his mature years, he found himself attempting to confront the inevitable eclipse of the grand-ducal dynasty owing to the lack of a direct heir: none of his three sons, in fact, was able to father an heir who could ensure the succession to the throne.

In his youth he was a brilliant and educated young man – as contemporary sources recall him – brought up by distinguished tutors, curious about science and art, and educated as befitted a future ruler. He was also a keen traveller, visiting the courts of Europe on several occasions and earning the appreciation and considerable favour of the sovereigns he met. His marriage to the French princess Marguerite-Louise d'Orléans, first cousin of Louis XIV, proved unhappy and frustrating from the outset, despite the birth of their children.

Dissatisfied with the marriage, with the dullness of the Tuscan court, as she saw it, and with her husband's family, the Grand Duchess, eager to return to France, left Florence in 1675. Settling in Paris, she led a dissolute and 'libertine' life, in defiance of the agreements governing their separation. This, in turn, aroused resentment in the sovereign and soon intensified his naturally melancholic disposition. This disposition, also the result of a rigorous education and a deeply felt religious faith, soon and progressively turned into gloom, directing the prince towards a form of devotion that much historiography has described as excessive and 'bigoted'. It should instead be considered – including its often extreme manifestations, such as his frenetic collecting of relics, his daily participation in religious observances, and the strictness of his moral conduct, above all towards himself – within the broader context of the period and of the sovereign's 'social' role: as the State's foremost believer, he was expected to serve as a model of virtue and righteousness in the eyes of his subjects.

Obsessed by the prospect of the extinction of his family, which had ruled Florence and Tuscany for three centuries, and having himself appointed a Lateran Canon, a rank intended to obtain the 'Royal Treatment' that would have given his ministers greater weight with the European powers in negotiations concerning the future government of the Grand Duchy, which would later pass to the Habsburg-Lorraines, the sovereign died alone and ill in 1723, after fifty-three years of rule.

Stories from the Life of Saint Francis

The five paintings depicting ‘stories’ from the life of Saint Francis were commissioned by Grand Duke Cosimo III from the Sienese painter Giuseppe Nicola Nasini. Through them, the sovereign intended to honour the Poverello and thank the friars of the Basilica of Assisi for the hospitality they had offered him during his pilgrimage to the Saint’s tomb in the autumn of 1695. The paintings arrived at their destination in the first days of the following year and were installed in one of the rooms of the papal apartment used by the Tuscan sovereign on that occasion.

Four of the five paintings have survived; the fifth, depicting Saint Francis throwing himself into a thorn bush, was lost at the time of the suppression of the religious orders.

The grand-ducal commission came at a moment of particular harmony between the Grand Duke and Nasini. The painter, who had trained in Rome through the sovereign’s patronage and subsequently in Venice, had produced important works commissioned by the prince during the final decade of the seventeenth century.

These included the four paintings of the Four Last Things (1690–94), intended for a room in Palazzo Pitti; the now-lost frescoes in the Villa ‘La Petraia’; the large-scale canvases for Assisi (1695); followed by the frescoes on the vaults of the Mezzogiorno Corridor of the Uffizi (1696) and the painting for the ceiling of the church at Villa ‘La Quiete’ (1697).

The artist, aware of the importance of the commission, devoted great care to the work. This is demonstrated by the preparatory modello for one of the paintings – Saint Francis, dying, puts on the habit – a highly finished work which was probably not the only one produced for Cosimo III’s approval of the commission.

At the centre of the room is another important Franciscan testimony, the Reliquary of the Habit of Saint Francis, from the Compagnia delle Stimmate at the Basilica of San Lorenzo: a precious case containing a fragment of the Poverello’s habit, donated in 1710, again by Cosimo III, to the confraternity.

Nasini's paintings in the correspondence between Florence and Assisi

The five letters, exchanged between 7 January and 12 May 1696, provide precise documentation of the execution in Florence and arrival at the Sacred Convent of Assisi of the paintings made by Giuseppe Nicola Nasini as a gift from Grand Duke Cosimo III, in gratitude for the hospitality he had received during his pilgrimage to the tomb of the Poverello in the autumn of 1695.

The letters reveal the Franciscans' appreciation of the munificent gift, intended "to enrich these poor walls", and provide information about the placement of the paintings "in the Apartment in which he [the prince] was pleased to reside" and their installation within stucco frames specially modelled by a craftsman from Perugia, who was likewise subsidised by the sovereign. The work, completed in May 1696, had, according to the words of the Custodian of the convent, turned out to be "no less beautiful than precious, both for the quality of the paintings

and for the decorative elements that adorn them, to the great admiration and complete satisfaction of both the Fathers and the whole City”.

The friars, through the Father Custodian and as a consequence of the Medici gift, then offered heartfelt prayers to Saint Francis, asking him to intercede with the Almighty on behalf of the sovereign, “for the fullness of grace in this life, and eternal glory in the next”.

Cosimo, for his part, replied to the letters by expressing his pleasure at the decision to “adorn those rooms with the aforementioned paintings and friezes” and that the work had met with general satisfaction. He warmly expressed his gratitude towards the Sacred Convent: “so deeply impressed upon my heart are the obligations I bear to give further proof of them”, asking “Your Paternity [the Father Custodian of the Sacred Convent] and all those Fathers to offer me other and more fitting opportunities”.

Francesco Maria Tanoni, from
Assisi, to Cosimo III de' Medici,
16 January 1696

“16 January 1695 ab Incarnatione

Most Serene Highness,

The five paintings, each animated by Art, I do not know whether they could more vividly represent the deeds of the Seraphic Father and, at the same time, the heroic generosity of Your Most Serene Highness. They arrived last Saturday to enrich these poor walls, and will be placed in the Apartment in which Your Highness was pleased to reside. Since my weakness finds no words sufficiently expressive to render thanks proportionate to so great a benefit, together with these Religious I shall entreat the same Holy Father, that he may deign to repay with his benefits such exalted favours, which will be still further magnified by the completion of the stucco work. Thus, overwhelmed by my perpetual obligations to your immortal merits, I remain with the utmost reverence.

Assisi, 16 January 1696

Your Most Serene Highness's most humble, devoted and obliged servant,

Fr. Francesco Maria Tanoni, Custodian.”

ASFi, Mediceo del principato, n. 1119, S.A.S. Frati 1696-1697, Lettere & Minute, n.10 (16 gennaio 1696 s.c.)

Francesco Maria Tanoni, from
Assisi, to Cosimo III de' Medici,
28 January 1696

“28 January 1695 ab Incarnatione

Most Serene Highness,
I am obliged to inform Your Most Serene Highness that, the five paintings sent by your great devotion to this Sanctuary having arrived, the sculptor has already come and arranged them with great skill in the small room designated by Your Highness. I offer you my most devoted thanks, and since my humble condition does not allow me to express the gratitude proportionate to your greatness, together with our Religious I too shall offer prayers to the Holy Father Saint Francis, that he may intercede with the Lord God on behalf of Your Most Serene Person for the fullness of grace in this life and eternal glory in the next.
I beg Your Highness to accept these simple expressions of mine, which come from a heart wholly devoted to your service.

Assisi, 28 January 1696.”

(Note: unsigned letter)

ASFi, Mediceo del principato, n. 1119, S.A.S. Frati 1696-1697, Lettere & Minute, n. 16, (28 gennaio 1696 s.c.)

Francesco Maria Tanoni, from
Assisi, to Cosimo III de' Medici,
7 May 1696

“7 May 1696

Most Serene Prince,

I have not until now informed Your Most Serene Highness of the installation of the five paintings consecrated to this Sanctuary by Your Most Serene Highness's pious hand, because the work had not yet been completed. I assure Your Most Serene Highness, with heartfelt sincerity, that it has turned out to be no less beautiful than precious, both for the quality of the paintings and for the decorative elements that adorn them, to the great admiration and complete satisfaction of both the Fathers and the whole City. All the old paintings have been removed from the room, which is now ennobled solely by the precious gifts of Your Most Serene Highness. For your health and prosperity my Religious brothers never cease to pray to the Seraphic Father, and I pray especially, to whom it has fallen to witness, at the end of my term of office, the establishment in this Sanctuary of a perpetual memorial to the person of Your Most Serene Highness. To whom, bowing humbly, I declare myself,

7 May 1696

Your Most Serene Highness's most humble, reverent servant, Fr. Francesco Maria Tanoni, Custodian of the Sacred Convent.”

ASFi, Mediceo del principato, n. 1119, S.A.S. Frati 1696-1697, Lettere & Minute, n. 67 (7 maggio 1696)

Cosimo III de' Medici, from
Florence, to Father Francesco
Maria Tanoni in Assisi,
7 January 1696

“To the Father Master Tanoni, Custodian of the
Friars Minor Conventual of Assisi.

Florence, 7 January 1695 ab Incarnazione

I now send Your Paternity the paintings of
which I mentioned in my last letter to Your Pa-
ternity, according to the permission conveyed
to me through Father Master Angeli. The stucco
worker will come from Perugia to arrange
them, and I inform you that everything will be
done at my own expense.

You will appreciate this confidence of mine,
and do not deny me the continuation of your
affection, while I, with my customary esteem
for your merits, remain wishing you every hap-
piness from Heaven.”

(Note: letter from the sovereign, unsigned,
rough copy written by the secretary)

ASFi, Mediceo del principato, n. 1119, S.A.S. Frati 1696-
1697, Lettere & Minute, minute di lettere, n. 467
(7 gennaio 1696 s.c.)

Cosimo III de' Medici, from
Florence, to Father Francesco
Maria Tanoni in Assisi,
12 May 1696

“To the Father Fr. Francesco Maria Tanoni, Custodian of the Friars Minor Conventual of Assisi.
Florence, 12 May 1696

I am greatly pleased that the work undertaken to adorn those rooms with the aforementioned paintings and friezes has finally been completed, and that the work itself has met with general satisfaction. But I am not content with this modest act of gratitude towards that place; so deeply impressed upon my heart are the obligations I bear that I must give further proof of them. I shall ask Your Paternity and all those Fathers to offer me other and more fitting opportunities.

While thanking you both for the expressions addressed to me and for the prayers you continue to offer for me in that Sanctuary, entirely partial and devoted to its religious life, I remain wishing Your Paternity true happiness from Heaven.”

(Note: letter from the sovereign, unsigned, rough copy written by the secretary)

ASFi, Mediceo del principato, n. 1119, S.A.S. Frati 1696-1697, Lettere & Minute, minute di lettere, n. 521
(12 maggio 1696)