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**THE IMMACULATE KISS
BENEATH THE GOLDEN GATE:
THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN DUNS SCOTUS
ON FLORENTINE PAINTING OF THE 14TH CENTURY.**

The dawn of the fourteenth century saw the sudden emergence of fresco cycles in Italy devoted to the Infancy of the Virgin. Although the Virgin Mary was a common figure in art of this period, she was usually portrayed in one of two roles – the Madonna of the Christ child or as one of the principal witnesses to the Crucifixion. Rarely were images of her own life prior to the Annunciation, referred to as the Infancy of the Virgin, depicted on the walls of Italian churches. In fact, illustrations of her youth were primarily found in illuminated prayer books such as the Book of Hours. Yet, in the early fourteenth century this rapidly changed and the Infancy of the Virgin became a popular subject in monumental wall painting in Italy. The most notable and influential of these fresco cycles was painted by Giotto di Bondone in the Arena Chapel in Padua around 1305.¹ Often credited with marking the birth of Renaissance painting, the Arena frescoes visually portray twelve scenes from the Infancy of the Virgin, beginning with the story of Joachim and Anna, Mary's parents, and concluding with Mary's marriage to Joseph. Although scholars agree that Giotto likely worked from an unidentified manuscript when creating the cycle, few have asked, "What prompted the sudden interest in the early life of the Virgin Mary in this and other monumental Italian art works?" This paper explores this question and suggests that the teachings of John Duns Scotus on the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin and its adoption by the Franciscan Order had a pro-

¹ For more on the Arena Chapel see Bruce Cole, *Giotto: the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua* (New York: George Braziller, 1993) and Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Giotto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

found effect upon the emergence of fresco cycles devoted to the Infancy of the Virgin in early fourteenth-century Italy.

Fresco cycles of the Infancy of the Virgin visually chronicle the events of Mary's birth and childhood beginning with the story of her parents, Joachim and Anna. Traditionally, the cycles begin with a tale of woe of two parents left childless for the first twenty years of their marriage. One day, when Joachim's sacrifice to the Temple in Jerusalem is refused because of their infertility, he runs to the desert humiliated, abandoning his wife and leaving her to believe that he was dead. In his hour of desperation, an angel of the Lord appears to Joachim and foretells of Mary's birth and instructs Joachim to return to Jerusalem where he is to be reunited with his wife and blessed with a child. The scene of their reunion under Jerusalem's Golden Gate symbolically represented Mary's conception and is followed by scenes of her birth. These cycles often conclude with the Presentation of Mary in the Temple at the age of three and Joseph's blooming rod as a sign of God's selection as the chosen one to marry the Virgin Mary.²

Although there are no biblical sources for Mary's infancy, written sources for her early life are recorded in the apocryphal texts of the Greek *Protevangelicum of James* and the later *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*.³ Influenced by these texts, in the seventh century Pope Sergius first established the feast celebrating the Virgin's birth on September 8th when special manuscripts were brought from the east to Rome explicitly for the occasion. Thereafter, the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin became part of the official church calendar.⁴ A century later, frescoes of the Birth of the Virgin first appear in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome. These early Italian representations were strongly influenced by Byzantine culture, where the

² Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), II, 152.

³ The *Protevangelicum of James* is of Greek origin and dates from the third century, while the later *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* is Latin and dates to the sixth century.

⁴ Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconographie de l'Enfance de la Vierge dans l'Empire Byzantin et en Occident* (Brussels: Academie royale de Belgique, 1992), 13.

Nativity of the Virgin was already a well-established feast in the Orthodox Church.⁵ By the late thirteenth century, the Virgin's early life was incorporated into the *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend* (c.1275). Written by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine and distributed widely throughout western Europe, the popularity of the *Golden Legend* quickly influenced the visual arts and by the early fourteenth century the text was the preferred source used by artists for sacred imagery.

Over thirty years ago, Don Denny first proposed a possible link between one of Giotto's early panels from the Arena Chapel, The Meeting at the Golden Gate, and the teachings of John Duns Scotus (Fig. 1).⁶

Figure 1. Giotto, *Meeting at the Golden Gate* (after 1305), fresco, Arena Chapel, Padua. (photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY)

The scene depicts Joachim and Anna's joyful reunion after Joachim's rejection from the Temple. Eyes locked, Joachim embraces his wife and in return, she sweetly caresses her husband's cheek and they kiss, symbolizing Mary's conception. Giotto, the masterful storyteller, translates one of the early Renaissance's most tender images into the most perfect illustration of what many medieval minds saw as the Immaculate Conception. In essence, Giotto gives a visual lan-

⁵ Ibid., 154.

⁶ Don Denny, "Some Symbols in the Arena Chapel Frescoes," *Art Bulletin* 55, 2 (June 1973): 205-12.

guage to an abstract and controversial dogma, one that concurrently was being defended by John Duns Scotus in Paris.

At the time of his death in 1308, Scotus was at the forefront of the theological debate over the Immaculate Conception.⁷ Although not the originator of the doctrine, his arguments in support of Mary's release from the stain of original sin at the time of her conception had a profound effect on Marian theology, spurring vigorous debate and reviving interest in the doctrine. Although not officially claimed as church dogma until 1854, the Immaculate Conception of Mary gained immense popularity throughout the medieval period due in large part to the Franciscans who were its greatest supporters. According to Scotus, Mary was protected by a unique grace from God that preserved her from contracting original sin and allowed her to be conceived immaculately. In his commentaries on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, Scotus argued that Christ, as the perfect Redeemer, was capable of exempting his Mother from original sin before her birth.

Scotus's support of the dogma was highly controversial. The debate over the Immaculate Conception split the two main mendicant orders, with the Franciscans embracing the dogma and the Dominicans fiercely rejecting it.⁸ The Dominicans, inspired by the teachings such as those of Thomas Aquinas argued that, "Mary was sanctified in the womb but not before animation, since in this case she would not have needed to be redeemed by Christ."⁹ In response, Scotus countered:

... Just as grace could be conferred afterwards, so it could be given at the first instance [the soul was created.] ... Mary most of all needed Christ as a redeemer;

⁷ John Duns Scotus taught theology at Oxford from the late 1290s onwards and at Paris between 1302-1307. See Antonie Vos, *The Philosophy of John Duns Scotus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 13-57.

⁸ The controversy over the doctrine became so intense that by 1387, the Dominican John de Montesono publicly declared the Immaculate Conception against the Faith. His actions fueled a heated debate within the Church, which led to his eventual excommunication and exile in 1393. See Hilda Graef, *Mary; A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 310-11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

for she would have contracted original sin by reason of her common birthright were she not prevented by the grace of her mediator [Christ], — and just as others would have had a need for Christ that through his merits the sin they had already contracted be remitted, so she had an even greater need of a mediator lest she would need to contract it at some time and to prevent her from contracting it (*Ord.* III, d. 3, q. 1).¹⁰

In fact, the Immaculate Conception proved that Christ was indeed the most perfect Redeemer because a “redemption that preserves from sin is more perfect than one that frees from it.”¹¹

Although controversial, Scotus’s message was quickly adopted by many of his fellow Franciscans. The dissemination of his teachings was widespread, reaching Italy in the early fourteenth century through followers such as Francesco degli Abbati and Landulpho Caracciolo.¹² By 1320, Robert of Anjou, King of Naples and Sicily had commissioned a treatise on the Immaculate Conception by Jacques d’Alba and around the same time there is evidence that the Office of the Conception was being celebrated in Perugia.¹³ Liturgically, the Franciscans began to celebrate the feast as part of the Nativity of the Virgin, before Pope Sixtus IV, a Franciscan,

¹⁰ John Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2000), 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹² See Jean-François Bonnefoy, *Le Ven. Jean Duns Scot: Docteur de l’Immaculée-Conception* (Rome: Casa Editrice Herder, 1960), for Francesco degli Abbati, 224f; for Landulpho Caracciolo, 229f. Building on Scotus, Peter Oriol (d.1322), another prominent Franciscan and friend of Pope John XXII, had the most significant impact upon fourteenth-century theology on the subject. In a treatise written between 1314-15 Oriol argued that the thought of Mary not born by special grace, and thought of her as being conceived in the normal, human way, as a “vessel of wrath, even for a moment, is something horrible for pious ears and devout souls.” See L. Rosato, *Doctrina de Immaculata Beatae Virginis Mariae Conceptione* (Rome: 1959), cited in Graef, 303.

¹³ Jacques d’Alba is also known by Jacobus Albensis. See Jean-François Bonnefoy, 252-53.

ordered the creation of special office for the Immaculate Conception for the Franciscan Order in 1476.¹⁴

The growing Franciscan interest in Scotus's teachings on the Immaculate Conception coincides with a proliferation of fresco cycles devoted to the Infancy of the Virgin Mary, many of which featured the Meeting at the Golden Gate. The Franciscan followers of Scotus believed that Mary was miraculously conceived at the moment of Joachim and Anna's embrace before the Golden Gate: the image visually reinforced the idea that Mary's conception took place without coitus. Symbolically, when Joachim and Anna reunited in front of the Golden Gate of Jerusalem their embrace, or kiss, represented Mary's miraculous, as well as immaculate, conception.

Beginning in the early fourteenth century, the Infancy of the Virgin became an unmistakable part of the visual landscape and the religious experience of Italy.¹⁵ Giotto's cycle of the Infancy of the Virgin from the Arena Chapel was quickly copied throughout Italy. Evidence of this can best be seen in Florence, Giotto's hometown, where the Arena Chapel images had the most indelible impression. By the mid-century numerous fresco cycles depicting the Infancy of the Virgin were painted in Florence, many in Franciscan contexts, paralleling the Order's support for Scotus's teachings on the Immaculate Conception.¹⁶ In the Franciscan church of Santa Croce alone, the Virgin is the subject of three cycles – the

¹⁴ Of note is the fact that as early as 1263 the Franciscans at the general chapter at Pisa adopted the Feast of the Conception of Mary for the entire order. See Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (New York: College Art Association, 1957), 10-12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Prior to this period, only isolated representations of Mary's life exist in monumental wall painting in Italy, the most notable of which is the choir of the upper basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, attributed to Cimabue from around 1279. Although the panels are badly damaged, they reveal the existence of four early Marian scenes – the Annunciation to Joachim, the Birth of the Virgin, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple and the Marriage of the Virgin. Of interest is the fact that the cycle does not include an illustration of the Meeting at the Golden Gate. This is significant because it predates the arrival of Scotus's teachings on the Immaculate Conception in Italy. See Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, 156-57.

Tolosini Chapel (1320s), the Baroncelli Chapel (1328-1335) and the Guidalotti-Rinuccini Chapel (1363-71).¹⁷

Of the three known fresco cycles dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Santa Croce, two focus exclusively on the Infancy of the Virgin.¹⁸ The earliest is the Baroncelli Chapel painted by Taddeo Gaddi, Giotto's trusted apprentice, completed between 1328-1335.¹⁹ The chapel is dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin and is decorated with two fresco cycles divided onto two adjoining walls. The east wall contains five

¹⁷ Ugo Procacci established that patrons played minimal roles in the choice of decoration of the private chapels in Santa Croce. See Ugo Procacci, "Il primo Ricordo di Giovanni da Milano a Firenze," *Arte Antica e Moderna* 13/16 (December, 1981): 49-66. For further reading on the relationship between Assisi and the artistic programming in Franciscan churches consult Louise Bourda, *The Franciscans and Art Patronage in Late Medieval Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ The Tolosini (or Tolosinghi) Chapel is located in the north transept of Santa Croce. Dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin, the frescoes, the majority of which are no longer extant, were attributed to Giotto and must have been painted prior to 1328 when he left for Naples. Although the majority of the fresco decoration no longer survives, according to Vasari, the chapel once included the Birth of the Virgin, the Marriage of the Virgin, the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation in the Temple, the Death of the Virgin and an illustration of her Assumption. Today, the Assumption is the only fresco that still remains, Vasari's sixteenth-century description is our only record of the frescoes, which he describes in his usual brevity as, "all very beautiful." See Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol. 1, 98. More recent examination of the fresco of the Assumption above the entrance arch has revealed the hand of a follower of Giotto called Figliino, or the Figline Master. In the fifteenth century, the chapel passed into the hands of the Spinelli family, thus it is commonly referred to as the Tolosini-Spinelli Chapel. See Ena Giurescu, "Trecento Family Chapels in Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce: Architecture, Patronage, and Competition" (Ph. D. diss., New York University, 1997), 61-64.

¹⁹ A memorial plaque in the chapel dated 1328 suggests the approximate completion of the fresco cycle, decorated with scenes from the Infancy of the Virgin on the east wall of the chapel. The chapel's decoration is broken down into six scenes beginning with Joachim's Expulsion from the Temple and ending with Mary's Marriage to Joseph. The Baroncelli Chapel marks Taddeo Gaddi's first independent commission after leaving Giotto's workshop. See Alistair Smart, *The Dawn of Italian Painting, 1250-1400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 78ff. For sources on the Baroncelli Chapel see also Julian Gardner, "The decoration of the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce," in *Patrons, Painters and Saints: Studies in Medieval Italian Painting* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1993), 89-110 and also Andrew Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1982).

scenes depicting the *Infancy of the Virgin* and the south wall depicts scenes from the *Infancy of Christ*, beginning with the Annunciation. Isolated on its own wall, the *Infancy of the Virgin* was the first full-length cycle of Mary's youth as a subject in Santa Croce (Figs. 2 and 3).

Figure 2. Taddeo Gaddi, *Infancy of the Virgin* (c.1328), fresco, Baroncelli Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence. (photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY)

Figure 3. Taddeo Gaddi, *Meeting at the Golden Gate* from the *Infancy of the Virgin* cycle (c. 1328), fresco, Baroncelli Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence. (photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY)

The cycle begins in the lunette with Joachim's Expulsion from the Temple and Dream in the Desert. The cycle then continues in the second register with the Meeting at the Golden Gate and the Birth of the Virgin and concludes in the third register with the Presentation of the Virgin and the Marriage of the Virgin. Located at the end of the south transept, the Baroncelli Chapel adjoins the public worship space of the church, just off the nave. As was common in this period, the chapel was decorated with images that were likely dictated by the custodian of Santa Croce, a friar in charge of orchestrating all the artistic programming for the church and who likely received his instructions from Assisi.²⁰ On the approach to the chapel, the *Infancy* cycle appears on the left wall, confronting the viewers as they enter the L-shaped space.

²⁰ For more on the artistic ties between Assisi and Franciscan church decoration throughout Italy see Bourda, *op. cit.*

The second fresco cycle dedicated to the Infancy of the Virgin is the Guidalotti-Rinuccini Chapel painted by Giovanni da Milano and Matteo di Pacino between 1363–1371 (Fig. 4).²¹

Figure 4. Giovanni da Milano, *St. Francis Receiving his Stigmata, Dream of Joachim and the Meeting at the Golden Gate* from the Infancy of the Virgin cycle (1363–71), fresco, Guidalotti-Rinuccini Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence. (photo: author)

Interestingly, the cycle is a near frame-by-frame replica of the Baroncelli east wall.²² Although almost identical, the one factor that distinguishes the Guidalotti-Rinuccini Chapel from the Baroncelli is its location. Placed within the sacristy of Santa Croce, the chapel is not part of the public worship space. Instead, at the time of its construction, its primary audiences were its patrons and the friars of Santa Croce, who used the sacristy as one of the passageways from the cloister to the main church. In fact, the Infancy of the Virgin cycle was oriented towards the friars as they left the cloister and prepared to enter the public worship space. Paired with scenes from the Life of Mary Magdalen on the opposite wall of the chapel, the two cycles created a powerful thematic juxtaposition of salvation through penance and piety.

Painted nearly thirty years apart, the Baroncelli and Guidalotti-Rinuccini cycles share one important characteristic, the placement of the Meeting at the Golden Gate. In both chapels, this illustration of the Immaculate Conception

²¹ Located in the sacristy of Santa Croce, it was one of the last private family chapels to be built and was dedicated to the Infancy of the Virgin and the Life of Mary Magdalen. See Michelle A. Erhardt, "Two Faces of Mary: Franciscan Thought and Post-Plague Patronage in the Trecento Fresco Decoration of the Guidalotti-Rinuccini Chapel of Santa Croce, Florence" (Ph. D. diss., Indiana University, 2004).

²² As Andrew Ladis and others have noted, the Baroncelli Chapel frescoes were quite influential and copied by numerous artists, including Giovanni da Milano in his design of the Guidalotti-Rinuccini cycle. The similarity between the cycles might also lend credence to the theory that Giovanni da Milano and Taddeo Gaddi were professionally linked to the same workshop. See Ladis, 29.

is located on the edge of the wall closest to the chapel entrance, prominently placed to face the viewer. Further examination of these cycles begs the question, "Why the need for two, almost duplicate fresco cycles of the same subject in one church?" The walls of Santa Croce are infused with images that promoted Franciscan theology, both implicit and overt, images that articulated the values of the Order, such as penance and poverty. The duplication of this image cycle in prominent locations in both public and private areas of the church speaks to the importance of the Infancy of the Virgin to the friars of Santa Croce and suggests its resonance within the Order.

In sharp contrast to the proliferation of Infancy of the Virgin imagery in Santa Croce, it is worth noting that across town in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella, where Scotus's teaching on the Immaculate Conception fell on deaf ears, the subject of the Infancy of the Virgin was treated in a much different manner. Around 1348, the north wall of the Ricci Chapel, or choir chapel, of Santa Maria Novella was painted by Andrea Orcagna with a full-cycle dedicated to the Life of the Virgin.²³ The frescoes, which are now lost, once prestigiously occupied the main chapel traditionally reserved for images of the titular saint, or dedication, of the church. Ten years after its completion, in 1358, a lightning storm caused severe water damage to the vaulted ceiling above the chapel and ruined the frescoes. For nearly a hundred years they remained damaged until Domenico Ghirlandaio was hired to repaint them in 1486. According to Vasari, Ghirlandaio preserved the integrity of Orcagna's lost panels by faithfully replicating the original design and compositions.²⁴ Located on

²³ The high altar of Santa Maria Novella was originally patronized by the Ricci family who donated a large parcel of land to the Dominican friars for the construction of the Church. They were in charge of the first wave of decoration, before the eventual transfer of power of the chapel to the Tornaquinci family who hired Domenico Ghirlandaio. See Giurescu, 83-85 and also Mina Gregori, "Giovanni da Milano," *Il Complesso Monumentale di Santa Croce* (Florence: Centro Internazionale del Libro, 1983), 166.

²⁴ Vasari records, "Bernardo took him (Orcagna) in company with himself to paint the life of Our Lady in the principal chapel of S. Maria Novella, which then belonged to the family Ricci. This work, when finished, was held very beautiful, although, by reason of neglect ... it was spoilt by

the north wall of the chancel, the cycle depicts seven scenes, four of which pertain to the Infancy of the Virgin. Read somewhat unconventionally from bottom to top, the cycle begins in the lowest register with the Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple and the Birth of the Virgin and then continues as the eye moves upward with the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, the Marriage of the Virgin, the Nativity, the Massacre of the Innocents, and finally concludes with the Dormition of the Virgin and Assumption of the Virgin in a single frame in the lunette. Notably absent from the cycle is a depiction of the Meeting at the Golden Gate.²⁵ The absence of the scene is odd, given that four of the five major events of Mary's youth are represented. One possible explanation is the fact that by the mid-fourteenth century, the Meeting at the Golden Gate was firmly established as a visual representation of the Immaculate Conception and in conflict with Dominican theology.

Although the anomalies listed here suggest that the divisive teachings of Scotus partitioned the visual culture of Florence in the fourteenth century, in truth, his teachings sparked a new found interest in visually portraying the life of Christ's mother, the intercessor for all and model of purity and humility. The visual reinforcement of these early images helped establish a set iconography for Mary's life prior to the Annunciation, which included the Meeting at the Golden Gate. By the turn of the fifteenth century, fresco cycles of the Infancy of the Virgin were common across Italy and regularly included illustrations of the Meeting at the Golden Gate. Of note is the occurrence in 1380 of a second cycle dedicated to the Infancy of the Virgin in Santa Maria Novella, this time

the rains and thereby brought to the condition wherein it is today ... It is enough for the present to say that Domenico Ghirlandaio, who repainted it, availed himself greatly of the invention put into it by Orcagna." Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol.1, 179.

²⁵ Although there are no panels dedicated to the Meeting at the Golden Gate in Ghirlandaio's cycle, in the upper left of the frame there are two figures standing atop a staircase locked in an embrace possibly referencing Joachim and Anna. Their inclusion in the fresco is an obvious fifteenth century addition by Ghirlandaio who likely felt the cycle was incomplete without the image's inclusion.

painted in the Dominican cloister, which included an illustration of the Meeting at the Golden Gate.²⁶

As the debate over the Immaculate Conception was being played out after John Duns Scotus's death in 1308, the debate was also playing out in the visual culture through the sponsorship of monumental art. Scotus's teachings gave the dogma rigor and legitimacy by successfully arguing the possibility that Mary was born without the taint of original sin. His ideas rapidly spread, due in part to his followers within his own Order that brought his teachings to Italy. Following in the tradition of their mother church in Assisi, Franciscan churches across Italy covered the walls of their churches with images that promoted Franciscan ideals and teachings, reaching out to the largely illiterate populace. Franciscans also used frescoes to visually reinforce doctrine to themselves, infusing the daily lives of the friars with reminders of the Order's values and convictions. Franciscans began to use images of the Infancy of the Virgin, in particular scenes of Anna and Joachim's Meeting at the Golden Gate, to voice their support for Scotus's teachings on the Immaculate Conception and spread his message.

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²⁶ Lafontaine-Dosogne, 27. The cycle in the cloister of Santa Maria Novella included the following scenes: Annunciation to Anne, Annunciation to Joachim, Meeting at the Golden Gate, Birth of the Virgin and Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple.